

Introduction

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When I look back on the University that I entered as a freshman in the mid-60s, it seems to me that everyone I knew was a writer. The tiny Faculty of Philosophy & Letters to which I belonged occupied only one third of the 3rd floor of what was then referred to as the Education Building, and later became the Commerce Building when the College of Education moved to its own building in another part of the campus.

But my college was proud of being the “the writing college,” with an illustrious tradition of producing writers who were among the country’s most distinguished fictionists, poets, and journalists.

Unfortunately this tradition has so slipped between the cracks that when I mentioned it to my graduate creative writing class in the University of the Philippines, they were all quite surprised, including the two Thomases among them.

It is perhaps this cultural amnesia, if you will, which led National Artist for Literature Bienvenido Lumbera to observe that it was high time that UST’s significant contribution to Philippine literature was recognized. In his UST Paz Latorena Lecture, delivered in February 2011, he said, “Literary production in the University, in the beginning, was an offshoot of the sheer talent and personal drive of its students. No special courses were offered for the cultivation to creative talent.”¹

Lumbera was referring specifically to the 30s, the 40s and the 50s. But the same was true of the UST that I knew. Our professors often spoke

of the people Dr. Lumbera mentioned in his lecture—Domingo Abadilla, Frankie Sionil Jose, Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta, Wilfredo Nollado, Rolando Tinio, Johnny Gatbonton, and of course Bienvenido Lumbera himself. They were among the outstanding alumni writers in whose steps we were expected to follow.

But we received no actual training in the craft of writing. Students entered one of two streams: philosophy or journalism. Philosophy graduates tended to end up in academe and Journalism graduates joined one of the national newspapers or the profession of advertising and public relations, an ascendant industry in those days.

Our professors, always aware that their classrooms were filled with young people who dreamed of becoming writers, assumed that we were all voracious readers, and fed that appetite with literary masterpieces. The books that did not find their way into our courses' official syllabi, we discovered by ourselves, in the shelves of Popular Bookstore and P & P Bookstore, which were a stone's throw away from our campus, and those of Frankie Jose's *La Solidaridad* and Tony Abaya's *Erewhon* on Ermita.

So we learned to write by trial and error, exchanging dog-eared copies of our latest discoveries, copying our idols, showing each other our manuscripts, and timidly submitting them to the *Free Press*, which nine times out of ten rejected them outright.

UST's Philets antedated UP's Institute of Mass Communications (later the College of Mass Communications), and in my time, media, advertising and public relations were dominated by Thomasians. In fact, one of the college's attractions was that most of the faculty teaching the upper-division courses were practitioners—newspaper or magazine editors or heads of advertising agencies—who recruited the best of their students into the organizations/companies they worked for. A good number of my classmates were practicing journalists. But they were also, in fact, poets or fictionists, and every year, Philets dominated the annual *Varsitarian* literary awards as well as the annual examinations held to select the new *Varsitarian* staff.

To the names already mentioned by Dr. Lumbera—Rogelio Sicat, Norma Miraflor, Cirilo Bautista and myself (and I wish here to express my gratitude for his inclusion of my name in his list of writers)—I would add the names of other contemporaries of ours: Kit Tatad, Cesar Aguila, Andy

del Rosario, Joe Burgos, Jose Flores, Julie Yap, Jean Pope, Jaime Maidan Flores, Albert Casuga, Rita Gadi, Benjamin Afuang, Sonia Cataumber, Roy Acosta, Chito Bautista, Manny Azarcon, Jake Macasaet, Manny Sison, Bernardo Bernardo, Rey Datu, Gil Portes, among many others. Kit, Cesar, Andy, Joe and Maidan were already journalists, working students who attended evening classes. Most of us began our writing careers as staffers of the *Blue Quill*, Philets' paper, which had a literary section; and later joined the *Varsitarian*, which also had an excellent literary section.

Kit later entered politics. After martial law was declared, Joe Burgos briefly joined the Development Academy of the Philippines (DAP), but later returned to journalism. Andy and Sonia became diplomats. Cesar left for Australia and eventually became a banker (though he also published a novel, and only last year, a collection of short stories published by the UST Publishing House). Albert, like Cirilo, joined academe. This was also true of Norma and myself, both of us beginning our teaching careers in UST. Norma later returned to journalism. Rita became part of *Solidarity*, the journal run by Frankie Jose. Julie, Jean, Ben, Jake and Rey remained journalists. I think Manny Azarcon and Chito Bautista went into advertising. Manny Sison eventually set up Booksale and became a millionaire. And when he returned from graduate school in the U.S., Bernie Bernardo entered the world of show biz, like Gil Portes, who became a film director.

When Philosophy and Letters was merged with Liberal Arts to be thenceforth referred to as Artlets, it continued to produce writers like Eric Gamalinda, Merlinda Bobis, Neil Garcia, Vim Nadera, Roberto Añonuevo, Rebecca Añonuevo, Jose Wendell Capili, Michael Coroza, Lourde de Veyra, Ramil Gulle, Nerisa Guevara, Alma Anonas, Lito Zulueta, Carlomar Daoana, Francesca Kwe, Natasha Gamalinda, Angelo Suarez, and others whom I might have forgotten. Some of these young writers became junior associates of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Studies when it was set up in 1999, with Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta, who had taught us Contemporary British and American poetry, as its first director. They were joined by Ralph Galan and Eros Atalia, who, though not UST graduates, were Dimalanta protégées.

It is devoutly to be hoped that, with the revival of our Center and the revitalization of our M.A. Creative Writing Program (and, hopefully, the

establishment of an undergraduate program), UST will once again become a hub of literary activity.

I am pleased to say that when I was serving as director of the UST publishing house, several of our alumni sent us new works which became part of the “400 Years, 400 Books” presented to the public in an exhibit in January 2012. Among these were Cirilo Bautista, Teo Antonio, Cesar Aguila, Norma Miraflor, and Rita Gadi.

And now, we have identified a core of writers who will form the nucleus of what we hope will soon be a vibrant literary community. Several of them were part of the UST Writers’ Workshop, held last May in Baguio City, either as members of the teaching panel or as writing fellows.

It is with this in mind that the CCWLS decided to devote the initial issue of the revived literary journal *Tomas*, to Thomasians. The succeeding pages feature the previously unpublished work of Thomasian alumni, faculty members and graduate students.

Dr. Lumbera’s “Magaling Datapoa: Ang Galing at Dating ng Estetika ng Ating Panitikan” critiques the tendency of Filipino critics and literature teachers to use Western aesthetic standards when evaluating Philippine literature, including more traditional texts. And the late Dr. Dimalanta’s “Literature and Religion” is an impassioned manifesto about the role of faith—true faith—in art and poetry, and about the “profound spirituality” in the work of the greatest artists. This paper was read at “Inter/sections: Crossroads and Crosscurrents in Literature and Cultures,” a national conference held in UST in January 2008. It was given by the author before she passed away to Ferdinand Lopez with the understanding that it was to be published.

Thomasian alumni are represented by several contributions. Vim Nadera’s ritualistic play “Binhi” presents a rich tapestry of agricultural ceremonies, practices, myths and legends, all having to do with rice, a testament to its importance in our culture. Teo T. Antonio’s suite of five poems is a study in the intertwining of the personal and the political via the poetic voice of a revolutionary who is also a lover. The suite of five poems by Albert Casuga is imbued with a sense of irretrievable loss, of vanished seasons... “a collage of dispersing dwindling drawings on skies that darken at sundown drowning them all.” Kit Kwe’s “True Lies: an Essay on Writing Fiction” is an interesting hybrid piece, part memoir, part meditation

on her own poetics. And then there's "The Choice" by Joanna Parungao, a story submitted to last summer's UST Writers' Workshop, one of the rare few in our literature which truly deserve the label "science fiction." It opens like a traditional tale with "Once, a long time ago, I went to a fortune teller who told me she could divine, my future simply by looking at the lines imprinted on the skin of my palms." But before the reader quite realizes what has happened, it has slipped into the world of tablets, parallel worlds, wormholes, physics, quantum mechanics... with dizzying effects.

From the faculty we have an equally rich harvest.

Love and loss resonate through the five minimalist poems in the suite by Ralph Semino Galan, weaving in and out of images of sand and sea, storm and flood, ghost ships, butterfly in a gilded cage. Augusto Antonio A. Aguila's short story "The Lost Season" takes a clear-eyed, unflinching look at a Catholic university and finds it sadly wanting. John Jack Wigley's "*Bui Doi* in the City of Angels" is a heartbreaking memoir of boyhood as a poor, bastard son who never knew his American father. Dawn Marie Nicole L. Marfil's "Roche's Limit" explores a different sort of heartbreak, a narrative saved from sentimentality by its protagonist's sharp self-awareness. Ferdinand Lopez's "The Two Trees" is a short memoir of the late Ophelia Dimalanta and Milagros Tanlayco, a tribute no less moving for its being humorous. "Brgy. Magapo" is the first chapter of Eros Atalia's novel-in-progress, and follows an unnamed broadcast journalist as he travels by *habal-habal* at the height of a tropical storm, to investigate illegal logging operations in a remote barangay. Then there is "Kapre" by Chuckberry Pascual a marvelous-realist tale of a *bakla* whose encounter with the hirsute, tobacco-smoking mythical creature triggers the break-up between him and his significant other. And there is Joselito D. de los Reyes' "Derby," a short story which exposes the vicious entanglements of dirty politics, tabloid journalism and high-stakes gambling through the eyes of a newly-hired assistant to the town mayor. Finally, there is Rebecca Añonuevo's essay "Sto. Niño sa Tondo" which captures the carnivalesque spirit of the Tondo town fiesta. Here is a straight woman whose understanding of queer consciousness enables her to appreciate the liminal spaces occupied by different gay men in an otherwise conservative religious festival.

"The Old House," a story by graduate student Giancarla Agbisit, takes the reader into the mind of a young matron in middle-class suburbia

and records her awakening in crisp, pared-down prose, made more powerful by its being so low-key.

All together they make for an auspicious re-entry into the local literary landscape for *Tomas*.

We look forward to more new work by Thomasian writers for our next issue, and in the coming years, to the contributions of writers from other universities, as well as from writers not based in academe.

October 2012
Manila

Endnotes

1 Bienvenido Lumbera. “Stepping Forward at 400: The Literary Production of UST,” Paz Latorena Memorial Lecture, 2 February 2011, UST (unpublished).
2 February 2011