

THE POETICS OF PARTISAN SCHOLARSHIP AND ENDURING FRIENDSHIP

-I was given a very difficult assignment today – to inject poetics and poetry in an otherwise purely rational and rather heavy intellectual discussion. Poetics explain why and how we write – what is it that drives us to put our thoughts and feelings into words deployed in particular ways. If we look at the expository (some say “exhortatory”) writing of Renato and Letizia Constantino in this light, we can sense its partisanship, its passion for justice and freedom, its devotion to a vision that is both beautiful and illuminating. And if we get to know the partnership of husband and wife behind the partisanship, we can see a mirroring of sorts – love of country made stronger and firmer by love for each other, the family that sprung from that love, and the close circle of a “few loyal friends,” as Renato described them.

I bring with me today three books which perhaps qualify me to speak about my enduring inter-generational friendship with Renato and Letty, which also best illustrate how and why I share their partisanship and their vision. **The first one is entitled “The Manipulated Press: A History of Philippine Journalism Since 1945,”** actually my masteral thesis for my M.A. in Communications earned from this College, and for which Renato, my mentor of 20 years, served as adviser

Renato identified very much with the working press, having been a journalist for much of his working life, and helping found the Philippine Newspaper Guild (PNG) which was a harbinger of progressive unionism in the early postwar years. He was a prolific writer, publishing hundreds of columns, including a lot in Filipino, tackling a wide spread of topics which remain as current today as they were before – the US bases which continue to endanger our safety and our sovereignty, the burgeoning debt trap, the politics of food and hunger, maldevelopment and the degradation of the environment, imperialist and Zionist aggression in the Middle East displacing the Palestinian people from their rightful homeland, among many others.

The Manipulated Press was first published in 1984 at the height of martial law, with a second edition coming out in 1986 shortly after the EDSA revolution, with Renato himself facilitating publication by a friendly publisher at a time when most publishing companies would not have touched the manuscript too sensitive to handle even with a ten-foot pole. Earlier, Renato spearheaded discussions among journalists belonging to the National Press Club, the transcripts of which became the basis of a book entitled “The State of the Philippine Press” published by the Foundation for Nationalist Studies in 1983. This book was Renato’s way of producing more clarity by addressing not only censorship and other constraints imposed by martial law but also exposing the power of big business and what he called “communication imperialism.” The latter was effected largely through the activities of transnational corporations virtually monopolizing telecommunications, international news sources, film and broadcasting content, as well as advertising, resulting in a cultural conditioning process that had become an integral component of economic and political domination. If he were alive today, he would most probably take on the

“digital colonialism” and “surveillance capitalism” which underlie the Fourth industrial Revolution and ushered in the age of artificial intelligence.

The second book I brought today is entitled “Renato Constantino: A Life Revisited” which I wrote, I must say with the close guidance and inspiration of Letty, and which came out in 2001, two years after his death. When Renato became very ill in 1999, Letty asked me to do regular interviews with him not really to record his stories and perhaps produce a biography, but more to keep his mind active and connected with others, giving him a sense of purpose in the last leg of his life.

The Renato which emerged from these interviews was remarkable for the consistency of the views he espoused as star debater and Collegian editor in the University of the Philippines, as a fearless journalist, as a prominent diplomat, as a productive curator and historian, and later , as a nationally and internationally recognized scholar and academic. These views he imbibed while growing up with an anti-Hispanic and anti-American grandmother, a father who was always attacking Quezon and other Filipino politicians for abandoning the cause of absolute and immediate independence from the US, and friends in College who grew close to leaders of popular revolts and were attracted to labor and socialist movements which launched dramatic protests during the red 1930s.

The integrity of his views was to him non-negotiable, and to others unassailable, as he earned scars and spurs defending and advancing them. He was taken to Fort Santiago to be scolded by a US major for writing about American atrocities in their conquest of the Philippines. During the second world war, he fought the Japanese as a foot soldier in the fox holes and experienced living on two rations of lugaw a day. He narrowly escaped sure death doing intelligence work for the resistance. During the Cold War in the 1950s, he had to leave the number two position in the Department of Foreign Affairs and endure the experience of a raid in his home by a military intelligence team. In the early 1960s, his name was dragged into the rabid anti-communist, McCarthyite investigations staged by the House Committee on Anti-Filipino Activities. There was a point in his life when he could not find work, could not teach (in his words, having been booted out from university to university) , and could not write because he could not get published. At the height of the attacks he directed against Marcos in the early 1970s as a hard-hitting columnist, he feared for his life and actually wrote a letter which he entrusted to friends explaining who would most likely be responsible in case he suddenly disappeared. During martial law, his name was one of the first on the arrest list but the arresting officers took son Renato Constantino Jr. (RC) instead. Renato was placed on house arrest for many months.

Ironically the martial law period and beyond was very productive for Renato and Letty. Aside from many other works and columns, including the **Nationalist Alternative** which according to Red presaged by many decades the call for transitioning to renewable energy, they published

two history books: *A Past Revisited* and *The Continuing Past* and also began working on a third volume, their “third child” according to Letty, “*The Present as Past*.” Their main thesis in all their historical works is this: that the people make history, and therefore, history must be written from their own point of view. They blast the myths propagated by colonial historiographers, specifically those connected with the continued veneration of undeserving heroes. They trace the development of Philippine nationalism through “dialectical progressions” of the people’s struggles against colonialism and thereby expounds on a philosophy of liberation. As they emphasize repeatedly in many of their works, “Nationalism is the ideological base for national liberation, but national liberation is only a step toward real liberation which will do away with all forms of oppression and exploitation.”

Renato’s mass nationalism which relies on the Filipino working people’s collective struggle against neocolonial domination, and later against elite rule, is therefore light years away from that espoused by Hitler, and today by Trump with his America First policy which actually means maintaining and further taking control of vast oil reserves that has led to the US-Israeli war of aggression in the Middle East, and the real possibility of a third world war.

If most of Renato’s works give the impression that he was mostly head and had little heart, that impression is mistaken. Was he a prisoner of ideology of the grim and determined kind, closed to other ways of viewing and experiencing life? Wrong again. He imbibed and studied music from childhood – the first interest which drew him to Letty and she to him, for she could have been a great concert pianist if she had followed her first love. He dabbled in chemistry (so he could concoct all kinds of perfume for her), had an almost obsessive love for tennis, and was a gourmet who would walk the extra mile to find food that he fancied. Sometimes, he would practice his culinary skills learned from his mother to cook for Letty. The books which lined his library reveal a breadth of interest transcending the limits of what men of his age would be expected to tolerate. Feminists will be surprised to find the *Dialectics of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone on one of his shelves. Firestone is known as one of the most radical of radical feminists who advocated sexual freedom, artificial reproduction of the human species, and the abolition of the patriarchal family.

Despite his imperfections, for after all, he was only human, Renato tried to live what he believed in as fully as he could, and to make the best of what he had in terms of human relationships. He dared to love and dared to struggle, emerging from it all as victor and survivor. He bequeathed to his loved ones, as well as to his people, a usable life which they could revisit anytime through his writings.

The third book seems to be Red’s favorite -- my recently launched anthology of poems spanning five decades, written in Filipino and English, entitled “..Dahil ang Bukas ay para sa Mapagkalinga.” It is an overtly ecofeminist collection using a life-cycle approach to reveal a

woman's unfolding and differentiating sense of self. In this book, I mention the decisive influence of Renato's {and then Letty's} writings in the evolution of my belief systems, beginning with my rude awakening reading Renato's essays as an adolescent, my ethical moorings which prioritized non-negotiable integrity, and my understanding of society and how it changed and can change through time. It is important to be an instrument of both freedom (to be "mapagpalaya") and caring (to be "mapagkalinga") in all realms of relationships rooted in love. To be able to achieve what we long for, we need to keep the fire burning in our hearts as well as in our bellies. Renato and Letty kept the fire burning for country and people, fueled by their abiding love for each other and the cause they both pursued with single-minded devotion.

In this sense, Renato and Letty may well be considered among the principal characters in one long epic poem about the birthing of a free and caring society, still unfinished to this day. I offer the poem I am about to read to Renato, inevitably, also to Letty, without whom Renato would not have been who he was. It is also meant for their immediate family, close friends, and fellow travelers belonging to different generations who continue to be moved by their inspiring example. It is what poets call a "poem in a hurry," not given the time to settle and congeal to its ideal form. I will read it just the same, because it comes from the heart.