

# ARTIFICE IN WRITING THE TRUTH IN A MEMOIR OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

## A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Julieta Diaz Gibbons  
The University of Newcastle

“Halcyon seasons, solstice of my days.... Far from exaggerating my former happiness, I must struggle against too weak a portrayal; even now the recollection overpowers me.”

Marguerite Yourcenar *Memoires of Hadrian* 163

The power of the memory is prodigious, my God. It is a vast, immeasurable sanctuary. Who can plumb its depths?

Saint Augustine *Confessions*

Some decades ago when I enrolled in English at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila, it was mainly for the purpose of continuing my love affair with the English language. After the Spanish-American war and until her independence in 1945, the Philippines was a protectorate of the United States of America and our institutions were very much Americanized. English was the medium of instruction in schools. Students who wanted to go further in their studies had to adopt English as their second language

One day at the University Humanities Library, I happened to find a copy of an English translation of *The Iliad*. I was dumbstruck. Pages and pages of images of a heroic past struck my senses and imagination: its fears, its colours, the odour of blood, sweat and decay, the sounds of thundering horses and chariots, the explosion of dirt and rubble, the passion of heroes against heroes, of gods and goddesses at war with one another, the anguish of the suppliant, the roar of the victor. And to counterbalance all the above, woven in unparalleled lyricism and imagery, the palpable love and woes of long-suffering figures: fathers, mothers, sisters, wives, children and lovers—the true casualties of war—while in the background, by the hearth, the gentle murmur of a loom. Homer’s sublime artifice in language craft had created imageries that made his heroes and their world almost materialize in the same room with you – otherworldly and extraordinary maybe, but the portrayal of the human experience, truthful.

One of the greatest joys in life is to every now and then chance upon a piece of literature where language is a vehicle that touches and engages the mind, heart and spirit of the reader. A good writer is nothing short of a magician, an artificer of words with the

power to hold you and twist your heart inside out, stretch and roll and pummel it like a piece of dough, and then to let you off with your soul forever enlightened and enriched,-- or disturbed and questioning. On the power of language, Gao Xingjian, the Nobel laureate and author of *Soul Mountain* writes:

Born at the start of civilization, like life, language is full of wonders and its expressive capacity is limitless. It is the task of the writer to discover and develop the latent potential inherent in language.<sup>1</sup>

It is a daunting expectation for an aspiring writer.

When the “menopausal blues” knocked at my door, a sense of panic set in. How short life is, and how much more I have to learn and how much of the past I needed to re-acquaint myself again! Since I would never have the discipline to do it alone, I had to swallow my pride and go back to university. I wanted to read Homer again and rediscover that classical world. I wanted to read Shakespeare again. And I thought I might as well honour my adopted language and learn to write it well. My aim was to be a magician of language in the humblest sense of the word; to acquaint myself with the tools of effective literary artifices so I too could create life experiences on a page and share with others my life’s story.

My first year of Creative Writing Courses was disastrous. Twice, feeling humiliated with the lecturer’s comments I wanted to give up. Helen Garner was my salvation, even if I wept after reading her impressions on my first romantic short story:

This story issues from the realm of your mind which is entirely captive to cloudy fantasy. [...] I don’t feel in it any sign of your voice, your particular intelligence or experience of life. [...] It’s as if you’d pressed the Romantic Cliché button and the story poured out. I would like to read you on something closer to your own experience, to the grit and awkwardness of life. I sense you are constrained by your beautiful manners.

Her comments on my writing style were brutal, but I admit, true. What was I thinking? Sadly, hero-worshipping Homer and Shakespeare does not make one a good writer. Perhaps, I was witlessly playing with the “big” words I have kept in my personal dictionary. Perhaps my overenthusiastic efforts in creating moods had actually disempowered my language and prevented it from doing what it was meant to do. Artifice in language alone does not make a good story if it does not engage you with truths that spring from the heart and the particular sensibilities of the writer.

When Kim Cheng Boey encouraged me to do Honours in Creative Writing, I felt a pat on the back. After reading three short stories of my childhood experiences, he suggested that I write my memoir.

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<sup>1</sup> Nobel Prize for Literature. Acceptance Speech, 7 December 2000. Gao Xingjian. *Soul Mountain*. (Trans. Mabel Lee). Harper Perennial, 1990. p.12

There is something I vividly remember of my childhood. It was my friend Alicia who sat next to me on the first day I went to school. I remember how quiet and delicate she was, and how she wrote so neatly and skillfully. That was all. I could not recall how she looked, nor could I remember the sound of her voice. I remember that she died one afternoon, the day after she grazed herself on a barbed wire fence. How it happened, I cannot remember. Sometimes, I visualize in my mind's eye that she was tall and thin with long black hair, plaited neatly everyday. But that could not be her, because that beautifully plaited hair belonged to another girl whom I knew at least three years afterwards whose name I could not recall. I remember looking at that plait and watching as lice crawled all over it, up over the bumps then into the crevices. I'm horrified remembering it now, but I was fascinated then.

Alicia and I must have been good friends, because I remember missing her when she died. What we did together, I could not recall. I simply remember a girl I liked a lot and her name was Alicia. And yet, her distant figure remains a towering landmark in my memory. To go back to my childhood, I decided that I must begin with that landmark-- a girl named Alicia.

But Alicia does not appear in my story until the fifth chapter when I went to school for the first time. How strange it was that, when I began to return to that landmark which is Alicia, my memory went still further back to a time I began to think of as my one spell in paradise. How bright it was and how those figures in that valley shine from this vantage point of the remembering present! All of a sudden songs of my childhood came to mind. I recaptured figures and distant realities that are dear and vibrant; they moved and smiled in the room with me. Father. Mother. Little Sister. Baby Brother, who grew up into a beautiful youth only to die at nineteen. All of them forever shaped the landscape of my consciousness.

When I struggle to recall memories of my early childhood, a staggering kaleidoscope of colours, movements, figures and emotions come on the picture-screen of my mind. It is daunting to pin down a particular moment or essence—a sense of place—or a sense of time. Were those experiences real or mere concoctions of my vivid imagination? There were many occasions in the writing process when this tenuous boundary between memory and imagination stopped me in my tracks. Ultimately, these reservations convinced me that I make my memoir partly fiction where I could write and reflect on remembered experiences and collate these together creatively, but as close as possible to chronological facts— and as truthfully as my mind and heart could muster. This style/artifice when memory is engaged with imagination gave me the freedom to frame figures from the past, like my friend Alicia, within the landscape and experiences of my childhood. This artifice, with utmost generosity gave these characters faces, grace and energy that once more connect them with the living present. It also gave me a freehand in imbedding the element of linearity to the narrative. This in no way aims to deceive; rather it aims to bring logical configuration of events and time frames that draw the narrative closer to reality.

Initially, I was not confident that my writing skills were capable of recreating characters and events that are so distant from this present state of being. How could I do justice to a past that is so bright I could hardly see it?

It is refreshing to read that even the great writers of memoirs have had similar doubts. In his memoir, *Father and Son*, Edmund Gosse writes of his recollection of an experience from his distant past: “the whole [experience] is a vapour in my memory which shifts as I try to define it (109).” Virginia Woolf ponders on the same process:

In certain favourable moods, memories—what one has forgotten—come to the top. Now if this is so, is it not possible—I often wonder—that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? And if so, will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them? I see it—the past—as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions... (“A Sketch of the Past,” 67)

Long before I started writing my memoir, my readings were driven by my need to find a style I feel would suit my sensibilities. I felt the importance of looking to other authors to learn from and be inspired by. In this regard Gao Xingjian and Marguerite Yourcenar and their major works (*Soul Mountain* and *Memoirs of Hadrian* respectively) were great sources of joy and inspiration. The Nobel Laureate, Gao Xingjian’s, *Soul Mountain*, is a passionate lyrical prose that draws out Xingjian’s powerful observation of his people and the landscape and traditions that shaped them. As a fugitive during the Cultural Revolution, he exiles himself into the heart of China and explores her spiritual, emotional and intellectual roots through the mystics, fanatics, plain and eccentric, sometimes genius peasants he meets on the way. The novel is a testament of spiritual and intellectual discovery of the self in relation to the social and political forces that sought to suffocate it; “an extraordinary product of individual identity in a society that exalts the collective; and a daring play with voice that plunders ancient Chinese myths, philosophy, history, folk songs and memory.”<sup>2</sup> I believe that Xingjian’s authorial sensitivity in *Soul Mountain* brought his readers towards a deeper understanding of the true heart and character of China and her people.

In my literary journey, I found Xingjian’s “play of voice” or point of view so appealing that I adapted some elements of this artifice in my memoir. The individual is more or less repressed in the far eastern culture where I come from, and the proliferation of the pronoun “I” in my original draft made me uncomfortable. Hence, the pronoun “you”, used to signify the main focalizer in *Soul Mountain*, was adapted into my second draft.<sup>3</sup>

As I persevered in finding my narrative voice in the second person point of view, another voice in the same level kept intruding. For example, at times when I found a sensory foothold on a particular experience another spoke or pointed out: “wait, do you

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<sup>2</sup> An apt comment by *The Australian* printed on the back cover of the novel.

<sup>3</sup> Xingjian, created the female character “she” as his alter-ego as well as the object of his physical/internal companion. As the translator, Mabel Lee writes: “The creation of an unnamed “she” allows the author to project himself with immense freedom into the psyche of women.” (P.5-6, intro. *Soul Mountain*.) Xingjian made some more changes as in referring to the ‘you’ as ‘he’ when he describes the back of “you” walking away.

remember that such and such did this and that, and then this happened?” Or, “do you remember how at that time the moon was hanging out of the night sky like the belly of a pregnant woman ready to give birth?” I began writing these interjections within the text until at last I adopted a two-voiced narration in my memoir, where the sense of memory is personified as the “spirit self”. I found this style a valuable artifice in recreating what I believe are significant personal experiences because it intensifies the sense of self as well as the presence of the other characters peopling my story. At the same time it extends the dimensions of the sense of place.

*Soul Mountain* had also inspired me to incorporate folk songs and legends into my own narrative in order to heighten the spirits of innocence and joyfulness. It is a creative artifice that has not only helped complement the experiences and themes I needed to expose but also encouraged me to rediscover the multi-layered qualities of my early nurture.

However, at first, the shifting narrative point of view in my work alienated some in the Creative Writing workshop. But as further chapters were added subsequent readings became easier. The dialogue may seem to lead to digression at times, but it helped the process of recollection and the juxtaposition of events and experiences my memory brought up at random. Certainly, I still have some way yet to go before I could use this technique, this artifice, with more confidence.

The style I had adopted has some similarity with the free indirect discourse prevalent in the works of Katherine Mansfield, when an authorial voice seems to barge in unexpectedly in the middle of a speech or a character’s internal monologue, injecting information which the speaker or the focalizer would not normally say or think at such a moment. I believe it gives the text elements of spontaneity and according to another student at the Creative Writing workshop; it gives the narrative its “power”.

Another artifice I “borrowed” and adapted into my memoir is the use of an epigraph to frame it. Prior to writing, I was lent Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Memoirs of Hadrian*. It is a compelling narrative where the author uses ancient sources to get into the mind of the emperor of two thousand years ago, and recreates his life-story. Yourcenar has chosen Hadrian’s valediction inscribed on an inner wall in his mausoleum, “Animula vagula...”<sup>4</sup> as a leitmotif in her text. It sets the atmosphere and adds poignancy, which using Alistair Rolls’ words, “serves to couch the whole novel in an intertextual network.” I feel that this “leitmotif”, which had caught my imagination long before I read the novel, is conveniently and sensitively suited as a frame in my work also. I, this body, am the sanctuary of that other “I” which is my soul/spirit. Like Yourcenar’s Hadrian, I had always been conscious of the co-existence of my soul with my physical being as far as I could remember. And like Yourcenar’s Hadrian who at his death bed recollects the past,

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<sup>4</sup> Animula vagula, blandula,  
Hospes comesque corporis,  
Quae nunc abibis in loca  
Pallidula, rigida, nudula,  
Nec, ut soles, dabis iocos...

the two voices in my work also look back with great fondness and nostalgia into the golden topography of their shared early childhood.

As he writes his memoir dedicated to his son and heir, Marcus Hadrian remembers the “halcyon seasons, the solstice of [his] days...,” the times he spent with his favourite youth, Antinous, his travels, his monumental achievements in architecture, his triumphs, his disappointments, and his relationships with his family. In re-living his past, he finds the understanding and definition of his being that he could not discern before.

My childhood was my halcyon season. I, too, long to give this season justice in my portrayal. As in *Soul Mountain*, much imagery in *Memoirs of Hadrian* is so appealing that I had to write several samples down in my notebook for inspiration, like that tense scene in the desert with the Parthians, and Hadrian describing his guard who “[...] was wholly at ease in this mingling of silence and tumult, immobility and sudden gallop, and in all this magnificence thrown on the desert like a carpet on the sand” (140). I found the juxtaposition of contrasting elements in these lines added drama and suspense to the experience being portrayed; I had to incorporate their essence into my work. Hence, before closing my prologue, I described my childhood as “one moment in time when innocence and mysterious tumults mingled, like the white floral silk lace woven on black tulle in Grandmother’s Spanish veil, and were strewn like a cool river on a hot landscape.”

I believe that borrowing ideas and adapting artifices/craft from other writers is a valuable tool in sharpening the writing skills of both established and novice writers. It is essentially a process where one learns from the craft or “trade secrets” of others—to find out what works and what doesn’t, so that one can recreate one’s own unique version of the truth.

Every text has an intertextual undercurrent and energy because woven through it are realities from the human conditions that we have read and seen, as well as the experiences we have observed and lived through. At the same time the social conditions we live in will always influence our judgments and values—our slant or own style of communication. Shakespeare for example, borrowed many characters and subjects from classical and ancient texts and recreated these through his superb imagination into masterpieces that reflect the temperaments, sensibilities, the foibles and ideals of that age. Like Homer in the *Iliad*, Shakespeare’s word-craft may be considered archaic today, but his expressions remain sensitive and sublime; his portrayal of the human experience truthful and eternal.

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