Chapter 5

Between repression and revolution: F. Sionil José: The Rosales novels.

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 the answer to this question 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, as there was no light for him to use at home. After experience of the Japanese occupation, war service with the Americans and diplomatic and journalistic service abroad, he returned to 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 that began in the 1960s and lasted until 1986.

I

The Philippines and India stand as the two portals of western imperialism in Asia. To the west of the Indian subcontinent lie the old realms of the Persian and Ottoman Empires, neither fully displaced by European power until this century. Although India was known to the Romans, direct contact began only with the voyage of Vasco da Gama in 1497, and it subsequently was subject, wholly or in part, to Portuguese, Dutch, French and British rule. The modern state is, with Pakistan and Bangladesh, both the creature and the successor of the British Empire, the first power to bring political unity to the subcontinent. These successor states remain members of the Commonwealth and retain, at least in outer form, British structures of government,

law and defence. to be remedied when the inflow of capital and expertise finally completes the process of development. As in the Philippines, English is so widely spoken as to have become a distinct variety, and has produced a local literature as well as local forms.

If India is still residually British, the Philippines is Spanish, with an American and international overlay. Its 7000 islands lie to the south and east of the ancient empires of China, Korea and Japan, which have often been subjected to western power but never completely subjugated, and never losing their separate identities. The Philippines, on the other hand, owes its national identity to the Spanish colonists, and its forms of government to the Americans. Europeans first came to the islands in 1521, when Magellan arrived with his fleet 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 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.

Unlike any country of Asia, the Philippines owes even its religion to Europe. Except in the south, most Filipinos practise a form of Catholicism grafted by the Spaniards onto a native animism, and more recently tainted by American styles of evangelism. Although its people speak 85 mutually unintelligible languages, nearly

three-quarters claim to speak English, which since the American occupation has been the language of education. Its institutions of government are American, but power remains with the ilustrados, the wealthy families who seized control of the land under the Spanish, and, despite fomenting the first stirrings of nationalism in Spanish times, retained their power in return for acting as agents of the successive colonial regimes that only yielded to nominal independence in 1946.

Although the Americans invaded the Philippines over a century ago, 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 capital of the new province 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.

The Philippines was first 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.

Despite the traffic and modern façades of the cities, and the multinational advertising that infects the highways, the evidence is clear that the origins and destinations of the Philippines, as of India or Pakistan, lie outside the trajectory of western progress. Their politicians may use western forms, their universities train their intellectuals in western skills and ideologies, their businessmen wear western suits and play western games, but power depends of networks of privilege that derives

from the exploitation of the countryside and its workers. The overcrowding and poverty of the slums are fed by the flight of the peasants from the oppression of the villages. This flight takes many even further - to Australia or America, or to the oil-rich countries of the Middle East and the trade-rich cities elsewhere in Southeast Asia, where the toil of labourers and housemaids furnishes the dollars that, sent back home, keep their families from destitution and, until the recent currency crisis, helped to keep their bankers happy by keeping stable the balance of national payments and enabling the elite to import their western luxuries.

II

Frankie José is a controversial figure in the Philippines. A former soldier and diplomat, he was once a supporter of Marcos, but broke with him when he proclaimed himself a dictator. In the last days of the Marcos regime, José sent his wife to America for safety, and he himself slept in a different house every night. For many years he has edited the journal Solidaridad, and with his wife he has run the Solidaridad press and bookshop in Ermita, Manila. This bookshop has become a meeting place for intellectuals, and home to the Philippines Centre of PEN, which has courageously maintained the battle for freedom of speech through the Marcos years and beyond. Although José was sympathetic to the Huk rebels and their successors in the New Peoples Army, he has incurred their hostility by refusing to endorse their ideology or tactics. A committed nationalist, he nevertheless arouses suspicion among linguistic nationalists by writing in English rather than in his native Ilocan or the national

Pilipino. These tensions, which belong as much to society as to the individual, appear in his work, making it an inclusive national saga.

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 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 constantly is the sense of lives stunted by subjection, deformed by complicity in power or finding their true shape by resistance to it.

III

In his Rosales sequence, José follows the fortunes of the peasant enduring on the land or seeking escape in the city, of the graduate returning from study abroad only to become entwined in the cycle of corruption, of landlords and tycoons deploying their wealth like generals their troops, of priests in the slums and revolutionaries in the mountains. The novels show the country, not as a provincial backwater or as part of an exotic Asia, but as a land caught in the toils of global imperialism but at the cetnre of its own history.

The Pretenders, the first of the 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 inspiriting 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.

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Eventually, they find a place where they are able to settle as tenants and at the same time carve out property of their own from the jungle, Istak finds himself as both farmer and healer. In this dual role in the new village of Cabugawan he is able to reconcile his peasant origins and the yearnings for a higher vocation that were implanted in him by Father José, the old priest of Cabugaw.

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. Don Jacinto, Istak's patron, allies himself with the revolutionaries who carry on armed struggle for independence. 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 they 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", the

intelligence makes of nature a friend rather than an enemy, and 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." His wife persuades him that he can not for ever flee the violence he has always avoided, and he allows the Cripple to recruit him to the nationalist cause. In almost the last pages of the book, he takes a rifle and finds satisfaction in killing the American invaders who are trying to take from his country, his people and his life. In accepting the cause, he finds within himself the faith he had sought since his time as an acolyte of the Church that rejected him.

Yet 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 last words from 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 conveyed as much 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. This 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 to the announcement that "Spanish justice triumphs again". But also 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, but from changing perspectives. 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.

While the changing perspectives, from peasant to middle class to wealthy and back again, demonstrate the vast differences of wealth and power that remain a constant of Philippines society, the moral issues remain the same. In each generation, the individual is challenged to discover in himself a truth that finally can come only by dedicating himself to the others who constitute a nation still coming into being. Peasants, middle class and landowners alike are caught in the trap of power. The peasants are condemned to unending toil and misery, the middle classes are dependent on the wealthy, the wealthy are imprisoned in their fine houses, divided from their people and within themselves.

If we consider the novels in the order they were written, this theme becomes even more clear. In The Pretenders, Antonio, facing the reality of his father, imprisoned for a foolhardy act of homicide in resistance to tyranny, is forced to confront the falsity of his own position and the privileges he has married into. His only escape is suicide. Similarly, but more honourably, In My Brother My Executioner the central character accepts death 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 the strength of 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" There is a world of difference between Antonio Samson, who kills himself in despair, and Istak, who dies knowing that his resistance is futile, that even his fate will remain unknown, but that the will of anonymous individuals puts spirit into flesh, and makes known the God who is in all of us, even as it leaves nothing but the Duty it has followed.

Although José has written an epic of nationalism, it is not simply nationalist. Nor, although 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, do they suggest armed revolution as an answer to the problems they depict. The revolutionary leaders are themselves too often vain and deluded, collaborators prosper, 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. The characters who point a way to the future are those who recognise within themselves a strength that comes from an identity with the people that transcends 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 as the price of love, and to know that they must place in humanity the faith once directed to God. Only thus will they overcome the divisions inherited from the successive regimes of colonialism and at the same time

join the strengths of its heritage to their own. Their struggles recapture their nation from colonial and postcolonial oppressors by creating it anew in their own lives.

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