

FERRIOLS ON FERRIOLS AND MORE

Compiled by Glenda C. Oris

This “interview” consists of excerpts from articles about or by Ferriols. Ferriols’s words are reconstituted as answers to seven questions, seven being, as Ferriols once remarked, “a symbol of completion.” The sources of the quotations are given in footnotes.

Glenda C. Oris (GCO): Tell us about your childhood and about growing up in Sampaloc, Manila.

Roque J. Ferriols, SJ (RJF): I am 1/4 Ilocano, 1/8 Zambal, 1/8 Spanish and 1/2 Tagalog. So that makes me a pure Manila boy.¹

A little over half a hundred years ago—according to reliable hearsay—I saw first light on floor twelve, PGH. Later I saw more and more light in Sampalok. Not the storied Sampalok of San Anton and Bustillos, an area steeped in centuries of lore and legend, but North Sampalok around P. Leoncio and Maria Clara, as little known then as now. Ricefields, houses here and there, feet running on pilapils, carabaos, dragonflies. When the rains came, watersnakes. Then you rafted or slogged through the flood. Men feeling through mud for dalag or catching hito and martiniko with their nets in the clean flowing water. A row of long-skirted fisherwomen on a pilapil, bamboo rods aslant, left hands holding rattan-lipped cloth bags for their catch. Near sundown a veiled one joins them. She is a leper. Her family is hiding her from the sanidad. They want her with them. They do not want her exiled to Culion.

In the sixteen years I grew there, the earth became less province, more and more city. . . .

At home the grown-ups talked to each other in Ilocano or Spanish. To the children they talked—condescendingly, I felt—something they called Tagalog. In the grassy roadways children of former farmers and of comers from elsewhere played together and talked to each other in something we called Tagalog.

¹“Jesuit Rings Right Notes, Clicks with Hopeful Youth,” *Guidon*, September 2, 1963, 3.

Then it was time to go to school. Trying to make friends in the playground, I talked to my peers in something I thought was Tagalog and was laughed at. In North Sampalok nobody felt superior to you if you spoke a different accent or mixed Ilocanisms with your Tagalog. Not three kilometers away, the little sons and daughters of the Tagalese were enforcing elitist norms. Slowly I came to know that my language is not Tagalog but North Sampalokese.²

GCO: How did your Philosophy classes in Filipino (called Pilipino/Tagalog then) start?

RJF: It was the beginning of schoolyear 1969–1970 and it occurred to a certain character that it was time the Ateneo college offered the entire philosophy core curriculum with Pilipino as the medium of instruction. That character is me.

...

Tagalog was beginning to be very much in the air in the late sixties. One attended public functions at which luminaries of church and/or state spoke bad Tagalog or fumblingly read prepared Tagalog statements. There was a desire to be with Tagalog. There was the usual strong wind for England (and/or America?): speak English, speak to the world, educational, scientific, literary, civilized, and so weiter. The Tagalog ground swell was noiseless, invisible, but tangy enough to cause tremors in the delicate nostrils of both civilian and ecclesiastical politicians—those connoisseurs of hidden currents. When respectable people can talk Tagalog in public as badly as I do and be applauded for it, it must be high time for such as me to speak Tagalog in public without having to fear the censorious eyes of some pure Bulakanese.³

GCO: How were your Philosophy classes in Pilipino/Tagalog received?

RJF: There were difficulties to begin with. After the lord highs had allowed the experimental [sic] classes (I tried to explain: my classes are not experiments, they are for real, my students are usually human beings, never laboratory rats; but the classes were still called experimental), the scheduler failed to schedule them. “To give you a chance to pick the best times,” with a sinister twitch of the eyelids. As a result we had classes during meal times: 7:00 to 8:00 A.M., 12:00–1:30 P.M., 6:00 to 7:30 P.M. We were tolerated in private, boasted of in public, while we made such rules as: one may eat and drink during class, just so he does it quietly—no chicharon or popcorn, no breaking of bottles—for as the soul regales itself it is not just that the body be left out in the cold. Class members were volunteers. The members of that first year were very game indeed.⁴

²Roque J. Ferriols, SJ, “A Memoir of Six Years,” *Philippine Studies* 22, nos. 3–4 (1974): 343–44.

³Ibid., 338.

⁴Ibid., 338–39.

GCO: What does philosophy mean?

RJF: There are many definitions. But a definition that a student of mine gave years ago has stuck in my mind and I think it is a good definition: it is a search for the truth. What do you mean by the truth? That was the question of Pontius Pilate, and it can be the beginning of a long discussion. But for a working definition, truth has some connection with what is actually happening, with what is real. “Is it true that February 25th has been proclaimed a holiday?” “Yes, it is true.” “Is it true that I know how to use PowerPoint?” “That is not true.” “Is it true that the anniversary February 25 is meaningful?” There can be a discussion whether it is meaningful or not. But I think if a person is looking for the truth, you have to admit that there is a true answer. It might be hard to find. It might be found only after a long discussion, but there is a true answer. There is an answer of a meaning which is actually taking place, the meaning of what is actually happening. And so philosophy is looking for the truth, being able to enter into the world of what is. That reminds me of a story which Dr. Manny Dy just reminded me of a few days ago. It’s from Chuang Tzu also. It’s about the man who was afraid of his shadow. There was a man who was afraid of his shadow. So he began to run away from his shadow, but that made things worse because then he began to hear footsteps. And so he was running away from the footsteps. But the more he was running away, the more his shadow caught up with him and the more the footsteps followed him. And then finally the man died. But he could have lived if he just sat under the shadow of a tree and quietly meditated in silence. And Dr. Dy reminded me that the Visayan word for meditation is *pamalandong*, which means to sit in the shadow of a tree. And there was a convergence with the forest hermits of the Indians, the *aranyakas* who, under the shade of the forest trees, in the silence, awaited and searched for enlightenment.⁵

GCO: How can philosophy be taught?

RJF: By teaching you mean creating a surrounding, creating an environment, creating a climate, where insight is possible. If the teacher can create some surrounding, some environment where the students entering the environment are enabled to see things they could not see before, that man is a teacher. So, it takes a certain amount of courage to be a teacher because one has to take the lives of his students into his own hands and tell them, “If you do this, enter into this surrounding, into this climate, then you will be able to see things.” The students

⁵Roque J. Ferriols, SJ, “Teaching Philosophy in Manila,” keynote address, International Conference on Teaching Philosophy in Asian Contexts, sponsored by Missio-Aachen, Ateneo de Manila University, February 2004.

might see things that this teacher has not seen himself. So the teacher must have the courage to learn from his students, to trust his students that they can really look and that they can really see. However, many students want to be taught according to the first definition of teaching: that they are taught what to do every step of the way, what to think every step of the way. A teacher has to destroy that expectation and help the student to enter into the world of insight.

How does one do it? I have a little exercise. I say, “Some of you move in the world of concepts, of pure ideas.” Think of a unicorn or think of a talking frog. Think of a friend, but don’t think of him as your friend. Instead, think of him as the idea of a friend. Think of your father and mother, but do not think of your father and mother as they are, but think of them as ideas. So you have a world of ideas, a world where you have an idea of a talking frog, an idea of a unicorn, an idea of a friend, an idea of a father and mother. And then you ask, “Is it really happening?” “Is it reality?” Then the talking frog and the unicorn disappear. What appears, what remains is not your idea of a friend, but your living friend, not an idea of your father and mother, but your living father and your living mother.

How did that happen? Did you add an idea so that what used to be pure ideas became living realities? You did not add an idea. What did you do? Perhaps you do not know. If you ask me what you did, I could not give a standard answer. I do not know it either. But I know one thing: You did a certain movement of your mind, a certain movement of your heart, that from a world of pure ideas, you stepped into the world of what was really happening.⁶

GCO: Are you trying to create a Filipino philosophy?

RJF: I’m not out to create a Filipino anything. Filipino philosophy is like Filipino food. If I like the food and I am Filipino, then that is Filipino food. If I look for the truth and I am aided to find the truth, and I happen to be a Filipino, so that can be called Filipino philosophy. But I am not anxious that it should be called that. It’s more important that I found the truth, or I was helped to look for the truth. Anything that helps me find the truth is important to me.⁷

GCO: Does language matter in philosophizing? In the search for truth?

RJF: I think in a sense it doesn’t matter what language you use. If you’re looking for the truth any language which helps you find the truth is a good language. But what is the truth? For example, if I am here philosophizing, looking for the truth and there are people outside cleaning the streets, driving the jeepneys, driving

⁶Ibid. This portion of the address was published as “Teaching Philosophy,” in *Philosophy Manual: A South-South Perspective* (Morocco: UNESCO, 2014), 140–41.

⁷Ibid.

the taxicabs, driving the buses, going to their work and they're all talking in a language which is not English, and I am looking for the truth in the English language, am I moving in a true situation? Is the environment with which I surround myself in my search for the truth a true environment? And another thing too, languages are like plants in the rainforest. There are some plants in the rainforest which have not yet been explored. But which they say can be the source of all kinds of medicine for all kinds of diseases. Now, languages are sources of insight. Insight towards the truth. And if a language has not yet been used for philosophy, that language is like a plant in the rainforest which is waiting to be discovered and to be used. It is a source of insight into truth, which is waiting to be able to exercise its ability to be aroused to search for the truth.⁸

Kung gagamit ka ng isang wika, 'yung mismong wika ang huhubog ng iyong isip. Wala naman tayong tradisyon na malalim na pamimilosopiya sa Pilipinas. Gayunpaman, maaari tayong pumili ng mga pilosopiya na galing sa ibang bansa. Tinutulungan tayo na tumingin sa ating kasalukuyan na buhay at sa ating kinaroroonan.

Kung gagamitin natin ang wika na ginagamit ng mga ibang tao sa ibang lugar, magkakaroon ng bagong paglikha. Halimbawa, maraming pilosopong taga-Kanluran at taga-Silangan na nakaimpluwensiya sa atin. Tignan ang mga pilosopiyang Tsina, si Chuang Tzu at si Lao Tzu. Tignan ang mga taga-Kanluran, si Sto. Tomas at ang kanyang pilosopiyang Esse. Kung gagamitin ko sila, hindi ito upang kopyahin sila, kundi upang matulungan akong tumingin at magising sa sarili kong kalagayan.

Kung gagamitin mo 'yung salita ng mga tao—halimbawa, kung gamitin mo ang wika ng mga taong taga-Maynila, dahil taga-Maynila ka rin—kahit na hindi mo sinasadya, mangyayari na makahuhubog ka ng isang pagtingin, isang pagmumulat, isang uring pagtatanong, isang uring paghanap ng bago. . . .⁹

May mga pulitikal na aspeto sa mga kilusan sa Pilipinisasyon. Pero ang alam ko lamang ay kung gagawin nilang Pilipino ang wikang pagtuturo, magbibigay ang mismong paggamit ng Pilipino ng isang bagong oryentasyon. Magagamit nito ang mga mabubuting natututunan mula sa ibang bansa. Isang lasa at kulay ito na nababagay sa ating pag-uugali, sa ating pakiramdam, sa ating uring pag-iisip.

Nagbigay-diin ako sa paggamit ng Wikang Pilipino. Ito ang binahagi ko. Ang tinatawag kong Wikang Pilipino ay 'yung salita sa Maynila, palibhasa'y

⁸Ibid.

⁹Roque J. Ferriols, SJ, interview by Leovino Ma. Garcia, in *University Traditions: The Humanities Interviews*, ed. Ramon Sunico (Quezon City: Office for Mission and Identity and Organizational Development, Ateneo de Manila University, 2005), 182.

laki akong Maynila. Ang sabi sa akin ay hindi Tagalog ang ginagamit ko. “Halatang-halata hindi ka Tagalog kung magsalita ka,” sabi nila. Sapagkat ako’y nasa Maynila, ang ginagamit ko ang salitang Maynila. Pinagmamalaki ko naman na ako’y Ilokano.

. . . naisipan ko, lahat ng wikang pilipino [sic] ay mahalaga. Kaya kung mayroon kang alam na wikang pilipino [sic], kailangan mong pagsikapan na gamitin sa pinakamabuting paraan. Sa abot ng aking kaya, kung mayroon akong pagkakataong gamitin ang Bisaya, ginagamit ko nang huwag kong malimutan. Bumalik ako sa aking mga ugat sa Ilocos upang matutong magsalita uli ng Iloko sa isang mas malalim na paraan.¹⁰

When I try to philosophize in Pilipino, it is with intent to live and to help awaken other people into living. Each language is a way of being alive that is irreducible. . . . he who has touched the heart of a language, even if only for a split second, knows that it is an irreducible way of being alive. Each language has unrepeatable potentials for seeing and feeling, its very own genius, its own nuance. The more languages you really feel, no matter how in a glass darkly, the more you live.¹¹

Twenty five years after I had left home, I was in Wao, Lanao del Sur. A man a little older than me called me by my name. After a few minutes of talking I too could call him by his name. He was an old neighbor. How did you know I was here? I recognized you on the altar when you were saying Mass. He had a farm in one of the barrios. He could not live in our old neighborhood after it had become too dense. We talked in North Sampalokese.

. . . one comes to know that, for human thinking, North Sampalokese is better than Plato’s Greek.¹²

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¹⁰Ferriols, “Interview,” 192–93.

¹¹Ferriols, “Memoir,” 340.

¹²Ibid., 344.