

OF TEXT, STYLE, AND METHOD: EDEL GARCELLANO'S DIALECTICAL CRITICISM

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Abstract

In his essay entitled *Philippine Hermeneutics and the Kingpins of the Hill* poet, fictionist, and critic Edel Garcellano talks about the “depoliticization of literary discourse” which, he says, serves as “a strategic/tactical interpellation to allow certain modes of unity and, in effect, certain philosophies to function as though literature were outside social, economic and political imperatives in human discourses” (59). This line underscores not only the apparent failure of dominant modes of critical practice to address exigent literary issues but also the systematic marginalization of Marxist/dialectical criticism in favor of the “non-ideological” methods of textual analysis such as American Formalism/New Criticism whose logic of operation is best exemplified in T.S. Eliot’s essay *The Function of Criticism* (1923), where he explains that the role of the critic is “the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste” (24). French philosopher and literary theorist Pierre Macherey, in his book, *A Theory of Literary Production*, calls those who share Eliot’s dictum as “technicians of taste,” and exposes a fundamental flaw in the interventions of critics who perform their textual readings with the idea of correcting artistic taste in mind, primarily, by sticking to defining and explicating, they necessarily fail to engage in the production of knowledge: “in the attempt to define the average realities of taste they are always inevitably mistaken because their work evades rationality and does not produce a knowledge in the strict sense of the word” (14). Furthermore, Macherey argues that such a form of criticism “treats

literature as a commodity” and hence, could only but establish “rules of consumption” (14).

While Edel Garcellano was not the first and certainly not the last critic to go against the New Critical tide and combat the critical formulations of the so called “technicians of taste,” his sustained engagements with the works of the leading proponents of *belles lettres* is significant because his critiques take the form of highly theoretical, politically reflexive, and most of the time defiant and belligerent critical essays that sadly elicited from his contemporaries not similarly theoretical ripostes but outright silence.

This paper is an attempt to engage with Garcellano’s critical oeuvre by examining the following: his notion of the text (the object of literary analysis) vis-a-vis the formalist notion of the text, the writing style prevalent in his works, and the possibility that as a committed critic who has produced four books of criticism in his more than three decades of practice, a programmatic method of literary criticism could be derived from his critical project which could help guide the new generation of literary critics and even casual readers in their foray into the locus of literary production and interpretation

Keywords: Dialectical Criticism, Marxist Criticism, Method, Style, Ideology and Politics, Historicity

I. A Socially Symbolic Act: Literary Criticism and Its Object

“The new idea of literature is that it is the language of societies and their history, and that an individual—including the ‘creative genius’ can only produce literature by simultaneously acting as the witness to a particular people at a particular time.”

—Gabriel Rockhill, introduction to *Mute Speech*

“[T]he past reaches us eventually as a text.”

—Edel Garcellano, *Knife’s Edge*

Poet T.S. Eliot, in an essay written in 1923 entitled *The Function of Criticism*—which discusses, among other things, the nature of art and what he believes is the most effective manner with which to make sense of an artistic work—acknowledges that art, “may be affirmed to serve ends beyond itself,” these ends however, which presumably refer to art’s political and social dimensions, are of little to no merit in the discussion of artistic production, and in fact, only serve as unnecessary baggage impeding the movement and continuity of the artistic process, the recognition of which would be detrimental to the serene order of things and thus must be ignored altogether. This leads the famous poet and critic to conclude that art, rather than recognizing its social and political dimensions, “performs its functions...much better by indifference to them.” It is with the notion of the primacy of the text or artistic artifact over any outside factors that may have influenced its production that Eliot formulates what for him is the utmost function of artistic criticism: “the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste” (24).

The idea that literary/artistic taste can be “corrected” presupposes that there exists a universal and objective list of criteria for an acceptable literary text and that it is the critic’s task, as someone accorded the special privilege of knowledge and familiarity with the true and organic composition of such a universal aesthetics, to dispel the veil covering the readers’ eyes so that they may be able to see clearly the artistic merits or lack thereof of a particular text.¹ This almost mystical undercurrent in the critical practice proposed by Eliot is reminiscent of the function of one of Foucault’s archetypal figures of knowledge transference:

the prophet, who, as explained by art critic Gerald Raunig, bears “the role of an imparter,” but the knowledge the Foucauldian prophet brings, which “existed before him”, assumes the form of a revelation much like Eliot’s critic who liberates precisely because he reveals a “correct” way of perception: “he reveals things that elude human beings” (57). In this line of thinking, the imagined autonomy of a text is considered as sacred as the text itself: *ideology*, regardless if explicitly shown in the text or neatly folded and hidden underneath its ticks and tendencies, its “eloquent silences” so to speak, is rendered immaterial. It is imperative that a text must be judged as a separate entity akin to an organ freshly excised from a body but unlike the organ which in life functions in unison with other organs, whose existence is dependent on its predetermined role in an established corporeal totality, there is a perverse sense of unitary wholeness in the abovementioned idea of a text. This imagined autonomy dictates that a critic’s gaze must not wander beyond the limits and boundaries set by the paper and the words scribbled on it. The text alone—its surface level appearance, its formalist structure, its coherent declarations—possesses the code that reveals its value. A value that is neither political, ideological, nor social but purely aesthetic, contained within the restricted ambits of form and literariness, concepts which, in actuality, have the potential to be radical but become defanged in the hands of a critic whose only concern is to use them as a context for the “correction of taste” of the uninitiated.

Faced by something that may be said as excessively apolitical and apathetic, indeed something that rejects exigent realities, it is no surprise that Edel Garcellano calls this specific strain of formalism and its practitioners, “reality-denying” (17). Speaking of the same poverty of formalism, of its penchant for denying reality and excluding historical truths in its discursive formations, Hungarian theoretician Georg Lukacs, in his book, *The Historical Novel* describes how formalism, in its attempts to reconfigure the criticism of genres, and because of its almost manic and obsessive emphasis on the text and the text alone, has created categories that completely deny the realities and influence established by previously existing traditions: “[i]n the formalist approach to genre, all the great traditions of the revolutionary period have completely vanished. This soulless and ossified, this thoroughly bureaucratic classification is meant as a substitute

for the living dialectics of history” (240). The formalist’s textual model exposes an outright denial of history in its discursive-argumentative structure in favor of the practical limitations of what the text contains. This is the reason why Lukacs describes it “soulless,” after all, history, according to cultural critic Ian Buchanan functions not just as a mere context or much worse, a footnote, but a motive force—history “animates all forms of cultural production” (xv). And hence, discussions and practices that discard a text’s direct and indelible relationship with history, are bound to offer mechanical and problematic assumptions and prescriptions, banal and lacking precisely because they have already failed at the onset to recognize the most significant variable in the equation of literary production, the text’s historicity—the well from which it sprang—its very reason for being. It is no surprise then, that Macherey, would label the new critical formalist strain as a mode that does not elucidate but rather prescribes ways of “consumption”—consumption of literary texts, a fitting description of a critical practice that emerged from the bosom of 20th century capitalism.

T.S. Eliot and others who belonged to his generation, especially those writing under the Anglo-American tradition, in veering away from the politics of the text unconsciously articulated the symptoms and contradictions of their time and, as Garcellano calls it, their “situs of locution”—their formulations of what they deemed as neutral and purely aesthetic methods that exhibit outright rejection of ideology is, as it were, very much symptomatic of the tendencies of the modern cultural and artistic plane. As explained by Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory*: [e]ven in the act of fleeing modern ideologies, however, literary theory reveals its often-unconscious complicity with them, betraying its elitism, sexism or individualism in the very ‘aesthetic’ or ‘unpolitical’ language it finds natural to use of the literary text” (196). T.S. Eliot and his contemporaries laid the theoretical groundwork for the birth of New Criticism, the American strain of formalism that became the dominant mode of making, understanding, and categorizing literary texts in the mid-20th century and is still being used sporadically today. New Criticism as it flourished in North America would soon find itself on our shores (adapted and espoused by local writers) and firmly plant its roots in literature departments inside the academe and literary circles outside of it,

as the American literary tradition, by virtue of our status of being a former colony and neo-colony, was one of our models and still remains so until today. In the last few decades, Edel Garcellano and his unforgivingly political and ideological practice had been the *bête noire* of the practitioners of the borrowed and indigenous forms of New Criticism/Formalism. Below, literary and cultural scholar Neferti Tadiar shows us one of Edel Garcellano's main argumentative points in his critical practice—that writers' literary production, whether they are aware of it or not, are always already bound to their historical, political and social contexts:

Against the tendency of New Critics and formalist writers to uphold the timelessness of their human values, Garcellano insists on the political locatedness of writers' locutions, the historical time-boundedness of their discursive imaginations and interpretation. His own reading of the universalizing and depoliticizing approach to literature that many critics embraced attributes this dominant Philippine hermeneutic program to the transformation of some sectors of the Philippines to a capitalist mode of production in the mid-twentieth century, its middle classes, from which most writers emerged, the most easily conscripted that its U.S. Cold War capitalist patron proffered. (15-16)

It is in this context of the dominance of New Critical formalist aesthetics in the locus of literary production that poet and critic Edel Garcellano produced his distinct form of Marxist-Dialectical criticism, which Caroline Hau describes in her introduction to *Knife's Edge* as "specifically directed against a prevailing idea of 'writing' in the Philippines, which is synonymous to mere acquisition of 'skills'" (ix). Garcellano, unlike his counterparts from the New Critical school, viewed a literary text not as a mere expression of a writer's innate creative genius, or a manifestation of the knowledge and "skills" accumulated through the years, and whose production is divorced from a larger context but an object that is inherently ideological. Garcellano used Marxist dialectics to expose the realities of the Philippine social condition—and how even texts that deny or exclude these realities are themselves symptoms of the existence of these realities. Indeed, in his essay,

The Arrogance of Imaginary Power, Garcellano claims that “[t]o acknowledge the text, is to conjure the invisible power that produces the text” (37). This serves to remind us that even if a writer or a critic unfailingly claims “fidelity to a text” and the text alone, or a pure position unsullied by politics and ideology, it does not ultimately negate the fact that there is a world replete with contradictions and besieged by a constant power struggle that exists outside of the text which the writer/critic as producer of the text cannot escape. This resonates with what Macherey says in *A Theory of Literary Production*: “[b]efore we know how a text works, we must know the laws of its production” (57). To further emphasize this relationship between a text and the “invisible power” that produces it, Garcellano quotes Foucault, “textuality which stripped of its hermetic elements, assumes its affiliation with institutions, offices, agencies, classes, academies, corporations, groups, guilds, ideologically defined parties and corporations” (37). Another poststructuralist philosopher, Jacques Derrida, also speaks of the complementarity, in fact, interdependent relationship between writing and power: “[w]riting does not come to power. It is there beforehand, it partakes of and is made of it. Starting from which, in order to seize it—namely power, such as determinate power (politics, for example, which does not assume an exemplary position by accident)—struggles and contending forces permeate writings and counter-writings” (50). Contrary to what the New Critical formalist would have us believe, a text is not a thing-in-itself, a pure and pristine document of beauty that rises, to quote Nick Joaquin, like “Venus...unbegotten from the froth of the sea,” but an artifact produced by mediation, and, is itself, a site of mediation.

Thus the possibility of truly making sense of a text would only arise by acknowledging first that it is shaped within a grid in which various forms of power—old, new and renewed—are always already engaged in a never-ending dialectical struggle which in turn affects the production of a text, as Pierre Macherey again notes, there are “determinate conditions” that influence textual production, and the view that privileges the text and asserts its autonomy over the possibility that it is a byproduct of something that is beyond it is not only problematic but entirely wrong since “[t]he writer as producer of a text, does not manufacture the materials with which he works. Neither does he stumble across

them as spontaneously available wandering fragments, useful in the building of any sort of edifice, they are not neutral transparent components which have the grace to vanish, to disappear in the totality they contribute to" (47). What Macherey effectively says is that there is an undeniable sense of materiality in the process of textual production and this materialism that is an integral part of the production of a text ultimately leaves its imprint within the text itself, the text "never arrives unaccompanied: it is a figure against a background of other formations, depending on them rather than contrasting with them. It is, like all products, a second reality..." (61). It is in this trajectory of this materialist-dialectical reading of a text that critic Fredric Jameson argues that a literary text, in fact, "cultural artifacts" in general are, "socially symbolic acts" (5). That is, the segments and sinews that constitute a text (indeed the entire text itself) are symbolic responses to or reflections of what is happening in the social grid, an attempt at making sense and meaning of the world not an escape from it. In the first chapter of Fredric Jameson's seminal book of literary theory *The Political Unconscious*, he explains the impossibility of the existence of a plane or locus which is not, in anyway, influenced by history and the social:

To imagine that, sheltered from the omnipresence of history and the implacable influence of the social, there already exist a realm of freedom—whether it be that of the microscopic experience of words in a text or the ecstasies and intensities of the various private religions—is only to strengthen the grip of Necessity over all such blind zones in which the individual subject seeks refuge, in pursuit of a purely individual, a merely psychological, project of salvation. The only effective liberation from such constraint begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed that everything is 'in the last analysis' political. (5)

This means that artistic artifacts, the text itself, are expressions of the fluctuations in the movement of history, indeed a product precipitated by the "omnipresence of history" and the "implacable influence of the social," the text reflects, more than anything else, the historical moment of its production. As critic, Robert Tally

notes “narratives are themselves what Lukacs called ‘form-giving forms’ by which individual and collective subjects make sense of the world” and the text and narratives would only speak to us if we acknowledge that they are echoes of socio-historical events (22). That the “past eventually reaches us a text,” as declared by Garcellano, captures beautifully the immanence of history in the textual, its embeddedness in our lived experiences. It is also an affirmation of the relationship between history and textuality. Going back to Macherey: “history is not a simple external relation to the work: it is present in the work, in so far as the emergence of the work required this history, which is its only principle of reality and also supplies the means of its expression” (105). The text’s existence is not autonomous but mediated, history being part not only of its larger context of being but more importantly, its interiority. The textual narrative gives form to the historical movement of history—the text is, in the final analysis, an undeniable gesture of history.

II. On Dialectical *Ecriture*

“[T]he dialectic requires you to say everything
simultaneously.”

—Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*

How does a critic, who is aware of the function of history, that is, the collective circumstances that govern the production of texts, formulate his critical interventions? In what manner, style or configuration will their critiques take shape and be most effective in? There is a plurality of existing and contending theories in the current critical landscape and in this plurality, as mentioned by Jameson, Marxism stands out as the “untranscendable horizon of interpretation” and the most effective form of criticism to the prevailing doxa. Marxist criticism is an approach to textual analysis that does not simply hinge on the idea of assessing a text’s artistic merits but exposes its ideological role in a larger whole, this form is taken by ideological/dialectical criticism, this criticism, according to Carolyn Lesjak “is primarily a practice of unveiling, in which surface appearances are shown to be illusory, and the hidden or latent meaning beneath the surface the truth”

(418). In the Philippines, one of the leading practitioners of this so called ideological/dialectical style of criticism is Edel Garcellano. Dialectical writing has generally been described as “difficult,” unfathomable and replete with jargons, hence, it is often times relegated to margins of theoretical and narrative discourse. In the introduction to *Knife’s Edge*, Caroline Hau speaks about the necessary complexity, the dialectical logic that operates in Garcellano’s writing style:

Taken to task for his ‘difficult’ prose, Garcellano appears to have set himself in deliberate opposition to the kind of ‘good writing’ which is the trademark of the literary practitioners whose problematic ideological positions he most wishes to expose. His liberal use of parenthetical remarks directs his readers resolutely to the branching lines of flight and inquiry taken by his ideas. By forcing his readers to backtrack on any given sentence, he defamiliarizes the reading process itself, calling attention to the material production of the ideas and their fraught disentanglement, and more significantly, to the labor of meaning-making that is demanded of text and reader alike. (ix-x)

For Hau, the difficulty inherent in Garcellano’s prose is marked, among others, by “the branching lines of flight and inquiry of his ideas,” flight from what, we must ask. What are Garcellano’s dialectical ripostes fleeing from? To better understand this notion of flight and fleeing, which, it has to be mentioned, is not in the sense often associated with the act of cowardice or resignation, but in the context of Garcellano’s criticism, a tactical and stylistic necessity, let us visit what Deleuze and Guattari have to say in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “[l]ines of flight, never consist in running away from the world but rather in causing runoffs, as when you drill a hole in a pipe; there is no social system that does not leak from all directions, even if it makes its segments increasingly rigid in order to seal the lines of flight. There is nothing imaginary, nothing symbolic, about a line of flight...What is escaping in a society at a given moment? It is on lines of flight that new weapons are invented, to be turned against the heavy arms of the State” (204). The “lines of flight” as developed by philosophers Deleuze and

Guattari, refers to a manner of circumvention, of resistance—not by directly participating (thereby, being subsumed) in the language games of prevailing discursive practices but by attacking them from every imaginable direction, producing, in the process new weapons, new tactics, new modes of resistance. Or perhaps, more appropriately, from multiple directions and points which they did not expect to be attacked, thereby “causing runoffs” and draining their energies. This form of argumentation might appear off-putting for people who are not used to reading a critical work that shows not a singular trajectory of thought but instead utilizes a multitude of points and directions in an almost dizzying manner. It is easy to dismiss such a work as incoherent. People whose idea of a critical piece is that which argues in plain, lucid, and concise language why a text is beautiful or not, do it all the time, what they fail to understand is that in this form of dialectical writing, as in Garcellano’s style for example, there is a totalizing logic operative in the formation of all “branching lines of flight and inquiry,” and that, in spite of the fact that the image these lines of flight gives us is that of microscopic particles in distress as if in perpetual state of motion, shooting in all directions without rhyme or reason, ultimately these are all interconnected, not in a straight linear form but in a nodal manner. This sense of connection is, of course, not easily perceptible and in fact, appears on the surface as difficulty or density. As Jameson suggests in *Marxism and Form*, “[t]he peculiar difficulty of dialectical writing lies indeed in its holistic ‘totalizing’ character: as though you could not say any one thing until you had first said every-thing: as though with each new idea you were bound to recapitulate the entire system” (306). It is imperative for dialectical writing to be able to convey a multitude even in singularity.

This density and difficulty, as already mentioned by Hau “defamiliarizes the reading process itself.” instead of maintaining the status of reading as “mute perception” (as Bakhtin calls it), as a one way activity of absorbing in knowledge without sifting through, without questioning, it opens up a space to the sincere reader for reflexivity, for thinking, and prompts them to participate in the process of writing the text, which is never really finished in the first place. By challenging the reader to offer their own opinions and reading, by transforming them into a thinking and speaking subject, this overhauls the normative relations of power

between the text and the reader and simultaneously makes the reader aware of “the labor of meaning-making that is demanded of text and reader alike” (x). Fredric Jameson offers an explanation on the role of the seemingly impenetrable prose of a dialectical critic: “density is itself a product of intransigence: the bristling mass of abstractions and cross-references is precisely intended to be read in situation, against the cheap facility of what surrounds it, as a warning to the reader of the price he has to pay for genuine thinking” (xiii). The concern of the dialectical critic, of a Marxist critic, is not only limited to the text, after all, ideology permeates everything—it can be seen in a text, yes but it also definitely exists outside of it, ideology is an integral aspect of the lived experience indeed the lived experience is structured by ideology: “we are always already interpellated by ideology” according to Althusser. By exposing the ideological functions of a text, the dialectical critique simultaneously exposes the ideological position of the reader, their beliefs are put on the stand and interrogated, a reader’s reaction to a critical text written by a Marxist critic is also a text that could be and should be interpreted.

Some might think that the project of Garcellano and others writing within the dialectical tradition would push for a more critical interaction between practitioners of different theoretical persuasions in the Philippine literary grid that would in turn lead to a more vibrant culture of textual production, but that is not the case. As Garcellano himself would say, “[t]he Marxist position in culture and the like has been the most denied, twisted and vilified in Philippine hermeneutics and the academe—on a subliminal mode—has seen to it...that this ‘manner of seeing’ superstructurally based on class would be eased out of the reading eye, shuffled toward the edge of textual abyss” (vii). The “critical” responses to Garcellano and those who write under the banner of Marxist-dialectical criticism range from outright dismissal to (in an anecdote told by Garcellano) equating their theoretical proposals to metaphysical posturing as in the case of a certain journalist who called the articles in the Philippine Critical Forum Journal “ethereal,”—the description, of course, appears valid for some. It has already been argued above that dialectical writing contains a level of complexity that, on the surface, could be mistaken for detachment—detachment from reality, if you will, this is deeply ironic since, if the reader of such writing would only

care to understand the necessary codified nature of the text, they would recognize that it is firmly grounded in reality as its basis is, of course, the existing material conditions of society. To the accusation of writing “ethereal” essays, Garcellano sarcastically concedes, “for the sake of argument,” that the journal in question may exude a “metaphysizing flair,” still, Garcellano says that he would prefer this than, “elegant spiels on one’s, for instance, collection of pens, or one’s wizardry in fixing the laptop” (228). What he effectively says is that, while the essays in the journal may seem disconnected to the real world by virtue of their highly technical language, they nevertheless address exigent issues that affect even those who would try reject them, and thus eclipses in importance the readable, even elegant works that talk about things that are neither political nor social. Dismissing works of dialectical criticism as metaphysical or ethereal is not new, Theodor Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, reminds us of how positivists who do not want to foray into non-objective ideological debates resort to summarily dismissing a work of materialist-dialectics and even Marx himself as a metaphysician: “[t]o cleanse himself of the suspicion of ideology, it is now safer for a man to call Marx a metaphysician than to call him a class enemy” (16). This is also one of the issues that must be addressed, reading is a political and reflexive activity as much as writing is. A reader’s reaction, as previously stated is also a text to be read—because it is a symptom of their ideological position. As it were, the call for the use of a more grounded language is not an innocent gesture from critics, although they might not be aware of it, their deep concern for communicability—for “good writing”—is, again, going back to Macherey, their way of imposing on us the proper way of consuming texts as if they were products displayed on supermarket shelves. The call for communicability is more akin to a marketing scheme than a valid critical stance. But ultimately, this act is, more than anything else, an ideological position. Robert Tally, following Fredric Jameson, reminds us that “the insistence upon ordinary language...may ultimately have less to do with conceptual clarity than with an unintended ideological purpose: ‘to speed a reader across a sentence in such a way that he can salute a readymade idea effortlessly in passing without suspecting that real thought demands descent into the materiality of language and a consent to time itself into the form of a sentence’” (26). As Garcellano

himself thinks, “obscurantist” and “transparent” writing is an artificial binary, “[t]here is no contradiction between the two, only the sad difference of time and speed in the personae’s individual accumulation and transfer of knowledge,” he concludes that while “intellectuals should not stay too much ahead of the pack lest they speak to themselves alone,” conceding to the demands of the advocates of a more transparent writing “would be disastrous” (231).²

III. A Question of Method

“Marxism has at the core of its theory and practice the analysis of history and its shifts that take place within it, it assumes that the economic is of prime importance in how social life is organized with respect to literature and literary criticism, it thus tries to understand the existing social and political functions of these practices by mapping out the manner in which they have developed and changed over time.”

—Imre Szeman, *Contemporary Marxist Theory*

Edel Garcellano has written four books of literary criticism, that is, if we were to be strict and use the more tamed and more conventional term “literary criticism,” than the more politically and ideologically charged “critique,” there is of course a difference, albeit a subtle one, between the two—in fact for Garcellano anyone who engages in writing necessarily engages in the act of critiquing: “the text, in whatever form as poetry, drama, story, etcetera, is critique in itself of the world, a point of conjuncture between appearance and reality” (85). Bearing in mind this reflexive declaration, it follows that everything Garcellano has written are, in one way or another, forms of critique. The four books of literary criticism by Garcellano, namely: *First Person, Plural* (1987), *Intertext* (1990), *Interventions* (1998) *Knife’s Edge* (2001) express in a more direct manner his political and ideological stance in the raging critical debates in the academe, and the world outside of it—by writing about the texts produced by the underground revolutionary movement that only a few people would dare read and almost no one would write about, by veering away from the academic conventions of textuality and

reading an event (the EDSA revolution) as a text, by exposing the problematic ideological positions of his contemporaries and so on, Garcellano was not simply practicing literary criticism, he was already theorizing, and in the process of theorizing, he is simultaneously declaring his own political and ideological position. For Fredric Jameson, Marxist dialectics gives a thinker a sense of “self-consciousness” which is aimed at “the awareness of the thinker’s position in society and in history itself, and of the limits imposed on this awareness by his class position—in short of the ideological and situational nature of all thought” (340). By Garcellano’s own admission: “a writer always serves class interest because of his location in the production process” (86). The text is not divorced from history and the *socius*, and so is, and indeed, more so, the writer.

With a sustained prolificity that reflected his commitment to the idea of writing as a materialist endeavor and that of textual production as a form of political engagement, “interpellations of the real and the false,” it is, I believe, fair to ask: is there a Garcellano method of criticism? Garcellano has been clear with his definition of a text, the critic’s object of inquiry—patterned after the theories of the text of fellow Marxist critics such as Fredric Jameson, Pierre Macherey, Terry Eagleton among others, Garcellano views the text as itself, the literary text and as corollary the critical reading of the text produced by the critic, as silent testaments to the contradictions of history: “the aperture” of a writer/critic’s text shows “the closure of a writer/critic’s consciousness which does not/cannot transcend history and society” (106) Surely we may be able to glean from his critical works, accumulated through the years, a silent but programmatic system that can be utilized in reading and analyzing texts?

While a Garcellano text exhibits a distinct style that anyone who has read him is sure to recognize, a stylistic imprimatur described by Neferti X.M. Tadiar in her blurb in *Interventions* as a “multivectoral, parenthetical, infinitely reflexive, Marxist and poststructuralist analytical style,” a singular and coherent method of analysis that could be followed, like, paraphrasing Garcellano’s term, a critical Rx, is possibly missing. This is not to say that the lack of a procedural matrix, a template, in his criticism is something that the reader could take Garcellano to task for or worse a glaring deficiency that could invalidate some of his critical

and theoretical assumptions, but in fact, this seeming lack of a singular methodological system in favor of the appropriation of multiple methods of analysis is an indelible reflection of his practice as a genuine Marxist theoretician and a reflection of his dialectical writing style. As cultural scholar Imre Szeman points out: “[t]here is no such thing as Marxist literary criticism: no established approaches, no clear methodology, no agreed upon ideas about how to approach a text or what count as appropriate texts to read” (380). To hear that there is “no clear methodology” when it comes to Marxist literary criticism is, of course, baffling as Marxism as a social philosophy and a guide for liberation, contains some of the most intricate, well thought-out and methodical proposals, based largely on the dialectical progress of history, for making sense of the world and for changing it.

Considering the methodical and scientific formulations of Marxism as applied on the social locus, and the apparent lack of a definitive method in its application as a theoretical lens for reading texts, one could hastily conclude that that there is possibly a *dissensual* gap, a break, somewhere in the process of importing and translating the codes. But in actuality, Marxist literary criticism is not a variant of Marxist philosophy, not a translation or appropriation of it but its extension in the literary field of production—meaning, one must first understand the project of Marxism to understand the project of Marxist literary criticism. Speaking of the underlying logic of Marxism, Ian Buchanan, quoting Jameson, says that “Marxism ‘is a critical rather than a systematic philosophy,’ Jameson argues; its appearance always comes in the form of ‘a correction of other positions’ or ‘a rectification in dialectical fashion of some pre-existing phenomenon,’ so that we should not expect it to (also) take the form of self-contained or scholastic doctrine,” to understand Marxism and Marxist theory in this manner, as a “critical rather than systematic” philosophy is to realize that the apparent lack of method is something intentional, perhaps even necessary as to give it a certain sense of malleability, that is, unlike other sign-systems and philosophies, Marxism’s criticality is not operative only within a particular segment or loci of our lived experience, it stretches across everything: the social, the cultural, the economic, the ideological, the political and so on. This is the totalizing aspect of Marxism and

because of this totalizing nature, Marxism takes precedence over all the other interpretative and critical philosophies, as Jameson suggests, Marxism cannot simply be considered as just a “mere substitute” for other interpretative systems whose “authority” is derived from “their faithful consonance with this or that local law of a fragmented social life, this or that subsystem of a complex and mushrooming cultural superstructure,” but while Marxism exists within a socio-cultural sphere that contains a plurality of contending discourses, and while its primary function is to rectify, to critique these problematic discourses, it does not simply discard them. Marxism operates in a dialectical manner and fulfills its function, in the process of critiquing, as the “untranscendable horizon of interpretation” that is, it “subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them” (x).

This explains the multiplicity of theoretical weapons in the arsenal of a Marxist critic, Edel Garcellano could utilize concepts from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Derridean deconstruction, Sausaurrean structuralist linguistics, Paul Virilio’s dromology, DeleuzoGuattarian concepts and so on in order to expose the ideological functions or malfunctions of the text that he is critiquing. Just look at this excerpt from Garcellano’s essay *Bamboo in the Wind and the Strategy of Containment* wherein he uses Lacan’s conceptualization of the relationship between language and the Real to further explain the poverty of the text in question:

Again, as a reader, I would not split-hairs over the historical accuracy [or non-accuracy, for that matter] of the linear programming of the subplots, unless it is predicated that they are parallel constructions of the empirically experienced. That history must dwell on the margin of the text is a conceptual given for Macherey, but that the text is a truthful rendition of the lived [naturalism is a dismal failure] is a wish never to be realized [nevertheless, always desired by fiction], because language, a mediator between object and subject, is a theoretical distortion, a lack, and in the Lacanian Real, transcends/is outside of the object itself. In a sense, language is a necessary failure, a lie. (24)

Or, how in the essay *Reading the Revolution, Reading the Masses* Garcellano juxtaposes two contending world views, that of Marxism as represented by Mao Tse Tung, which argues of the liberative power of the masses, and the postmodern view as represented by Baudrillard, one of the doyens of postmodernist thought, who opines that *masses* as a term is empty and without meaning:

Mao's categories of national/petit bourgeoisie, workers and peasants are too well known to be repeated: they are potential allies of the revolution, a rational mass that would eventually put together the pieces of ignominious puzzle of their lives, and praxiologize themselves toward national liberation.

..

For Jean Baudrillard, "the term 'mass' is not a concept. It is a leitmotif of political demagog, a soft, sticky lumpen analytical notion. A good sociology would attempt to surpass it with more subtle categories: socio-professional ones, etc. Wrong: it is by prowling around those soft and acritical notions (like 'mana' once was) that one can go further than intelligent critical sociology. Besides, it will be noticed retrospectively that the concepts 'class', 'social relations', 'power', 'status', 'institution' — and 'social' itself — all those too explicit concepts which are the glory of the legitimate sciences, have also only ever been muddled notions themselves, but notions upon which agreement has nevertheless been reached for mysterious end: those of preserving a certain code of analysis." In short, Baudrillard would persist that "to specify the term 'mass' is a mistake — it is to provide meaning for that which has none. (105)

How about Garcellano's commentary in *Theory, Theory, Theory* on why certain theoreticians (such as Zizek and Badiou) are more popular than others:

One goes into theorizing on the basis of an already constructed mind-set: we prefer Zizek over Sartre, Bourdieu over Teilhard de Chardin, Badiou over

Kierkegaard on the assumption they perform the closure over our interests – that is, their discourses supplement what we have initially found to linger in our habitus, our curiosity triggered by the context of our subjectivities.

It is not surprising that Žižek would find resonance in the heart of young scholars: The Elvis Presley of philo is a veritable compendium of film, music, philo & lit giants that are intertwined in a new light: this bestiary that would dazzle the Socratic flaneurs in MTV mix. At this point of historical flux when Marxism is a god that failed & the future isn't even privy to Benjamin's angel, anyone who emerges from the ruins of despair would find Žižek a comforting figure that survived the first wave of socialism but wouldn't denounce it, assaying also as unacceptable the triumphalistic chest beating of capitalism. Which exactly fills the bill for a generation of Filipino activists who devours Žižek as a feast of texts: he represents a positive despair in view of the promise yet unfulfilled by the revolutionists of the '70s, its deflection in the '80s, & the subsequent rectification in the past decades to keep their hopes alive. We choose the philosopher who amplifies most our secret longings & defends our subject-positions. (Retrieved from: <https://theworksofedelgarcellano.wordpress.com/2008/05/13/theory-theory-theory/>)

This consistent borrowing from other methods and theories and utilizing them for Marxist ends, aside from being a manifestation of Marxism's untranscendability is, for Terry Eagleton, also a distinct feature of modern radical criticism as radical critics generally are "open-minded about questions of theory and method: they tend to be pluralists in this respect. Any method or theory which will contribute to the strategic goal of human emancipation, the production of 'better people' through socialist transformation of society is acceptable" (211). Perhaps the method of Marxist criticism is the non-existence of method which gives it the luxury to use other structured and programmatic systems as a means of "correcting positions." Another way of looking at it is that Garcellano's *method* is also Garcellano's politics. In an unpublished book, with the working title *For Edel*, filmmaker and critic Epoy Deyto in his analyses of Edel Garcellano's filmic

criticism aided by his literary interventions observes that “[c]lass-partisanship in art production has been Garcellano’s methodical core even in his literary criticisms,” Deyto adds that “locating the art object, in this context the film, against the larger context of class struggle, production, and even criticism, for Garcellano, is an extension of the participation of the artist-filmmaker and his work in this war” (35).

Garcellano and his texts are products of necessity and history. More than the confining rigidity of conventional methodologies, Edel Garcellano the Marxist-Dialectical critic offers new vantage points, new perspectives in viewing daily realities as mediated by literary texts. A perspective that is unmistakably ideological and partisan. If the Philippine socio-political landscape is a war zone it also follows that literature, and language itself, are spaces of conflict whose “articulators are combatants engaged in a war of positions – the basic antinomies, creating the difference/differance that allows the stasis and flux of meaning” (106). When a critic writes, it is always already an act of declaration and makes them a participant in the raging conflicts and hence, contrary opinions in the critical landscape, “are not a matter of personal/existential options or schools, but ideologico-political alignments that assume the gravity of trench warfare” (107). In the end, Edel Garcellano as a Marxist critic was not concerned only with the improvement of the literary landscape—deploying Marxism as, more than anything else, a theory of liberation, he showed us the possibility and necessity of circumventing and resisting the logic of capital that governs our lived experience, he showed us that the literary text exists not just as a form that is bound to aesthetic and sensorial experiences. More than anything else the text is political, and writing which makes a text possible is also political. The dialectical logic which informs Garcellano’s production exudes a utopian impulse, as his predecessor, one of the most important figures of dialectical criticism, Walter Benjamin says, at the core of dialectical thinking is its ultimate duty, that of an “organ of historical awakening” and that, “[e]very epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening” (45).

NOTES

¹ Edel Garcellano, in his article “*Theory, Art, Life: How the Santos-Recto Wedding Can Be Read as Theory*” explains how this power of imposing aesthetic truths resides and operates most especially in the academe: “The common claim by some academics who hold key positions (read: they can therefore impose their canon on how the masa should read/see text/film, experience empirically truth, beauty and other “objective correlatives”) is that a critic can become a virtual transparent agency (free from biases, and other ideological sediments that pollute the truth because crystal-clear) for the masses to deem him as guide, guru, gatekeeper in their journey towards an absolutized truth...” See Garcellano, Edel. *Interventions*. 1998, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, PUP Press, 161.

² Gerald Raunig has an interesting take on this, commenting on the current neo-liberal trends in the academe, he says that “Wild and transversal writing is tamed and fed into the creativity destroying apparatuses of disciplining institutions as early as possible,” in the example of Raunig “students are instructed in the splendid art of how to write a scientific article, how, in other words, to squeeze the last vestiges of their powers of invention, into the straitjacket of the essay industry.” See Raunig, Gerald. *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity*. 2013, Semiotext(e), 35.

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