

# IN HIS OWN WORDS: AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCISCO ARCELLANA ON JOSE GARCIA VILLA<sup>1</sup>

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When Doreen G. Fernandez and National Artist Francisco Arcellana passed away earlier this year, Philippine Literature was left the poorer. Dr. Fernandez, about whom more is written elsewhere in this issue, was a chronicler of its theater and output in English; Mr. Arcellana, a creator of that literature and a bearer of its memories. Between them significant chapters of the story of Philippine Literature, its gaps and cruxes, were laid bare and glossed.

Mr. Arcellana, born 6 September 1916, was the leader of the Veronicans, a group of thirteen writers formed in 1934 who broke away from traditional themes and forms in short-story writing. Among its members were Narciso Reyes, N. V. M. Gonzalez, Estrella Alfon, and Hernando Ocampo—all of them important names in Philippine writing in English. Their stories were deemed too controversial (that is, too sexually explicit, too violent) to be published in the national magazines, so the group started its own publication called *Expressions*, with Arcellana as its editor.

Mr. Arcellana's stories, many of which were written and published in the 1930s, are known for their lyricism. The stories are collected, rather belatedly, in *Selected Stories* (1962) and *The Francisco Arcellana Sampler* (1990). In their terseness, intensity, and mystery, they are almost poetic. In such stories as "Robin in the Reading Room" and "The Trilogy of Turtles," Mr. Arcellana resorts to repetition, stream of consciousness, and startling imagery, the better to impress his insights into love and death.

These stories caught the attention of Jose Garcia Villa (1908-1997), fictionist, poet, and critic—the most important Filipino writer in English of his generation. By the time the Veronicans were formed, Mr. Villa had already made a mark in the United States as a short-story writer and had been issuing an "annual selection" of the best Filipino short stories. Mr. Arcellana's were regularly in his honor roll. The two wrote to each other, met, and remained friends.

Both were eventually interviewed by Dr. Fernandez for the series *Writers and Their Milieu* (1984 and 1987), Villa in the first volume and Arcellana in the second. In her interview with Mr. Arcellana, Dr. Fernandez emphasized his prodigious memory—for he recalled even middle initials—and thus his value as a source of literary history. "He is the only one," she wrote rightly, "who could write the still unwritten history of contemporary Philippine literature in English."<sup>2</sup> However, it was Dr. Fernandez who finally put his words down for posterity—the gossip, analyses, reveries, middle initials and all.

I could not, therefore, as a graduate student writing a thesis on Jose Garcia Villa reasonably skip the opportunity to get Dr. Fernandez as thesis adviser or to interview Mr. Arcellana about his longtime

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this interview appeared in *Pen and Ink* 1 (1997): 18-22.

<sup>2</sup> *Writers and Their Milieu* (Manila: De La Salle University, 1987), 35.

friend and admirer Mr. Villa. The following is a transcript of the interview, only slightly edited, that Dr. Fernandez and I conducted. The main subject is, of course, Mr. Villa. However, in the course of the interview, Mr. Arcellana inevitably mentioned other Filipino writers and his own writings. It may be taken as an extension of his interview in *Writers*, inspired and informed by it, as informative and, I would like to believe, as faithful to its aims: “to retrieve material for literary biography” and “to lay foundations for the literary history still to be written, and to support the literary criticism ongoing.”<sup>3</sup>

Here, then, is a bit of Philippine literary history, prepared and presented in a form that Dr. Fernandez pioneered in locally, containing data on two of the country’s most important writers in English.

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JC: How did your correspondence with Villa begin?

FA: He wrote to me first. Because of *Expressions* number one.<sup>4</sup>

JC: I notice that your stories are lyrical, which quality Villa seems to like.

FA: I think he is the same kind of writer. Maybe he was partial to lyricism, that kind of writing.

DGF: But did he say so to you?

FA: Yes, he did.

DGF: In writing? verbally?

FA: Both. But I think . . . how do you put it? We just like each other, you know. As far as each other is concerned, I was probably the person closest to him in the islands.

JC: There’s a letter he wrote about you that got published . . .

FA: He was trying to explain something that he wrote about me which was not meant for publication, which he wrote to N. V. M. [Gonzalez], which Teddy Locsin<sup>5</sup> published in *Free Press*. It was a beautiful letter. . . . He was writing about my prose. He thought it was too loose. . . . Everything bad about prose he found in my prose. And I believed him. . . . And so he wrote that letter to N.V.M. and somehow Teddy got hold of it and then he printed it in the *Free Press* . . . I didn’t mind.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., v.

<sup>4</sup> The first issue was put out in 1934.

<sup>5</sup> Teodoro M. Locsin, Sr. (b. 1914) was the editor of the *Philippines Free Press*.

<sup>6</sup> But see below and note 6.

JC: But he [Villa] explained to you.

FA: Yes. Villa felt so badly about it. He wrote to me about it. I wish I had that letter. He was writing me a lot of letters. He was a very good letter writer, *eh*. Very good. Very good letter writer. And I was able to collect maybe this much letters. And then Estrella [Alfon] borrowed them—she was staying at the YWCA. Before I knew it, the thing was lost. *Si Estrella*.

JC: His letter to N. V. M. appeared in an essay you wrote. He says: “I wonder if he will pursue prose or poetry. One must make a choice. I believe that he is essentially a poet and therefore should work hard at poetry . . .”<sup>7</sup>

FA: Ah, that’s the one! That’s the letter! Yes.

JC: *You* wrote about Villa in that essay. And your thesis was: “But never before until now have we had a poet who first wrote prose that was the very prose and then prose that tended to poetry and was sometimes prose and sometimes poetry . . .”<sup>8</sup> And then you said, “Now . . .

FA: “Mar pacifica.”

JC: “. . . for the purest blue in the mar pacifica of poetry, now for purity in poetry, now for the purest poetry.” This was before *Volume Two*.<sup>9</sup> Do you think that Villa ever reached that blue?

FA: I think Villa achieved being a pure poet. But here’s the problem. He has always remained self-absorbed. Yah. His poems are self-absorbed. Beyond himself there was nothing, which of course was not true. Beyond ourselves is the world! Yah, and he never broke through.

JC: Do you think he would have become a better poet if he had broken through?

FA: The trouble is [it is] a matter of temperament. He simply wasn’t capable of breaking through. *You* [pointing a finger at DGF] met him.

DGF: Yah.

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<sup>7</sup> Villa, epigraph to Francisco Arcellana, “The Via Villa,” *Literary Apprentice* (1948-49): 62. Did Arcellana confuse the *Literary Apprentice* with the *Free Press*?

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Villa’s second volume of poetry published in the United States (by New Directions, 1949), where are found the “comma poems.”

FA: *O*, he simply wasn't capable of breaking through. In other words, he was like a child. And he is *still* a child.

JC: You wrote an essay in the *Brown Heritage* on the short story and you said that Villa "helped define [the short story], gave it direction."<sup>10</sup>

FA: Because you know, he made annual selections [of the best short stories]. And everybody was trying to make it into the selection. You know, he gave three stars—three asterisks, two asterisks, and one asterisk. . . . He really directed [us], although we weren't aware of it.

JC: And was the direction good or bad?

FA: You see, we were an American colony, and Villa was doing for us what Edward J. O'Brien was doing for the American short story. It's that. Only that. . . . Of course, [at] hindsight, oh boy, I would have all the advantage. I'd say that he is a very small tributary. For one thing, I think maybe better work was being done in Tagalog. Well, I say maybe because I haven't read enough.

JC: There's a short story by Marcel Navara, Cebuano writer, in which the main character follows Villa's advice on writing stories by imitating the stories listed in the roll of honor.

FA: Nothing like that happened to us. What you described . . . a deliberate, conscious . . . Nothing like that happened to us. For example, *ako*—I can only speak for myself, no—I was really writing like myself. And that, I felt, was what you would call the individual voice. Villa was very full of that, *eh*. He would speak of a writer achieving his voice. And there are not too many of us who he felt had achieved what he calls voice.

JC: Who might these be?

FA: Narsing [Narciso Reyes], N. V. M. Gonzalez, Manuel Arguilla.<sup>11</sup> *Yan*.

JC: Were *you* influenced by Villa?

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<sup>10</sup> Francisco Arcellana, "The Short Story," in *Brown Heritage*, ed. Antonio Manuud (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1967), 609.

<sup>11</sup> Manuel Arguilla (1910-1944), Filipino short-story writer, most popularly known for his use of "local color" as in "How My Brother Brought Home a Wife."

FA: Ah, yes. I mean, for a long while I couldn't tell myself apart from Villa. I mean, even writing—even speaking—you might say have traces [of Villa].

JC: So do you call yourself an angel?

FA: Well, not to that extent. I think this angel thing he got from William Blake. Yeah, he got that from William Blake. At that time I was reading Blake, too.

JC: Villa's favorite Filipino writer is Nick Joaquin, is that right?

FA: This is very interesting. Villa wanted to be close to Nick, and Nick just rebuffed him! Yes. Nick just snubbed him. . . . *Naawa ako kay Villa*. He wanted, he really wanted very much to be close to Nick. He admired him [Joaquin] so much.

JC: Although Nick would write an essay about Villa.

FA: Very good essay.

JC: But I wonder how accurate it is with regard to biographical information, because he has a tendency to dramatize . . .

DGF: He's a very good reporter so I would suspect they are accurate.

FA: Nick interviewed F. V. R. [Fidel V. Ramos] and published the interview in the *Graphic*, which everybody admired for being accurate, objective, precise.

JC: Do you remember Liam Kreeps?

FA: No.<sup>12</sup>

JC: But you mentioned him in your article.

FA: I'm losing my memory!

JC: What about your poetry?

FA: My poetry?

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<sup>12</sup> Kreeps was an Irish janitor in New York who gave Villa four dollars to help pay the rent. He died before *Have Come, Am Here* was published. Ironically, his story appears in Arcellana's essay "Fifty Years of Jose Garcia Villa," *Philippines Free Press*, 23 May 1959, 46-47.

DGF: You want to know what Villa said about Franz's poetry?

JC: Yes.

DGF [to FA]: Did Villa comment on the poems?

FA: He called my poetry—this is his exact words—“elementary verse.” Elementary verse! He thought that I was *essentially* a poet. See, there's a world of difference. He thought I was essentially a poet and therefore should move to poetry. I tried to but couldn't get there. That is the situation. Yah, I tried to . . . but I just couldn't hack it.

JC: He says the same of Angela Manalang Gloria's poems.

FA: Angela is a very fine poet. I'm really flattered.

JC: Were you affected by his choices?

FA: The thing is, there was a need for me to say these things [the content of his poems] and so I sat down and said them as I always did. And maybe Villa was right that they were elementary. . . . When I was given the National Artist for “Flowers of May” I believed them [the committee], because I was saying to myself if C. P. R. [Carlos P. Romulo] can be named National Artist for “I saw the rise, I saw the fall” whatever, then I said I have the right to be named National Artist for “Flowers of May.” See? Yah. You know that story, don't you? It's about this family . . .

JC: No. I've only read “The Mats.”

FA: No wait, I'm talking about “The Mats”! I'm talking about “The Mats.” Why did I say “Flowers of May”?

DGF: That's good too.

FA: No, I think “Flowers of May” was my favorite. I'm talking about “The Mats.” Joaquin calls it [“The Mats”] an archetype. An archetype . . . whatever that means.

JC: And what did Villa say?

FA: Villa loved that story. He did.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The story is in Villa's Roll of Honor for 1938.

JC: It was translated into Filipino.

DGF: Where?

JC: In Sol [Soledad Reyes]'s book.<sup>14</sup>

FA: I think the story *is* Filipino. I think that is its strong point. It's really a Filipino story.

DGF: It's a best-selling children's book.<sup>15</sup>

FA: Right! . . . Maybe they're doing well because of the nice artwork. Beautiful.

JC: What norms do you follow when you write?

FA: I just write the story. I don't bother about what you call norms. It's just a story. It's a matter between me and the story. It's the story that I'm trying to tell. I think it is for that reason that I have been able to write. . . . The stories that I want to write . . . ah, I just can. I mean, it's a kind of wrestling. I find myself pinned to the floor. Instead of me pinning the story, it's the story pinning me.

DGF: That must be heavy.

FA: Very heavy. Now, there's another thing. Some people say I should write a novel.

DGF: You once said you would.

FA: Well, it seems that the only way I can write now is by dictating it. I don't have a dictating machine.

DGF: I have one.

JC: Let's go back to literary norms. Were you writing with a conscious set of norms in your head?

FA: No, no notions of writing a great story or even writing a story *a la* American stories . . . like what's the name of this guy who writes in Cebuano?

JC: Marcel Navara.

FA: Nothing like that.

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<sup>14</sup> Isagani Cruz and Soledad Reyes, *Ang Ating Panitikan* (Manila: Goodwill, 1989)

<sup>15</sup> *The Mats*. Illustrated by Hermes Alegre (Manila: Tahanan, 1995).

JC: Did you ever talk to Villa about the short story?

FA: He talked about voice, about the story where you hear the voice of the writer. So it can be anything. It can be . . . like “My Old Man” by Ernest Hemingway. You know that story? It’s written in illiterate English, but that’s the voice of the old man there. . . . It’s his [Hemingway’s] greatest short story. Not many people know this.

JC: I thought it was “The Killers.”

FA: No, no. It is the story called . . . Edward J. O’Brien thinks this is his [Hemingway’s] finest story. . . . This is drawn from a character who appears in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. This is the old man on the bridge. That is the character from which this character is drawn. What I’m saying is . . . Nothing technical. The way Villa selected short stories [has] nothing to do with norms. Not even technique, *eh*. . . . It’s really a matter of feeling. . . . When we came up against classics like Nick’s, *a wala ‘yan* [technical norms]. I mean, no question about it. When he comes out with a statement about Nick—“the finest writer” . . . short stories like “Fathers and Sons” . . . “Three Generations”—that story, for example. That’s the way I look at it. I think it’s a natural thing. Villa could identify with the story. He was having problems with his own father. He could identify. It made him more comprehensible to himself. That’s it. That really throws criticism out of the window. No really, the way we react to literature. . . . I mean, there is no sense in deceiving ourselves. We don’t like it because it’s a great piece of work. No! We like it because it touches us. It moves us. It enables us to understand ourselves. It makes us a better person. Nothing to do with the way it is written. Nothing to do with technique. Absolutely not.

JC: Did Villa share the same views?

FA: Ah, he thought . . . you know, he was talking about the test of substance and form, which he got from O’Brien. That’s a lot of bull. No really, that’s a lot of bull.

JC: Do you think he didn’t follow these standards?

FA: *I don’t*.

DGF: Do you think *he* did?

JC: When he was making those selections?

FA: According to his likes, I guess. According to his likes. Now, there's another thing about Villa. This is the thing I've wondered about. He really can't be as good as when he sits down to write what it is he wants to say vis-à-vis a work. I'm talking about criticism. A letter that he wrote to Carling [Carlos] Angeles<sup>16</sup> had an analysis of a poem by Hart Crane called "At Melville's Tomb." It is the finest thing I've ever read, I've ever seen. You know Hart Crane? This American poet? It's a short poem, maybe about twelve lines [long]. The first line is "Monody shall not wait the mariner." That's the first line. It's "At Melville's tomb." You know *Moby Dick*? The guy who wrote *Moby Dick*? "Monody shall not wait the mariner." Villa wrote *galing* about this lyric poem. Oh boy! Sharp, sharp. . . .Incidentally, you try to get hold of this controversy. Villa had a debate with Edmund Wilson about reversed consonance.

DGF: Really?

FA: *Oa*. Villa wrote me about this.

DGF: A written debate?

FA: Yah, yah. . . . Well, it's like this. Villa said he invented reversed consonance in his poetry. . . . Edmund Wilson claims the same thing to discredit [Villa]. He claimed he had invented the same thing, and that essay by Wilson appeared in the *New Yorker*. Naturally, Villa had to . . .

DGF: Answer?

FA: No, he lost out. My goodness, the *New Yorker* and Edmund Wilson! You're not going to do anything.

DGF: Villa wrote you?

FA: He wrote me about it. He felt awful about it, of course.

DGF: So he wrote you.

FA: Yes, about that.

JC: But he never responded to Wilson?

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<sup>16</sup> Carlos Angeles (1921-2000), Filipino poet.

FA: No. He just called my attention to it, and I looked up the Wilson essay. Villa calls it “reversed consonance” and Wilson calls it by the Latin equivalent of reversed consonance. That was what convinced me . . . because Villa’s profession of it happened much before [Wilson’s]. That’s how this guy Wilson is, and I think that is in keeping with Wilson’s character.<sup>17</sup>

JC: And Villa’s character?

FA: When I met Richard Wilbur for the first time, he asked me, “Ah, you’re Filipino?” He had a look I couldn’t stand, and I understood it only recently when I was reading an account—I don’t know whose account it was. He [Wilbur] was really manifesting an . . . the impression he had of Villa, his prejudice against Villa. “Oh, you’re Filipino,” and then he gave me a look. Then, I understood. It was only this past year when I read this account about these people—about Wilbur, about Villa. And then I learned Wilbur’s attitude towards Villa. It’s like this. When Wilbur started to write poetry, Villa panned him. Yah, very savagely! Yah, Villa really panned Richard Wilbur.

DGF: Where? Was he writing specifically about his contemporaries?

FA: Villa had a school [a creative writing class]. He was teaching poetry, and he really swept the floor with Richard Wilbur.

DGF: And it got back to Wilbur?

FA: I think so.

JC: This was never published.

FA: No. But as I was saying, Wilbur gave me a look that I did not understand until I learned about this [incident]. And that was in character, because Villa was panning everyone. The only poet he cared for was William Carlos Williams who called him Little Joe. He got very close with William Carlos Williams. A lot of his letters were about William Carlos Williams. He got very close to William Carlos Williams. You know, Villa wrote me a lot of letters about William Carlos Williams.

JC: What did he say? Did he like his poetry?

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<sup>17</sup> But Villa did write a letter exposing Wilson. The letter was published in *Western Review* (1949) and reprinted in *The Critical Villa* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2002), 307-309.

FA: Yah! It was Villa who published William Carlos Williams as a fictionist for the first time . . . in *Clay*. Saroyan, too, and a guy by the name of Eugene Joffe. These were the guys that Villa discovered in *Clay*. . . . He put out three *Clay's*. . . . You must read them. My copies were destroyed. There was the fire and after that there was this typhoon.<sup>18</sup>

JC: Villa seemed to have read H. L. Mencken a lot. He quotes from Mencken . . .

FA: Mencken was knocking down people.

JC: That quality he got from Mencken.

FA: Not really. I think Villa was really that way. Villa *was* really that way. He was knocking down people. He sort of enjoyed it. He's really *kuwan, eh*. . . . a gossip, *eh*. He's a gossip. He's a gossip. . . . Bitchy! What I really would like to see is his poetica . . .

JC: Let's talk about the "essential difference" between prose and poetry, as Villa put it.

FA: There's poetry, of course, and then there's prose. Suppose you can write poetry. Do poetry. Really poetry. I suppose it can be done. . . . Have you tried reading Blake's prose? Awful! I read Milton. Awful! What I'm saying is this. That notion is correct, but there is also this other thing where you develop from prose to poetry. I do believe that poetry is the summit of language. Jimmy [Gémino] Abad<sup>19</sup> says that in an essay. So it is! So you work up to that. Prose is the lowest low. I mean, we can't kid ourselves. I mean, poetry is the highest possible utterance. Don't you agree? This notion of Villa is a lot of bull. If you're gifted, yeah, maybe, you can open your mouth and poetry comes out. But I think really, you work on the poem and really achieved it.

JC: What do you think of Villa's experiments? Reversed consonance?

FA: I can understand reversed consonance but this matter of sound, this matter of manipulating consonants and vowels. I think that's . . . gobbledygook. To make the thing very impressive, to

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<sup>18</sup> Williams and Saroyan were published in issue number 2 of *Clay*, notes on which journal are in the *Critical Villa*, 56-57.

<sup>19</sup> Gémino Abad (b. 1939), Filipino poet and critic, editor of the series of anthologies chronicling the history of Philippine poetry in English: *Man of Earth* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 1989), *A Native Clearing* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1993), and *A Habit of Shores* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1999).

make it a secret language to lock you out . . . Talk about melodies . . . the theme of Scheherazade. Will someone try to explain to me why I react the way I do? What he was saying about the sound of words . . . Sound doesn't make sense. You think sound makes sense? That's what he wants to believe. Not only do sounds make sense, they also express emotion. No, no. That is a lot of bull.

JC: The commas?

FA: He speaks of the comma achieving the quantitative pause that he wants. That's a lot of bull. I mean, you're not going to read it the way he feels it. You're going to read it the way you want. I mean, the way you feel.

JC: Have you ever heard him read a comma poem?

FA: Villa's voice is not for reading. It's not even for talking, least of all, for singing. I heard him sing. Oh wow! Remember I told you he was singing this song "A Farewell to Arms"? And he was half a tone off. Half a tone off! He could follow the melody but he was half a tone off. I think he was tone deaf.

JC: The adaptations?

FA: The only way to describe that is a fellow running dry. I mean, the spring is drying up.

JC: Do the commas make a difference if one read the poems out loud?

FA: I don't know if I ever told you I was reading Gertrude Stein. Well, you know how I feel about Stein. And then one evening, I heard Rolando Tinio<sup>20</sup> reading it and I thought I understood the whole damned thing. Even as he was reading it, I really felt I understood. One thing has to be done about poetry. It has to be read. When Rolando read it I understood it.<sup>21</sup>

JC: How did you regard Villa in those days?

FA: He was a master. I mean we lived in anticipation of his annual selections. We looked forward to it. [A. E.] Litiatco<sup>22</sup> made a very big production of it. About three or four weeks before the thing was

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<sup>20</sup> Tinio (1937-1997), Filipino poet, playwright, and critic.

<sup>21</sup> See Tinio, "Villa's Values: Or, the Poet You Cannot Always Make Out, or Succeed in Liking When You Are Able To," in *Brown Heritage*, 722-738.

<sup>22</sup> A. E. Litiatco (1906-1943) was literary editor of the *Graphic* before the second world war.

published he announced, gave the teasers and something like that. . . . What I'm saying, Jonathan, is that Villa and I were *not* contemporaries. People tend to think . . . *Footnote to Youth* was published in 1932, and I did not publish *Expressions* until 1934. He was already a master. We were not contemporaries. He was a master and we . . . we read him, we worshipped him, we wanted to be like him. . . . He has a story called "Given Woman." I think it is one of the finest Philippine short stories. It is the story with which Villa broke into *Scriber's*. It's about this woman and this man Ponso . . . This guy decides to get rid of this woman, and he gives her away! He gave her away, Flora. *At saka si Ponso. Si Ponso yung pangalan nung lalake.* One day, he decides he wants to give her away, so . . . "Given Woman."

JC: Your favorite story of Villa's is "Song I Did Not Hear."

FA: Yah! You know why? It is the first gay story in Philippine writing! This is about David . . .

JC: No, it's Joe, Jack, and "I".

FA: No, I was thinking of another story. There's another story about David.

JC: "Untitled Story."

FA: That too is homosexual. But this one is "Song I Did Not Hear." A homosexual story. Our first one. Don't you agree? Nobody has mentioned this.

JC: They usually anthologize just "Untitled Story." "Father did not understand my love for Vi."

FA: Right. That's standard and traditional unrequited love. Not really unrequited love but love that had a lot of obstacles. But "Song I Did Not Hear" was a story about gays. Beautiful story! Really beautiful. I think it's terrific. Even the title is beautiful. "Song I Did Not Hear." It is the fourth part of the trilogy ["Wings and Blue Flame"].

JC: A tetralogy, then?

FA: Written in the same style—numbered paragraphs.

JC: Did you disagree with Villa's choices?

FA: I did, but we did not really fight. . . . One thing he felt very strongly about was this. If a story gave you . . . made it possible for you to realize, to see, to catch a glimpse of a way of life—he was

very strong about that—that a story is a great story if it dramatizes or manifests a way of life. Yah. . . . Paz Marquez Benitez<sup>23</sup> had a different way of viewing it. If you read a story, she said, and if the story changes you, you become a different person because of that story, then it's a great story, which [idea] I think is more like mine. If a thing changes you and you become different forever afterwards because of the thing that you read, whether story or poem . . . which is what [W. H.] Auden said about the poem. You read a poem; it is a poem if it changes you, changes the way you look at things . . . in other words, you become a different person. You're never the same again after reading the poem. . . . You've read "Lay Your Sleeping Head, My Love" . . .

JC: "Human on my faithless arm."

FA: That's a homosexual poem!

JC: Really?

FA: Ha-hah! That's a homosexual poem. There's a stanza in that poem which gives it away, which you wouldn't understand except with that idea [of homosexuality]. There's a stanza which gives the poem away. That's a homosexual poem.

JC: I'll read it again.

FA: He said so himself.

JC: What else do you remember about Villa?

FA: He's a very proud man. . . . When I went to America in '56, I was walking up Fifth Avenue and who should I see but Jose Garcia Villa? I went to him and said, "You're Villa!" We went to . . .

DGF: Gotham Book Mart?

FA: No, to Choc'ful of Nuts for coffee.

JC: Did he ever finish his M. A.?

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<sup>23</sup> Paz Marquez Benitez (1894-1983), short-story writer, teacher at the University of the Philippines of an entire generation of Filipino writers in English. Her story "Dead Stars" (1925) is considered the first Filipino short story in English.

FA: I'm glad you asked that. He did an M. A. thesis on Browning at Columbia.<sup>24</sup>

DGF: Oh!

FA: He wrote an essay on Browning.

JC: What about his Ph.D.?

FA: He's a very academic man. He could be. He likes teaching.

JC: Where did he say that the short story "humanized" him?

FA: He wrote it in an essay that he wrote about himself. You see he was a visual artist. And then somehow he got hold of Sherwood Anderson. You see how meaningful it is? He gave up visual arts and he went to literature. And the reason? Because Anderson humanized him.

JC: Will he come home?

FA: This is something you should know. Villa was always saying New York is the only place to live in. See, now by implication, he's saying that New York is the only place to die in.

21 May 1996

Creative Writing Center

University of the Philippines

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<sup>24</sup> But Villa's resume does not mention an M. A. We read, "Postgraduate Work, Columbia University." According to a letter from Luis Cabalquinto, Villa's friend in New York, "Jose categorically says *no* to getting that Columbia M. A. He says he lasted only a year in the Ph.D. program he registered for. After dropping out he worked at the Columbia U. bookstore, where he met his wife" (Letter to the author, 8 October 1996).