

Discovering Writing: The Ground Beneath The Writer's Feet

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Fiction provides ample opportunity to detail accounts making a seemingly microscopic experience pivotal to the development of character and theme. The short stories in the present writer's debut collection *The Heart of Need and Other Stories*, published by the UST Publishing House, examine the multivalent experiences of characters, the personal and/or interstitial spaces they inhabit, their unsettling realizations and the meaning they ascribe to them. The characters eventually turn inward to process their drives, motives, feelings, decisions, and actions leading them to a significant moment of self-discovery. The publication of his first story *The Heart of Need* in TOMAS, the literary journal of UST, has likewise inspired the writer/researcher to write short stories. Emphasizing the harmonious correspondence between craft and content, he develops a poetics/poeisis that elucidates his writing philosophy and narrative theory, situating the writer's critical position in the current political and literary climate and discusses extensively the writing process.

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Why Write in English?

One significant issue that needs to be addressed by any Filipino fictionist when he writes stories is his choice of language. On the surface, it seems that English has achieved that pre-eminent status as the privileged language for writing because it has always been in the Philippine academe for more than a century now. The academe has also defined the significance of English in people's personal and professional lives. It also does not hurt that English as "lingua franca" is the language generally used in business, science and

technology, the arts, and the humanities. There is also a great effort to translate non-English texts into English. But of course there are exceptions. France, for instance, continues to resist the very concept of a “universal” language. The French demand that people who go to their country must learn and speak their language or be forever silenced (and marginalized) by using another language like English. It is a different scenario in the Philippines, because Filipinos never resisted speaking a foreign tongue which eventually (or supposedly) became our second language. Amusingly, the “unconstitutional” practice of charging a certain amount to students as punishment for speaking their native language still exists in many educational institutions today. In other words, majority of Filipinos totally embraced English as the privileged tongue in their own territory.

The present writer is not only a product of the academe but also a part of it. He teaches English, Literature, Film Theory and Speech to college and graduate school students and for twenty-three years and he has been using English as his medium of instruction inside the classroom which is due partly to institutional policy. It is nearly impossible to separate English from the aforementioned courses. Their very creation has already signified English as a designated given. It is a fact that meetings in the academe as well as seminars, workshops, conferences and conventions, particularly in the University of Santo Tomas are all conducted in English. Reports, memoranda, circulars, letters, etc. are required to be written in English. Aside from teaching responsibilities which require him to teach courses in English, administrative duties also included editing manuscripts, dealing with authors, doing office communication and writing summaries of manuscripts and articles which require him to use English all the time.

The colonial period has also institutionalized the language in the academe. This is the reason English has become the privileged language in the country relegating the native language to the backseat. Majority of degree programs and courses have English as medium of instruction. Term papers, reports, theses and dissertations are required to be written in English. Also, the concept of being “educated” or “literate” in the Philippines is synonymous with being able to use the language. Its importance has been validated or stamped with the seal of approval by institutions. The present writer’s use of English did not happen by historical accident. It is the language that has defined him. But even if the present writer utilizes English in the professional sense, particularly as a writer, it is a distinct kind of English peculiar to most Filipino speakers/writers of English. It seems that English dominated the world more than any other language and linguists say that it may never be dethroned as the king of languages (Saxena & Omoniyi, 2010), and this has led to various “localized Englishes” which have developed in many parts of the world where English has taken on new forms and has become a distinct kind of English which does not sacrifice national

and cultural identity. For instance, Filipino English, which the present writer uses in writing his fiction, is a kind of English used by Filipinos which has its own nuances, native/local leanings and meanings, and a distinctively Filipino character.

The present writer, as a non-native speaker of English, has developed a fluency in educated English but obviously does not speak and write like native speakers. He has been trained to be an example of an educated speaker of Standard English identifiable to his own country. But what separates his style is that he is not locked in some ivory tower lost in touch with reality. He does not belong to the snobbish intellectual elite whose stories are more likely a showcase of language than subject or material. His short stories are written in the “homegrown” variety that readers will never mistake the writer for an American, Canadian or an Indian, Chinese, European whose brand of English is distinctly Filipino.

The Literary Milieu

To be able to establish the current literary climate in which this present writer belongs, there is a need to trace and explore the contributions of the first-and-second generation of great Filipino writers like Paz Marquez Benitez, Angela Manalang-Gloria, Luis Dato, Bienvenido Santos, Jose Garcia Villa, Loreto Paras Sulit, and Arturo Rotor who were all masters of the English language. They were taught to think and speak in English and in a few years' time after having polished their craft, they eventually taught their students to think and speak and write in English. Their models of exceptionally good writing were mostly western writers. The second-generation writers such as Ricaredo Demetillo and the Tiempos from Silliman, Rafael Zulueta da Costa from De La Salle, Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero from the Ateneo, Nick Joaquin and Narciso Reyes from the University of Santo Tomas and Serafin Lanot had great respect for the first generation writers. Like their predecessors, they likewise published their first poems and stories in the same national magazines: *Tribune*, *Graphic*, *Philippine Magazine*, and other publications. They said that their milieu was still congenial to writing in English and that weeklies encouraged the literary world. Like the older writers, they, too, were in touch with each other.

It did not come as a surprise that majority of the first-generation and second-generation writers wrote in English because their milieu provided a lot of opportunities to use English as the literary medium. Their childhood and early education had tremendous impact on their becoming writers. There are those who come from families that were musically-inclined or lovers of art while a number of them were encouraged by parents and relatives to read books and magazines in English whatever their economic status was. Poverty did not prevent any of them to read and to study; their exposure to literature and the arts came early. They

had as teachers and professors, in the elementary, high school, and tertiary levels, Americans, foreigners, and Filipino *pensionados* who went to the United States to study English to acquire the vocabulary who taught them to write, think, and even feel in English. They likewise read the same authors as well as what their American counterparts were reading. English was also imposed on the nation as the medium of instruction and nobody questioned it.

There is a tendency for most people to think that writers in general did not start off roughly writing their works. In truth, they devoted time to polish and perfect their craft (De Ungria, 1995). When a reader got hold of writers' best works and read them for the first time, he could not help but be awed by their brilliance and genius, thinking that they wrote that way – perfect and hardly without flaws, from the very beginning. It is interesting to note that many of them too were not proud of their first few works. The period to which the first-generation and second-generation writers belongs was conducive for writers because aside from the school organs, like the *Collegian* that published literary works when they were still college students, there were a number of major national publications that catered to writers which according to Maria Kalaw Katigbak served as a medium that encouraged them to write.

Fiction writing in the Philippines heeds the call to form, even though other approaches, techniques, theories and ideologies dared to rock the boat of craftsmanship. The issue of whether literature was first and foremost “art” or a “socially responsible” medium, was hotly debated on in the early days of Philippine writing in English by Jose Garcia Villa who insisted that a writer must write art for art's sake, and Salvador P. Lopez who believed that with the many social upheavals happening around the world, literature must do its share in enlightening its readers. This battle ensued for quite some time, but eventually it was somehow settled when a number of those who at one point in time sided with Lopez later declared that a literary work must first be well written. Didn't Percy Bysshe Shelley say in his critical essay “In Defence of Poetry” that a writer who is good at what he does is in essence “moral?” But the present writer adheres to what critic W.C. Browning said that ideally there must be a correspondence between the idea and the expression of the idea (form) and the value of the idea itself (content). In other words, why not strike a balance between the two? Why not write a well-written story that says something important too? NVM Gonzalez's first short story, for instance, acknowledged him as the supreme craftsman:

His works are products of serious artistic effort and of an artistic creed which upheld the belief that art must involve working with material (a serious craft) and must be a thing of beauty (artistic). The social note in Gonzalez's fiction never called attention to

itself and never took precedence over the artistic objective, and Gonzalez trained many of his students at the University of Santo Tomas and the University of the Philippines always to labor with loving attention over every line and detail.

(Dimalanta & Mata, 2001)

Among the current crop of fictionists – Charlson Ong, Marianne Vilanueva, Angelo Lacuesta, Clinton Palanca, as well as Filipino-American fictionists Cecilia Manguerra Brainard, Ninotchka Rosca, R. Zamora Linmark, and Jessica Hagedorn – have made notable contributions here and abroad.

Angelo Lacuesta, for instance, started out writing as a pastime. It was his interest in literature and the theater that led him into writing. His stories “Life Before X,” “White Elephants,” “Rest Stop,” and “Thousand Year Eve” delve into contemporary/postmodern Filipino psyche examining technology-mediated romance; delineating snippets of past catastrophic events, the character’s personal life experiences and his yearning for an ideal world; depicting alienation in a foreign land and how meaningful a chance encounter could be with a fellow Filipino; and interspersing the tediousness of the character’s daily routine with situations that require immediate attention. Charlson Ong, on the other hand, situates in his stories the Filipino-Chinese hybridized existence and the common thread that connects the Filipino and the Chinese experience as they inhabit the multi-variegated, central and interstitial spaces (Ong, 1995). Marianne Villanueva, on the other hand, has always felt anger and has always been concerned with history. She works off a very ironic and sarcastic voice. She admits that there are times when she thinks whether what she is writing is true to her cultural background because she feels a sense of obligation as a Filipina writer but the longer she lives in the United States, the harder it becomes. She likewise admits that knowing that she looks at the world through a filter that enables her to transmute her own experiences into a story lends everything she does a sense of purpose (Villanueva, 1981; www.necessaryfiction.com).

The aforementioned writers all have written about the contemporary Filipino experience with a great sense of history which is oftentimes fragmented and highly mediated by technology, media, ephemeral distractions, and hyper-realities. It is in this particular context that this writer situates himself as a fiction writer. His stories are character-driven that often turn inward to examine the characters’ desires, motives, ideals, and aspirations and how they confront their respective realities, which are often starkly unsettled by a force or entity larger than their own, like the jungle-like metropolis, the questionable and contradictory motives and intentions of institutions as well as the people who run them, and ironically even the characters’ desires, motives, ideals and aspirations that become their own personal monsters.

The Need to Write

In Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, human needs can be classified into physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization. While every act such as quenching one's thirst, protecting oneself from any form of danger or harm, expressing affection for someone, yearning to receive love in return, lead to the satisfaction of certain human needs, or finding meaning in life, the first level of need requires that it be addressed immediately, which is precisely the reason it is referred to as basic.

The need to be nourished, for instance, is something that cannot be delayed for a long period of time. The moment nourishment is withheld and prolonged, physical hunger aggravates. When extreme hunger pangs begin to affect the body, the individual literally races against time to find food. He does not have time to perform other activities such as go to the gym to develop washboard abs, read an engaging book to enrich his mind with philosophical insights, or long to be recognized for whatever accomplishments he has obtained. Physical hunger automatically prompts the mind to direct its attention to the tension that constricts the body's midsection.

Anything basic ceases to puzzle or confound. If perplexing at all, due to the lack of available resources, the level of perplexity may come in the form of an intrusion that is predominantly faith-related. Prayer is a brief intervening agency uttered by a person who is hungry to ask for some sort of assistance from a divine entity. The prayer may be a genuine cry for help due to sheer desperation or merely a perfunctory or careless utterance driven by force of habit or some mechanical linguistic reflex. If this particular need is not addressed immediately and appropriately, certain life-threatening complications can occur that may eventually lead to death. Under normal circumstances and when ample resources are within reach and readily available, the one who needs to satisfy his hunger will be devoid of any anxiety. In other words, once basic needs are satisfied on a regular basis, a person begins to consider satisfying other needs which are higher than the basic. Whether the condition is economically stable, poverty-stricken, or politically-deprived, the need to be nourished as well as the amount of time required to satisfy it remains the same. This holds true with other physiological needs such as discharging the waste the body has produced, quenching one's thirst, breathing clean air, and resting and sleeping, which all require a sense of immediacy to sustain a person's life and make him a fully-functioning individual.

Self-actualization need, on the other hand, is the highest form of need since it concerns man's quest to realize his full potential. Unlike lower needs, this need is never fully satisfied. Self-actualized people tend to have truth, wisdom, meaning as motivators. Here, the individual experiences moments of profound happiness and harmony. While the essence of a basic need stems from something that is purely

physical and organic, self-actualization obtains its strength from achieving various levels of fulfillment. While it is necessary to satisfy one's basic needs first before a person seriously considers developing his full potential, the gap that separates basic needs from self-actualization needs seems too wide as if the basic need could not serve as a bridge or conduit leading to the higher need. For example, the rich intellectual elite take for granted sometimes the importance of basic needs like food, water, clothes and shelter since these are things that are always around; something they do not have to be anxious about since these things have always been readily available. This occurs because of their dogged preoccupation with intellectually-enriching and spiritually-satisfying activities. Their constant search for meaning serves as the ultimate motivation that drives them to achieve a higher level of fulfillment such as engaging in philosophy, reading literature, earning academic degrees, or seeking spiritual enlightenment. On the other hand, the poverty-stricken have very little or no time at all to devote for self-enriching activities. Their main concern is simply to satisfy basic needs on a day-to-day basis in order to survive. If one takes out the biblical implication of the Christian maxim, *Man does not live on bread alone*, it could very well be what the financially capable intellectual elite could be saying to themselves, but on the opposite end, the poverty-stricken, have only to concern themselves with matters involving their diurnal exigencies, and so in the literal sense, they do live on bread alone.

The question now is, what does the aforementioned treatise on man's basic and higher needs have to do with a writer's desire to express, to write, and to fully contain on his canvas, whether on a sheet of paper or on the laptop screen, his creative work, which is, in this particular case, his fiction? It would be a cliché to say that writing in the literary sense, satisfies a higher form of need, since it is the culmination of many years of careful study, of nurturing the creative spirit, of developing and enriching one's art, of observing keenly human nature, actions, and behavior, of living and breathing one's experiences and other people's experiences, of looking for connections and disconnections, of plunging deeper and deeper into life's ironies, of making sense of man's Sisyphus-like existence. Writing is more than just a skill one learns and acquires in school; it is more than just a tool one utilizes to put across a message. It constitutes a more complex machinery that enables a writer to fully eventuate his art. The question whether writing to produce poetry, fiction or nonfiction makes the writer a self-actualized individual is already a foregone conclusion.

The issue that requires further explication is the idea that writing is as important and as basic a need as food, water, air, and sleep for a writer. First, the act of expressing is something that is taken as a means to respond to a stimulus just like verbalizing one's thoughts when asked a question, making a query, defending

oneself from an unfair and unkind remark, uttering interjections when surprised or delighted, making a comment when required to critique an article, explaining a point when there comes a need to clarify or even declaring undying love for someone. In other words, expressing one's self is something that is second nature to human beings. In fact, there are occasions when the urge to express things verbally comes first before satisfying the actual need like hunger or thirst. It is common to hear a person say that he is hungry or thirsty or that he needs some rest and sleep before he actually does what is needed. To prevent a person from expressing himself is similar to depriving him of food, water and sleep. On the other hand, the ability to express oneself through writing is a more sophisticated skill that requires years of careful study, exposure to various literary forms, mastery of the language, constant practice to perfect one's craft, and, of course, a considerable degree of talent, to be able to produce something worthwhile.

For a writer, the need to write is a necessity; he cannot do without it because it is the very lifeblood of his existence. His "life" actually depends on it. He serves as the voice of his generation performing the roles of sage, prophet, chronicler, historian, devil's advocate, artist, nation-builder, conscience, satirist, oppositionist, observer, participant, and catalyst for change. This is the essence of being a writer. When one is a writer, there is no escape from his essence – to write, which what makes a writer a writer. To put it in simple terms, a writer is called a writer because his main business is to write. The same is true when one chooses to be a soldier, teacher, doctor, priest, there is no way that the individual would be able to separate the idea that makes him such with the inevitable function that he must perform. The term "writer" is in itself a "category" or "label" that requires certain functions, and the writer's major function is to write. This is the general principle that serves as the "inevitable" springboard for the present writer to write his short stories.

Generally speaking, those who intend to have a career in writing, have in one way or the other, started being influenced by other writers. It usually starts with reading other people's works and being naturally inspired by them. The desire to write is prompted by a powerful stimulus – the actual or physical contact of the writer with literary texts. The exposure to literary works and the styles of writers somehow serve as building blocks for the budding writer to create a framework that will give him important "rules to live by" in writing.

Narrative Theory

The writer's senses are constantly assaulted. The senses serve as receivers of all sorts of experiences. They may come in the form of regular snippets of everyday encounters or significant episodes that affect us in various ways. These snippets and episodes are actually "glimpses" of a larger picture or of something deeper. A story is

first and foremost a “glimpse” of a particular experience or moment whether real or imagined. The moment the writer opens his eyes (literally) early in the morning until the time his body resigns to rest after a long day, his senses are exposed to “glimpses” or “scenes” which provide him with hundreds of ideas for stories. A small hole in his blanket, an overcooked bacon for breakfast, an empty shampoo bottle, a missing toothbrush, his maid apologizing to him for the overcooked bacon and for forgetting to buy a bottle of shampoo, choosing what clothes to wear, seeing an old woman counting a few coins on her palm, the first person he sees outside his house on his way to work, ten-year old boys quarreling in the street, two high school students talking loudly inside the jeepney about the teachers they despise as well as a middle-aged man with his arm wrapped around a younger woman’s shoulder, people rushing to cross the street, a woman who shouts at a reckless driver, the stinking smell of a fellow passenger in an elevator, the whispered gossip passed around by colleagues, the smell of coffee coming from a vendo machine, the flirtatious office mate who eyes him with interest, and yes, even facial expressions, gestures, posture, all happen to be glimpses that have a variety of possibilities for fiction. Ordinarily, a person will just ignore these normal life events but they can mean much more for a writer. There is also the danger of forgetting and setting aside important details due to the number of things that a writer sees and thinks about. The other aspects of his life which do not involve writing such as his role as employee, brother, boyfriend, etc. also get in the way. What the writer has to do now is to choose from these glimpses what interests him, which has more meaning to him, and what he intends to develop as a full story. Although every glimpse of human experience is already a story in itself, there are still many things that surround a particular “glimpse” that are concealed or hidden from the writer. It is his job to make them come out in the narrative.

Everyday a writer catches a glimpse of a fleeting and ephemeral human experience. These could be people, places, events, incidents, situations, actions, etc. This explosion of possibilities is filtered by the writer by selecting from said human experiences his subject matter. A story is actually a glimpse of a glimpse. When perusing the writer’s work, the reader is given a glimpse of life and experience which is elaborated and examined by the writer. But there are occasions when the writer utilizes his imagination for ideas for stories, but even these ideas about characters and situations have a sense of realness to them since they are mostly about the human condition. At this point, the present writer is bent on writing about real people and the various concerns that beset them.

Writing a story is a form of “seeing.” The writer can be exposed to many incidents and experiences, but he cannot see (or hear or feel or experience) all of them at the same time. He may have to disregard some incidents and focus or highlight others. Aside from his senses that provide him with images and information, the writer’s mind also “sees” and processes the things that he encounters everyday. It

is impossible for a writer to write everything about life, or his and other people's experiences, whether real, inspired by or imagined. This glimpse allows him to see or perceive an incident or situation in a different light or at various angles. The present writer's stories are the "glimpses" he culled from human experience which he has probably selected or chosen arbitrarily, subjectively or by setting certain criteria or standards. His stories also contain other incidents and situations - those that may have assaulted the writer's senses, which contribute to the development of the story. The writer has chosen from the innumerable incidents or situations he has encountered and developed them into full-fledged short stories.

In the context of this paper, "to see" can mean many things such as to perceive by the eye, to discern mentally and comprehend, to behold or to view, to find out or ascertain, to experience, to prefer in a specified condition and even to imagine. The writer puts himself into all of the aforementioned states of "seeing" when he finds a subject matter worth writing about. This also implies that a writer is able to see through a seemingly ordinary, everyday circumstance. The many other things that the writer has taken a glimpse of also find their way into his fiction and utilized as major and minor details, which could in themselves, be stories that possess narrative qualities. For example in *Thicker than Any Circumstance*, the writer includes Marco, the major character in his other story *Kissing the Dead* as Ritchie's love interest. In the former, Marco becomes a minor character as the author goes back to his teenage years as a high school student, which he did not do in *Kissing the Dead*.

This act of seeing also involves distilling those snatches of human encounters that could be separated from the multi-variegated experiences and eventually made into a story. It is not sufficient for the writer to simply "see." He needs to possess the power to observe acutely and accurately, to put together experiences that may have some connection to each other. When the writer observes, he develops a montage of details in his mind that somehow fall into their right places in the course of writing the story. For instance, when this writer started writing *Bliss*, he was merely inspired by a particular personal experience - his mobile phone being stolen by someone he knows, but the other details found in the story came elsewhere. For example, his frequent trip to Quiapo provided him with a realistic backdrop for his story. Quiapo is just one jeepney ride away from the university where he teaches. In Quiapo, he gets to buy rare finds from thrift shops like out-of-print CDs, walk down the narrow, dirty, and urine smelling streets, observe barkers entice possible customers to watch male or female dancers go all the way, witness gays who work in beauty shops entice young boys to have sex with them, see street urchins who seem to have no cares in the world, recognize peddlers selling dust-and-smoke covered street food, notice uniformed students in the University belt smoking cigarettes, sight an old woman who screams that the world is about to end, catch lovers leaving motels, etc. The present writer has also made a few friends in Quiapo who tell him exciting stories about the place,

giving him a second-hand “glimpse” of the various forms of negotiations that happen in the historic area. The present writer has immersed himself into the snot and grime of the locale. This regular trip to Quiapo provided him with a rich space for his character Tony to find “love” in one of the most unstable and unsettling places in the metropolis. The rapid exchange between buyer and seller, the negotiation between prostitute/pimp and prospective client, and the “economic” relationship a thief and victim have, etc. are common occurrences that the present writer has witnessed. He was able to see, hear, smell, taste and feel how it is to immerse oneself in a place like Quiapo. To observe can also mean to watch closely, to look at something attentively, to scrutinize as well as to see and to note and to make sense of other people’s stories like a scientist examining something for a scientific purpose. In observing, the writer gives the situation or incident a more “lingering” look for his material to take shape.

The writing process does not end with mere observation. It is imperative for a writer to focus or to “zoom in” on his subject matter after the observation phase. He makes his material, subject matter, details and the narrative, in a way “cosmetic-ready for an extreme close-up.” This redounds to “focus,” where the writer puts together all the strategies, techniques and devices he utilized in writing his story. The present writer acknowledges that zooming in on his chosen material requires, for instance, certain details to be more pronounced and highlighted to emphasize irony, contrast, contradiction, a value, an earth-shattering discovery, a realization, a new feeling, a strange occurrence, an important point, etc. For instance, in *The Heart of Need*, the priest’s mobile phone which constantly reappears in the story is a pivotal object that will cause the major character’s misery; the fake mohair sofas in the coffee shop signify the fakeness of the “romance” that the lead character has in her mind; the orange tempura sauce that stains the priest’s white shirt is conclusive of his malicious intentions. The writer has zoomed in on these significant details to reveal characters and their motives and intentions. In *These Memories Provide*, the writer highlights the long taxi ride the narrator experiences to emphasize the many years he hasn’t seen his high school friends. The character feeling a sense of urgency to get to his alma mater shows how he has missed his friends. In *Thicker than Any Circumstance*, the present writer highlights Madonna and her album “Like A Prayer.” The writer zoomed in on the lines of songs that accurately depict the traumatic incident experienced by the protagonist. Zooming in on important details allows the writer to get really close to his material and the reader to get more “personal” with the actual story like some secret shared between writer and reader.

Finally, in the act of writing, the writer opens a “window” to some fictional reality which allows the reader to enter that narrative providing him with a “glimpse” of people’s lives and the possibility of probing deeper into human condition. The story “ready for viewing” develops a life of its own as it discourses and examines the “choice” made by the writer.

Fusions in Fiction

The concept of “fusions” may have been developed by Percy B. Shelley. In his landmark critical essay “In Defence of Poetry,” Shelley declares that the best poets “borrow,” that there is nothing really original anymore. But the concept of borrowing for Shelley means that the poet must present whatever it is that he has borrowed in a new light in a way that has not been done before by other writers. The post-structuralists say something similar by positing that everything is a trace of a trace of a trace, which echoes again the concept of borrowing and presenting the borrowed material or idea in a fresher way, giving it a new twist. The present writer utilized the very concept of fusions as the meat of his poetics since his work is an amalgam of his own strategies as well as the strategies and approaches used by other writers that influenced him as a fiction writer.

The present writer acknowledges Paz Marquez Benitez who said that *All real writing is autobiographical* (Alegre & Fernandez, 1984). The idea of having models in one’s mind before creating characters actually work and serves as some sort of springboard to developing characters. These models are, of course, people he knows personally, people who live in his neighborhood, those he got the chance to be acquainted with, and those he encountered only by chance. It is also possible to put together the different character traits of people and make them all reside in one character. Some of the characters he created – Tony, the ordinary looking chap in *Bliss*; Miranda, the woman who fell madly in love with a handsome priest in *The Heart of Need*; Marco, the gorgeous macho dancer in *Kissing the Dead*; Arthur, the idealistic teacher in *The Lost Season*; Phoebe, the shallow college student who thinks that being beautiful is the most important thing in life in *The Art of Neglect*; Ritchie, the gay teenager who is a big Madonna fan in *Thicker Than Any Circumstance*; the teachers who find fault in the administration in *The Shadows of Sorrow*; Jeric, the tired office employee who sees nothing redeeming in his everyday existence in *A Convenient Fantasy* and the taxi driver who has to live with the boring routine of his day job in *Soon Before The Sun*, came alive in the stories because the writer had models when he created them. In other words, the characters and their experiences in the short stories are partly based on real people and incidents. Joyce Carol Oates reinforces this theory by saying that *Reality was the province of adults. To enter that reality, to find a way in, she read books*. She was particularly influenced by the poem “After Apple Picking” by Robert Frost, because Oates realized that *experiences of our domestic, seemingly ordinary lives could be transmuted into worthy art* (2003).

But more importantly, the writer is not totally cognizant of the fact that when he creates a character or narrator, it becomes a device to make them serve as his mouthpiece to say whatever he wants to say as well to guard himself from any intrusion. Fiction writing is always “confessional” making it autobiographical. Shammas (1988) says something about the “autobiographical” component of fiction or any kind of writing that writing boils down to memory and imagination *being the*

respective tools of the storyteller and the novelist. Ophelia Dimalanta when asked whether her works are autobiographical, she answered “Aren’t they all?” which further gives shape to the autobiographical nature of literary works.

In the writer’s experience, the characters come first before the incidents when he writes stories. Just like Bienvenido Santos who said that “characters always come first before the plot or the locale. He weaves it around character. He doesn’t think of plots. He thinks of what happens to certain persons and try to see if he could identify with their predicaments” (Alegre & Fernandez, 1984). But unlike Santos who admitted that he did not remember anymore who among his characters were based on real people and who were not, the present writer clearly remembers who his models were and those who were not based on real people. The rest, particularly the details, are mostly fictional just like the mannish Mother Superior who resembles a bulldog and her extremely masculine office in *The Lost Season*; Maritess, the pretty chinky-eyed girl and Tony believing that he is actually *chinito* in “Bliss;” Rock Hard Bar, the posh gay nightspot in *Kissing the Dead*. But everything in the stories – the characters, incidents, details – just like other stories, will always have a semblance of realness to them because they depict typical human experiences and encounters which the writer may have encountered or heard about in one way or the other. Merlinda Bobis illustrates how she creates characters:

I make a note of what I should observe: faces, physique, landscape, ways of talking and gestures. A writer must not only gather facts, but also their texture: how they are delivered by the subject. The texture might turn out to be even more relevant than the facts.

(2004:14)

Bobis also added that *the writer must engage in hours of honest listening when making decisions about voice, especially in creating the perfect register of characters. How they should speak should be consistent with their age, class, nationality, nature, attitudes, and mannerisms, not only for truthful characterization, but to assist the reader in character recognition. The language of the character must be peculiar to his location. Personality is revealed through language; character is revealed through language.* (2004:14) This writer made sure that this basic rule of consistency is followed. For example, in *The Lost Season*, Arthur is described apropos to his stature as a newly-appointed university administrator and college professor:

Arthur fixed the microphone before he spoke. He would propose conferences on special disciplines in the future. If his proposal would merit the approval of the nuns in the audience, it was going to be the first ever national conference held at St. Peter’s University. Arthur explained to the audience how it was going to work – the call for papers in July, the mileage the university would have in the academic arena, the benefits the faculty members would get when they presented their papers, the prestige the institution would

have when they invited big names in the field, the people and the offices that would be involved, the conference that would happen in November, the possible regular holding of conferences in the university if the first one succeeded. He ended his talk considering the amount that would be needed to finance the project. Arthur did not buckle. He spoke in clear English. He was confident. He knew that his project was important and relevant. An academic institution must be known for its intellectual pursuits. It was the just right time since the University would be celebrating a milestone very soon. The University people had to think big.

Bienvenido Santos said that storytelling “is about taking risks, like a tightrope walker.” There is always this danger of going overboard and to tell the story, the writer had to take risks.” He proposes that writers should not to be too conscious about technique like the use of symbolism because if they were they would not be able to write. To Santos, the best symbols were those that are a part of the story (Alegre & Fernandez, 1984). This dictum rings true in this writer’s stories. For instance, a number of this present writer’s stories are “long” because he pays loving attention to details. This rigid attention paid to details is probably what Santos meant when he said something about writers going overboard. The use of symbols in stories is not something that is thought out consciously; it is something that happens naturally in the course of writing the story. It is like the associations made between objects and what they stand for in the symbolic sense that flow naturally even automatically while writing the story. It is not like this writer stops to “overthink” about symbolism. For example, in *Bliss*, the Beatles’ song that was playing while Tony was getting ready for his first real date says something about the unspoken desire of the character to love and be loved. The choice of song was automatic or sort of “just happened” maybe because the writer just happens to know by heart almost all of the songs of the Beatles. The second-hand articles sold at Mr. Lonely, Inc., a shop Tony frequents, speak of his plainness and uselessness in the love department. The neckties sold at the *Ukay Ukay* reveal Maritess’ uselessness in Tony’s life. Like neckties which are pretty to look at but have very little function in one’s apparel except for its value as ornament, Maritess, Tony’s object of affection, is also pretty, but she is someone he doesn’t need in his life. Likewise, his affinity with second-hand things also symbolizes his acceptance of his plight that the only women he could go to bed with are prostitutes who work in seedy beer gardens, who, like second-hand goods, have been used by other owners and sold to anyone who thinks they have some kind of use. Also, the white shirt worn by Fr. Walter in the story *The Heart of Need* symbolizes his supposed purity as a man of God, but when the orange tempura sauce accidentally stains his immaculately white shirt, Miranda sees clearly for the first time his less-than-pure motives. The stupid animal characters in the cartoon TV program Arthur was watching while waiting for the dreaded interview in *The Lost Season* symbolize the shallowness of the whole institution, and that there is something cartoonish about people even those who are a

part of the academe. The lines from Madonna's songs from the album "Like a Prayer" provide the reader with a stark picture of what Ritchie is actually going through emotionally and sexually in the story *Thicker than Any Circumstance*.

Abercio Rotor and his fellow writers *went for the classical definition of what a short story should be. There should be conflict, build up, denouement, etc.* (Alegre & Fernandez, 1984) which is a formalist tenet the present writer followed when he wrote his first few stories. In a number of the stories he has written, his characters experience a moment of illumination. This moment is usually found towards the end of the story where the characters discover something new or something they haven't seen before but has been there all along or an old awareness has been heightened. For example, that part where Miranda sees the orange stain on Fr. Walter's shirt in *The Heart of Need* is an important moment for her to finally realize that the man she loves may be a priest by profession, but she sees in the end that his intentions and motives are far from pure and that like the white shirt that could be easily soiled, Fr. Walter is after all just a man who led her on and took advantage of her feelings for him. Marco, the macho dancer in *Kissing the Dead* confronts the pathetic truth when towards the end of the story he is able to justify the necessity of his job which is sex for money. He realized that perhaps he is doing something worthwhile when his daughter thanks him with so much joy for the toys he gives her. Marco makes that personal stand not to deprive his daughter of simple joys even if it means selling his body. Arthur in *The Lost Season* ends up disillusioned when his fellow administrators choose a ridiculous school activity over his proposal. He witnesses how his colleagues are transformed into something cartoonish when they howl and scream at the thought of wearing Disney costumes in the institution's biggest event. He discovers that there is ironically more room for shallowness and stupidity in an academic institution. Another is Phoebe in *The Art of Neglect* whose effort to transform herself from plain Jane to campus beauty is put to waste when she finally confronts the painful truth that a more naturally beautiful girl in school, instantly and without much effort, gets the attention of the university's star basketball player Phoebe desperately wants to date. There is also Ritchie in *Thicker than Any Circumstance* who finds a deeper meaning in his love for his favorite pop star, Madonna, whose songs are incidentally playing at the time he experiences his unplanned but momentous sexual awakening.

Henry James, another writer who emphasized the importance of form and craft, posited in his landmark essay "The Art of Fiction" that fiction must be organic – that everything that a writer puts in his work must be necessary and functional. He believes that fiction must observe the laws of precision, proportion, and exactness in terms of execution; that the details are not just borne out of the writer's whim. Instead, details are pivotal to making every part of the story work. In other words, organic unity in a literary work means that its parts mutually support each other, contributing to making the story one cohesive whole (James, 1956). In a similar vein, Merlinda Bobis (2004) advises writers not to use image arbitrarily, only because it

is beautiful or shocking. It must be integral to the narrative. She said that *image is of the flesh. It is what makes any writing real and present. It is at every warp and weft of the story. If the novel is an architectural structure, then perhaps image is not only one of its main bolts, but also the little screws that hold the structure together.* On the other hand, Joyce Carol Oates (2003), the poet and fictionist, adds that *since writing is ideally a balance between the private vision and the public world, the one passionate and inchoate, the other formally constructed, quick to categorize and assess, it's necessary to think of this art as craft. Without craft, art remains private. Without art, craft is merely hackwork.*

In *Bliss*, Quiapo as a space is an important detail in the story. Quiapo Church is a place where people go to pray. There are those who walk on their knees when they ask God for special favors. Ironically, there are also people inside the church, usually women, called *mandadasal*, whom you can pay to pray for you. Around Quiapo Church, there are a number of fortune tellers, pimps, male and female prostitutes walking around eyeing potential customers, street urchins, dirty children getting high on rugby, pickpockets, hold-uppers, drug pushers, swindlers, seedy motels, stalls that sell pirated CDs and DVDs, shops that sell second hand and stolen goods as well as smut magazines, vibrators and rubber vaginas, rundown theaters that feature old sex flicks which also serve as a haven for sexual predators, urine-smelling beerhouses that feature girls who go all the way and *torohan* (live sex) sessions, mobile carts that sell street food like barbecue, fish balls, squid balls, *tukneneng* (hard boiled egg wrapped in flour), banana cue, crispy chicken skin, etc. In Quiapo, faith, cult, commerce, crime and fornication seem to coexist harmoniously.

All of the aforementioned practices contribute to the odd and interesting personality of Quiapo. It is also an overpopulated district but ironically, the presence of many people, contributes more to its impersonal character. Every form of dealing or transaction is fast and rapid like what happens between thief and victim, seller and buyer, prostitute and customer, or a more complex cycle that involves thief-victim-buyer-seller and back again.

In the story *Bliss*, Tony is just one of the many who goes to Quiapo who willingly participates in some of the fleeting transactions that happen there. He buys cheap stuff from Mr. Lonely, Inc., a shop manned by a solitary old man that sells second-hand and probably stolen goods, like the shiny cell phone he bought which was later on stolen by Maritess, the pretty girl who also becomes a temporary inhabitant of Quiapo. The wasted and washed-up character of Quiapo appropriately situates the two characters because they, too, had their share of painful experiences. Like Quiapo, there is nothing special or heroic about Tony except probably his finally taking one more shot at love. He is like many others who exist but remain invisible to the world. His acceptance of his ordinariness is both medicine and malediction – a blessing and a curse. Although, his acceptance of reality saves him from catastrophe, it is also tinged with a sense of resignation. To have big dreams, to strive harder and to

do something better have already eluded him. He lives in a box-like rented room and owns only a few things. Paying low-class prostitutes to have sex with him provides access to the kind of love available to losers like him. Maritess, on the other hand, can be likened to the rare find one discovers in Quiapo like those brand-new looking cameras, mobile phones and telescopes, out-of-print compact discs and collector's items like the *Playboy* magazine with the Techie Agbayani centerfold. Nobody has an idea where they came from; one just finds them proudly displayed in glass cases announcing their availability and evident extinction making them quite attractive to buyers and collectors. Their history is only unfolded when the shop's owner tells the customer who sold them to him and why the original owners sold them, which usually becomes interesting conversation between seller and buyer. Maritess tells her life story to Tony. Whether her story is true, partly true or merely her fantasy production, those are the only things that Tony knows about her and he accepts them without question or doubt.

The same holds true with the details the writer has chosen for his story *Thicker than Any Circumstance*. Ritchie and his friends' fascination for pop music, pop divas and MTV clearly depicts that fan stage/phase in a gay teenager's life. They fiercely defend and argue incessantly about their favorite artists. The aforementioned images and details speak of the characters' innocence and youth. It is also in this particular phase when idol worship for pop stars becomes more pronounced. But Ritchie's love for Madonna, as well as the lyrics of the songs from her most controversial album "Like a Prayer," foreshadows the events that are about to happen to him. Using Madonna as an image is necessary. First, because she is the most sexually provocative female celebrity of any generation putting sex in the forefront, shamelessly flaunting her sexuality, providing various feminist and sex discourses for critical study and serving as an icon for the gay community. Second, her album "Like a Prayer" contains the artist's most confessional and sexually provocative lyrics which this writer utilized to serve as the ideal atmosphere for the shock and wonder of a young gay man's sexual initiation. And third, the story is set in the eighties. In other words, every detail the writer chooses to integrate in the story must serve a purpose and must mean something. This adherence to details is the writer's commitment to form.

Generally, when we talk about details in fiction, Silko (1991) forwards that *when one is telling a story, and one is using words to tell the story, it could not be helped that each word that one is speaking has a story of its own, too. Often the speakers or tellers will go into these word-stories, creating an elaborate structure of stories-within-stories*. In other words, the details are actually by themselves stories.

Francisco Arcellana believes 100% that a writer cannot operate without a muse; that the writer has to be in love to be able to write, and that's the only way one can get to a story – the only way (Alegre & Fernandez, 1984). This commitment might be true in the case of poetry, but T.S. Eliot debunked this idea a long time ago in his

essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” where he stated that poetry is first and foremost art. This confirmation led to the formalist dictum - *first, think the poem, then feel the poem* (Eliot, 1920). NVM Gonzalez applied this dictum in his fiction where he exercises total control (Dalisay, 2004).

To this writer, inspiration is not an issue of importance, because in his case, writing a story starts with a germ of an idea beginning with a character he has in mind followed by the incidents or situations. It is deleterious to rely on love-induced inspiration and other forms of romantic musings because they may never come, and if they do, the writer might be consumed totally by what he feels and not bother to write anymore. He agrees more with what the poet and fictionist Joyce Carol Oates said about inspiration; that to be inspired is to *be filled suddenly and often helplessly with renewed life and energy, a sense of excitement that can barely be contained; that a word, a glance, a scene glimpsed from a window, a random memory, a fragrance, a conversational anecdote, a fragment of music, or of a dream can have the power to stimulate us to intense creativity.* (Oates, 2003)

This writer also echoes what Ricaredo Demetillo said that some of his works “seem to have been dictated from heaven.” After writing, he finds that it’s practically a finished thing. There is something almost mystical, and with regard to his experiences as a writer, he didn’t go into ecstasies, the writing itself is the ecstasy. The present writer’s experience involves getting lost in the act of writing that he often gets surprised with the finished work. It is like there is something about the present conscious state, all the things stored in the brain, the creative imaginings and the seemingly unconscious articulation of what is in the subconscious that fuse to produce a good story. This action is perhaps what Demetillo was talking about. He likewise says that “literary devices are all up to the minute and that he is not conscious of the objective-correlative when he writes because he lets his feelings dictate what he wants to do.” Joyce Carol Oates forwards a similar theory:

The unique power of the unconscious is that it leads us where it will and not where we might will to go. As dreams cannot be controlled, so the flowering of any work cannot be controlled except in its most minute aspects. When one finds the “voice” of a novel, the “voice” becomes hypnotic, ravishing, utterly inexplicable. From where does it come? Where does it go? So the familiar notion of a “demonic” art: the reverse in a sense of Plato’s claim for its divine origin – yet in another sense identical. Something not us inhabits us; something insists upon speaking through us (84).

In her book “A Novel-in-Waiting: Towards a Creative Research: Towards Writing Fiction,” Merlinda Bobis echoes a similar idea for writing fiction:

I wanted to pave the road, so it could offer her a safe passage.
But the narratives and characters, who eventually took charge

of their lives, kept pulling her towards different directions. Utter chaos. Only when I gave into these other callings did I recover her sense of order. Finally I trusted her characters and allowed the pre-determined road to go hang. I took time following these self-directed characters in their strange and circuitous routes. I am convinced that the novel developed into a richer text, because she had responded in the spirit of diversity. She advises that writers can launch themselves into diverse directions, but they are always moored *back* (8).

When the present writer writes, feelings, not mush, find their way into his story which gives the story its “lump-in-the-throat” quality. Joyce Carol Oates likewise encourages writers to write their heart out and to never be ashamed of their subject and of their passion for their subject. She says that the writer’s “forbidden” passions are likely to be the fuel for their writing. The present writer took all these valuable advice to heart.

According to Joyce Carol Oates (2003), *the so-called creative impulse begins in childhood, when we were all enthusiastic artists*. She recounts her earliest reading experiences were in the Webster’s dictionary and being fascinated with words, but she related that her early creative experiences evolved not from printed books, but from coloring books. She further adds that *there are two primary influences in a writer’s life: those influences that come so early in childhood, they seem to soak into the very marrow of our bones and to condition our interpretation of the universe thereafter; and those that come a little later, when we are old enough to exercise some control of our environment and our response to it, and have begun to be aware not only of the emotional power but the strategies of art*.

The present writer cites some early memories that led to his becoming a writer. As an asthmatic nine-year old kid in the late seventies, he stared lovingly at long-playing album covers which to him seemed like a better prospect than playing outside with the neighborhood children that smelled of sun and sweat. The Beatles’ serious young faces half-hidden by darkness held some kind of special mystery to him. This writer’s mother, his biggest influence, was a big music lover. To him, listening to records was the real deal, much better than simply looking at album jackets or watching Combat or Tarzan on TV. The quadrosonic playing loud music every five in the afternoon after school and almost the whole day during weekends were quite a normal occurrence in the house. Unlike television that provided its viewers everything, leaving nothing to the imagination, the stereo in the living room allowed “imaginings” of all kinds. There were song titles that already gave clues as to what the songs were trying to say but there were those that made you ponder because the lyrics seemed to be saying something else. They were quite unfathomable at that time. Knowing what certain songs meant took some more years, a little maturity, and listening to them on a regular basis.

Newstands back then sold a pocket-size song magazine called “song hits” that could be carried around. The ultimate joy was copying in a notebook the lyrics of favorite songs found in those song hits. This activity did not pose a problem since there was always an endless supply of pad paper and notebooks in the house. It was also fun making lists of favorite records, favorite singers, favorite albums, and many other favorites and bests. More importantly, copying songs in a notebook also made possible the close examination and interpretation of lyrics; it also made memorizing songs much easier. Although it was quite unusual for a nine-year old kid to be doing, creating possible song/album titles and lyrics (no matter how juvenile) and writing them down was a blissful task. It was fascinating to put words together, to see how they work as song titles, and to say them again and again savoring the word combinations glide and warble in one’s tongue. One particular song the present writer wrote was “Delightful Days” which was about a young boy and his crush at school. This song was probably inspired by those slum books that queried about the giddiness one felt for someone. The first few lines were something like:

I like you
 I think you like me too
 You’re seated there
 I’m just here
 Delightful Days
 Are all about you
 My A & M, my 8 & 9

The A and M stood for the initials while the numbers eight and nine stood for the number of letters of the object of the boy’s attention’s first and last name. A downright corny idea in that era when slum books presented numerous possibilities for friends and classmates to keep on guessing who your secret crush who was partly revealed by those numbers and initials. The other words in the song have been mostly forgotten. The other “songs” mostly had the “I am here, you are there” theme that most kids loved. The Beatles’ “If I Fell” and “Good Day Sunshine” were inspirations.

One birthday was particularly memorable because of the portable blue phonograph gift from his mother. Donna Summer and Teri de Sario’s singles had their round of regular spins as well as “Grease” and “Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band” (the soundtrack of the motion picture, not the Beatles classic original). Donna Summer’s “I Feel Love” was the first 45 rpm that signified a form of ownership. The writer’s mother had it scotch-taped on the blue phonograph as its companion piece. The song was amazing despite its simple lyrics which consisted of cooing and “ooohing.” It was played repeatedly in the house. Its pulsating and throbbing beats were intoxicating. It was only when the song was played a few times side by side with “Love to Love to You Baby” and “Hot Stuff” that the endless moaning, whispering and gasping took on some meaning. The discovery of sex in music was more fulfilling than seeing two people making love on TV. The words, rhythm, and soundscapes

contributed to the overall effect and they could be listened to on the quadrosonic and phonograph (when alone) over and over again unlike the cavorting images on TV that were ephemeral and fleeting. Donna Summer was doing her part already. That was a life-changing moment.

Listening to records developed one's "feel" for things. This is a very important aspect in writing. It may sound absurd, but writing becomes easier, almost second nature, when there's music playing in the background. The words seem to flow more naturally than let's say when it's quiet or when the TV is on. *Bliss* was written while listening to a lot of sad albums. The other story *Kissing the Dead* was written while listening to Prince, Madonna, Nine Inch Nails, Sophie B. Hawkins, Deborah Harry, Usher and Jody Watley. *The Heart of Need* was a product of regular listening to heartbreaking songs. The short story *The Lost Season* had for its company Bob Dylan, Marilyn Manson, and Patti Smith. For the present writer, music serves as a springboard, a mood setter, an aphrodisiac. It speaks to the body, the reflexes, the mind and more importantly, the soul. The writer's mother had a lot to do with this musical intervention.

The writer's short stories are heavily steeped in popular culture, probably more than any other collection produced by a Filipino short story writer, past or present. Pop culture does not only serve as a necessary time marker that indicates the setting of the story, but it is also utilized to create more "culturally realistic" characters, images, details and atmosphere. Popular culture is also one very important aspect of post-modernity, if not its very lifeblood. In our current age, our existence and experience is highly mediated by the mass media, shopping malls, the internet, movies (theater exhibitions, DVD copies – whether original, pirated, illegally downloaded, streamed, etc), MTV, digital and recorded music, books, television programs, advertisements, video games, "one-stop-shop" mobile phones, billboards, glossy magazines, coffee shops, bars cum health spa cum pick-up joint cum restaurant, etc. These varied forms of popular culture are often dismissed as unnecessary and irrelevant since they do not really have much use *ironically* in the "cultural" sense. In other words, anything "pop" is not taken seriously. But there is no escaping popular culture; its impact and influence has become more potent and ubiquitous now than ever before. It figures prominently in everyday conversation and in the manner in which people project and (re)package themselves. We hear people say things that have a very close affinity with popular culture.

Popular culture can be a rich source of details and images which surprisingly can be elevated to the realm of the symbolic. The exciting and inevitable interplay between the art (and craft) of fiction and popular culture provides not only a rich and ambient texture to the stories, but also a multi-tiered perspective which is like having two different, and in some ways, opposing worlds – the controlled and the fragmented - on the same plane.

The present writer has situated in his fiction The Beatles, horror movies, Madonna, iPods and walkmans, Jeff Buckley, Cameron Diaz, soap operas, Starbucks, magazine covers, Debby Harry, Prince, cartoon programs, Disney characters, cosmetics, shopping malls, movies and theaters, Playboy magazines, Tetchie Agbayani, Game and Watch and Pacman games, Katy Perry, Rayban sunglasses, radio programs, etc. in such symbolic contexts which do not only further reinforce and heighten what they originally stand for but also making them major details, giving them a new level of meaning.

Henry James said that he listened avidly to dinner table conversations. He has learned the art of keeping still, to listen, to hear, to be overheard, a lot of gossip tales but he did not want to be told everything; *he didn't want his imagination contaminated by mere factual truth* (Oates, 2003:76). Eudora Welty experienced something similar to what James did which was *hearing week after week, the most amazing things said in her local story the writer effaces herself completely and allow the voices to speak* (Oates, 2003:78-79). The present writer also gets a lot of ideas for his stories from actual conversations he had with people and from conversations he overheard. There is so much out there in conversations for writers. This does not mean that the writer has to make an effort to eavesdrop. The present writer, for instance, has engaged in a lot of conversations with people from all walks of life, and has overheard even more accidentally and incidentally when he eats in restaurants, while walking in the school corridor, inside the jeepney, MRT, LRT and the faculty room, shopping in the mall, office and faculty meetings, high school reunions and get-togethers, etc. The story *Shadows of Sorrow* plays like a recorded piece of conversation where hard-working and oppressed college teachers talk about their frustrations in a bar, lashing out their superiors for power-tripping, playing politics, their bad decisions, biases, favoritism, and stupidity. The writer has heard snatches of similar rants from fellow teachers who feel the same way about their immediate superiors. The memoir-like *These Memories Provide* is about high-school reunion and watching regularly his batch mates' weekly basketball game. The bits of stories he heard from his classmates served as the germ that inspired the writing of the story. Similarly, the story *The Art of Neglect* has been somewhat inspired by the foolish and often retarded exchange by teenagers, particularly their obsessive preoccupation with their youth and looks as if they are the most interesting and important things in the world. The character Phoebe represents this generation of young, self-absorbed girls whose main concern in life is to flip their hair, check whether there are boys ogling at them, and exchange stupid banter with their friends.

The first few stories written by the present writer were obviously influenced by Formalism in which a short story must have only one major character who experiences the epiphany/denouement/key moment, which is more popularly known as moment of illumination. It is important to note where the present writer is coming from. His background and training involved being taught Formalism by

teachers and by being exposed to the works of writers who were all staunch advocates of form and craft where everything a writer puts in a story must have some kind of significance and function. He also learned from his teachers that a writer must pay loving attention to details where every part must mutually support each other. This is the primary reason why the writer was more “conscious” of form, always thinking in terms of structure, climax, key moment, etc, and following or complying strictly with the tenets of formalism. But he also believes that a writer must free himself from what he calls a “convenient crutch” and Formalism has provided him with that crutch from which to create characters, choose details and symbols, and think of the exact place in the story for the key moment. After a few of attempts to write stories guided by formalistic template, the present writer realized that following a particular approach or style religiously can also become tiresome, repetitive, and boring. Although the present writer genuinely expresses his sincerest gratitude to and great admiration for his mentors who taught him how to write in the “formalistic way,” writing a story in the same way over and over again has become very mechanical, no longer presenting a challenge and it likewise does not allow one’s art to move forward, and more interestingly, in different directions. Every budding writing goes through that stage of trying to follow the footsteps of their favorite writers and he does this by imitating their writing style. Even the great Filipino short story writers admitted they tried to imitate the writers that they read, but eventually they found their own voice and style as they continued writing and eventually they became more relaxed with their art. It is to the writer’s advantage to explore new possibilities, try various approaches, and experiments in order that he may be able to expand his art and not to be confined only to the strategies that he has been used to. He must go out of his comfort zone to test his mettle as a writer.

The Writer’s Critical Position

The present writer is currently situated at a time when excessive relativism and plurality of ideas thrive. The post-modern ideology has already seeped into mainstream culture. The writer has observed one thing unique about the nation today is that despite the post-modern condition and temperament that characterize the present time, the fantasy and fiction of “grand narratives” continue to create a dynamic interplay involving all sorts of contradictions. Some instances include holy masses held in shopping malls which contradicts the Christian idea that faith and commerce should not be in the same place at the same time because one becomes only a coincidence of the other; the presence of fortune tellers, merchants that sell pirated DVDs, CDs, talismans, and all sorts of exotic herbal concoctions to induce menstruation or for the purpose of abortion, and flesh traders strategically situated around a historic church; the existence of hyper-realities such as shopping malls, technologically amusement parks, activity centers, and cyber shops that attempt to approximate the concept of the ideal metropolis.

The Filipinos' physical senses and daily experiences are highly mediated and regularly assaulted by these hyper-realities. It is in this particular context that the present writer locates his fiction. Fredric Jameson echoes that this experience is termed postmodernism which *names a historical period, not just a new style or aesthetic. As modernism was a result of the imperial stage of capitalism, so postmodernism is the distinctive "ideology of for" of the contemporary period of consumer capitalism.* He further argues that postmodernism works exhibit a wide range of distinctive features such as pastiche, simulation and "hyperspace" (Jameson 1991). The present writer writes stories that do not only depict current realities but also a product of the times where characters are greatly influenced by cultural discourses perpetuated by the media. These are story settings that reveal the present fragmented spaces, situations, and incidents echo the multi-directional and patchwork-like experiences whether actually lived, created, imagined, or brought about by powerful forces and super structures.

This pre-determined condition translates into complex narratives exclusive and distinct only to those who inhabit the third-world sphere. The present writer draws from the complexity and unsettling character of the third world experience to properly situate his fiction. He is confronted with the challenge to extract from strategically-scattered, ubiquitously-fragmented, and pastiche-like views, perspectives, experiences, and exchanges, which constitute an entirely different milieu compared to that of the first-and-second generation writers. It is this complex context that the present writer locates his voice, delineates the politics of his fiction, and validates his position as a writer writing in a hyper-real world, a fitting description of the present times. It is in this context that the writer portrays the lives of the characters in his stories. The authenticity of his voice emanates from going against the very nature of his milieu. Despite the influence of post-modernism, the present writer puts his message across clearly in his stories. The purpose is to put or to actually "push" sense and order in what seems to be just snatches of life or explosions of experiences. Anything post-modern defies form, structure, order, or pattern. Post-modern fiction is a break from the straight narrative in which a writer can do almost everything to tell his story such as incorporate newspaper articles, journal entries, recorded conversations, music lyrics, slogans, archival material, comic strips, etc. It is also possible for the post-modern writer to shift from contemporary language to something that is reminiscent of the Victorian era. But the present writer does the exact opposite. Instead of utilizing post-modern techniques and devices to depict a post-modern experience, he examines with loving detail every part of his story. There is a strong desire to still be understood even if the world out there renders a galaxy of meanings and possibilities. The post-modern condition is clearly delineated in contemporary Filipino experience and this is found in the writer's stories. For example, in *Bliss*, the major character's existence is highly mediated by commercial establishments, cultural productions, the mass media and pop culture. He tries to

find love in the most unlikely of places. The space that he inhabits is a displaced center caught between historicity and moral decay. Today, even the idea of love is commodified in all sorts of ways. One can no longer “love” without the assistance coming from shopping malls, flower shops, movie houses, restaurants, chocolate factories, motels, etc. The aid that these establishments provide make love seem truer and more sincere. In *The Heart of Need*, the writer takes on a one-sided love story involving a female professor and a handsome priest, but more than that, the story looks into the shrewd and calculating negotiations and transactions behind the possibility of “getting” love. Miranda, the major character, writes the priest’s entire thesis to win his love. She is dead sure that no one will do something as heroic as making a priest finish his degree. She knows that she has the intelligence and the diligence to perform the herculean task. She is also aware that the priest possesses something (i.e. looks, sex, etc.) that she needs, and so she promises him a degree in the hope that she would win his love. The priest, on the other hand, is a scheming character who preys on Miranda’s ability and weakness by allowing her to write his Master’s thesis. The two characters come from two professions that require the most rigid of moral standards but they leave all that to the ground. Miranda and Fr. Walter’s story is happening today, with the number of priests leaving the priesthood to get married or priests having girlfriends and/or boyfriends is something that we hear about regularly.

The idea of having multiple identities is typical of the post-modern condition. In *Kissing the Dead*, Marco, the major character in the story, plays the role of good father and husband. He does his best to provide for them. But he is also the most sought-after macho dancer in Rock Hard Bar where he sells his body to paying customers. In his dance routines, he has taken numerous roles as pirate, sailor, police officer, rock star, school boy, barbarian, Flash Gordon, the Phantom of the Opera, roman soldiers and Lucifer to feed on customer’s fantasies. Those with money can take him out for a fleeting but joyous sexual encounter. In *Thicker Than Any Circumstance*, Ritchie, the gay teenager, has another life, one that has to do with his pop idol Madonna. The news that Madonna’s new album is already available in record bars preoccupies his mind even when he’s inside the classroom listening to the teacher’s lecture. His concentration is marred by the idea that he would finally get his hands on the album after class. Using the lyrics of Madonna’s songs to depict a harrowing sexual abuse has a tinge of the post-modern. Another important characteristic is the issue of image and how it prevails over substance which the writer examined in *Art of Neglect*. Phoebe, the lead character in the story, wallows in shallowness as she reinvents herself into a campus beauty. She surrounds herself with fashion magazines that inform her about the fashionable clothes to wear, the cosmetics to use, the beauty tips of pop singers and celebrities, how to behave in parties and when boys are around, etc. The present writer has observed that many young people today are merely preoccupied with basically the same concerns – hair

rebonding, body building, partying, the latest gadgets, etc., but they have no time to do well in their studies. Depth and substance have taken a backseat which is probably due to the many influences that distract the youth today.

On the other hand, the story *These Memories Provide* allows some familiarity as it plays on the usual nostalgia circuit – a high school get together where images of the past and the present collide. The yearning for the sweet and innocent past and the more “distant” present become the subject of the characters’ exchange. It is in get-togethers and reunions that the past become more familiar and memorable while the present is placed in some obscure place because adulthood besets people with numerous responsibilities and concerns.

Despair and disillusionment are the themes tackled in two stories with the academe as backdrop. In *The Lost Season*, Arthur, the newly-promoted administrator, discovers that many of his fellow administrators are far from being an intellectual like him. They choose a ridiculous activity over an academic one. The animal characters in the cartoon show he was watching in the Mother Superior’s office as well as its stupid plot foreshadows what Arthur would eventually think of his colleagues. In *Shadows of Sorrow*, university professors go to a bar to wallow in their misery which has something to do with the dirty politics being played in their department. The story is written like a recorded conversation as if the writer spied on a group of people, sat at a table near them, and recorded every bit of their conversation from a tape recorder. Their painful exchange is mediated by the things other people in the bar are saying and doing and the DVD film with a silly plot playing at the time they are actually in the bar.

A Convenient Fantasy and *Soon Before the Sun* depict the experience of the typical working class Filipino – overworked and underpaid, a victim of circumstances beyond their control. In the former, Jeric unwillingly does what his job requires without getting the right compensation. He is often tired from working overtime. The stress he undergoes is further aggravated by the slow service at a fastfood joint, the customers who cannot seem to make up their mind, the horrible and alarming news about the coming typhoon and the reproductive health bill on his pocket radio, the sight of two young boys scrounging for food in a garbage bin, and his aunt who is gotten pregnant by a much younger married man. In the latter, a taxi driver earns a few bucks to fend for his family. He encounters different types of passengers but it is the same monotonous experience everyday. He addresses their needs as the situation calls for it and earns extra money by providing momentary pleasure to a sex-starved passenger.

All the issues examined in the stories - the risk of falling in love with someone one hardly knows, the multi-layered negotiations regarding love, the concept of possessing multiple identities (light, dark, real and illusory), a celebrity-mediated

consciousness, the shallow and irrelevant priorities of the youth of today, the longing for the return of a happier times, the disillusionment in one's profession, and the Sisyphus-like existence of the working class which are all heightened and intensified by the present post-modern milieu are "glimpses" of the contemporary Filipino experience.

The next important question to ask is where the present writer is coming from. According to Wicomb (1987), in his essay "The Author's Agenda," the writer must address the political reality. For the present writer, issues concerning class, oppression, power – being a member of the working class subjected to institutional power define the present writer's subjectivity and location. After writing the stories, he discovered what kind of writer he was going to be.

The characters in the stories he has written serve as the present writer's mouthpiece which allows the writer to articulate his politics and subjectivities. The use of character as mouthpiece creates aesthetic distance for purposes of objectivity. There are people who have more access to power and this leads to various forms of oppression. And this happens because according to Head (1984), *human society is a narrow world, trapped to death in paltry evils and jealousies, and for people to know that there are thoughts and generosities wider and freer than their own can only be an enrichment to their lives*. The "oppressions" the present writer has experienced has led him to discover a powerful mode of resistance – to write fiction. There was a time when the present writer merely intended his stories to be tucked away in some musty place in his house, not to be completely revealed. Valenzuela (1985) said that *she is often curious about power and what this madness of power is all about. She claims that when she writes a book she attempts to get under the skin of those who covet power, who have it, or who believe in it. For her, power is exciting and terrifying at the same time*. For the present writer, abuse of power that leads to oppression is something that angers and provokes him. But despite these subjectivities, the present writer will not render himself voiceless even if Gayatri Spivak (1999) said that the sub-altern cannot speak. The stories in this collection will tackle issues as a form of protest which clearly gives shape to the writer's sub-alterity, which the writer also rebels against.

The present writer has to make judicious choices whether to bring out the craft or bring out the politics in his stories. The formalists constantly remind writers that craftsmanship, form, language, style, and approach are the be-all and end-all of literature, that form is the only objective criterion for a work to be considered literary. But there are also writers who disagreed with the formalists saying that writers have a social responsibility and must effect change in society through their writings. This brings us back to the famous debate involving Jose Garcia Villa and Salvador Lopez. Toni Morrison's novel "The Bluest Eye" reminds readers that art is socially constructed, that there is no realm of the imagination that is not acted

upon by reality (Hooks, 1990). But to the present writer, all craft redounds to narrow experience; all aesthetics gives the work no heart and soul. If it's all politics and social responsibility, the work becomes mere propaganda. The writer needs to strike a balance between the two. What happened was the present writer wrote the stories first and discovered that underneath his stories is his politics, which is subverted never overt. In other words, politics becomes the undercurrent. It has become a case of aesthetics subverting politics and politics informing aesthetics. As a writer, he does not have a ready agenda before he writes. But like everyone else, he writes from a political position which he is not aware of at the time that he wrote his stories. It was after writing the stories that he discovered his politics. The politics of the writer which is deeply rooted in his subjectivities is something previously unrecognized and unacknowledged; he realized later on that they were there all along, lying dormant and inactive in the innermost recesses of his being. This informs the present writer's writing just as his role or situation as teacher, lover, administrator, member of the working class or part of a dysfunctional family affects his writing. The agenda are simply stated, which according to Mukherjee (1988) *makes the familiar exotic, the exotic familiar*. The present writer eventually developed in his course of writing his true material – oppression in family relations, love, profession, the many difficulties as working class, etc. In other words, he saw himself and his experiences, in the words of Mukherjee, *refracted in a dozen separate lives*. Wicomb (1987) says that *to think in terms of fixing an agenda seems both hopelessly reductive and dangerous*.

The agenda did not come first. The writer wrote the stories first and in the process discovered his politics. Wicomb (1987) adds that usually the writer's first concern is aesthetics which requires him to write well before he becomes preoccupied with the "correct" subject matter." But all writing, whether it deals directly with the revolution or not, occupies a political position. He also said that *setting an agenda that bans certain subjects and prescribes others seems foolish, since it can generate only two categories of writers: the obedient who will slavishly follow agenda, and the disobedient, who will avoid it as a matter of principle*.

A review of the writing process through introspection made the present writer more aware of himself and his politics which leads to self-consciousness and self-reflexivity. As a writer, he becomes part of a group that assimilates the power of community which intensifies awareness about human struggles in his works inviting readers, fellow writers and society to think, feel, imagine and act together. The writer struggles to write something meaningful. He discovers that the minor – the unspoken, the unloved, the untold, the unacknowledged, actually constitute the major or revolutionary. Writing is a journey. In the process of writing, the present writer has come to know himself better. He has taken himself for granted for the longest time. It is now time for self-clarification. ■

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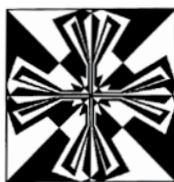
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