

# The Challenge of to the Filip

**I** DON'T THINK there is any poet, essayist, or fiction writer who wouldn't be pleased to know his work could produce a laudable course of action. In this afternoon's discussion I shall attempt to present the point of view of a fiction writer and that of a student of literature, particularly in the field of criticism, poetry, and drama. I post the following as my thesis: If a literary piece must contain propaganda, such as Mr. Soliongco seems to suggest, then the propagandistic content of the work must possess an internal relationship with the other artistic elements of the work; the writer's effort must follow the concept of necessity, or inevitability, as Aristotle calls it; it must have intrinsic rather than extrinsic conviction. I shall discuss the idea of necessity, or inevitability, more fully later.

**N**OTE that I used the conditional if — if a literary work must contain propaganda. If literature were nothing but propaganda, then probably we shouldn't be meeting in this conference. We should be at editorial desks, or standing before pulpits or on soap boxes, or in government bureaus of information. The danger of any extremism in assuming the functional category is the resulting demand for literature with an overemphasis on utilitarianism or moralism which sacrifices everything else that is in the work.

In our own lifetime we have seen two movements that stressed the utilitarian function of literature. First, there were the literary humanists, whose followers are still among us. They insist that modern literature has generally lacked centrality be-

# National Growth into Writer

By Edilberto K. Tiempo

cause it ignores the ethical core of human experience. The humanists demand that literature be the handmaiden of whatever they assume to be the Supreme Good. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with that demand, but the literary humanists so accentuate the moral and ethical content of literature and what results is didacticism.

The other movement, popular in the thirties, was the leftist movement which flowed from the Marxian concept of the class struggle and which required the conscious utilization of literature as an instrument of revolutionary action. In what may become a lopsided stress to make literature an instrument to promote national growth, we may sound like Michael Gold, the most famous representative of left-wing writers in America, when he said: "One of the basic

tasks of the writer is to stimulate and encourage and help the growth of proletarian literature ... We must realize that only this literature can answer these intellectual abstractions into which petty bourgeois people fall."

I may mention another school of thinking whose persuasion may not be too distant from the values we may be considering at this moment. I refer to the American muckrakers near the turn of the nineteenth century. *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, *The Octopus* by Frank Norris are examples of this school. The intention was to use fiction to rake up America's muck in the last decades of the nineteenth century, hoping that in the process of aeration its various elements would be bleached clean.

My reason for mentioning these movements is that in de-

fining the function and scope of the creative writer — or any artists of the fine arts, especially in relation to his milieu, any prescriptive injunctions are artificial and can choke the growth of any artistic enterprises. I categorically affirm that our Philippine writers concern themselves with the local — the national — scene, but doing so is only the initial step in the writer's creative effort — if he is still concerned with art at all. What he does with his material is his most challenging, his most important task. In dealing with issues and events, the writer must be aware of certain dangers.

One of them is this: If the writer aims to present a system of ideas as ideas, he will end up not as a poet or fiction writer but as a theoretician or a pamphleteer. There's nothing wrong with being a theorist or a pamphleteer; we need them in the Philippines. But a novelist and a pamphleteer belong to two different irreconcilable categories. Literature, we must recognize, is not so directly concerned with finding answers to social problems that will be immediately embodied in action; and, furthermore, novelists and poets are not equipped to substitute for political or economic leaders. Their concern is not so much to act as recorders of life and events, for that is the func-

tion of the historian or the sociologist. The writer's chief concern is that of interpreter, of generalizer. Literature commonly follows in the wake of life and events, and the writer's task is to give them synthesis, to give order and coherence. It is only as he creates universal form and coherence that the writer unconsciously assumes the role of legislator and prophet because he speaks the truth that is above the petty wranglings of his time; because he speaks for all mankind.

The writer's acceptance of utilitarianism as a primary consideration amounts to an explicit disbelief in the autonomy of the writer's art. "Art," said Goethe, "is but form-giving." Art is giving form to an *idea*. In explaining that incisive definition John Addington Symonds says, "There is not a work of art without a theme, without motive, without a subject. The presentation of that theme, that motive, that subject, is the final end of art. The art is good or bad according as the subject has been well or ill presented."

It would indeed be convenient to point to Rizal as a fine example for the Philippine writer. I am bracketing Del Pilar, Mabini, and Lopez Jaena with Rizal because the first three were unadulterated propagand-

ists. Rizal stands above his contemporaries as a writer. Setting him as an example for our generation of writers I heartily endorse. In the words of William Dean Howells, the eminent critic and novelist, *Noli Me Tangere* was the greatest novel written in any language within a hundred years of its publication. *Noli Me Tangere* is great not because it is propagandistic, but because it is a brilliantly executed novel. I say this in spite of the fact that the novel has the characteristic flaws of nineteenth century novelists like Thackeray and Dickens. Since we are writers, in evaluating Rizal as a novelist I should like to bring out the criteria by which novelist and critic James T. Farrell evaluates Dostoevski. First, are we going to slam into his ideology, disprove it, which is easy), and then throw him into the discard? This approach remarks Farrell, oversimplifies our extra-literary functionalism. Second, shall we say that Dostoevski was all right for his time, that for his time he was or was not reactionary, that in any case he was a revolutionary in his younger days, was exiled to Siberia, and once was even on the verge of execution before a firing squad? This method, Farrell says, would stow Dostoevski away in a museum, and attribute to his novels only the interest we find in any historical

curiosity. Third, shall we recognize that his characterizations are among the most profound and incisive to be met with in any novelist? Using this approach, which is a universal approach, Farrell concludes, we assimilate Dostoevski's values in and for our time.

If we use these criteria for *Noli Me Tangere*, Rizal would emerge as a triumphant figure in our literary history. The strongest proof of that assertion is this: that Rizal's dreams for reforms are past history, but *Noli Me Tangere* still lives in Sisa and Doña Consolacion and Padre Damaso and the philosopher Tasio. Rizal lives in the indignation with which he presented the errors of his day. It is this persistence value that makes *Noli Me Tangere* a living novel.

While still on Rizal, I should like to comment on the so-called "genuine Filipino tradition" which stems back, so responsible people among us say, to the tradition of the propaganda movement, to the days of Balagtas, Del Pilar, Rizal and Lopez Jaena. Let us not forget that Balagtas, Del Pilar, Rizal and Lopez Jaena were using the tools of Anglo-European culture and tradition. The outstanding writer of them all, Rizal, used the same satirical approaches as Juvenal, Voltaire, and Jonathan Swift, and commits the same

fictional flaws as Hugo and Thackeray. It's a fine thing to be nationalistic, to be truly Filipino, but we will be losing our perspective if we denied the continuity of the Anglo-European tradition of our forbears and denied the extension of this tradition through the Americans, in spite of Longfellow. American literature itself is a continuation — and until the middle of the nineteenth century a weak echo of English literature. English literature itself, one of the greatest conglomerations in history, had its roots in and its directions from Continental Europe. From Beowulf through Bede, through Chaucer, through the Renaissance and Shakespeare, through Dryden and the Neo-classical period, and then through the nineteenth century, Continental influences continually poured in to help shape English literature.

Literature is complex in origin and growth. Our own Filipino *balitao* — and we may not find a better illustration of an indigenous art from than the *balitao* — is a mongrel product. It traces its history back to Provence in the Middle Ages, and from there through Spain. As a Filipino writer I have not the least embarrassment or apology for riding down on the stream of Anglo-European-American tradition, since this Anglo-European-American tradition itself is

a mongrel breed. I am proud of it and blessed with it. The Philippines has been in a unique position in Far Eastern history; to deny the impact of external influences upon our own culture is to deny the facts of our history, of which we should all be proud.

The writer — the Filipino writer — must begin with an idea, with a theme, with a subject. But granting his theme, whether it be propagandistic or anything else, the writer's chief interest is to make that theme significant, and this he can do only through his art. If he were not concerned with his art, with his manner of communicating his subject, no matter how significant the theme, he has no business being a writer. Thus the statement of Mr. Emilio Aguilar Cruz that at this conference the delegates are 'apparently apathetic to the problems of craft,' if this were true, would be a wilful evasion of our responsibility as creative writers or as students or patrons of literature.

I do firmly advocate the writer's involvement in his milieu because this gives him authenticity, a solidity of specification, as a contemporary critic calls it. And if a writer aims to propagate a course of action, in other words, if a writer's work must embody propaganda, the work must contain that in-

ternal consistency and that essential external reference, it must follow the concept of artistic necessity, or it is no work of art. The propagandistic novelist's fundamental weakness lies in his inability to apply the principle of necessity in an essential and compelling manner. Inevitability must necessarily flow as events and implication from what has already been presented in the structure of events. If this principle is violated, then what emerges is the subjective imposition of the author's plea for a course of action, or whatever it is that he wants to present in the name of progress or morality. Regarding this subjective imposition the poet and critic Shelley warns that the more exclusive the writer's emphasis towards ethical or utilitarian demands, the farther it is from artistic realization.

**C**ONTENT is important in living literature, but this content must not be taken as synonymous with formal ideology, generalized themes, and the explicitly stated ideas of a writer. This content — whether of a public or private nature, whether it is about exploding a national policy or about a character's salvaging of his own private failure — this content must be the shaping of life itself into literary form, or in the words of James T. Farrell, "a way of

feeling and thinking and seeing life that the creative artist conveys to his audience—the structure of events, the quality of characterizations, the complex impact of the work itself." In evaluating Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, we do not judge Shakespeare's personal position in the conflict between the Roman aristocracy and the plebeians (the bias in this play happens to be patrician), but the evaluation should be on the basis of the inevitability of *Coriolanus'* decision, as he vindictively stands with his conquering army before the helpless city of Rome. In other words, the basic critical question is: When he decides not to attack Rome, and by this decision his own life is endangered the hands of his allies, the Volscians, has Shakespeare prepared us for this final prostration of *Coriolanus*? Shakespeare, as in his other plays, has given us adequate foreshadowing for this scene, one of the most dramatic in all of Shakespeare, in fact in all literature. Through the artist's craft we forget the issues of empire for the more vital problem of a man who must make a crucial decision upon which his life perilously hangs.

As a summary of what I have said, I suggest that what ultimately counts is what the writer does with his material.

If this were not so, then we are relinquishing our primary responsibility, then we may even pretend to bear the name of creative writers. The main business of the creative writer is not preaching. By the tools of his art, his main concern towards his audience and towards his material is that of bringing a shock of discovery, of recognition, of revelation, so that in his work the reader sees

himself in new awareness and evaluates himself with a more quickened spirit, and is given a richer insight into life and into his fellow beings. Thus the successful writer transcends the incidents of his time and becomes a sage and prophet. The writer of the highest integrity can rest his case on this. Artistic revelation is his final responsibility to himself and to his art.

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### **High-Power Camera**

*An Japanese camera firm recently announced the entry of the world's brightest lens system which it produced experimentally in the current International Camera Show at Cologne, West Germany.*

*The lens system has four times the resolving power of the human eye in a standard lens of fifty millimeters made up of five groups of seven lenses each.*

*If the system is used along with an ASA 2,000 high sensitive film, the camera can easily catch fast moving objects in the dark, its maker, the "Canon" firm, said.*

*Canon cameras using this system of lenses will be put on sale sometime next year after some further improvements, it was announced.*

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