In our third age

In our third age, whether we like it or not, the past catches up with us and demands that we face it. It is a time in which memories that lay dormant for 50, 60 years unexpectedly leap to life; that skeletons spring from their closet and we have to deal with decisions that cast their shadow over our lives. Gracefully, if we have faced up to our frustrations, grudges have dissipated and the past may, accordingly, become a storytelling friend; a pleasant companion—as is apparent from Nicholas Tarling’s History Boy: a memoir.

**Niels Mulder**


WHILE STILL IN THE FIELD, I crashed into the wall that separates the second, or the working stage of our lives, from the third, the age of retirement, reflection, and recollection. It came abruptly and decisively, all of a sudden, I was through; I knew I did not want to do any new research; the things that had preoccupied me during 35 years of professional life lay behind me. I would retire, somewhere around the Mediterranean; Southeast Asia was over and done with.

Even Amsterdam, the town that had always been like a warm womb in which I would relax after a stint of high visibility ‘in the field’, didn’t agree with me any longer. In between exploring a few cities at a good distance from the harsh northern winter, I still wrapped up my remaining findings in an ultimate academic title, Southeast Asian Images. Upon its conclusion, I was free to indulge in writing about how I had gained my insights and evolved from young dog in the mid-1960s to professional stranger at the end of the 1970s. It opened the gate through the wall. The gate, though, turned out to be like Alice’s mirror as it landed me in a place where prospects had gone topsy-turvy and where time stood as, it were, in reverse.

The point is not whether we should deal with the past or not; with our lives willi-nilly revisiting us, we have little to choose from. The point rather is how we deal with it. With the inevitable nostalgia, some of us write about it to exercise and be with it; others visualise the evolution of their lives and personality in a Bildungsroman that may offer something of self-help in the form, a known man, certain scholars, most memorably Clifford Geertz with After the Fact and ‘An Inconstant Professor’, write intellectual biographies that visualize the self’s evolution in the context of contemporary theorising and history; quite a few produce a memoir that relates the way they went to their offspring. Tarling’s is within this latter category, but in the absence of marriage and children, his privately published memoir is presumably addressing an audience of former students, friends, relatives and colleagues.

The recounting

As a fellow Southeast Asianist preoccupied, first of all, with my field biography and, currently, with the adventure of growing old and older still, I am interested in the relations of others, and so I solicited to do a review. As a result, and for fairness’ sake, I had to read through a 277-page soliloquy devoid of inner tension, plot or action in which hundreds of names are dropped and not a single character comes to life. Even the author remains a figure in his own eyes. Whereas it is clear that he holds his Mum dear—the biography draws heavily on their letters—in personality appearance, we get to know the names of his siblings but nothing about the author’s relationship with them. At the end, we know that Tarling has no affinity with dogs, the army and sports; that his is a reticent person, sticking to himself and books, a perennial bachelor, a keen student and a successful academic; noisy dorms, colleges, flats, hotels, and neighbours (three to four score mentions) get on his nerves, at the same time that he found relief in the cinema and in listening to his records—he hints at two to three hundred performances and compositions. He also likes to watch theatre and, especially in his later career, to act on the stage, but also there we have to do with listings that, in the absence of content or setting, fail to enliven the narrative. In a way the author anticipated that he wouldn’t qualify as a Bildungsroman or even as an intellectual biography when he warned the reader that he has no real aptitude for ‘original’ or ‘imaginative’ writing (p.47).

For the outsider, the interest of the book is in fleeting remarks about one or the other of the place names that occur in the text, such as Singapore or a China town in the late fifties and Hong Kong without high rises, or about certain historical contexts. We see, as a matter of course, the novelty of having a radio, sea travel to Australia, and occasional opinions on the academic curriculum, but like with the names of persons referred to, it all remains perfunctory.

**Inventing ourselves as Filipinos**

Despite myth and ideology, the US is a multicultural society that, because of its segregationist tendencies, nurtures ‘primordial’ identity feelings. As one of the biggest Spanish-speaking countries, this is obvious enough among the Chicanos and variant Latinos, but other second and third generation descendants of original immigrants are also stimulated to keep their ethnic identity alive. Over time, such identity is increasingly rooted in group- and generation specific rituals and other invented traditions. Identities evolve over the years and, at the personal level, even over one’s life time.

**Niels Mulder**


GONZALEZ PARAPHRASED his book, a title from ‘The Day the Danes Danced’ by the Filipino American writer Bienvenido Santos, to that story, an old-time, "indentured" labourer eagerly anticipates reviving his youth, his nation, his origin, through watching a Philippine cultural show that had come to town—and that does not any longer occur. He has outlived his rouses as it were, and so he realises that he is an outcast, without identity, and no better than refuse.

The audience of the performances the author describes is as different from our parish as the other face of the moon. It consists of the children and grandchildren of postwar, mainly middle-class immigrants who currently study at colleges and universities and who organise, for their own benefit, the yearly Philippine Cultural Nights that are the proper subject of the memoirograph.

A national repertoire

In order to trace the evolution of the shows’ contents, the author takes us back to the 1930s, when contemporary cultural expressions were amalugating the example of American popular culture. At that time, educators Jorge Bocobo and Francisca Reyes Aquina felt that the country, on the eve of commonwealth status and impending independence, needed to develop a cultural repertoire rooted in the pre-spanish past. In order to do so, they sought inspiration in the folklore (costumes, music, dances) of the groups that had withstand the ibersian intrusion and retained much of their own. Subsequently, they invented and developed a national repertoire that, in the 1950s, culminated in the internationally acclaimed pageant of the Banyan-eh Filipine Dance Company. According to a fellow critic, this troupe presents ‘an ethnic dance culture which has gone beyond simple preservation and into creative growth’, which is of ‘great significance in the Diffcultural Mission to the Americas and Europe’ (p.72).

Whereas it may be expected that, in the course of its adaptation to theatre and stage, and in its development as a world-class dance company, the original sources of inspiration ‘up there in the hill’ got diluted or even become unrecognizable, the rise of a Philippine dance company that performed with a timelessness of deep cultural crisis in which the nation seemed to be deprived of identity and purpose. In this way, bayanian filled a void and became a primary ‘rite of Philippine identity’. It culminated in the internationally acclaimed pageant of the Banyan-eh Filipine Dance Company that performed with a timelessness of deep cultural crisis in which the nation seemed to be deprived of identity and purpose. In this way, bayanian filled a void and became a primary ‘rite of Philippine identity’.

This evolution of folklore-derived ‘culture’ that exists as it were without identifiable culture barriers marked the yearly Philippine Cultural Nights at a variety of campuses. Then, the second and thrid generation student children of Filipinos living in the US, would celebrate an indigenised origin in dance and display it in Bayahan, interspersed with a standard repertoire of historical skits. Wherever the participants commit much effort and pride to the perfection of these shows, they have, from the 1970s and into the pristine, acquired such a rigidity as to become standaritised ‘rites of passage’ that, of course, with each following generation of students will be understood in different ways. Believe it or not, the PCNs have become an easy target for satire (ch. 5) that has, however, not made a dent in the programming.

The crux is the performance

The author is a musician, composer and theatre performer who, as an academic, focuses on Filipino American and performance studies, and so it is not strange that ‘performance’ takes the centre stage. This results in straightforward directions of shows, countless names, and a collage of dates and historical tidbits that fail to evoke the forest that has gone lost for the trees. What has become clear, however, is that the PCNs are there to stay as a ritual marker of belonging to the Filipino community in America, comparable to celebrations of those of Irish, Italian, Mexican, or Chinese descent. In this context, the author has used the idea that participation in a PCN serves as a ‘rite of passage’, implying on the way to becoming a fully fledged Filipino American [?] with the rite itself evolving nostalgia, the desire to obliterate history and to turn it into something new or original (presumably identity-confirming) mythology (pp.142-3).

Whereas this interpretation sounds plausible, I dearly miss the subjective experience of the audience and, largely, of the performers, too. By stating that the PCNs are an expression of diasporic identity, we still remain in the dark about the performances triggers with the individual level. What are the images and illusions of the Philippines evolved? Do these play any role in one’s identity feelings or in the way one defines one’s self with these things being talked about etc. But perhaps, in this day and age, simulacra à la Baudrillard substitute, or ‘surrogate’ as Gonzales calls it, the real thing without question and render recast in the personal moment superficial.