

Angelique: A Hero Remembers

Sitor Situmorang¹
Introduced and Translated by
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Introduction

Sitor Situmorang (born 1924) was a leading Indonesian poet from 1948 until his death in 2014. He also wrote a small number of excellent short stories that have recently been translated into English.³ Among these stories is one, which has been known since 1956 as “Fontenay aux Roses.” When first published, however, it bore a very different title: “Angelique: Kenangkenangan seorang pahlawan” (1954).

The earlier version is about 500 words longer than the later version of 3,500 words. Both tell of a young man’s meeting with a neighbour, Angelique; their relationship and her eventual death from tuberculosis; followed by the narrator’s acceptance of an invitation from Angelique’s mother to visit Fontenay aux Roses, a village eight kilometers to the southwest of Paris.

The earlier version, however, continues with the narrator’s growing boredom with living in the countryside. He joins the French army; trains in Algeria; parachutes into Dien Bien Phu, in northwestern Vietnam; loses a leg to mortar fire and is repatriated to France; returning to live once more in Fontenay aux Roses.

The translation that follows includes this additional narrative detail. (Let us call it “Part 2” for convenience, although it is not marked as separate from the earlier and major part of the story.) Its status is clearly uncertain.

On the one hand, the style is different from that of Part 1: harsher and more factual. The events seem curiously out of tune with what preceded it. In particular there is the earlier statement that, as one possible way of breaking out of their lethargy, “we (existentialists) would have had to fight against people in Indo-China, who wanted to be free, just as we did,” which is contradicted by the narrator’s later decision to fight in this arena. A possible hypothesis is that Part 2 was added, by Sitor or another hand, to fill a space in the layout of the weekly magazine. (Part 2 of the story occurs exclusively on page 27 of the 19 September

¹ **Sitor Situmorang** (1924-2014) lived in France and the Netherlands from 1950 to 1953, before returning to participate in Indonesian artistic and political life. During his lifetime, he published ten volumes of poetry, three volumes of short stories and a collection of plays. Following his death, he was buried in the village of Harian Boho, near Lake Toba, Sumatra, his birthplace.

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³ See Sitor Situmorang, *Oceans of Longing: Nine Short Stories* and *Red Gerberas: Short Stories*.

1954 issue of *Siasat*.)

On the other hand, it could also be argued that Part 2 is sufficiently integral to the story to give it its name. The hero is presented as an indifferent and pseudo-existentialist in Part 1; and fighting a war, any war, is his opportunity to confront “reality,” as he explains in Part 2. The battle of Dien Bien Phu was fought from 13 March to the 7 May 1954 (see Fall 1967) and Sitor, having lived in Paris during 1952-53, would have been very aware of the significance of this event. Finally, the narrator does not actually engage in fighting with any Vietminh soldiers and treats his “heroic” status somewhat ironically.

I have long admired Part 1 on its own, I admit, and find it hard to accept Part 2 as an integral continuation of the story. Others may feel differently.

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If I think about it now, my meeting her was not a coincidence but something I hoped would happen. Let me tell you about it. At the time I was renting a room on Rue J, on the fourth floor and faced out to the world through a small window. The window pointed to the back wall of a tall building, across a dirty, square courtyard.

From my window, if I stood and looked slightly upwards, I could see another window. That window was dirty too. It had no curtain and was almost always closed. But there was a small pot on the sill filled with flowers. At least there was in summer, which it now was.

Of all of the windows on the wall opposite, which were like boxes and had thin dirty grey curtains, only that one was adorned with flowers. That wasn't the only thing that drew my attention to the window. I was surprised that the window was seldom open even though it was summer, and when it was open, even though only a little, I never saw who opened it. The pane behind the flowerpot always remained closed. But more than that, there was another even more important reason why I looked toward the slightly opened window on hot summer afternoons. For as long as I had been in my room, six months, almost every afternoon, toward six o'clock, I always heard someone playing the piano. They played well but still practiced in order to play even better. Having grown accustomed to the music, I didn't give it much thought, although the sound of the piano, which I assumed came from the building opposite, had soothed my feelings from the very beginning. And from the very beginning, I connected it with the flowerpot, for some reason.

I started renting my room in winter. And only when summer was well advanced, four months later, did I realise that my room faced west because I could see the rays of the sun shining at an angle onto the pot in the morning as I hung my bathrobe and blanket out to air. In winter, one seldom saw the rays of the sun, or the sun itself. The part of the city in which I lived was normally extremely quiet as well.

It was like living in a village, an isolated place in a city of millions where the not-too-poor and the not-too-rich lived far from the bustle of the large boulevards. Nor was it as grimy as the suburbs of the industrial zones that had their own particular sounds.

The village peacefulness had been attractive, as was the cheap rent. I liked the calm and the sense of simplicity. I should say that I knew very well what it was like to live in a real village, the boredom of it all, and I didn't think I could do it anymore. I enjoyed the crowds and activity of a city of millions of people, the sense of not knowing everyone else or being known by them. That seemed to me to be true freedom. And at that time, I really enjoyed that sort of freedom.

But there were also times when the rural-like atmosphere was very oppressive, just like living in a real village, without the cackling of hens after laying an egg, the barking of dogs, and without the rustle of the wind through the leaves. Only the emptiness of a city of millions of people on a hot afternoon. The silence and the hard faces turned to stone.

Now, after living in a true village away from the city, I can see that my enjoyment of the noise and the crowds in the city was due to my reluctance to be involved with anyone or anything, and perhaps my unwillingness to shoulder any responsibility. I wanted to be free.

But that afternoon, that summer afternoon, I needed a friend, someone to talk to, go places with, when everyone else was on holidays, visiting the public gardens or the forests or the countryside. But my circumstances didn't allow me to do any of those things, and so I gazed hopefully at the window across the courtyard. Hopefully because the flowerpot was still there; if its owner had gone away for a long holiday out of town, the pot would have been taken in and given to some neighbour or other to look after.

It was almost six o'clock and I suddenly realised that I should be hearing the piano, but I couldn't and I hadn't heard it for several days. That made me feel even more lonely. And I decided to go out, to share in some of the excitement of the city. Suddenly the window opposite opened and I saw.... Angelique. I found out her name later. She was small and slim, attractive but not pretty, and had long black hair.

Her face was pale, unwell, and she was not wearing any makeup. Her eyes lit up briefly when she saw me; then she vanished back into her room and reappeared carrying a cup. She watered the flowers. When she had finished, she looked at me. For a moment, I was uncertain. Then I gestured with my hands, like a person playing the piano and, after a short while, she looked at me again, nodded, and closed the window. My heart beat faster than it had ever done before and I too closed my window, withdrew into silence, lost in thought, hoping I would hear her playing the piano. But the silence continued and I remembered that her body had been covered with a sheet. She must have been sick to wrap herself up like that on such a hot day, I thought, and then I went

out to catch some of the bustle of the city.

The next afternoon, I met her.

After I had described what she looked like, and her floor level, about the fifth floor, the concierge told me the girl's name and room number, adding "the Existentialist!" in a proud but gossipy way. But perhaps he was describing me too, because my appearance was exactly the same as those called "existentialists."

My thick short hair, carefully trimmed beard, thick check shirt which was intended to hide the dirt, my uncertain origin and my lack of an occupation, apart from drinking coffee and talking all day, because coffee was cheaper than anything else but water, and refreshing enough. Existentialists: the young bore the name of the fashionable "philosophy" in a city where philosophers had flourished and fought throughout the ages, Paris. Like the other young existentialists, I never thought about existentialism. I simply felt that we agreed with the philosophy's founder, a man called Sartre, that life, including the world, nature and humanity, was absurd, and that no good reason could be found to justify it, even if you could be bothered to look for one. I don't know if that was what existentialism was really about. That was how we explained it. In general, we were pseudo-intellectuals, read a lot, and in Paris, on the basis of a moderate education, and moderate intelligence, could dive into all the philosophies there had ever been or ever would be, and all the works of literature as well, so we believed, so I believed. The whole of life could be spent reading, and at that time this was all I did and all that I thought was worth doing. The rest of our time was for fun. If we wanted to live, we lived through our bodies, feeling our muscles, blood and bones, the lungs that helped us to talk. We danced, debated, fought, made love. What else was there to do? If we had money, we became spectators, spectators of life, life played out on the stage: the theatre, opera, or silver screen. It was easier than reading. We worked to earn money, but only enough to meet our needs. A small amount of time was enough to fill our bellies. We followed one basic principle: do as little physical labour as possible in order to have as much time as possible to pursue cultural activities, create art, write literature, think, think about the human condition, think about the secrets we each contained, think, think.

As an illustration of the meaning for which we were searching, we had the theatre. Watching life on the stage called for a change in the way we lived. But it was too late to have our own adventures – go to war, win a colony, conquer some uncivilised race. Instead, we would have had to fight against people in Indo-China, who wanted to be free, just as we did. It was no longer possible to discover new continents. Scientific discoveries belonged to the experts. There were not many Mount Everests. There were no more unknown lands to be mapped, or poles and oceans. Almost all the plants and animals on the land, sea, and air, had been classified. Those sorts of tasks were increasingly the work of a few specialists. All that was left for us to explore were the worlds of thought and

philosophy, as free individuals with the same rights as the original thinkers and philosophers, the freedom of our own rooms and the darkened theatre, where everyone was equal in the debates with those thinkers, philosophers and poets. If our opportunities were so narrow that we did nothing at all, that was not our fault.

Doing nothing: that was how I felt. Doing nothing meant more than being unemployed. It was a culture in which no one worked, and, as everyone knows, culture involves every aspect of one's life. From cutting one's finger nails to thinking about the world to come, and diving deep into the human soul.

But the words "doing nothing" only became meaningful once I started living in this village, outside Paris.

As I climbed the steps to Angelique's room, because the lift was broken, I felt disappointed. At that time, I didn't very much like existentialist youths. I didn't believe that they had really considered their position as unemployed. And I especially didn't care for those who criticised them, but gawked anyway, the American tourists, and pious folks from the countryside who came to Paris to visit prostitutes then returned home, cursing Paris again.

But I kept climbing. I needed Angelique as someone I could talk to, or ask not to talk.

When she opened the door and invited me in, she smiled, the smile of an older woman, receiving a child who had fallen in love with her. "Poseur!" I thought.

After introducing ourselves, and discussing my room and work, she had no option but to play the piano. Briefly. Then she coughed. Tuberculosis, I concluded when I looked at her pale face in the lamplight.

"I haven't long to live!" she said, lighting a cigarette (no wonder, I thought), without offering one to me. Her every action fitted the general image of an independent Parisian woman. And she knew it. She seemed to be acting a part in a play, knowing that she had an audience. I invited her to come out with me, to go to a café for coffee.

"I would cough all the time!" she said but finally decided to go and we went.

She told me the story of her life, of course. The child of a small shopkeeper, with big ambitions to become a solo pianist. From Milan. She was Italian. I didn't ask her anything else. We sat thinking, doing nothing.

After that we often went out together. And I learned that she was like many other young men and women: she was clever and well informed, perhaps too well informed!—it was more than her sweet small body could bear. Her spirit was vast but her body had not grown because she had not had enough vitamins or sunlight or fresh air, and the inevitable consequence had been tuberculosis.

"Why don't you go home?" I asked her. "Back to the hills and sunlight of Italy?"

"Sometimes you can't go home again," she said very dramatically and I

realised that I wanted to know more, to dig more deeply.

But no matter how skillfully I probed, I only learned more about what she thought and not about what she had experienced. Perhaps she had not experienced anything important, I later decided. People who live in constant illusions become psychological cripples.

To have experiences means to become a person. The person is the individual who meets other people, who meets life. Not to meet other people, meet life, through love, responsibility, and anger, meant one had never begun to be an individual. Was Angelique an individual?

I thought about these different things each time we met.

Finally she told me, showing neither sincerity nor mockery, that Angelique was not her real name. She called herself that because she was close to death, on her way to heaven. I had no desire to ask her real name.

I once asked her whether she believed in heaven, simply for the sake of asking. "Yes," she replied. "But there is no hell," she added with a sigh, as if this disappointed her. She believed in God and gave a simple reason: Why is an apple shaped like an apple?

Then she was silent for a while and looked sideways at me. And she said: "It doesn't exist. Heaven doesn't exist. There is nowhere to return to. There is no paradise lost."

The condition of her health and the approach of autumn, season of decay, made her think more often of the afterlife. The yellow leaves would soon harden and fall, and once winter came the rain on the asphalt would soon become ice. I smiled, spontaneously. Why is an apple shaped like an apple? Why is Angelique? I thought playfully.

Very early one morning, after we had spent the night dancing and drinking at a dance hall, she took me to a nearby church. And she truly prayed. As though she wanted me to watch her praying, she left me at the entrance and went to kneel in the middle of the church. Then we left.

The trees were completely bare and we walked close together along the edge of the river, as the cold wind blew. She coughed. "Heaven means not knowing," she said. "Hell is praying in a church the way I did."

"We know that we will never know until we die. Or when we are very old, and our body and blood need nothing more. When you are very old, you should live in the countryside."

I made no comment. In fact, I was a little annoyed. I wanted to sleep.

"But everything has an end, its own form of death, in God. If you don't die young, I hope you can live in a quiet village, with trees and the light."

Had I been more used to such chatter, I wouldn't have noticed, but, in fact, her words suddenly made me aware of the pleasure of the clear blue early morning sky. A vast blue, more vast than the happiness and hope in my heart.

My smile faded when she coughed. She said: "But if you reach heaven, don't

forget what you once had, don't forget them. Heaven is only perfect when one remembers the precious things one has lost."

A few days later, I was startled when I went to see Angelique and the concierge told me that she died. She hadn't committed suicide, as I first suspected. She had coughed up a lot of blood. And her body had already been taken away, he didn't know where. The concierge closed the door. Angelique was dead.

A few days later, I received a letter from Fontenay aux Roses, a rather pleasant name for a village. Close to Paris. Surrounded by hills. Quiet. The sort of place where I thought I would like to spend my old age. I had visited there in winter, while the snow was falling and the village was covered in white. I was briefly reminded of my visit as I opened the letter.

The letter offered me the use of a room. It was a friendly letter. "The room is not a large room but I think it should be large enough for your needs." A short letter. Who wrote it? The signature was not clear. A woman.

I decided to go, and not just because of Angelique's passing. I could try it for a few months, I thought, remembering Angelique's words. I was slightly sad.

Before finally leaving, I glanced at the window on the other side of the courtyard. The flowerpot had gone. A pure white curtain covered the window. I went. The seasons were changing and Fontenay aux Roses felt particularly beautiful. Of course, it was simply an ordinary village. An ordinary village with which I had no connection, or where I felt like a stranger. If I had seen it from a quickly passing train, it would have looked rather boring. Perhaps it would have given the impression of being inhabited by an important person who liked solitude, the sort of person one often reads about in books, or just a very ordinary village where one occasionally heard the creaking of a passing bullock cart, the cackle of hens, and the barking of a dog, and at certain times of day, the roar of a train behind the hills, coming and going, but invisible.

That was certainly my impression as I entered the village, carrying my suitcase. An impression that intensified as I approached the house indicated in the letter. A freestanding, two storied house, on the slope of a hill facing toward Paris in the distance. The house and yard were uncared for and rather deserted. Apart from the woman who opened the door, there was no sign of anyone else. If one wanted to live in solitude, I thought to myself, this was the ideal place, and I turned and looked back toward Paris.

I was startled by the first words the woman spoke as she warmly took my suitcase. I still remember how my blood raced when I heard her say: "I am Angelique's mother. Welcome. So you are the friend she has told me so much about."

Angelique's mother? Was she Italian?

As we ate, Angelique's mother talked. She told stories the way Angelique did. I learned a lot about their family, a French family, original inhabitants of

Fontenay aux Roses.

Angelique's father died as a partisan, resisting the German Nazis. Her brother, her only brother, had been in jail for ten years, having been a German spy, and would stay there for the rest of his life.

"Perhaps Angelique told you that she wanted to be a doctor, a chest specialist," the old woman said. "But she was always sick and never received the scholarship she wanted. So she studied the piano. Anyway, it would have been too hard to be a doctor."

"She played the piano well," I said, perhaps to console her. "She had talent."

Then the old woman said: "Of course you'd like to see her grave."

"To... morrow," I said, "when it is lighter." I was still thinking that Angelique had always appeared to be so honest when she was talking. Had she said she came from Mexico, I would have believed her.

No matter what, I felt that she believed what she said about death and heaven.

The next day the old woman apparently forgot that she had invited me to visit Angelique's grave. I was glad she had forgotten. Because I never wanted to see the grave. And I never have visited the grave, even though it is in the yard near the house, according to her mother. When the mother asked whether I had visited the spot, I simply said: "Yes."

Several months passed. I still had not visited the grave.

Then, in spring, as the flowers blossomed, I noticed the grave from my window, as I stared toward Paris in the distance.

And as if she were standing next to me, I heard Angelique whisper: "Heaven is remembering what you once had."

That was a year ago, the spring of 1953. She had died at the beginning of winter, the previous year. Living in Fontenay aux Roses, I was soon treated like an old inhabitant, and I think that I could have lived here forever like that. But I left. Something happened between that spring and now when I am writing this. I have just returned from a journey I never thought I would undertake. But I have returned without one of my legs.

Several months ago, after living here for almost a year, I couldn't stand the boredom and perhaps because I was troubled by my memories and my sense of emptiness, I enlisted as a volunteer to go to fight in Indo-China, where the French imperium was threatened with destruction. Angelique's mother was surprised and saddened. Some people praised me, because they thought I was brave. But I did not go because of any feeling of patriotism, in fact I felt that we were fighting the Vietminh for the wrong reasons. I had to get away, away from Fontenay aux Roses, away from France. If I fought on the wrong side, at least I would be face to face with the truth. I would have the opportunity to confront that particular truth. That would allow me to hide from my feelings. So I went.

After basic training in Algeria, in Africa, I was sent to Asia, to Saigon. It was

urgent. In April 1954, the fortress of Dien Bien Phu was under severe attack from the Vietminh. And once again I had enlisted as a volunteer, a member of the parachute brigade that was to be dropped into the besieged fortress and fight valiantly, as in the romantic days of long ago.

I never fought. I was crippled on landing, fragments of mortar shells shattered my right leg. Surprisingly, the thought entered my mind at that very moment that I might see Dudoc and the fierce expression on his face. Dudoc had been my friend when he was studying in Paris. I had heard that he had joined the rebels after returning to Hanoi from Paris. Of course I never saw him. Instead, I was taken to an underground hospital in the fortress. The fortress was under continual bombardment. I cannot describe the atmosphere or the intensity of the fighting which, in fact, I never saw.

The fortress fell and I was taken back to France as a one-legged hero. That is, more or less, the story of how I decided to stay in Fontenay aux Roses for the rest of my life. Angelique's mother looks after me carefully and I intend to help her in her daily chores as best I can with an artificial leg.

I never told her about Angelique's lies. Angelique is innocent in my eyes, like some illusion.

Perhaps I think longingly of my lost right leg. That is the story of Angelique.

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