Answerable Only to Ourselves: F. Sionil Jose's *Mass* and National Amnesia

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> "We compromise ourselves the day we are born. If we are looking for the original sin, there it is- our incapacity to live honestly with ourselves because we are human, because we are shackled by custom, by obligations and we accept compromise only in the light of our conscience, answerable as we are only to ourselves."
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> - F. Sionil José, *Mass*

This is a quote from a novel that has stayed in the depths of my consciousness ever since I first read it as a college student. In some gentle way, it has made my understanding of history and struggle with questions that are related to justice and responsibility. I found myself rereading it, with each time finding something new in its pages. It provides, I think, a good departure for some reflections about novels that bring together creativity and history.

Mass: A Novel, was written by multi-awarded National Artist for Literature F. Sionil Jose (December 3, 1924 – January 6, 2022) and published in 1973. Today it is well known and widely read. Jose's early work earned much praise, along with the other books in the *Rosales Saga*. In a recent blog, Stephanie Zubiri writes:

> Jose has dedicated his life to documenting the social injustices that plague Filipino society and the persistent sickness he calls "national amnesia." One of his greatest

> inspirations as a writer is the National Hero, Jose Rizal, whose primary weapon was his plume when many of his contemporaries were brandishing arms. Jose deeply admires Rizal's devotion to his art and to his country.

The popularity is understandable. The 1980s continued to be a decade of social realism in Philippine literature. But through these years, Jose went on doing as he had always done: writing novels on massive, spread-out Rizalian themes of justice and equality, evil and abuse, faith, redemption and revolution. Many of his works are set in places he was familiar with—Cabugawan, Rosales, Pangasinan. His stories unfold in the misty backstreets of Manila, the houses of elite Forbes Park, and the quaint places of old Pangasinan. Jose reaches bravely for the great metaphysical questions of life and moves on—slipping into passages of prose that are profound or loaded with existential questions. His work succeeds magnificently. At its best, his writing has that power peculiar to the creative arts. It can change the way you see the world.

In the opening pages of *Mass*, Jose takes his readers out of their comfortable chairs and transports them, without explanation or apology, into a bleak and poor Cabugawan that proves to be a prison for Jose, aka Pepe, Samson. More disconcertingly still the narrative takes the reader through the life of Emy, the supportive mother who does not lose hope that one day her son will be like his father, Antonio.

For Pepe, Manila is a refuge, but an insecure one. The past keeps threatening to seep through cracks in his memory. For Pepe, his father, Antonio, has the troubling power to light a spark in his mind. So, Jose invites his readers to see the world through the eyes, not of the victims of evil, but of someone who, at an obscure subconscious level, is aware that he is lost, but has found psychological defenses to seal himself from confronting that knowledge. The daily routines and dramas of the persons he meets and becomes close with absorb all his energy. Only in his heart does he seem to hear the 'troubled human cry' and know for a fleeting moment that he cannot "escape a sense of responsibility".

Over the years, such questions of poverty, migration, revolution, responsibility had become staples of countless books and articles. When *Mass* was published, writers had already ventured into the labyrinthine realms of Martial Law and the issues of corruption and social turmoil. Jose

is adventurous in his choice of topics; and his novels, like much good creative writing, reach into dimensions of history.

The theme of historical responsibility is a universal one, of which Pepe's story is just an extreme illustration. For most readers too, "the present is enough for us to cope with," a place whose absorbing routines allow us to create a comforting amnesia, even if in a less drastic form than Pepe's struggle to leave the shadow of poverty and that of his father. But the novel resists simple universalisms and generalizations and allows room to evoke the multiplicities of memory and forgetting.

In *Mass*, the counterpoint to the main character's search is the awakening and somewhat challenging role that Ka Lucio, an ex-Huk commander whose refuge lies, not in forgetting the past, but in fighting for the present: Ka Lucio, despite all the evidence of his shabby and difficult surroundings, believes himself to be living for what will help the people: freedom, shelter, medicine, and education. It is the meeting with Ka Lucio in the Brotherhood that makes the first decisive breach in the walls of Pepe's resistance, starting a process that will ultimately force him to confront the inequality that has been destroying the masses since the beginning.

Pepe's nemesis, though, lies in encounters with the bourgeois, among them Juan Puneta, a fellow Filipino whose life has been privileged by money, and who is unrelenting in his determination to push his agenda. In the telephone conversation that Pepe is able to eavesdrop on, he learns that Puneta has been masterminding trouble all along:

> The man seemed frantic. "What's this I hear about another big demonstration in January? Shall we tell our men to work on the kids again? They want more money this time. After all there were more than ten killed in the last . . ."
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> "Of course, of course," Juan Puneta said with exasperation. "They have to be there. Always. I don't care how many get killed. They must simply make sure that the kids will blame the Metrocom, the police, for everything." (Jose, 234)

Jose "justifies his politically-charged work which call for the fight for justice by the poverty-stricken masses against the few who feed off them." (Galang and Moyano, 123) "I will not let anyone forget": that, surely, might

be a motto for F. Sionil Jose. But the reader, confronting Puneta's remorseless iniquity, can also see that the work of memory is at times a kind of violence. The novel invites us to consider the nature of and the need for that violence. It poses questions, not only for those who escape into amnesia, but also for those who insist on remembering. The novel is not expected to offer strongly argued conclusions; the questions do not have simple answers.

The encounter between Puneta and Pepe has the former trying to bribe the latter. In the chapter titled "The Dawn is Red," Puneta explains that more people would be killed.

> "Not only because we have the money. More important, with money we have been able to develop brains. And if we can't have brains, we buy them."
>
> "Like you're trying to buy me now?"
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> He laughed in spite of himself. "Pepito—you're very sharp," he said brightly. "Of course! This is why I brought you here. To convince you. Living in that dump, working for that priest—that is not your future, *hijo*. Your future is much brighter. The gates of Pobres Park are open to everyone—you know that. You are welcome—as long as you abide by the rules. Let the scum fight for the crumbs. Ours is the cake . . . And we are not going to give this cake away. No, *hijo*. We cannot lose." (Jose, 237)

Most centrally of all, *Mass* takes up a question with which scholarly history still struggles: the issue of historical responsibility. Jose in the 1980s was more concerned with the question of justice. What happens when apologies or sense of responsibility for the past are insufficient to soften the hearts of those who were wronged? What happens if the past is simply unforgivable?

The wrongs of the past create injustices that persist into the present. This places burdens of responsibility even on those who were not personally responsible for the original sin, but who have failed to right enduring injustices that flow from this sin. Which of us can endure the terrible moral absolute which F. Sionil Jose lays out before us: a world in which there are

only "two sorts of people"—one lot who goes through hell, and the other lot that makes them, or else just stands back and does nothing. In people who inherit a responsibility-laden past or present, the hunger for absolution can become intense and laden with emotion. To be forgiven by those who "go through hell" is to have a burden lifted from their shoulders, their self-esteem restored, their hearts liberated.

This does not happen with Puneta. He continues to reject righting the wrongs. When he speaks with Pepe, his overwhelming temptation is to even ram the fist harder:

> "We are going to be here for a long time. As a matter of fact, for always. We know how to change, and that is why we will always be on the top. But the change comes from us, dictated by us. And as for the President—his interests are with us; he is one of us! Not with the masses—ha, the masses! That's wonderful for speeches. They could not care less for the class struggle, for ideology. Do you know, Pepito, that all they want is a roof over their heads? And three bowls of rice a day? You yourself said that. And most of all—a sense of order, of security. It is really that simple. Their perception of the world, of society, is dictated by their needs, and we will give those to them, slowly, slowly. Never the pie. Just the crumbs." (Jose, 238)

But the cost of amnesia is isolation, a retreat from human society, for fear that any encounter with others may once again stir the agonising pangs of memory. In the final pages of *Mass*, Jose evokes the story that Antonio Samson wrote, *The Ilustrados*. Pepe was seized by the terrifying certainty that only a great mind was capable of writing the book. Those who deny the past, Jose suggests, are condemning themselves precisely to that endless solitude. The only escape from solitude is to face the past and the present in a world where one remains unforgiven. It is a wake-up call to rise up and change the world for the better.

But this is a novel, not a philosophical text. It draws the fine threads of specific themes out of the tangled fabric of everyday life and holds them up to the light. The novel finds its life in the midst of the tangle. They confront them while at the same time struggling to cope with the everyday. The power

of creative writing is its ability to put the philosopher's big questions back into the tangle of everyday life.

And it is in that tangle itself that *Mass* finds some kind of resolution. Memory is painful; forgiveness does not come cheaply, and may not come at all. The only path to accepting responsibility is the step-by-step path through the infinitely complex everyday world of human existence.

Jose was a novelist using his craft to probe deep questions of history and philosophy. There are no simple morals or conclusions, though the journey is full of suggestions about the meanings of the past. Education, books, and the power of words figure prominently in the itinerary. Moreover, the novel shows revolutions. *Mass* describes the uncertainties and social upheaval that Marcos used to justify his dictatorship.

In the mouth of Pepe, it is the angry cry of the righteous. But Jose's writings fight a war against forgetting in a quieter and more peaceable way. Bearing witness, he insists that we remember, not just the grand tales of the tides of history and the rise and fall of empires, but also the irreplaceable small pasts of the individuals caught up in history's flows. He makes each of those small lives, and the landscape in which they were lived, matter to his readers. And that, in a way, is what history is all about: the reality of those millions of human lives that have gone before ours. The infinite complexity of each of those lives, with its pains and hopes and loves and visions of possibility. History can only rescue small fragments of a tiny fraction of those lives from the abyss of oblivion; but every fragment rescued adds to our understanding of what it is to be human.

Jose's work is also a "small act of rebellion" against how history is written. He has written short stories in which the remembered and the recorded past is mixed in complex ways with imaginative re-creation. What matters is that its creative power should make the past come to life for readers in a very different time and place. Jose's writings place the big philosophical questions of history back into the endlessly complex tangle of life in which they are always played out: the world, not just of the mind, but also of the emotions and of all the physical senses.

Creative writing unsettles our senses and interrogates our certainties. Jose makes his readers share the experience of Pepe Samson's memory and memory-making, and so become more conscious of the amnesia in their own lives. He enriches our visions of the forms in which history can be passed

on from one generation to the next, challenging us to narrate and write our histories in a novel manner. *Mass*—blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, history and literature—is profoundly disconcerting, since it brings direct emotion into a space that is often dominated by abstract intelligence. The novel makes history and social thought very personal, breaking down the barriers that protect the life of the mind from simple existence.

Jose's novel remains a masterpiece because it challenges one to go to the heart of scholarship. Why, and for whom, do we read, research, and write? How do we ferry across ideas and to what audience? How can we share the passion and imagination to others to love those ideas? And how can we make our words alive and dangerous so that they go on making new worlds in many minds, long after the readers have read the last page?

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