

# Consciousness in a Time of War: A Review of Roque J. Ferriols' *Sulyáp sa Aking Pinanggalingan*

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**R**oque Ferriols' *Sulyáp sa Aking Pinanggalingan* is an autobiography dedicated to articulating the experiences and reflections of the author during the perilous time of World War II in the Philippines. It could be said that the text, in reference to its title and perspective, was written for two possible reasons: (1) as a personal form of meditation and the revisiting of the author's experiences, (2) and as a way of acquainting the readers to the mode of consciousness during such a desolate time. The latter reason shall be given more emphasis than the former in this review as to further investigate how man thrives through the dangers of war viz. how they consciously respond to the daunting exposure to dread, death, and the search for hope.

As one reads the book, one is immediately introduced to the mood of Ferriols' autobiographical writing—one that espouses existential and phenomenological themes. This can be seen in the page before the table of contents, having for itself an introductory statement that proclaims: “Ang hindi marunong lumingón sa kanyang pináanggalíngan ay hindi makararating sa kanyang paroroónan” (He who does not know how to reflect upon his past shall fail to reach his destination).<sup>319</sup> This quotation straightforwardly stresses the essentiality of retrospective meditation in accomplishing future aspirations heavily founded on the present and progressive deeds and habits. On the one hand, it echoes a phenomenological tone in man's act of reflecting upon her historical development, the internalization of what *was* transitioning and influencing what *is*. The existential tone, on the other hand, resonates in man's capacity to creatively and authentically shape himself into a self-determined individual; one who is not held captive against himself by material or spiritual forces. Thus, implying that man is more able to determine the direction of where he wishes to go, actively navigating through the troughs and crests of his wavelength-like life, if he understands—even if partially—how he traversed through time. History, therefore, serves as a benchmark and compass for human unfolding, an event one can only interpret in retrospect—always different at one point in life and in another—an unchanging reality that may aid him in actualizing his aspirations through the reevaluation of his disposition.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Roque J. Ferriols, *Sulyáp sa Aking Pinanggalingan* ed. Leovino Garcia (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2016).

<sup>320</sup> Moreover, one should also consider the reality that some may reach such ends but find little fulfillment; a lifetime felt as inauthentic.

This intertwining of themes remains constant throughout Ferriols' narration and is evident in his writing style. Two significant—and, in my opinion, the most striking—chapters of the book are greatly bathed in such themes, having been portrayed in a metaphorical style of writing. These chapters are *Paghabandog*<sup>321</sup> and *Exaltatio Crusis*. The former chapter is where Ferriols starts the book with an account of the passing of Gusting<sup>322</sup> and his reflection on human consciousness as compared to that of animals—expressing his initial disdain for a higher degree of awareness, but then reconsidering it as that which is the noblest of human existence; to know and be one with everything that is. Here, one is exposed to this phenomenological identification with another object, in this case, the consciousness of a chicken in contrast to that of a man's consciousness. It was through his meditation of an outside existence did his consciousness move out from himself back to himself, granting him the realization that the beauty of his higher degree of consciousness is that he can endeavor to be one with the universe and, in turn, have the universe exist within him as he apprehends who he is. This idea is later fitted to a bigger and broader view in *Exaltatio Crusis*.<sup>323</sup> In this chapter, the young Ferriols, and 'Br. Pat Ceballos journey across a silent Manila to meet Dr. Gonzales.' Such silence is later broken by *pung pung pung*'s, *PUNG*'s, and *tak tak tak*'s. These sounds represent Ferriols' creativity in his craft; invoking the readers to think of an innocent mental image that represents a heavy and morbid reality. The first sound signifies the exchange of airborne warfare, specifically machine gun fire. The second is the earth-shaking power of anti-air emplacements. And the third sound is the haste of people running away from danger as they seek safety.

Taken for their possible metaphorical significance, these sounds underline the experience of their time; attuning the reader to the thought that, even in times of peril and dissonance, man seeks—through the power of their creativity and humor—various ways to mollify this unsettling grief. They set themselves within such grounds and consciously merge themselves with this environment. Man intentionally does so in order for him to further understand war as it is, then view it differently as to not fall into the crippling effects of disarray and death, that in times of war one can see death as the beginning of one's spiritual prayer in the afterlife, and that the sounds of war are transformed into human sounds to render such harsh reality as tolerable and not beyond human understanding.

Moreover, it is also through this reformation of views does man positions himself in a world of otherness, that he is not isolated from these realities and takes part—when in the presence of others—in the realization of its greater idea.<sup>324</sup> This gives a person a sense of hope, to pursue, despite

<sup>321</sup> Ferriols, *Sulyáp sa Aking Pinanggalíngan*, 2-3.

<sup>322</sup> Ferriols, *Sulyáp sa Aking Pinanggalíngan*, 2. Ferriols expresses his reflection of Gusting's death in a striking manner: "Sabado noong inilibing namin si Gusting. Namatay siya noong Miyerkules. Noong Martes isang araw lamang ang nalalabi sa kanyang buhay... Balang araw parami nang parami ang nalalabi sa kanyang buhay. Ang mahirap sa tao ay kailangan niyang mamatay." This alludes to man's existential fear of death and that he, with such fear, is always plagued and conscious of its presence. This acquaintance with death foreshadows the next chapters and the carried grief in its knowledge and experience.

<sup>323</sup> Ferriols, *Sulyáp sa Aking Pinanggalíngan*, 110-112.

<sup>324</sup> Ferriols, *Sulyáp sa Aking Pinanggalíngan*, 111. In this chapter, Ferriols talks to a person inside the Post Office building as they were seeking refuge from the battle taking place: "Tinanong niya, "Father, saan ang parokya ninyo?" Sabi ko, "Hindi pa ako pari, nag-aaral ako maging paring heswita. Ang parokya ko, bago pumasok ng seminaryo, ay Espirito Santo na nasa kanto ng Tayuman at Avenida Rizal." Parang lumiwanag ang kanyang mukhâ.

perilous odds, the dreams he has whether it is for peace, survival, or love. Such hopefulness is given greater depth when one reflects on what he has traversed and garnered, like the memory and thought of someone waiting for you at home or the fortitude to keep one's word or mission when recalling the need for God's presence to be felt in a time of death and hell incarnated. These sentiments inspire a person to continuously unfold for oneself and, most importantly, for others.

Concerning the overall reach of the book, it is a text for readers to reflect upon, to establish an understanding of history and the contemporary age. Indeed, there is a stark contrast between the past and today, but it is precisely by this historical distance can a sense of responsibility for self and society be fostered, and that knowledge of the past allows us to construct a more intricate and relational present. Learning is a humbling process if one permits himself to reflect upon everyday experiences regularly. It is to look once and look over again to see truths that were not seen at first glance. It is the act of acknowledging one's indebtedness to history in the development of oneself that the ideas and beliefs that we hold now are not presuppositionless. Thus, we are bound to be struck by the thought that our past, as it haunts, plagues, and vexes our minds, are not as crude and cruel as we have once perceived them.

As a conclusion, it would have to be demanded from the reader to read and feel the text deeply as to realize more significant and more personal reflections on what is said in the text; a gaze at moths and flies.<sup>325</sup>

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“Aba, iyon rin ang parokya ko.” This further posits the idea that it is in establishing a relationship with the world do we find ourselves building connections with other people. It is in being conscious of others, whether of a moment, community, or place, do we find a sense of belongingness with all those connected to them. Hence, a return to the idea proposed in chapter one where man's consciousness allows him to embrace the world and be one with it.

<sup>325</sup> Ferriols, *Sulyáp sa Aking Pinanggalangan*, 18-21, 111. Ferriols learns lessons from the moths that bother them as they work and pray. This connotes the idea, in relation to my review and use of the metaphor, that our origins and past journeys can be a bothersome memory, hence, the need to keep an understanding eye and tolerate attitude towards future challenges. "Brother, parang mga langaw" is a sentence stated by Bro. Pat Ceballos as he saw the war rage on above them. This figuratively portrays how our understanding of things can be as humorous and straightforward as flies but are nonetheless significant sources or ways of appreciating or unearthing the significance of event or reflection.