

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

A Personal Chronicle, by Salanga

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Philippine Studies vol. 39, no. 1 (1991): 119–121

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Book Reviews

A PERSONAL CHRONICLE: 1971-1987. By Alfredo Navarro Salanga. Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1990. 182 pages.

Time hurtles past with the speed and force of a runaway train and before we know it, momentous events we've lived through are mere footnotes in history. In a desire to remember and understand the present that so quickly becomes the past, we find ways to stay the runaway train, or at least keep an image of it, for the length of time we might need to mull things over. The stories, poems, histories, reports, and commentaries we write make possible a hold on the ephemeral.

In *A Personal Chronicle: 1971-1987*—an anthology of Alfredo Navarro Salanga's writings as a journalist, published posthumously—the author's literary and journalistic skills merge in a book that has also become a kind of history. The anthology gathers together some fifty-four feature articles, column pieces, and editorials written by Salanga over a turbulent period in our recent past—from the Marcos-martial law years through the beginnings of the Aquino era.

The book is divided into five sections bearing as chapter headings the names of five publications for which the author wrote at various stages in his life: the *Asia-Philippines Leader*, where Salanga's articles appeared almost regularly from April 1971 to September 1972; the *San Pedro Express*, which he edited from December 1977 to April 1979; the *Panorama*, which carried his "Post-Prandial Reflections" from 1982-86; *The Manila Times*, where his column "The Mandala of Mabuhay Street" appeared daily from May 1986 to February 1987; and *The Independent* (previously named the *The Observer* and then, with Salanga as editor, *The Independent Observer*), which he edited from June to November 1987. (See introductions to each chapter, pp. 2-3, 55-56, 71-72, 105, 127-28, and bibliography, pp. 144-47.)

The selection of articles for inclusion in the different chapters was done by the book's section editors—Jose F. Lacaba for "Asia Philippines Leader," Augusto Miilat, Jr. for "San Pedro Express," Domini M. Torreallas for "Panorama," Benjamin V. Afuang for "The Manila Times," and Rodolfo Dula for "Independent/Observer." All preface their chapters with a background on

Salanga as each knew him, and on his relationship with the publication he was writing for at that point in his life.

As an aid to the reader, each section closes with endnotes that give basic information regarding some people, events, and places that Salanga mentions in his articles. Also included in this anthology is the text of Salanga's acceptance speech as 1985 TOYM (Ten Outstanding Young Men) awardee for Literature and Journalism, a bibliography of his journalistic writings from 1971-87 (very useful for researchers, critics, and Salanga readers who might want to read/re-read/review more of his works), and some notes about the author written by Salanga himself.

In *A Personal Chronicle*, we see how Salanga's considerable skills as writer, reader, and observer of events came together to convey the significance of everything that captured this journalist's mind and senses in the times in which he lived and worked. His pieces edify, enlighten, and entertain as they shift in content from personal musings (excellent examples are his "Notebook of Pedro Urbano" essays in the "San Pedro Express" chapter), to commentaries which cover practically every aspect of Philippine social and political life in the seventies and eighties.

Particularly gripping among the latter group of articles is his first-hand account of the execution of those convicted in the celebrated Maggie de la Riva abduction and rape case of the late sixties. The article, "Death in the Afternoon," (pp. 36-39 in the anthology) appeared in the 26 May 1972 issue of the *Asia-Philippines Leader*.

Salanga also wrote several pieces on the kidnappings, massacres, and individual deaths that sprang directly or indirectly from the economic, political, and social crises that plagued the nation during those decades. Among these pieces are "The Tacub Massacre and the Politics of Blood" (pp. 25-29) which dissects the Tacub Massacre and traces it to the intense political rivalries that gripped the two Lanaos in the sixties and seventies; "In Praise of Pilar Ardison and the Striking Sugar Workers in Negros" (pp. 40-43) in which Salanga juxtaposes the striking VICMICO workers' experience of "institutionalized violence" with the death of a striker's wife from an illness she could not seek treatment for, from sheer lack of money; "The Van Vactor Kidnapping" (p. 67) which recalls the contributions to Muslim-Christian understanding of the Rev. Lloyd Van Vactor, a missionary in Marawi, who was kidnapped by Muslim secessionists; and "A Death that Reduces Us" (p. 139) which is effectively a eulogy for assassinated Bayan leader Lean Alejandro. In such articles as the above, Salanga writes with a reasoned moderation that keeps his commentaries well above the polemics of their times, yet also with a compassion and quiet indignation that reflect his own sense of outrage.

Events of greater national significance were also, of course, given Salanga's distinctive intellectual-cum-man on the street treatment, as in his essays on the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus ("Where were You when Big Brother Needed (or Wanted) You?," pp. 16-20); on the Ninoy Aquino funeral ("Hysteria, Histrionics and History," pp. 82-84); and on the Agrava report ("Après Agrava, le deluge?," pp. 91-92).

"Where were You . . ." in particular, reflects Salanga's deceptively casual touch when dealing with the momentous, as well as his ability to perceive and convey the ironies in Philippine political life. The article recounts the varied comments and reactions of individuals, politicized and otherwise, when they heard the chilling news that then President Marcos had just suspended the writ. Salanga ends this piece with a telling reaction from a Nation Cinema ticket collector:

"Suya naman itong corpus-corpus na ito. Kakaunti lang ang nanonood ngayon." Management, she feels, should give her a medal. (p. 20)

A few of the articles in the anthology also reflect Salanga's keen sense of culture (both high and low brow) as it relates to history and society ("Literature and Crisis: Our Experience from the Second World War," pp. 85-87, and "Poetry and the Monastic Virtues," pp. 88-90), and again, to the man on the street ("A Problem like Elvira" [p. 124], in which he muses on the impact of TV personality Elvira Manahan's tragic death).

In all the articles in this book Salanga as journalist is an ever-present mediator between reader and culture, reader and society, reader and history. His pieces reflect his skill at weaving past and present together to give current events a wider perspective and situate them in a kind of historical continuum. In one article, for instance, he draws parallels between the witch-hunting of the Spanish Inquisition and the 17th-century Puritans of America, the political witch-hunts of the McCarthy era with its anti-Communist hysteria, and the more recent rash of anti-Communist witch-hunts in the Philippines ("A Thematic Outline for a History of Witch-Hunting in Philippine Society," pp. 76-80).

There is also a characteristic subtlety, a literary elegance to all of Salanga's reflections even when he explores such volatile topics as the NPA "Sparrow" units and the "Eagle" police squads organized to hunt them down ("Of Sparrows and Eagles," p. 131). In this piece, he takes the issue off the streets and into the realm of language—he muses on the connotations of "sparrow" and "eagle"—yet conveys the complexity, the hard-core reality of the problem. Read, for instance, the article's closing paragraph:

And what about eagles? My particular problem with eagles is that there weren't any in that small town by the sea where I spent many a summer with sparrows flitting in and out of church and rice mill. I've always had a healthy respect for eagles though, in an idealistic picture book and jungle movie sort of way but nothing really on the level of familiar the way I was familiar with those bird droppings and with occasional birds' nests that were magic to discover when one was eight or nine and beginning to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong. (p. 131)

Towards the end of his life, as Rodolfo Dula notes in his introduction to the *Independent/Observer* chapter, Salanga's essays became more urgent, more strident in tone—and, we might add, more prophetic. The last article in the anthology, "Time is Running Out," (p. 140) appeared in the 12 November

1987 issue of *The Independent*, and comments on the assassination attempt on Nemesio Prudente, President of the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. This piece contains a stern warning for government that continues to hold in these sobering times:

... the clockwork image holds true even unto the powers that be. In their case it is that of a clock striking closer and closer to the appointed hour—of failure and public exasperation. . . . Time is running out on all of us and it is getting increasingly more difficult to hold back the hands on that clock. (p. 140)

This latest anthology of Salanga's works is aptly titled. It is indeed a very personal chronicle—the writer's as well as ours, for the times he lived in and wrote about are ours too. History, in books as well as in reality, is always both past and present intertwined.

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NINETEENTH CENTURY MANILA: THE WORLD OF DAMIAN DOMINGO. By Nick Joaquin and Luciano P.R. Santiago. Manila: Metropolitan Museum of Manila, 1990. 151 pages, illus.

The book was "published on the occasion of the exhibition of Damian Domingo Paintings from the Paulino Que Collection, February 12–23, 1990, Metropolitan Museum of Manila." One might think, then, that it is a catalogue of the exhibit. But it is not. If it is, then it lacks the standard technical data one expects in an art catalogue: medium, dimensions, provenance. Rather, it is a text that has long begged to be written but had to find an auspicious occasion for its launching. And what better occasion than the exhibition of Domingo's watercolors, recently repatriated to the Philippines.

Damian Domingo (1790–ca. 1832) was the first Filipino painter to leave us a self-portrait, as he was the first Filipino to open an art academy in Tondo. He was the bright light of Philippine painting of the early nineteenth century, known for his fine portrait miniatures, usually on ivory, his religious paintings, and for his *tipos del pais*, illustrated volumes depicting Filipinos in their daily attire of varied hues and shapes, an art genre which he single-handedly created. Domingo was born in Tondo, probably on 27 September of *criollo* parentage. He married Lucia Casas, a *mestiza de sangley*, and built for her a house on Calle Real, opposite the theater of Tondo. In 1821, Domingo set up a private art school in his spacious residence. Then in 1823, the Real Sociedad Economica de Amigos del Pais inaugurated the first Philippine Art Academy and in 1827 appointed Domingo professor of painting. Domingo's association with the Sociedad Economica brought him in contact with Raphael Daniel Baboom, a cloth manufacturer and merchant, who collected samples of Phil-