

Between repression and revolution

F. Sionil José: The Rosales novels.

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When, in F. Sionil José's novel Mass, the hero is asked "What do you want most?" his tentative answer is "To be truly alive." José himself has pursued ^{an answer to this question} ~~this ambition~~ since, as a schoolboy living near the provincial town of Rosales in the northern Philippines, he read the adventures of Don Quixote ^{under the street lamp} ~~by streetlight~~, as there was no ^{light} ~~lamp~~ for him to use at home. After experience of the Japanese occupation, war service ^{with the American army} ~~at home~~ and diplomatic service abroad, he returned to ^{quest his quest} ~~this issue~~ in the five volumes of his 'Rosales' novels, which provide a fictionalised history of the modern Philippines from the revolts of the 1890s to the Marcos regime of the 1980s.

Although the Americans invaded the Philippines just 100 years ago this year, the country remains residually Spanish. Magellan and his fleet arrived among its islands in 1521, and, after exchange of gifts and pleasantries, moved to the real business of conversion and killing. Magellan himself died of wounds inflicted while trying to subjugate the inhabitants of Mactan to the Raja of Cebu. Fifty years later, Manila ^{became} ~~had become~~ a provincial capital of the Spanish Empire. Ruled for three centuries by a rivalry of Spanish governors and friars, and for the first half of this century by American missionaries of Protestantism and democracy, the Philippines remains an Asian state living within the institutions of western culture. Even its dominant religion comes from Europe, grafted by the friars onto a native animism, and more recently tainted by American styles of evangelism. Power remains with the ilustrados, the wealthy mixed-blood families who gained their power under the Spanish and, although fomenting the first nationalist stirrings, retained it as they collaborated with the successive colonial regimes until the nation gained nominal independence in 1946. Yet, despite its western institutions of government, education and business, its traffic snarls and the modern façades of its cities, and the multinational advertising that infests buildings and highways, the evidence is clear that the origins and destinations of the Philippines, lie outside the trajectory of western progress.

José's novels track the resistances and corruptions of a traditional society responding to the pressures of modernism. They follow the fortunes of peasants enduring on the land or seeking escape in the city, of graduates returning from study abroad only to

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become entwined in the cycle of corruption, of landlords and tycoons deploying their wealth like generals their troops, of priests in the slums and of revolutionaries in the mountains. At their centre is the constant sense of lives deformed by complicity in power or finding their true shape by resistance to it.

The Philippines is a country long united by imperialisms that depended on an imposed religion and on a ruling class based on Spanish descent and usurped property rights. After the coming of the Americans, this class quickly discarded its Spanish language in favour of English and faithfully served the new masters until, in the name of democracy, they in turn departed, installing their former agents as their new clients. The Philippines today is thus, with the exception of the Muslim south, geographically united, but at the cost of intractable social divisions. While everyone may enjoy the right to vote, there are few representatives of the peasants in Congress or the governors' palaces. Those who have come from humble beginnings have forgotten the exhortation of the crippled poet in Dusk: "the most important thing ... is not that we are not farmers any more, but that we should never, never forget that we were." This kind of forgetting unites the Philippines with all those former colonies in south Asia where the new rulers merely exercise their power in the way they were taught by their former masters.

The Pretenders, the first of José's 'Rosales' sequence, was published in 1962. The next two, My Brother, My Executioner and Mass, which also deal with the problems of independence, were suppressed until 1988 and 1982 respectively. José then returned to the beginnings of the nationalist struggles in Tree, an episodic chronicle of the loss of hope in the latter days of American rule and under the Japanese, and Po-on, now renamed Dusk - the first of the sequence to be published in America. This, the last to be written, is chronologically the first of the sequence, and provides an inspiring account of resistance to Spanish cruelty and the birth of nationalism from a combination of idealism, anger and solidarity. The events of the novel are shown through the consciousness of Istak, or Eustaquio, Samson, whose life encompasses an education both in European civilisation and in the wisdom and endurance of the peasant. Unfortunately, Random House, the publishers of the American edition, report no plans to release it in Australia.

The first part of Dusk is an account of Istak's passage into adulthood from a youth spent as acolyte to Father José, the old priest of Cabugaw. His passage, which is both literal and metaphoric, starts with his dismissal from his post by the new priest, whom

Istak has discovered in flagrante delictu, his consequent return to the tasks of a peasant, the expulsion of his family from the lands where they have worked for generations, and their flight south in search of a promise of land and freedom. In the course of their flight, Istak is shot and left for dead by the Guardia, loses his father and mother to hazards of the journey, finds a wife and becomes leader of the party. Eventually, the family reach the town of Rosales, the centre of the district where they are able to settle as tenants, build a village and carve out property of their own from the jungle. Here Istak finds himself as both farmer and healer. In this dual role in the new village, reminiscently named Cabugawan, he is able to reconcile his peasant origins and the yearnings for a higher vocation that had been implanted in him by Father José.

The second part of the novel reveals this settlement as illusory. Filipino patriots in alliance with the Americans overthrow the Spanish government, only to be themselves betrayed by the Americans. When the poet of the revolution, Apollinario Mabini, the Cripple, comes to live among them, he awakens in Istak his earlier longings for justice and for recognition as an autonomous human being, rather than as a man destined by the colour of his skin to serve others without will or voice of his own. The Cripple's conversations with Istak analyse the way colonialism denies the humanity of the colonised, taking away even their belief in themselves. Istak remembers too much of Father José and his teachings to share the Cripple's hatred either for the Spaniards, whose language held "a nobility that affirmed man's worth", or for the Americans, whose constitution represents a similar idealism and who did eventually free their slaves. His concern is with the land he has cleared, with the family he feeds with the fruits of his labour, and with the neighbours he serves through his knowledge of language and healing. Although he fears that the villagers may once more be forced to flee into the wilderness, he knows that they could do this with the confidence "borne out of the sweat, the agony of having tried", with the intelligence makes of nature a friend rather than an enemy, and through the tight kinship of families who have made their own beginnings. Among these people he can find the patience to wait and the courage to prevail against the enemy. Yet this knowledge does not give him "peace such as he might have found had he become a priest." Such peace, he comes to realise, can be found only by retreating from the world. His wife persuades him that he can no longer flee the violence he rejects, and he allows the Cripple to recruit him to the nationalist cause. In almost the last pages of the book, he takes up a rifle against the American invaders who

are trying to take from his country, his people and his life. In accepting the necessity of resistance, he finds within himself the faith he had sought since his time as an acolyte of the Church that rejected him.

This action of the book is bracketed by two letters that qualify any simple nationalism. The first, from Father José to his superior, although acknowledging the failures of the friars, reiterates the importance of their high mission, which he argues will be fulfilled only by admitting Indios like Istak to their seminaries so that they can carry the legacy of Spain into charge of their own future. The last, a letter from one of the American soldiers to his brother, who has announced that he is coming to the Philippines with similar high hopes to those that had brought the friars in other generations, praises the opportunities open to men of goodwill, but ends with a quotation from the final words of the diary Istak kept during his last journey:

“Conquest by force is not sanctioned by God. The Americans have no right to be here. We will defeat them in the end because we believe this land they usurp is ours; God created it for us. The whole history of mankind has shown how faith endures while steel rusts.

These words sum up the theme of the whole series.

The action of the novel, built on the twin quests for land and freedom, conveys both the urgency and the excitement of the struggle, but its theme is expressed even more strongly by the images that dominate it. The life of the peasants is symbolised by the patient buffaloes that pull their carts and their ploughs, and by their few carefully crafted implements, passed on through the generations, worn by use and lovingly taken with them to their new habitations. Their endurance is shadowed by the horse riding Spanish officers of the Guardia and their mestizo and native accomplices, by casual rape and mutilation, and by the pistol shot of summary execution, accompanied by the announcement that “Spanish justice triumphs again”. In the background of the northern villages stand the thick-walled churches, built to shelter the population from attack by the Moros, and the belfries that call the people to prayer and remind them of vengeance. The bells represent the control of the friars, the churches the sanctuary of faith and a universal tradition. Later, the American invasion, first heard of only as rumour, becomes concrete in the bodies of the three rebel soldiers Istak sees hanging in front of the church, the village he sees set on fire and the blue Ilokano cloth lying, “already dry and in a heap” beside the young village girl raped and

killed by the well where she had gone to bathe.

The later novels in the sequence continue this history through its alternating cycles of continuity and destruction, violence and community. Tree tells story of Rosales through the eyes of the young grandson of Don Jacinto, the patron who directed Istak to land they can clear for themselves, only to have it corruptly seized from them by a later landlord. My Brother My Executioner moves the story on another generation to the Hukbalahap rising, and to Luis Asperri, offspring of a union between a granddaughter of the first settlers and Don Vincente, the grandee who dispossessed them. Luis learns from his mother's father how the Americans came with their transits and their measuring rods, how the Spaniards worked with the Americans and how with no more than scraps of paper they made binding and permanent the bondage of those who from the beginning had felled the trees, cut the grass, killed the snakes, and dammed the creeks, so that this inhospitable land could be made gracious and fecund.

But Luis is taken as a child from his mother's family and adopted by his natural father. His memories of his mother, and his knowledge of her rejection by his father, prevent him enjoying the privileges that nevertheless separate him from his people. He and his half-brother, the rebel leader Captain Victor, represent the alternatives of peaceful change from within or violent revolution from below. One brother remains trapped in the past, the other seeks to wipe it out, to destroy what he has not created. The novel admires revolutionary virtue, but endorses the proverb that "He who does not know where he came from cannot know where he is going."

The Pretenders returns us to the Samson family, where Istak's grandson Antonio, now married into a wealthy Manila family, has even less freedom to choose. The first member of the family to escape from Rosales and the restrictions of poverty, he destroys himself through a combination of ambition and moral cowardice. Finally, Mass brings us close to the present, telling the story of Antonio's illegitimate son Pepe, who has been brought up in the village but escapes to Manila, where he becomes involved with priests and revolutionaries in the reeking slums of Tondo.

If we consider the novels in the order they were written, their themes become even more clear. In The Pretenders, Antonio, whose father has been imprisoned a foolhardy act of homicide in resistance to tyranny, escapes from the village by scholarships that eventually take him to America. However, his marriage into a wealthy family imprisons him

in a world that requires him to surrender his independence in return for privilege. Only in suicide does he find escape. Similarly, the central character of My Brother My Executioner accepts the death of himself and his wife as the cost of the way he has lived. In Tree, set in the forties and fifties but published in 1978, at the height of the Marcos regime, all choice and all hope seem lost. The novel closes with the image of the baleta tree, symbol of protection for the villagers, but itself growing only from the strangulation of the sapling to which it has clung. Yet Mass, written a couple of years earlier, and Dusk, set earliest but written last, both find hope in the endurance and defiance of the common people, the “little people” who “have always been like flies - they die, but then they can bring on a plague.”

Although José has written an epic of nationalism, it is not simply nationalist. The novels condemn poverty and the rapacious landlords who perpetuate it, and present as heroes the rebels who take up arms against cruelty and tyranny, but they do not suggest armed revolution as an answer to the problems they depict. The revolutionary leaders are themselves too often vain and deluded, patriots become profiteers, and the little people, capable of enormous endurance and compassion, also betray each other. José is filled with pity for his people, but he does not ignore their share of responsibility for their troubles. In part this comes from a patriarchal society, where although men take the decisive actions, only strong women enable them to maintain their integrity. These women represent the continuing power they draw from the community, whereas wealth confers only the power to destroy. But the women who allow themselves to become merely creatures of their men are also complicit in this destruction. Alienated from the land and its people, they lose their vitality, their ability to live with others and to achieve the desires that wealth and violence promise.

The characters who point a way to the future are those who find within themselves a strength that comes from a solidarity with their people, transcending their individuality and even their ties of loyalty to immediate family or clan. This enables them to accept death as the price of life and hatred of tyrants as the price of freedom, and to know that they must place in humanity the faith once directed to God. There is a world of difference between Antonio Samson, who kills himself in despair, and his grandfather Istak, who chooses death despite knowing that his resistance is futile and that even his fate will remain unknown. The series ends as Pepe, Antonio’s son and Istak’s great-grandson, returns to the village and takes up from his forebears the struggle he knows he cannot avoid. “I was afraid, but I felt

very light. I knew I could go very far without tiring.” After experiencing love, degradation, betrayal and torture, he has joined the living who take command of their own lives without denying their fellows.

Just as Pepe learns to take control of his circumstances, so the ‘Rosales’ novels transcend both the constrictions of colonialism and the limitations of the merely national. The voices they allow us to hear speak from within the particular history, loyalties and structures of a Philippines society that is itself subordinated to global structures of control. The speakers appeal from their constrictions to universal concepts of individual integrity and its necessary communal base. By recognising these two axes of social identity can we may yet find a way of moving beyond the tyrannies of a global economy to the possibilities of a global network of communities.

Note: All the novels referred to are published by Solidaridad, Manila. The American editions are to be published by Random House, New York, commencing with Dusk (Po-on) in May, 1998.