

## **AN EXAMINED LIFE**

Rosario A. Garcellano

THE UNEXAMINED LIFE was farthest from what Edel Garcellano lived. It appeared like every waking hour was spent deconstructing the million and one details that crowd the human condition, from the personal to the political (seemingly separate but not), entering his consciousness like shafts of sunlight and boring in, there to be retrieved, inspected, turned inside out, each in its turn.

It was a veritable affliction. He was a man “wired to everything” he read, or noticed while crossing the street, or lived with since childhood, or encountered in the university, or made aware of from afar as in a face that turned his head, or overheard in a conversation between women in the intimacy of a packed jeepney, or discovered, as words on a page declaring intentions, positions, justifications: ultimate targets for interrogation

resulting in an occasional nod, a rare recognition and flash of hope, a spurt of anger, or a curt, crushing dismissal.

Two teenagers espied through an upstairs window rummaging through the neighbor's garbage gave him pause. The boys were not grubbily dressed the way one expected scavengers to be; they seemed in fact about to head to the mall. Why were they picking at the detritus of other lives and salvaging scraps for their sustenance? He wondered why long and otherwise unendurable hardship could not bring people to finally conclude that they're impoverished. "Only a few are up in arms," he wrote, "as if life would take care of itself."

Or he recoiled at the sight of the woman on the TV screen railing against the barbarity of Muslims sacrificing animals in a ritual even before they were sedated and made "dizzy," and somehow spared the torture of pain and of realizing their dreadful fate. He remembered her in her youth, lithe and seductive, the stuff of every hot-blooded man's desire, and even then speaking out against the slaughter of seals and other defenseless (but profitable) creatures. But though distressed, he was quick to pay homage: Madame Brigitte Bardot was now old at 73, all jowls and eyebags sagging, but "she's still incandescent in the bigger cinema of life," he wrote. "O never had she looked more enthralling than when she was no longer beautiful."

SCENES BEHELD LIKE vignettes unfolding — hardly anything could be so insignificant for him who, having observed and apprehended the unerring connectedness of our lives and the

state apparatus that keeps us in chains, proceeded to explain why it was so and laid down the predicates for one's arriving at the logical conclusion of breaking them. No beating around the bush. Poetry was, after all, not just lovely or precious words, he wrote — "hindi lang magagandang salita."

He badgered his readers and his students on the true role of the writer in society, in the course of such badgering pronouncing the task of presenting that society in all its contexts a "heroic" task. Whether in print or in sessions and conversations with his students and friends, he embodied what the Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa said (the statement comes to mind every so often, masterfully presenting as it does the imperatives of our day): "The writer cannot be a mere storyteller, he cannot be a mere teacher; he cannot merely x-ray society's weaknesses, its ills, its perils, he or she must be actively involved in shaping its present and its future.

Edel was a difficult, impatient, exacting man, as everyone in our assembly must know, but the mourning that marked his passing last year, as well as this continuing forum, appears to ensure that his ideas and critical stances will remain points for discussion to serve, if not as guideposts and arguments for a correct reading of our infinitely perilous times — "when guns rule, the law falls silent," he wrote— then as provocative triggers set alongside that all-important question: What is to be done?

TRUTH BE TOLD, I hesitated at accepting the kind invitation to speak about Edel at this forum, aware of how I have fully changed from 50 years ago when I sprang to meet each challenge with an

exuberance I cannot now approximate. His memory looms ever large but I could not quite know where to begin. First I had to find, with not much success, the specific solitude in which to chip at the lode of remembrances that besiege anyone suddenly bereft. I mean to say how terrible is absence, not in the maudlin sense, but in the sheer physical sense: You turn away and when you look back, you confront a void. It's an existential thorn in the side, a literal needling, while you put on a face to meet the faces you have to meet in the course of preparing, along with others thus conscripted, a neat package of words and pictures with which to inform readers what occurred yesterday in the world at large — and thereby, according to an avowed mission, offer them an informed choice on how to proceed.

How to proceed... One could say he showed me the way. The conversation that began when we were young and which flashed or flickered through the long years was marked as much by the events, whether mundane or momentous, that occurred in this unhappy archipelago as by the peaks and valleys of our time together, ourselves seemingly constant but changed in so many ways in time, each reading and being read by the other, whether intoxicated or sober, whether offering or withholding words, whether speaking or being silent (and silence, said Albert Camus, "has taken on formidable meaning").

I can imagine how bracing, how satisfying, the conversations were with his friends and colleagues. A number of his students say they learned from him; I take it as a compliment and I take it to mean that they accepted and were changed by his offered way of reading — whether texts, events, gestures, government actions and pronouncements — to help them

navigate the society in which they live and to be true poets even without words.

WHEN HE WAS lecturer at UP, Edel once asked me to suggest a short story to assign to his class. I thought about it, and impishly wondered whether a tale of infidelity in American suburbia stylishly told by John Updike — marked by poignant details of borrowed time, such as a hurried tryst of the lovers among sand dunes under “an El Greco sky” — would be appropriate. I imagined him discussing the dialectics of white marital perfidy in the 1960s, when the Vietnam War was raging, as presented by a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant male in the most elegant language.

But in the end I pitched a story set in apartheid-era South Africa by Nadine Gordimer, titled “Country Lovers,” about a white boy and a Black girl who are playmates in the vast farm owned by his parents and at which her parents till the land. He leaves for school in the city but returns to the farm whenever school’s out and they resume the happy companionship. But soon they are no longer children; it seems inevitable that they become lovers. She gets pregnant by him but he is ignorant of it on his return to the city. She marries a young Black man and delivers a healthy baby. When her white lover returns to the farm, he learns of her marriage. He goes to see her and she shows him the light-skinned and gray-eyed child. Two days later he returns and asks to see the child by himself. She leaves the hut. When she goes back inside she discovers the baby in a weak condition; it dies within days, having been poisoned. The white father is

arrested. But the mother refuses to testify at his trial, and he is released.

Both are stirring love stories, but racial conflict, colonialism, impoverishment, and the strict dictates of class, whether in our own country and elsewhere, are the enduring realities that Edel most examined in prose and poetry. Apartheid may be formally a thing of the past in South Africa but its vestiges remain, and the massacre in Soweto ever finds echoes in many other places worldwide. Middle-class America groaning under the weight of dead marriages is an altogether different, though wry, picture, and at any rate anguished couples there have the option of divorce — a state of affairs so far removed from our uncivilized neck of the woods.

I imagine Edel in the classroom taking caustic note of the irony that plagues little lives — for example, the old couple in Franz Arcellana's "The Mats," in which the father appears to ascribe the "fault" of the children's deaths to their mother, as though her gender ensured her guilt over their early extinction. Of course, Edel's own work bristles with snapshots of irony stalked by hunger and desperation: of a woman who managed, in the frantic effort to escape with her life, to save a spoon from her lahar-ravaged hut; of the "boys of Naujan" who quite literally drank themselves to death in the process of killing time in their small town; of petty bureaucrats climbing the ladder to power; of the lover left in the dumps and unable to understand why or to douse his desire; of the retired professor waking at dawn, getting dressed, and realizing that there was nowhere to go...

Yet Edel cautioned against mindlessly getting lost in, and urged a deliberate recognition of, the welter of details that

daily assault us. He taught a rigorous lesson in his rereading of the Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "One Hundred Years of Solitude," in which he noted the celebrated author's "seamless weaving of the historical (that which transpired as attested to by empirical research) and narrative fantasy (that which imagination has invested with the plausibility of truth)." The narrative, as admirers of Garcia Marquez well know, is breathtaking for language, scope and detail, with actual events included such as the slaughter in Macondo Plaza.

"Contrast this," Edel said, with the El Salvadoran Manlio Argueta's "One Day of Life," which is set against the backdrop of a civil war into which, he noted, "a Filipino reader might read Davao, Negros or Quezon." He quoted the narrator, Lupe, as reporting: "And a huge cloud of smoke started coming out. And they threw another bomb in and the bus began to burn with the people still inside... Then after they threw the tear gas, the policemen went back into the bus to have a look. And then they started shooting at the people..."

Edel noted the authors' stylistic difference. "Yet, it is their respective closures that make for ideological distinction..." He added: "Garcia Marquez ends in metaphysical indifference, as with an old man repeating an old truth, a madness; Argueta finishes off with an active resolve, a call to rupture: '...It is the way: we must organize ourselves so they won't be able to abuse us. ...'

AT ONE POINT last year, having tried to clinically track my grief over Edel's passing and calculating now that I was in the anger stage, I was struck by a passage from a book in which an aging woman

admits regretting having “adopted her husband’s predilection for sorrow; she wishes she had laughed more. ‘Why did this world become amusing,’ she asks, ‘only when I realized I was about to leave it?’” I also mused on how, in the ironic scheme of things, he who pontificated against privilege was himself privileged by his gender and his platform to give voice to his ideas and provocations, unlike others muted by their own circumstances.

It didn’t help that I had willy-nilly watched an American movie, titled “Downhill,” of an American couple taking a skiing vacation and tentatively working on an uneasy marriage. In one extended scene they settle with their two sons on the verandah of a restaurant for lunch with a view of the slopes. She scans the menu, he, restless, says they must have soup. Suddenly, a cry: Avalanche! Indeed, an icy torrent is swiftly sliding down the slope and heading their way. She reaches for their sons and protectively crouches over them. He reaches for his phone on the table, leaps to his feet, and scurries away. Minutes later, after the snow has settled and the waiters have calmed everyone down with freshly wiped tables, he returns sheepish. She is incredulous at his behavior. “You left us, Dad,” his son says. “Let’s have soup,” he says.

I went to bed unaccountably discomfited. (What was that Truman Capote wrote, in the story of the blind man left by comen in the desert? “We all, sometimes, leave each other out there under the skies, and we never know why.”) Later the dream that came to me was as vivid as the salty taste of tears: The children and I, panicked and sobbing, are running in the dark, fleeing a place where we have been trapped for hours. We keep running, and we hear their father shouting in the distance. He emerges running from the dark to meet us, shouting, “Here!



Here! Here!" He leads us to the car. And we pile in, shaking and sobbing. And he starts the car. And we roar safely away...

I lurched awake, heart pounding so hard that I couldn't breathe. But the message was, as always, dramatic and wonderfully precise.

Thank you.

April 2021