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Remembering Dr. Cirilo F. Bautista

Ronald Baytan

De La Salle University, ronald.baytan@dlsu.edu.ph

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REMEMBERING DR. CIRILO F. BAUTISTA*

In my youth, I would often hear my teachers declare with pride, "I was the student of this artist, this great economist, this political thinker, this poet." And those pronouncements did not mean anything to me. I was young. I cared about nothing, and even matters of great consequence would have slipped through my innocent, if not ignorant, hands. To paraphrase A.E. Housman, "I was young and not even twenty, no use talking to me."

I was that young man who thought I had talent, who thought I knew poetry, until my classes in literature proved me wrong. Knowledge forces us to recognize the limits of our intellect and accept what a beloved teacher once uttered: "the vastness of our ignorance."

I first met the great epic poet Dr. Cirilo F. Bautista in January 1991. I was a literature major required to take Introduction to Poetry, a class for which there was only one teacher, Cirilo. And about poetry, Bautista was never wrong.

He "knew all the footnotes," his "words were precise and correct," and he was quite a character. No one messed with him. Sporting a moustache and a pair of eyeglasses, he demanded discipline and a sharp mind in his class, over and above the dictionaries that he required all of us to bring. We visited Troy, made friends with Shakespeare, talked to the Romantics, communed with local poets like Villa and Angeles, marvelled at Auden. We conducted close readings of timeless poetry. And every now and then, he would crack jokes that became really funny because he did it with a poker face. You would have had to be smart enough to know when he was pulling your leg, or when he was serious. We got used to him but were still afraid of him.

*Delivered at *Timeless Fjords: Celebrating Cirilo F. Bautista*, June 14, 2018, at De La Salle University.

The shock came after the poetry class had ended. He singled out the aspiring writers among the lit majors and prodded us to write. He conducted writing workshops for us.

The nurturing, however, did not stop there. Every time I or another student would bump into him in the Literature Department, he would ask: “How’s your writing?”

I would often remark, “Sir, mukhang ‘di po para sa akin ang poetry” (Sir, maybe I wasn’t meant to write poetry). His usual reply would be: “Keep writing. No, you can do it. *Write even if it’s difficult.*” He insisted on it so often that I actually believed I could do it. He turned my frustration around and led me to more workshops.

Sometimes, all we need in life—whether we may be a Mozart or mere Salieri—is a simple encouragement.

Why would a writer of Bautista’s stature genuinely find the time to constantly nudge his young students to keep writing and to provide them the books and the workshops as tangible forms of support?

The answers are simple: kindness and commitment.

These two words—aside from Genius—are the very things that made Cirilo Bautista an important presence in Philippine literature.

The years passed by like a dream. I just woke up one day and realized that I had already been teaching literature for almost 26 years.

These past 26 years, have I—knowing how people “believe and betray”—ever really learned to trust anyone?

Yes, only one, and his name was/is Cirilo F. Bautista.

Dr. Bautista was a man of integrity. I never heard him badmouth anyone in public or even in our private conversations. He was not the kind of person who looked for blotches in other people’s personalities. Objective. Professional. Honest.

When I finally became Chair of the Literature Department at DLSU in 2004, I would stand outside Miguel Building 317 waiting for his MFA class to end. I would then sneak into the room to consult him about a pressing problem in the department or the university. Always he listened, and always, the implicit message involved these: *Perform your duty. Defend the arts. Take care of your faculty.*

Cirilo Bautista was a staunch defender of the arts and faculty rights on campus. He sincerely believed that Literature had an

importance place at the university and in the development of this nation.

Even until the end, Cirilo stuck to his conviction that literature mattered and writers—especially the young and the underprivileged—should be given the support to maximize their potential. He kept telling me writers should be paid judiciously for their services. Note these passages from his personal essays in *The House of True Desire: Essays on Life and Literature* (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2010):

Hunger is poison to the imagination. ... Art demands respect and three full meals a day. Anything less will be an insult to the artistic mind. (19)

I lived my youth in the slum areas of Balic-Balic in Sampaloc. In the early post-World War II period, things were so unsure and unstable that I thought poverty was a natural condition of living. My parents were literate though uneducated. With the money my father earned as a foreman at the Alhambra Cigar and Cigarette Factory and the money my mother scraped together doing various domestic jobs for neighbors and friends, they enabled their five children to attain varying levels of education. In the '50s and '60s our educational pursuit was a constant struggle against hunger and social injustice. To stay alive, my sister worked wrapping candies in a confectionary house, my brother became a draftsman to an architect, and I sold newspapers and, later on, became an attendance checker in my university's personnel department. So full of trials and difficulties was my youth that I tried to push memories of it into the darkest recesses of forgetfulness. (355)

Poor but talented, Bautista struggled to live and struggled long and hard for his art. When he finally had the opportunity to pay it forward, he did so, generously.

From the classroom to the writing workshops all over the country that he had conducted to the writing centers and writers' groups whom he had helped found, Cirilo's zeal was unwavering.

In one of our last few conversations, he reiterated that academic institutions should fund national writing workshops and continue pouring money into the arts.

In 2006, after serving as Chair of the Literature Department for two years, I swore to myself I would never take on another admin post. Never never never never never never never never never.

But there is a saying: We become the teachers we admire.

I ended up becoming the director of the Bienvenido N. Santos Creative Writing Center, whose first director-general was Dr. Cirilo F. Bautista.

I took on the directorship of BNSCWC because I believed in what it stood for, because I was one of those students who benefited from the writing workshops Cirilo had lovingly organized and facilitated in his younger years.

Cirilo Bautista's love for his country is evident in his magnum opus *The Trilogy of Saint Lazarus* and his other masterpieces. But this love has also found expression in his life as a teacher and guide to many writers in academe and beyond it.

Teaching is an art grounded on the notion of imitation and repetition. We who all have been students once carry with us and preserve the best ideas and ideals that our outstanding teachers have so selflessly and passionately bestowed upon us.

Now I know why my teachers in college were so proud of their professors.

Every now and then, I find myself repeating what they would state, almost chant-like, with loving remembrance and pride: "I am Ron Baytan, sometimes called Ronnie by this great epic poet. I am a proud student of National Artist for Literature Dr. Cirilo F. Bautista."

Paalam at maraming, maraming salamat po, Sir Cirilo.

Ronald Baytan
De La Salle University
ronald.baytan@dlsu.edu.ph