

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

---

**Paz Marquez Benitez, by Licuanan**

Review Author: Myrna Peña-Reyes

*Philippine Studies* vol. 48, no. 4 (2000): 574–579

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

from the book, but which is also a delight to anyone who wants to read the book out loud, among friends, over dinner.

Finally, Fernandez rounds off paragraphs with such flourish as only master stylists can achieve. In her article on Philippine breakfasts, for example, she ends, "Go ahead then, and enjoy the global breakfasts available in this country, but do heed the wise, and think of healthy combinations with which to break your fast and open the first day of the rest of your life." In Fernandez's prose, as in genuine *haute cuisine*, presentation makes the edible delectable.

If there must be a bone to pick, it would be the use of miniscule type. "That is no country for old men," Yeats once lamented. *Palayok* is no book for old folks, or young ones with astigmatism. In places, Flores' layout and choice of type make the text look like captions for the photos. But to dwell on that point would be to pick a bone, indeed, and why do that when the rest of the feast is exquisite?

All told, *Palayok* is bound to satisfy all but the captious, whom it is impossible to please, anyway. The coffee will never be strong enough for them, and the pot will always be cracked. But like the mystical cauldron of Celtic lore, *this* pot promises—and provides—treats both nourishing and appetizing, whether one is culinary scholar, cultural historian, hotel chef, household cook, *restauranteur*, antiquarian, bibliophile, designer, common reader—anyone who has a taste for the manifold pleasures and varied flavors of Philippine culture. One merely has to lift the cover and peep inside.

Jonathan Chua  
*Department of Interdisciplinary Studies*  
*Ateneo de Manila University*

**Paz Marquez Benitez: One Woman's Life, Letters, and Writing.** By Virginia Benitez Licuanan. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1995.

Not often have I come across a book that offers such delight and pleasure as Ms. Licuanan's tribute to her mother, Paz Marquez Benitez, mother writer, editor, and teacher of writing. This most extraordinary woman, lovely in mind and person, whose unflinching eye saw with joy and courage, compassion and humor, and accepted life's vicissitudes which she faithfully recorded in her diaries, journals, and letters.

Shortly after her mother's death, Ms. Licuanan discovered bundles of her mother's old letters to and from her husband and children which she had kept in an old camphor trunk. Paz's mother had burned her husband's letters after his death ("He wrote those letters only for me"). Unlike her mother, Paz hoarded her letters (explaining in a poem to her daughter)

For some far-off day still in the unknown  
 When reading them once again

And thinking of me long gone,  
 You will know me anew—  
 Not as your mother, as now,  
 But as another woman.

From one woman to another, one human being to another, Paz Marquez Benitez takes the reader into her world. She was an inveterate letter writer whose letters are lessons on that lost art. Sensitively chosen by her daughter "to reflect Paz's personality and move along the story of her life or reveal some interesting slant on the people and events of her times," the contexts of the letters are supplemented with quotations from her diaries and journals, notes she scribbled on scraps of paper, on the backs of used envelopes, as well as the recollections of her family. Like any good writer, Paz filled her letters with details, anecdotes, reconstructed dialogues. Reading them is having a chat with a most interesting, entertaining, and fascinating person.

Born in 1894 in Tayabas (before it became Quezon province), her life was a romp through the country's history, touching such pivotal moments as the Revolution against Spain, Spanish-American War, Philippine Commonwealth, World War II, the young Republic, martial law under Marcos, and the years that followed.

She and her husband, both children of educated and landed families, would live comfortable, upper class lives devoted to teaching. Dean Francisco Benitez, a *pensionado*, was instrumental in organizing the College of Education at the University of the Philippines. Paz, a member of the first U.P. graduating class of 1912, taught writing at the university until she retired in 1951. As a teacher, she was admired and loved, and many first and second generation writers in English would remember her with affection.

Most of the book's letters are those written every week to her only daughter when she was studying in the U.S. from 1937–39. Thorough, Paz supplies, in addition to the date, the time of day she wrote them (morning, evening, noon, 10:30 A.M., etc.), and sketches the setting: "I am here in Room 20, Engineering building, helping watch a Math exam. The sky is overcast and there is a feeling of dampness in the air. I look over the rooftops on the blossom-laden crests of the acacia trees. Their subtle fragrance comes to me on the breeze. It is half after five and cool, with a feel of rain."

She chatted about family, friends, people, events, ideas with enthusiasm and an exuberance that makes them alive; gently reminded her daughter to write to her Lolo, send bread and butter notes, not to make her amusement of other people too obvious; and gave advice on choosing a mate (" . . . ask: After the all-important question, 'do I love him?' this other, 'will he be good for me?'""); and always the teacher, corrected misspellings ("You were careless enough to spell *atento* with two t's"); offered support when her daughter was homesick, pointing out that she needed loneliness to learn, part of "the education of your heart."

Theirs was a wonderful mother-daughter relationship. Greeting her daughter on her birthday: "I think it would be fun to chum around with you for the next forty years."

Many of her letters record events and people we know through history. In a 1913 letter to her then husband-to-be, she writes of attending a function where American Governor General, F. B. Harrison, spoke of his administration's taking steps with "one end in view—the independence of the Philippines." Her sense of humor shows when she continues: "A shake of Mr. Harrison's honorable hand costs a great deal. It cost us three hours waiting on high heels and tight toes, and when we got to the hand at last we were so tired and sleepy we didn't enjoy the shake."

A list of the Benitez's friends, especially before World War II, reads like a who's who in Philippine history: Quezon (in her diaries Paz reproduced delightful dialogues between her and the President who often phoned from Malacañang), Osmeña, Roxas, Quirino, Jose Abad Santos (her husband's best friend), Cayetano Arellano, Recto, Osias, Romulo; as well as famous tycoons, fashion designers, artists, musicians, writers, etc. Paz scrupulously, often humorously, recorded their interaction. With brief strokes, she made the characters come alive: Quezon charming, but also temperamental, foul-mouthed, imperious, suspicious, manipulative; Quirino, a loyal follower, too trusting; scrupulously honest Osmeña, a kind gentleman, excellent dancer (her husband would serve on the Cabinet of his short-lived administration after the war).

Mainly because of her gregarious husband's love of parties/social events where he could engage people in intelligent conversation, the couple had a busy social life. Paz would have preferred a quieter life. She wrote: "I don't have the least desire to go out with the people we usually run around with. I want to be alone these days. I want to think. I want to get a perspective . . . I find that the socially active life we have been leading has given me no time in the last year, to think. That is why I have been so irritable and dissatisfied. I want to find God again—my God. To do that, I have to be at peace."

Her God was not from organized religion, but "that something—God, spirit, principle—from which we sprung," and one must "commune with it, put our trust in it, otherwise we lose spiritual balance and security. This Power or Spirit I know is beneficent, for when we are attuned to it, we are at peace; all petty fears fall away from us, and the larger fears lose their terror." At the same time, she recognized the need for organized religion "not for me because I am incurably unorthodox and will die in unorthodoxy, I hope; but for some—and many of them—it is a necessity. I am reconciled to its being a necessity."

She enjoyed talking with the common folk on her farm. To her perplexed husband's question, "What do you talk about?" she answered, "Many very interesting things." She was unimpressed with the trappings of the rich and famous, eliciting her husband's remonstrance, "Do not discriminate against the rich—they are people, too, you know."

Paz showed compassion and kindness to everyone, but especially to those less fortunate. Her retinue of household help included their relatives, like "Brigida's claw-handed, moronic son Lorenzo, otherwise known as *alimango* (crab)"; an old woman paralyzed on one side who swept and weeded; a young unmarried housegirl helped through her pregnancy, the baby's birth and growing up. Paz addressed her help and other employees as "dear," and made arrangements for their care after her death.

Paz lived in the present for she was always acutely aware of "the sadness of time that goes and of life that passes." Some of the most beautiful and poignant passages in her writings are on loss and memory: "How to recall the joyousness of those days under the old tamarind, the showers of golden petals falling everywhere, the happy chatter—how to recall them in a way that is not words, the mere words that memory becomes when we try to convey them to another." (In 1925, her remarkable short story, "Dead Stars," dealt with the sadness of lost opportunities.)

Paz talks about writing and writers. She mentioned having read *Gone With the Wind* in three hours, and though it "ends on the same fresh, restful note with which it began," she judged it "Not a great book, no." She thought *The Good Earth* "a greater one in spite of . . . dull portions . . . [and] the quasi-Biblical style becomes tiresome and exaggerated also . . ." Then she muses, "Are the old masters . . . really greater than the best our generation has to offer, or were they merely stars of inferior magnitude made seemingly brilliant by the absence of brighter stars? . . . Perhaps we should school ourselves to a purely historical approach to literature: insist that each writer be judged with relation to his background and epoch." One wonders what she thought of the different schools of criticism that came up through the years.

Today's feminists will have to read Paz in the context of her time. At one time, she wrote: "I am truly sorry for every childless woman." Another time when it was suggested that she ran for political office (an idea she rejected), she wrote: "I was astounded at the idea . . . the fact that the women of this country do have political rights." She was expressing the views of a typical pre-1960s woman who was successful in her private and professional life.

Her daughter remembers the good life her parents gave their children in the half-hectare San Juan property which they transformed into an idyllic home with fruit trees and gardens ("gardens are like love: you can't neglect either with impunity"), and a swimming pool. The house was often filled with the happy sounds of family and friends, music, dancing, stimulating conversation at the dinner table where the children learned how to be curious and informed.

In 1939, Paz embarked on her only trip abroad to visit and pick up her daughter who was finishing her studies in the U.S., and to see Europe. In her detailed daily letters to her husband, she made him experience her trip vicariously. (In an earlier letter, she had written: "Travel should mean something

more than viewing sights . . . it should be an enrichment of understanding. That is why I would never wish to travel in countries whose language I did not understand . . . I could comprehend only thru communicating with people.") Her observations of people and their culture were always thoughtful, tempered with her sense of humor. Of Japan: "The very glimpse . . . of the Japanese at home, their home, has filled me with the conviction that sooner or later we shall have to reckon with them. Once independent, we shall never be able to keep them away . . ."; observed their "so fussy" customs officials' non-subservient attitude: "I felt a grudging admiration for these little fellows and the nation they represented. It gave me a malicious pleasure to see these lordly whites meekly filing past and submitting to being questioned. If you wish to see the white man at his haughtiest, watch him traveling in . . . the Far East outside of Japan." To reinforce her presentiment about the danger from Japan, across the Atlantic, she saw a Europe preparing for war.

When war arrived in the Philippines, the Benitez's comfortable life changed overnight. The brief entries in Paz's diaries addressed the uncertainties, fears, and new emotions she and her family experienced. They survived through her resourcefulness: raising mudfish and *kangkong* in the swimming-pool turned fish pond; growing vegetables instead of flowers; raising milking goats, pigs and chickens; bartering for rice with clothing material including her *ternos*.

But mostly, the quest for food and "real news" (not propaganda) occupied them. Paz would reflect: "Freedom! A word that used to be so vaguely beautiful, so full of general hazy implications. Now, I know what it means. It means not having to close my doors for fear the laughter in my house may attract attention, hence disaster. It means not having to lower my voice when speaking of 'the constituted authorities!' It means not having to have permission to come and go."

The account of the birth of her first grandchild is deeply moving, a warm encounter with the unexpected kindness of the enemy.

Though the family survived the war, they had lost friends and families of relatives. In a greatly changed world, the Benitezes picked up their lives and went on with life.

In 1951, the unexpected death of her husband from a heart attack left Paz a widow at 57. Their marriage had been a loving and close relationship, supportive of each other's careers and interests. They were the best of friends, seeking and giving advice, teasing each other, keeping romance alive. After ten years of marriage, she had still been able to write to him: "I know what it is to be hugged and kissed and cuddled close to a big, warm person, and feel his beard and know him in the dark by the smell of him." To this not-too-demonstrative husband, she would write teasingly while on a world tour twenty-five years into their marriage: "I am eager to get home, really . . . to

hear you say all the things I am hungry to hear. I fear, however, you will not say them—You are so inarticulate—or shy—or proud—or stingy? Do say them before the heart gets too old and dead, and before we get used to too much reticence.” She complained that his letters were “bare and completely unsatisfying.” She had also written him when he was away on a trip: “the fact is I miss you an awful lot—more especially the you that is my friend . . . that element alone that couldn’t be found in any other person in the world.”

Though devastated by his death, Paz worked gradually through her grief with characteristic courage, acceptance, and humor. Years earlier in 1938, in a letter to her daughter, she had said: “I think the only way we can deal with sorrow is to grow stronger by it. The dead are beyond our power to aid or reach in any way. There remain only ourselves and our grief. If in thinking back on tragedy we could say, “It has made me stronger, it has enabled me to understand life; it is helping me to live more wisely and fully,” then there is assuagement of pain.”

After her husband’s death, work helped in her healing. Hers had always been a busy life: teaching and writing; co-founding Philippine Womens’ University and St. John’s Academy; overseeing her poultry and mango farms; and editing the *Philippine Journal of Education* [PJE] she has cofounded with her husband, (she had also cowritten a series of history books with him); gardening, taking lessons in music (piano) and French (which she took into her seventies).

Soon after her husband’s death, she retired from teaching, but took on the main responsibility for the PJE. She drastically cut back her social outings and lived quietly, surrounded by her children and grandchildren, attending to her gardens and farms, aging gracefully. Of old age and joy, she wrote: “O for a reserve of joy to draw from in one’s old age to keep us eternally refreshed and young! . . . I do not have it except in all too fleeting exquisite moments. I know what it is—it is a feeling of harmony with the Universe, a Sureness of Faith. A vision of God.” Still, she could say at 78, “But I am not about to address myself to preparing for death nor to postpone it, but to marshaling my forces, keeping them alive and functioning, yielding only what I must, so I, too, the essential Me, will remain alive and functioning to the end.”

She remained informed and engaged to the end. When she died at 89, she had lived a full life, had seen and participated in the march of her country’s history. She was the woman we would have wanted for a mother, a sister, an aunt, a teacher, a friend. Too busy living to write about her life, she would have been proud of this book, her daughter’s offering, a sharing of that life done with sensitivity and nostalgia and love.

*Myrna Peña-Reyes*

Poet

Eugene, Oregon