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## Language and Power

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## Review Article

### Language and Power

EDILBERTO N. ALEGRE

MASS. By F. Sionil Jose. Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1984. 232 pages.

PLATINUM. By F. Sionil Jose. Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1983. 180 pages.

After F. Sionil Jose's *The Pretenders* was published in 1962, it looked as if the tetralogy of which it was the announced beginning would take some time. However, *Tree* came in 1978, then in rapid succession *My Brother, My Executioner* (1979), and *Mass* (copyright 1979; first published in Dutch in 1982), all belonging to the Rosales novels, as well as the short story collections *Waywaya and Other Short Stories from the Philippines* and *Platinum*. Even before it became available in Manila, *Mass* created a stir in literary circles, since it had won the Palanca award for the novel in a hotly-argued contest, in which the judges finally decided to split the major literary prize between *Mass* and its rival.

*Mass* follows its hero, Pepe Samson, from Barrio Cabugawan in Rosales, Pangasinan, to Manila where he goes to study after high school. At the close of the story he decides to return to Cabugawan. Simply put, the book is a *Bildungsroman*; the plot is centered on Pepe Samson's growth till he reaches political awakening. It can be subtitled "The Making of a Radical."

Pepe's character slowly unfolds through the tension between the subjective I-narrator and the people around him: his mother and aunt in Cabugawan; Lucy, the servant-mistress of the uncle with whom he boards; Kuya Nick, the drug pusher; Toto, Professor Hortenso, Father Jess, Roger — the new revolutionaries; Ka Lucio the former Huk; Lily, the young masseuse from the slums; Betsy, the rich chic radical from Maryknoll College, and Puñeta, the wealthy homosexual whom Pepe murders. As he interacts with them, one sees Pepe's growth and the unfolding of his character.

The hero follows the Filipino migration cycle from barrio to city. Life in the bucolic setting of Cabugawan means a happy childhood, innocence. The need to break out of the boredom in the barrio leads Pepe to follow the trajectory of the dream of the educated youth – further study in Manila, and then becoming an earning college graduate like Pepe's father and his uncle, a lawyer working for a Chinese in Binondo.

F. Sionil Jose is adept at drawing the scenes of Pepe's life. Basically his viewpoint is naive, a blend of Wordsworth and Amorsolo. In the country there is beauty; the people have integrity, and are loving, virtuous, and capable of self-sacrifice. In the city are the slums, the clogged *esteros*, heroin, prostitutes, hypocrisy. Nevertheless, Jose catches the clarity of country streams as well as the nauseating smells pervading the slums of Tondo. Perhaps only with an intact naiveté can one achieve this and hold on tenaciously to the Romantic view that the city is the dark opposite of the country.

The novel has four major problems – language, audience, point of view, and mode – which interfere with the successful fleshing out of its theme, the making of a revolutionary. Let us detail these slowly.

First, there is the unrelieved triteness of language: “chilled to the bone” (p. 6); “my chest tightened” (p. 10); “tears were starting to scald my eyes” (p. 14); “the great unwashed” (p. 18); “all that razzle-dazzle” (p. 25); “pure as virtue” (p. 26); “putting my neck on the block” (p. 40); “stick the knife in the back” (p. 110); “claw their way to the top” (p. 110). The level of language suffocates what could have been a very powerful theme. The subject matter is not trite, but the language in which it is handled reduces it to the level of fiction lacking in fineness of distinction.

The author seeks to remedy the lack of nuances in the use of language by means of excess, which is another aspect of triteness of language. For instance: “her breasts were heaving, her words were a torrent” (p. 163); “I felt the thumping of her breast, the silky warmth of her legs entwined with mine” (p. 183). Furthermore, there are pointless repetitions where one word would suffice. We are given pairs like “the masses, the poor” (p. 54); “the strong, the powerful” (p. 55) – or else needless triads: “the pith, the core, the heart” (p. 82); “the lousiest, the meanest, the ugliest” (p. 182) – or a quartet like “Manila, Queen City, Pearl of the Orient, Jaded Harlot” (p. 11). The epitome of repetition is going multilingual, ending with a Tagalog equivalent, e.g., “the terminus, *fini, kaput, tapus*” (p. 58). Redundance not only dulls the intended effect; it does not contribute to the deepening of a viewpoint or the portrayal of a character. Jose seems unfamiliar with or unwilling to rely on the strength in understatement.

He mistakes excess for insight: “shock splattered all over his face” (p. 26); “the eyes finally glowed” (p. 12); “making each word sink like stones in a quagmire” (p. 9). The extreme of excess is to mistake vulgarity for witticism: “Recto! Rectum of Manila!” (p. 18). If his diction and style characterize

him, then Pepe Samson, the hero, is trite, prone to redundancy, and of the belief that excess in language is perspicacity and wit.

A little editing could have improved the style:

I was someone, yet no one, for I was no longer living for myself, *for this bundle of nerve and flesh*; I was part of those who had perished and those who were yet to come. *I belonged no longer to this casement of skin*. I was part of the earth, the water, the air. (p. 230, italics supplied)

Simply excising the italicized phrases, for example, would have made the paragraph more powerful.

Of course, this is romantic excess. And this is fatal to the book. Pepe, as a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary would more probably think of his life as part of the historical process, rather than conceive of it as merging with nature. The idea of merging with nature comes from a kind of mysticism germane to Hinduism and eighteenth century English Romanticism, and alien to the leftist ideology which, in the novel's fictional world, Pepe is exposed to and finally embraces.

There is a lean, sinewy, powerful book inside the novel as written. Pared of its verbal excesses and romantic tendencies, there is the realistic story of the awakening of a young man to revolution. As it is, it reads like an upbeat Zoilo Galang, or a local Harold Robbins. This stems from a disparity between the language in which the novel is written — English — and the sensibility which it attempted to portray — Filipino. If the novel were written in Tagalog, it would read authentically, even including the redundancy, floridity and romanticism, for these are innate characteristics of our indigenous languages. Even the hortatory portions — beginning with some chapter titles like “Destroy the Bridges,” “Unite, Don't Be Afraid,” “Down with the Burgis,” “Filipinos — Wake Up!” and the numerous scenes heavy with moral lessons, such as the scene between Pepe and his mother after he stole money to eat noodles (pp. 4-5) or the learning sessions with Ka Lucio (pp. 150-54) — would work within the native language and the sensibility therein encased.

Since English is the medium in which the novel is written, however, a character like Pepe becomes endowed with characteristics more appropriate to a young man brought up in English. He incessantly goes through a self-examination: Who am I? Where am I now? What have I done with my life? Even Pepe's angst sounds borrowed, like the language in which he is made to speak and think.

This is a problem of language, not of subject matter, for the latter is valid and significant. Pepe's journey does not only take him from Cabugawan to Manila, but from the very sensate (*mami* and *siopao*, movies, sex) to the intellectual. Cabugawan, like any barrio, is a dead end to a young man because it is a place where lives are patterned and repeated. In it is the ennui caused by a realization of the present and the future as repetitions of the past. The need to break out is a need to search for freedom. Pepe returns to

Cabugawan after achieving that freedom.

However, even given the fact that Filipinos do write novels in English dealing with the Filipino sensibility, and often achieve some success, still another problem surfaces to interfere with Jose's craft: the target audience of Jose is apparently the non-Filipino. He explains what is obvious to a Filipino, for example: "the *batalan* — the open space behind the kitchen where the earthen jars and the wash were hung and where, as in most provincial houses, the artesian well also stood" (pp. 71-72). Or when Pepe tells Lily of the image he has long held of the girl he would love: "she is dark brown — very *kayumanggi* — as they say. Usually, the girls boys dream of would be fair — *mestiza*" (p. 122).

Jose's deferring to the foreign audience he has in mind results in an over-eagerness to explain, which in turn results in awkwardness of manner and bulkiness of phrase in the handling of objects and concepts that should properly slip imperceptibly "beneath the skin" of the novel, so to speak, instead of standing out like tourist attractions.

*Mass*, perhaps because it was consciously written for English-speaking and foreign readers, attempts to find an explanation for what the Filipino is like. Passages such as: "We are status-conscious, we easily believe in appearances" (p. 73) are a giveaway of this intention, and may seem too simplistic or sweeping to the Filipino reader.

In the same intent, but more effectively, the novel sorts out the economic and sociopolitical background in which Pepe grows up — centered on the milieu of the student activist movement, specifically the early seventies prior to the declaration of Martial Law. Jose succeeds fairly well in delineating the social strata that make up Philippine society: the restful students, the middle class represented by the teacher-aunt and lawyer-uncle; Puñeta's entrenched, old-rich family; the *nouveau-riche*; the lower class to which Lily and Roger belong. He also interconnects the old revolutionaries like Ka Lucio and the new ones like Toto, Professor Hortenso and Father Jess.

Since the novel deals with the politization of Pepe, we are also given the political spectrum: the apolitical or nonpolitical mother, aunts and uncle of Pepe; the student activists; the more "professional" activists; and the rightist elite. There is also a description of Pepe's torture at the hands of the military.

Politics is shown to be a matter of commitment, since the issues had already been clearly drawn. Is one for or against revolution? If one is for it, how far is one committed, i.e., to peaceful reform, or is one willing to use violence to bring about a change in the sociopolitical order? Pepe moves from a lukewarm activist to one who dispassionately uses violence. At the start, student activism is a means to popularity and scholarship, but commitment is not deep. Pepe is able to murder for political reasons only after he has been tortured by the military.

Despite the closely followed awakening of Pepe, the book, like the lan-

guage, lacks nuances. This stems from the characterization of the protagonists. Pepe is the only one who is drawn fully; he is the only one who grows. The others serve as foil, or at most as options for a way of life for Pepe. The author keeps explaining points of view, beliefs, and so these are told to us — explained by Pepe or by the other characters — instead of being dramatized or rendered in novelistic ways. The choice of a singular first person point of view is in this respect unfortunate, for it is delimiting. The interplay of social and political forces could perhaps have been more successfully delineated with an omniscient point of view.

A further problem of craft starts from the fact that *Mass* has the character of a picaresque tale — the adventures of a provinciano in the city. Where the socio-economic-political forces should have been *seen* as affecting the hero-protagonist, however, they are instead explained through the limited perception of Pepe, or in the several political discussions between him and the other characters. These discussions give the novel a polemical nature.

Pepe's acceptance of violence, therefore, as a means of changing the order or as a valid tool for revolution is weakened by the two conflicting natures of the novel — the picaresque and the polemical. In fact, the book may be viewed as beginning in the picaresque mode and ending in the polemical. This would have been valid as a gauge of the politization of Pepe, i.e., he begins as an adventurer and ends as a believer in the cause. However, as it is, the polemical roots are skimpy and the politization of Pepe rests on sentimentalism (e.g., the death of Toto) and not on a real awakening to action based on a realization of the manner in which the socio-economic-political forces are at work. He remains tethered to a personalistic viewpoint, though perhaps at the end of the novel, he is psychologically ready to join the revolution.

Even during his freshman year in Manila, Pepe is already aware of the socio-economic-political forces which shaped his milieu. That is why we cannot say that he awakens to that; he already knows that. It is the use of violence which he cannot accept. His final acceptance of the validity of revolutionary violence comes after police violence is used on demonstrators (he is one of them), killing many, among them his best friend, Toto, and then later violence in the form of military torture and sodomy in the city jail. Only after being violated in body and spirit does he kill Puñeta and rob his place of money and guns preparatory to returning to Cabugawan as a transformed Pepe. He is now a true revolutionary. He has killed dispassionately, objectively, and in fact feels released from his old self.

What goes through Pepe's mind just before he shoots Puñeta? "I want not just the irrevocable end to my poverty, but justice as well" (p. 218). He identifies with the trodden poor and asserts that they did not kill the Filipino elite before "because we did not know," but now "our eyes have been opened" (p. 218). He raises the magnum and fires at Puñeta, killing him

instantly. The novel should have ended here, with the masses shooting the national bourgeoisie. That shot would have reverberated longer and louder.

Instead we are given the post-facto reflections of Pepe, which diminish the effect of that magnum shot, and water down his politization. In the first paragraphs of the final chapter, the hero does admit to having been an "adventurist . . . not 'intellectual' enough to understand the ideological basis for revolution" (220). However, what follows is a romanticized view of himself as part of that revolution: "I was no longer living for myself . . . I was part of the earth, the water, the air" (p. 230). The first two sentences of the last quotation do put him in the historical process, the history of revolution. However, the last sentence makes that commitment mystical — a very un-historical view of that process.

This is why the last chapter should have been edited out of the book. Pepe's final attitude toward Betsy and Father Jess could have been written in earlier. As it is, he is as personalistic, individualistic and now, above that, self-righteous. He judges the old revolutionaries as "self-righteous . . . because they wanted to be more than men, invulnerable, capable of venial sin" (p. 225). Yet, he is the one who is self-righteous: ". . . if they only knew how to enjoy themselves, if they only knew how it is to love and, therefore, to forgive! I will not be like them" (p. 225).

So, how is Pepe in the end? How is the provinciano basically altered by his exposure to contemporary forces in the city? He is not really changed radically by his experiences: "I will live as I have always lived, amassing memories" (p. 225). And that is the pity. The novel's subject matter is contemporary, relevant, powerful. And Jose could be an excellent raconteur. However, the level of language, the choice of viewpoint, the confusion of modes, and the explicatory attitude sap the matter of its potential. In Tagalog, Amado V. Hernandez and the *Agos sa Disyerto* writers among many others have treated the subject matter with more justice, because they did so more artistically.

*Platinum*, subtitled "Ten Filipino Short Stories," proves that F. Sionil Jose's forte is the short story, not the novel. The embarrassing phrases are still there, such as "swift demise of day" (p. 40) for dusk; and the redundancy, such as "Co Pac was the fountain of youth, Shangrila, El Dorado" (p. 110); and dated expressions like "started their racket" (p. 53) for noise, and "shapely gams" (p. 126) for legs. However, these short works are redeemed by precious insights in the character portrayal.

The domain is characteristically Jose's: the committed youth, just before and just after Martial Law; the loneliness of old men; the ambitious businessman; the failed writer the quaint honor of lower class girls; the hypocrisy of the middle class; the exploration of sex as a correlative of love as well as lust. The only long story is "Platinum," which depicts a youthful love affair which could have ended happily, had Martial Law not been declared. The last

three stories should not have been included, since they are actually just sketches, and on the back cover are said to "belong to a larger work in progress." There is no point in including them in this collection, since they organically weaken the first seven stories.

Jose occasionally mistakes the literal for the symbolic. An old man is improbably named Francisco Buda, and he closely resembles a Buddha. Another is incredibly called Adu T. Cuartana, and he is what his name literally means in Ilocano — a man with much money. Symbolism is definitely not Jose's forte. Rather, it is story-telling, the plot itself. He can be quite an engaging raconteur. In fact, it is when he is not examining psyche and not probing the interaction of personal motives and social conditions that he tells his story best. He is very capable of making the character burst through the bare plot. And what else can one achieve in a short story, except illumination of character or clarification of motive?

Length often tempts Jose to be hortatory, and that is alien to the contemporary use of English in fiction. A "sermon" in fiction sounds natural in the vernacular, for it is a part of the indigenous tradition; prose has ever been a teaching medium for the Filipino. In English it is excessive and alien. Since the stories in *Platinum* are short, Jose was not tempted as he was in *Mass*.

Asked what she really wanted, Malu, the student-activist in "Platinum," answers: "To be alive . . . to see that time is not wasted. I don't want to grow old without having lived usefully" (p. 14). And that is what her story is about. The last line of "Magic" covers the generation gap very succinctly: "I am a loyal son, but I cannot go home again" (p. 108). The latter half of the sentence is of course borrowed from Thomas Wolfe, but the utterance is still perceptive. In "The Drowning," the failed writer says, "I have been afraid to discover that I have cheated myself with loyalties that disappear in the morning" (p. 60). Jose is obviously very capable of discerning alienation, loneliness, lust, hypocrisies, and treating them with candor, irony, and even scorn (as in "Imagination").

These stories explore the limits of honesty — honesty to self, to one's feelings, to one's social class, to one's upbringing. The author is on the side of sincerity. Sincere beings are drawn sympathetically while those who are not, are given scornful names and made to embody scornful stories. The first seven stories in *Platinum* illuminate lives by focusing on moments in which the truth of the protagonists' character shows. That certainly is achievement enough in the short story form.

To achieve equivalent truth in a novel, however, requires a masterful handling of all the reins in the novelist's hand — language and its silences, rendering and all its ways, plot and its interstices, characters and their realities. The subject matter of *Mass* makes it an important, current, significant novel; the level of its craftsmanship reduces this achievement considerably in power and in truth.