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The Problem of Integrity

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Review Articles

The Problem of Integrity

IT might be said with some degree of oversimplification that *The Pretenders*,* by Francisco Sionil Jose is a novel about the Ilocano migrations. That is one of the main things discussed in the book, to which the narrative repeatedly calls attention.

It might also be said that this novel is about the "ilustrados"—past and present. The ilustrados of the past were the aristocrats of Philippine society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The ilustrados of the present are their successors: the wealthy landowners and the business and industrial magnates, as well as the other wielders of power—in politics, in the newspapers, and in the universities.

It might be said, finally, that this novel is about a man who is engaged in two kinds of search: for identity and for integrity. The search for identity links him up with his ancestors who had to fight the ilustrados of the past. The search for integrity is his own struggle against the corrupting influences of modern wealth and power.

I

The Ilocano migrations are a well known fact in Philippine history. Beginning with the nineteenth century, and in

* THE PRETENDERS: A NOVEL. By F. Sionil Jose. Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, Second printing, 1966. 219 pp.

ever growing numbers in the twentieth, the farmers from the Ilocos provinces have left their native villages, their low hills and narrow valleys, to seek better opportunities and a better livelihood elsewhere. Some of them migrated to the Cagayan Valley in northeastern Luzon. Others settled in the central plains, in particular in the provinces of Nueva Ecija, Tarlac, and Pangasinan. Others went to the coastal towns of Zambales. But many also ventured much farther and have crossed the seas to seek land in Mindanao or to seek jobs in Hawaii or Alaska or California or other western states.

Wherever they went they brought along with them a strong sense of distinctive identity and a certain clannishness that have earned for them the taunting name of "the Ilocano nation". But together with this clannish spirit, they also brought with them their native virtues: simplicity, frugality, industriousness, a strong sense of loyalty, and a strong family spirit that shows itself, for instance, in a deep reverence for elders.

Therein lies what might be called the Ilocano paradox: they are among the most pioneering people in the Philippines, and they are also among the most traditional.

What was it that impelled such tradition-bound people to wrench themselves from their old life in the Ilocos and seek a new life in strange and distant lands? And what did they find, and how did they fare, in their new homes? In the answers to these questions, Mr. Sionil Jose finds material for his novel.

He does not develop his subject in the epic manner by following the migrations of the Ilocanos from their original villages to their new home. He reverses the process. He begins with the present and seeks to link it up with the past. The main point of the story lies precisely in the success or failure of this attempt to link together the past and the present: for the present is in some respects a repetition, and in some respects a reversal, of the past. The past therefore becomes a norm and a standard by which to judge the present.

The present is made concrete in the lives of a few remnants of one such family that had migrated from the Ilocos to Pangasinan and thence had exploded into a kind of diaspora. The remnants are few and in various ways unfortunate. There is, first of all, the protagonist, a penniless young man of intellectual interests named Antonio Samson. Then there is his sister, not very fortunately married, who with her husband and family lives in the Manila slums. Then there is their cousin Emy, an unwed mother, who still lives in Pangasinan. And finally there is Antonio Samson's father who is in prison and who dies there.

The reason for his imprisonment is only gradually revealed to the reader. This suspense is a piece of excellent craftsmanship, and it is an important element in the story for it answers the question: What happened to the Ilocanos in their new home. These particular Ilocanos had migrated in the nineteenth century from Cabugao, Ilocos Sur, to Rosales, Pangasinan. There they cleared the forests and transformed the barren cogon fields into fertile land. Other Ilocano settlers joined them, and a new generation grew up—only to have their lands taken away from them in the early years of the American occupation by the “*ilustrados*”—the wealthy and educated families who were able to obtain Torrens titles to precisely those lands that the Ilocano settlers had cleared and cultivated. In protest against such manifest injustice the peasantry of Pangasinan rose up in a bloody revolt which was quickly put down. The rebels died or were imprisoned—like Antonio Samson's father.

Imprisonment and penury: such is the present. From this sordid present there are two ways of escape: one into the past, the other into the future. The escape into the past is a search for identity and for roots: a way of finding some meaning for, and a way of shedding some rays of faded glory upon an inglorious present. The escape into the future is by way of wealth and prosperity. Antonio Samson, hitherto penniless, has the singular fortune of marrying the daughter of a very wealthy—and complaisant—industrialist.

The immediate question therefore to which the novelist addresses himself is: What happens to a poor man who marries the daughter of a very wealthy industrialist?

Put that way, the question sounds extremely simple. But it is not as simple as it sounds. What is at issue is not a rectilinear progress from rags to riches, from the slums of Sampaloc to a millionaire's mansion in Santa Mesa. The question becomes very complex by the introduction of complicating factors, and these complicating factors give life and substance to the story.

One complicating factor is the fact that the protagonist is a displaced person, with no assets except his talents and his Harvard doctorate. That Harvard doctorate brings with it its own complications, for it has been made possible by a scholarship to the United States obtained for Samson by the chairman of his department at the University of the Philippines. That department chairman is himself an Ilocano who tries to help his proteges (especially if they are Ilocanos), but in so doing tries also to rule their lives and make their academic careers and their promotions dependent upon their usefulness to his own academic ambitions. He himself has obtained his own doctorate with a plagiarized thesis. Consequently, Antonio Samson's position as professor at the University is an extremely precarious one, dependent not upon his own academic deserts but upon the goodwill of his department chairman. When that goodwill snaps, his academic future tumbles.

From this academic world now closed to him, Samson turns to the business world where his future is even brighter, for he is assured a high position and every material comfort by his wealthy father-in-law. But this too turns out to be precarious. It appears stable enough, based as it is upon that most stable of relationships, a marriage. But the woman he is married to is a most unstable person. When she proves unfaithful to him, he leaves her and gives up his position of privilege. There is then nothing for him to return to but his original assets: namely, his sister's shabby apartment in the slums and his own brains. But brains are not much help when

one has lost vision and the will to live. He seeks an easy way out by throwing himself in the tracks of an oncoming train.

A second complicating factor has already been indicated. Antonio Samson, though he comes immediately from the Manila slums, is not from Manila. He is Ilocano, born and bred in Pangasinan, and descended from a grandfather who had migrated with his family from Cabugao, Ilocos Sur. Being a historian, Samson never forgets his Ilocano ancestry and he is intrigued by the story of these Ilocano migrations. He feels somehow that his own present life would have more meaning if he could understand better its obscure origins. He visits the land of these origins, first in imagination by his doctoral thesis; then in reality, by automobile trips to Cabugao and to Rosales. The chapters that describe these visits to the land of his forbears are among the best in the novel.

A third complication arises from the fact that the protagonist is an introspective intellectual with a strong sense of history. His rise from poverty to opulence would have been gladly and gratefully accepted by anyone else; but it is only a source of embarrassment and even of undefined guilt to this quixotic individual who is forever brooding upon the past and lamenting his loss of identity with it.

The nature of that past is itself another complicating factor. In trying to answer the double question of why his ancestors left the Ilocos and what happened to them in their new home, Antonio Samson comes face to face with the social question and the agrarian problem. He discovers that the Ilocano people have always been the victims of exploitation and injustice. The scene has changed and the exploiters have varied, but the injustice remains the same. In the Ilocos during the Spanish era the exploiters were the Spanish government or the Spanish friars. In the early years of the American Occupation the exploiters were the "ilustrados" who grabbed the lands that the Ilocano peasants had cleared and cultivated in Central Luzon and elsewhere. Today the "exploiters" are the wealthy businessmen and *hacenderos* from Luzon or the Visayas who have again gobbled up the small homesteads of the poor settlers in Mindanao.

By marrying the daughter of one of these capitalists and by working for the firm of his father-in-law, Antonio Samson feels that he is sharing the guilt of the new breed of "ilustrados": he feels that he has turned traitor to his Ilocano ancestry and has joined the ranks of their exploiters.

This does not mean that he does not feel attracted to the good life that wealth can provide him. He feels attracted to it, but at the same time the prospect of it repels him, as if wealth itself were something unclean. The reason, perhaps, is that the only wealthy people he knows are corrupt individuals. Here is how he thinks of himself, in reverie, when he himself should become wealthy:

As for children, there would be at least five—and several more who would naturally be illegitimate. Carmen would send the girls to the Assumption Convent, where they would learn French—or to Madrid, where they would polish their Spanish and acquire a European accent. As for the boys, they would go to La Salle, of course, or to the American School, or to San Beda. Not Ateneo—my God! That school has become too common and too crowded with plebeian characters.

The Ateneo may indeed have become crowded with plebeians (thank God)—but what a picture of a wealthy man's life is given in that passage! Is it really standard practice for wealthy men to beget illegitimate children?

A fifth complication is the character of the woman he has married. He would never have met her in Manila for they belong to different worlds. But in America all Filipinos manage to meet. A pampered and headstrong girl who has always gotten what she wanted, she finds that neither money nor beauty is sufficient to assuage loneliness. She throws herself at this serious but penniless student who readily enough falls for her. He gets her with child and marries her. Or, more accurately, she insists on marrying him. He does not marry her for her money; indeed he is foolish enough to think that he could marry her without it. But she and her money cannot be divorced, nor can she free herself from the extremely narrow mental bounds to which her unbounded wealth has confined her. She marries him because she has a baby coming: but she really does not want to be a mother, and when it suits her to

do so, she procures an abortion. This is a shock to her husband who calls her a murderess. Eventually he learns that she has also been unfaithful to him and he leaves her.

There is a sixth complication, arising from the character of the woman's father, Antonio Samson's wealthy father-in-law, Don Manuel Villa. He is one of the modern aristocrats of the business world who have inherited power from the social aristocrats (the "ilustrados") of half a century ago. Villa, the modern industrial baron, believes only in money. To him it is the source of power, and he has the cynical belief that all men without exception can be bought.

Villa himself has been bought by three foreigners who supply him with needed capital for his expanding ventures. One of the foreigners is Japanese, another is Chinese (though a naturalized Filipino citizen). The third is an American whose curriculum vitae is interesting in view of recent developments in Philippine politics. (The American is an ex-GI who has chosen to remain in the Philippines; he has become a multi-millionaire whose financial interests include Virginia tobacco and steel; he works in close collaboration with Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino businessmen; he obtains government concessions through the services of a senator; and his name is Alfred Dangmount.) These three foreigners control Villa, who in turn controls others. They also control a senator who is also an interesting character. He is a professed nationalist, a leader in the nationalistic crusade, whose speeches—some of them ghost-written by Harvard-trained Antonio Samson—are hailed as important statements in the nationalist cause. Behind that patriotic facade is the ugly reality: he has become wealthy through graft, and he is a tool of Alfred Dangmount.

These are some of the complications that render the original question complex. It is no longer, "What happens to a poor man who marries a wealthy woman"; but rather: What happens to a poor man who marries a wealthy woman—if the man is an Ilocano, an intellectual brooding upon the past and seeking to identify himself with his roots, who has lost his position in the academic world, and feels himself a traitor to his race by accepting employment in the larger world of busi-

ness; and *if* the woman he marries is headstrong, selfish and inconstant, and her father is a money-mad, unscrupulous, and ruthless cynic who thinks that everyone can be bought?

That is the situation in the story. Nor is that all: for there are further complications, partly personal, partly social. One is the fact that although he marries Carmen Villa, Samson is really in love with his cousin Emy. Before his departure for the United States, and through circumstances largely unforeseen, he has had a child by Emy, though he does not learn of this fact until his return from America six years later. He has been unfaithful to Emy; but she has been faithful to him, and one way in which she has shown this fidelity is by keeping the identity of her son's father a secret. Her son is in fact Samson's only child, for his real wife, Carmen Villa, has procured an abortion by which his only hope for legitimate offspring is frustrated.

Emy, to whom he has been unfaithful, is the only real friend left to him. Her patience and fortitude in her difficult life and her devotion in bringing up her son are sufficient to wipe out the shame of her unwed motherhood.

To Antonio Samson she represents all that is good in his past. But it is a past closed to him, and he desecrates it further by an inane offer to take the child away from its mother in order to bring it up in his luxurious home in Manila where he can provide the child with material comforts that the child's mother in her poor home in Pangasinan cannot provide. This offer is rightly rejected: which dramatizes the fact that there is more joy and real honor in that poor and apparently dishonored home in Pangasinan, than there is in the rich and seemingly honorable home in Manila.

One final source of complications are Antonio Samson's supposed friends. They have been former classmates at the university, and now they are newspapermen, wretchedly poor but without the graces of poverty. They are embittered and cynical. They hate the rich. They profess to despise Antonio Samson for marrying an heiress, but their ill-natured contempt is a thin disguise for envy. It is also a desperate attempt at

self-justification, for they too have been bought. In the end, their contempt and continual harassment are among the factors that drive Samson to ultimate despair.

III

Such are the strands skillfully woven into this narrative. The story is narrated from a single point of view, that of the protagonist—except of course the Epilogue, which continues the story after the protagonist's death as seen from the viewpoint of an American visitor.

The story is told in leisurely fashion, with much questioning of motives and a preoccupation with appearances and reality. There are many insights (social and psychological) and much incidental wisdom: such as, that only a man who has suffered can understand suffering and be kind to those who suffer; or that nationalism is often a mere hypocritical cloak.

There is much local color, and the reader is made constantly aware of scenery and surroundings: the "bad" hills of the Ilocos; the blue sea in the distance; the rain over Manila Bay; the old rectory in Cabugao; the cogon-roofed houses in Rosales; the apartment near the railroad tracks trembling with the noise of the trains; the millionaire's garden in Santa Mesa; the newspaper office; the shabby coffee shop.

A social dimension is added by juxtaposing the sophisticated ways of polite society with the more blunt and less subtle ways of the Igorots.

All this together makes this novel one of the most readable and one of the most thoughtful in our literature. Few Filipino novels can be read with as much intellectual excitement as this one.

The first edition of this novel (published in 1962) contained several defects which happily have been corrected in this second reprinting. In the first place, some typographical errors have been corrected. In the second place, the "packaging" has been improved. The first edition consisted of the novel and of several short stories, all "packaged" together in one volume.

That may have caused some saving in expense: but it did not do justice to either the novel or the short stories. In the 1966 edition, *The Pretenders* stands by itself alone in a separate volume.**

But there are defects which the second edition has not corrected, including a few malapropisms. (An office is described as "flatulent"; a person is said to "fondle" the scenery.) Such defects, however, are purely verbal, and therefore superficial. They do not mar the basic qualities of the book.

IV

It is as social commentary that this novel exhibits its strongest as well as its weakest points. This is in a manner of speaking an "angry" novel, though it differs from the writings of the "angry young men" of England and America in that its anger is not hurled indiscriminately against everything in the Establishment. The anger in this book is directed at certain well-defined targets hinted at in the book's title. The word "pretenders" in the title can be taken in a double sense. It can refer to those who are ambitious and who are seeking to obtain or become something (like pretenders to a throne). It can also refer to those who put on a false front to hide an ugly reality, whose lives therefore are a pretense.

Such "pretenders" abound in the book. They are found in the academic field: like the professor who owes his academic prestige not to genuine scholarly work but to a plagiarized thesis or to intramural politics. They are also found in government: like the politician who professes to serve the nationalist cause in words, but serves an alien interest in deeds. They are also found among the newspapermen who profess to seek nothing but the truth and the public good, but who write what they are paid to write.

** The first edition of this novel was entitled, *THE PRETENDERS AND EIGHT SHORT STORIES*. By F. Sionil Jose. Published by Alberto D. Benipayo, and incorporated in *The Regal Series*. Manila. 1962. xvi, 328 pp.

But in this novel's hierarchy, these are "small fry". The really big "pretenders" are the "ilustrados" of the past and the capitalists of the present. The capitalists profess to help the national economy, but (as the novel depicts them) they sell out to alien interests; they destroy the small landowners and small competitors; and they work on the principle that everyone has his price. Similarly, "ilustrados" of the past professed to be patriots but were merely opportunists.

It is into such a world of pretense and "pretenders" that the protagonist of this story is thrown. Being an intellectual with a strong sense of history and of self-respect, he finds himself fighting a double struggle. He must reaffirm his true identity, and he must reaffirm his integrity. He wins the first struggle but loses the second.

Actually, he loses it through his own fault, for there is something not entirely correct about his concept of integrity. His sense of guilt with regard to wealth is unnecessary. Not all wealth is tainted. Not all Filipino industrialists who go into partnership with foreign investors are "dummies". Not all wealthy men are unfaithful to their wives. There are indeed unjust business practices which are morally wrong; but not all business is wrong, nor is the capitalist system essentially immoral. There is nothing wrong in working for a business firm, nor is it a violation of one's integrity to be paid a high salary.

Back of this fear of losing one's integrity is a fear of wealth itself and of its corrupting influences.

This sense of guilt with regard to wealth produces an uneven system of moral values. The protagonist in this novel is hypersensitive to the loss of integrity in one direction, but is completely callous to its complete loss in another direction. He does not want to be "bought" by a wealthy industrialist: that is against his sense of honor and integrity. But he does not seem very much disturbed, nor does his conscience feel overburdened with guilt, at having violated the honor of two women only one of whom he can marry.

Basically, what is wrong with Antonio Samson is a self-centered outlook. He condemns or distrusts the selfishness

and the hypocrisy of others; but he fails to realize how self-centered he himself is. Ancestry, identity, integrity, honor—these matter to him when *his* identity or *his* integrity or *his* honor is involved; they do not seem to matter very much when he has dishonored others and have destroyed *their* integrity.

When his world seems to crash around him he commits suicide. It is a perfectly credible act in view of his self-centered outlook. His suicide is not an act of bravery but of cowardice. It is an essentially selfish reaction to humiliation and defeat. It might be interesting to speculate what might have happened if the novelist had not killed off Antonio Samson but had allowed him to live and to rebuild his life anew. As T. S. Eliot says, we can “survive humiliation”. Antonio Samson might have survived the ordeal. He might have learned humility and patience, as well as genuine unselfishness. He would have been a much poorer man: he would also have been a wise man.

V

One set of “pretenders” to whom much attention is given in the book were the “ilustrados” of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. They were the Filipinos who had the double advantage of wealth and education. They constituted an educated elite and a kind of ruling class, economically and socially far above the peasants who tilled their fields or the tradesmen and laborers who worked in the cities. Since they had been educated in Manila or in Europe, they took the lead in the Propaganda Movement which paved the way for the Revolution. They filled the highest positions in the first Philippine Republic. And it was to them that the Americans turned for help in governing the Islands after the American conquest.

The names of many of these illustrious men are held in high respect among the people, but it is the contention of some historians that they did not deserve their fame. According to this view, these “ilustrados” were in fact not real patriots but were mere opportunists who sought their own advantage and who sold their services to the highest bidder—Spaniard, American, or Filipino. In this view, the only true heroes of

the Revolution were Andres Bonifacio and the unknown plebeians. For that reason they refer to the Revolution as the "revolt of the masses".

Such a view of the ilustrados is accepted in the novel. The indictment against them is expressed clearly and emphatically at the very head of the book in an epigraph—supposedly taken from Antonio Samson's doctoral dissertation:

They were bright young men who knew what money meant. But though they were rich and were educated in the best schools of Europe, their horizons were limited and they knew they could never belong to the alien aristocracy which determined the future of the Filipinos. They cried for reforms, for wider opportunities, for equality. Did they plead for freedom too? And dignity for all Indios—and not only for themselves, who owed their fortunes and their status to the whims of the aristocracy? Could it be that they wanted not freedom or dignity but the key to the restricted enclaves of the rulers?

Very well put, and doubtless true of some. But do the words apply to all? Do they apply, for instance, to Gregorio del Pilar who died at Tirad Pass? Or to Jose Rizal?

Rizal, as is well known, did not favor a bloody revolution, and for that reason there are those who consider Andres Bonifacio a greater hero than Rizal. That may well be: but is it necessary to diminish the one in order to extol the other? Must we condemn Crisostomo Ibarra in the *Noli me tangere* who wanted to work for the uplift of his people, because he did not have the fiery temper of Elias who wanted to even the score with blood?

Heroism and patriotism need not always be demonstrated in a readiness to shed blood. Rizal, a physician and a scholar, may have hesitated to shed the blood of others: but he was liberal with his own.

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