

THE DEATH OF ARNULFO CANELO: AN EXCERPT FROM *MATERIALES SA KOMPLISIDAD*

Amado Anthony G. Mendoza III

Translated from the Filipino by Caroline S. Hau

DESCRIPTION

Amado Anthony G. Mendoza III's *Materiales sa Komplisidad* (Materials on Complicity, 2023), the second novel in his “Trilohiyang Reaksionaryo” (Reactionary Trilogy), can be considered a “metatext” of Mendoza’s own dictator novel, *Aklat ng Mga Naiwan* (The Book of the Damned, 2018). A novel purporting to be a compendium of “accompanying texts” or “supplements,” *Materiales* seeks to re-materialize the overarching themes of *Aklat*: the complicity of literature in different forms of oppression in society and the legitimization of repressive regimes; the relationships among literature, politics, and history; and the intuiting of alternative literary configurations. In this translated excerpt, the Spanish-Filipino industrialist Andres Soriano, leader of the Philippine Falange (Juntas Nacionales Española) and confidant of Commonwealth president Manuel L. Quezon, writes to the brother of Arnulfo Canelo, grandfather of would-be writer-dictator Felix Canelo/Caesar Repaso. The letter relates Arnulfo’s career as an “agent with countless faces” during the Spanish Civil War and the circumstances leading to his death.

KEYWORDS: Fiction, literature of reaction, complicity, Fascism

Source: *Materyales sa Komplisidad* [Materials on Complicity] (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2023), pp. 22-30. Translated, with permission of the author and the publisher.

Dear Anacieto,

Please excuse me for not writing sooner. I don't know you personally, but we are now linked together by the pain and sorrow of losing someone close to our hearts.

Sad news of Arnulfo's death reached me last week. Alberti wrote me on behalf of the leadership of the Juntas Nacionales Española (JNE) in Spain. Canelo was allegedly the victim of infighting among various Left factions. In order to ascertain the circumstances behind his death, the JNE formed a committee to take the lead in the investigation and compilation of testimonies from witnesses. Their investigation lasted three months. The investigation would have been swifter had the JNE not been so preoccupied with aiding in the transition to the new republic established by General Franco. Here, more or less, according to the investigation¹ (which reads almost like an excerpt from a novel), is the sequence of events before Canelo was murdered:

1. Three weeks before Canelo is killed, Orlov catches him in the act of translating Trotsky's *The Permanent Revolution*. Orlov scolds Canelo on the grounds that writings by counterrevolutionaries like Trotsky ought not to be translated. That plenty of other works are worthier of translation. Because of this, Orlov gradually reduces the tasks he has assigned to Canelo. Canelo takes this

¹ As any reader who hasn't lost their marbles will note, there is no denying the apocryphal nature of said letter. According to hearsay, the real significance of which lies in things and statements that are true but cannot be officially disclosed to the public, said "letter" and "investigation" by the JNE may be part of a perennially unfinished novel by Soriano. Other than this, no other information exists regarding the source and authenticity of said letter.

as a sign that he has lost Orlov's confidence. Following the said incident, Canelo also notices his colleagues watching him closely. Responding to the prospect of imminent capture, he personally requests Orlov to send him on a difficult mission to demonstrate his allegiance to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Orlov does not accommodate Canelo's request, and from that moment on has him tailed by his people.

2. Two weeks before he is killed, Canelo receives orders from Alberti to "expedite" the elimination of Andrés Nin, founder of the Partido Obrero Unificación Marxista (POUM). The leadership of CEDA (Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas) and other allied forces of the Falange are worried that the agreement they are cooking up among themselves and the more conservative factions of the Republican forces might be jeopardized. In response to said directive, Canelo intensifies his verbal attacks against the POUM in article-pamphlets published by the JNE. This is aimed at deepening the rift between the Partido Comunista de España (PCE) and the POUM, and inciting members of the two parties to launch a major offensive against each other.
3. One week before he is killed, he is instructed by Andrés Nin to write a statement denouncing the ongoing liquidation efforts of the PCE against what it considers "reactionary elements" in the ranks of the popular front. Understanding the urgent need to exploit any gaps in the enemy's tactics and actions, Canelo immediately acts on Nin's orders. He even gets Nin to look over the draft of the statement before it is issued the following day. Nin has almost nothing to add to Canelo's draft. Seeing the destructive power of Canelo's pen, Nin thinks they are lucky to have Canelo on their side. Were he to join Orlov's ranks, Nin

adds to himself, the fangs of the CPSU and NKVD² propaganda would be so much sharper.

4. Six days before he is killed, his article-pamphlet comes out condemning the divisive tendencies of the PCE, the CPSU, and the anarchists. At the same time, Orlov receives news that confirm his suspicions. Nin attends a gathering of writers and intellectuals who support Trotsky. General Franco's forces fail for the third time to lay siege to the key cities that are still under the Republicans. Canelo reports to Alberti in a busy salon near the POUM office. Their conversation is interrupted when they hear a series of gunshots outside the salon. Alberti, the first to go out, checks to see if there is a body lying on the road. After that, Canelo and the other patrons who were interrupted in their drinking follow. Two bodies lie before them. From the uniforms they are wearing, Alberti right away deduces that those killed came from the anarchist side.
5. Five days before he is killed, Canelo drafts the counter-statement of the PCE and Orlov against the serious accusations of the Nin camp. Although Canelo is aware that it is not as savage and controversial as the ones he wrote for the POUM, Orlov immediately approves it for publication in the next issue of *Pravda*.
6. Four days before he is killed, Nin fails to get in touch with his comrades for two days. Three days pass since his comrades in the POUM last saw him. Meanwhile, as the porous ranks of the Republicans disintegrate further, General Franco launches his fourth attempt at laying siege to several cities near Madrid.

² *Translator's note:* Acronym of The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (*Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del*), interior ministry and secret police of the Soviet Union between 1934 and 1946.

7. Three days before he is killed, a number of POUM officials are informed that Canelo is a “quinta columnista.” Following a five-hour meeting, the remaining members of the POUM rule to mete out the punishment of “summary execution” on Canelo.
8. Two days before he is killed, at the meeting of the Central Committee of the PCE, Orlov shares his findings on the nature of Canelo’s “work” for different “sides.” At the end of the meeting, the PCE decides to impose the heaviest penalty on Canelo. At that moment, while the different camps are crafting his upcoming death, Canelo is busy thinking of a topic for an article-pamphlet he plans to contribute to *Luz y Veritas*. When he feels restless, he heads for the salon together with a colleague from JNE. The colleague shares with Canelo the leadership’s plan to put together a publication specifically devoted to issues of culture and the arts. Adds the colleague, Canelo is being tapped by the leadership to be the editor-in-chief of this publication.
9. One day before he is killed, senior representatives from NKVD, PCE, and several members of the International Brigade subject Nin to horrendous torture after he refuses to condemn Trotsky. After several days of arduous torture, from Alcalá de Henares, the PCE entrusts custody of Andrés Nin to the NKVD. Nothing more is heard of him from that day on.
10. Twenty-two hours before he is killed, the JNE leadership decides not to help Canelo in case he falls target to the PCE and POUM offensives. The leadership’s reasoning is that it is part of the job of an agent with countless faces to shave years off and discount the value of his own life. Ultimately, the success of the task or mission at hand remains paramount.
11. Sixteen hours before he is killed, Orlov’s men spot him lingering in a small bookshop. Immediately realizing that this is their

chance to grab Canelo, they guard all the alleyways he might slip out of, surround the perimeter of the shop, and, just as Canelo is about to leave, snatch him from the claws of light.

12. Twelve hours before he is killed, Canelo's final article-pamphlet for JNE is published. It is about the conspiracy of communists and anarchists to sabotage the alliance between the more conservative Republicans (such as Generals Segismundo Casado and Julián Besteiro) and the Nationalists. As news spread of the factionalism among the Republican ranks, Orlov's men and remaining POUM members are embroiled in a bloody encounter.
13. Six hours before he is killed, his accusers play three-card monte. Even though he is blindfolded and his arms and legs are bound, Canelo tries to identify his captors and feel his surroundings. Whenever one of them loses in monte, Canelo gets a couple of kicks to the side of his body, paired with belt lashes on his back.
14. Three hours before he is killed, his accusers start to lose patience. Where at first he had received kicks to the side and whippings by belt, now he is kissed by the butts of rifles and tickled by bayonets.
15. One-and-a-half hours before he is killed, his accusers begin running out of ideas to make him sing. And we know what happens in moments like these: teeth clench harder, blood spills faster, it is easier to be seduced by the logic of violence, and the reason of madness grows more tolerable than the madness of reason.
16. One hour before he is killed, General Franco is sound asleep, confident of the plan he has hatched to overthrow the cities of Catalonia.
17. Thirty minutes before he is killed, his accusers fall silent. He is given water by one and offered soup by another whom he takes to be the leader of the group. He does not hesitate. He hurriedly gulps down the water and slurps the warm soup.

And in those moments, as he alternates between gulping and slurping, it suddenly dawns on him what the biggest mistake and shortcoming of the last article-pamphlet he wrote are: to have left enough clues for the reader to realize that he, the author, is about to be murdered by his own pen.

18. Fifteen minutes before he is killed, he hears the splash of one of his accusers' urine against the wall.
19. Seven minutes before he is killed, he is surrounded yet again by his accusers. They ask once more for his "amen" to their "prayers," but Canelo refuses to give it.
20. Three minutes before he is murdered, he remembers the manuscript he left in his lodgings in Azcárraga. He remembers the abortive agreement he had with Alejandro Abadilla to publish the sudario³ he had compiled.
21. One minute before he is killed, a mixed aroma of blood and crushed wood (from the rifle butts) brushes his swollen nose.
22. Thirty seconds before he is killed, as often happens in countless execution scenes in history, the Mauser carried by one of Canelo's accusers appears to flag.
23. Fifteen seconds before he is killed, he hears again the question that from the very start he cannot answer.
24. Seven seconds before he is killed, his accusers' sweaty fingers are on the triggers.
25. Three seconds before he is killed, like anyone who has already accepted his looming death, he remembers the most inconsequential things in the world: light escaping through the fingers of a child catching fireflies, the cawing of birds on the

³ *Translator's note:* An inculturation of the Ilocano dung-aw (dirge), the sudario (from the Spanish *sudar*, lit. "cloth for wiping off perspiration") is a printed form of folk-spiritual poetry, each stanza of which consists of five lines of eight syllables.

seashore, pods of acacia strewn across the road, ants feasting on beads of rice under the table, whitish black smoke rising from the chimneys of factories in Manila, the smell of blood admixed with brook and river, the resolute stance of the unionists, the bawling of an infant, shadows fading into night, words that do not make it past the tip of the tongue, and the pages of books that he has not yet written, has not yet thought of writing, and/or will never write.

26. One second before the wheezing and slicing through the air of bullets that will etch, bore, and burrow into his temples and body, Arnulfo Canelo translates into Tagalog some sentences from *The Permanent Revolution*. Before blood and pieces of his brain spatter the wall where Madrileños used to piss every day before the war broke out, he cannot blot out of his mind the one question from his accusers that he cannot answer: *Who do you take orders from?*

Forgive me for writing to you only now. Many matters have been taking up my time and energy these past months. You, too, are not unaware of the great changes taking place in Spain that we, General Franco, the JNE, your brother, and I, have midwived. Of course, I am busy advising President Quezon on matters concerning the destiny and future of our country. I know we don't know each other personally, but I would like to offer you my heartfelt condolences. God may have taken him from us, but the mark he left on history will never be erased.

Sincerely,
Andrés Soriano