

METAPHOR AS SOCIAL REFLECTION
An Essay on the Poetics of
Federico Licsi Espino Jr.

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Kislap ng talinghagang
Hiniram sa bituin,
Patay na ang makata'y
Kumukutitap pa rin.
(The glow of a metaphor
Borrowed from a star,
Shall sparkle on, and on,
Long after the poet's gone.)

— F. LICSI ESPINO, JR.

*Poetry is beautiful and eternal,
like the ears of corn and the stars.
It is created for living
and serves people.*

Man says: I'm fine!

Poetry answers: I'm with you!

Man groans: I'm in pain!

Poetry responds: I'm with you!

— KAISYN KULIEV

In his introduction to Part One of *The Sociology of Literature*, Alan Swingewood writes:

For the literary critic, literature is seen as a largely self-enclosed, self-sustaining enterprise. Works of literature must be approached primarily in terms of their own inner structure, imagery, metaphor, rhythm, delineation of character, dynamics of plot, and so on. Only occasionally is the external society allowed to intrude and then merely descriptively, as a necessary background.¹

Swingewood's literary critic is, without doubt, the redoubtable formalist-textualist-'New Critic' effectively immunized against the contagious agent of social analysis in the arts, since the arts (to include literature), in his perception, must and do exist in a self-contained universe, proceeding from the minds (and hands) of craftsmen and thereafter liberated from them, not being social products reflective of the entire creative process involving both internal mind and external reality (human society), but

¹ Diana Laurenson and Alan Swingewood, *THE SOCIOLOGY OF LITERATURE*, London: Paladin Books, 1972, p. 11.

'creations' of the artistic 'imagination' expressive initially of the individual artist's *mood*, assuming a separate, independent, 'value-free' existence. At the very least, Swingewood's literary critic will never subscribe to the social-history approach of an Arnold Hauser, or the dialectical historical-materialist approach of a Christopher Caudwell, to art and literature in general, to poetry in particular.

He will not construe a poetic metaphor in terms of *social reflection* — not the conventional sense of 'holding up to a mirror', but the purposive, deliberate handling of word-images in the *active contemplation* of nature and society, in the process evoking correspondences with social, natural, political and economic phenomena existing in the world external to the 'poetic mind' — since a metaphor, as far as this critic is concerned, is nothing but a finely wrought, fine-tuned, well-crafted abstraction designed to bring out the immanent beauty of language: metaphor is the Word Incarnate.

The New Critics rediscovered in the wake of *l'art pour l'art* and modernist formalism that works of art are discreet, autonomous, self-referential, radically implicit artifacts without relation to any reality except perhaps our aesthetic sensibilities.²

On the other hand, literary critics with a worldview (indeed, the basis for the difference is systemic, systematic, and total) diametrically opposed to the linguistic mystification and disembodiment of literature implicit in the formalist approach have been waging constant battle for their views to be heard.

In discussing the Tagalog poetics of Federico Licsi Espino Jr., especially the poems of the last ten years, a formalist analysis will simply fail to explain—as by necessity it fails to explain totalities of the human experience in *any* art form—the constellation of images and the wealth of symbolisms corresponding to identifiable historical and political events in recent Philippine history. The explication of social meaning (not merely *meaning*) is not, of course, the province nor proper task of formalism. But in seeking to explain the poem's form, the approach practically explains nothing. The social historian of art and the dialectical literary critic then cannot accommodate either the premises or the conclusions of such a method of criticism. Such method may succeed in dissecting the nuances of rhyme and meter in Licsi Espino, explain the linguistic significations of the poet's well-known wordplay, but it is likely to ignore the component philosophies in his political satire, fail to explain the social and historical referents of a metaphor or metaphor-cluster, and will certainly be at a loss to explain why the poet often resorts to ancient Tagalog poem-forms for his contem-

² Norman Pudich, editor, *WEAPONS OF CRITICISM: MARXISM IN AMERICA AND THE LITERARY TRADITION*, Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1976, p. 17.

porary themes. Thus, formalism explains the poem's form, and explains practically nothing else.

At his most lyrical, the formalist (speaking as a true-blooded belletrist) might be moved to state, 'a poem is a poem is a poem'.

What, indeed, is a poem?

A poem is a concrete act. It is concretized by a poet. But where does a poem originate? What is its ultimate source? To answer these is to answer the question, 'what is a poem'. To say that a poem proceeds from the mind (or 'soul') of the poet both begs the question and leads to yet another question: where does the poet 'get' the poem? Of what 'raw material' is it made? A process is proposed: a poem is formed out of the thoughts, impressions, dreams, visions, feelings proceeding from (the human brain of) the poet subjected to external stimulation acting on his subjective intimate psyche: the external factor may be a personal encounter or interaction with another human being, an experience involving a natural phenomenon or a social event, in fact *any* happenstance (even 'imagined' ones!) that takes place in nature and in society. A poem always has an objective referent in external reality. Even the most 'abstract' concepts do not escape the social nexus: freedom, love, joy, truth, beauty, are meaningless outside of the human, social and natural environment. A poem is a concrete and conscious act. It is the poet's active reflection *on* and reaction to his time and his historical place, to his human situation which is inseparable from the larger Human Condition. There is of course no human condition outside of society. Thus no poet goes beyond the parameter of social existence when he writes. His being is always social being. In writing 'for himself', he merely performs the act of self-alienation, but remains a part of society, and in being read by others, or allowing himself to be read, he relates vitally to others. The purpose of a poem is to communicate—an idea, an emotion, a message, an inspiration, a thought, a question, an answer, a search, a discovery, being or becoming. It does so by using *language*. (Even Xoce Garcia Villa's purely punctuation poetry is using language, the metaphysical language of social alienation.)

The early genius of a Christopher Caudwell had put the matter pithily:

Poetry is written in language . . . language is a social product, the instrument whereby men communicate and persuade each other; thus the study of poetry's sources cannot be separated from the study of society.³

The sociological approach as an analytical-critical method of clarifying the sources of poetry—as well as those of the other arts—is primarily

³ Christopher Caudwell, *ILLUSION AND REALITY*, New York: International Publishers, 1973, p. 13. Cf. Raymond Williams: "Literature is the process and the result of formal composition within the social and formal properties of a language." In his *MARXISM AND LITERATURE*, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 46.

concerned with the unity of form and content, source and function, the individual writer and the rest of society. All other approaches (which does not consider the external world of the artist) would appear fragmented, illusory even. A phenomenon is not sufficiently explained by one of its mere manifestations but by its roots in reality which is the external world, the source of all manifestations (the archetypal, the psychological, the mythological, the formal, etc.), the matrix of all life, art or non-art.

In the realm of literary criticism, the sociological approach necessarily juxtaposes the individual work of art with some vaster form of social reality which is seen in one way or another as its source of ontological ground, its Gestalt field, and of which the work itself comes to be thought of as a reflection on a *symptom*, a characteristic *manifestation* or a simple byproduct, a coming to consciousness or an imaginary or symbolic *resolution*, to mention only a few of the ways in which this problematic central relationship has been conceived.⁴

To write a poem is to express oneself in the language of metaphor. (All expressions, indeed, use a *language*, the inescapable, the crucial vehicle of all human thought, of which poetry is but a part, a manifestation.) *Metaphor as social reflection*: the phrase attempts to overcome the formalist barrier by actively involving the external element, underscoring its importance as both the cause of the psyche's reflection as well as its intended final audience. Thus, poetry is mind and society producing a metaphor that reveals or explains something of both. Reflection here is, of course, understood in the sense of intellection or contemplation, rather than the conventional notion of a "mirror device".

The conception of the mirror . . . must be treated with great care in the sociological analysis of literature. Above all else, of course, it ignores the writer himself, his awareness and his intention.⁵

The theory of reflection has been one of literature's problematics. The criticism of it takes to task the passivity that it implies, the mechanistic picture of presenting to society a mirror image of itself, an idea that even in the most 'representationalist' visual art may not be valid since the process of transferring an idea, an object, and occurrence existing in historical time upon a canvass necessitates the mediation of the artistic philosophy, temper, medium, technique, etc.; in short, the visual arts are nothing if *only* visual: there is an interpretation always involved. It is posited that the act of mediation and interpretation is even more pronounced, more intense, more

⁴ Frederic Jameson, *MARXISM AND FORM*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 5. Underscoring in the original.

⁵ Laurensen and Swingewood, *op. cit.*, p. 15. I was 'actively reflecting' on the possibilities of 'refraction' as an alternative: the artist/writer as a prism who absorbs totalities of 'personal' and social experience, to break them down into a spectrum of impressions and interpretations.

complex, in the creative process of writing literature. Much can be settled, therefore, if we finally and once and for all begin to set aside the mechanistic construal of 'reflection' and instead use it in the sense of 'active contemplation' of society and nature.

(Art is) seeing the world as sets of changing possibilities; it is a reflection *on*, not *of* nature—including human nature as it is developing within society.⁶

Licsi Espino's Poetics: Sources, Setting, Effects

The importance of Licsi Espino's poetry lies in the fact that not only is it a rich lode of visual lyrical metaphors about a society, a milieu, in agitated and often violent flux, not only does it make statements about the human condition in a forthright historical context, but it also stands out as a self-evident negation of 'apolitical' literature in this country. (But since we insist on a sociological reading of all literature as a 'social product', 'apolitical' turns out to be a virtually meaningless term, to be understood only in the sense of 'withdrawn', 'unconcerned', 'aloof', 'alienated' attitudes or worldviews that may convey an 'absence' of 'political consciousness' or 'conscious politics', but are in fact every bit as touched with politics as those views expressed in a Licsi Espino poem on peasant revolts or a beggar under the Quiapo Bridge.)

One of the most versatile poets in the country today who writes in Tagalog and English, Spanish as well as in other Philippine languages, Licsi Espino defies strict classification. A periodization of his poetry would show that beneath the overall mantle of 'modernist' appended to his name by literary critics like Almario, he has actually undergone the ascending stages of historical consciousness from an early romanticism and naturalism in theme to passionate engagement with historical-political themes. These include the Katipunan and the 1896 Revolution, the war for independence against American colonialism, the student demonstrations of the sixties and seventies, martial law, the new 'social cancer', Aquino's assassination, etc.

We are concerned with the latter period of Licsi Espino. Here, aesthetics and politics fuse: the poetic imagination is fleshed out with a consciousness of history and a partisan concern with social issues; almost every imagery is an allusion to a political event, or to an ideological point of view that the poet either takes for himself or sees in the welter of events and the movement of people in his time.

⁶Darko Suvin, "The Mirror and the Dynamo," in Lee Baxandall's *RADICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE ARTS*, Penguin Books, 1972, p. 74.

'Modernist', the omnibus descriptive for a writer who writes in the contemporary period, who does not follow the 'traditional' rules found in the old vernacular literatures, who writes about the alienation of his 'modern self', who experiments with form (and sometimes with content, as witness the disembodied dadaist poetry or computerese-simulation poetry of word-montages, for instance), applies to Licsi Espino only in the sense that he follows the 'established' norms of free verse, but even this is evident only in his poetry in English. He refuses to do away with rhyme and meter in most of his Tagalog poetry. 'Modernist' was applied to Espino's early poems which featured a startling use of metaphors by which stereotypes about romantic love and genre themes are banished. 'Modernist', however, loses significance in the light of his multi-form poetics, and more important, his political themes and ideological commitment which are expressed in both traditional and modernist techniques.

The poems analyzed in this paper appear in several of his anthologies, namely: *Sa Paanan Ng Parnaso* (1965), *Makabagong Panulaan: Mga Hiyas ng Parnasong Pandaigdig* (1974), *Mga Tulang Apro-Asyatiko* (1975), *Dalitan at Tuksuhan* (1979), *Punlay at Punglo* (1980), *Ritmo ng Lingkaw: Mga Bagong Tulang Premyado at Iba Pa* (1980), and *Ang Panulaan ng Aprika at Timog-Silangang Asya* (1981).⁷ Not included in this study are his poems in other languages such as English, Spanish, and Ilocano.

In his foreword to the poet's *Sa Paanan Ng Parnaso*, the Marxist critic E. San Juan Jr. writes:

One of the outstanding qualities of Espino's Tagalog poetry is a form or structure which embodies an intense experience and a consciousness which find meaning in the force of symbolisms and the dramatic narrative method of the poem.⁸

Perhaps no other early poem of Licsi Espino's can bear witness to this critical judgment than the landmark *Ang Daigdig Ng Sining* (The World of Art) which came out in 1965. According to the poet and critic Mangahas, the poem stood out among its contemporaries on account of its innovative meter and caesura.⁹ Coming from a critic who would later distinguish himself for poems on political activism and for literary criticism with a pronounced orientation towards Marxist aesthetics, this formalist

⁷ At the Feet of Parnassus, *Modern Poems: Gems from the World's Parnassus, Afro-Asian Poems, Songs and Teasings, Seed and Bullet, Rhythm of the Scythe: New Prize-winning Poems and others, African and Southeast Asian Poetry*. All translations into English were done by the author of this essay.

⁸ Federico Licsi Espino Jr., *SA PAANAN NG PARNASO*, Quezon City, Journal Press, 1965, p. 3.

⁹ Rogelio G. Mangahas, *MANLIKHA: MGA PILING TULA, 1961-1967*, Manila: Pioneer Printing Press, 1967, p. 41.

observation on Licsi Espino's poem was, to say the least, interesting: even the most erudite formalism could not have possibly done justice to *Ang Daigdig Ng Sining* because the "innovation" (which was not really a striking or radical departure from traditional Tagalog prosody) of meter and caesura actually paled beside the revolutionary (in the sense of new) *sensibility* of the poem which couches metaphors in philosophical irony. Here is the poem:

ANG DAIGDIG NG SINING

Ang daigdig ng sining
Ay bayan ng San Roque na puspos ng hiwaga —
Doo'y nakakikita
Ang bulag at pusikit na isip at haraya.
Ang daigdig ng sining
Ay bayan ng San Roque na puno ng misteryo —
Doo'y nakaririnig
Ang binging guniguni ng awit ng salteryo.
Ang daigdig ng sining
Ay bayan ng San Roqueng lipos-kababalaghan —
Ang pilantod na diwa
Doo'y nakaiindak, doo'y nakasasayaw.
Ang daigdig ng sining
Ay bayan ng San Roque na batbat ng himala —
Ang piping kaluluwa
Doo'y nakaawit, doo'y nakatutula.¹⁰

THE WORLD OF ART

The world of art
 Is San Roque, steeped in wonders —
 There, the blind, dark
 Mind and imagination see.
 The world of art
 Is San Roque, full of mystery —
 There, the deaf phantasm
 Hears the music of the psaltery.
 The world of art
 Is San Roque, filled with riddle —
 There, the hobbled muse
 Can dance and wiggle.
 The world of art
 Is San Roque, awash with miracles —
 There, the mute spirit
 Can sing, can write a poem.

In Philippine folklore, the mythical and apocryphal town of San Roque is preserved in song. Seemingly a nonsensical song, it turns out upon closer analysis to be a social archetype of the absurd, the surreal, the unnatural:

¹⁰In Virgilio Almario's *WALONG DEKADA NG MAKABAGONG TULANG PILIPINO*, Manila: Peco, Inc., 1981, p. 251.

DOON PO SA AMIN

*Doon po sa amin, bayan ng San Roque
 May nagkatuwaan, apat na pulubi.
 Nagsayaw ang pilay, nakinig ang bingi.
 Nanood ang bulag, umawit ang pipi.*

IN THE TOWN WHERE WE LIVE

In the town where we live, named San Roque,
 Four beggars decided to have fun one day,
 The cripple danced, the deaf listened,
 The blind man watched, the mute one sang.

The very structure of the song has been a model for many a 'take-off'—variation-on-a-theme—in song and poetry, the latter especially, both in a funny and mock-serious vein. The most recent, and arguably one of the most successful adaptations of them all, is a poem by Teo Antonio also titled *Doon Po Sa Amin*, which tells about a town named Panique where

*Ang pulis ay pilay, ang meyor ay pipi,
 Gobernador ay bulag, and hukom ay bingi.¹¹
 The policeman's crippled, the mayor's mute,
 The governor's blind, and the judge is deaf.*

San Roque, as far as poets like Antonio are concerned, becomes a social metaphor. In the real world, it is a political phenomenon. In a third world society like the Philippines, San Roque (Paniquesque) politics is not at all uncommon. Thus in Antonio's poetry, the politics of the perverse is converted into the picaresque. On the whole, however, San Roque as social metaphor may be open to at least three levels of interpretation. One is as pure and simple folk nonsense rhyme, involving the conversion of the commonplace into an absurdity, or the juxtaposition of the natural and unnatural, the familiar and the unexpected, the bizarre and the comic, with transcendental humor as its chief purpose.¹² Thus the four disabled types may represent no actual social archetypes at all, but are mere distortions of reality designed to elicit laughter (unfortunately at the expense of society's disabled), perhaps in times past to spice up traditional folk gatherings. The second interpretation delves into the meaning of the conversion and juxtaposition: why let the cripple dance, the blind watch, the deaf hear, the mute sing? A liberation-of-the-spirit of the 'damned' is suggested here, an affirmation of the capacity of the 'diminished human being', the underprivileged, the physically incapacitated, to transcend his

¹¹ Teo Antonio, *BIRO-BIRO KUNG SANLAN*, Manila: Tagak Series, 1982, p. 17.

¹² In Philippine literary history, (*vide* Maramba and Lumbea), there is ample mention of various song types applicable to different social functions and purposes: lullabies, harvest songs, drinking songs, even songs for the street blind. *Doon Po Sa Amin* may be a descendant, a variant.

limits and find fulfillment in being able to "will" himself to do what is normally impossible for him to do. But this, while being the positive interpretation of the folk song, is self-defeating idealism and perpetuates the *illusive* quality of idealism and idealist art. This, in fact, may be an inaccurate interpretation in the context of *Doon Po Sa Amin*, going against the folk ethos surrounding the very invention of San Roque. The third interpretation may be closer to the actual context in which the San Roque archetype (and the song itself has become a prototype) has been understood. 'Things are not always what they seem'. It is as social criticism—light-hearted originally, it seems—that the San Roque phenomenon has been understood by writers. Another variation worth mentioning here is an early play, a 'dark comedy', by novelist Ninotchka Rosca entitled *Komedyang Sa San Roque*, where the extreme dimensions of society's moral infirmities are explored. San Roque becomes a generic concept, a negative paradigm, an identification tag, and while in Rosca's play, social psychosis (a complicated mesh of individual dementia and bureaucratic evil) takes the place of the most negative connotation of San Roque's four disabled, the absurd characters of Rosca's play, near demonic in their absurdity, underscore the perceived perverse aspects of a 'blind, crippled, deaf and mute' human order where injustice reigns. (Again, how do we explain to society's handicapped that we mean no injustice by this social metaphor?)

Now to Licsi Espino's *Ang Daigdig Ng Sining*. The just interpretation of the poem seems to lie between the second and third levels discussed above. This is so because the poem has fallen into the trap of the San Roque archetype (or rather, the song prototype): ambiguity.

If we apply the second interpretation to the poem, then we mean that the poet intends to use San Roque unconventionally (against, that is, what is recognizable and identifiable in literary or folk symbology), and proffers it as an alternative society, where the trammled imagination (but trammled by what? Censorship? Inhospitable milieu?) can give itself free rein. In other words, the world of art is a condition of freedom for self-expression: it does not matter if the artist, any artist at all, is 'political' or 'apolitical'.

If the third, then we mean that the poet wishes to say that the world of art is the world of illusion, the abode of escape (or Escapism, the more formal/academic denunciation of *belletrists/beauxartists* by the politicals) where the *mind/imagination/imagery-creating faculty/spirit/will* can distort reality at will, and the inescapable conclusion is that the poet denounces the world of art as a veritable San Roque of the Absurd, the Irrational, the Irrelevant, and the Anti-Social.

The ambiguity is mainly traceable to the unparallel construction of metaphors. At least one does not belong to this group:

'bulag at pusikit na isip at haraya';
 'binging guniguni'; 'pilantod na diwa';
 'piping kaluluwa'.
 ('blind, dark mind and imagination';
 'deaf phantasm'; 'hobbled muse';
 'mute spirit'.

What does not belong is the fourth construction. The first three do not seem to be inspirational attributes. But the fourth elicits sympathy. It is the Right Stuff, so to speak, of which are made all handicapped men who would rise above themselves and prevail against the odds. The first three archetypes appear to be indulging themselves in the world of illusion; but the fourth affirms the victory of the artistic spirit. Yes, a formalist analysis would have some limited success here, were one to concentrate on the metaphorical constructions. But Licsi Espino's *Ang Daigdig Ng Sining* cannot be taken away from the cultural ethnology, the folk ethos underpinning the very idea of a *San Roque*. In contrast with this poem, the *San Roque* of Rosca and the *Panique* (a *San Roque* clone) of Antonio are more traditional, predictable social metaphors.

(In the light of the foregoing discussion, would Formalism still maintain that the main contribution of *Ang Daigdig Ng Sining* to Philippine poetics was a new meter and caesura?)

The political events of the second half of the decade of the 1960s marked a turning point in the poetics of Licsi Espino. While undoubtedly, the virtuoso (indeed, the virtuous) use of poetic language remained, and continues to be the textual manifestation of the poet's craft, it is his reactions to the social upheaval of his times which redefined the political consciousness of the country's intellectuals, artists, together with a considerable part of the urban and rural masses, that injected a more pronounced political philosophy into the poetry of Licsi Espino. The historical context seeped into the poetic consciousness, and his art was further transformed. But before this happened, the metaphorical language as the vehicle of the poetic imagination was the dominant motif in Licsi Espino's poems, even in those poems which were already projecting a distinct social, historical voice. His contemporary, E. San Juan Jr., would describe his poetics at this particular stage thus:

Each poem is a field of contention, an arena witnessing the drama of Being-Man, which is the mark of humanity. Achieving a consciousness of depth and scope first requires undergoing a crisis, whose resolution is the successful, finished poem. *Ekstasis* precedes Being-Man. Espino's poetry is outstanding and, to my mind, the poet is at the forefront among the modern poets who are loyal to the judicious handling of poetic language.¹³

¹³ "The Drama of Being-Man in the Tagalog Poems of Federico Licsi Espino, Jr.," E. San Juan Jr.'s preface to FLE's *Sa Paanan ng Parnaso*.

The emphasis of the critic is obviously not the social-historical input into the poem but Espino's linguistic craft (thus hews closer to a formalist commentary), but considering that Tagalog poetry was, in the early 1960s, just emerging out of tradition's womb (or cocoon) — during which Alejandro G. Abadilla was the standard bearer for the Tagalog 'modernists' — it would take another leap of consciousness (after the first, which was the revolt of the moderns in form and language, *not yet in social content*), for the Filipino poet to arrive at the present stage of poetics, which is Licsi Espino's present situation: the unity of form and content, the aesthetics of social poetry in the concentric context of Filipino-Asian-Third World literature.

At his best, Licsi Espino weds lyricism with a profound awareness of the social dimension, and the effect is a prosody that rises, soars above both didacticism and emotionalism. In the poem *Pahimakas* (Farewell) the poet's technique of run-on metaphorical construction would have possibly gone awry as breakneck adumbration of images in the hands of a less skillful verse-maker. The 'clustering' which seems to be the literary signature of the poet is very evident here, the entire poem-idea centering on the 'chaste principle' mentioned in line 6:

PAHIMAKAS

*Kung ang tambol sa dibdib ko ay mahinto na ang ragay
Sa kalabit sa gatilyong di isa at maramihan,
Habang ang paglalanda's'y isang pasilyong luntian
Ng amihang kung sumimoy ay banayad sa tag-araw,
Huwag sanang lilimutin at hayaan mong magnawdaw
Ang malinis na prinsipyong inihatik ko sa linang
Ng isipan mong dinilig ng lirit na kalungkutang
Hindi pansariling lungkot na animo'y patak lamang
Sa lumalalim na ilog na lalampas din sa pampang.¹⁴*

FAREWELL

Should the drum cease to beat in my breast
When the triggers, unsolitary, are pressed
While the breeze courses through the greenest
Pavilions, gently wafting in a season of heat,
May you not forget, may you let grow and yield
The chaste principle I sowed in the field
Of your mind touched by raindrops of sorrow
That is never alone, never a lone drop of woe
In the deepening river that shall its banks overflow.

The power of this short poem derives from the dialectical interplay of interior (the poetic reflection, the poet interiorizing memory, effective images, political philosophy) and the exterior (reference to social forces,

¹⁴ Federico Licsi Espino, Jr., *PUNLAY AT PUNGLO*, Manila: Palimbagang Araro, 1981, p. 3.

literary symbology for the 'historical tide'), and here we come closest to *metaphor as social reflection*: the use of lyrical imagery to serve as the vehicle for an otherwise tract-like perception of the dialectical process in society—the negation of individual solitude by its commonality among a society of individuals, that is to say, the poet's acknowledgment of the collective experience (or the collective social being) giving rise to collective social consciousness. Lyricism—poetic musicality—becomes necessary in a poem to smooth out the 'hard edge' of the language of political and historical perception. History, at any rate, is the proper, and indeed the most significant, material for poetry but is refashioned in its manner of being retold, or illumined.

This poem which opens the anthology *Punlay at Punglo*, in spirit the book's virtual epigraph, makes a statement about the relationship between Self and Society. It in fact practically negates all that has been mystically forwarded both in Art—the autonomy of the individual spirit—as well as in History—the theory of the 'Hero'—while at the same time the dialectics between the individual self and social phenomena *flows* (not merely is explained) in the poem. Consider the separate ideas in this single metaphor-cluster which is Licsi Espino's *Pahimakas*. The first says something about individual fear being overcome (or 'silenced') by the pressing of unsolitary triggers (referring to either the mass movement or the armed struggle or both). The second, seemingly sounding 'apolitical' mentions the breeze wafting, in a season of heat, through the green pavilions (rice-fields in full bloom, the lush countryside which, together with *field* three lines later gives evidence of the rural—but certainly not pastoral!¹⁵—setting of the poet's deceptively quiet scenario for revolution) and which, therefore, in the context of preceding and following images, turns out to be 'unapolitical', after all. Then the pivotal sixth line, the third image: *the chaste principle I sowed*. This contains three elements:

- a. the political/social/ideological element, 'chaste principle'
- b. the motive subjective consciousness of the persona, 'I'
- c. the operative metaphorical act that describes the historical action and symbolical setting, 'sowed'

In this particular line, the poet expresses full self-consciousness of his historical act (he even sounds here as if he were himself a proselytizer of men and causes, and the vocative or person being addressed is the other subjective element in the process). Hence, the persona actually talks of two consciousnesses transcending individual solitude and finding fulfillment

¹⁵ cf. Licsi Espino's poetry on peasants and Rio Alma's neo-pastoral poetry. In the former, the social tension is present, testimony to unresolved historical issues in the Philippine setting. In the latter, sheer lyricism, with touches even of eroticism, harks back to a romantic past or dwells on a quietistic, pastoral paradigm.

in merging with the 'larger solitude' of the multitude.¹⁶ The poem thus unfolds outwards, rather than inwards, and triumphs over sheer inscaping, interiorizing, introspectiveness. Out of the psyche flows the reflective stream, the contemplation of history and human life and one's role in it, then the flow joins—but only as a projection of one's subjective commitment (the ultimate limitation of even the most politicized poem that can only *contemplate* on historical action)—the tidal waters of a metaphorical river overflowing its banks. Understood in its proper context, this overflow would have either of two interpretations, both in favor of the river or the 'revolutionary high tide': it sweeps away the rotten and the dead, or it fertilizes the land and helps create life anew for man.

Licis Espino's *tanaga* poems are less successful as lyrical compositions, but their main purpose, after all, is to ignite instantaneous ideas and images. In his *tanagas*—originally an ancient Tagalog poetic quatrain with monoriming heptasyllabic lines—the poet reverts to traditional form and metaphorical insight, but the content of his *tanagas* has transformed the form into something contemporary, revolutionary even, with a thematic treatment that makes it similar to the 'gentler' *tanagas* of pre-Hispanic origins only in terms of structure. The *tanaga* in Licis Espino's poetics becomes verily a *taga* (literally, a bladestroke), a cutting aphorism or political witticism that is a capsule commentary on the System against which the poet jousts. (Aside from the celebrated *tanaga* series, the poet has also written verse parodies which, in terms of formal structure, too, are indistinguishable from their 19th century antecedents: *Dalitan at Tuksuhan*, a take-off on a patriotic anti-friar parody written during the colonial period, is reminiscent of the literature of that era.)

Bagong Dinsulan is an early example of Licis Espino's version of the *tanaga*. It may be described as being too 'open', shorn—like many of his *tanagas*—of this poem-form's original lushness and intricacy of metaphor, especially since the quatrain was sometimes two rhyming couplets each with an independent thought, metaphor or aphorism.

ANG BAGONG DINSULAN

Ang panulat ni Karl Marx
Ay may bagong dinsulan
At ito'y yaong puso
Ng ibong-kalayaan

THE NEW INKWELL

Karl Marx's quill
Has a new inkwell
None other but the heart
Of a bird named Freedom.

¹⁶ This theme, of course, is of recent vintage among Latin American writers and their explicators.

The historian of political theory may well be intrigued by the poet's reference to Marx's 'New Inkwell' as a 'bird named Freedom', when the concept of Freedom was certainly not a stranger to the German philosopher. The poet's association is the result of a synchronic slip: he is referring to the new Marxist literature in his own time and society, because in contemporary Philippine political culture, the 'freedom bird' has become a living symbol of political ideals, such as 'decolonization', 'national liberation', 'emancipation', etc.

But Licsi Espino is certainly not one-track-minded about his political symbology. He straddles the old and the new, tradition and revolution, and the inkwells of his art appear to be inexhaustible for the bright reason that he draws from the distant as well as recent past. In his *tanaga* which he titles *Dalawang Sisne* (Two Bards) the poet pays tribute to tradition and change:

*Kudyapi ni Balagtas,
Makinilya ni Aga,
May kani-kaniyang tunog
Kayganda sa tainga.*

Balagtas' cither,
Aga's typewriter,
Each has a timbre
Both sweet to the ear.

Curiously, though Balagtas in Philippine literature is a representative of the traditional style, he is only formalistically so: it has been pointed out by critics like Lucila Hosillos that the metrical tale *Florante at Laura* contains an anti-colonial sentiment, or what may be interpreted as a form of proto-nationalism, such that the story is not entirely about the triumph of love, but is also about colonial politics and man's struggle for justice.

On the other hand, Abadilla's "rebellion" was an individualist secession from the conventions of Tagalog prosody and poetic sentimentalism. Another way of putting it would be that Balagtas was traditional in form and content but progressive in orientation (if we are to accept the political symbolism read into *Florante at Laura*), while AGA was radical in form and even content (rejection of sentiment, emphasis on the subjective world-creating Ego), but was 'reactionary' in orientation, since he did not address himself to the social realities of his time. [In contrast, writers like Salvador P. Lopez and A. B. Rotor were critical of the 'uncommitted' Filipino writers of their time, who chose to write about the 'moonlight in Manila Bay' while the peasants, oppressed and hungry, were restive throughout Central Luzon.] But this categorization of AGA may run the

risk of simplism because his rejection of traditional poetics was—the social alienatedness apart—a step towards freeing Tagalog poetry from the strictures closely adhered to by the ‘Old Guard’ and opening up new possibilities for dynamic expression in the poetic medium.

It may be asked then, in the case of Licsi Espino’s *tanaga* poems, which is the decisive attribute, form or content? At first glance, it would seem that the traditional form he uses serves merely as a means for the content which is contemporary aphorism, vision or commentary. But is this really so? What, after all, was the basis for the efficacy of the ancient *tanaga*? As constructed in its ancient form, the *tanaga* was a complex statement, a distillation of folk wisdom captured in snappy, measured and rhyming verses.¹⁷ It may be argued that it is less the form than the content (or ‘spirit’) of the *tanaga* which Licsi Espino wishes to capture in his version. But—and here is the crucial point—the *tanaga* is nothing if not a strictly structured quatrain, combining the rhyme-meter framework and the pithy philosophy maintained by oral tradition, and thus we conclude that to argue about the primacy of either form, or content, in the ancient (as well as in Licsi Espino’s) *tanaga* misses the point: we are talking about a *social form* and a *social content*. Here is perhaps the outstanding exception to the earlier formulation that in the sociological approach to literary analysis—but indeed, the process itself of literary creation—form becomes secondary to content. The *tanaga* is only one of numerous ancient art forms in Philippine and world literature which have become a veritable repository of a people’s culture. The *tanaga* might as well be a *time capsule*. It contains, in four heptasyllabic lines, the heart and mind of forebears, and this means not only the wisdom, but also the structured musicality. It is interesting to note what Caudwell thought of such verse forms:

Poetry is one of the earliest aesthetics of the human mind. When it cannot be found existing as a separate product in the early art of a people, it is because it is coincident with literature as a whole; the common vehicle for history, religion, magic, and even law. Where a civilized people’s early literature is preserved, it is found to be almost entirely poetical in form—that is to say, rhythmical or metrical.¹⁸

It would follow from such a formulation, then, that natural predilection for poetics is part of ‘racial memory’, but if such memory exists, we may assume that it progressively recedes with the passage of time, unless there

¹⁷ An example: *Ang tubig ma’y malalim / malilirip kung libdin / itong budhing magaling / maliwag paghanapin* (Though the water be deep / one can always fathom it / the really difficult thing / is finding a trusty heart (Tagalog *tanaga* from Bienvenido and Cynthia Lubera’s *PHILIPPINE LITERATURE: A HISTORY AND ANTHOLOGY*, Manila: National Book Store, 1982, p. 9).

¹⁸ Caudwell, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

is a very efficient retrieval and preservation, or unless poets of the new age, like Licsi Espino, decide to revive those poetic forms that presumably form part of that memory, that heritage. How successful is the modern *tanaga* of Licsi Espino? Of late, he has been concentrating on a series of these short poems which are undisguised polemics against present conditions in his country. Here are four examples from "*Sari-saring Karam-daman: Mga Makabagong Tanaga*" (Types of Diseases: Some Modern *Tanagas*):¹⁹

ISPAT

*May ispat daw sa baga
Ang sinisanteng piyon
May ispat sa kalul'wa
Ang nagpatanggal na don.*

SPOT

A spot in the lungs, they said
Of the kicked-out laborer;
A spot in the soul, so dead,
Of the filthy rich employer.

SAKIT NG LIPUNAN

*Iyang kanser sa dugo,
Hindi nakakahawa,
Ang kanser ng lipunan
Laganap kapagdaka.*

SOCIAL DISEASE

Blood's cancer, fortunately,
Has no danger of contagion;
But the cancer of society
Spreads like conflagration.

KANSER

*Buwaya sa katihan
Oo nga't palasimba,
Talamak na ang kanser
Sa budhi't kaluluwa.*

CANCER

This land-based crocodile
Is oft, in church, a presence;
But cancer, all the while
Infests his soul and conscience.

MIKROBYO

*May mikrobyo sa pulmon
Ang obrerong pumanaw
May mikrobyo sa budhi
Ang among di dumamay.*

MICROBE

His lungs were microbe-ridden,
This worker who is dead.
His soul is microbe-laden,
This boss with heart of lead.

These poems may be said to have the didactic tone or flavor of folk wisdom. One is reminded of the somber philosophies of English poet Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man* and *Essay on Criticism*. What Pope did for the English couplet,

giving (it) its greatest possible finish and brilliancy . . . (to become) a bright and sharp-edged tool, excellent for satire or for turning aphorism. . . .²⁰

Licsi Espino may well have done for the ancient Tagalog quatrain. In this particular set of *tanagas*, there are three general characteristics: 1) strict observance of the seven-syllable rule, 2) irregular rhyme patterns

¹⁹ Licsi Espino, *PUNLAY AT PUNGLO*, p. 11.

²⁰ Emile Legouis, *A SHORT HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE*, Oxford: University Press, 1934, pp. 200-201.

as against the traditional monorime, and 3) the use of metaphor for *political* aphorism. Compared with the almost contemplative nature of the ancient *tanaga's* proverb-complex, Licsi Espino's aphorisms appear here as 'unsubtle', 'open', and 'graphic'. These short poems are works of social analysis (a hazardous term to employ here, as the quatrain can be very limiting). *Ispat* and *Mikrobyo* are trenchant observation on class stratification and economic inequalities. *Sakit ng Lipunan* and *Kanser*, almost synonymous poems, speak more generally about injustice in society without specific reference to social classes, although the latter refers to a popular symbol for (usually) upper-class greed and predatoriness, the crocodile.

An interesting aspect of Licsi Espino's art is his criticism of the atavistic elements of the religious worldview, in particular that of the devotional, prayerbook-and-scapular medieval Catholicism introduced and cultivated by the colonial Spanish-Roman church in the Philippines. The explicit criticism of religious obscurantism in some of his poems is a direct influence of Marcelo H. del Pilar's 19th century polemics against it, especially as manifested in the propagandist's parodies of Spanish 'friarocracy' in colonial Philippines.²¹ That the degree of submission to the medieval religious mythology is an index of the general cultural underdevelopment of a people subjected to colonization, seems to be the underlying thesis of Espino's anti-religious poetry.²² He threads this theme through several centuries of Philippine history, and in the present time, the System's institutional mechanisms and human accomplices have taken the place of the callous colonial friars. This point is dramatically limned in the poem "*Payo Sa Isang Pasyente Sa Charity Ward*" (Advice to a Charity Ward Patient):

*Habang namumukadkad ang mikrobyo
At nagkukulay rosas ang ulser mo sa sikmura,
Bilangin mo na ang patak ng rosaryo
At makipag-usap ka na sa mga anghel,
Pagka't mas malayo ang botika sa kampusanto
At bingi ang mga doktor
Sa tagulaylay ng pagdaralita.
Malaki ang nagagawa ng pananalig
Ngunit huwag mong isipin

Na ang isang "Ama Namin" at isang
"Aba Ginoong Maria"
Ay makagpapatikom sa rosas ng karamdaman
Sa muling pagkabuhay ng araw*

²¹ In fact, Licsi Espino's *Dalitan at Tuksuhan* is a modern progeny of del Pilar's satirical *Dasalan at Tuksuhan*, and still harps on the anti-friar theme.

²² A talk with the poet, reveals, however, that he believes himself a devout Christian. Some of his poems express an intense level of 'non-institutional' religiosity. In fact, Licsi Espino fuses religious thought and political belief in his adherence to 'Christian Socialism'.

*Bukas ng umaga.
Makararaan ka sa butas ng karayom,
bakit hindi?
Ngunit huwag mong isipin
Na sa dambuhalang gusaling ito
Na amoy-antiseptiko at amoy-kamatayan
Ay may isang anghel na nakaputi
Na magpapagaling sa iyo.²³*

The poem thus begins with a double irony:

*Habang namumukadkad ang mikrobyo
At nagkukulay-rosas ang ulser mo sa sikmura . . .*

While the microbes bloom like flowers
And the ulcers turn rosepink in your belly . . .

that reiterates the theme of one of the *tanagas* earlier cited. The succeeding lines employ irony in the most elegiac of tone, depicting the absurdity that brings out in stark relief the relationship between poverty and disease:

*Bilangin mo na ang patak ng rosaryo
At makipag-usap ka na sa anghel,
Pagkat mas malayo ang botika sa kampusanto
At bingi ang mga doktor
Sa tagulaylay ng pagdaralita.*

Count now the rosary's beadfalls
Time to converse with the angels
For the pharmacy's farther than
the graveyard
And the doctors can lend no ears
To the sad songs of poverty.

The poet begins to give counsel on faith, but aborts it after a line, taking up again the cautionary comment on doctrinaire 'faith':

*Malaki ang nagagawa ng pananalig
Ngunit huwag mong isipin
Na ang isang "Ama Namin" at isang
"Aba Ginoong Maria"
Ay makapagpapatikom sa rosas ng karamdaman
Sa muling pagkabuhay ng araw
Bukas ng umaga.*

Faith can accomplish much
But do not think
That one "Our Father" and one
"Hail Mary"

²³ Licsi Espino, RITMO NG LINGKAW, Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1978, p. 7.

Can shut close the roseate disease
 When the sun rises anew
 Tomorrow morning.

Why the aborted counsel on faith? Was it deemed unproductive, thematically and logically? The indecisiveness of the line makes it rather out of place in the poem. It does sound unproductive, thematically and logically, because the whole point of the poem is the inutility of religious faith relying solely on prayer and miracles to reverse the process of social neglect, helplessness of the poor, and inevitable death. Now if the poet had continued on the theme of 'faith', it would have to be constituted as something more efficacious than mumbled faith, no matter how fervently done. At any rate, the handling of these particular lines, apart from the incongruity of the first, is quite remarkable. The metaphor-cum-irony is striking: flowers shut at night, open again in the morning, a symbol of hope, of life continuing, among other things. But here is one flower that needs to be shut close when the new day dawns: the roseate disease gnawing away at the patient's innards.

In the final thematic section, the poet repeats the pattern of the preceding section: a rhetorical statement that borders on an optimistic note, but which finds no elaboration, promises no relief for the addressee. There is only the poet's admonition not to put one's faith in one of the System's instrumentalities, and the poet proceeds to convert into one imagery religious and secular symbols in an unrelenting whipsnap at the System:

*Makararaan ka sa butas ng karayom,
 bakit hindi?
 Ngunit huwag mong isipin
 Na sa dambuhalang gusaling ito
 Na amoy-antiseptiko at amoy-kamatayan
 Ay may isang anghel na nakapui
 Na magpapagaling sa iyo.*

You can pass through the needle's eye,
 why not?
 But never think
 That in this monstrous building
 Antiseptic-reeking, redolent of death,
 A white-clad angel
 Will cure you at last.

For a Filipino reader, it is rather easy to accept the validity, the genuineness, of the situation being described by the poet. It is recognizable: the charity ward patient in a setting like the Philippines has become almost a social archetype, to be associated with indigence, segregation, classification, stratification, the hospital system, social neglect and 'distance', etc. With

this poem, Licsi Espino gives substance to the proposition that a poem has a definable and definite *social function* of imaginative description and analysis. Much shorter than a tract or even an abstract, the poem *Payo Sa Isang Pasyente Sa Charity Ward* moves us to think and feel, even *educates* us about social processes, and is therefore a social document that happens to be an organic part of Social Reality: it is a *reflection on it* and a *product of it*.

EPILOGUE: Licsi Espino's Poetics and the Social Imagination

Georg Lukacs, in an essay 'The Intellectual Physiognomy of Literary Characters', quotes Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher:

Those who are awake have a world in common, but every sleeper has a world of his own.²⁴

In being an 'artist engagé', in identifying himself as a social partisan in the Philippine class struggle, in writing about the aspirations of the workers, peasants, and activist intellectuals, Licsi Espino practices the aesthetics of the *social imagination*: his artistic introspection becomes a means for concretizing his vision and interpretation of external reality. The groundwork for this thorough reflection on society is prepared through a familiarity with Philippine history, culture, literature, as well as a grasp of political philosophy.

Thus it is that in a Licsi Espino poem, that is, a poem of his dealing with the Human Condition in the context of Philippine history and society, we find the consummation of the creative process as the inseparability of *aesthetic contemplation* and *agonistic commitment*: the poet in Federico Licsi Espino is also a *social warrior*. His allusions to, and his self-identification with, Philippine-Asian-Third World reality, put him in the mainstream of national-liberation literature. Thus it is that a finished Licsi Espino poem is not 'free' of the poet, does not and cannot enjoy an 'independent existence' open to all possible sorts of interpretations, does not float around as a metaphysical product of idle reflection, because it is a people-oriented, socially partisan statement of the poet about his time, place and circumstance, as well as—and this is no less important—his role (or his perception of it) in history.

Federico Licsi Espino's latter period of aesthetic engagement with Philippine reality (artistically interpreted by him and by other writers as a social landscape of surrealistic dehumanization-of-man by exploiting-man) concretizes the relationship between art and man as an interdependence struggling towards the fullest human liberation. This cannot be stated more

²⁴ Epigraph to his article, in Lee Baxandall, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

beautifully than by Christopher Caudwell in the final two paragraphs of *Illusion and Reality*, in words which must rank among the most lucid and moving ever written by anyone:

That everything which comes into being must pass away; that all is fleeting, all is moving; that to exist is to be like the fountain and have a shape because it is the texture of reality. Man is drawn to life because it moves from him; he has desires as ancient and punctual as the stars: love has a poignant sweetness and the young life pushes aside the old; these are qualities of being as enduring as man. Man too must pass away.

Therefore the stuff of art endures as long as man. The fountain dwindles away only when men are rent and wasted by a sterile conflict, and the pulsing movement of society is halted. All this movement is creative because it is not a simple oscillation but a development unfolded by its very restlessness. The external simplicities generate the enrichment of art from their own bosoms not only because they are eternal but also because change is the condition of their existence. Thus art is one of the conditions of man's realization of himself, and in its turn is one of the realities of man.

The heroics of Caudwell can only be approximated, then finally equalled, when poets like Federico Licsi Espino, Jr. or his literary progenies shall have attained to that state of social being and consciousness where poetry can be written in a condition of freedom. When, that is, human freedom shall have been more reality than illusion.

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