

TRANSLATION AND THE PROBLEM OF REALISM IN PHILIPPINE LITERATURE IN ENGLISH¹

J. Neil C. Garcia
University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City
jcgarcia1@up.edu.ph

Abstract

To the degree that Philippine literature in English is translational it cannot be realistic: realism is a signifying practice that presupposes a monocultural ground, upon which the “consensus” of representational fidelity can happen. And yet, much of the criticism of this literature, as produced by Filipinos themselves, has generally failed to take note of this crucial precondition, enacting a ruinous category mistake that, among other things, unwittingly confounds contemporary departures from the referential towards the “avant-garde” and/or antimimetic modes, as these are espoused by young Filipino poets and fictionists alike. Finally, this paper argues that the various literary practices encoded in Philippine anglophone writing still need to be postcolonially specified, their translated or syncretic qualities critically recognized and acknowledged, and that this kind of interpretive labor needs to be made not only by locally engaged critics but also by Filipino writers who purport to champion more theoretically informed and self-reflexive “performances” or texts.

Keywords

anglophone, poetry, Filipino, mimetic, category mistake, avant-garde

About the Author

J. Neil C. Garcia teaches creative writing and comparative literature in the University of the Philippines, Diliman, where he serves as Director of the university press and a fellow for poetry in the Institute of Creative Writing. He is the author of numerous poetry collections and works in literary and cultural criticism, including *The Sorrows of Water* (2000), *Kaluluwa* (2001), *Performing the Self: Occasional Prose* (2003), *The Garden of Wordlessness* (2005), *Misterios and Other Poems* (2005), and *Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics: Essays and Critiques* (2003). In 2009, Hong Kong University Press published its own international edition of his *Philippine*

Gay Culture (1996). Between 1994 and 2006, he coedited the famous *Ladlad* series of Philippine gay writing. His most recent book is *Aura: the Gay Theme in Philippine Fiction in English*, published in 2012. Forthcoming titles by him are *The Postcolonial Perverse: Critiques of Contemporary Philippine Culture, Myth and Writing: Occasional Prose*, and *Homeless in Unhomeliness: Postcolonial Critiques of Philippine Literature*. He is also currently at work on “Likha,” his seventh poetry book.

THE CENTURY-OLD HISTORY OF PHILIPPINE ANGLOPHONE LITERATURE has supposedly passed through its own “realism,” as exemplified by the works of celebrated writers like Manuel Arguilla, Bienvenido Santos, N.V.M. Gonzalez, Kerima Polotan Tuvera, among others. And yet, we need to realize that realism in this case is a “category mistake,” because realism as a critical term presupposes monocultural verisimilitude in a first language. To wit: Charles Dickens’s and George Eliot’s novels about nineteenth-century London were deemed realistic, because among other things their characters actually sounded/talked like the Londoners of their time. By contrast, the typical scenes of *kaingeros* and their children talking to each other in English on the loamy fields of Gonzalez’s stories and novels were obviously not realistic scenes in this sense. They were translations,² and precisely to this degree we cannot so easily subsume them under the category of realism, short of falling into historical error.

Filipino writers working in English are, most of the time, translating from a plurality of linguistic and cultural registers, and this amounts to a form of *ironic distanciation* between reference and sign—to a form of self-reflexivity that exists despite the habitual response (actually, the neocolonial wish) that deems it doesn’t (or it shouldn’t). Without realism per se, the modernist/postmodernist departures being bandied about by some young avant-garde Filipino writers nowadays cannot be said to signify the same “radical” things. In fact, it’s rather likely that the imitation of perceptibly modernist/postmodern ironic forms—premised on a hegemonic monocultural dispensation, and the realism that shores it up and that it promotes—may be nothing more than the expression of a fetishistic attachment to the phantasm of a neocolonial power that a self-referential and formally involuted deployment of a globally desirable (because prestigious) English at once signifies and performs.³

In this paper, I intend to perform the following tasks. First, I will describe realism as a literary genre and as a signifying practice. This account will specify its genealogy securely and definitively within the representational episteme of the West. I will then reference misguided descriptions of Philippine anglophone fiction as “realist” and/or “realistic,” as such may be found explicitly—or implicitly—in the writings of a variety of its critics. And lastly, I will present some preliminary arguments concerning the issue of anglophone Filipino poetry and its “mimetic” resistance to the kinds of self-reflexive poetics—premised upon modernist biases—that shut out referentiality for the sake of a “materialist” model of language. In the process I will attempt to locate points of convergence between both the “mimetic” and the “non-mimetic” camps—a dualism that obtains just as much in poetry as in fiction⁴—and argue that the increasingly dismissive and self-righteous mooting (using a narrative of supersession) of representational writing in English in our country today proceeds from a conceptual slippage that fails to account for its translational quality. Moreover, such a slippage overlooks the continuity and persistence of thematic concerns across these supposedly clearly cloven

aesthetic positions on one hand, and on the other possibly betrays the presence of a neocolonial fetishistic dynamic, which seeks to flatten out the global language to sheer surface in order to more affectively possess its historical referent, which is nothing if not global capitalism itself.

We can speak of realism as a genre, and in the Western literary tradition, it effectively superseded Romantic idealism sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century. Realism, in this sense, is a fictional mode that devotes close and intense attention to detail, and uses accretive and thick description in order to better “reproduce” the real. This mode largely foregoes commentary, in order to report incidents and events that it describes in rich and verbally dense terms. As critics remind us, this genre sacrifices plot for the sake of character, whose psychological complexity this mode of writing seeks to faithfully represent.⁵

Thus defined, realism is said to have originated in the work of the French author, Honore de Balzac, who wrote closely observed scenes of ordinary French life that were full of environmental and place-specific details. No grand plot turns take place in his works; instead, narrative nuances and small observations move the story along.⁶ At the wellspring of the American tradition, on the other hand, was Mark Twain, whose novels are remarkably realistic in their use of vernacular or “honest” speech, as well as descriptive “local color.” Twain’s stories are also mostly about middle-class and downright poor characters, whose lives sometimes take grim turns.⁷ This is another well-known characteristic of realism: the so-called refusal to embellish or “prettify” reality. On the more “introspective” side of the realist continuum, there is the American-British fictionist, Henry James, who towered over many realist writers of his day.⁸ His fiction focuses on the clash between the old and the new worlds—between decadent, languid, and insidious Europeans on one hand, and dynamic, gullible, and upstanding Americans on the other. James’s characters are almost always fully fleshed out in his fictions. His narrators hardly editorialize in their respective stories, which unfold entirely through the eyes of his characters.

Historians have concluded that literary realism is analogous to journalism in the sense that like a news report, it aims to achieve “objectivity” in its rendering of scenes. In Victorian England, the better-known realist novelists of this period in fact worked in journalism, in the main. Realism can be seen as a precursor of documentaries in this sense, and like this contemporary mass media genre, it treated the lives of the socially downtrodden, as well as the difficulties being faced by the bourgeois class in Europe and America. Moreover, literary realism draws from psychological science, operationalizing its insights into human behavior, motivation, and emotions, which it attempts to render in all their complexity. Realist fiction regards people as the locus of complicated forces and influences, and it deploys the technique of internal monologue in order to reflect this “truth.”⁹

A realist fictional text, therefore, dwells more on inner transformation than outer

plot, registering its movements as changes in the main character's perception and understanding. Unlike Romantic novels—in which emplotment was both obvious and orderly—the narrative arc of realist novels traces trajectories that are not easily apparent. Further examining realism in formal terms, we easily notice that the omniscient point of view—that was the norm in Romantic writing—in this fictional mode gives way to the selective omniscient or even the first person perspective. Often, in these instances, the narrator proves himself to be far from reliable. Realist stories are also commonly framed within bigger narratives—a technique that further distances the reader from the story's external events. This complication of narrative logic serves to further imitate reality, which is, by definition, difficult, intractable, and shifting.¹⁰

On the other hand, as a signifying practice that exceeds mere formalist technicality, realism has been described as the ensemble of discursive strategies which enable—and encourage—the reader to believe in the text's referential power. Literary realism is, hence, the production of “reality effects” in literary texts—a specific form of referentiality that seeks to faithfully reference the nature of the world and of human life. This representational process is, needless to say, indicatively Western. It is rooted in the “dominant mood” of nineteenth-century Europe, and was premised upon “a rationalist epistemology that turned its back on the fantasies of Romanticism” (Furst 23). The social, political and scientific events of its time and place all contributed to shaping it. As such, realism is a staunchly secular vision, that emerged in the West when empiricism and materialism were in full sway, when the mechanistic paradigm rendered reality explainable in terms of causalities and determinations, when individualism had been rationalized in terms of rights, and when the economic system of capitalism had effectively reified many aspects of human life (Furst 25). Some Marxist critics, in fact, have seen realism as the only legitimate—because scientific—representational mode, that can account for the real (which is to say, ideologically disabused) state of economic relations in society. Nowadays, owing to the ascendancy of critical theory, we understand that the “real” in realism is, of course, merely a convention—an effect of a signifying system that permits this kind of referential logic in literary representations.

It is important that we understand more clearly the cultural presuppositions of realism. Philippe Hamon explains that for realism to work, the reader needs to lend credence—to “authenticate”—what the realist text claims to be real (qtd. in Villanueva 130). The reader in this sense may be seen as empirically minded, who believes only what he or she can access through his senses. The realist text can only hope to accomplish this through its structure, which is painstakingly detailed in a specific sense, composed of a dense mosaic of descriptive passages, which must occur often—and *resonantly*—and privilege a content which is suited to such description: places, events, and characters that are systematized or categorized. Examples of such “thick” descriptive passages are those that pertain to domestic interiors, ritualized events such as meals or feasts, ordered parts of society such

as villages or towns. Moreover, family histories narrated within the context of social histories frequently become the topic of realism, precisely because they lend themselves relatively easily to readerly “validation”—on the level of character and setting, both.

In other words, realism is a rigid and highly ritualized mode, with its requisite structural and contextual qualities, and offers only a limited range of artistic choices to the writer. It is in this sense that realism can be called, in Hamon’s words, “a constrained discourse.” Realism relies so much on consensual and univocal signification, that virtually “anything else is liable to lapse into noise.” And so, we may think of it as an “ideological and rhetorical code, common to sender and receiver, that ensures the legibility of the message through implicit or explicit references to a system of values which takes the place of the real” (Hamon 425). Verisimilitude is therefore a socially sanctioned activity of *vraisemblance* or referentiality. As such it is nothing if not an institutionalized system of values that takes the place of the real and therefore establishes, at any given moment in time (and for any given group or community), what is credible, likely, or possible.

Hamon further spells out, in fact, the following conditionalities required for realism to work (Hamon 435). First, the world must be an abundantly “describable” location. Next, it must be possible to fully name and communicate something about this world. And then, words must be deemed as capable of imitating, but not literally producing, the real. And then, both the message and the style must be as unobtrusive or “imperceptible” as possible. Finally, the reader must believe what the author is saying. Clearly, these requirements cannot be easily assumed about the usefulness of an always already perceptible and self-consciously deployed English in the Philippine context, whose realities aren’t entirely describable or even nameable in this language, and whose linguistic situation is dizzyingly mixed and multifarious, right from the start. And then, the last condition proves most salient, indeed: basically, for realism to be possible, both reader and author must share the same “attitude”—needless to say, must share the same language and the same cultural ground, the same *habitus* that deems this form of imitation as realistic, precisely.

The topic of realism, however, is far from exhausted, and continues to be explored and critiqued by Western critics to the present day. For example, the “unknown aspect” of the question of realism, as Dario Villanueva argues, in fact pertains to the actual reception by its audience of the mimetic illusion that realism proffers. Amazingly enough—as Villanueva observes—most theorizings of the representational claims that realism makes avoid this aspect of the entire signifying process, focusing instead on the “genetic” claims being made by this mode, as they are channeled through the author. (128-29) Suffice it to say, and as this paper’s preliminary examination of the subject wishes to suggest, critiquing the use of this term to describe the translational practices of Philippine anglophone writing indeed pertains more to the question of reception than form or intentionality, *per se*. The

complexity of the representational process that occurs when a Filipino anglophone writer attempts to refer to his or her experiences using English derives as much from the translation that he or she enacts on the page, as from the translational and culturally syncretic context within which he or she seeks to make the work signify. On the other hand, Luc Herman's exhaustive survey of how realism has been theorized as a concept in Western epistemology makes it clear that underlying the modernist and avant-garde rejection of this representational mode is the rejection of "programmatically realism," as such was established in the realist canons of the major literatures of Europe and America. (1-5) Calling it programmatic strikes me as a particularly fortunate and illuminating thing, because it emphasizes the monocultural ground that underpins this signifying activity as it was practiced and theorized in the West. Even as it's becoming more and more customary to see realism in analogy with mimesis-poiesis—which is to say, the imitation-creation, that is inherent to the process of translation—as a genre of writing realism has always assumed the absence of the need for cross-cultural "translation," in the ordinary or everyday sense of the word.

Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Dickens, Twain, Balzac: the great and touchstone literary realists in the Western tradition (for realism is nothing if not Western, strictly speaking) all wrote in their first languages, all wrote within monocultural empirical traditions, all described their worlds expansively and *citationally*, copying even the speech of their subjects' real-life counterparts, and describing (almost transcribing) their fictional situations thickly and convincingly. The context for realist utterances may either be deictic or fully described, but the point is that the social ground for realistic consensus must be linguistically unproblematic enough to facilitate representation. While it's true that the works of some of these standard realist authors may have been translated subsequently into English and taught as examples of realism (for instance, those by Balzac and Dostoyevsky) in the anglophone world, nevertheless we need to remember that none of this changes the fact that their subsumption into this genre was made on the strength of their having been deemed realistic by their own critics writing also in the same original language.¹¹

Turning to Philippine literature, we can more or less conclude that critics of Filipino fiction in English have, by and large, ignored the issue of realism as a culturally specific category that cannot so easily be imputed across localities. We need to understand at the outset, however, that this "undertheorization" of the translational aspect of realistic representation in postcolonial literature is also pretty much the case elsewhere: indeed, it's interesting to note that attempts to understand realism in postcolonial contexts have almost always dwelled on the supposedly self-evident and "universal" techniques of this genre, and the ways they are deployed by writers in various locations around the neo/colonized world. As far as I know, the question of translation as I have posed it here—which is to say, that it problematizes the otherwise straightforward operations of mimesis,

and renders it ironic right from the get go—has not really been recognized in any of these preliminary works on literatures of the Global South.¹² While the more theoretically supple and responsible of Filipino critics of Philippine anglophone literature—for example, the Cebuano Resil Mojares—do take exception to the universalist dogma of simplistic formalism by arguing that Philippine literature in English properly belongs to and is intertextually implicated in an old and rich narrative tradition of local oral epics, tales, folk stories, and ballads, as well as Spanish metrical romances, fables, and the like (Mojares 1983), like postcolonial criticism in general by and large the criticism of our anglophone writing has not been overly careful in avoiding category mistakes of this sort.

Instead, identifying Rizal's novels as the first realist texts in this tradition, critics of Filipino anglophone fiction (including even more "attentive" readers like Mojares) have mostly assumed the category of realism to be self-evident and universally applicable, completely forgetting the fact that, on one hand, the cultural condition that brought it about in Europe did not remotely obtain in the Philippines of Rizal's time, and on the other, that Rizal's famous fictional texts were themselves translational, having been originally written in Spanish and addressed explicitly to a Spanish (or even European) cosmopolitan readership. As we know, this was a decision that required Rizal to fashion a narrator that would act like a compulsively describing and annotating informant, and to translate the dialogues of many of his characters, who would have realistically spoken to each other most certainly not in Spanish, but in Tagalog. Strictly speaking, the fact of these novels' *dialogic translatedness* alone should have confounded the idea that realism is a fitting ascription for them.

And yet, because by the late nineteenth century, Romantic novels in Spanish started to get serialized in local papers in the Philippines, the clear and revolutionary difference that Rizal's novels brought to the scene made "realism" seemingly inevitable and appropriate as a label with which to best describe them. This was, after all, the way the passage of the novel's own history went, in Europe itself: from the sentimentality of romanticism to the sociological posturings and "reckonings" of realism. Soon enough, nationalist critics could be read unanimously extolling these texts for their dissident and detailed (which is to say, "realistic") portrait of the Philippine colony, which was much abused by its panoply of corrupt religious and secular colonial leaders.

Because its theme was not about revolutionary change but rather about unrequited love, the first novel in English, Zoilo Galang's *A Child of Sorrow* (1921) has, by contrast, been described as a Tagalog melodramatic novel that only happened to have been written in English (Mojares 340). It would take Maximo Kalaw's unabashedly political and historical *The Filipino Rebel* (1927)—thematizing as it did the agonies of the American occupation—to inaugurate, in Filipino anglophone fiction, a version of the "realist" tradition that Rizal started with his famous diptych (Mojares 344). On the other hand, it is worth mentioning

that during the American period, Tagalog novels, mostly sentimental and patently unrealistic, started coming out. They certainly cannot be said to have emulated the achievement of Rizal's novels. It would take Lope K. Santos's novel about social inequities, *Banaag at Sikat*, to break away from the sentimental mold—although, even then, not successfully or completely (Mojares 345). With N. V. M. Gonzalez's 1940 novel, *Winds of April*, the Filipino novel in English may be said to have arrived at a new thematic and stylistic watershed (Mojares 347). This novel, along with Gonzalez's other works, deliberately aims to "reflect"—by supposedly rhythmically imitating—some of the "verbal qualities" of local languages. In the post-War period, there was of course the great Kerima Polotan, whose award-winning *Hand of the Enemy* (1962) has been acclaimed for its seamless use of English, and its successful fusing of domestic and nationalistic themes.

Critics of the Filipino novel nowadays observe that the central interest of many of the recent productions by Filipino writers is the question of history. Contemporary Filipino novelists typically use history as material, although increasingly they also interrogate its conventional definition by infusing their fictional projects with ideas poached from postmodern narrative theory. The main characters in these novels are situated firmly in social and political contexts, and the nation is almost always allegorized through the conflicts of their own individual lives.

On the other hand, according to the anthologist Leopoldo Yabes, realism was also the favored mode in Filipino short stories from the pre- and post-War periods. This passage from "Morning in Nagrebcan" (Arguilla 319) a dark and memorable "rural" story by the famous pre-War writer, Manuel Arguilla, demonstrates clearly the translation that the author needed to perform, both in the registered speech of his central characters—in this passage, a peasant boy and his mother—and in the lyrical and descriptive speech of the narration itself (for indeed, any work of fiction is, finally, all things considered, someone's narrated speech). As is the typical case in most stories of its time, in Arguilla's fiction the language of narration is rendered in standard English sentences that include, every now and then, place-names and proper nouns that were clearly meant to lend the story some "local color":

It was sunrise at Nagrebcan. The fine, bluish mist, low over the tobacco fields, was lifting and thinning moment by moment. A ragged strip of mist, pulled away by the morning breeze, had caught on the clumps of bamboo along the banks of the stream that flowed to one side of the barrio. Before long the sun would top the Katahagan hills, but as yet no people were around. In the grey shadow of the hills, the barrio was gradually awaking. Roosters crowed and strutted on the ground while hens hesitated on their perches among the branches of the camanchile trees. Stray goats nibbled the weeds on the sides of the road, and the bull carabaos tugged restively against their stakes...

The boy descended the ladder, leaning heavily on the single bamboo railing that served as a banister. He sat on the lowest step of the ladder, yawning and rubbing his eyes one after the other. Bending down, he reached between his legs for the black-spotted puppy. He held it to him, stroking its soft, warm body. He blew on its nose. The puppy stuck out a small red tongue, lapping the air. It whined eagerly. Baldo laughed—a low gurgle.

He rubbed his face against that of the dog. He said softly, “My puppy. My puppy.” He said it many times. The puppy licked his ears, his cheeks. When it licked his mouth, Baldo straightened up, raising the puppy on a level with his eyes. “You are a foolish puppy,” he said, laughing. “Foolish, foolish, foolish,” he said, rolling the puppy on his lap so that it howled...

Nana Elang, the mother of Baldo, now appeared in the doorway with a handful of rice straw. She called Baldo and told him to get some live coals from their neighbor.

“Get two or three burning coals and bring them home on the rice straw,” she said. “Do not wave the straw in the wind. If you do they will catch fire before you get home.” She watched him run toward Ka Ika’s house where already smoke was rising through the nipa roofing into the misty air. One or two empty carromatas drawn by sleepy little ponies rattled along the pebbly street, bound for the railroad station.

Committing the same conceptual slippage, critic and fictionist Cristina Hidalgo surmises that the “realist” imperative in Filipino fiction in English will remain pretty much in place, but that the future of this tradition will become more and more “open”—which is to say, more and more syncretic (Hidalgo 58-109). As she sees it, in the same way that contemporary Filipino fiction is becoming thematically more inclusive—becoming infused with a variety of political issues and concerns, like gender, sexuality, globalization, migration, etc.—linguistically it will also allow increasing degrees of “diversity.” Hidalgo foresees that, in the proximate future, Filipino anglophone fiction will most likely be written in a variety of languages—if not in the narration, then in the dialogues as well as in the characters’ narrated thoughts—in order to reflect more and more the reality of the Filipino contemporary situation. What Hidalgo is saying is that, to her mind, in the near future this genre will become more and more “realistic,” finally in the critical (as opposed to “loose” or uncritical) sense of the term.

It is surprising to realize that this “category mistake” could have been committed by so many critics across almost a century of critical reflection on this literature. Things are slightly “better” in Filipino criticism, however, most likely because the deployment of Western categories in the reading of non-English texts is more easily disabused precisely because of simple linguistic incongruence. In his study

of “aesthetic” transitions in Tagalog poetry, for example, the poet and Virgilio S. Almario cites the simplistic way some Filipino critics have deployed the terms “romanticism” and “realism” in their analyses, “superimposing” them on local texts without much contextualization. In this respect, Almario distinguishes the kind of “romantic” (that is to say, sentimental) writing by Filipinos, from the European romantic animus, which isn’t so much a style as a “world-view” (6). He does the same thing to “realism,” qualifying that the way Filipino writers understand it veers away from the Western conceptualization and toward a more native “sensibility,” a profound commitment to “bring literature back to the homeland.”

Nonetheless, it’s possible to say that some Philippine anglophone critics actually intuited various aspects of this problem (of inappropriate critical categories), even as the ways they articulated it didn’t necessarily spell it out as a conceptual or even as a terminological issue. For instance, Miguel Bernad’s famous putdown of Philippine literature in English was, to him, necessary, given the economic, linguistic, and cultural “inchoateness” of the Philippine nation-state itself (Bernad 5). Without elaborating it, it’s possible that what he had in mind was the fact that since English itself was not yet fully naturalized or developed in Filipino society, it really couldn’t be expected to become any more naturalized or developed in Filipino fiction. And then, there was Leonard Casper, who regularly performed strict formalist readings of different Philippine texts—by novelists, poets, and essayists. Casper famously surmised that the “mixedness” of Filipino culture gives rise to the characteristic “self-effacement” or diffidence of its fictionists, which sadly prevents them from shunning what he deemed to be “inappropriate” foreign influences (Casper 9-28). The implication here is that he believes they should in fact be shunning or taking issue with some of these “influences.” Just now I’m thinking that possibly one of these is precisely the “realistic” mode of writing.

Of course, there was also the Marxist Bienvenido Lumbera (Galdon, *Essays on the Philippine Novel*, 180), who at least noticed that the best novels in English written by Filipinos are not only realistic but also allegorical (narratively fleshing out variations of Rizal’s prototypical ill-fated protagonist, Ibarra/Simoun). Lumbera is almost certain that given this allegorical burden, the realist frame commonly affected by Filipino fictionists would soon come undone. In another instance, he expresses the opinion that Filipino writers in English are by definition—and primarily because of English itself—“alienated” from their culture, and it is by writing about history that they find ways to *repatriate* themselves (Galdon, *Philippine Fiction*, 201). This project is a daunting one, however, since the use of history raises several technical problems (he unfortunately doesn’t elaborate what these are).

However, as early as 1967, N. V. M. Gonzalez, in an essay that appeared in Antonio Manuod’s anthology, *Brown Heritage*, did already bewail the absence of a Philippine literary tradition—an absence he attributed to the lack of a sustained and credible literary criticism (Gonzalez, “Difficulties with Filipiniana” 539-43). Carrying out his own criticism a number of years later, Gonzalez declares that

English is a “medium which puts the writer at one degree removed from immediate experiences.” For Gonzalez, a Filipino writer in English “transfigures” what he writes about, and this occasions both alienation and illumination. Elsewhere in this personal essay, he confesses that his stories had been translations even before he set out to write them. And so, with Gonzalez, we have a Filipino literary practitioner who may be said to have—at long last—successfully “named” the problem.

That it had to be a practicing fictionist who would realize the inescapably translated quality of Philippine anglophone writing shouldn’t strike us as strange: all it takes is a modicum self-awareness to be able to see the disparity, in this case, between the real and the realistic. Gonzalez, in particular, was the most logical candidate for this kind of epiphany, since he regularly exhibited self-reflexivity in his fictional practice—something that his years of teaching creative writing, both in the Philippines and in the United States, obviously cultivated in him. More recently—around a couple of years before he passed away—Gonzalez took exception to the solicited observation of a guest British writer that Philippine literature in English didn’t seem to profess too much irony, based on the sampling she’d just heard at a literary conference in Cebu in the summer of 1997.¹³ Hearing this woman writer’s sheepishly registered observation, Gonzalez practically barked back: “I beg to disagree, madam. What can be more ironic than someone like me writing in your language?”

I was there when this interesting exchange took place, and I remember that the guest writer promptly apologized upon hearing Gonzalez’s retort. Smiling her brilliant smile, she promptly returned the formality, and very humbly said: “My apologies, kind sir. I have been put soundly in my place.” I remember that everybody in that room laughed, albeit nervously, because we all instinctively knew that something terribly important had just taken place, even if I could sense (with unease) that many of us gathered there were not exactly willing to understand the full extent of what it implied.

Just now I can recall that what this wonderfully talented British writer had heard were earnest confessional stories and poems, about urban and rural poverty, the desire to reconnect with one’s past, the power of familial love, the persistence of sentiment, immiseration, and other such easily relatable things. On the other hand, what she read was this exquisitely written passage about something wickedly wry and witty—a passage about the relationship between a terribly intelligent and self-conscious shrink and a simple-minded woman, who’d just given birth to their first child, with the hope that this would make her husband love her at last; needless to say, unlike the spellbound reader, this poor woman doesn’t know just how altogether doomed this foolish hope is—thus, the dramatic irony.

Of course, it’s inconceivable that this writer didn’t know where exactly she was—didn’t know how different this literature was, or who or “what” Gonzalez and the other Filipino writers in attendance were, in relation to the identities of those Anglo-American (or even anglophone) writers that a famous British writer like her

would naturally be familiar with. Of course, she didn't really need to be reminded any of this by Gonzalez. Just now I'm thinking that her choice to disremember—or at least pretend not to know—what she inescapably knew must've simply been her way of being courteous, put on the spot as she suddenly was by the request from someone in the audience to give her impression regarding the literature that she had just "heard." But Gonzalez simply had to do it, I suppose. He simply had to call her bluff, and make it known to her that he knew what she was doing—knew her choice to evaluate this literature unapologetically, from the perspective of her own literature, isn't really a form of compliment in the end, because it is informed, and indeed can only be informed, by that plainest and most undeniable of facts: history has deemed that, despite their use of a common language, she and Gonzalez (and all other Filipino writers in English) are not and cannot ever be the same, and that it's devastatingly (actually, painfully) ironic that most Filipinos can even begin to forget that. It was we, the Filipino audience who were present when this discomfiting incident took place, that needed to hear what Gonzalez had to say. Finally, this British writer, while unwittingly providing its occasion, was entirely external to this realization.

We can account for the relative absence, in the Philippines, of verbally reflexive and self-referential experimentations that the "anti-realistic" modernists first carried out in the West in the early part of the twentieth century—and that have now become almost normative in the avant-garde circles of American institutions for creative writing in the present time—by simply remembering the fact that the use of English as an expressive language by Filipinos must continue to induce a variety of enduringly complex and necessarily ironic effects.

Evidently, literature's urgent and enduring "inner call" is still being heeded by Filipino anglophone writers in the present day, and what it urges is to bring to bear on the English language the various local realities they are seeking to represent, in light of the syncretic and inescapably multilingual conditions that they find themselves living and working in. Thus, resonating with Gonzalez's specific "objection," we may conclude that English in our literary tradition remains an ironic language.

On one hand, this language is ironic because, historically speaking, it shouldn't even have been an option, to begin with. On the other, the simple fact is that the everyday reality of most Filipinos isn't monolingual or monocultural at all;¹⁴ precisely for this reason, the task of getting English to bear the terrible burden of representing intensely transcultural and syncretic realities remains a challenging and altogether daunting one, for the writers belonging to this anglophone tradition. This situation comes in stark contrast to that of the monocultural Western modernists who, working in their respective native languages, abandoned realism in favor of self-reflexivity—which is to say, in order to foreground the (supposedly scientifically observed) materiality and mediating power of the verbal medium itself.¹⁵

Obviously, Filipino poets and fictionists are still mostly baldly referential or mimetic in their orientation,¹⁶ and this is simply because the task of making English signify *complexly* the different meanings that necessarily circulate, complement, and contest with each other inside an at once postcolonial and neocolonized culture describes a primary and ongoing struggle for most Filipino anglophone writers, still and all. Of course, this form of interpretive labor, specific and situated as it is, necessarily exceeds categories like realism, which themselves are specific and situated as critical concepts.

Since the most pressing “question” that Philippine anglophone writing poses must continue to pertain to the problem of how exactly such a practice may be made to represent the plural realities and ironies of a diverse plurality of Filipino lives, the attraction of the self-reflexive forms of poeticizing has simply not proven irresistible enough for most Filipino poets. First of all, mimesis in literary expression is, after all, nothing if not a social accomplishment. And then, language only refers to extralinguistic realities—which is to say, the project of realism is only feasible—if existing convention or “interpretive consensus” deems it can. In the West, linguistic theory forcefully determined, in the previous century, that language cannot, in and of itself, be referential. While this view essentializes language as anti- or nonreferential, we need to keep in mind that language per se isn’t naturally any of these things.

Language is a medium of signification, and what this means is that it is culturally determined on one hand, and on the other that it functions culturally, and embodies culture itself. As such, language varies in and *with* its “purposes”—all according to the obtaining conventions of meaning and meaning-making. Therefore, before deciding on the epistemic status of these various and related “issues,” we first need to ask the following critical questions: What kind of literary or poetic culture is being considered, in the first place? What language community, what formal considerations in interpretation—what notions of readership, what authorial functions—are in place?

Western civilization’s famous “linguistic turn” practically invalidated the role of the referent in the production of meaning. This shift of perspective regarding the part that language plays in relation to the comprehension or even the “perception” of reality derives directly from the empirical revolution that this selfsame civilization has undergone—a “cognitive” revolution and epistemological turn that, among other things, gave rise to realism (or the ideology that posits an equivalence between signs and objects in the world), as well as, interestingly enough—not long thereafter—induced its “crisis of representation.” Suffice it to say that just as not all the world has undergone a scientific and technological “overhaul,” then in like manner not all the world can be said to have suffered from the crippling effects of this representational crisis (at least not in a qualitatively identical sense). Not all the world’s cultures have deemed language to be inherently “hermetic”—meaning, folding or turning back into itself exclusively, and therefore incapable of referring

to anything other than the differential nature of its freely floating signs. And so, Euro-American modernist practice's scientific "rationale," to the extent that this creative-critical practice taps into and channels the precepts of modern linguistic discourse, proves itself far from universally valid or insightful.

Of course, even as we register our demurral against this new "universalism," we may need to rethink the question of referentiality itself—after all, it is broader than just the mimetic or the realist, which is simply one kind of representation language can make. All language is referential in this sense, all language points to or "refers"—first to the world (we may call this function mimetic or extralinguistic), next to elements in the linguistic system (either intra or interlinguistic), and then to the bigger conceptual system or theory of meaning-making that overarches the particular linguistic activity being considered (metalinguistic).¹⁷ This implies that a text, any text, possibly evinces all these referentialities, and that cultural systems may indeed be distinguished one from the other according to the emphasis—or lack of emphasis—that they give to certain referentialities, to the exclusion of the rest. This also obviously underscores the crucial role the act of interpretation plays, which is finally what determines not only the meaning of a text, but also the manner in which it is read.

Turning, in particular, to the topic of Philippine poetry in English—a topic which is my own province and personal passion, although conceivably enough the same will be true for Philippine fiction—what we possibly need to bear in mind as we grapple with its "nature" is the question of the "appropriate interpretive paradigm." To be more specific, we might need to rethink the falsely universal, Western-minded modernist or postmodern position that seeks to impute if not to prescribe a largely self-referential motive to our own representational texts, that would seem to have been most likely written under a different set of linguistic and/or literary assumptions. Needless to say, in reading our own poems we need to, first and foremost, spell out the conditions that determined their production and consumption. Any other attempts to "deconstruct" our anglophone poems—deconstruction being, in many ways, simply a more faddish term for the activity of pointing out the internal contradictions in texts—would have to begin by taking into account the dominant signification/reading that has come to subsume them (and so, yes, we may say that what really gets deconstructed is the dominant interpretation, using the text itself as a "dismantling tool"). Without this requisite acknowledgement of the overt and subtle workings of a determinate "contextuality," the reading will end up being ill-fitting or uninformed.

An analogy that comes to mind is that such a "misstep" would be similar to looking for moments or instances of modernist stream-of-consciousness or postmodern *pastiche* in the Tagalog folk Catholic epic, *Pasyon*, or in the mystical Arabic *ghazals* of the seventh to twelfth centuries. Needless to say, the gross incongruity—the sheer inappropriateness or "lack of fit"—between the interpretive paradigm and the culturally specific elements of signification that poetic or literary texts in general

fundamentally assume (at the moment that they are composed, and at their various sites of reading), should be egregiously obvious in these hyperbolic examples.

An easy way to account for this “uneasy” state of conceptual things is that the condition of literary or even cultural studies in the Philippines remains theoretically underdeveloped, if only because the ideas that continue to inform and prevail over these fields of knowledge are universalist and positivistic, in the main. Critical theory’s well-known commonplaces, while largely already assumed in the contemporary West, are only now being seriously considered by certain (not all) players in the Philippine literary scene, and their effects remain to be deeply felt across the humanistic and scientific disciplines. At this point we can perhaps rehearse some of the most basic of these theoretical “givens” (Barry 34-36): one, that the so-called facts governing our lives are socially constructed political enforcements that are contingent and provisional; two, that the interested nature of these constructions proves that politics and power are all pervasive, that ideology (on which power relies) is inescapable, and that there is never any fully disinterested inquiry into social phenomena; three, that because language constitutes and constructs, rather than merely reflects or represents, reality, our entire experience of the world is inalienably textual; and finally, that totalizing and universal concepts are fictions that we must distrust, because they erase the specific situations and circumstances that engendered them.

Just to back-track a little—as well as to stress a historical and altogether germane point—we can say that it is not entirely pure coincidence that the skeptical attitude adopted by the early twentieth century modernists toward the question of linguistic transparency and referential meaning was premised upon a European linguist’s “scientific” unpacking of the inner mechanisms of language. I am referring, of course, to the theoretical interventions of Ferdinand de Saussure, to which the roots of the immensely influential movement called structuralism in the West may be traced.

Presuming to have arrived at a genuine scientific insight into the nature of language—and ceremoniously demurring from the diachronic and referential paradigm of his discipline—Saussure took language as a self-enclosed system of unmotivated signs, whose meanings are arbitrary, and stabilized only by convention. This new “theory” contends that language isn’t a reflection of objects in the world and of experience but is rather a system of signs that exists separate from them. Moreover, rather than transparently recording (or “encoding”) our world, language actually constitutes it, and what’s additionally interesting in this formulation is that it’s not the worldly objects themselves that contain meaning, but rather only our linguistically constituted mind that attributes significance to such. This happens so efficiently and “naturally” that, for instance, our words for flavors, colors and smells summon them into being—“make them real”—rather than merely denominate them. It only follows that within such a system, meanings are relational—that is to say, the constituent units or words are defined in relation to other words, and not in isolation. Finally, Saussure observed that a common relationship between words

is mutual or binary opposition, whereby both terms achieve meaning only as a contrast to the other (Barry 104).

Examining the development of critical thought, it's clear that Saussure's bold assertion that language is arbitrary, relational, and constitutive has, over the past century, influenced many Western artists and thinkers: soon after Saussure's lectures were disseminated and published, not a few of them began to think of social realities in terms of systems that are self-contained, in which individual elements are relational and thus interconnected in structures of increasing complexity. We might say that, on one hand, this obsession with structural relationships and their levels of complication describes a fundamentally "scientific" attitude toward the question of human phenomena; on the other, we can also conclude that this kind of "Saussurean" linguistics effectively severs the "mystical" and scientifically indefensible *correspondence* between words and reality, between signs and things.

The poem's verbal materiality (or performativity) itself has therefore become, for Western modernist poets, poetry's new object of interest, its new object of inquiry. Attending this was a fascination with the self-referential aspect of language-use, and these artists' poetic productions indeed became not only formally experimental and structurally complex, but increasingly involuted and reflexive "performances" and "texts," eventuating in the many forms and practices of contemporary avant-garde aesthetics and "language poetry," that now abound in various parts of the West. But because this view on language is itself culturally specific—and because, as we are already well aware, its assumptions cannot take into account the translational and plurivocal linguistic realities of a neocolonized and culturally simultaneous country like the Philippines—we may need to take issue with the prescriptive supersession or obsolescence of the mimetic mode, and the endorsement of the staunchly self-referential as the only legitimate mode for Philippine poetry at the present time.¹⁸

We can perhaps, at this point, invoke "Keeper of the Lighthouse" as a specific example.

Astride a coconut-shredder, the closest touch
 Allowed her touchy thighs, Gerarda Galang
 With passion finishes her job but cuts
 A finger on the shredder's teeth, and when
 The shredded coconut is squeezed the milk
 Is smeared with blood. There is no man to do
 The job for her, a comely, middle-aged one
 Entrusted with the lighthouse and its lamp,
 Her father's heir officially confirmed
 To have her buried father's job. She has
 Been taught from childhood, almost like an oath,
 That mariners must be warned off the reefs
 And guided in their wake—storms often blurring

The land but not the turning, constant lamp;
 Why, only four weeks back a skipper came
 With roses aiding him in thanking her
 For that good light, without which he would have
 Now been one of the corals. Gratitude like that
 Does gratify Gerarda Galang and no man
 In person can quite measure up to such
 A feeling though he be an actor or be he
 One with a string of titles. She just cooks
 Rice cake for kins; one year ago tonight
 She has been in the watch against the harm
 To mariners, and she is blithe that deaths
 Have elsewhere happened, not within the span
 Of light from her good lamp. Her kins arrive
 But with a stranger—he who notices
 The lamp’s encasement shattered as he picks
 Up by the tail an inland bird, a dove,
 Alive and bleeding. An instinct, quite
 Submerged below Gerarda Galang’s blush,
 Converts her into mothering the bird
 As she remembers but the wind that blew
 Her scarf last night into the cliff nearby—
 A shadow caught a little on the light,
 And in the engine’s beat within the heart
 Of her stone lighthouse seemed a tiny flutter
 That calmed as soon as it was heard. She feels
 The pulse ebb in the dive, and her eyes meet
 The stranger’s as they break a sweet rice cake. (Hufana 64-65)

The Ilokano author of this poem, Alejandro G. Hufana (1926-2003) taught in the University of the Philippines Diliman, where he served as a Poet-in-Residence and the director of the Creative Writing Center.¹⁹ He was born and raised in San Fernando, La Union, and to the devoted reader of his works, the broadly sketched seaside setting of this poem’s narrative is entirely familiar, for it is consistent with the general “environs” within which his other poems are likewise resolutely “worlded” (his modern long poem, *Poro Point*, for instance comes to mind). Clearly representational in its commitment to tell the story of a fictional spinsterish character performatively named Gerarda Galang (in Filipino, *galang* means reverence or respect), this poem’s postcolonial significance nonetheless cannot be reduced to just the ostensible features and “content” of its narrative. Despite its seeming “accessibility” (as a text written in a universal-sounding English), this text is shot through with what postcolonial critics have famously called “metonymic

gaps"²⁰—those moments of textual illegibility and/or unintelligibility, that effectively prevent the postcolonial work's easy assimilation/translation into the cosmopolitan (in this specific case, anglophone) sensibility.

There's a wealth of subtextual references in this text, all of which are functions of the specific historical situation within which it was composed and within which it was meant/designed by its author to be read and (presumably) understood. Needless to say, this specificity isn't remotely available to readers who have no real claims—historical and/or cultural—to its mode of production. The reason it's inside a poem in English that these meanings must be found and “dissimulated” lies in the simple fact that, like modern fiction (the novel and the short story), this medium/form offered Filipinos an opportunity to broach and explore topics hitherto impossible to literarily entertain and/or express—and perhaps, even just practically imagine. In particular, what this poem would seem to be most crucially and deeply about is sexuality—a regime of knowledge that the Americanization of Filipino culture at once proliferated and regulated—and like the earlier anglophone poets (Angela Manalang-Gloria, Jose Garcia Villa, and Bienvenido Santos, among others), Hufana in this text can be seen to have merely availed himself of the “distantiating” effect of the language of colonization, from whose privileged perspective aspects of the writer's traditional (in this case, conservative and erotophobic) culture could indeed be dispassionately examined and critiqued.

This poem's surface story is quaint and almost meaninglessly so, and this is because it's almost—come to think of it—entirely a double-entendre, and it's one whose ulterior “project” pertains to the sexual unmasking of Filipino feminine composure and respectability. Needless to say, read symptomatically, this poem dares to impute eroticism to the otherwise prim and proper middle-aged Filipino woman, represented here by the figure of Gerarda Galang, who not only works in a phallic building, but also undergoes, right in the poem's opening scene, a powerful and most erotically charged experience: ceremoniously mounted on the coconut shredder (provocatively called *kabaya* or “horse,” in the local dialect), with her “touchy thighs” rubbing against its sides, she cuts herself on the shredder's sharp metal teeth, and the blood from her injured finger smears the thick and otherwise entirely white ooze—the coconut milk—that she must endeavor to squeeze from the clumps of freshly shredded coconut meat. This “devirginization” trope is presented in neutral and strictly imagistic terms in this section of the poem, but when it recurs at the end, the text's language in fact does something else altogether—something that most definitely qualifies as a metonymic gap, for it denotes nothing if not a form of privileged “insider” information. Suffice it to say that the poem's last line references Filipino folk “sexual” tropology, pertaining to the woman's vagina as a *bibingka* or rice cake, which gets “broken” as Gerarda Galang and the stranger mutually “share” it—which means, at the conclusion of this little story, they abandon all formality at last, and become truly intimate with one another.

Earlier on, this man's arrival into her life is depicted as being announced by his bequeathing of an injured bird, a fragile little "creature" that Gerarda Galang cannot help but attend to and nurture. This is another sexual "Filipinism"—the bird signifier being a popular local euphemism for the penis—and in the tradition of Philippine anglophone fiction there's at least the famous story "The Virgin," penned by Hufana's contemporary, Kerima Polotan Tuvera, which also makes memorable use of the bird image (Tuvera 214-18). In this "realistic" narrative, the bird comes in the form of a clumsy and ill-assembled paperweight, and it can only bring to the "knowing" reader's mind something naughtily penile: here, in Tuvera's little story, Miss Mijares—yet another spinster character—can be seen to be quietly regarding the wooden form, as it is "righted" and restored to its proper place on the table by the stranger's big and manly hands, inside of which the otherwise nondescript thing suddenly looks pretty, like a dove.

Doubtless, these plainly representational images—the seminal *kakang gata* or coconut milk, the pudendal rice cake, and the priapismic avian form—derive directly from irreparably local and "folk" sexual knowledges, and they provide a very clear and convincing argument for the complexity of postcolonial representations, which cannot be decontextualized from their cultural and historical moorings without at the same time attenuating the full-bodied nature of the postcolonial text's meaning. Self-evidently mimetic though they may appear to be, their culturally specific significations transcend and exhaust the imperatives of the plainly referential schemata within which conventional "realist" writing in the West is known to readily make sense.²¹

And so, we need also to more carefully understand that while Euro-American globalization has brought both the mimetic and nonmimetic modes of poeticizing to our country, these practices may not be as mutually exclusive in our case as they may have effectively been in the Western episteme whence they came. Again, we must consider the fact that this is an episteme that has suffered from a historically specific, protracted and profound skepticism, since the end of the Second World War. Curiously enough, this historical passage was relatively the same period when the present global dispensation—with its centers of economic growth all situated in the former imperial powers of Europe, and the consequent damning of their ideologically non-aligned former colonies to the endless immiseration of underdevelopment—was decreed and enacted by the Marshall Plan, as it was hatched in the headquarters of the global American empire in Washington DC (Lazarus 5). How simply and unproblematically referential can our poetry in English really be, when at the very least, on the level of the metalinguistic, the typical Filipino mimetic poem, unlike any of the brilliantly self-referential and complex textual performances enacted by contemporary postmodern American poets, points or refers not so much to elements within itself as to the cultural and historical inequities, discrepancies, mistranslations, hybridities and syncretisms that constitute it? Needless to say, these various social processes are the very

condition of the Filipino anglophone poem's possibility—which is to say, a poem in English written by a non-American living in this pauperized corner of the Global South.

We may thus argue, in view of this, that the two general lines of “poetic descent” identified by Western critics in their own tradition—the mimetic and the non-mimetic, or the “extrinsic” and the “intrinsic,” or the realistic and the non-realistic—are often ironically conflated in postcolonial poetics, for the simple reason that their signifiers, being drawn from the mixed or syncretic languages of colonization, cannot be expected to ever function fully or exclusively propositionally, transparently or “extrinsically,” to begin with. Using this perspective we may conclude that, already, the Filipino poem in English, being grounded in the historical irony of colonialism, is “intrinsic” or verbally involuted, representationally ambiguous, and self-reflexive, right from the get-go. In other words, “realism” as practiced by postcolonial writers, is entirely capable of evincing the qualities of ambivalence, irony, hybridity, and “fragmentariness” that are typically ascribed only to postmodern Euro-American texts. Because Western poetics assumes an unproblematic and homogeneous linguistic ground, the only way it distinguishes these two broad “traditions” in the Western lyric tradition is by emphasizing the role that verseform plays in the case of each. In extrinsic poetry, which is typically seen as mimetically descriptive and narrative, words are able to better facilitate interior visualization because poetry's prosodic means—all the kinds of opportunities afforded by verseform—have been suppressed. In the intrinsic line of descent, we are told that reference is minimized, ignored, or denied, and that the words become wholly of interest in themselves, as pure sound form or visual form (or as both). Poems written in this mode demonstrate, sometimes to excess, the full range of poetry's prosodic or structural devices, and in the history of Western literature, they have come from such diverse and “difficult” modernist and/or postmodernist movements as Pure Poetry, Language Poetry, Sound Poetry, and Concrete Poetry.

Again, in our case, we must register and insist upon the obvious difference, as decreed by our specific form of postcoloniality: the “unnaturalness” of English as a language that precariously “coexists” in the heady flux of local languages in the Philippines makes it virtually impossible to be perfectly transparent to its meanings; it only follows that the poetry written in it simply resonates the characteristically postcolonial opacity—the problematic non-convergence—between referent and sign. While the philosophical premises of mimesis have long ago been persuasively deconstructed by Theodor Adorno—who argued that verbal imitation is always already an active additive construction, rather than a passive “reflection” of the world—we can say with confidence that as practiced by postcolonial fictionists and poets representational writing in English is all the more (self-)aware of the “rationalizing” imperative under which it labors, as well as of the complex condition within which it is framed. Needless to say, these pressures enable anglophone “realistic” narration and description to register, even more emphatically, the

mediating role that language plays between “life” and “art.”²² Little wonder, then, that thus far, Filipino poets writing in English have mostly eschewed the scrupulously intrinsic manner of poeticizing. Wittingly or not, our anglophone poets have all along been producing mimetically complex and verbally self-reflexive poetry even as they themselves may believe that, for the most part, they have simply been writing plainly descriptive or narrative verse.

And so, as Filipino poets practice them, both the mimetic and non-mimetic kinds of poetry, to the degree that they remain sited and/or situated in our culture, and to the degree that they are conducted in the global media of textuality and English, profess comparable neocolonial “affects or “desires.” In fact, because referential writing in a second language, in a language of colonization, in a hybrid cultural situation like ours, is not and cannot be simplistically referential, then, counterintuitively, the gesture of evacuating English of its (in our case, necessarily problematic) referents possibly betrays the even more inexorable colonial desire to turn the colonial presence into a fetish, by and through which it may be so tremblingly possessed. The thing about fetishes is that—as we ought to know—it is finally all in vain. Likewise, at this point in a climatically imperiled, ruthlessly neoliberalized, and globalized history, fetishism presents itself as a rather *retardataire* aesthetic gesture.

Furthermore, I see another possible danger in pursuing the overinvested and underexplained desire to post/modernize—which is to say, to turn linguistically indeterminate and textually self-reflexive—our poets’ mostly representational and “confessional” poetries,²³ and it is the same danger that inheres in the use of global information technology, which has the power to install, in our imaginations, as an affectional reference-point, the phantasm of a First-World modernity that we never really had. Already, the new global media’s sundry powerful simulacra—movies, electronic books, television shows, Youtube videos, games, etc.—are exiling us from the gritty reality of our literal selves, and all this “simultaneity” simply serves to obfuscate how terrifyingly inequitable and uneven the processes of neoliberal globalization really are... As though it still needs to be said, but despite its promises, egalitarian globality is nothing if not a malevolent illusion.

Just now, I’m thinking that the fact that many of our poets persist to write representationally may also actually indicate a kind of “prescience,” on their part: maybe they continue to write this way because they instinctively know how pointless procedurally intrinsic or strictly self-referential writing in English possibly is. Maybe it’s because they already understand that this kind of writing proceeds out of a concept of the fragmented or incongruent subject that is either much too luxurious or much too “redundant” to be entertained. Indeed, it is possible that their refusal to valorize the fragmentation of multiple subject-positions—which, as we know, has been the logical conclusion of differential linguistics in the history of Western consciousness—as a “more positive” alternative to the “unified” (in actuality, historically fractured and split) self of our brand of referential anglophone writing,

comes out of an unconscious realization that such would be a brute exercise in futility.

After all, being neocolonized subjects, our Filipino poets/writers understand only too well that to champion the non-mimetic and the “fractal” and/or fragmentary would be tantamount to celebrating the cultural deracination and subjugation that already harrowingly afflict us as a people. Needless to say, to the degree that the more thoroughgoing and “scientific” kind of poeticizing is also necessarily self-referential and non-mimetic, then committing oneself to such a poetics would be tantamount to undoing the urgent and collective attempt we Filipinos need to keep mounting to integrate the many uneven and often conflicting aspects of our being, and bring these to bear on a beleaguered “sense of national self” which an unfinished colonial history continues to fracture and threaten with extinction.

And so, finally, we realize that the task of contextualizing the practices of Filipino writers is the same thing as arguing for how particular these practices really are, in their constitutive hybridity—which is to say, their *translatedness*. To my mind, the primary commitment of the Filipino literary critic must be to specify the postcolonial difference of the different aesthetic claims, posturings, and gestures of Filipino writers—a task which begins perhaps with a genealogical critique of these movements (thankfully already performed in the West by Western critics), followed quickly by an empirical accounting of the entirely different set of historical and cultural circumstances that could have only modified or localized their deployments here. Of course, this is independent of the required description and interpretation of the literary practice itself—including not only the declared intention of the writer, but also the ethnographies or “affects” of its local audiences, as well.

Notes

1. A draft of this paper was delivered by the author at the Kritika Kultura International Conference on Translation, August 31, 2012, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City. Portions of the last section of this paper appeared in a different form in the paper, "Valence and Ambivalence: Science and Poetry in the Philippine Anglophone Tradition," delivered at the Panayam lecture series of the Likhaan: University of the Philippines Institute of Creative Writing, Faculty Center, UP Diliman, 24 November 2010.
2. The author himself admitted, years and years after they first saw print, that all these "rural" stories were translations even before he wrote them. See Gonzalez, "Kalutang" 81.
3. Indeed, it's easy to see that the problem with present-day Filipino "avant-garde" practice is that despite channeling contemporary appropriations of modernist precepts—picked up from exposure to hypermedia and even overseas graduate education—it doesn't quite channel what fundamentally defines this aesthetic as it exists in the postmodern West today. Which is to say: alongside the contemporary ascendancy of critical theory in the humanities, nowadays in the West this compositional system or mode is nothing if not theoretically invested and/or critically "self-aware"... To my mind it's entirely reasonable to think that, among other things, its practitioners or advocates in the Philippine art scene would need to perform, as a matter of preliminary definition, and in keeping with the avant-garde animus itself, the kinds of epistemological labor that the "postcolonial specifying" of problematic concepts (like realism and mimetic representation itself) exemplifies, especially where the appropriation of various forms (and mediums) of colonization is concerned. An explanation of the "theoreticist" commitment of a particular contemporary avant-garde poetic movement in America is provided by Marjorie Perloff in her online essay, "Avant-Garde Community and the Individual Talent." Here, Perloff declares that at the heart of American Language Poetry is a post-structuralist and post-realist perspective that views language not as a "window... a transparent glass to be seen through in pursuit of the 'real' objects outside it, but [rather as] a system of signs with its own semiological relationships." See Perloff.
4. Poetry and fiction both, because language as communication is representational: it encodes knowledge that is thereby conveyed by senders to receivers. We can speak of two representational modes, then: realistic and nonrealistic, which we may also call mimetic and nonmimetic. The latter term can apply to all abstract, surreal, fantastical, and "non-quotidian" art. The former term can refer to either of two senses of mimetic art. The first or general sense is the realistic representation by art of reality, by which the former captures, encodes, or conveys the image or meaning of the latter. We may also call this mimetic mode "extratextual reference," and its presence across all the genres is what makes it possible to speak of both poetry and fiction as "realist." In the second sense, however, mimetic can also refer to verbal forms in which the words

- in and of themselves—their sounds, shapes, sequence, etc.—resemble or reproduce (through analogy) characteristics or features of that to which they refer. In poetry, mimetic language may be said to be “imitative,” “expressive” or even “iconic” in this sense, with onomatopoeia being one of the more common examples. (Brogan 255)
5. The qualities of realist narration are summarized—and reevaluated—most recently and most thoughtfully in Morris (2005).
 6. For a recent study of Balzac’s realism, in relation to the changing concept of temporality, see David F. Bell (2004).
 7. An interesting study of Twain’s peculiarly American “brand” of literary realism may be found in Michael Davitt Bell (1993).
 8. A masterful study of James’s use of realism in his fiction may be found in Ermarth (1998).
 9. For a comprehensive summary and presentation (in extract form) of the most important criticism on Victorian realism, see O’Gorman (2002).
 10. Of course, among the first to spell out these more familiar conventions of literary realism was Richard Chase (1957).
 11. Of course, this summary of the critical discourse surrounding the practice and theory of realism is necessarily provisional, for even in the West itself, critics are rethinking realism and re-reading its founding texts, and uncovering complexities and contradictions that have long been elided by the mimetic imperatives of various Western schools of thought across the centuries. For a recent compilation of these critical reevaluations, see Isomaa (2012).
 12. The work of Schipper (1985) on the African novel is one of more “methodical” of such critical interventions, that seek to differentiate the non-Western practice of realist fiction from its Western counterpart. On the other hand, “marvelous” hispanic fictions produced by such Latin American writers as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and anglophone novels written by writers like Salman Rushdie have received critical attention from postcolonial critics like Kumkum Sangari, who take pains to distinguish these nonmimetic postcolonial modes from their supposed Euro-American postmodern counterparts. See Sangari, 157-86. Both such attempts at a critical elucidation attend mostly to the question of techniques and political motivations, and all but entirely ignore the condition of possibility of realism as genre and as a historical and culturally specific mode of representation.
 13. I first wrote about this incident in my monograph, *At Home in Unhomeliness: Rethinking the Universal in Philippine Poetry in English* (Manila: PEN Philippines, 2007).
 14. This is one of the arguments I proposed in my reflections on the question of the “universal” register that predominates in Philippine anglophone poems. See my monograph, *At Home in Unhomeliness: Rethinking the Universal in Philippine Poetry in English* (2007).
 15. Even as she deconstructs the realistic claims of the great realistic English novelists of the nineteenth century (comparing and contrasting them with other artistic genres,

and examining the evidence of their own self-awareness), scholar Alison Byerly's masterful study presupposes a monocultural ground of these authors' attempts at literary verisimilitude. See her *Realism, Representation and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (1997).

16. In his summary of the history of the short story in English, fictionist Jose Y. Dalisay, Jr. clearly states that the bulk of the more distinguished short stories during and after the period of Martial Law have been "realistic"—a fact that's easily apparent in their increasingly sociopolitical concerns. At the end of this survey, he concludes that realism is still the dominant mode, despite the emergence of alternative forms (like minimalism, magic realism, etc.) (145) On the other hand, Gemino H. Abad, the foremost critic and anthologist of Philippine poetry in English, acknowledges the preponderance of the mimetic mode in the three periods of this tradition, as he has described them: the Romantic, the New Critical, and the Open Clearing. A Neo-Aristotelian by training, he sees in the great majority of these poems expressions of the Filipinos' "lived experience," which the poets recreate in language. (Abad, "Mapping our Poetic Terrain," 18-19). Elsewhere, he defines the Filipino poem as mimetic; in particular, as a "representation of the Filipino experience." (Abad, *Getting Real: An Introduction to the Practice of Poetry*, 61).
17. This is my appropriation of the categories proposed by T. V. F. Brogan in his article on "Representation and Mimesis" in *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, (1994), 254-55.
18. A particular Filipino poet who has been most vehement in espousing forms of antimimetic, antiromantic, and anticonfessional practice nowadays is Angelo V. Suarez, whose online publications across the years have articulated, in various ways, the key tenets of his "conceptualist" position. See, for example, his essay, "Provisions: an essay in episodes," which came out on *POC: Philippine online chronicles*, 08 March 2010.

An example of a counterpart "movement" in Philippine anglophone fiction would be the *speculative*—understood as fantastical and/or "anti-realist"—stories being regularly anthologized by the writing couple, Dean Francis Alfar and Nikki Alfar, who recently edited a selection of their favorite pieces. See Dean Francis Alfar and Nikki Alfar, eds., *The Best of Philippine Speculative Fiction 2005-2010* (2013).

19. For a short biography of Hufana, see Abad, *A Native Clearing: Filipino Poetry and Verse from English Since the '50s to the Present: Edith L. Tiempo to Cirilo F. Bautista* (1993), 634-65.
20. For the critic, Bill Ashcroft, while postcolonial writing "alienates" the metropolitan reader in many ways—primarily by installing its critical difference within the colonial discourse—nonetheless the use of the "metonymic gap" is one of the more effective means. The insertion of the untranslatable word or passage within the otherwise intelligible sentence renders the articulation at once familiar and strange, marking out the text as "unassimilable" to metropolitan aesthetics on one hand, and its experiential origin as practically impenetrable on the other. The text thus becomes

synecdochic of the difference that the postcolonial world that has produced it bears in relation to the colonial center that now seeks to understand and “account for” it. See Ashcroft, *Postcolonial Transformation* (2001), 75.

21. I have performed more such “critically specifying” readings of famous Filipino poems in English in order to demonstrate just how complex they are as representational projects that cannot be subsumed under universalist categories—for instance, of the mimetic. I included some of these critical interpretations in a paper, “Reclaiming the Universal: Postcolonial Readings of Selected Anglophone Poems by Filipino Poets,” that I delivered at the national conference, Language and Literature: Teaching Terrains, Research Routes, and Learning Landscapes, jointly sponsored by the College English Teachers Association and the Council for Department Chairpersons in English, at the SMX Convention Center, SM Mall of Asia, on 12 September 2013.
22. While realism has fallen out of favor with many postcolonial critics, who reject it on well-known poststructuralist grounds, there however are attempts by Western critics to reclaim it as an ironic mode, precisely by arguing that realism isn’t as naïvely reflectionist and ideologically suspect as it’s been made out to be. Not surprisingly, however, such attempts have not referenced the issue of translation—which pertains most urgently to postcolonial literature, after all, for which the fact that the actual use of English (or any other language of colonization) provides the best argument for the peculiarly postcolonial viability (and validity) of representational writing. See, for example, Morris, 2-10, and Ermarth, 21-25.
23. We need to place “confessional” under scare quotes because while this term operates in the creative and critical practice of Filipino poets, and while this mode of poetic composition doubtless functions as the poetic equivalent of realist fiction in the West—premised on comparable positivist assumptions and constituted of comparable technical constraints (that, in the confessional poem’s case, facilitate the illusion of “autobiographical self-presence”)—the actual ways Filipino poets enact it exceed the circumscriptions of its Western signification. In the first place, the psychoanalytic style of reasoning that underpins confessionalism in the Western tradition (of America, for example) simply doesn’t enjoy that much currency in the Philippines; and secondly, should an inner motivation for this form of “literary unbosoming” actually exist, in the case of Filipino poets it’s less secular than religious (or possibly even spiritual) in character. An explanation of the condition of possibility for confessionalism, as this movement has taken root in modern American poetry, is provided by Lucy Collins in her article on the subject (197-208). On the other hand, that the mimetic register of the “confessional” constitutes a major stream in contemporary Filipino poetry is one of the clarifications made by Francis L. Martinez in his unpublished thesis in English Studies: Creative Writing, from the University of the Philippines, Diliman.

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