

# “Speak, Memory”: The Joy of Interviewing Writers



Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero's love of theater began when at ten or eleven, he was taken as “chaperone” by mother and aunt to watch a Spanish dramatic troupe at the Opera House. Trinidad Tarrosa and Abelardo Subido wrote each other sonnets in the *Philippine Collegian*, eventually married, and published a book called *Two Voices*. N.V.M. Gonzalez writes on a computer, because “. . . if you have a machine that functions beautifully, it does not only start the ‘flow’ but sustains it.” Carlos Angeles has retired in Los Angeles with his children and grandchildren, but misses *dalag* grilled on coal “served with a salad of unripe tomatoes with onions and vinegar, and with sugar,” and very hot rice.

Sinai Hamada used to be paid ₱10 for one short story — at a time when a cup of coffee cost two centavos, and *pan de sal* was one centavo. Pacita Pestaño-Jacinto first saw her husband, Dr. Oscar Jacinto on the *tranvia*; he liked to stand by the motorman, and she liked to take the first seat up front. Manuel Viray waxes nostalgic about a downtown panciteria called Wah Hing, near the old *Manila Times* office on Florentino Flores, where he and other writers used to hang around. Astrologer Serafin Lanot, on the other hand, says that his group used to hang out in the cabarets (“Why not? Quezon, Avelino, Roxas — they all went out cabarets which were supposed to be ‘decent.’”).

Dominador Ilio has all his life combined the writing of poetry with the teaching of hydraulic engineering, while Renato (Katoks) Tayag always was a lawyer and chronicler of Angeles City life. R. Zulueta da Costa lost jobs because of the “Anti-Americanism” of his poem “Like the Molave,” winner of the 1940 Commonwealth Award. Armando Malay went directly to the *Tribune* from graduation on the invitation of Fernando Maramag, who had learned that Malay was suspended from the UP for a critical piece entitled “Journalism Students Go on TVT Tour; Learn Nothing.”

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How do I know all these facts not to be found in these writers' stories or biographies? By interviewing them, that's how, and discovering that the interview not only nets you vignettes of human life, but gets you into the memories, inside the skin and person of the interviewee.

"Oral History," was what historians called it, when they realized that history had always been written from the records of the elite — the generals who directed the war (not the soldiers who shot it out); the big shots of government (not the underlings who toiled). Why not ask the little guys what they thought and felt? They asked; and thus was born "history from below."

In our case, my co-author Eddy Alegre thought: how can one retrieve all the information about Filipino writers that lies between their stories and their biographies? How can one find out what got them started writing, who or what their models were, why they wrote in English, who published them, etc.? Thus was our first book of oral history, *The Writer and His Milieu* (1984), born. That book focused on the first generation of writers in English, and on one memorable day, we interviewed S. P. Lopez, who had been reluctant, saying that Shakespeare had never had to speak into a tape-recorder. During the interview, S. P. was so engrossed in reliving the past that he never even noticed that a typhoon raged outside, or that the lights went out. On the same day, when Bienvenido Santos was asked, "Why do you write in English?" he answered, "... why not? ... I think I fell in love with the sound of the English Language."

Oral history, or the retrieval of data through the interview, enshrines the tape recorder as instrument of history, and introduces technology into research. We shamefacedly admit now that, as greenhorns, we made the standard mistakes. The cassette recorder had weak batteries when we interviewed Loreto Paras Sulit, and we had to repeat the interview. Another time Dr. Rotor and Franz Arcellana were so carried away in conversation that we ran out of tape, and had to borrow one from Emma Rotor. Now that we are working on our second volume (writers of the second generation), we know: always carry spare batteries for the tape recorder and camera flash, spare film, spare tape. Unwrap the tape before the interview, because precious words are lost as one fumbles to take the cellophane off and reload the recorder.

(The second volume was launched Aug. 12. Published by De La Salle University Press, it's now available in all bookstores.)

### *Listening Presence*

The ethics of interviewing requires that the subject be fully informed about the reason and thrust of the interview. "We are trying to bridge the gap between writers' biographies and their works to find out the circumstances of their development as writers," we started, very formally, when interviewing Pacita Pestaño-Jacinto in her Forbes Park Home. Franz Arcellana, who knew all about our work, to which he was godfather and adviser, began: "Okay? You want to ask me questions, right?"

The technique requires that the interviewers not ask obvious questions, like "What stories have you written, Dr. Tiempo?" since the information can be obtained from books. Instead, after extensive background research, one zeroes in: e.g., noting almost two years 1933 and 1935 stories, we ask why the gap, why the change, and Franz answers, "You know, that's a very nice question," and proceeds to explain. We found out that we had to be "listening presences," completely tuned in, interested in, and informed about our writer-subjects. This focused attention made them open up, recollect, organize, and interpret the past, making it alive again. Our being writers much younger than they also made them see things anew, and often in a different perspective. "It's only now that I'm talking to you that I'm going back to all these things. Actually, you started me off..." said Carlos Angeles in the Los Angeles Playboy Club, the unlikely setting for our interview.

Manuel Viray asked *us* questions, not only the *what* of writing today, but the *so what*.

The first joy of interviewing comes from the warmth of memory — N.V.M. Gonzalez remembering that when he was given ₱3 by his grandfather ("Go ahead, spend it as you please!") he bought his first book: *Webster's Vest Pocket Dictionary*. Abe Cruz, now known raconteur and gourmet, remembers his first taste of *marron glace* ("like camote") in a fluted cup, in a theater, with his father: "I think that was when I really became conscious of gastronomy — food could not only be delicious, but beautiful."

Joy, too, is all the data that will be valuable for future students and teachers of literature, and for literary historians — data that helps in the interpretation of literature which, as N.V.M. Gonzalez says, prepares for the interpretation of life. Ricardo Demetillo, for example, explains the spiritual quest behind all of his volumes of poetry. Carlos Angeles reveals that his poems are made by images “*na nagsasalpukan*,” bumping into and shaping each other. Edith Tiempo speaks of how she shapes composite characters, about “the heightened consciousness” beneath her poetry.

Still another thrill comes from the way the interviews flesh out the period, the milieu in which these writers wrote. Narciso G. Reyes talks of how lonely it was, being the only writer from UST, and how he liked being one of the Veronicans, the writers who gathered in Nanding Ocampo’s house, published a mimeographed magazine called *Story Manuscripts*, and named themselves after St. Veronica’s Press. Armando Malay, of the first of the UP writers to commit to journalism, talks of the newspaper offices: The *Tribune* on Florentino Torres, the Herald at Intramuros, under a neon sign with a rooster symbol. Their joke: Where is the DMHM office? Where the chicken is.

### *Language of Maturity*

One also realizes the way the educational system supported and nurtured writers. Bright students for the provinces, like Dominador Ilio, Serafin Lanot, and Sinai Hamada, came to the city and, on the strength of their school records, got into university, and into the school papers or magazines. Many (Arcellana, Hamada, Tayag) name the teachers who got them started writing — most prominently Paz Marquez Benitez, who had belonged to the first Freshman class of the UP, and graduated in 1912.

The use of language, of the English that had been introduced only two decades before they began writing, is revealed in these interviews. Both Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero and R. Zulueta da Costa began writing in Spanish, the language of the home, but went on to write their works of maturity only in English. Sometimes the English retains the vernacular nuance, as in Renato Tayag’s Pampango-flavored English, and suggests what “Filipino English” might be. The fast, journalistic clip of Armando Malay, the diplomatic cadences of Narciso G. Reyes,

and the special, personal rhythm of Franz Arcellana's remembering—all outline the English spoken by Filipinos, an English born in schools, but bred and developed through the handling of Philippine experience.

Doing this second book of oral history, *Writers and Their Milieu* (we changed title because Lindy Aquino called our first title sexist), we further realized that what we had on tape — and eventually on typewritten transcripts — was not only history, but literature. After we had edited the transcripts (for spelling, consistency, coherence), we submitted them to the writers for checking, revising, permission to publish. Some, like Demetillo and Ilio, just checked terms and dates. Trinidad Tarrosa Subido compressed, tightened, and edited the copy. Edilberto Tiempo and Pacita Pestaño-Jacinto rewrote portions, while N.V.M. Gonzalez not only read out passages from a forthcoming book during the interview, but also rewrote — thus making the texts both oral and written.

### *Tape Goes to Type*

Since, however, these interviewees were writers, the final texts showed not only writer and milieu, or even literary theory and purpose, but also the writers' language, minds — their thinking, the substrata of their thinking — and hearts. This — the literature that results from interviews, and thus from oral interaction — is shaped both by the past milieu as well as by the present, in which the questions are asked and the answers given. Tape thus goes to type and ends in text.

Nick Joaquin, who instead of an interview, offered a foreword called "The Way We Were," speaks of it the books and stories he read, and the writers he knew, and especially of how the milieu got into his writing — "Because I was a writer conscious of his milieu, I wanted that milieu projected in my work." How well he succeeded, everyone knows, who has read and still reads Nick Joaquin as literary artist and as daily newspaper columnist. He ends: "If I tell my readers that the best compliment they can pay me is to say that they smell *adobo* and *lechon* when they read me. I was smelling *adobo* and *lechon* when I wrote me."

We interviewers were smelling *adobo* and *lechon*, and tasting Wah Hing and cabarets, and walking through the old UP Padre Faura, and the National Library in the old Congress building — as we asked questions and listened to answers; as we taperecorded and transcribed, and put this book of writers' memories together.

Should we perhaps have called it "Speak, Memory?" as Nabokov did? ↪