Notes

[1] From Joni Mitchell's *Turbulent Indigo* (1994)

[2] See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "The Madwoman in the Attic" (1980), in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998) Most theories were taken from this anthology. According to Gilbert and Gubar, men have forged "mythic masks... over her [a woman's] expressive face both to lessen their dread of her 'inconstancy' and by identifying her with the 'eternal types' they have themselves invented to possess her more thoroughly."

[3] See Simone de Beauvoir, "Myths: Of Women in Five Authors," in *Feminist Literary Criticism* p. 1087.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Cynthia Ozick, "Puttermesser Paired," in *Fictions*, ed. Joseph F. Trimmer and C. Wade Jennings, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994) p. 947-81.

[6] See Joni Mitchell site http:// www.jonimitchell.com/Vogue.html

[7] From Bourdieu, "Distinction," p. 1029.

[8] See Bakhtin, "Rabelais and His World," p. 46.

[9] The war on and of the canons is a highly controversial direction which literary criticism has wisely taken.

[10] From Rivkin and Ryan, "Feminist Paradigms" p. 530.

[11] From http://jonimitchell.com/TroubleChildPart1.html

[12] From Elizabeth Meese, "When Virginia Looked at Vita, What Did She See; Or, Lesbian : Feminist : Woman - What's the Differ(e/a)nce?," in *Feminisms*, p. 468

[13] Boris Eichenbaum, "Introduction to the Formal Method." Eichenbaum discusses repetition in verse by focusing on alliteration, rhythm, or generally the musicality of the verse. The way they are seeing how poetry's meaning relies on sound is quite obvious in music, how a phrase repeated, with variation in tone or not, holds the meaning in its melody and not in its imagery only.

[14] From *Blue Motel Room*

[15] Published in *Harper's* (March 1998)

YOUNG WRITERS AND THE TRADITION IN PHILIPPINE SHORT FICTION IN ENGLISH: DOES THE FORCE EXIST OR IS THE JEDI COUNCIL PULLING OUR LEGS?

Timothy R. Montes

ABSTRACT

The paper tackles the problematic of establishing a definable Tradition for the Philippine short story in English. From the point of view of a creative writer, establishing a tradition in the genre is as fuzzy as defining the Force in Star Wars.

The canon in Philippine short story in English was established by the academe and young fiction writers, most of them college-educated, emerged from the country's institutions of higher learning. Nevertheless, despite the consensus that several short story writers are significant, creative writers themselves are wary of defining a/the tradition in this genre. Of more relevant concern is how young writers can break away from the Anglo-American tradition of modernism in fiction. The paper ends with the answers of three contemporary young writers to questions about their awareness of a literary tradition in the genre they are working in.

Tradition: The Phantom Menace

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away there were young warrior-writers who, before they could learn to master the Force (or what writing workshops now call The Craft, yes, something as mysterious as Witchcraft), had to apprentice themselves to Jedi-Literary Masters. A young writer, perhaps a little bit older than Anakin Skywalker, had to stand in the middle of the Jedi Council (in a scene reminiscent of a writers workshop) and prove to the Masters that he (or she—although feminists have not yet deconstructed Star Wars for after all Princess Leia was the twin sister of Luke and could become a Jedi instead of

a princess) had the Force, that he was the Chosen One. After being accepted into the literary priesthood, a young warrior-writer had to go through a long, arduous training to make him master the Force. (In fact, he had to finish a masters degree in creative writing.) But first a Jedi master like Obi-wan Kenobi or Yoda the Yul-Brynner-Ears had to take him under his wings—a writer had to study under the Tiempos of Silliman or Arcellana and NVM Gonzalez of the University of the .Philippines to learn how to use the light-saber (although in this case the instrument had to be as modest as the pen).

The Force, The Force—it was a mysterious energy that permeated the Universe, and a warrior-writer had to live and breathe the miasma of it until its very rhythm became second nature to him. What was It? Did It exist or was it merely an old wives'—no, to be politically precise, George Lucas'—tale? For the Force was a Presence that was an Absence, and Darth Vader had more of it compared to Luke Skywalker. A warrior had to master the Force or else without literary training in the academe under a Jedi Master, he would end up selling scraps of iron on a desert planet all his life. Or if he up and left without finishing his training like what Luke Skywalker did in *The Empire Strikes Back*, a warrior would end up on the Dark Side—a Black Hole that sucked in the literary incompetents into the whirlpool of oblivion.

But then some strange things began to happen. The Jedi Masters started to die one by one—first it was Bienvenido Santos, then Edilberto Tiempo followed by Jose Garcia Villa and NVM Gonzalez. The old order was passing away and the new breed of warriors discovered that there was a less medieval order existing in the universe—their world was changing. The narrative archetype of Baldo riding on a carabao cart as he drove into the sunset of Nagrebcan or of Lupo and the river was being supplanted by surface images from MTV, pop songs, and, yes, movies like *Star Wars*. In a way, the Force, whatever it was, was losing its mythico-religious character, perhaps because the Deconstructionists were gnawing away at the foundations of the Jedi order.

It is into this world that the young warrior-writer enters. His name is Anakin Skywalker—"wild, precocious young talent, disapproved of by the Council, and destined to bring doom and ruination through his misuse of the Force"[1] —and we have the primal battle between the old and the young, between light and darkness, or, in the words of T.S. Eliot, between "tradition and the individual talent."

The Use of Force

In last year's conference, I mentioned the word "tradition" in a more positive light. It did not carry the dark connotations of "the Force" in *Star Wars*. I associated it with another word: ***agon***—a writer's imaginary dialogue, a struggle, a conversation, a wrestling—with writers from the past. It was T.S. Eliot who wrote in his influential essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919) that tradition was the force to reckon with for any writer. He said that if young writers worth their salt want to continue writing beyond their twenty-fifth year, they have to develop a sense of history, of tradition. Young writer can begin writing in their teens from a host of motives—to win a Palanca, to get the attention of a classmate in Introduction to Poetry, to preserve childhood memories, to be inspired by early Joyce: "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." But young writers are apt to lose steam and fall along the wayside if they rely on romantic, adolescent obsessions alone. One simply outgrows them when the sordid realities of life overtake him: marriage, work, payment of insurance—what philistines call "reality." Eliot's prescription was for the writer to take the long view: in his case he carried on an agon with the past, with the Western Canon. Eliot was carrying on an artistic dialogue with his predecessors—Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Wordsworth, etc. "No poet," according to him, "no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists."[2]

There is therefore something darkly onerous about this concept of tradition

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by Eliot. The burden of literary excellence, of obeisance to the golden past, can be unnerving when he wrote that "...the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this *will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities*."[3] In this case, since the yardstick has been established by the past, the contemporary young writer has to take the responsibility of critical judgment by the standards of the past. It is as if our predecessors were millionaires who have bequeathed such accumulated wealth to us and we can not afford to lose that inheritance in the money market of free enterprise. The past, therefore, can be an object of imitation, of inspiration, or of derision by contemporary young writers. It behooves us to have the gall to say: "Dear literary idols Nick Joaquin, Greg Brillantes, and Kerima Polotan—I am singing a different song and dancing to a different beat but I am not afraid to be subjected to a police line-up with you." (Of peripheral concern for the writer these days is the ascendancy of literary theories which interrogate aesthetics to a discourse of power based on class, race, and gender; it is getting to be more and more difficult to hang on to the old standards of sublimity in the works of the past without dragging politics into the arena.)

There is therefore an ambivalent attitude among young writers like me towards the juxtaposition of the label "young writer" with the semantically fuzzy word "tradition." Sure, many of us are enthusiastic interpreters of the stories by Nick Joaquin, Kerima Polotan, and Greg Brillantes to our undergraduate literature classes every year. (Most young writers, if they are not into teaching, are into advertising or journalism.) So we cannot help but feel like featherweights to these Muhammad Alis of literature: they know how to float like a butterfly and sting like a bee, while we make hit-and-miss shots at the Palanca or the Free Press or Graphic Awards.

But in a way Eliot was right. A sense of tradition can be a source of direction for us young writers in the same way that political/religious conservatives, instead of being portrayed as ugly villains with outmoded ideas and values, are actually the guiding force behind the efforts of young liberals and radicals. Young rebels and iconoclasts do not just foment revolutions and instigate innovations—they must, in the first place, have something to rebel *against*. Tradition is the tapping board in our basketball ring without which our ball will seldom get back to us for a literary rebound. It provides resistance, guidance, new shooting angles for games we want to play in our own way. This is perhaps what Cesar Ruiz Aquino had in mind when he described his teacher Edilberto Tiempo this way: "He was establishment, we were future shock."

The Academe, The Canon, and the Problem Of Establishing Tradition

"Young writing in the Philippines today," begins Bienvenido Lumbera in an address to the First Iligan Writers Workshop, "is largely a production of the academe."[4] I agree. But more than the influence of school-based writing workshops, creative writing centers, and the emergence of student literary journals, is the fact that it is in schools, especially in institutions of higher learning, where most young Filipinos get their first taste of Philippine short stories in English. For most students who grew up with Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew and Sidney Sheldon and Danielle Steele, a college course in Philippine literature is usually their first time to get acquainted with the writers of their own country. (For my part, my encounter with the Palanca canon came earlier; the Palanca Foundation donated a whole set of anthology to the small library of my high school in Samar.) How many young writers today were

inspired into writing in college after their first reading of *Dead Stars* by Paz Marquez Benitez, *May Day Eve* by Nick Joaquin, or *The Witch* by Edilberto Tiempo? Not a few student writers start out as imitators of F. Sionil Jose after discovering him in the college library. (Pity those schools without a respectable Filipiniana section.)

The influence of college courses in Philippine literature in English to the emergence of new writers cannot be underestimated. And yet when we make a cursory survey of the titles in college textbooks, we cannot help but notice a certain kind of parochialism in the choice of selections: the textbook used at the University of Santo Tomas has large dollops of selections written by graduates of the school, while University of the Philippines and Silliman University and De La Salle University have their own gallery of writers to highlight. This has resulted in a less catholic, less varied line-up of selections. Students at University Santo Tomas are exposed to the stories of Wilfrido Nolledo, but students in Mindanao are ignorant of him. Sinai Hamada's *Tanabata's Wife* is studied in Baguio schools but not in the Visayas, in the same way that Anthony Tan's *The Cargo*, a wonderful story set in Muslim Mindanao, is largely unknown to many students.

There are, however, stories which are taken up by most, if not all, schools but it is risky to group them under one umbrella and label it as a definitive canon.[5] The pedagogical consensus seems to agree on the importance of stories like *Dead Stars*[6] by Paz Marquez Benitez, *May Day Eve* by Nick Joaquin, *The Virgin* or *The Sounds of Sunday* by Kerima Polotan, and *Faith, Love, Time & Dr. Lazaro* by Gregorio Brillantes. It is not therefore surprising to note that Joaquin, Polotan, and Brillantes are often cited by young writers as their favorites.

Nowadays, having been subjected to a regional Balkanization by a recent Commission on Higher Education memorandum, the domain of Philippine short stories in English is getting smaller and smaller. The course

in Philippine literature I took fifteen years ago was called "Survey of Philippine Literature in English," and in one semester I was introduced to the stories by Benitez, Villa, Daguio, Rotor, Santos, Tiempo, Polotan, Joaquin, Cordero Fernando, Arcellana, Gonzalez, and a host of other writers. By the time I started teaching, the subject was changed to "Contemporary Philippine Literature" and the sense of literary tradition was lost in the unclear definition of what "contemporary" exactly meant and the teacher was free to choose his or her own favorites from among the living writers of our country. Recently this course has been changed into a subject which emphasizes the plural case—"Philippine literature[s]"—where stories in English have been pared down to three or five selections in a semester, stories that share the same room, cheek-by-jowl, with Tagalog and other regional writings. I am not sure yet how this will affect the sense of literary tradition among our students and would-be fictionists in English especially now that the Palanca Foundation also stopped publishing anthologies of the prize-winning stories in English.

But of this I am sure: young writers serious enough to go about learning the craft will find a way to get acquainted with the works of their literary forebears. At a time when a course called "The Tradition of Fiction" is required of all literature and creative writing majors, it would be worthwhile to develop a lateral, comprehensive reading list for writing students in order to make them feel the firmness of the ground on which they stand. This tradition of fiction should be capacious enough to be able to embrace the best stories in English written in the past. And along this line I think of the two-volume *Philippine Short Stories* (1925-1950) edited by Leopoldo Yabes[7], *the Anthology of Palanca Award-Winning Stories* (1950-1975) edited by Kerima Polotan, and, a more recent project, *The Likhaan Book of Fiction and Poetry* (1995-1996) undertaken by the University of the Phil-

ippines Creative Writing Center.[8] Young writers who are impressed by a story written by particular writers in an anthology will not be contented with a single helping; they will look for other stories written by these writers, read their collections of stories, or even their whole *oeuvre*.

Worth noting here is the presence of a lacuna, a gap in the chronological continuity of the tradition of fiction in English. There is a gaping silence between 1975-1994. During Martial Law, even as the Palanca contest continued, there was no publication of "best of" anthologies so that the generation that came after Polotan and Brillantes is largely unknown to the young writers today. This is perhaps the reason why young Jedi-warriors are not in awe anymore of the people sitting in Writers Workshops; they may even doubt the artistic ascendancy of these unknown second-liners. The aspiring writers who start writing in college will have read Joaquin, Polotan, Arcellana, Tiempo, Jose, and Gonzalez but not Dalisay, Deriada, Susan Lara, Charlson Ong, Alfred Yuson, or Connie Maraan simply because their undergraduate teachers did not take up their stories in class. Maybe if they decide to pursue a graduate degree in creative writing, these student will get to meet these writers before they will have read them. Worth noting, too, perhaps, is the absence of the *enfants terribles* of the 60s and 70s—Wilfredo Pascua Sanchez, Cesar Ruiz Aquino, and Erwin Castillo. Except for Alfred Yuson, these writers who rode the wave of postmodernism have been ignored by academia.

I discovered Erwin Castillo, for example, when I was already in graduate school. He wrote amazing stories like the Free Press Award-winning "Ireland" while he was still in his teens during the early seventies. When I finally got to meet him in the early 90s—graying hair, garrulous voice, and heavy-drinking as Hemingway—this owner of an advertising agency was trying to get back to writing after a 20-year silence. Feeling like a child abandoned by his father, I asked him why they (his generation) stopped writing. Joaquin, Polotan, and Brillantes were our literary grandparents but I felt that we were deprived of the guidance of the generation that came before us. The Jedi warriors of the 1960s and 70s seemed to have gone over to the Dark Side. Erwin's answer to my question, of course, was "Martial Law," the Evil Empire. ("Marcos was a most fantastic character no fiction can come up to." At heart, with the collapse of the division between fiction and reality, Erwin was still faithful to the spirit of postmodernism.) But the happy thing about this delay in their writing and publication was that many of them from that generation—Erwin, Ninotchka Rosca, Cesar Aquino—have gone back to writing; those who were supposed to be part of the pantheon of tradition have also become our contemporaries in the 80s and 90s. We are, in a way, playing basketball with our fathers and the game has become more challenging. The last time I drank beer with Erwin, he was still nursing with his bottle the resistance to the tradition of realism in fiction writing. "The trouble with Greg [Brillantes]," he said without losing that edge of respect for an elder, "is that he plays it safe. He is afraid to go farther, to explore the unexplored." Erwin never made it to the ranks of the Masters and here he was in his forties, still a Jedi knight respecting the past while resisting it. Now I hear he is writing a novel set in the future, carrying on an agon with his literary forebears, trying to out-Pynchon Pynchon.

Apologetics, Polemics, Problematics

This leads me to the problematics involved in the writing of Philippine short stories in English. Philippine writing in English is hounded by the question: What is Filipino about our stories in English? Is it a question of language? Is it a matter of sensibility and style? Is it the material? For whom are we writing? This constellation of political questions are often hurled at us by

some critics who consider us a dying breed of priests in a dying religious order, still murmuring prayers in a dead language under our breath.

But I do not want to indulge in apologetics and polemics. My concern is with how porous, how prone to cross-fertilization, how transnational in influence fiction writing in English can be. In the first place, the form is very Western and the aesthetics that go along with the genre were established by Americans and Europeans. In the Philippines, many of the literary masters of the genre studied, and even taught, in American schools—Santos, the Tiempos, NVM Gonzalez, and, in our own time, Butch Dalisay. Writing workshops like the ones in the University of the Philippines and Dumaguete were patterned after the one in the University of Iowa from where many of our literary luminaries graduated. Inevitably the Filipino fiction writers in English do not only fix their eyes on their native coast; the waters that come to shore, they notice, also come from foreign lands. And yet, despite the fact that Kerima Polotan was influenced by the writing of Carson McCullers, or NVM Gonzalez by Hemingway, or Gregorio Brillantes by James Joyce and Graham Greene, this does not make their work less Filipino than, say, the works of Amado Hernandez. The tradition we follow carries with it heavy influences from the West and our literary education in the academe is steeped in reading from the Western Canon, not to mention our favorite contemporary authors from Britain, the U.S. or Canada which we may read without the blessings of our teachers.

No wonder then that Butch Dalisay, in his introduction to the most recent anthology of young short story writers, described us this way: "True, their inspirations remain largely Western; but even the Western writers they look up to are dissident voices, or remakers of the form. Perhaps more tellingly, many of these young writers seem to know little about, and have little to do with, Southeast Asia and its culture, or—except for the very

highly-educated—with the classical and historical past.

"Their politics will be bourgeois-liberal....Their locales and sensibilities are overwhelmingly urban, even cross-continental. They are generally well-schooled, well-read, and well-traveled, which lends their work a certain consciousness of form, a deliberation of design."[9]

As to the language "question" (for I do not think it is a "problem") most of us just go ahead and write in English because we feel we write best in it. Or if we want to have a critical shield against the criticism of elitism of our writing in English, we now go to post-colonial theories that claim we can strike back at the Evil Empire of Anglo-American history and tradition—we shape their language according to our native sensibility and purposes. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of contemporary writing in English: to interrogate not only the past but even the language itself. If we have to believe in Gemino Abad, we are whacking away at the forest to make a native clearing within the language and this departure is signaled by the new label "Philippine literature *from* English," not *in* English.

Another challenge facing the young writers in English has something to do with how to break away from the Anglo-American tradition of modernism in fiction. Bien Lumbera, noting the prevalence of the Western standards of literary excellence in our schools, calls for "the subversion of the academe." The modernist tradition which greatly influences the young writers earnestly toiling at their graduate degrees in creative writing at the University of the Philippines, Ateneo, Silliman, or La Salle ought to be broken from these traditional constraints in order for the writer to find an authentic voice. "[It] might be worthwhile to ponder," Lumbera said, "the ways by which a Westernized academe had determined the norms by which the canon of Philippine literature has been constructed. Writers using English as their medium ought to be specially concerned about this problem...[and] face up to the questions it raises: "To what extent has the Filipino writer, whether writing in English or

in the vernacular, allowed himself/herself to be constrained or constricted by norms imposed by encounters in college with creative and critical works from the U.S. or England?"[10]

Although I heartily agree with this injunction, this can also be problematic because the artistic expression of "Filipino-ness" when it comes to our short stories in English can be varied and multifarious to be contained in a particular norm. Many young writers, for example, dream of getting published in America, of studying there, even of participating in the diaspora. Filipino writers based in America have come up with their own workshops and launched their own anthologies which explore cultural borders. If they follow a certain tradition in our literature, it would be the tradition of exilehood explored by Ben Santos and Carlos Bulosan.

I believe, though, that as the young writers try to plot the coordinates of their aesthetics and politics, their own search for authenticity will make them confront and redefine tradition, whatever that may be. The anti-western, postcolonial decentering project calls for a new aesthetics, but only the writers will determine their direction as they slash through the thicket to create the native clearing within the English language.

Kuwarta o Bayong?

After so many qualifications and divagations, we go back to the question "Does the Force exist or is Tradition merely a critical mumbo-jumbo?" Kuwarta o bayong?

I asked the help of seven young fiction writers in English to answer this millennium question. Of the seven, three responded. Of the three, only one made the claim that there *is* a Tradition in Philippine Short Fiction in English. One wrote an essay; the other two answered the questions point by point. I will end this paper with their answers to my questions to introduce the new voices emerging from the literary carnival.

Question 1:
Do you think there is a tradition in Philippine short fiction in English? How would you describe this tradition? Which Filipino short story writers have influenced you and which of them would you include in the canon?

Anne-Marie Jennifer Eligio[11]:

There is no tradition. Filipino short story writers who have influenced me are Brillantes, Polotan, Dalisay. I would include them in the canon.

Gad S. Lim[12]:

I think there is a globalization, maybe? Krip Yuson had a similar evaluation in his column roughly, I think, two weeks ago.

The writers I like (I tradition and, outside of Valentine romances, is probably one of the most vibrant among the different streams of Philippine literature today. Credit would not dare claim influence since that would mean their works produced some definitive change in my own. Or in some cases, claiming Arguilla, Greg Brillantes, Kerima Polotan. I might be missing one woman author here, or maybe not. After them, maybe Nick Joaquin (influence might sound as if you are putting yourself on the same level. Doesn't help them any, only myself.) include Bienvenido Santos, Manuel because it would be a sin to omit), GCF [Gilda Cordero Fernando]. Surely not, though maybe this you should omit, F. Sionil Jose (why him who gets Random House to publish his books? Can't figure it out.) This you didn't ask, but I'll say it anyway. Bienvenido Santos I like for his sad, melancholy, sentimental strain. Santos, Arguilla, Polotan for a vaguely romantic strain that is probably everywhere in Philippine lit (ah! *Dead Stars*, the flowers bloom in unchanging freshness, the dear dead loves of vanished youth!), Brillantes for the place of faith in his fiction. For some reason, I think Philippine fiction in English had its heyday in the 60s, maybe until politics changed things in the 70s. We probably haven't produced anything since which has a grand view of man, stories which deal with issues of import, universal experiences, etc. After the moon, where else?

Question 2:
How do you situate yourself in that

tradition? Do you feel you belong to that tradition or do you feel like breaking it?

Eligio:
Since there is no tradition, I don't feel I belong to anything.

Lim:
I would like to think that I write, or at least try to write, stories like those from that past time. Maybe for that reason I feel I do not belong with people who chronologically are of my generation. I do not particularly care about post-modern topics or concerns, and am maybe beginning to develop a bias against certain kinds of technology. Is this a kind of rebellion?

On another hand, for the longest time I consciously decided not to write Filipino-Chinese stories. At that time I felt it would marginalize me, and keep me away from the mainstream of Philippine literature. I don't think Charlson Ong will or can escape it, though he is trying. There is not much of a Filipino-Chinese tradition in Philippine lit. So, if ever, I was not "rebelling" from a literary tradition but from an ethnic-racial one.

I did write my first Filipino-Chinese story in 1998, and my thesis adviser (I'm working on a collection of stories now) thinks it's the best story Ihave ever written. I wonder what that means? Is that where I belong? My own answers to this question should be clearer in a few weeks, as I work on and write on.

Question 3:
Aside from Filipino fiction writers, what other cultural influences have affected your writing? Which foreign authors have influenced or inspired you? Have foreign writers become more influential to you compared to Filipino writers?

Eligio:
There were several cultural influences. Mostly these were from the many racial and social distinctions of people I met in books I read. They are Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, D.H. Lawrence. Yes, I can say that foreign writers became more influential than Filipino writers, especially since the first "serious" books I read were highly Western influenced.

Lim:
Culture is such a big word, and I think it would not be wise for me to say that I've figured out the different threads that have wrapped around me. Foreign authors? Updike wrote a whole series of Maple stories, and I like the idea of interlinked stories (B.N. Santos' *You Lovely People* was also a collection of such stories.) Most of my stories have companion sequels. Does this mean my stories are incomplete and so I need another installment? Read a lot of E.B. White in college. (Not a fiction writer.) Like Dante a lot, (maybe for the Beatrice romance angle). Graham Greene I like, maybe for the faith angle. Foreign writers are maybe beginning to influence me more now. Have been reading a lot of short fiction from *The Best American Stories* series, from other collections, the *New Yorker*, people who have been in Iowa, etc. I think I have recently set a goal of publishing in the United States, so I have been reading up to see what flavor there is.

Question 4:
What can you say about the allegation that Filipino writing in English is elitist?

Eligio:
I agree that Filipino writing in English is elitist. Writing in that second language has become the privilege of the highly educated and those who have attended prestigious schools. Often, writers are "judged" according to their grammar and not according to their work's essence.

Lim:
If ever it was, I would not really mind. No one can target all audiences. Erap for a long time catered only to his adoring masses. Whynot accuse him or a reverse elitism?

By the Light from Extinguished Stars: Writing Philippine Short Fiction From English

An essay by

Luis Joaquin Katigbak[13]

People tend to refer to the "Tradition" of Philippine

Short Fiction in English—or *from* English, to borrow a notion from Gemino Abad—as if there is a huge body of work with a definable set of common traits. In fact, what they are usually referring to is a vast union of all the stories we have gleaned from English ever since Paz Marquez published *Dead Stars*. One would be hard put to identify an actual tradition—from generation to generation—in the history of Philippine Short Fiction in English. (Let's call it PSFE for short).

Even a cursory examination of the grand sweep of PSFE will reveal a startling diversity: a diversity of styles, of underlying tenets, of subject matter. I don't believe there are "schools" of writing as such in the history of PSFE—there are the famous arguments like Villa's "Art for art's sake" versus Arguilla's "Writing for a better society, and there are legendary writers' groups such as The Ravens and the Veronicans—but it's hard to label a specific writer's output as belonging, or being excluded from, a single particular tradition. Is Francisco Arcellana "traditional"? He is widely lauded and recognized, he is a National Artist, but his prose works from decades ago are still more experimental, more playful, than much of what is being written—and ignored—today.

One could also equate Tradition with The Canon—namely, with a group of writers or works deemed by the powers that be to be Essential, as being the only writers or works worthy of critical attention. However, I have to admit that the idea of a canon does not sit well with me. I disagree with the idea that there exists a strictly defined, inviolate set to which all "valid" works belong. I will not deny the usefulness of a canon, in terms of drawing attention to certain works, and of defining one's standards—but there should not be an inflexible "Canon" with a capital C. There should be a wide array of personal "Best-of" lists—a whole armory of canons, if you will excuse the horrendous pun. Every teacher (actually, every reader) has his or her own personal ideas about which writers and works are worthy of attention and which are not.

My own list of essential Filipino short story writers would include Francisco Arcellana, Gregorio Brillantes, Jose Y. Dalisay, and Kerima Polotan. These are the writers I continue to reread, and recommend to others. I do not know if they have had a discernable influence on my writing—I do not consciously try to emulate their work—but they have certainly been inspirations. Also noteworthy is Gina Apostol, whose *Bibliolepsy* was the last Filipino novel I thoroughly enjoyed.

In a broader sense, of course, our writing is influenced by the very age we live in, by everything we take in—by our knowledge of current events, by the TV shows we watch, the conversations we have. "Input equals influences." We are influenced by CNN, MTV, NU 107, the Internet. And, of course, by the works of foreign authors. Another personal "Best-Of" list follows: Jorge Luis Borges, Truman Capote, Haruki Murakami, Renata Adler, and James Thurber. I do not know if you can compare levels of influence—certainly I read more works by foreign authors simply because of the sheer amount of worthwhile books that are out there—but while foreign authors show me what can be done with the English language, local writers show me what can be done with that selfsame language here, in this country, fused with our histories and sensibilities.

And so we are all significantly influenced, in subtle or obvious ways, by local writers of days past and by our own contemporaries. However, in a very real sense (going back to the question of our local "tradition"), perhaps because PSFE is still a comparatively "young" phenomenon, or because as writers and readers in English we are constantly reacting and being enamored of such a huge number of movements and schools of thought from a number of different milieus, it seems that every Filipino writer who writes in English constitutes his or her own tradition. As young writers, we are rarely subjected to such onerous com-

parisons as "He's the new NVM Gonzalez!" or "She's continuing the tradition of Kerima Polotan!"

The easiest and most practical way for any practicing local writer to "situate" himself, I believe, is quite simply, chronologically. "I am one of a number of Filipinos under the age of forty writing short fiction in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century." Boring, but accurate—and it is a statement that does not set limitations on our writing.

Of course one can always identify similarities, parallels. However, to tell oneself that one is continuing a tradition of experimental wordplay as defined by Arcellana, or a tradition of stark realistic stories as defined by Arguilla is to perhaps constrain (or, on the other hand, delude) oneself. Let the critics decades from now "situate" us, if they have to, or are at all inclined to—that is not our job. Feeling that one belongs, or is excluded, from a tradition should not, in the end, affect one's desire to write what one wants to write. And that is what it's all about.

Which brings us to my next notion. There may not be a strictly defined "Tradition" per se—but there is definitely a local literary establishment. The membership of this establishment (established writers, editors and others) may fluctuate, but they always possess considerable influence in the literary community. I believe that literary paralysis is not necessarily caused by the sense that unless one writes like a dead writer (or a living, multi-awarded one) that one's works will be denied publication, recognition, validity. I am not bothered so much by the thought that Nick Joaquin, through his undeniably remarkable output of short fiction, set the bar for writing in English so high that I cannot reach it. Rather, I am bothered by the thought that if I write, say, a story with science-fiction elements, it will automatically be denied "serious" attention by most editors or literary-contest judges. It is this, I believe, that the young writer instinctively feels like rebelling against: this notion that one has to conform to a set of standards that one may violently disagree with.

Again, though, nothing can really stop one from writing what one wants to write. To sum up (and, in a roundabout way, address your last question too), let me join two of my favorite quotations—one from Francisco Arcellana and one from NVM Gonzalez, to create a mantra for myself and for anyone else who is also trying to tell stories: "Write the story that only you can write, and don't worry about the language."

Conclusion

My foregoing correspondence with other young Filipino fictionists confirms the problematic of establishing a tradition. We seem to have read (and even admire) the same Filipino writers and yet we also refuse to make the claim that this list of best-ofs constitutes a Tradition. These literary predecessors (a more apt term) can be considered more from the point of view of inspiration than from a critical paradigm of continuity/discontinuity.

Tradition, I feel, should not be viewed as a chronological parade of great works—from *Dead Stars* by Benitez to *Penmanship* by Dalisay. The Mindoro of N.V.M. Gonzalez and the Tarlac of Brillantes are two different worlds which cannot be lumped together under one school, movement, or period. And even if the new generation of short story writers in English read more foreign than Filipino writers, they cannot be faulted with not having read their literary forebears.

In the post-Jedi order, young Filipino fictionists, despite the necessary egotism that sustains artists, are more modest about their efforts unlike the preceding generation of short story writers which also dreamed of writing the Great Filipino Novel. There is something about the short story form that defies the bravura of novelistic genius—Chekhov was more modest than that. What we follow is a tradition of small gestures that open up to revelations beyond words—Alfredo Salazar looking up at the