A Case for the Possible

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Panel: Why I Write The Way I Do

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During my initial weeks in the IWP, a friend sent me a link to a funny photo that affirmed for me the value of a grammatical contention called the serial (or Oxford) comma. In the many years I've spent as a journalist, editor, and an educator, it is a personal rule I've lived by. It's an interesting punctuation mark because Philippine writing in English has thrived under American standard usage. Yet the use of the serial comma is often not condoned in the United States (i.e., you won't see CNN reporters, predominantly and ironically donning British twangs, using it).

I mention the anecdote above because it is peripherally connected to a conceit I hold in high regard when writing poetry: to write not in English, but from it. On the surface level, that may sound like a post-colonial agenda, which is a convenient way to undermine the language of the colonizers. But in the grander scale of the universal, that stance assumes a deeper role. In this age of social networking and global identification, a return to the sublime and the earnest just might be the clearest path toward reclaiming grace.

Nonetheless, it is convenient to talk about the experience of poetry from the third-world perspective. There’s too much “exoticizing” going around these days. And a country like the Philippines just might not be that mapped in people’s global terrain. I’ll sum up the idea by saying that the so-called academy centered in Metropolitan Manila has a firm grasp of the global trends in poetry, particularly the tradition in the United States. Hence, there’s no need for that sort of exposition.

Recent visits to Singapore and Korea provided a rude awakening for me, especially having seen the rise of performance poetry and spoken word in Asia. The poets I came across on those trips performed elaborately, with a commanding, electrifying presence onstage. What I initially found quite disturbing was that most of the poems read were still stuck in the confessional mode, on exorcising old demons, with little attention to craft.

It’s a hurried perspective on literature and art in general, a cutting corners mindset. I’m not referring here to just slam poets, but page poets reading their poems aloud. I felt like I was watching one of those pageants where the winner is decided based on the loudest applause (not to dismiss the influence of hip hop, of course). I am a firm believer that poetry’s duty to delight is not decided by stage presence, but by a human epiphany rooted in heightened language: “best words, best order,” as Coleridge once said.

Craft-wise, I’m aspiring for poems that are informed by the intricacies of sound on the page, not necessarily on the stage. I am a firm believer in the power of assonances, half rhymes, and enjambments. I envision the new poems I’m writing as ones that play around with a more pronounced tone, an unforced balancing of utterances with figures of speech, taking risks, and the all-important turn – terms
which I now find most crucial in giving the experience of reading any poem more depth, beyond the simple extended metaphor mode.

In respectful but contentious response to a paper presented by a fellow resident a couple of weeks ago, I maintain that writers are never born writers; they are made. The other arts are more accommodating to the young. But no writer is good at writing at, let’s say, ten years of age. The inclination to write might be bolstered by the conduciveness of one’s growing-up environment, yes, but it takes real life experiences and a lot of emotional fermentation to gain poise and sense in writing. For example, I grew up in a barrio with no electricity until I was around twelve years old and then only had it because we needed light for my grandmother’s wake. There is nothing conducive in that.

Poetry must trickle down to the masses if it’s to really matter. This is an important clause, though one that’s often perceived as bordering on the cavalier. Because care for language must never be a casualty in the process. Immediacy and the instant seem to be all the rage these days. We should re-learn waiting, value patience when reading or writing poems. People, even fellow writers, detest poetry because they don’t understand it. We’ve been raised thinking it’s an elaborate riddle with an equally elaborate punch line. So if we don’t get the insight or get stuck in the difficult vocabulary, we feel like we’re wearing the proverbial dunce cap.

Every semester I tell my students that our motto in my literature classes is to read the lines before reading between the lines. The humanizing virtue of a poem is in the care given to its crafting, not in emotional outbursts. Because to the untrained reader, language itself – the building block of all literature – becomes the greatest inhibitor, a bump on the road that delays the so-called affect.

Herein lies the seeming dilemma. What should be of primacy? Affect or effect? Aesthetics or content? The answer is not as non-negotiable as many might think. It’s in one’s firm acceptance of a basic tenet in poetry: the multiplicity and subjectivity of meaning, the sharing of both the literal and the figurative. Of all literature, poetry alone demands nothing less than this intertwining.

Instinct is of constant primacy, and form and matter should be unified to make for fine crafting. Otherwise all will just be about the clever and the witty (now trending; wit in poetry must always remain unassuming, sublimated). When I write my poems, I do not begin with an agenda or a plot. Instead I settle with peripheral patches of speech: a word, a phrase, a line. And, in some cases, a punctuation mark. I like to think that writing is dreaming on the page.

I believe that good poetry blurs the line between the denotative and connotative, the image and the symbol, the effective and the affective, the craft and the art. At the end of the day, poetry wants to be generous, not difficult. It’s not about the truth, but what could pass for truth. So that the reader who is open to poetry may say, “Hey, this poem rings true; this feels real.” There’s no math, no science, required in that kind of realization.

All in all, reading and writing poetry is neither easy nor convenient. But it is a way of trying to pray. Because it trains its eye then fixes its gaze on the possible –
in language, in form, in insight. Because its grander duty is not to systematically (and often academically) polarize, but to naturally pluralize and humanize so that we can stare again at our scarred hearts without flinching.