

“Literary Influences” and the Like

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In the jargon of academic discourse, they’re called “literary influences.” When interviewing writers, reporters refer to them as “the writers who have affected your writing.”

As a writer myself, I don’t think I’ve come across any study of my work that has troubled itself unduly with possible literary influences. And it’s not a question I’ve frequently had to answer during interviews. It doesn’t seem to be something that interests too many Filipinos, literary scholars included.

But a few months back, a reporter for a student paper put the question to me. And I realized that I’ve never really given the matter much thought either.

Doing so now, in preparation for writing this essay, it occurs to me that “literary influences” should not be limited to writers or works of literature. More interesting might be other people or particular circumstances or forces that led the writer to the literary life.

For instance, I think the person who first pointed me in the right direction by surrounding me with heaps of books from earliest childhood was my mother. The second one was her unmarried younger sister, who lived with us, and took care of me until I was maybe nine years old, and was my chief confidante for many more years. As a child I had poor appetite and an aversion for sleeping. Tita Pacita discovered that the most effective

way to convince me to eat a little more, and agree to lie down for a nap in the afternoon, was to tell me marvelous stories, stories that she had read, or had invented herself.

So I would say that my mother and aunt were the first literary influences in my life.

Next to them would be the authors of the story books and fairy tales that I never tired of looking through even before I could read; and, later, the authors of the childhood novels that became my most treasured possessions—Louisa May Alcott (*Little Women*), Lucy Mary Montgomery (*Anne of Green Gables*), Kate Douglas Wiggin (*Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*), Gene Stratton-Porter (*Girl of the Limberlost*), Jean Webster (*Daddy Long-Legs*), Eleanor Porter (*Pollyanna*), among many others. Most of the heroines of these books dreamt of becoming writers, except Elnora Comstock of the *Limberlost*, who wanted to be a violinist. And there was Anne Frank and her diary.

The effect of these books on me was that at the age of 9, I began keeping a diary—a small, hard bound, gilt-edged book, with a lock and a tiny golden key—not surprisingly, a gift from my mother too. All my heroines kept journals or wrote voluminous letters. I also produced a family newspaper, using ruled pad paper, on which I drew vertical lines to make columns, and writing all the articles myself. But my most ambitious project was a “novel,” written in longhand on a spiral notebook, and illustrated by myself with pencils and crayons (singularly bad illustrations, for I had no talent in this area). I titled this “novel” the title “The Life and Letters of Elizabeth Farrier,” gave my heroine blonde hair and blue eyes, constructed a story which simply copied the plots of the books I had been reading, and wrote in a style deliberately modelled on Wiggins, Montgomery and Alcott.

Mama was pleased by my literary ambitions and encouraged them by presenting me with even more books, careful to select those she deemed appropriate for my age. Behind her back, I raided her own bookshelves, which contained more interesting stuff. Some years later, I discovered an old wooden trunk where she kept others—I particularly recall Alberto Moravia’s *Woman of Rome* and Françoise Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse*. Sagan’s struck me chiefly because of its title, which I found so poetic, when I discovered what it meant. Of course most of these books were way above

my head. It didn't matter. I had fallen under the spell of words. I was fascinated by what words could do, what magic they could create.

When I was a bit older, like most of my other classmates, I fell under the thrall of the Nancy Drew books by Carolyn Keene. Two classmates who had the largest collections of these books—Olga Cruz and Helen Samson—were objects of great envy. But when I began reading the Beverly Gray series by Clair Blank, I quickly shifted loyalties. Beverly Gray was not just a kind of amateur sleuth like Nancy Drew, but a journalism student, and later an actual journalist. It is arguable who the stronger influence in my life was at that point—Beverly Gray or Brenda Starr, the comic strip character who was a reporter for a Chicago newspaper called *The Flash*. Brenda Starr had red hair, starry eyes, and a mysterious lover called Basil St. John, who wore a black eye patch and required a serum drawn from a rare black orchid to live. What intrigued me about Brenda Starr was, not just her profession, but her being what I thought a modern woman was: career-oriented, independent, adventurous. In the 50s, which was when this comic strip was at its height, the “ideal woman” was still the person described by Betty Friedan as “the Happy Housewife Heroine” in her classic *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

In retrospect, I believe it may have been similar qualities which drew me to the young girl heroines created by Alcott, Wiggins, Montgomery et al. They stood out because they were different from other girls, by temperament and by aspiration, qualities which often got them into trouble, but which their authors obviously held out as something to be valued and admired.

In those days we were not producing our own literature for children, so the myths I absorbed—even about writers and writing—were all western.

My upbringing was quite conventional. I went to a private school for girls run by nuns—St. Paul College in Quezon City—until I graduated from high school. And then I got an undergraduate degree in Philosophy and an M.A. in English Literature from the country's oldest university, also, incidentally, a Catholic university, the University of Santo Tomas. While this education certainly had its limitations, it ensured that the process begun by my mother would continue. I had access to the best books; I was taught by some wonderful teachers; developed friendships with my contemporaries

who would become major figures in literature and journalism. Even while still an undergraduate, and working for my university's student paper, I was offered a regular column in a major daily newspaper, and began editing the youth section of a weekly magazine. Then as now, editors—many of whom also had connections with academe—were always on the lookout for promising new writers, and did some of their recruiting in their own classrooms. By the time I got my degree, I had two jobs waiting for me.

An obviously undeniable shaping factor in my life was being born into a middle-class family in the capital city. It made things easier for a would-be writer.

There were no creative writing subjects taught in high schools then, or creative writing degree programs in college. Nor were there creative writing centers such as now exist in the major Philippine universities. My writing style, or what passed for it, I had arrived at through my reading, which, by the time I reached high school included my two favorite magazines, *Seventeen* and *Ingenuue*. These magazines also planted a seed in my mind, the seed which became the dream of someday going to university in America.

My friends and I had outgrown Keene and Blank, by then, and had turned to the romance books of Emily Loring and Grace Livingston Hill, whom the nuns did not approve of. The reason for this disapproval remains a mystery to me, since those romances were quite wholesome, a far cry from the Mills and Boon series of the later decades. In any case, neither of those authors inspired me to imitation. I was not tempted to write romance novels. I was slowly coming under the spell of the writers I was studying.

Our high school English classes combined English Grammar and Composition with Literature in English. I no longer recall the titles of my literature textbooks. But I see them clearly in my mind's eye—large, thick books, handsomely illustrated with both photographs and art works, in full color. I recall reading, in freshman and sophomore years, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” by Washington Irving, a couple of Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “Desiree’s Baby” by Kate Chopin, “The Cask of the Amontillado” and “The Masque of the Red Death” by Edgar Allan Poe, as well as his poems, “Annabelle Lee” and “The Raven” (both of which we had to commit to memory, along with “Sea Fever” by John Masefield). There were also Robert Frost’s “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy

Evening” and some poems by William Wordsworth and Robert Byron and Elizabeth Barrett. There was also Henry W. Longfellow’s *Evangeline*, whose “Prelude” we had to memorize. And my memory, which has become such a poor thing of late, is mysteriously able to recollect the opening lines of that “Prelude” without any trouble.

*This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,
Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,
Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic,
Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms.
Loud from its rocky caverns, the deep-voiced neighboring ocean
Speaks, and in accents disconsolate answers the wail of the forest.*

I loved these works, first, because they told stories different from everything I had read before; and, second, because they used words so differently. It helped that Miss Ofelia Maniquis, our English teacher for Years 1 and 2, was like the older sister many of us wished we had, a slim, petite woman, no longer young, but clearly in sympathy with us, willing to laugh at our jokes and listen to our gushing about our schoolgirl crushes and “autograph books.” And her own enchantment with the works she taught us was so contagious that even those of us who really preferred math or geography began to consider English our favorite subject.

In any case, my imagination and taste had been shaped entirely by American and British books. It would take a few more years, and exposure to the best work of our best writers, to begin to effect a change.

When the time came for me to prepare for college, my mother felt I should go to UST, and take up Journalism, since I had always wanted to be a writer. My choice was the University of the Philippines, where my best friends—Victoria Zablan, Aurora Achacoso and Tess Achacoso—were going. But my mother would not hear of it. The Sisters had been carrying on a campaign against UP chiefly because of the dominant presence there of a philosophy professor named Pascual, who was an atheist, and probably a Communist as well. This argument was buttressed by a Catholic newspaper called *The Sentinel*, which was required reading for our school and many—if not all—other Catholic schools.

I thought this was particularly unfair since both my parents were UP alumni. But my mother wouldn't budge. She declared that she was certain that UST was just as good a university since she had once taught there, and still knew some people in the faculty, including several Dominican priests. It would be the far better choice for me, she said, and my father was willing to let her have her way about this, though I could see it was with some reluctance.

Before enrollment, Mama took me to meet the Dean of Women, who was personally known to her, to consult her about degree options, even if I had already made up my mind to take Journalism. This lady's opinion was that, since I was already writing for the papers, there would be no point in studying how to write for the papers. She suggested Philosophy instead of Journalism. It would provide my writing with more "substance," she said. I don't think I had a clear idea of what one studied if one was majoring in "Philosophy. But I was willing to give it a try. And an aunt, who was much respected by the clan because she had PhD from Fordham University and was a dean in Centro Escolar University said that "Philets," as it was called by people in the know, had a very good reputation, and offered both Journalism and Philosophy. I could always take Journalism electives, she added.

I know how pathetic this must seem to today's millennials—accepting, with such docility, suggestions and decisions which would have a lasting effect on my life. But I was not yet sixteen, and my upbringing had not been conducive to rebellion. I wonder whether I would have been as complacent had Mama or the Dean of Women tried to make me take up Commerce or Pharmacy or Nursing. I'd like to think not, but who knows? One thing I am certain of: I would have been a total failure at anything that wasn't in the field of the humanities. Perhaps I would have had such poor grades that I would have been allowed to transfer to the program of my choice.

Being deprived of life as a UP co-ed rankled for a while. But it turned out to be a fortunate choice. Philets was one of the oldest colleges in the university. It was also the smallest, and apparently there were advantages to being a small college in a huge university. It fell below the Dean of Discipline's radar. We had only two sections per year level—one in the afternoon for regular students and one in the evening for the irregular students, most of whom were working students. This meant that men and

women could not be segregated by gender, as they were in the rest of the university. It helped that the Dean, a philosopher of great intelligence, erudition, and wit, was a bit of a bohemian himself, and more concerned with metaphysical issues than trying to keep young men and women from spending time with each other.

There were only two majors offered: Philosophy and Journalism. (Literature was lumped together with English in the College of Liberal Arts.) This meant that students hoping to become teachers of philosophy, students dreaming of becoming writers of fiction and poetry and drama, and students who were already reporters or planning to become reporters, all took their classes together and had very similar syllabi, so everyone met everyone else in the college.

The classrooms and corridors in our third of the third floor of the Education Building (what is now the A.B. Building in UST) were permeated by a vaguely bohemian air. Everyone smoked and had their heads buried in paperbacks most of the time. Some of the guys were already inebriated by mid afternoon, but read to spouting witty repartee on demand. After classes, they hung out in a tiny place off Dapitan called Aling Mameng's, and consumed huge quantities of beer while discussing Sartre and Camus and Jack Kerouac. We girls understood that going to Aling Mameng's was not an option for us, so we drank gallons of coke or black coffee and discussed Sartre and Camus and T.S. Eliot and Carson McCullers in Eugene's along España or in Wilfranor's in Dapitan.

Like the rest of the university, our college had a uniform, but while there was some agreement about the pleated navy blue skirt of the girls' uniform, no one seemed to know the exact design of the white blouse that was supposed to accompany it. So, we all wore white short-sleeved blouses, but we touched them up with a bit of lace, or some embroidery on the sleeves, or a Peter Pan collar, or buttons colored pale green and sky blue and pearl grey, as suited our individual tastes. And most of the boys didn't even know that they were supposed to wear uniforms.

Meeting young people whose life experience—and even education—was totally different from mine was mind blowing. And the things they wrote made me realize how fluffy and immature my own writing had been. The big fish in the small pond had been tossed into the big pond, and was finding it most exhilarating.

However, as is the way of the world, I gravitated toward my own kind, and soon belonged to a group of other *ex-colegialas*. Together we would stroll under the pine trees, and across the football field, to the university chapel, its stained glass windows gleaming like jewels, constructed in 1932 and the original home of the Our Lady of La Naval de Manila, until her transfer in solemn procession to the Santo Domingo Church. And, farther, to the little stone structure at the far corner of the campus, which housed the UST Press, oldest printing press in the country (founded in 1593, eighteen years before the University itself). We learned that the Main Building, was built in the 1920s, not in 1611 as we had ignorantly assumed (but this hardly mattered since it looked like it was built in 1611 anyhow); that the sculptures mounted on pedestals in its roof garden were saints, philosophers, historians and writers; that inside its walls were the oldest museum in the country, a library with a rich collection of old books as well as stacks and stacks of contemporary literature, elevators which had grilled doors, that one had to manually slide to open and close, like those in some of the buildings in the old Escolta, and a radio station. We discovered that in the middle of the Pharmacy Garden was an old wishing well, and that just outside the Gov. Forbes gate we could get some dirty ice cream from a sidewalk vendor. And one evening, just as we had passed under the Arch of Centuries (the only structure in the campus that had made the trip from the old campus in Intramuros to España), we heard the chapel bells pealing musically, and everything came to a standstill as people stopped to pray the Angelus. And when we looked up, there was the blue cross lit up against the evening sky.

The Philosophy curriculum allowed us to take quite a number of electives, so I decided to take 3 Journalism courses—News Writing 1, Advertising 1, and Public Relations 1. The rest of my electives were literature courses. Our college offered only one course in Philippine Literature in English. And it was in that class that I discovered the works of many of the writers, who would become my idols, my teachers, my editors, my publishers. Some of them would actually become my friends and colleagues in academe and media. Nick Joaquin, NVM Gonzalez, Bienvenido Santos, Francisco Arcellana, Jose Garcia Villa, Wilfredo Ma. Guerrero, Edilberto and Edith Tiempo, Kerima Polotan, Ophelia Dimalanta, Rolando Tinio... all of them gone now. But there are those who are still very much around, and still providing inspiration, if not actual guidance... Frankie Sionil Jose,

Bienvenido Lumbera, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, Gilda Cordero Fernando, Virginia Moreno...

I had literature professors who were both gifted and dedicated. My particular favorite was Erlinda Francia-Rustia, who handled two semesters of what was then called “World Literature” (today it’s usually called “Great Masterpieces”), Oriental Literature (a quick survey of the works of some Indian, Chinese and Japanese writers), and Introduction to Aesthetics. She had fair skin, an angular body, an unusually sensuous laugh, a sharp sense of humor and a flair for the dramatic. She wore jewelry to match the color of her dresses—ruby red, sapphire blue, emerald green, amethyst—and made literature sound like a romantic adventure.

One time, after an impassioned lecture on Petrarch’s sonnets for Laura and Dante’s for Beatrice, Prof. Rustia paused and sighed. “Ah, compared to those men of the Renaissance, you young men today, professing love for your girlfriends with phone calls, and letters sometimes riddled by grammatical errors, are so tedious and insipid!”

And another time, talking about modern ballet, she described the legendary Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev, who were lovers in real life, dancing in *Romeo and Juliet*. She rose to her feet, and gesturing with one arm, as though the luminous couple in their finery stood before us in their costumes, she said, “And as they returned to the stage for the curtain calls, they were met by thunderous applause which went on and on. Then Nureyev fell on his knees before her and raised his face to her with an adoring look. And she plucked one long-stemmed ruby-red rose from the bouquet in her arm, and presented it to him with a smile.” And we, her students, burst into applause for *her* own performance.

There was also Josephine Bass-Serrano, a large, motherly lady, who taught the Romantics and the Victorians, as well as Literary Criticism, and succeeding in making both courses equally enthralling. And Ophelia Alcantara-Dimalanta, who, even then, was already goddess to our campus poets, taught Contemporary British and American Lit.

I remember summer afternoons, seated tailor-fashion on Rita’s her four-poster bed, in her little attic room in her grandmother’s lovely old white mansion, on what was then called Sampaloc Avenue (now Tomas Morato, a much less romantic name, and reading our favorite passages to each other... Yeats’ “*But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,/And loved the*

sorrows of your changing face..." and Thomas' "Oh, as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,/ Time held me green and dying/ though I sang in my chains like the sea..." and Lowell's *I shall go/Up and down,/ In my gown./ Gorgeously arrayed,/ Boned and stayed./And the softness of my body will be guarded from embrace/ By each button, hook, and lace...*

Those classes made Rita bend over the old, drop-leaf desk in her little attic room to write a new poem by lamplight. They made Linda de Bosch look more kindly on Leo and Pet, who had been courting her hopelessly for years. And they made me despair, for I was never going to be able to write poetry.

Among our professors was also Piedad Guinto-Rosales, who taught Modern Drama, a small, pert, bundle of energy, who ceaselessly urged us to attend the performances of the Aquinas Dramatic Guild, or, better still, to try out whenever there was an announcement of auditions. "You don't really understand drama unless you've had an actual experience of *theater!*" she would say.

Later, in Graduate School, there would be the erudite Carolina Garcia, who never lectured from written notes, but just off the top of her head, fanning herself with a Spanish *abanico*, pausing in her lecturing and her fanning only to toss a question which we struggled to answer in a manner which would gain a nod of approval, and instead of a gentle "Well... not exactly." And there was Clemencia Colayco, a small, frail, wisp of a lady with grey hair and a soft, almost whispery voice, who taught "Modern Catholic Writers," and stunned us with the passion with which she discussed the poetry of Gerald Manley Hopkins, Francis Thompson and Alice Meynell.

*I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears...*

It was that little band of women who influenced me as an aspiring writer, more than the writers they taught, who seemed so many worlds above me. So even if I never gave up the dream of being a writer, I think it was they who unconsciously influenced my decision, years later, into thinking that I might also be a teacher.

Anyway, there is no doubt in my mind about the role played by my college—and the University itself—in the kind of writer I was to become, and yes, that goes for my failings as well as my strengths.

I had begun my writing career as a journalist, and intermittently returned to it throughout my life. While still an undergraduate, I wrote feature articles for the *Manila Chronicle* and a weekly column for the youth section of the same paper, and I became Youth Section Editor for *Graphic* magazine, and later Assistant Women's Editor. When already married, I wrote a regular film review column for *Variety* magazine, Sunday Supplement of the *Manila Times*. Tony and I also published a short-lived small political/literary paper called *Revision*, with many of our writer-friends as contributors. In Bangkok, I worked as Assistant Editor for *Living Magazine*, a glossy lifestyle magazine. In Seoul, I wrote a weekly column for the *Korea Times* called "Passages," which dealt with women's issues, Asian women in particular. During all those years that we lived overseas, I was a regular contributor to *Female* magazine in Singapore, *Celebrity* magazine and *Gloss* magazine in Manila, and in New York, I had a regular column in *The Inquirer Magazine*, called "Traveller's Tales."

This training and experience as a journalist has been invaluable. To this day, I am able to produce, regardless of private biases and personal tragedies, an article or story with the required word count and submit it on time. Nick Joaquin once said it was indispensable for all creative writers to have some experience as journalists. He knew whereof he spoke.

When Tony and I decided to get married, we discussed the matter of jobs for me, and came to an agreement that academe was preferable to journalism for a married woman. I could always continue to do free lance writing. And since then, this is what I've been. For a time—in Seoul and New York City—I worked as an editor. But, for most of my life, I have been a full-time academic and a part time writer.

Is there a writer I can point to as a major influence on my essays, articles and columns? I wish I could say Oriana Fallaci, who antedated CNN's Amanpour by many decades, and whom I greatly admired. But this would not be true. I was never assigned to the "hard news." And being a war correspondent was never an ambition of mine, despite our having lived in Beirut, which remained a "battle zone," for all that its protracted civil war was officially ended; and my having been evacuated from Rangoon, with

Carmen, our youngest daughter, when the Burmese version of “People Power” resulted in the slaughter of unarmed students by the military. (The two older girls were studying in Manila by then.)

There is a *New York Times* columnist whose writing I always enjoyed reading, and whose work I have studied and taught—Mary Cantwell. But since I only began reading her column “Close to Home” when we were living in New York City in 1989 and 1990, she can’t have influenced my earlier writing. I think it was really Kerima Polotan’s essays in the *Philippines Free Press* and the *Asia Philippines Leader*, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil’s column *In My Humble Opinion* in the *Manila Chronicle*, and Gilda Cordero Fernando’s column “Tempest in a Teapot” in the *Sunday Chronicle Magazine* that must be given credit. Along with these women were Nick Joaquin and Gregorio Brillantes. These writers set the bar.

It is in my nonfiction where I think I tend to be most consistent in tone and style. My persona is my alter ego, with my biases and my enthusiasms; and I make no attempt to disguise her or pretend that she is other than what I am. The largest part of my work has been in nonfiction. I have written ten books of nonfiction and contributed to countless others. But I have written of this in another essay, which is included in this book, so I shall not go into that here.

The point I was leading up to is simply that all that time that I was writing essays and articles, I still desperately wanted to be was a writer of fiction, like my friend, Norma Miraflor, who, at 18, had already been published by the *Philippines Free Press*.

When I began to write this piece, I had to hunt down an earlier work which I know I presented as a lecture at the Philippine-British Literature Conference in the late 90s. I had prepared for that paper by going through my early journals. The journals were lost in the fire the gutted UP’s Faculty Center in 2016. But I found the essay, “The Story of My Stories” in my book, *Coming Home* (Anvil, 1007).

It reminded me that when, in 1969, I finally summoned the nerve to submit a story to Ninotchka Rosca, then the literary editor of the *Graphic* magazine, and it was accepted, I felt the same elation that I experienced when I read Alfredo Salanga’s review of my first essay collection, *Sojourns* (New Day, 1984). The story was titled “Ghost Day,” and it was about a young woman working as an instructor in a university during that turbulent

time of student rallies and demonstrations and graffiti on walls, and theatre of the streets. One of her students is an activist, who always leaves her classroom to join the marching students, coming from UP Diliman, on their way to Plaza Miranda, via España and what was beginning to be referred to as “University Belt.” This sets off a memory of another young man who had loved her, and whom she had loved, but had rejected, because he was a rebel, and in her eyes, dangerous.

I had forgotten that “Ghost Day” was among my stories that didn’t make the final cut when I chose six for my first collection. And it was only when I read “The Story of My Stories” that I recalled that “Ghost Day” was an early version of the story that I considered the best in the collection: “Ballad of a Lost Season.”

Writing fiction did not come easily to me. I labored over my stories as my students bent over their exams, or while I waited for Tony to come home to fetch me for the movie we had decided to catch after work. I wrote whenever there was a lull in the office, typing on newsprint, using the office manual typewriter; or scribbling in longhand on a notebook while waiting for my daughters to come out of their classrooms; in between washing machine cycles; and between ten P.M. (which was when the rest of the family retired), and twelve P.M., which was when I gave baby Carmen her last feeding). And when I put together my first collection of short stories, it included only six stories—six stories produced over a period of ten years. Obviously I did not consider the other stories I had written good enough. This was *Ballad of a Lost Season and Other Stories* (New Day, 1987).

Again, it was only when I reread my old essay that I recalled that all these stories “were influenced by the dominant aesthetics of that time in the Philippines: literature as politically engaged or socially relevant,” even if three of the stories were actually written overseas, and none was written in the social realist manner. The period of student activism and political turmoil which culminated in the First Quarter Storm, and eventually led to the declaration of martial law by Ferdinand Marcos in 1972, had a strong effect on literary writing. Mao Tse Tung’s *Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art* (1942) was preached by the militant Left as the ultimate word on poetics. And many writers and academics were drawn to it in reaction to the abuses of the Marcos dictatorship, as they were to Jean Paul Sartre’s introduction to *Les Tempes Modernes* (1945) and its emphasis on *littérature engagée*.

But, though this bias affected my choice of subject and theme, it did not alter my writing style. In those days, I was enamored with Henry James, Herman Hesse, Albert Camus, Rainer Maria Rilke, Lawrence Durrell. And the stories I wished to fashion my own work after, were the works of Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Elizabeth Bowen, and Edith Wharton, who were once derisively referred to by a male critic as “daughters of Henry James.” I know that my fiction bears shades of their work, as well as of Henry James’. However, when I reread those stories, I hear echoes of Kerima Polotan and Gilda Cordero Fernando yet again.

I was much older when I began writing the tales that went into *Tales for a Rainy Night* (DLSU, 1993). Perhaps the many years of living among people of different cultures and different faiths had made me more aware of the mystery of things. I turned to the modern tale in an attempt to capture the strangeness, the elusiveness, the magic. This book is my favorite child. Writing it was a different experience in ways I cannot adequately explain. Sometimes I suspect that it was a magic wrought by the place in which I did much of my writing. For some years we had a house in San Miguel, Bulacan, an old enchanting house sheltered by coconut trees, its windows open to sunlight and birdsong and the wind blowing in across the rice fields. I seem to have tapped into a secret lode, from which I was drawing an intense kind of energy.

By then, I had discovered A.S. Byatt, Doris Lessing, and other modern spinners of tales. I had also begun to read the writers of the great Latin American “Boom,” and was blown away by them, and the strategies they devised to capture life as lived in their part of the world with their “marvelous realism.” Our world was much closer to theirs than to America or Great Britain. But I didn’t want to sound like them. I felt my temperament was too different. I was drawn again to the tales of Gilda Cordero Fernando, many of whose stories, I now realized, were not realist stories, but tales. And I was drawn to Nick Joaquin, my true master, who was, I think, the first major Filipino writer in English to write non-realist fiction.

I think perhaps that into that magic brew was also mixed the effect of the two weeks I spent as part of the teaching panel of the the UP National Writers’ Workshop for the first time. This was the summer of 1992. It was the last of the writing workshops to be held in Diliman, before it moved

to Baguio. The workshop fellows were an extraordinary group, which included Sarge Lacuesta, Vicente Groyon, Auraeus Solito, Dean Alfar, Neil Garcia, Paolo Manalo, Chris Martinez, Michael Coroza, Ruel de Vera, Rebecca Añonuevo, who were all to make waves in the literary scene soon after that workshop. There was an energy that filled the room when they were deep in discussion of the manuscripts, and enveloped them when they were sitting under the stars after the sessions, singing and clowning around, with bottles of San Miguel beer smuggled into the campus, under the stars. They had brought guitars. Sarge sang lead for a rock band. Mike had a wide repertory of *kundiman* and would begin each song with a brief history of its composer, the movie for which it was composed, the singers who first sung it. Auraeus, Dean, and Chris were theatre students, and greeted each day as though it were a scene in a play that they were acting in or directing. These young people would talk to me about their lives, the things that tormented them, the things that drove them.

Actually this was the life I had imagined for myself when, as a high school student, I wondered what college would be like.

Because I had no idea whether my tales were any good, I showed the first one, with much trepidation, to Gilda Cordero Fernando, who by then had become my friend. This was “The Most Beautiful Woman in the Island.” She received it warmly, and gave me a few suggestions about the conventions of the tale, which I immediately followed when I rewrote this tale and wrote the succeeding ones.

When I had completed six stories, I mentioned them to my old pal, Isagani Cruz, who was head of the De La Salle University Press. Without seeing them, he said he would publish them. We thought the book would be better with some illustrations, so I asked Manny Baldemor, a contemporary of mine at UST, and he agreed to do it for me, *gratis*. I returned to Gilda with the request that she do me the honor of writing an introduction. She read the entire manuscript in a day, and then phoned to tell me she thought they were beautiful. “*Ang ganda ganda!*” she said. “But I can’t do an introduction. *Matagal na akong hindi nagsusulat ng fiction*. I’m afraid I won’t do the stories justice.” No amount of pleading from me made her change her mind. Because I had not published any of these tales before, I was quite insecure about their worth. It seemed to me that they needed the benefit of a senior writer’s approval. At Gilda’s suggestion, I went to Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, then the director of the UP Creative Writing

Center, and she obliged.

My third collection, *Where Only the Moon Rages* (Anvil, 1994), though also a collection of modern tales, is different in tone and texture from *Tales for a Rainy Night*. At the heart of each tale is an idea, rather than an image or a character. I re-read Isak Dinesen's work, and became aware that she had left traces in my own stories. I felt more confident now. It seemed I had found a new voice. And Ophie Dimalanta, who had become a close friend, wrote a wonderful introduction for it.

With my fourth collection, *Catch a Falling Star* (Anvil, 1999) I returned to realism, but I tried to pare down the language, to bare it to the bone. Again, I was thinking of Isak Dinesen's tales, their distillation of experience into its essence, their limpid simplicity, their luminosity. But I also wanted my stories to be funny. And I don't know who or what was my model for this. Maybe Mary McCarthy's memoir, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*? Some of the plots are drawn from the diary that I had continued to keep since age 9. It was the first time that I had tried to write a story sequence, i.e., stories centered around a single character. And the voice I used was very similar to the one I used in my nonfiction.

My novels are a different matter. I have written only two. Someone once asked me if they were similar to each other. The only similarity between them is, perhaps, their fragmented structure.

Recuerdo (1996) is a family saga written in epistolary form. The version that was finally published took a whole year to write. But the idea or ideas for a novel had been with me for much longer than that. And when, for some reason, in 1994, I decided that it was time to write that novel, I found in my old folders many fragments which I realized would all fit into the project I had in mind. I knew *who* I wanted my novel to be about, but I wasn't sure *what* I wanted to say about her. In my journal, an entry dated July 13, 1994 reads: "What is the story I really want to tell? They (the fragments) seem so banal, so *burgis*. Yet another story about yet another alienated middle-class woman..."

A few days later, I wrote: "Something pushes me toward history. Maybe it's a historical novel I wish to write? Not really. More like a 'tales my mother told me' kind of thing. But as a novel. A kind of novel. Maybe I can't write a realist novel. Maybe I can't write a novel. Maybe I can write something like Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*..."

The main character, Amanda, tells her daughter Risa the stories that her own mother has told her about 5 generations of their family, through letters that she sends via email. These emails contain the tales Amanda's mother, Isabel, recounted to her about the family's ancestors, drawn from her own memoirs that she began to write when she turned 80. There are many gaps in the narrative, due as much to the remoteness in time, as to the family's natural reticence about matters both dangerous and unpleasant. So Amanda tries to fill in the gaps by doing research in the history shelves of the UP Library, and with her own imaginings. The family drama unfolds against the backdrop of the nation's tumultuous history.

In that essay I mentioned earlier, "The Story of My Stories," I describe the process—how characters would emerge, and drop away, how the structure would change and change again, how the focus would shift. "Just before Christmas, I wrote the last word or the last chapter of Draft #6, printed it out two copies and gave one to Neil Garcia to read. But while he was reading, Draft #6 turned into Draft #7. And this time, it involved doing the whole thing over."

The thing is, even as my Amanda went "sleuthing in the archives" for clues that would help her fill the gaps in her mother's tales, I was doing the same thing in real life. And even as she uncovered what she was looking for, I was stumbling on the missing links in the stories Mama had told me.

In February 1995, there's this entry: "The writing of this novel is very strange. I am living what I write, writing what I live. My discoveries are my heroine's. I am digging into the old books to give my heroine a past. But in the process, I am finding mine..."

I would be hard pressed to name novels that might have influenced the writing of this novel. I don't recall ever reading any epistolary novel which particularly struck me. I do know that I very consciously wanted to make this a "woman's story," and of course there is a long tradition of epistolary writing by women, including the letters exchanged by those doomed lovers who lived in 12th century France, Heloise and Abelard. But these letters, which began as impassioned love letters, and later morphed into brilliant philosophical and theological explorations, was hardly a model for my novel. There is also much travel literature by women in epistolary form, with Lady Mary Montagu as perhaps the most famous. She was wife to a British diplomat, who lived in the 17th-18th centuries, and her letters covered the

time when her husband was assigned to Turkey in 1715.

And there are the six volumes of Virginia Woolf's letters, edited by Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann, and *Letters from Africa, 1914-1931* by Isak Dinesen. I had read all of these works by the time I wrote *Recuerdo*. In fact, they were among the most treasured in my small collection. But none of these are works of fiction. I suppose that Woolf's diaries and letters and Dinesen's letters—along with Kingston's memoirs—must have had some effect on my novel, since their authors were writers I particularly admired. To these, I would add Elizabeth Bowen's memoirs, Katherine Mansfield's journals, the diaries of Anais Nin (which turned out to be largely fictional). And—I almost forgot this one, which I first came across when I was still an undergraduate, and which I wished I had written, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, and those other court ladies of 11th Century Japan.

The novel, then, has a frame structure: the frame is Amanda writing to her daughter and trying to come to a decision about what to do with her life when she returns to Manila from her present job in Bangkok. Within the frame are the tales that Amanda's mother, Isabel, told her. These follow a roughly chronological order, but there are many time jumps, backward and forward, and always a reverting to the narrative present in which Amanda and Risa exist. The idea of using the epistolary structure came to me after many false starts, using the conventional narrative style with flashbacks, and alternating chapters with a shifting point of view. My own heroine, Amanda, describes this in her letter to her historian friend, Rafael, which is the final chapter in the book, and reveals that what this text has been all along is a novel.

“... The strategy seemed to work for me. It enabled me to put together all the stray bits and pieces, the elusive fragments which are all really part of the larger story, which in my mind now seems like a kind of tapestry, with different scenes woven in, using many strands of many shades, which somehow fit into the intricate pattern...”

When I decided on the epistolary structure, I also decided that I needed to use email. I meant for the whole story within one year. So, to tell all the tales she needed to tell, Amanda would have to be writing more than just one letter a month. And while the letters from Amanda's daughter, Risa, are not part of the novel, it is assumed that she does write them. Given the pace of snail mail, only email would do. But the Net was not yet

as familiar—to me, at any rate—at the time of the novel’s writing. So I did not employ such features as hyperlinks, hypertext, hyper media, cutting and pasting pdf piles on to word files, etc. I didn’t even use emoticons and emojis or stickers. But maybe this is just as well. The resulting story might have been different, from the story I wanted to tell, had I written it differently.

My second novel *A Book of Dreams* (2006) was difficult to write, and I know it is not an easy novel to read. Tony told me this when I gave it to him to read. I know it is not an easy novel to teach either. Isabelita Reyes, who had been my student, became my colleague, and is now one of my closest friends, told me she and Paolo Manalo actually discussed how they might teach it, but they kind of gave up. (She recently told me that she has taught it, after all, and that I would be pleased by her students’ reactions.)

I guess one might say it is the most experimental of my works. It follows its six characters’ search for faith through dreams interwoven with straight narration, and pages from the notebook of one of the characters, which consist of tales, sketches, fragments of poetry, etc. Each of the six characters has his or her own narratives, each is struggling to find answers and solution, each has dreams which perhaps bring them closer to those answers. They intersect in real life, and sometimes in their dreams. The character with the notebook is Angela. And she is a writing a novel, so the entries in her notebooks are notes toward that novel, which, may or may never get written. Dreams and actual narratives are two strands of the novel, and weaving in and out of these braided strands are the notes from Angela’s notebook.

I was quite conscious that I was trying to walk in the footsteps of Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Eduardo Galeano (but it is doubtful that any reader will perceive this). One critic called the book “postmodern.” Another critic (Ophie Dimalanta, if I’m not mistaken), said it wasn’t so much a postmodern novel as it was an anti-novel. I think I wasn’t aiming for postmodernist pastiche, but for modernist collage.

I was hoping to create something both evanescent and haunting, something lyrical, something romantic, which at some level might also be called realist, something that captures the quality of magic and dreams, but is grounded in contemporary Philippine reality. To this day, I have no idea whether I succeeded. Perhaps it was too ambitious a plan. Perhaps it can’t be done—one either aims for one effect or the other.

Perhaps all this is about is just that I was at a different stage in my life when I wrote each book, and so I wrote differently. It has occurred to me that my career trajectory might be different if I were a writer with a huge following, and had to keep in mind my readers' expectations each time I started on a new project. As, indeed, novelists whose work used to be serialized in magazines or newspapers, had to pay attention to letters to the editor; and as today, writers of scripts for TV serials have to keep their eye on ratings.

This raises an issue which I think may be affecting the way I write. One cannot be in the profession of writing for as many years as I have, and not confront the reality of the pitifully small readership for titles of the sort that win literary awards.

Filipino writers have been wracking their brains and breaking their hearts over this one since the Commonwealth—including Francisco Arcellana and NVM Gonzalez, National Artist for Literature both—particularly if they spend some time in the publishing industry.

Between 2002 and 2005, I was director of the UP Press, and between June 2010 and June 2012, director of the UST Publishing House. Academic publishing houses don't have to worry about profits to the extent that commercial publishers do. Nonetheless, they must generate enough sales to be able to keep their outfits feasible. Thus I became more conscious about this dilemma. But something else made me confront it more directly. This was Tony's setting up of his little publishing company in the late 90s—Milflores Publishing—and later his decision to return to fiction-writing. Tony had always believed that literature had the responsibility to educate, to influence thinking on large issues, in order to bring about social or political change. When he first began studying the market for literary works, he was appalled. He quickly realized that the reason for the dismal state of affairs was the inaccessibility of much "literary" writing for most potential readers. So when he put up Milflores, he was determined to publish work that would be accessible to larger groups of people, instead of limiting himself to trying to reach only other literary writers, literary critics, and students of literature. To this principle he remained true, including in his own writing, even going so far as to translate his books into Filipino, which he firmly believed had a better chances of reaching a large audience than English. When he passed away in 2011, Tony had succeeded in his

objective to the extent that his business was providing him with at least half of his income. How he did it is another story.

Today, I think Facebook has made possible another type of experiment. One can write something—poem or essay or story—post it in one’s blog, as a Facebook Note or even as a status report, and get immediate feedback on how many people like it or hate it. Is this another one of those “forces” I referred to, at the beginning of this essay, as deserving attention as a “literary influence” on one’s writing? I would say that this should be quite obvious.

When I first started posting short essays as Facebook Notes, my purpose was, not so much to get feedback, as to slip back into the habit of writing regularly again, which happened whenever I was writing a regular column for a newspaper or magazine. I was astonished at the number of “reactions” and “comments” these Notes would receive. (Although it was obvious that such posts did not get as many reactions as did good pictures, or striking one-liner status reports). The responses ranged, from a single word (“Wow!”), or even a non-word (“OMG”), to mini-essays of their own (maybe we might call them “flash nonfiction?”). I was even more surprised—and pleased—when I discovered that these “comments” sometimes actually helped me in the work of revision, because they provided useful suggestions, links, and other types of information, that led to exchanges, not just between the person and myself, but among the people posting comments.

I like to think of my writing as a kind of conversation with readers. But before social media, this conversation was largely imaginary. I imagined I was addressing an ideal reader—basically like myself, maybe slightly younger, or slightly older—who would read attentively, and react intelligently. In Facebook the “conversation” has become literally true, for all that it is virtual.

Has the effect of this dynamic relationship been good or bad for my writing? It goes without saying that I can’t be the judge of that. All I’m certain of is that Facebook (I don’t use Instagram or Twitter) has had—is having—an effect on my writing. And I’m immensely curious about where this will lead. It feels almost as though I were standing on the brink... about to explore a new world.

11 March 2017