

From the Editor

“Anyone can play a note. But as Bela Bartok said, the problem starts with the second note.” – András Schiff

My ultimate editorial is a veritable confession. Firstly, I confess to being addicted to books. It might be considered a pathology, but ever since college, I had made it a point to max out my library card. I like borrowing books, buying books, reading books, people who write books, and making books. But I confess to an even more serious addiction to music, especially classical music. In our ancestral house *junto al Pasig*, I learned to play the piano from childhood, and nothing was as pure as the joy that music brought. Finally, I am obsessively addicted to an activity called “reflection.” Rudi Visker, one of my professors in Leuven and relative of the Dutch Jesuit Rudolf Visker, was alarmed when he thought he was standing before a tropical Hegelian. Rather than the modernist penchant for thinking on thought itself, reflection is the translation of the Filipino word, “*pagmumuni-muni*.” Also with repeating syllables, its synonyms are *pagninilay-nilay* and *pagbubulay-bulay*. This cognitive act, whose sound connotes repetition and play, is different from *pag-iisip*, which is “thinking,” and *pag-alam*, which is “knowing.” *Pagmumuni-muni* is the act of dwelling on an image, idea, or event, chewing on it with one’s heart and mind. Its meaning is closer to *meditatio*, a form of mental prayer used by Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus. According to our beloved Roque Ferriols, SJ, *pagmumuni-muni* is nothing more than reaching for depth (*lalim*).

Furthermore, I confess to being naïve. During my sophomore year, ca. 1984, our Macroeconomics teacher required us to listen to a lecture in Makati, and she said that the speaker was her father. I vehemently whispered to my seatmate, “Why? Who is her father?” My seatmate, less naïve, said, “Idiot, she is the daughter of Diosdado Macapagal.” I wish I could say that my life in the Ateneo had been a story of gradual awakening to reality, but instead it had been merely an awakening to my own naïvete, which only proved to be an endless pit. Another story illustrates this. At the height of the controversy surrounding the statement by some Ateneo de Manila faculty in support of the RH Bill, a Jesuit (who was probably feigning naïvete) asked me, “Is there a political party trying to dominate in the Ateneo?” I answered: “I guess, but I do not know which one.” Part of my confession would also be to declare that if there were political parties involved in the Ateneo, I would be totally clueless about their identities or ideologies and agenda.

This editorial, however, is less an account of my own political involvement (we leave this tale of staggering innocence for another opportunity), and more a discussion of a vision for the Humanities in a Jesuit university, within the context of political positions open to a Filipino Catholic thinker today. My reflections are triggered by a book I chanced upon, entitled *Beauty Will Save Us*, by Gregory Wolfe. The title is taken from a quotation from Dostoevsky, “Beauty will save us,” and speaks of the role of the imagination in the social order:

Whereas I once believed that the decadence of the West could only be turned around through politics and intellectual dialectics, I am now convinced that authentic renewal can only emerge out of the intellectual visions of the artist and the mystic.¹

Wolfe, however, is not talking to his political opponents—the “Democrats and Communists.” Rather, he addresses his fellow conservatives, asking, what is next? How can the conservative agenda take over the reins of power once again? Or, put another way, how will the conservative agenda save the West from the liberals? He proposes the use of culture, the very instrument that brought the conservatives to their knees; the reason that led many conservatives to be branded as “philistines,” or advocates of empiricism and pragmatism who deprecate culture.

Wolfe’s generalizations might make us ask whether there are competing ideologies inherent in Ateneo’s Humanities education. On the one hand, we are heavily Western. This is the reason why we have entitled this journal *Asian Perspectives*, because our advisers have remarked that the Ateneo School of Humanities has not been reputed to be a *locus* of Asian and Philippine Studies, but is instead a bastion—if not the last bastion—of Western liberal arts. On the other hand, the Ateneo has been known as the place where one acquires a liberal arts education, that is, knowledge of the classics of Western culture. Perennially, one would hear colleagues lament the loss of the appreciation for Latin and Shakespeare. If we follow Wolfe, a self-confessed conservative, to uphold the Western canon would be part of the conservative agenda, that is, the return to the glory days of Western culture when it was not contaminated by the liberals—the so-called “Democrats and Communists.” Many, however, would still lament the opposite, that there was no need for the School of Humanities to return to its glory days, for it had never cast aside its devotion to tradi-

¹Gregory Wolfe, *Beauty Will Save Us: Recovering the Human in an Ideological Age* (Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2011), 1.

tion. We are immitigably Western, and we uphold a canonistic education in the liberal arts. As long as the Great Books are being taught in our core classes, we will continue to be justifiably considered such.

I myself have been schooled in the Catholic canon. I have read my Tolkien, Dostoyevsky, Bernanos, and Greene. I remember lines from the *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The transcendental ideas of the one, the true, and the good have been ingrained in us by Francis Reilly, SJ. The story in Manila, however, is not as straightforward as Wolfe's own context. In the 1980s, the triumvirate of the one, the true, and the good, was understood (by most Ateneans) as a subtle critique of Martial Law. No one was supposed to take it seriously, since Imelda Marcos kept on parroting the transcendentials formulated by Jesuit Thomists. Genealogical analysis would also help us understand how Martial Law culture had been imbued by Transcendental Thomism. My political naïvete would probably prevent me from appreciating the full ramifications of the use of St. Thomas for the purposes of the Conjugal Dictatorship (although now I understand why a Marcos loyalist did a stint at the Lonergan Center at Boston College). And, even more, such an analysis could help us understand how those that fought Martial Law tried to shoot down anyone who made mention the transcendentials with any modicum of sincerity. For the same reason, anyone who raises the issue of beauty as a category in urban renewal risks being branded "Imeldific."

Advocates of art and culture would have to ask themselves seriously whether the idea of the Humanities as the canon of Western culture is a form of conservatism. There are those who think that a Jesuit University has no other choice. Personally, I would ask, does Catholicity necessarily mean conservatism? Perhaps my question betrays my medieval mind. As I have said, I confess to being naïve. It would, however, be even more naïve to think that the Ateneo is not prone to persuasions on both sides of the political fence (namely, the conservatives and the liberals). But is it the case that an elite culture requires one to be very subtle about his interests, or to simulate to forward the ideology of the master in order to gain leverage to advance the slave's ambitions?

The principal question is whether the Ateneo Humanities education is conservative or liberal. This does not seem to be a difficult question to answer from the purview of wanting to foreground the riches of Western culture. There was a time when, drawing up a syllabus in philosophy, one needed to pay lip service to the History of Ideas (my field of specialization), and that would ineluctably commence with Plato, and should include the requisite bashing of Cartesianism—a form of self-hate, since René Descartes stood as one of the great fruits of Jesuit liberal arts education.

At this point of our reflection, three questions come to mind: How have attitudes changed among scholars of the Humanities in the Ateneo and in the Philippines? How are conservatives reacting to these changes? Does the term “Jesuit university” necessarily mean conservative or liberal? There are no easy answers to these questions. I am not, however, so naïve to offer simple solutions. As I leave my position as editor of this journal, I set the question which I think should inform humanities education and research in the Ateneo. What is our stand on the question of the preservation of Western culture? Are we content to simply give an Asian perspective to it? How are we to define an Asian perspective in the first place? Are we tasked to study our national and indigenous texts? What is our position in Southeast Asia as Arts and Humanities experts (see in this issue “Filipino-ness and the Heterosexual Matrix in the Work of Gregorio Brillantes,” by Wernmei Yong Ade; “Local Discourse, Identity and the Search for a Filipino Philosophy: A Re-exploration through the Lens of Reynaldo Ileto,” by Rhoderick John Abellanos)?

Speaking more concretely (if not materially), these questions can be placed within the context of the interest of South American countries to see the Philippines as a gateway to Asia, as a way of expanding their market (see “Claudio Bravo: Sojourn in Manila” in the Arts Section of this issue). This phenomenon coincides with young students in Spain discovering the Philippines as a gold mine for scholarship (see “Gemelli and His Journey to the Philippines,” by David Manzano and “The Oriental Passion to Honor the Dead,” by Ana Ruiz Gutiérrez). While economists continue to deliberate whether culture has anything to do with economic development, *humanists* consider the work they have to do. Is the work of a humanist that of a moralizing agent? Is our work a catalyst for change? Is our work to help souls? Just what is our work in an age when the Philippines stands at an economic sweet spot, but is also faced with the challenge of inclusive growth?

Is our task to forward the role of the imagination in being human? Indeed, *imaginatio* serves as a third way to *fides* and *ratio*. Conservatives would often raise the horror of the artist’s wild imaginings. Perhaps imagination is what Jesus of Nazareth had. A new movement within spirituality has been trying to portray a Jesus who is closer to a stand-up comic than to a gun-toting moralist. The teaching of this Jesus is imbued with the spirit of the Buddhist praxis of the *koan*.² This movement would like to think that Jesus did not give answers in the way most Christians present him. Instead, he invited the disciples to become a community where they

²Kenneth S. Leong, *The Zen Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 2001).

reflected on the meaning of his words. The task of the Humanities educator in a Jesuit institution is to foster companionship with this Jesus, who is a companion of all other great teachers of the Way.

This inevitably was the import of the scholarly work in the Arts and Humanities that this journal has wished to publish (see especially in this issue “Performing Hypermasculinity in Billboard Ads and Malls in Manila,” by Gary Devilles; and “Disrobing and Redressing Sex,” by Geoffrey Guevara). It is not an accident that it is only now that Philippine society is passing the so-called liberal laws. Both conservatives and liberals would have the benefit of experience and hindsight, by which we can see what has happened in highly secularized societies as well as in fundamentalist societies. Thus, beauty will save us, if we take the understanding of beauty, the ever ephemeral, to be (like music) an important category of modern life. (In order to understand the idea of culture needed in our times, we had the honor of interviewing Usec. Manuel [Manolo] Quezon, III, on the idea of culture inherent in the present government.)

As a philosophy teacher I have always put premium on argumentation as well as depth. I believe that the most important contribution of the Humanities is *beauty*, defined as *depth tinged with pleasure*. Pace the towering figure of Thomas More on Ateneo’s University Road, the humanist is not somebody who is just devoted to either God or King. A Filipino humanist is devoted to *Lalim*. What *Lalim* is can be illustrated by this exchange: I ask my students how they know if a person has skills in relating. I ask, “Is it in the quantity?” They all say, “No!” I ask, “If it is not the quantity of relationships, what is it then?” They say, “*Sa lalim* (depth).” This is probably the easiest and yet the most difficult aspect of the Humanities: the category of depth. It is easy because it does not have to be quantified; it is difficult because it is totally indeterminate. *Lalim* is not something we can see. It is the darkness of an abyss, which envelops one who plunges into it. Being in the depths is not always pleasant. *De profundis* is the lament of one depressed by defeat and poverty. However, without depth, there is no genuine relationship and friendship, as my students pointed out. I guess it is a function of a consumerist and ambitious society to keep relationships at a shallow level, for then, the quantity of relationships becomes the premium. Furthermore, if the art of the actor is to be the basis of love, truth is needed in the life of a humanist. Against the absolutist, the truth of the actor is performed: it is staged and produced on cue. It is, as Teresa de Avila declared, “humility.”

The question of how one knows depth and how he acquires it is not something easily articulated. For that reason, a humanist is an unneces-

sary inconvenience. Depth also cannot be tested through loyalty checks to one's political party affiliation. Depth is none other than that which is the inconvenience of being human. Like music, the human is so deep it can be heard, but only heard.

Depth might not be quantifiable, but spiritual discernment has formulated a sure-fire way of "knowing" it. One knows he has reached depth if it leads to action and generosity (See "Restless Heart: Towards an Existential Ontology of *Eros* in Augustine," by Jeffrey Centeno). The premium on depth is a premium placed on loving action. Put more concretely (if not materially), Voltaire declared, "*Il faut cultiver notre jardin.*" This is a kind of antidote to a form of optimism that accepts the *status quo*. But even the turn to subjectivity is inadequate in our age of climate change and extreme weather: we must now develop our parks. The Humanities is about the creation of public spaces, especially green spaces where civic virtues (like equality and transparency) can be fostered. Likewise, the Humanities is a veritable move from the gallery to the museum; from one's bookshelf to the public library.

A humanist would understand that depth and action (articulated in the creation of public spaces) would immune us to a clericalism that is the centrality of the religious synthesis. When this balance is achieved would the religious find its real power. Like beauty, power is maintained in a balance. Our post-modern condition would warn us against the balance of symmetry. Rather, this balance we speak of is that of the dialectic—the tension that triggers the dramatic movement. Only within this conflict can a story be told, and alas, a climax achieved. Thus, the religious synthesis may tell its story in our age once it allows for the public, for the civic, and for the secular. For in our times, those who deftly tell their stories gain the laurel of political victory.

Let me end by thanking the Ateneo School of Humanities for allowing me to serve as Editor of *Asian Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities*. I always considered my role as Editor as a mode of intimacy, since we scholars converse in our solitude through our writing. I confess that what is next for me is certain, I shall read Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier*, and learn to play the second note as well as the first.

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