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An Experience in Literary Oral History

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An Experience in Literary Oral History

DOREEN G. FERNANDEZ

In the files relating to our book, *The Writer and His Milieu*¹, an oral history of Philippine writers in English, is a note from short story writer Francisco Arcellana, which says:

What a wondrous thing this is after all, what a wonderful thing! I can only hope it will do some good, it will; it will; it's some worth, it is, it is . . . I know I'm clutching at straws, straws in the wind? straws for the fire! But what wispy warmth! what lovely light! Thanks.

The wondrous thing (even more wondrous to us than to him) is oral history — oral literary history.

"Sometimes," *Time* magazine says, "oral history is an art; sometimes it is merely mouth-to-mouth resuscitation."² After more than forty interviews with thirty-five Filipino writers in English of the first and second generations, after a collection of about a hundred tapes, and a two-foot high pile of transcripts both raw and edited, we thought that it was time to speak of the experience, both to evaluate the process and the methodology, and lay out our findings, mistakes, and triumphs for other oral historians and researchers to possibly profit from.

RATIONALE

The project began as an idea of Dr. Edilberto N. Alegre, my co-author. He wanted to interview Angela Manalang-Gloria, one of

1. Edilberto N. Alegre and Doreen G. Fernandez, *The Writer and His Milieu* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1984). A second volume is forthcoming in 1987.

2. Stefan Kaufer, "Periclean Age of Celluloid," *Time*, January 13, 1986, p. 51.

the first Philippine lyric poets in English. The reclusive and elusive Angela Manalang-Gloria had been my mother's high school classmate. I offered to make the connection, since in the Philippines, the entry point into research, field work, a community, or an interview for oral history, often determines the success of the enterprise. I caught Angela Manalang Gloria "in flight," so to speak, on a brief visit to Manila, and she granted me a telephone interview with promise of a later meeting. It was over the phone that I asked, "How did you begin to write poetry?" And she answered, "I just wanted to write lines that rhymed."

From then on, I was captivated and became a partner in the enterprise. The purpose of the project was to learn what made these Filipino writers begin to write and why in English, a language that had barely been introduced into the Philippines. How did they begin to want to write in this new language? Who were the teachers who introduced writing or encouraged their efforts? What were the curricula, courses, assignments in which this happened? What was the receptive milieu? What were the papers and magazines? Who were the editors who accepted, invited, coddled them? How was this done? How much were they paid? How did it feel to have a story accepted or rejected? Where, when and with whom did they discuss their writings? Were literary assemblages or discussions held in schools, homes, clubs, restaurants? What were the models used consciously or unconsciously? What were the sources and the influences? What did they think of each other's work? Did they discuss these, criticize each other? Where did their critical perspectives come from? Who were the literary gurus? Where did their consciousness of English start? of literary language? What were the contributory factors in their homes, hometowns, elementary and high schools, family environments? Was English a first language? a second? If the latter, how was the transition made from the home language to the "school," then literary language?

Obviously, the information sought could not be found through ordinary historical research, or in the standard historical sources. Baptismal and birth registries, school records, periodicals in which the authors published, collections of some of their canon, periodical articles on them and their work, would provide information on the lives and the literary work, but not on the shaping influences, or the creative forces. Oral history, or the face-to-face interview, was the obvious solution.

The purpose of this oral history project, therefore, was to capture a milieu, to explore the interstices between biography and literary work, to discover the so-far unnamed circumstances that caused a literature to be born in a new era, in a foreign language, in a native setting in which there previously had been a medley of vernacular literatures, mostly and largely in the oral tradition, and a brief literature in Spanish.

METHODOLOGY

It soon became obvious that a list of questions might be practical but not effective, because they would overwhelm the narrator and quite possibly impede the flow of memory. What we needed was to unlock the floodgates, to have the writers remember, if possible with pleasure, the days when they began writing, so that they would recapture the feel as well as the facts and bring to light nuances that we could not possibly know to ask about. We also needed to grow in understanding of the milieu, because all the stories and poems read, and doctorates in literature earned, did not add up to a time machine.

The method we evolved, therefore, was to engage first in historical research and literary study, to steep ourselves in the biographies and canons of the interviewees beforehand, and then, during the interviews, to have these and the questions in mind but not in hand and to make ourselves practically invisible as persons and literary researchers. What we were, what we knew, what we had read, did not matter. What mattered was to be focused, listening intelligences receptive to data, information, nuance, suggestion, allusion, implication, metaphor, even to dissembling, just as if we were reading literary texts, which indeed the interviews were.

In the concrete, the work was divided thus: Ed Alegre was in charge of the detail work. He reread all the stories, searched through the magazines and journals and located as many old works as possible, even juvenilia. Sometimes this astounded the narrators: "Sonnets? I wrote sonnets?" exclaimed essayist S.P. Lopez. And then, glowing, ". . . if a writer doesn't begin by writing love poetry, he won't amount to very much." I was responsible for sketching out the literary context (the forest for Alegre's trees), for making and confirming appointments, on the principle that

the right connection often makes all the difference, tending the tape-recorder and keeping supplies of tapes and batteries on hand, taking photographs, and usually making the opening small talk so necessary in the Philippine setting (about mutual acquaintances, families, other writers – the preliminaries that reassure the narrator and place the interviewers in context).

The interviews themselves generally began with a statement of the rationale of the project adjusted to the temper and familiarity of the narrator: "How did you become a writer? Where did you begin?" we asked poet Serafin Lanot. But Franz Arcellana, having been our principal adviser, and therefore knowing all about the project, began: "Okay? You want to ask me questions, right?"

The interviews were usually done in the narrators' homes, but occasionally in their or our offices, depending on availability, and such factors as the presence of noisy air-conditioners, typewriters, or other people. Sometimes the "other people" were necessary and helpful, as when novelist Bienvenido Santos, quoting Angela Manalang's poetry, and my mother, giggling at their girlish memories, helped draw her out. Or when Emma Unson Rotor sat quietly by the made an occasional comment, illustrating the supportive, companionable intelligence with which she had seen master short story craftsman Dr. Arturo Rotor through his long and shining career.

Some interviews went well despite all manner of unfavorable circumstances. A storm knocked the power out while we were interviewing S. P. Lopez, and so powerful was the rush of memory that he never even noticed that we were sitting in the dark. In the same storm, with the wind whirling and whining outside, Bienvenido Santos gave the first of three luminous and memorable interviews. He had just buried his wife, and when he said that he did not know if he still could write after having lost his primary audience, we knew it was a plea for assurance as much as it was a question. Poet Carlos Angeles spoke quite freely in the Playboy Club in Los Angeles; Franz Arcellana in a borrowed board room at the Ateneo de Manila University Press.

We learned from experience not to be impatient with silences. Bilingual short story writer Casiano Calalang, painfully shy and with a very low opinion of his own achievements, gave hesitant and laconic answers which, in retrospect, are like jewels of understatement and suggestion, and for Ed Alegre have yielded the richest lode for the study of Philippine writing in English.

We learned that the most important thing about the interview was to listen in complete openness, forgetting preconceptions and literary judgements, and just allowing ourselves to interact humanly with the writer. The receptiveness of the listening, the quality of the understanding, was what opened up those veins of memory, and allowed the writers to speak without fear or dissembling. "It's very good to meet with people who really understand writers . . . !" exclaimed poet Edith Tiempo. It was the fact that we consulted no cards, and jotted down no notes, but listened with all our senses, that eased the interaction. "I like your style . . . not even a yellow pad in sight," wrote poet R. Zulueta da Costa.

We allowed the writers to lead us up and down the byways of memory, even if the route was circuitous. Later, we could always return to the matter on hand or delete the unnecessary in the transcript. A detour or tangent not only brought in unexpected and welcome information, but helped by easing the flow, building the relationship between interviewers and interviewee. Hardly any moment could be called a waste. If data about childhood, childbirth, hometown, other interests, seemed later irrelevant to the literary milieu, it could be deleted from the transcript, but in the telling it had made bonds grow, and that was valuable to the process.

PROCESSING THE TAPES

The tapes, labelled as to narrator, date and place, were then submitted to our invaluable secretary, Carolina Diyco, who used a Sanyo transcriber in the transcription of the tapes. Her method was to take them down by hand, then type them, and make a final auditory check. She left blanks where she could not understand the words or phrases, and approximated spellings she was not sure of. She became such an expert that the last few tapes were practically letter-perfect by the time she was through with them.

The next step was an auditory check by Ed Alegre, in which he corrected spelling, names, and foreign or literary words or phrases that Lina had not been able to catch. At this time he would make a preliminary editing, marking those passages that were extraneous to the subject matter of "writer and milieu" and might be deleted.

The preliminary word-processing was done next, and this included my textual editing. Obvious repetitions were eliminated; extraneous material was deleted; sentence fragments and names were completed with bracketed material; unclear portions were marked; names, dates and titles were checked. Furthermore, since a decision had been made to produce English texts for circulation even outside the Philippines, Tagalog portions of the texts were either translated in equivalent idiomatic level or partly translated, translated, with the rest underscored. Only a limited amount of code-switching was allowed to remain, in consideration of the projected English-speaking audience for the book.

The word-processing was done on an AES Alphaplus, and all the interviews stored on diskettes. Two copies of each interview were printed out, one to serve as control copy, and the other to be sent to the narrator for checking. This was accompanied by a letter which asked the interviewee to check, correct, clarify, delete, as he/she saw best, with the assurance that only what he authorized would be published. The letter usually also expressed the interviewers' gratitude for and pleasure in the interview, not only as an acknowledgement of the favor, but also to make the narrator realize the value of the interview as it was, and thus forestall the temptation to rewrite extensively, and thus destroy the oral quality of the interaction.

TEXTUAL EDITING

After the transcript had been returned by the narrator, the final editing was done on the word-processor. Consultations were made back and forth by the interviewers. Decisions were made, for example, (reluctantly) to cut down the fifty-nine pages of E. Aguilar Cruz's interview because, even though the subject was a superb raconteur and entertained wittily with stories of his father's adventures hunting crocodiles, and Pampanga folk life, the congenial conversation had often strayed far afield of the writer's milieu, and a too-hefty manuscript might not ever find a publisher.

One transcript presented a very individual problem. The narrator had gone through very much personal stress, and the interview had often focused on personal problems to some degree of incoherency. Leaving the transcript as it was meant presenting a somewhat incomprehensible text. The interviewers could under-

stand it, because they had been there, and had seen the agony and the stress. Editing was therefore done to render the text comprehensible even to a reader unconscious of the underlying problems, and the text sent to the narrator who returned it with a pleased letter, which showed that the editing had indeed been judicious and justified.

The sixty-eight-page transcript of the Franz Arcellana interview was left uncut, because Prof. Arcellana's understanding of oral history and long friendship with the interviewers had produced a lucid, rhythmic, relaxed (and very candid) interview that was like a poem. Cutting it would have been mutilation, and would have affected the timing and the temper of the text. The use of names, complete with middle initial, the swing and heft of phrase and repetition; the expression of feeling — all brought the milieu to life, filled in the spaces, suggested color and nuance in a way only a literary artist could.

THE USES OF ORAL LITERARY HISTORY

After the taping, the transcribing, the preliminary and final editing, and the transmutation into typed copy, what had happened was, more than the retrieval of data, the actual creation of a text. Even if the narrators had not been literary men (if they had been, say, textile workers or farmers) the oral discourse would have constituted texts. But since the interview subjects were poets and fictionists, the texts usually had a literary quality, or at the very least, reflected a quality of language.

The interviews were therefore not only the raw material for history; they were literature as well, new texts where there had been none, texts created by the interviewers' probing, the verbal interaction, the narrators' reaction and remembering.

There was, in effect a dialogical process. The interviewers, by bringing in through questions their perceptions of a literary period, a literary artist, and his literary output, had awakened what had been a closed, past world. The writer's perceptions were revived and sometimes altered by the interviewers' questions and attitudes. Memory, sometimes faulty, but more often quite alive, was searched, sometimes checked, explored successfully or unsuccessfully. In the process, the interviewers gained in understanding and appreciation, while the interviewee, primed by both

understanding and appreciation, came to see the past world anew. The curiosity of present teachers, students, researchers, provided new light in which to see a past structure of literary standards, reactions, interactions. Discourse occurred, discourse was created, and because the interviewee was a literary artist, a literary text was born.

To what uses can this text be put? *First*, and at the surface, it can be mined for the data provided on the literary milieu. The teachers, the courses, the writing models and exercises, the literary standards presented or upheld, the authors read or admired, the contemporaries who mattered, the venues of publication, the editors who accepted literary work, the standards of payment, the alternatives to literary writing that started to open up (journalism, public relations, film scripts, teaching, publicity, speech-writing, etc.), the Japanese Occupation and its effect on writing and writers' lives, the study abroad and the new mentors found in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the prizes and awards, the groupings and gatherings of writers, the meeting places and clubs, the controversies and alliances, the attitudes to English and to the vernaculars, the creative process for each writer, the writer in the present, and his perception of writing in general and in particular — sifting all this, and all the other related data out of the interviews would provide the raw material for the literary history of the period and also for social history, and the biographies of the writers, and the history of ideas. That is the most obvious use of these interviews, and the probable reason *The Writer and His Milieu* has been assigned reading in a number of literature courses.

A *second* use, however, would be the texts as literary statements, and therefore material for literary criticism. In them one can find the literary ideals and standards of each writer and of the period. What was Arturo Rotor trying to do when he wrote "Zita"? If Villa was the literary arbiter because of his Roll of Honor, what were his literary tenets? Why does Narciso G. Reyes think "Lupang Tinubuan" worked better than his other stories? Why was it written in Tagalog? What does NVM Gonzalez think of it? What made Serafin Lanot notice the first poem submitted by Nick Joaquin to his magazine? What is Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero's chief concern in the shaping of a play? Where does Carlos Angeles get his images? What models and motives made Zulueta da Costa write the poem, "Like the Molave," that won

the Commonwealth Award? What does Franz Arcellana think of his own famous "Divide by Two"?

Third would come the interest of the ordinary human in people, and thus the reading of the interview texts as voice-prints, character-prints perhaps, of unique and interesting people. When we interviewed S. P. Lopez, it was always the public man who came to the fore, his speech in well-constructed paragraphs, organized and punctuated. He had actually objected to being interviewed at first, arguing that Shakespeare had never had to speak into a tape-recorder, and thus had not had to expose stupidities and hesitations. But when he did speak into the machine, however, S. P. Lopez realized that this was the way to order, and re-order, one's life, and understand its twists, turns and directions.

Quite different was Bienvenido Santos, who never for a moment was anything but the private, warm human being, glowing with memories, aware of his fears and doubts, unafraid to hold them out to virtual strangers, seeing past privations and past joys with humor and gratitude. In the first book, he is the hands-down favorite of students, casual nonliterary readers, and critics like Epifanio San Juan, Jr., who all react to the human as well as to the literary artist.

In our second book, now in process, we have been fascinated by the humorous narrations of Serafin Lanot, who speaks in whole dialogues (amazing that he never thought to write a play) of a sprightly, whimsical rhythm. He considers himself a lucky man, and recounts his bumping into people, jobs, good fortune, new experiences — as he nonchalantly walks down the street — guided, of course, by the stars and planets, since his consuming passion is astrology. Also speaking in dialogues, but of a different temper, is Rafael Zulueta da Costa, whose speech has a brisk irreverence, with an occasional rapier gleaming through. The master raconteur and wit is certainly E. Aguilar Cruz, who rambles on about Pampanga, folklore, art, language, French literature because he is "making up for lost company," a phrase he (to our regret) changed to "making up for silences." The speech of ordinary people is interesting enough; the speech of writers known to most Filipinos, read through their schooldays, revealing themselves as the humans they are or the people they hope to be — certainly this would contribute to understanding of their work, and assuage our unending curiosity about people.

Fourth would be the potential of these texts for the study of the quality of the English language as employed by Filipino writers. Not only can the texts be studied for allusion, metaphor, turn of phrase, and connotation, but also for the use of idiom, for speech and word patterns, the adaptation between vernacular thought and English expression, the regional flavors given the living English tongue. The placement by Pampango narrators of "also" and "already," for example, is generally at the end of the sentence. Spanish nuances give the English of Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero and Zulueta da Costa a particular flavor. Dominador Ilio is a Visayan writing in English. Sinai Hamada writes from a background of Ibaloy and Ilocano. E. Aguilar Cruz, by his admission, has English of a nineteenth century flavor, and Ricaredo Demetillo acquired his speech rhythms from sermons he had to write as a student preacher. Linguistic analysis of these transcripts of actual speech (with some written interference via editing) should yield valuable conclusions about Filipino and regional English, or perhaps about the English of the college-educated literate Filipino in a particular time and place.

The *fifth* function of these tapes would be to reveal that which the words do not say, the perceptions of the writers of their craft, their art, their time, their world. Why does a writer write? What vision of the world has made him choose a craft with so chancy a future, such flimsy rewards? What attitudes to reality outside the poem or the story bolster those seen in his literary work? What kind of a universe lies beneath the landscapes of Carlos Angeles, the Benguet land of Sinai Hamada, the Mindoro fields of N.V.M. Gonzalez, the *lupang tinubuan* of Narciso G. Reyes? What perception of a woman's role shaped the writing of Maria Luna Lopez? Trinidad Tarrosa Subido? Angela Manalang Gloria? What is the spiritual quest of Ricaredo Demetillo? The pristine world that one glimpses in the novels of Edith Tiempo? The dark vision of Manuel Viray? What song is being sung in Franz Arcellana's "Trilogy of the Turtles"?

The manuals of oral history tell us that the work is accomplished once the tapes are made, transcribed, indexed, catalogued, stored, and perhaps edited. Preparation for publication, and publication as texts, are not necessarily the work of the oral historian. We have taken our interviews of Filipino writers in English to the final stage, however, their publication as finished, polished,

edited texts, because, with literature the discipline in which we have been bred, and literary analysis the tool of our profession, we must confess to being especially interested in the end-uses of this product.

This is a project that has presented rewards at every stage: at the taping stage, the interaction with the writers, and the growing understanding of the men in the milieu; at the transcription stage, the perception of the qualities of mind and tongue; and at the finish, with the completed texts, material for literary history, literary criticism, character analysis, linguistic exploration, and entry into individual universes. Even more than this, our perceptions of literature and our experience of people have been vastly enriched by the friendships gained with such luminous personalities as Bienvenido Santos and Dr. Arturo Rotor; Narciso G. Reyes and Franz Arcellana. Our experience in the preparation of two books on writers and their milieu show that historical research and literary study are given a special human face by the method called oral history. The method puts voices, faces, human perceptions, and fresh light on the facts of history.

To quote Franz Arcellana again — "What lovely light! "