

TRAVERSING FICTION AND NONFICTION IN TRAVEL WRITING

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In 2009, I received an offer for a rather strange commission. The Instituto Cervantes in Manila was planning to commemorate the centenary of the Spanish poet Miguel Hernandez the following year, and wanted to send three Filipino writers to Spain to visit the places in which Hernandez had lived and worked during his short life, and to each write a travel essay about the experience.

I call it a strange commission because it seemed, and still seems, a rather roundabout way of memorializing a poet's life and work. One would imagine that a centenary edition of his poetry, accompanied by scholarly essays by Hernandezian experts, would have been more apt. Still, I had never been to Spain, and I embrace any opportunity to travel, so I accepted the project and, after a flurry of preparations, found myself en route to Madrid.

It was only when I was finally there that it sank in just how unprepared I was for this endeavor. I spoke very little Spanish, could read even less, and knew next to no one in Spain. I had done some preliminary research into my purported topics, but even then was stymied by the scope of the assignment. Was I to focus on Hernandez and his troubled life? Or was I to concentrate on the country? Or should I use Hernandez's poetry as a lens through which to view Spain?

I have no claims to being a travel writer. Up to that point I had written only fiction and the odd feature article or two about smaller places—restaurants, resorts, cities—never an entire country. Still, I accepted the task with a degree of cockiness, believing, with my fiction writer's bias, that if one can write a decent story, then one can write anything.

The relationship between fiction and nonfiction is, I believe, that of conjoined twins. Forever attached to each other, sharing vital organs and bodily fluids, and living the same life. Well-meaning society-at-large, hell-bent on an orderly taxonomy, would prefer that the twins be separated so

each can function autonomously, with their own individual identities, but to me, it seems physiologically impossible.

The recent to-dos about the fictiveness of certain books and films presented as nonfiction, most famous being the scandal of James Frey and *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), indicate how far we have come from journalist Daniel Defoe, whose realistic novels claimed to be true stories, the better to boost credibility and, therefore, respectability, in an age when romance had become a debased and derided form of reading material.

Further back, conquistadors embellished their logs and journals with fantastical details, to bolster support for their expensive expeditions. Miguel de Cervantes pretended, as did many of the writers of his time, that his *Quixote* was a mere translation of a found manuscript, and repositioned the border between fiction and reality by showing his heroes responding to a world that had read about them in the best-selling first volume and now treated them as celebrities of a sort. In medieval Japan, travel journals were stylized to produce deliberate and specific emotional effects, and autobiographies were presented and read as novels, the precursors of the still popular “I-novels.” Real-life stories of crime and passion were written down and read as sensational potboilers. If we proceed further to the beginnings of narrative, how many of the epic writers believed that they were writing histories for the future generations of their societies?

In a more recent era, the advent of the New Journalism in the United States saw nonfiction writers blurring the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, as in Truman Capote’s nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood* (1966), yet even Capote’s “invented” genre maintains the separateness of the two categories, one merely qualifying the other. These days, the idea of multiple truths arising from multiple subjectivities has gained comfortable purchase in mainstream thought, and we are used to seeing the world as a large gray area. Once reality is filtered or curated by an individual consciousness, what results is a mere version of reality—a fiction, no matter how close to the truth it comes.

As a fiction writer, I often deal with readers seeking to confirm that events in my fictions actually happened, and if they actually happened to me. Readers are all too willing to believe the veracity of something that they’ve read: there is a pleasurable frisson in the certitude that *this really happened*, which accounts for the success of even the most banal biographies, memoirs, or histories. Realism is the point where fiction and nonfiction are joined. It is the union of history and romance, and their children carry their mixed DNA blissfully unmindful of the contradiction.

Writing students are usually taught the value of precise, concrete language, the better to render reality with fidelity and accuracy on the page. In fiction, this skill finds its way into description—the hallmark of realism, which strives to create in words an unimpeachable illusion of reality. Nonfiction writers are taught to use the techniques and tricks of fiction, the better to make the reality they are documenting come alive.

The slippery notions of truth, veracity, and factuality are all that separate these genres of writing, as well as each writer's degrees of commitment to honesty and objectivity. However, I don't believe readers are yet ready to take down the boundaries, and writers find that there are advantages, as well as pitfalls, to having permeable boundaries between these genres, as I discovered while working on the commission.

When I took on the travel essay assignment, I did so as a naïf. While I had read a fair amount of travel literature over the years, I hadn't a clue how to actually write a travel essay, nor could I sense what the finished essay would be like, or what it would be about. Still, I gamely put my best foot forward, and landed in Spain with my senses on red alert, ready to absorb the experience as fully as I could. I had two weeks and a limited amount of funding, which accounts for the frantic urgency with which I initially approached the assignment. Just how much Spain could I take in, given my time and resources?

Not a lot, as it turned out. Through my research, I had decided to limit the range of my tramping to Madrid, where Hernandez had spent several years as a rising literary star and an ardent freedom fighter in the Guerra Civil; to Orihuela, the small city in the Valencia region where he grew up and which figures prominently in his poetry; and to Alicante, where he died and is buried. Packing too much into my itinerary would have reduced the country into a meaningless blur.

In Madrid I would meet with writers and scholars who had studied Hernandez, to obtain leads on “the Spain of Miguel Hernandez,” and in Orihuela I would be hosted by two Hernandiano experts who would tour me around the city and answer any questions I might have.

I had also been advised to avoid the clichés of Spain—the bullfight and flamenco, in particular—in favor of getting at something more “real,” whatever that was. I had read and enjoyed Sir V. S. Pritchett's *The Spanish Temper* (1954), a revered English perspective on Spain, supposedly instrumental in shaping the image of Spain for America and England, as well as Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), which was set during the period of Miguel

Hernandez's guerrilla career. Yet, finding myself in Spain for real, at last, I realized that I needed to find and shape my own perspective on the country, if I was to write about it at all.

This proved quite tricky and fraught with hidden landmines. The Philippines was a colony of Spain for three centuries, and continues to bear the name of the most significant monarch of the Siglo de Oro. While the Philippine Revolution against Spain is much too distant to have any tangible impact on someone of my generation, my nationalist historical education has tended to cast Spain as the oppressive empire from which we had to fight to liberate ourselves. All Filipino students are required by law to read the two novels of National Hero Jose Rizal (*Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*), neither of which cast Spain or Spaniards in a favorable light. It didn't help that Rizal was executed for treason and subversion against the Spanish crown. Spanish language courses, long a requirement of collegiate education, were finally stricken by law from the curriculum, symbolically shutting the door on our colonial past and ensuring that when I arrived in Spain, I would have to carry a phrasebook and dictionary with me at all times.

Although my relationship with Spain is largely secondhand, I harbor a received resentment of the former colonizer. It is a resentment that I am aware of, having felt it bubble up in the wake of an insensitive remark or gesture from Spaniards I have encountered, but I had never had to confront it directly. I felt that using this lens as I worked on this project would be akin to biting the hand that bought my plane ticket and paid my hotel bills, and yet I felt I had to remain loyal to my countrymen. On the other hand, I had jumped greedily at the chance to see Spain at another's expense, so I was somewhat beholden.

This was the nature of the raging inferiority complex that beset me as I took in the wonders of Madrid for the first time. I was overly polite and meek, shunning human contact unless absolutely necessary, gaping quietly as the unfamiliar sights.

In hindsight, this state of mind is readily apparent in the photos I took in Madrid. I fixated on the grand, large edifices, taking them in from a distance, forever looking up at things, as if I had been reduced to a tiny insect on the sidewalk. In the finished essay, I wrote:

In Madrid, it seems clear, even obvious, that such a country could have wanted to rule the world, steadily acquiring half of it, imposing its gargantuan will and its power over nations too weak or clueless to defend themselves. Madrid throbs with pride and confidence, its magnificent

buildings shouting “Look at *me*.” Everything seems designed to be seen from a distance, and strangers are kept at a distance.

The more I thought about the assignment, the stranger it became. Not only did I have to convey my first impressions of an unfamiliar place, but I also needed to consider it alongside its historical existence in the 1920s and ’30s, as well as filter it through the sensibility of a long-dead poet. I grappled with the assignment the whole time I was in Spain and for several months after, as I labored to complete the essay.

To begin with, approaching a place with an assignment in mind already colors the experience, eliminating any aspirations to objectivity one might hold at the onset of traveling. I planned my itinerary with my purpose in mind, and as I traveled about, I mentally categorized things as useful to the project, and therefore worth a closer look, or not. I blinkered myself quite effectively, leaving me with the niggling feeling that I was only experiencing a small fraction of what Spain had to offer. For instance, in my relentless pursuit of the ghost of Miguel Hernandez, I completely forgot about an aspect of Madrid that was closer to home and would have excited me to no end had I remembered—the city had once been the stomping grounds of several 19th-century Filipinos who went there to study and returned home to lead the Philippine Revolution against Spain. Many of their haunts still stand in the old quarter of the city, as well as a few memorials and markers, all of which I realized I must have passed on one of my rambles.

Undoubtedly, my impressions of Spain would have been quite different had I gone in cold, so to speak, without an articulated agenda, and I wonder what sort of essay I might have written had I done so. I recognize that a travel writer is never objective—in a sense, all travel writing is simply the story of a consciousness, a sensibility, moving through a place and an experience, whether or not this entity chooses to reveal itself as an explicit “I” in the narrative.

In my case, my “I” was a newcomer, an outsider unfamiliar with the country, and bearing various other signifiers: Filipino, fiction writer, 21st-century participant-observer. I initially resisted the role, wanting to place the subject matter front and center in my essay, but I quickly realized the futility of such a strategy. Given all the material that has been written about Spain, my own contribution would be insignificant if I did not infuse it with that which only I could contribute to the subject: my own personal, biased perspective. Thus it would not matter if I ended up writing about Spanish clichés, because the clichés would at least have been experienced by and through me.

Embracing this released me from another burden—that of knowledgeable ability. Readers often look to travel writing for information, and in this framework, the travel writer is expected to be an authority, able to provide facts to explain his observations. This was, to me, the most daunting aspect of the assignment—having to know enough about Spain to write about it credibly. The limitations of my self and my travel would undermine all my efforts if I chose to write the essay as an authority on the country. I saw that if I was to write about the subject truthfully, I needed to become an explicit presence in the essay, and to make it *my* story of my trip to Spain.

Thus, acknowledging the narrative underpinnings of my assignment, I finally found myself on familiar ground. On my third day in Spain, in a train hurtling across the plains of La Mancha en route to the Eastern coast, I allowed myself to relax, to stop worrying about what I needed to think about what I was experiencing, and allow sensation and impression to land and take root as they normally would. To a large extent, my itinerary had already been mapped out by Hernandez's life, so all I needed to do was follow it.

The train ride afforded me several hours of idle time, and I was able to take notes continuously in my seat, of the names of stations, the changes in scenery. Would that travel writers could work in this way, ensconced behind glass in a comfortable chair with a convenient tray to write on. But most of the time, to travel is to move constantly, with very little time to sit in the reflective mood necessary to produce coherent writing. This has led me to wonder how much travel writing emerges from the unreliable workings of memory, which creates its own fictions. A detail is selected for retention while one is discarded, often unconsciously. Just how factual did I have to be?

Which brings me to another roadblock: I'm a terrible note-taker. On my previous travels, I have tried to be an assiduous journalist, recording my trip with as much accuracy as I can muster in a travel diary. As with my other attempts at keeping journals, the contents of my Spain diary are typical: an outburst of words and details the first few days, and then the frequency of writing gradually dwindles, to be replaced by scrapbook-style pages covered with ticket stubs, receipts, cards, mementos, pressed leaves and flowers—markers of significant events or stops on the journey that might or might not trigger memories. And then, finally, just lists—inventories of events and places—assembled from memory after I had returned home.

When I have a camera with me, my journal is supplemented and then supplanted by the photos I take to document my trip visually. Usually, when I know that I will only have a limited amount of time in a certain place, I take

photos frantically, foregoing a direct immersion, hoping that I will be able to re-experience the place vicariously through my photographs.

As it happened, the longest part of my trip, some eight days, were spent in Miguel Hernandez's birthplace and the site of his youth. He returned constantly to Orihuela, drawing on it for inspiration and imagery, and it was small enough to explore thoroughly and in a more leisurely fashion. The company of the Hernandiano experts allowed the city to come alive in my imagination and contributed immensely to my historical research.

I sat in the backyard of Hernandez's well-preserved ancestral home, leafing through a collection of his poems. I retraced his steps around town to where he had studied and worked, the street corner where he slipped his wife-to-be a sonnet. Orihuela retains the air of the medieval about it, and it was not difficult to drop back in time and gain a sense of the world as the young Hernandez might have known it. Madrid, with its size and noise, seemed worlds away from this enclave.

Inevitably, as I reconstructed Hernandez's youth, I reluctantly drew parallels between my subject and myself—our writerly ambitions, our small-town origins, our eventual migration to the capital to pursue our dreams. I say reluctantly because I was still unwilling to put so much of myself into my essay, still hoping to efface myself and retain the focus on the poet and his country. But I felt that I had arrived at the most feasible route to my quarry, perhaps the only one, given my limitations.

The breakthrough came when I visited one of Hernandez's favorite haunts. This part of my trip remains the highlight not only for its unexpected wonders, but also for its revelations.

Orihuela lies nestled in the crook of a mountain range, bounded by a river. Its strategic location led Moorish invaders to build a castle fortress atop the mountain, with walls that snaked down the slopes to enclose the city in a protective embrace. On a plateau halfway up the mountain, they built a mosque, since razed and a Catholic seminary built on its ruins. Portions of El Castillo and the walls still stand, and it takes a mere half-hour hike up rocky inclines to attain the summit and an excellent view of the surrounding plains. From the top of the peak, one sees a sweeping panorama of Orihuela, both the old section and the newer districts across the river. To the west, the mountain range continues to the neighboring city. To the east, the ocean glitters in the distance. To the north and south, the plains stretch away to meet other mountain ranges and hills.

It's said that Hernandez liked to stay on the mountain, where he could read to his heart's content while tending his father's goats and sheep. One of the few photographs of him smiling shows him sitting on one of the rocks of the fortress, gazing down. I recalled too that the seminary below had served as a prison during the Guerra Civil, one of the twelve that Hernandez was incarcerated in during his last years. To be held in the darkness of a Franco jail within sight and earshot of his beloved hometown must have been the most exquisite torture for Miguel.

As I stood on the peak, the dawn mist lifted and the city came to life as the sun rose. An odd acoustic effect made the city far below sound extremely close. The sounds of traffic, schoolchildren, market vendors, television sets, and radios wafted up to me on the breeze. I spread my arms to measure the breadth of Orihuela and found that it fit comfortably into a relaxed embrace.

Then the bells of the thirty-three churches in the city began to toll the hour, and in that moment I felt I had come to a kind of ineffable understanding of Miguel's relationship with the city of his birth and why it figured so prominently in his writing. Although I was hard-pressed to articulate my epiphany at the time, I was aware that I had stumbled upon the organizing element of the essay I had to write. Almost immediately, the details of my trip thus far were rearranged in my memory into the beginnings of a structure, and all my subsequent experiences in Spain would be fitted into this armature. I had finally begun to fictionalize.

Storytelling is a sense-making process. The act of narration proceeds in tandem with that of understanding, sometimes even preceding it, as when clarity descends only after one has shared the details of a confusing or distressing experience with a close friend.¹ Because I was no expert on Spain and had no hope of becoming one after a mere fortnight in the country, I realized I had to frame my essay as the story of my search for Miguel Hernandez; and isn't the quest narrative (cf. Joseph Campbell) really the only story one can tell? This gave my essay its ultimate shape, and guided the decisions I later had to make regarding structure.

I had to deal with two sequences of events—that of Miguel Hernandez's life and progress through Spain, and that of my own trip—and they did not align. I had begun, and ended, in Madrid, where Hernandez had spent part of his adulthood, before proceeding to his hometown, and fitting in a day trip to the city of his death and burial, Alicante.

Furthermore, I had decided that my epiphany on the mountain would function as the climax of my quest, as this was the point when I felt that my search had ended. Given the disparities, I needed to bend the facts of my trip and rearrange the sequence of my itinerary to generate some semblance of rising action that could build up to the climax in Aristotelian fashion.

The adoption of a dramatic structure for a piece of nonfiction seemed perfectly natural to me—the most satisfying essays I had read intensified to a high point towards the end, usually through accumulation of information, or at the very least used a punchline of sorts to provide closure.

The problem of how to manage a truthful rearrangement of my itinerary was resolved when I considered the matter of point of view. In fiction, although point of view is usually classified as either 1st-, 2nd-, or 3rd-person, it really is all in 1st person—the storyteller’s position—and the variations arise from the extent to which the narrator makes himself an explicit presence in the narration.

In reality, I worked on the essay from June to October of 2009, looking back at the events of my trip first from the Philippines, then the United States. A biographer or memoirist looking back on history will usually use chronology as an organizing principle, but the most compelling storytellers know that this need not always be the recourse. Because I was no longer narrating as I experienced the trip, but from a distance of time as well as space, I was free to allow my mind to shuttle back and forth across chronological time, using my consciousness moving through memory to generate the thread of my narrative. Although I am no great fan of Proust, I am indebted to the nonlinear blossoming of memory into story that he made famous.

The finished essay thus moves from memory to memory as the narrating “I” recounts the quest for Miguel Hernandez through contemporary Spain. The narrating “I” digresses into opinion, biography, history, and literary criticism along the way, drawing together the disparate aspects of the assignment, coaxing them into the chosen structure.

As in fiction writing, nonfiction makes use of three modes of narration: summary, description, and scene. The functions of summary and description in essays are straightforward and familiar enough, but in a piece of fiction, these modes represent the dull bits. Summary is generally used to speed through stretches of story time during which nothing is happening, and description is akin to hitting the pause button on a video player, freezing action and halting momentum to examine in detail. Scenes, in comparison, slow down the narration enough to render a scene beat by beat, but maintain

momentum by delivering the event as it happens, imbuing it with immediacy. To make my experience of Spain come alive on the page, I needed to render certain incidents as scenes, but in doing so I needed to walk the line between fiction and nonfiction again.

Using an old storyteller's trick, I begin the essay with my trip to the nearby city of Alicante to visit the tomb of Miguel Hernandez—the chronological end of Hernandez's life, the midpoint of my trip, and the falling action of my quest narrative. A train ride and a bus ride took me outside city limits to the Cementerio Municipal Nuestra Señora del Remedio. My poor understanding of Spanish led me to Hernandez's old tomb—really just a niche among many, in a wall among many, like condominiums for the dead. I had bought some roses from a florist outside the cemetery, and laid them on the ledge of the niche, which oddly had no marker, just the words “Miguel Hernandez Poeta” scratched into the cement. I found it terribly undignified, and a quick phone call to one of my guides in Orihuela corrected my error. I retrieved my roses and found the correct tomb in a small fenced-in memorial that I had passed earlier.

None of this made it into the essay, although this was what really happened. I had no desire to highlight my ineptitude and call attention to my taking back of my floral offering, or my solemnities at an empty grave. I do mention the former resting place, but only to compare it to the more appropriate memorial. There was also the problem of pacing—taking my reader through the entire laborious process would have taxed their patience, since I needed to get to the point. Clearly, a certain amount of selection and glossing over was called for, but I could not help feeling pangs of guilt at betraying reality.

At the tomb, I was approached by an elderly woman who wanted to see what I was photographing so avidly. She recognized the name of Miguel Hernandez and began to speak to me in rapid-fire Spanish which I could not follow. I'm not quite sure why, but I pretended to understand her and offered a variety of nods, smiles, neutral grunts, and sighs to indicate I was listening. She might have noticed my dissemblance; I'll never know. I was struck, however, by the passion she showed upon recognizing Hernandez. She appeared familiar with him and lingered to read the poetry inscribed on the memorial aloud. I realized I needed to include this encounter in my essay without sacrificing the air of confident authority that I had to establish as the travel writer. This is how I ended up rendering the scene:

As I stand there regarding the tomb in silence, a lady in a pink tailored suit, stooped with age, her hair silvered by the years, passes by, carrying a bucket of water. She sets the bucket down to rest and looks at me curiously, and then at the tomb.

“Ah, Miguel Hernández, *el poeta*,” she exclaims, gesturing at the tomb.

Caught off-guard, and failing to muster the little Spanish I know, I can only murmur a faint “*Sí*.”

She begins speaking rapidly, her hands waving in the air, half to me, and half to the world in general. I compose my features in an expression of attentiveness and nod from time to time. I haven’t the heart to tell her “*No hablo español*,” guessing that it’s unlikely that she can speak in English. I have no idea what she’s saying, but the tone of her voice suggests recognition and rue.

Finally she falls silent and we contemplate the tomb together. She reads the poetry inscribed on the tomb aloud, haltingly, as though testing how the words feel in her mouth. “*Libre soy. Siénteme libre. ¡ Sólo por amor.*”²² Absorbing the words’ meaning, she repeats the lines, and they become her own. She makes another rueful noise, smiles at me, and continues on her way, still talking and gesticulating with her free hand.

Not quite the whole truth, and perhaps I had been unfair to load a chance, casual encounter with as much significance as I did. However, I felt that my dramatization had arrived at a kind of truth, one that was necessary to my essay. There was no one else near us at the time, and what were the chances of this woman happening upon my essay, reading it, and contesting my version of events?

I felt that I would be safe from accusations of falsification, and yet the deliberate liberties I took with reality continued to bother me, more than my rearrangement of chronology. I recalled the infamous story of Janet Cooke, who fabricated a Pulitzer-Prize-winning story for the *Washington Post* in 1980 and was forced to return the prize and resign in shame. I imagined how I would react to being censured by Oprah on a live television show.

And yet my decision seemed correct. I had taken some creative license to make myself look less foolish and to streamline my essay, but it did not feel dishonest. I wasn’t writing news, or history, and biographers have been known to insert full-blown scenes into their accounts, complete with quoted dialogue, where they would have had no way of knowing or recording what had actually been said or done. Truman Capote and Norman Mailer had taken far greater liberties in their own fiction-nonfiction hybrids.

James Frey claimed that his publisher had slapped the word “memoir” on a novel. It both matters and doesn’t matter at the same time. Perhaps it is a problem of labeling, of representation, and yet the boundary between fiction and nonfiction continues to stand and continues to be taken seriously by readers, even as writers pass back and forth freely and, perhaps, surreptitiously. It is a boundary that is constantly negotiated with each new piece of writing, and is perhaps just as fictional as the stories it polices.

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of narration as sense-making, see Yiannis Gabriel’s *Storytelling in Organizations: Facts, Fictions, and Fantasies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31-58.

2. From Miguel Hernandez’s “Antes del odio” in his *El cancionero y romancero de ausencias* (1941).