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## The Three-Cornered Sun: Portraits of the Revolutionary

*Jaime An Lim*



Abstraction, then, is confronted with the flux of experience, the monolith of program with the richness and diversity of motive, the purity of ideal with the contaminations of action.

—Irving Howe  
*Politics and the Novel*

The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right thing for the wrong reason.

—T.S. Eliot  
*Murder in the Cathedral*

While Rizal's novels represent a direct literary response to a contemporary sociopolitical condition, Linda Ty-Casper's two historical novels set during the Spanish period are essentially a reconstruction of a past where history and imagination merge and interact to reveal heretofore unexplored facets of that colonial experience. It may be assumed that distance in time entails a loss of immediacy, a softening of the sharp contours of the unfolding events and human reaction long gone; but it can also be argued that distance allows a more comprehensive perspective where the connections between acts and consequences, the relation between parts and whole, acquire a greater clarity. So in either case, there are losses; but there can also be definite gains. It is interesting to observe how theme can provide a strong sense of continuity to novels separated by nearly a century and spawned by essentially different sets of realities. Ty-Casper's *The Peninsulars* (1964) stakes out a time-frame earlier than that of *Noli*. Set during the 1750s up to the British siege of Manila, the novel follows the fortune of the two principal protagonists, the Governor General and his aide Santistevan, in their uneasy attempts to balance the scruples of conscience and the temptations of ambition. Their predicaments spring from the discrepancy between their

need to justify their lives and their inability to realize their justification, which is a consequence of their human as well as their sociopolitical conditions.

### The Novel as History

In *The Three-Cornered Sun* (Quezon City: New Day, 1979; all quotations are from this edition), Ty-Casper pursues and enlarges the fundamental issues touched upon earlier in *Noli* and *Fili*. However, while Rizal can still weigh the viability of reform as public redress against that of revolution, and explore their possible consequences, Ty-Casper can only take the revolution as a given, not a choice. The uprisings portrayed with great prophetic exactness in Rizal's novels have finally become a historical reality in the Philippine Revolution of 1896, the organizing crisis around which her novel is built. Thus, the polemics of Ibarra and Elias have turned, to all purposes, academic and the question now has shifted, paraphrasing T. S. Eliot, from "Have we done the right thing?" to "Have we done it for the right reasons?" The answer to that question constitutes the central moral burden of the novel.

The novel's debt to history is obvious and is made explicit in the author's dedication where she acknowledges Gabriela Paez-Viardo de Velasquez, a witness of those tumultuous times in the history of the country, "whose memory of the Revolution of 1896 is the touchstone of this novel" (p. iii). While general history can provide an account of that event in terms of external facts, fiction addressing the same event can enrich our understanding by giving us a sense of the internal conflicts and responses of its individual participants. The teacher Zacarias Clemente, who is in many ways similar to Don Anastasio and the schoolmaster in *Noli* in his grasp of the time's dilemmas, voices eloquently the novel's own justification: "History as it recedes becomes confused. By raising the past to the level of imagination—by the leap that comes from knowledge itself and the respect for truth that is all that matters in life—a novel can preserve the essence of the past and give us a sense, a vision, of what we are" (p. 166).

Rizal offers the house of Kapitan Tiago, or more accurately the town of San Diego, as an analogue of the wider world of the Philippines. Ty-Casper uses the same device in her novel and singles out the Viardo family, with its intrigues and idiosyncracies, as an

embodiment of the Filipino nation in a time of crisis. Through the Viardo family, as much as through the other families who function as variations of a theme, so to speak, we confront a gamut of motives which the characters bring to the cause of national liberation. The confrontation both ennobles and demystifies the image of the revolutionary. What seems like a simple matter of commitment to a cause becomes, in the course of the novel, both sacrifice and equivocation, calculated risk and blind gesture, accident and design.

### The Structure of the Novel

The structure of the novel is basically contrapuntal. The twenty-eight chapters are so sequenced that they emphasize the contrasting struggles of the characters who fight their battles in the villages and mountains, as much as in their hearts and minds. As the revolution progresses from month to month, in a series of attacks and withdrawals, dispersal and consolidation, defeats and triumphs and finally surrender, the narrative increases its tempo. The meditative sequences embodied in the spiritual struggles of Simeon and the leisurely ambience reflected in the dilettantism of Blas become less and less frequent while the active confrontations exemplified by Cristobal and the other revolutionaries (e.g., Juanchon, Amado, Jacob) become more emphatic. Moreover, the constant geographical changes, from Manila to Lian to San Juan to Cavite el Viejo to Zapote to Bulacan to San Isidro, underscore the idea of the revolution as a mass *movement*, a physical as well as an ideological and a spiritual process of becoming. One of the recurrent images of the novel is that of mountain streams springing out of separate lonely crevices, joining together into rivers, overcoming barriers in their search for the final destination.

The center of consciousness also changes from chapter to chapter; and within the chapter itself, there is a tendency to give the numerous minor voices a chance to be heard. The point of view used in the novel is what Norman Friedman, in "Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept," calls a multiple selective omniscience (pp. 127-28). The effect, therefore, is one of inclusiveness, the democratization of point of view, the rhetorical consequence of having the people, the masses, as hero. This strategy can easily result in a disjointed narrative where each character pursues a separate destiny. But a strong unifying influence is pro-

vided by the theme of the revolution itself which directly affects all the characters, major and minor, from the most dedicated revolutionary to the most apathetic bystander, like an uncontrollable flood carrying away everything that stands in its path. The revolution touches the lives of all and changes them, sometimes dramatically and sometimes more subtly, but changes them in a way that challenges their understanding of themselves.

### The Characters

Despite its attempt to portray the revolution as belonging essentially to the common people rather than to individuals, the novel—perhaps inescapably—has to embody more fully the experience of the many in a few. Among those who exemplify the Filipino revolutionary is Cristobal. Quantitatively, or simply in terms of the number of chapters where he constitutes the controlling center of gravity, Cristobal can also be said to be the central character of the novel, if we do not consider that designation a contradiction. In many ways, Cristobal is a limited hero: young, impulsive, proud, given to moments of self-doubt, jealousy, and indecision. But his limitations are those of ordinary and morally imperfect men struggling to transcend their moral imperfections. He is no Andres Bonifacio, a hero among men, a figure as large as the revolution.

It is to Ty-Casper's credit that, while she includes such historical heroes as Bonifacio and Emilio Aguinaldo as characters in the novel, she does not focus on them but rather on the common people around those figures, the unknown masses whose blood just as surely fed the fires of the Philippine Revolution. To concentrate on Bonifacio and Aguinaldo is to follow the traditional approach to historiography which tends to identify movements only with their leaders. Thus, to an extent, by realigning the focus on Caesar's soldiers or Alexander's cook, so to speak, Ty-Casper is revising history through literature and doing what Teodoro Agoncillo has done in *The Revolt of the Masses* (1956): celebrating the unsung heroes of the revolution. For that revolution, like the novel's lioness in panic, has indeed devoured many of its children. Ernesto is shot dead trying to escape at Lian. Celso, tortured with a torch, refuses to divulge the names of the insurgents and dies in prison. Filo, Pasio's grandson, is among the first casualties of the unsuccessful attempt at San

Juan. Pasio himself is killed months later in Dasmariñas, half-buried in stones. Palma dies during an encounter with Leon's troop in Bulacan. Martin is kicked to death by a provincial governor. Amado is shot, ironically, during the surrender at San Isidro. And there are others without names: the man who catches a bullet in the throat, the boy who fails to free himself from the falling cannon, the many resting in shallow graves along the roads, in the fields, on the mountains.

Cristobal's emergence as the central character in the novel is gradual and a bit unexpected. The novel opens with Simeon agonizing over his recent failure to win reforms for Filipinas and over his relevance in a world tottering on the brink of violence. A man of peace, he feels terribly out of place in these times of crisis, and it is his personal burden to justify his continuing belief in reason and reform to himself and to those who have finally given up the arguments of peace to the strategy of force. Simeon, therefore, resembles Crisostomo Ibarra before his bitter disillusionment; and the moral struggle that characterizes his view of the world immediately arouses the reader's sympathy and suggests, mistakenly as it turns out, that he might be the novel's moral center. The outbreak of the revolution in the last week of August 1896 has suddenly rendered Simeon's reformist politics obsolete, and the narrative focus of the novel gradually shifts to the most committed revolutionary, Cristobal, ironically the eldest son of the politically indifferent Blas Viardo.

Descended on one hand from a Portuguese *fidalgo* and on the other hand from an ancient *dato* who made a blood compact with the Spanish *conquistadores*, the Viardos aptly exemplify the *mestizo* class. Their complete family name reveals this familiar intermixture: Viardo y Gatmaitan. Foreign and *indio*. The four Viardo brothers—Angel, Simeon, Blas, and Jacob—embody opposing attributes and attitudes. The most successful family member financially, Angel, is the family reactionary who has learned to master the game of playing up to the friar and the official. A man who considers his own personal interest above all, he has no real sympathy for a revolution that can only threaten the security and privilege of his world, although at the same time he gives token support to it to forestall the ire of the revolutionaries in case they win. Simeon is the family reformist. He returns in mid-1896 to a Filipinas astir with rumors of a revolution. Because the reader already knows that the Philippine Revolution is to materialize soon after, Simeon's obstinate re-

fusal to heed his nephew's exhortation to join the revolutionary Katipunan takes on a measure of irony because here is a man destined to miss out on life's rare chances for greatness and heroism. The choice of his name is likewise ironic: it closely resembles that of Simoun in *Fili* whose sentiments, though patriotic, are anything but peaceful. Not inappropriately, he is married to a woman called Paz. Simeon's trust in the power of reason is exceeded only by his distaste for the anarchy of violence. Blas is the family dilettante. He could easily be another Capitan Tiago, the younger Tiago: a dandy tipping his cane gaily and brushing his gleaming pearl buttons with his cuffs, a man whose idea of a bloody struggle is a fight between a bull and a tiger, a society grandee who understands the practical value of mixing with people of consequence. If he has toyed with the possibility of joining the revolution, it is only as a means of escaping from his wife and his mounting gambling debts. Jacob is the family priest turned revolutionary, an interesting proposition which could have been explored more fruitfully at greater length. He does not appear till Chapter 25 of the novel.

The novel is built on contrasts, and the diversity of temperaments seen in the Viardo brothers is further developed and enlarged, in Chapter 3, in the interactions of a small group of confreres—doctor, teacher, pharmacist-chemist, planter, shopkeeper, and reformist—at Don Claro's. Just as the Viardos are divided on the question of the revolution, these men too reveal feelings that range from cautious accommodation to outright rejection. Anacleto Verano denounces the revolution: "[O]nly fools will let their history be decided by those who do not think beyond what they will stuff into their bellies" (p. 29). Felipe Austria echoes the same sentiment: "Men with everything to gain and nothing to lose have nothing to give" (p. 30). Honorio Magno decries their reluctance to commit themselves: "We are all afraid. See how we consult our safeties" (p. 30). Pedro Claro is more sympathetic to a mass revolt: "We must not dismiss the possibility of revolt. . . . We must not estrange ourselves from the future" (p. 30). Tomas San Gabriel is worried about his son joining: "I know that when revolution breaks out, our sons will be the first in the field. If we allow that, who will be left for the future?" (p. 32). However, it is Zacarias Clemente who embodies the spirit of fraternity and commitment:

I want it clear that we can be men in revolution, whether we own property or not, speak Latin or not. I am wary of distinctions among

brothers based on whether they drop their final *ds* or not. It is the system that enforces one class upon another, one race upon another that must be denounced. Unless we see this, we can become our own oppressors. (p. 31)

But Zacarias, of course, is expressing an ideal; and like most ideals when tested in the crucible of human nature and reality, it resists easy fulfillment. Before the novel is over, worse things will happen, brother will kill brother, a tragedy that has its historical foundation in the execution of Andres Bonifacio, the Supremo, the founder of the Katipunan, the leader of the Magdiwang, on orders of Emilio Aguinaldo, the leader of the rival faction of revolutionaries, the Magdalo (p. 3). The elite will wrest the leadership away from the plebian. And the revolution which has united the people in their common aspiration for freedom will also divide them in their differing loyalties and motivations.

The *ilustrado* fathers are singularly unwilling to risk their security by joining the revolution. The sons, however, are just the opposite. Idealistic and reckless because of their youth, they see in the revolution the chance of an exciting adventure, a shining heroism. Chapter 3 explores the equivocations of the adults; Chapter 5 examines the revolutionary fervor of the young. It is here, too, that Cristobal starts to edge into focus as the novel's dominant consciousness. In a mission to take a cargo of guns from the *SS Marcelo*, four young men, accompanied by three tenants from the San Gabriel farm, have been waiting on the shore for two days. Through flashback, interior reflection, and dramatic action, the reasons for each one's presence are explored. Cristobal, functioning as some sort of Devil's Advocate testing the depth and sincerity of their commitment, resents his friends' easy confidence, their casual acceptance of their destiny. Marcos Verano, set to study at the Academia Militar de Toledo, has readily joined the mission "certain that the revolution would not last until he returned, afraid that it would not start before he left" (p. 50), thereby missing an opportunity for greatness. Yet through acts of gratuitous wastefulness and thoughtlessness (e.g., hurling the spyglass at a hawk, throwing his unfinished breakfast into the fire), he betrays his failure to understand the implied sacrifices that the revolution entails. Juancho San Gabriel has come knowing well that the revolution, even if it succeeds, cannot change his life for the better: he already belongs to the *ilustrado*, the privileged class. His future lies ahead of him, secure and promising. The act of rebellion,



therefore, is for him an act of personal sacrifice. And yet, even in the midst of the urgency of their mission, all he can think of is being home in time for the final festivities. Ramon Arroyo has claimed the revolution as his own although, as a Creole, he probably has less cause for rising against the Spanish oppression which is primarily aimed at the indios. "As much as you are, I am an indio. My scar is as deep as yours. . . . I was born here, Cristobal. I know no other country" (p. 52). Cristobal Viardo justifies himself too: "All I want is the simplest life that will take nothing from another" (p. 54). Is Cristobal, then, the better revolutionary because he does not have Marco's self-importance, Juancho's frivolity, Ramon's mixed blood? Ty-Casper is less interested in ranking them according to their moral superiority than in rendering them as facets of the complex psychology of the revolutionary. Their diversity and contradiction, instead of nullifying the validity of their cause, enriches it because they bring to it the breadth and depth of their humanity. "At once belligerent and humble, pious and profane, liberal and arrogant, they anointed each other with blood and gambled away their families' honor and their future for the moment's brief enshrinement" (p. 54).

Such contradictions cannot but confuse the tenants—Tante, Celso, and Ernesto—whose own reason for involvement in the revolution is less complex. They have come because their landlord's son has brought them along. It is not a matter of choice then, but rather of obedience, submission. Tante counsels his companions as one who has learned the harsh lesson of survival: agree, stay away, remain mute, submit, obey. "Their generation, linked by debts that sons and unborn sons inherited, had known no rights" (p. 50). Because they have been deprived of their will, to what extent can their involvement be considered a deliberate act? When they risk their lives by unloading the guns from the burning ship, is their heroism any less? And for the ilustrado sons, how can they reconcile their own participation in the general scheme of minor oppressions perpetuated by the Viardos and the San Gabriels with their fight for national liberation? Are they driving away the colonial masters only so that they can become the undisputed masters of their less fortunate countrymen? Are they really fighting for freedom then, or ultimately for self-interest and self-enrichment? And finally, are private ambition and public responsibility irreconcilable? Where does one end and the other begin?

Cristobal insists on the purity of his motives. And the reader must judge the extent to which he satisfies his own harsh measures. Ty-Casper certainly does not exempt Cristobal from that burden, and many times Cristobal almost transcends his flawed humanity to become truly selfless, a man dedicated to a cause larger than his personal ambitions. But not quite. He remains an imperfect human being, like the rest of the characters. After the victorious assault in Zapote, he refuses a promotion in rank. But is it because of his need for self-effacement or, as the men suspect, because of pride and even cowardice? And why did he allow the school teacher who has forbidden his sons to join the revolution to be shot in the cemetery? Is it justice, or simply a refusal to take responsibility for the life of someone whose convictions differ from his own? If indeed the school teacher is guilty of treason, how can Cristobal's own father Blas and his uncles Simeon and Angel, or Juancho's father himself, Tomas San Gabriel, be absolved from the same crime? What is right? And what is wrong? The question is no longer simple, the answer clear-cut. The revolution, which in the beginning was such a forthright moral force, no longer offers the comfort of certitude, of righteousness, in the course of its escalation. As they shoot the indio auxiliaries marching in front of the Spanish infantries, Cristobal is forced to redefine the identity of the enemy. When Bonifacio is killed by the revolutionaries headed by Aguinaldo, he is torn by the rift in the leadership and is forced to treat some of his own countrymen as though they were his enemies. Instead of giving them a sense of justice, the revolution has managed to breed suspicion, doubt, and betrayal.

However, it is precisely because of his own moral anxiety that Cristobal, without exempting himself from guilt, redeems the true meaning of the revolution: as distrust of moral simplicities. Though he does not believe in Simeon's political assumptions, Cristobal shares his uncle's capacity for spiritual anguish, struggle. Though they are so different in their relation to the revolution, Cristobal and his father also are similar in many ways: "The same contradictions made father and son unpredictable. Trapped in preoccupations about appearances, Blas masked his uncertainties with intense enjoyment of pleasures while Cristobal protected himself with anguish and occasional longing for death" (p. 195). Though they fight on opposite sides, Cristobal and Leon have an affinity as strong as blood: they both suffer from a form of alienation, the former because his

love for España is as strong as his love for Filipinas; the latter because he finds it difficult to accept that the people he has been fighting for have become the ones he is fighting against. Juancho, Quintin, Palma, and Cristobal, though individuals with their own idiosyncrasies, ultimately complement one another, their individual images coalescing into a fuller portrait of the Filipino as revolutionary.

If the Filipino achieves his multiplicity in conjunction with his fellow countrymen, he achieves his clearest distinctiveness in relation to the Spaniard. Rizal has developed the image of the Spaniard powerfully and with infinite variety in *Noli* and *Fili*, and Ty-Casper; achieves the same in her *Peninsulars*. But *The Three-Concerned Sun* has a different emphasis, pursues a different ambition. The author includes Spanish characters mainly as constant reminders of the injustice and inequality against which the people are rising. Victoria Reixas Prega de Viardo is a demanding, vindictive, and calculating woman whose highest ambition is to achieve social recognition and clout. With her tiaras and gowns, her tapestries and chandeliers, her stage shows and river boat excursions, her hams and chocolate prepared just right (not too sweet, not too thin), she reflects an unconscionable opulence which contrasts starkly with the hunger and poverty of the revolutionaries in the mountains. The three governor generals who have taken office in quick succession during the one-and-a-half years that frame the narrative—Ramon Blanco, Camilo de Polavieja, and Fernando Primo de Rivera—are often referred to and their exploits recounted but they remain mere props, in the same way that Bonifacio and Aguinaldo remain shadowy figures, simply calculated to give credence to the historical basis of the novel. Colonel Picon, Curiel the photographer, and Torralba the journalist provide brief episodes illustrating the Spaniard's propensity for intimidation, insensitivity, and misguided optimism. Only Toribio Nin among the Spaniards can be said to demonstrate a degree of complexity. A man who is said to be a liberal as well as an agent of the friar and the monarchists, he survives handsomely in the world of intrigue and change because he has learned well the art of flexibility, of bending with the wind. Perhaps only too well. An exile in Filipinas in search of his dream, he is anxious to leave his imprint on the flow of events and yet afraid to commit himself wholly to either side. He vacillates, is non-committal, and like Simeon, wakes up too late from the nightmare

of his personal insignificance, a bystander at a momentous point in history, to find that destiny has indeed passed him by.

It is in their defeat that people like Nin, the less than admirable Tomas de San Gabriel—"How about a small revolution? ... just a little fighting so the young ones will not be bored until we can send them to Europe—" (p. 32), and even the calculating Andres Gaz—"There will be rewards. Trust me . . ." (p. 208), that they somehow rediscover the compassionate humanity that in better times has eluded them.

### The Revolution as Moral Movement

The revolution is of course conceived not only as a political movement but, more significantly, as a moral one. A characteristic gesture of the characters, therefore, is the recurrent sounding of their consciences. Simeon, Cristobal, Zacarias Clemente, Jacob—the characters hounded most severely by a need to justify their acts and beliefs—define the moral tenor of the novel. Their questioning, their doubts and despair emphasize the moral complexities involved in the seemingly clear-cut act of rebellion. Who is the enemy? Is there a proper way to live and to die? On which side does God stand—on the side of the oppressor or that of the oppressed? Do we deserve to be free? The idea of salvation and liberation as something that must be *deserved* runs throughout the novel.

In a world made up of imperfect human beings, there can never be enough time for self-reflection and self-evaluation. The revolution of 1896 is a cry against oppression, but the revolutionaries themselves, in the imperfection of their understanding or in their willful denial of human compassion, have perpetuated and continue to perpetuate their own little tyrannies against their family, their neighbors, their tenants, their own people. Did the Filipinos lose the revolution, then, because in a sense they do not deserve it? Every time an injustice is committed—the execution of the school teacher and Bonifacio, the killing of the prisoners of war—the revolutionaries are that many steps removed from deserving the grace of salvation. There are, of course, other tactical reasons for their defeat—untrained fighters, insufficient ammunition, unsophisticated weapons, disorganization and rivalry, lack of food, the superiority of the enemy. But there are also victories and defeats other than military ones. And if the Philippine Revolution has ended in less than shin-

ing glory, many of those who fought in it have also affirmed their capacity, however limited, for compassion, sacrifice, and heroism. In that affirmation lies their moral triumph. It is only fitting that the final sacrifice in the novel is offered by Amado, an ordinary tenant turned reluctant leader, the one man whose life Cristobal himself, perhaps in a moment of clouded judgment, has hoped he would not have to save. During the surrender of the revolutionaries in San Isidro, we see the man deliberately running away against the orders of a soldier who then summarily shoots him. To that act, the casual onlooker can attach any number of interpretations: fear, defiance, cowardice, stupidity. But we who have been privy to his last thoughts know better and can appreciate the generosity of his spirit, the magnitude of his gesture. It is in such acts of self-sacrifice that the Filipino revolutionary achieves the moral victory that the revolution itself has harshly denied.