

Writers and Our EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

THE DEAN of one of our colleges once told me that the reason he has quite a number of eccentrics in one of his departments is that there are several writers in it and these men and women are well-known for their eccentricities. But he added, he expects them to produce sooner or later excellent poems, essays, and novels which will surround the University of the Philippines, so to say, with a halo of fame and glory. At the same time these men and women are themselves the very creators of more creative writers who in turn will bring more fame and glory to the Filipino nation. The argument is beautiful and quite persuasive even if not completely convincing. At any rate, the fact that we have in the faculty of the University of the Philippines a number of well-known Filipino writers is sufficient proof that our institution has at least some understanding of the importance of writers as teachers and as scholars.

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WHEN WE SPEAK of writers, giving it a restricted meaning, it is assumed that we refer to men and women who produce literary works of a creative nature. I understand that this group belongs to that category. Their productions take the form of poems, dramatic plays, novels, essays, and treatises, either creative or critical. In that restricted sense, I should not include writers of textbooks and reporters of newspapers. But we must admit that they perform an important service to a particular group, and in the case of textbook writers they need not at all be dull and unimaginative. Many of them can also be creative and even literary. If given the right incentive,

they should be able to write textbooks that stimulate interest, curiosity, and a hunger for aesthetic, intellectual, or emotional possessions and aptitudes . . . If they do rise to that stature, their textbooks may perhaps even find their way to the higher literature of the nation. As a matter of fact, we have read purely informational and factual works that have become classics and, in my student days, were used as textbooks in our political and social-science courses. I have reference especially to De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Woodrow Wilson's *The State*, and James Bryce's *The American Commonwealth*, which are considered treatises, but nevertheless serve and may still serve as effective textbooks. They are literary masterpieces, for behind their factual content they reveal brilliant imagination and an appeal to the finer sensibilities of the individual for love, beauty, valor, and truth.

To say that our country is in need of good writers and that in our social and cultural milieu native literature of some excellence is altogether inadequate is to state the obvious. This is not, however, saying that we have no competent writers at all. Your presence in this room would contradict such a thought. I believe, however, that we have but very few of them who are giving their

full time or much of it to the production of works comparable with those produced in the countries of Europe, in the United States, South America, and some countries of Asia. I would not be positive in concluding that the works of Filipino writers, whether they be the works of Rizal, or Recto, or Apostol, or Gonzales, or Lopez, and others, are inferior in their intrinsic literary value, their style, or their significance, to similar works of men and women in Europe or in America and other Asian nations. I am quite convinced that the reason they have not received due recognition outside of our country is that they have not been given the right amount and the right kind of publicity. In fact, they have not received wide and general recognition even among our own people and are known only by a small circle of habitual readers and book lovers.

The question that has to be answered is how we would develop a sufficiently large reading public in our country that appreciates the works of our own writers. I am convinced that this task may well be started in our colleges and universities. In fact, the work might well be started in our elementary and high schools. It involves improvement of our teachers, revision of textbooks, and some overhauling of the curriculum. And the process might

also result in giving more vigor and vitality to the nationalistic element in our culture.

Thirty or more years ago, the high-school curriculum was not quite as empty and sterile as it later became. The deterioration of secondary education has been brought about by the simplification of courses and the removal of certain subjects from the curriculum. This action was largely the result of the desire of certain educators in the United States to adjust the standards of secondary education to the level of the mentality of the poor student who must have an education which could be labeled secondary education as he or his parents desired. That the curriculum had to be watered down, made no difference at all to those whose concept of education was not intellectual training, but the mere learning of a job. While the change was partly brought about by outside pressures, this idea had also an appeal to a certain tribe of educationists who formulated a special theory made to fit the new system, the theory of *learning by doing*, which was practically substituted for the principle of *learning by thinking*. That theory had a strong appeal to many persons, some of whom were rightly critical of the old rote and memory system. But the remedy applied was not only far from being a cure, but was

actually a death-dealing blow to real education, which is basically improvement of the mental faculties. Mechanical standards were used in evaluating the quality and excellence of schools and colleges. Teachers who prepared themselves to work in such schools lost their sense of appreciation of books and intellectual development. I shall quote from David Riesman's article in the *Anchor Review* what one of the high-school principals in an American city stated about intellectual training:

Through the years we've built a sort of halo around reading, writing and arithmetic . . . The Three R's for All Children and All Children for the Three R's! That was it. We've made some progress in getting rid of that slogan. But every now and then some mother with a Phi Beta Kappa award or some employer who has hired a girl who can't spell stirs up a fuss about the schools . . . and the ground is lost . . . When we come to the realization that not every child has to read, figure, write and spell . . . that many of them either cannot or will not master these chores . . . then we shall be on the road to improving the junior-high curriculum. Between this day and that a lot of selling must take place. But it's coming. We shall some day accept the thought that it is just as illogical

to assume that every boy must be able to read as it is that each one must be able to perform on a violin, that it is no more reasonable to require that each girl shall spell well than it is that each one shall bake a good cherry pie . . .

When adults finally realize that fact, everyone will be happier . . . and schools will be nicer places in which to live . . .

FOR SOME REASON or other the depreciated system of secondary education in the United States found its way into the schools in the Philippines. Thus the quality of the high schools of thirty years ago in our country was debased. The literary works that used to form part of the courses of study in our former high schools disappeared one after another. I still remember vividly some of the literary masterpieces that we had to study in our high school. Among them were the essays of Lord Macaulay and Ralph Waldo Emerson, some of the longer poems of Longfellow, Tennyson, Walter Scott, and Arnold, some of the novels of George Elliot, Hawthorne, and Dickens, and the tales of Washington Irving. I doubt if these works or other works of the same literary excellence and broadening effect are required reading even in our college courses today.

Perhaps the time is now pro-

pitious for our education authorities to re-introduce in our high schools and colleges the study of good literature, such as we formerly had in our high schools and, by way of establishing a cultural balance, to introduce more and more the writings of Filipino authors, both past and present, which could well be considered worthy of being placed side by side with the literature of other countries. Reading and studying them day after day, students in our schools and colleges may soon develop a deeper appreciation of the works of their fellow countrymen. That appreciation will be a source of encouragement to our writers to improve their literary output. At the same time, the wider distribution of these literary products in our country will bring them to the attention of countries outside our own land.

REFERRED a while ago to the development of nationalism through a more intensive reading program of the works of our own writers. This method of spreading the spirit of nationalism does not seem to have been given much importance. The teaching of nationalism in our schools seems to have been confined largely to the teaching of the biographies and works of our great men in public life and our national heroes. While it is doubt-

less one way of fostering nationalism, it could have a more telling effect if its scope is broadened. Even the study of the works of the great men of our country should be supplemented by the writings of newer authors in order that a more realistic understanding of the contemporary national ethos may be obtained. I for one would not care to confine my reading to decalogues and platitudes, which abound in older Filipino writings, and to the national episodes of the distant past, which could not have any significance to our new environment. Nationalism is better fostered by understanding the thoughts, the sentiments, the aspirations, the hopes of the nation than by listening to mere exhortations and verbal effusions of the demagogue, the parvenu, the nouveau riche, the Sybarite, or the so-called leader who preys on the credulity of the masses. The spirit of nationalism is more concretely revealed in the account of the typical lives of the average man and woman, the forgotten man and woman, and the masses that furnish the physical, the moral, and the psychological make-up of the nation. The triumph and tragedy in the lives of our great men are interesting to know. They are springs of inspiration to us. But the daily trials, sufferings, joys, ambitions, disappointments, problems of the men

and women that do not hold high public offices and do not occupy the brilliant stage of our national life supply those elements that enable the artist to draw the picture of the life of our people and of our country. From these elements are derived the themes of great literary works, and these are the things that we want the world to know in order that the Filipino may be better understood and better seen in his true perspective.

The question of what language to use in an intensive promotion of Filipino literature should not find great difficulties for its answer. In my opinion, we should count ourselves fortunate because we have considerable groups who have acquired two of the most widely-used languages in the world, English and Spanish. Both languages have been imported into our country and used by our people not just as mere second languages. The fact remains that they are still our official languages. Our national Constitution is written in the English language. The two languages have been with us as vehicles of instruction in different epochs of our national history. In many instances they have been and are being used even as a means of communication in the home, in business, and in social intercourse. Therefore, not just among a few of us these two languages

have been assimilated in the thinking process and in the expression of emotions.

BUT BESIDES writers in these two foreign languages, we have had authors who have employed the native language of the region where that language is spoken by no less than a million people. While the works in these indigenous languages are not quite as widely distributed and read as those written in English, their popularity is steadily growing. This is especially true in the case of those written in our new national language—Tagalog, which promises to become more widely used all over our country. Aided by the radio, the moving pictures locally produced, some magazines, and the schools, Tagalog threatens to displace English as the most widely used language in this country. But English may not be easily uprooted from its position in the intellectual and literary life of the Filipinos in which it has been developed for over half a century. It still remains the language used in all the principal daily newspapers of the country with steadily increasing circulation, and it is the language actually used by most of the better writers of the nation.

But there are certain essential factors beyond the direct control of writers and educators that

must appear in an environment where literature is expected to flourish. Without them a country cannot hope to produce an adequate crop of excellent writers, scholars, and thinkers. Chief among these is the economic well-being of the country. The flowering of any national literature requires the existence of a degree of national economic prosperity as a prerequisite. Genius, especially literary genius, cannot thrive on starvation rations. To grow, to acquire robust dimensions, to produce and be productive, the man of genius should be relatively free from the harassment of hunger and worry. Above all, he should have at his command ample moments of leisure.

We are informed that in the cultural history of Great Britain, the continental countries in Europe, and the United States, we find the truth of these observations portrayed in lucid outlines. The English author John M. Robertson in his *Essays in Sociology* devotes a portion of it to a discussion of what he entitles "The Economics of Genius" to disprove the theory of Francis Galton that genius is sure to work its way to the front, to appear by itself, independent of the conditions and the social environment in which he lives. Galton emphasizes the role of heredity and the supposed superiority of certain races from which a

large number of great writers and other men of genius have risen in proportion to the country's population. Robertson, citing several studies by Cooley, Nichols, and Candolle on the subject, disproved Galton's thesis, which was based principally on the relative infrequency of great writers and thinkers in the population of the United States as compared with that of England. He was referring then to the conditions obtaining fifty or sixty years ago when elementary schools were more numerous and made more easily available to all classes in the United States than in England. Galton argued that if genius were suppressible by adverse social conditions and cultivable by favorable conditions, the American people ought to have yielded more writers, thinkers, poets, artists, and scientists than the British at that time. Robertson, however, disposed of this argument, which is only apparently plausible, with this statement: "That the emergence of high literary capacity is the outcome of the totality of intellectual and economic conditions, and that Galton has given no thought to the totality, which varies greatly from age to age, and which differs widely as between England and the United States." He then mentioned the different factors which existed at that period of English history and which he considered

responsible for the rise of a proportionately larger number of famous writers and thinkers in England than in America. Among those factors were (1) a much larger leisure class in England, who attained their condition through inherited incomes, (2) a large provision for intellectual life in the way of university and other endowments and ecclesiastical semi-sinecures, (3) public offices with sufficiently high salaries permitting a speedy accumulation of savings or a great deal of leisure, (4) certain kinds of business positions, such as that of banker or stockbroker, which permitted a much larger amount of leisure in England than was usually possible in similar positions in the United States, (5) the presence of an old and relatively rich literary soil and literary atmosphere furnished by the liberally educated classes and the scholarly groups with good incomes, and therefore an adequate amount of leisure, (6) the high prestige attached to the work of British writers not only in their own country, but also in America, where reprinted books by English authors were sold at lower prices, because American laws gave them no copyright protection.

THUS THE TOTAL opportunities arising from these factors were pointed out by him as res-

possible for the development of a larger proportion of literary men and productive scholars in England than in America. These conditions, of course, have changed since the time Robertson made that comparative study. But the validity of his argument has not been impaired. Instead it has found additional support. For the opportunities for greater leisure in the United States, resulting from the enhancement of the economic prosperity of its people during the last generation or so, have given rise to a greater number of writers and scholars in America. The large number of books that are published every year in the United States find a big market not only in the schools and universities, but also with the general public at large. The standard of living of the American people has risen to such height, that the mass of the population does not only have the money to spend for books and magazines, but also the leisure to read them, either for enjoyment or for edification or for escape from boredom. On this subject, I should like to quote a portion of the monumental work of Max Lerner, who spent twelve years to finish his book, which has just gotten off the press. Here it is:

In the last generation something like a revolution in reading has taken place in America in the form of low-cost paperbound

books, making of Americans a nation of readers. With this has come a rise in publishing costs, which makes books that are destined for a very limited audience a luxury few publishers can afford. Thus there has been simultaneously a dwindling of the Small Audience for reading and a vast growth of the Big Audience.

The emergence of the paperbacks, along with the book clubs, has had a revolutionary impact on American reading habits. The clubs have served not only as large-scale distributors, but also as reading counselors, and through them millions of Americans have shaped new reading tastes and habits. The book industry had been more backward than most American industries in developing large-scale merchandising through retail outlets. There are 1,400 bookstores in America, compared with 500,000 food stores, 350,000 restaurants and bars, almost 200,000 gas stations, and over 50,000 drugstores. The revolution of paperbacks has been accomplished by mass-production cuts in cost, by a shrewd editorial selection of titles suggesting sex, crime detection, and violence, along with a number of classics, and finally by a revolution in distributing techniques. This has been achieved mainly by adding drugstores, newspaper stands, and even food markets to the bookstores, thus

bringing the reading habit to the ordinary American in his everyday haunts.

At mid-century Americans were buying almost a quarter billion paperbacks a year, with about a thousand titles appearing annually. Freeman Lewis calculated that the five most popular authors have been Erle Stanley Gardner, Erskine Caldwell, Thorne Smith, Elery Queen and Mickey Spillane. Three of the five are murder-mystery writers, and Spillane's books embody the worst fusion of violence and sexual exploitation in American writing. Yet a different kind of book, including some of the classics of social science and literature, has already found a way to a mass-reading public. The long-range consequences of paperbacks are likely to include the popularization of the best in literary achievement. Whether this will counterbalance the shoddy and sadistic stuff is an unresolved question. It should also be added, for perspective, that, despite their astronomic sales, paperbacks are bought by something less than 10 per cent of the American population.

At this juncture and by way of what you might call an episodic digression, I wish to draw your attention once more to our schools, particularly the elementary and secondary schools, which at present offer the only large market for the works of our writ-

ers. It seems most unfortunate, however, that the requirements obtaining in this field, more often than not, repel, rather than encourage, good literary writing and sound scholarship. I fear that the demand in this area is not for originality of presentation and free expression of an author's understanding of subject matter. The field has been made available only to those dogmatically prescribed in minute detail by textbook committees and their assistants. The books for elementary schools have to be written on the basis of an extremely limited vocabulary which must be mechanically and rigidly followed if writers expect their works to be adopted as textbooks. Unless a change has taken place in the last four or five years, the books that had been prescribed either as basic or supplementary readers in elementary schools are either written by American authors and published by American publishing companies or written by Filipino authors who are mostly teachers in public schools or persons who were at one time connected with the public schools. The criteria of adoption have nothing to do with beauty of presentation. They emphasize instead the slavish use of a very limited vocabulary and the boring repetition of simple words of one or two syllables. If such conditions are suggested by studies and researches of

some educational psychologists of twenty years ago, it is about time that we suggest a re-examination of the whole system. After all, we are living in a dynamic society which calls for constant re-examination, review, and revision of our mode of thinking, our ways of working, and even our methods of dying.

No wonder that most of the textbooks used in our schools make reading so unpleasant and disagreeable a task that the cultivation and acquisition of the reading habit becomes impossible. The objective apparently is to adjust the book to the immature mentality of the young rather than to pull up his undeveloped intellect and lead him to an appreciation of well-written books on things that arouse his interest within the field of his limited experience. Stevenson's "Child's Garden of Verses," for instance, becomes too difficult for a fifth- or sixth-grade pupil in our schools to understand and appreciate and yet it is a book intended to stir up the imagination and the interest of the young child who has reached that stage in his schooling.

WHILE MOST of the books for primary and elementary grades are now being written and published locally, the textbooks for secondary schools and colleges, with a few exceptions,

are still written by American authors and produced by printers and publishers in the United States. There is absolutely no excuse for this state of things. Academically and economically, the practice is detrimental to the interests of our nation. I believe that a country that claims to be politically independent should never remain educationally and culturally dependent in this manner. To be so is to perpetuate colonial mentality. It should be a cause for national embarrassment that a group of leading American university administrators and professors who came to make a survey of the University of the Philippines ten months ago urgently recommended in their report that we prepare and publish our textbooks for college and university students. If they as Americans are convinced that we could write such advanced textbooks, is it not strange, if not downright shameful, that we have not taken steps to stop the importation of elementary and secondary textbooks for our schools and prepare them ourselves in our own country? Where is our spirit of nationalism?

Let me not be misunderstood when I appeal to the spirit of nationalism before this audience. There are things that should properly belong to one's country and should be done by it, unless that country should choose to be dis-

loyal to its duty and thereby lose its self-respect and the respect of others. It is neither national bigotry nor fanatical patriotism for a nation to let no other people perform its own obligations or carry its own burdens.

But the writer, the thinker, and the scholar of today cannot afford to cultivate or to encourage any form of national Philistinism. We need not adopt an attitude of hostility to strangers in order to feel proud of our own nation. Our writers could exalt the virtues of our people without pouring contempt on the character of other nations. They need not be smug and cocky. For in the final analysis their field of service need not be restricted to a specific area of the earth, or to their native

country, or to a particular class, or to specific interests. It is man and humanity. "For," in the words of Lewis Mumford, "the writer is still a maker, a creator, not merely a recorder of fact, but above all an interpreter of possibilities. His intuitions of the future may still give body to a better world and help start our civilization on a fresh cycle of adventure and effort. The writer of our times must find within himself the wholeness that is now lacking in his society. He must be capable of interpreting life in all its dimensions, particularly in the dimensions the last century has neglected, restoring reason to the irrational, purpose to the defeatists and drifters, value to the nihilists, hope to those sinking in despair."

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A Case of Latin

IN A BACKWOODS courtroom in Oklahoma, a farmer was suing a railroad for the death of his cow, struck down by a train. The railroad attorney claimed it was a clear case of "damnum absque injuria"—*damage without liability*.

The farmer's lawyer, a backwoodsman, sauntered to the jury box.

"Gentlemen," he drawled, "I don't know much Latin. But I think I can translate that expression 'damnum absque injuria.' It means: It's a damn poor railroad that will kill a cow and not pay for it."

The farmer collected in full.