

BEYOND TRANSCENDENCE
TOWARD INCARNATION:
THE POETRY OF JOSE MA. SISON

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*Piita'y bahagi ng pakikilamas,
mapiit ay tanda ng hindi pagsuko. . .
tanang paniniil ay may pagtutuos,
habang may Bastilya'y may bayang gaganti.*

- Amado V. Hernandez
"Isang Dipang Langit"

When I visited London in the summer of 1981 on my way back from Yugoslavia where I chaired a postgraduate seminar in Third World poetics, I had the fortuitous occasion to talk to the Asian editor of *Index*, a European Journal devoted to exposing and indicting press censorship and assisting persecuted writers anywhere in the world. I then conceived myself the bearer of messages from home. Despite my impassioned effort to convince the editor to publicize the brutal, inhuman punishment being inflicted on Sison by the Marcos regime, the simple and naïve retort I got was: Sison is in prison not as a writer but as a revolutionary partisan, an organizer of armed struggle.

From the Westernized perception of an Asian exile, Sison's writings are incidental, even accidental, to his revolutionary calling. Whereas *Index*, given its aristocratic bias, privileges the full-time partisan of the Word whose craft happens, by circumstance or sheer bad luck, to have incurred the ire of the authorities. Thus, Sison the radical exponent of the national democratic cause would not qualify. I dared a riposte: "But surely Byron, Malraux, Ho Chi Minh, Neruda . . ." But in the milieu of a fragmented and commodified metropolis, the fortress of a moribund empire where the centuries-old upholding of reification still reigns supreme, my plea for upholding the old bourgeois illusion of the total integrated person -- of Sison as an artist *and* revolutionary evaporated in the pollution and cacophony of London traffic.

It is now the close of 1982, marking ten years of martial law and also ten years of popular resistance. This all-embracing dialectical unity of opposites informing our national development finds its poignant emblem in one of Sison's latest poems, "The Forest Is Still Enchanted." While the disintegrating feudal cosmos of superstition and natural abundance (an ironic figure given the rabid transnational plunder of our resources) inevitably yields to the World Bank-funded infrastructures and to the electronics counterinsurgency apparatus, still the element of awe and the new, now displaced as a trope of the people's will to resist alienating and exploitative forces, persists.

*But the forest is still enchanted.
There is a new hymn in the wind;*

*There is a new magic in the darkgreen,
So the peasant folks say to friends.
A single fighting spirit has taken over
To lure in and astonish the intruders.*

The understated allusion, of course, is to the peasantry's allegiance to the New People's Army and the prairie-fire resurgence of people's war. But what is striking here is the coalescence of myth and history -- already figured in "The Guerrilla Is Like A Poet," "From A Burning Bush," etc. -- which I submit, defines the essentially prophetic thrust and vocation of Sison's linguistic practice, a praxis whose visionary mission is to simultaneously demystify the alienated world and project images of apocalyptic rebirth.

From the view of traditional hermeneutics, this prophetic impulse which transforms linear time to kaleidoscopic space, memory into action, and in the process enacts a creative dialogue between spirit and matter, can be explained by Sison's confinement and the claustrophobic syndrome coinciding with it, as evinced, for instance, in Gramsci's motto: "Pessimism of the mind, optimism of the will." Pursuing this trend, one can plausibly analogize the theme of such poems as "In the Dark Depths," "A Furnace," and others, with Sison's litany of suffering and anguished privations distilled, for example, in his May 1982 Statement (*Political Detainees Update*): "Our prolonged solitary confinement has cumulatively increased the intensity of our imprisonment so much so that we have in effect suffered by so many times the bare number of five and six years that we have already spent in prison."

It might be more appropriate, however, to reflect on the idea that subsuming the personal or biographical context, the raw materials worked on by a rigorously dialectical mode of literary production, is precisely that *sine qua non*, the constellation of first principles, which at once incorporates critical realism, supersedes it, and elevates it to the level of prophetic allegory proletarian ideology, dialectical materialism.

For this occasion, I will not elaborate on those first principles and will limit myself to emphasizing the crucial determining function of a Marxist-Leninist theoretical perspective in elucidating Sison's poetics. Contrary to the mistaken academic notion, this perspective is not a specialized "workerist" bias, or reductive economic presumption. It is fundamentally a totalizing historical outlook without which one falls (as Lukacs points out in *History and Class Consciousness*) into the dualistic chasms of abstract formalist idealism and of mechanical materialism. Sison himself, in his recent *Message to the U.P. Writers' Club* (its intertextuality with his previous messages to PAKSA, LEADS, and also to the relevant chapters of *Struggle for National Democracy* needs to be explored) reformulates that proposition that urges progressive writers to leap beyond neocolonial liberalism and position themselves in the pregnant and fertile space occupied by the working class. Why? Because, to quote Sison, "It is not only the productive vanguard for industrialization and modernization but it is also the basis for the most progressive world outlook and methodology for comprehending all social forces and their development in

the current national democratic revolution as well as in the subsequent socialist revolution."

Also synthesized by implication in Sison's message is the basic materialist principle of analyzing overdetermined contradictions: literary production as an instance of ideological practice cannot be divorced from the socioeconomic formation, the entire oscillating totality within which it interacts with other regions as a relatively autonomous force. Hence, like Mao's strategic reminder in the 1942 *Yenan Talks*, Sison also posits literary specificity (distinguished from the political or programmatic) as a tension between spontaneity vis a vis discipline, the private realm of feelings vis a vis the socializing effect of linguistic practice and the task of art to systematically humanize reality.

Such a distinction, however, reinforced by the arguments of Althusser and Gramsci, should not obscure the truth that all art springs and is nourished by human needs and passions that transpire in history. And its fabled transcendence of empirical contingency, the so-called universality of art, exists only because we, humans, resurrect, reincarnate and renew those once fluid energies now petrified in museum fetishes and gallery commodities: those living energies which, once unleashed in the "festival of the oppressed," begin to crystallize our hope and desire to change life (as Rimbaud and Rilke vowed to do) and thereby transform the world. Conceived then as the living science of praxis, i.e., the conscious and sensuous activity of the human species, poetry cannot but be politically/historically engaged.

To further underscore the primacy of the materialist framework, I quote Sison's concluding words in the WHO magazine interview (12 December 1981): "In sum I would say that my books are linked to the great tradition of the Philippine revolution and the mass movements of workers, peasants, urban petty bourgeoisie and other patriotic forces." Whether in 1896 (Rizal and the Propagandists), in the 1950s (Baking, Hernandez, Lansang) or today, the Filipino intellectual finds himself always already embedded, knowingly or unknowingly, in the compromising, recalcitrant "thickness" of class struggle; and to such a situation he can only respond in two mutually incompatible ways: by full commitment to the side of the progressive forces, or by temporizing ruses -- the mirror-image of blatant collaboration with the fascist agents of the US imperialism.

Isn't our history replete with the lessons of Biak-na-bato, with the ordeals of making a choice at those peaks of crises: the Filipino-American War, the Sakdalista uprising, the Huk rebellion, and now?

Given our historical predicament, the Filipino writer then finds himself "compromised" in both the pejorative and honorific senses, only because his practice of language, his processing of signs, occurs within a concrete, specific site of conflict which necessarily stakes his body and the bodies of his affections -- a site within which is inscribed as in a constantly deciphered palimpsest the incandescent dynamics of hope evolving into will or personal desire unfolding in the matrix of a collective dream.

There is in Sison's corpus of poems no more eloquently moving and intransigently perspicuous testament to this materialist aesthetics I have sketched above than "The Bladed Poem." Here we perceive the two phases of the social process: workers objectively defined as functions within a commodity-oriented system, and workers emerging as the collective subject organized and cohering around a project of self-knowledge achieved only in revolution. We have then the worker depicted as the artificer of the social totality in motion in which labor metamorphoses into play, the play of struggle, in which they experience the pleasurable release and fulfillment of needs and phantasies. Art is then grasped as both a pedagogical instrument (a learning tool, Brecht would say) and a weapon of organizing.

So far we have moved from the romanticized equation of the earlier "The Guerrilla Is Like A Poet" to the imaginative fusion of theory and practice, consciousness and action, in the prison poem where the symbols and archetypes of freedom are glimpsed presaging its eventual conquest in real life. Sison's poems are thus incomplete, denied organic closure, because the materialist textualization of struggle escapes from the prison-house of language in order to emancipate itself in the discourse of physical combat.

In an essay I wrote for an UGNAYAN pamphlet (1979) designed to publicize Sison's case to an international audience, I tried to articulate the nature of the prophetic or utopian motivation in Sison's poetics, in these terms: "Life is not a natural phenomenon governed by implacable laws. It is, for Sison and other Third World militants, a project shaped by, and shaping, history. The solidarity of human wills, the fusion of participating subjects in organized action, intervenes in the world to create the groundwork for the future: a new society and culture that is genuinely popular, democratic, libertarian." I used the word "utopian" in the sense of Ernst Bloch's "hope principle": an apocalyptic gesture of precipitating the resolution of crisis (here, Sison's unspeakable brutalization) by evoking a hidden significance prefigured in it, an evocation both retrospective and anticipatory in effect and in so doing memorializing an eroticized, Orphic harmony of nature and man (note the recurrent image of rain, wind, tropes of the spirit) and summoning in vision the lineaments of a long expected reunion many times postponed, a communal celebration suggested in microcosm by Sison's communciation to his children: "Across Blue Waters" and "To Jasm, My Captive Child." This prophetic impulse both preserves the anguish of a repressive order (class domination, fascist instrumentalization of life) and supersedes it, in much the same way as the Promethean refusal of taboos and prohibitions -- its text of negations and annulments -- contains within it an affirmation of a liberated realm of gratified desire. This impulse we encounter everyday as an inherent quality of the labor process itself whose end, for humans, is already anticipated in thought, consciousness, above all in the imagination.

Intrinsically dialectical in operation and materialist in grounding, this prophetic/utopian tendency in Sison's poems -- a trait one discovers as an obsessive rhythm in *Florante at Laura*, Rizal's novels, Bulosan's and Amado Hernandez's writings

-- explains the choice of allegory as a formal device to transmute the individualized flux of experience into the differential system of rhetorical figuration. This allegorical drive manifests itself most vividly in "Against the Monster of the Land." "The Women and the Strange Eagle," and "Defy the Reptile" which, rehearsing a historical moment of demystification, converts the narrative sequence into the illusion-breaking stasis of parable.

What happens in allegory is this: instead of inducing an easy reconciliation of antinomies, an existential leap into faith where all class antagonisms vanish and rebellious desire is pacified, allegory heightens the tension between signifier and signified, between object and subject, thereby foiling empathy and establishing the temporary distance required for generating critical judgment and ultimately cathartic action. Nowhere is this allegorical method of structuring more intensely sustained than in "Fragments of a Nightmare," Sison's "inferno" stage of a quite undivine comedy.

It is obvious that a reading of "Fragments" will not add to one's conceptual understanding of Sison's suffering and the issues at stake. Such an effort can be advanced by grasping the evidence and import of all his published testimonies. What this mode of oblique staging unfolds is precisely the primordial incongruity between what exists and what can be, the disparity between fact and possibility, the inassimilable dissonance between the reality principle and the pleasure principle which may be how Sison aims to register the fact of repression, the dominance of commodity-fetishism, in our neocolonized society with its host of internal contradictions.

Allegory then, as process of mediating opposites, focuses on the crux of the contradictions and discharges a call, a polemical challenge. It images the transitional movement of difference from passive contemplation to the active involvement, converting objects into process, the process of social production and of social relations. Note the fusion of perceived and perceiver. "As I struggle and scream for air, / American rock music screens my screams / Outside the torture chamber" (No. 16).

Sison compels us to accompany him in his abortive Virgilian pilgrimage. For in this ironic, inverted realm of the antiromance, the legendary paradise longed for, the classless society which is the object of humanity's quest, is displaced by a double estrangement: imprisonment as fact and as metaphor. Hinted in Hernandez' lines quoted here as epigraph, the duplicity of imprisonment reveals itself as a temporary unity of opposites, a momentary paralysis but also a phase of becoming. By employing the imperative and subjunctive mood, a dialogic and carnivalisique technique (Bakhtin), Sison seeks to preempt any idea of organic plenitude or mimetic equivalence between language and reality which would thereby make art a self-sufficient, autotelic object, the hypostasis of psychic drives in some Lacanian prison of the Imaginary.

What Sison's poems consistently undermine is the aura of a language of self-presence (whose libidinal investment one finds in the exuberance of Villa or Joaquin), a language of ritualized sublimation which is incessantly

decentered by the heterogeneity of imagery and tone in "Fragments". The logic of this somewhat convulsed style and the theoretical rationale for revolutionary art in general (Sison's included) are succinctly expressed by Walter Benjamin and Christopher Caudwell:

The utilization of dream-elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thought. Hence dialectical thought is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch not only dreams the next, but while dreaming impels it towards wakefulness. It bears its end within itself, and reveals it -- as Hegel already recognized -- by a ruse. With the upheaval of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.

-- Benjamin, "*Paris, Capital of the 19th Century*"

Of the future one can only dream -- with greater or less success. . . Even dream is determined, and a movement in dream reflects perhaps a real movement into daylight of material phenomena at present unrecognized. That is why it is possible to dream with accuracy of the future -- in other words, to predict scientifically. This is the prophetic and world-creating power of a dream. It derives its world-creating power, not by virtue of being dream . . . but because it reflects in the sphere of thought a movement which, with the help of dream, can be fully realized in practiced. It draws its creative power, like the poetry of the harvest festival, from its value as a guide and spur to action. It is dream already passed out of the sphere of dream into that of social revolution. It is the dream, not of an individual, but of a man reflecting in his individual consciousness the creative role of a whole class, whose movement is given in the material conditions of society.

-- Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality*

Long before I encountered the *Index* editor in London last year, my intervention in the cultural front took the form of a booklet *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature* (1871) where I pointed out in one chapter how Sison's 1961 collection *Brothers* succeeded "in projecting the democratic tendencies of the Filipino bourgeoisie" in the period of Recto's nationalist crusade. Subsequently, a qualitative leap occurred in the mid-1960s. In hindsight, I should now qualify that it is rather the progressive national-democratic ideology of our intellegentsia aligned with class-conscious workers and peasants that constitute the enabling condition of possibility for *Brothers*. For this volume, such conditions -- a description of which, for the Marxist critic, replaces any mere formalist explication of texts -- are the intensifying class confrontations in city and countryside to which we are all witness in which the whole society (as the political prisoners testify in *Pintig* and *Pumipiglas*) is unveiled as a huge, tumultuous prison replicating the State institution and thus allowing the victims to recuperate in the same

breath their oneness and integrity with those who are poised to blast their chains and bars in one last decisive, apocalyptic act of liberation.

Let us then celebrate its foreshadowed advent with the voice of our comrade Sison who, from the depths of the military dungeon, inspires us with his unrelenting lucid courage and selflessly redeeming hope. #