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 indecisions 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 could nurse my philosophies, my compositions. He also likes to watch theatre and, especially in times that he finds relief in the concert hall and in listening to his records – he hints at two to three hundred performances and attendances that visualise the origin and evolution of their cerebration and ‘An Inconstant Profession’, write intellectual biographies and not a single character comes to life. Even the author remains a remote figure. Whereas it is clear that he holds his Ms Mum dear—the biography dwells heavily on their letters—no personality appears. 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 he is a reticent person, sticking to himself and his studies, a peripatetic 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 feels relieved in his complete solitude 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 context or setting, fail to enrobe the narrative. In a way the author anticipated that he would not 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 places that occur in the text, such as Singapore as a China town in the late fifites and Hong Kong without high rises, or about certain historical events. To see, in near secrecy, 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.

Intellectual biography

We need scholarly memoirs that show us the origins and development of ideas, and so it is sympathetic to the urge of describing our course in retrospect. The challenge, though, is in producing an enjoyable text. As eggheads, we usually have no experience with creative writing; the texts we produced were written in an entirely different mode, and with close to 20 books to his name, Tarling will be remembered as a prolific historian of Southeast Asia and the interrelationship between the Philippines and Europe. He would provide us with a significant contribution to historiography in-action. With History Boy, however, we have no more than a baring, bawdy glimpse into the life of a renowned scholar, then from dean to vice-chancellor—in brief, an extremely personal account that holds little interest for his fellow Southeast Asians.

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References


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 descendents 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 Dancers Came’ by the Filipino American writer Bienvenido Santos. To that story, an old-time, ‘indentured’ labourer eagerly anticipates evoking his youth, his nation, his origin, through watching a Philippine cultural show that has come to town—and that does not want any recognition. He has outlived his roots as it were, and so he realises that he is an outsider, without identity, and no better than refuse writer, 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 willy-nilly revisiting us, we have little to choose from. The point rather is how we interact with the inevitable temps perdu. Some of us write about it to exercise and be through with it; others visualise the evolution of their lives and personality in a Bildungsroman that may offer something of self-knowledge. I am one of those who, with a token of our identity, and through personal experience, the Philippines, I turn my gaze on the evolving society and culture that is now referred to as ‘Philippine culture.’

Theodorico Reyes Aquino felt that the country, on the eve of commonwealth (pp.142-3).

The musician, composer and theatre performer who, as an academic, focuses on Filipino American and performance studies, and so it is strange that ‘performance’ takes the centre stage. This results in straightforward descriptions of shows, countless names, and a collage of dates and historical titbits 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. Comparative 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 that, of course, with each following generation of students would be understood in different ways. By this, the richness of the PCNs have become an easy target for satire (ch. 5) that has, however, not made a dent in the programming.

The crux of 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 strange that ‘performance’ takes the centre stage. This results in straightforward descriptions of shows, countless names, and a collage of dates and historical titbits 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. Comparative 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 that, of course, with each following generation of students would be understood in different ways. By this, the richness of the PCNs have become an easy target for satire (ch. 5) that has, however, not made a dent in the programming.

The audience of the performances the author describes is 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, their yearly Philippine Cultural Nights that are the proper subject of the monograph.

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 amassing 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, was paying little heed to and remaining estranged from much of their own. Subsequently, they invented and developed a national repertoire that, in the 1950s, culminated in the internationally acclaimed pageant of the Bayanbuhay Philippine 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 has become 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 withheld the indigenous 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 Bayanbuhay Philippine 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 has become a cultural repertoire rooted in the pre-Spanish past.

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 sky’ got distorted or even become unrecognizable, the rise of Phi Am culture has been accompanied with a deep cultural crisis in which the nation seemed to be deprived of identity and purpose. In this way, Bayanihan filled a void and became a primary site of ‘Philippinesness’

The institution of folklore-derived culture that exists as it were without identifiable culture bearers witnessed the yearly Philippine Cultural Nights at a variety of campuses. Then, the second and third generation students of Filipino immigrants would celebrate an indigenous origin in dance and display its Bayanbuhay, interspersed with a standard repertoire of historical skills. Whereas the participants commit much effort and pride to the perfection of those shows, they have, from the 1970s and into the present, acquired such a rigidity as to become standardised ‘rites of passage’ that, of course, with each following generation of students will be understood in different ways. By this, the richness of the PCNs have become an easy target for satire (ch. 5) that has, however, not made a dent in the programming.

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