THE NOVEL AS POLITICAL APPEAL: EAST TIMOR'S TRAGEDY IN TIMOTHY MO'S THE REDUNDANCY OF COURAGE

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Abstract: The present paper examines Timothy Mo's quasi-fictionalised representation of the genocide inflicted by Indonesia on the emerging nation state of East Timor, following its occupation in 1975. The Redundancy of Courage (1991) chronicles East Timor's colonial and postcolonial history and its process of national identity formation, interrupted by the aggression of neo-colonial powers serving the vested interests of global capital. The paper focuses on the novel's use of the political memoir to accommodate a whole gamut of discourses, registers, narrative styles and techniques, such as autobiographic confession, historiography, political and media analysis, journalistic investigation, adventure story, political thriller, (mock-) heroic epic to the heart-rending testimonial – all deftly wielded in a narrative tour de force which has the immediacy of reportage. We also discuss the archetypal image of the communal body and mind in representing nationhood, analysing Mo's representation of the nation as a narrated body kept alive by the narration of its memory, identity and heroic struggle.

Keywords: nationalism, neo-colonialism, national identity, genocide, media, memoir.

The Redundancy of Courage, Timothy Mo's fourth novel of 1991, focuses on the troubled recent history of another 'insular possession' – the former Portuguese colony of East Timor – and narrates its dispossession and misappropriation by the neo-imperialistic aggression of Indonesia. From the narrative of colonisation undertaken in *An Insular Possession*, Mo turns to the epos and ethos of decolonization and liberation movements, in a compelling enquiry into the painful construction of nationhood and the strain of self-government confronting the emergent state. The novel also levels a critique of the more recent hegemonic discourses of neo-colonial powers. It advances a vision of history as patterned by successive cycles of progress and regression, bondage and freedom, utopia and dystopia. As he embarks on quasi-documentary explorations of contemporary developments in South East Asia, Mo poises his tone perfectly between tragic gravity, benign comedy, self-irony and mordant satire, in a penetrating study of human nature faced with extremity.

The Redundancy of Courage aspires to the moral authority of an awareness-raising documentary on the contemporary drama of East Timor, fictionalised as Danu. As the critic Elaine Ho observes, the book's publication amounts to a historic act in itself, as it 'anticipates the attention of the global media on Timorese resistance against Indonesian hegemony' (Ho 2000: 88), brought about by the awarding of the Nobel Prize in 1996 to Catholic Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo and Jose Ramos-Horta, two prominent activists for the Timorese cause. The book foretells the international crisis entailed by the developments in East Timor. Ho commends the author's interest in the topical issues of the contemporary world: 'Once again, Mo shows how his artistic antennae are finely tuned to the faintly heard messages of crisis before they explode on the world's stage.' (Ho 88). Mo's novel can be seen as drawing on Naipaul's variety of postcolonial Gothic, which blends the political documentary, inspired by the ascendance of New Journalism, with the mystery and suspense of the detective thriller. It

has been described as a political thriller, dealing with the political and economic conflicts in the postcolonial world. East Timor is a tragic episode in contemporary history, in which an emergent nation has been victimised for a quarter of a century by its Indonesian neighbours. The worst of it is that the Indonesian aggressors – the real life referent of the '*malais*' in the novel – acted with the tacit approval of Western capitalist powers, whose economic interests in the region prevailed over humanitarian principles. The novel proves that the international community can turn a blind eye to local tyranny when the grand-scale tyranny of global capital and commercial interest takes over.

The Redundancy of Courage reads like a compelling first-person testimony. It is Mo's first novel to be narrated in the first person, which gives more weight to its claims to veracity. The narrative consists in the confessions of Adolph Ng, an active participant in the Danuese resistance. From his present South-American refuge, he relates the events before and after the invasion of his native island, Danu. His narrative is an attempt to grapple with absurdity, to derive meaning from events which verge on the surreal, and to assess their bearings on his sense of identity. He probes into the occult geopolitical motivations which could explain his country's predicament. It is a grave enquiry into the nature of bondage and freedom, oppression and resistance, cowardice and courage, of the psychological resorts of heroism, loyalty and betrayal. The narrative is meant to reveal an extreme experience of history in the making. Ng's harrowing testimony points accusingly to the international forums and mass-media which turned a blind eye to the East Timor crisis.

The self-conscious narrator adopts an ambiguous position towards his engagement with history. He presents himself both as an insider and an outsider, because of his Chinese ethnicity. From the very outset he emphasises his outsidedness and his status as a man apart, racially, ethnically and sexually. Emotionally and intellectually, though, he feels it his duty to honour his friends' memory and salvage their sacrifice from oblivion. The novel begins with a pious invocation of their names: 'I don't want them forgotten: Rosa, Osvaldo, Raoul, Maria, Martinho, Arsenio. It would be easy to say in the glib way of those who lead uninterrupted lives in placid places that such oblivion would be worse than death. No fate is worse than death.' (Mo 1991: 3) This establishes his role as the chronicler of deathly histories, as a voice raised against oblivion.

His biography of the island eschews linear chronology. The novel opens with a harrowing account of the '*malai*' invasion of Danu. Invasion day, inaugurated by 'the bang of the explosion' (4), is presented as a moment of apocalypse, in which the hero's familiar universe is extinguished and replaced by an unrecognizable reality, alien, nightmarishly absurd. The dynamic, cinematic account of the invasion functions as a prologue, establishing 'invasion day' as a cataclysmic point breaking the temporal frame of reference into 'before' and 'after'. In most postcolonial novels, the temporal frontier is marked by the moment of independence, with its attendant 'pre-/post-' temporal denominators. To the Danuese, Invasion Day signifies the end of their nationalist dream.

Ng's recollection of the invasion opens onto a scene of everyday normality. The narrator, whose identity remains vague until the next chapter, sets the scene with care. The quiet, peaceful image of himself shaving on a morning with a clear sky, 'the 7th December to be precise' (3), establishes the contrast between the smooth flow of normalcy and the eruption of terror. Against the promise of that blue sky he discerns the first signs of military

operations, uncannily de-familiarised by the beauty of floating white parachutes. As the scene gradually reveals itself for what it really is, Ng sallies out on his Yamaha, plunging into a surreal reality of exploding fire and earth. His alert senses take in the exodus of people out of Danu, the 'convulsion of the earth', the 'dirt fountains', the 'three silver insects' which later 'appeared as the machines they were', which create the 'dust-storm' and the 'orange blossoming' (4). Ng explains that his lyrical expressiveness only serves his desire for accuracy: 'I do not strive to be poetic. That was exactly how they appeared.' (4) His brisk, expressive notation of the physical signs of the disaster replicates the breath-taking rhythm of erupting violence, described in parallel with its impact on his hypertrophied senses. Ng's acutely enhanced perceptiveness is in contrast with his uncomprehending stupor. The accumulation of images and sensations creates an arresting effect of apocalyptic horror: 'The cornet of black smoke…the fiery pillar straight out of the Old Testament, to go with the parachutes, the falling manna of the early morning.' (9)

The narrator's feeling of dreamy detachment from the nightmarish reality around him and his delayed understanding of its meaning help convey the disorientation of the mind in front of senseless brutality: 'I had been standing as if I was some privileged witness, outside the events I was observing, with, I admit, some degree of interest.' (4) The numbness of his reasoning faculties suggests the refusal of rationality to acknowledge the outbreak of irrationality. Ng explains the nature of his shock as due not so much to the events, which his people have foreseen, but to a natural human penchant for hope, for denying menace: 'In fact, the invasion hardly took us by surprise. We'd been all expecting it. […] We'd been waiting for it, sure, but when it came it was still a shock.' (12) This uncanny detachment from the surrounding drama appears as a defence against absurdity. For him, reality splits into the familiar reality of his individuality, which he calls 'the objective, witnessing part of myself' (7), and the new, collective reality of the island irrupting before his eyes, which absorbs him out of 'a sense of himself' (4). His subconscious refusal to take in reality reads like an obsessive refrain: 'Again I had the sensation of being dissociated from what was going on around me. I did not want to be part of it. […] Again, I had the sensation of being an invulnerable witness inhabiting a third dimension. […] And once again the sense of unreality, of alienation from the actual, descended upon me.' (6-9)

The narrator takes care to orientate the reader in this confusing, abrupt entry into the history of the island. He drops analeptic hints about the remote and recent history of Danu, a former Portuguese colony, which has only recently declared its independence and recovered from the civil war between its agonistic political factions. We learn that the new nation-state is still far from stability, but is enjoying a period of nationalistic enthusiasm under the leadership of FAKOUM, a Marxist party whose socialist idealism blends with the authoritarianism of the quasi-military governing elite. At the same time, he offers proleptic glimpses of the country's fate after the invasion of the neighbouring '*malais*', who inhabit not only the surrounding archipelago, but also the other half of Danu, formerly an English colony. Thus, his account of the apocalyptic interruption of Danu's marching towards nationhood becomes a synoptic biography of the island, with the narrator assuming the role of a *sui generis* historiographer. Overly conscious of his mission as the chronicler of his people's historical trauma, he is a conscientious guide for his implied audience, which he construes as the whole wide world. As his purpose is to inform, explain and interpret the gravity of his

experience of history, he addresses his virtual reader with the naturalness with which you negotiate meaning with a real-life narratee. His directness of address, based on a dialogical discourse linking the narrating 'yours truly' to the 'you' for whom he narrates, confers the narrative a tone of convivial colloquy. Ng's half-confessional, half-documentary narrative unveils the truth about the events in East Timor and casts light on the hidden substratum of international politics in the region, involving the reader in a communal project of discovery.

In order to give his prologue the resonance of general human experience facing the exploding nightmare of history, the narrator makes it a point to remain anonymous. The only information he drops about his background is that he is Chinese, homosexual and a hotel owner in Danu. His identity is blurred in order to further our identification with the archetypal image of man confronted with violence, absurdity, incomprehension, impotence, horror, and reduced to one overriding concern – the instinct for self-preservation. Ng's opening account of his encounter with evil acquires the dimension of a timeless, placeless fable of human vulnerability in a fragile world-order still haunted by an ancestral atavism. The prologue is meant to present Ng as a mere Everyman faced with extremity. His predicament also marks a turning point in his quest for identity, within the new context of a world gone awry. The act of writing helps him to order and interpret the meaning of his experience, and its bearing on his sense of national, rather than ethnic affiliation.

In his overview of the island's history, Ng reflects on the short-lived, but bloody civil war that preceded the birth of the future nation state and its subsequent invasion. The episode offers a grasping analysis of the proneness to self-violence of fledgling nations. The birth of the nation, like any birth, is figured in images of pain and blood. Mo contends that the upheavals brought about by factionalism and pseudo-political conflict in decolonising countries boil down to traditional local rivalries and power struggles. The phenomenon, common to most emergent states in the Third World, is described in terms evoking the 'politics of hurt' in Naipaul's Caribbean or communalism in Rushdie's India. Ng diagnoses domestic strife as 'the politics of the grudge' (69). He explains it by the lack of the 'luxury' of democratic experience, ironically invoking the paradox that divisiveness grows in inverse proportion with the country's size.

His description of the civil wars of decolonisation as petty tribal feuds disguised as ideological struggles also indicts the politics of the vested interest implicit in fratricidal postcolonial politics. The virulence of Mo's satire focuses on the discursive hypocrisy of the 'politicos', whose patriotism boils down to the sheer seizure of power at whatever cost: 'It was all or nothing. There would be no elegant retirements in Danu. It was power or prison…That was the 'subjective' factor in the descent into Civil War. It was what put that vicious kink into that spiral.' (70) The ensuing Civil War, spelt with capitals, is paradoxically regarded as a necessary evil, an inevitable act of cleansing the festering wounds of a colonial society entering modern nationhood. But Ng reflects with bitter irony on the futile waste of 'Danuese murdering Danuese', rendered even more absurd by the anachronistic pettiness of its motives: 'it had nothing to do with any modern notion of ideological conflict; still less with the issue of Independence […] The IP – FAKOUM struggle was just a mask for the expression of feuds and grudges already old when Marx was in girl's clothes. Those ancient enmities burned long, and it took blood to extinguish them.' (77)

The anachronism of the island's convulsions is emphasised by a choice of vocabulary suggestive of a feudal society torn by 'feuds', 'grudges', 'ancient enmities'. The irony of the situation, which mocks the claims of both sides, is enhanced by the fact that independence has not even been fought for, but simply granted to them by the extinct imperial power. After the purging slaughter of the Civil War, FAKOUM launches on their intense, if short-lived, programme of socialist reforms, aimed 'to bring us into the new century' (86). The narrator believes that the soldierly-proletarian youth of FAKOUM, who engage zestfully in the historic project of nation-building, 'had idealism on their side as well' (67).

Without really engaging in the nationalistic and socialist project of his friends, the founders and leaders of the FAKOUM – the ruling political force of the newly independent Danu – Ng remains anchored to the mainstream of events as their loyal companion. Though ironically aware of their theatrical staging of the myth of nationhood and their socialist regime, where democracy rather bends to their autocratic military control, he cannot help acknowledging the political intelligence and inspirational dedication of these men (and women), their 'pedigree of valour' (66). Ng is seduced, as are the crowds at the public meetings, by these men's self-assurance and the heroic aura of their military record. He is fascinated by their commanding sense of mission and belief in their power to accomplish their historical assignment. In the portrayal of Osvaldo, Ng extols the assets which make him the epitome of the providential leader 'the charisma, the flair, the courage, especially the courage' (61). The leader's power, Ng reflects, lies in an overbearing self-awareness, uncorrupted by infatuation: 'his meticulousness, his inner strength, and his self-discipline set him literally and figuratively head and shoulders above his contemporaries. Like so many natural or born leaders, it was control over himself which allowed him to command others […] *he had a strong, a perfect sense of who he was*.' (60, 61)

However, as 'the rhetoric of nationhood [...] speaks often of the body' (Ho 94), the force of Danuese nationalism is symbolised by the commanding physicality of its body politic, taken both collectively and separately. Mo literalises the metaphor by the image of their imposing masculine bodies, united in a heroic brotherhood which stands for the national body. Evoking his first meeting with Osvaldo, Ng records features of his martial looking body: 'You could see he was in good shape from his sinewy body' (59). Ho observes that Mo's portrayal of the leaders as 'epical heroes' plays on the symbolic valences of body imagery: 'in their epical figuration, it is their powerful, muscular bodies which mark them out as heroes' (Ho 95). His martial destiny and the impending war are foreshadowed by his casual playing with a grenade during the Independence festivities, while his assembled countrymen, celebrating in one body, were intoning the national anthem in unison. 'Osvaldo's body motions are seamless, moving without hesitation in between the nation as collective performance and the nation as site of danger […]. Osvaldo is the heroic body of the nation conceived as epic.' (Ho 102).

The country's spell of independence is disrupted soon after its moment of apotheosis. Ng explains the nature of this large-scale political set-up, one of the grossest ideological manipulations of international opinion, which shadowed the last decades of the 20th century. Ng comments amply on the web of disinformation woven round Danu's plight: the *malais*' self-justificatory lies, the media's bias, the West's indifference, the Americans' anti-communist paranoia. Ng constantly refers to the blindfolded international forums, institutions

and media by an ironical metaphor, 'the eyes of the world', implying that their eyes are either unseeing or deliberately kept shut. The nation, killed in the bud, is twice undone by the world – both physically and spiritually, not only by aggression, but also by oblivion. After its brief moment of triumphant virility, the island's violated body is left to its fate. Ho remarks: 'The body stands up for itself and is then afflicted with and infestation of foreign bodies – the *malais*; the nation falls ill. It is invaded by a pathology, becomes diseased, endures pain, develops resistance; the island-nation is a body as a site contestation, threatened with death.' (Ho 95)

Ng's account of the atrocities committed against the island's civilian population verges on the surreal. He records with perplexity the eerie, indiscriminate unleashing of the *malais*'s reign of terror. The military leaders and troops are treated as metonyms of the whole race, collectively represented as the ultimate incarnation of evil. In Ng's embittered articulation of difference, their viciousness is generalised as innate to the collective *malai* soul: bloodthirstiness, lustfulness, megalomania, thievery, laziness, lying: 'That glee for blood, the joyous knowledge that all control was gone, that others had no claim and there was only the gibbering, dancing core of self with its lust to kill, all those things existed in a private part of the *malai* soul. […] The *malais* were great thieves. They were one of the corruptest nations in Asia.' (102, 103) As if to suggest their proclivity for terror and oppression, their appetite for destruction, the fictional name of the race is spelt with a small initial. The *malais*' atavistic instinct for violence is presented as incongruous with their emulation of modernity and technological sophistication: 'Rebus's men didn't go amok in loin-clothes and waving knives; they did it in uniforms, firing M-16s' (102). The figure of Major Rebus stands out as 'a ruthless, implacable killer […] a Draco' (102), a reality at odds with his credentials as a US educated military man. The diabolical mastermind of this hell, Rebus is presented as the kind of leader who does not need to repress the knowledge of his crimes as others might do, but likes to 'live with that knowledge' (102). Mo's portrayal of this bloody tyrant is ironically modelled on the Western stereotype of Oriental despotism. Forced to accommodate 'the Great Man himself', at his hotel, Ng feels 'it was like being at the court of some ancient despot', explaining that 'the *malai* military were the lineal descendants of the piratical rajahs and sultans in their island nests.' (103)

Ng's narrative acquires a double focus: the executioners' excesses and the victims' endurance of terror: 'The victims expected nothing but the worst, and the *malais* lived down to their expectations.' (107) The protagonist probes into the defensive mechanisms of the psyche confronted with the extreme, marvelling at the sublime, yet inherently tragic, human capacity for survival, at man's soothing potentiality for self-delusion and self-consolation: 'In the end normalcy resumed. It's not, in fact, normalcy. Not under our kind of circumstances. But the psyche can only take so much abnormality. It rebels in the end, fails to register, refuses to endure. In the unusual it discerns only the usual. It habituates itself to the grossest of existences. From an unplanned string of horrors it extracts a timetable of the banal.' (109-110)

For Ng, normalcy means returning to the sheltering certainty of his Chinese selfhood, no longer ennobled by the patriotic abnegation of his friends. With the leaders of FAKOUM either dead or putting up a resistance away from the occupied capital, his nascent sense of being part of the nation begins to dissipate. He is unexpectedly saved from the humiliation of

being of service to the invaders, being kidnapped and turned into a reluctant guerrilla soldier by the FAKINTIL guerrilla force commanded by Osvaldo, operating from Danu's wooded, mountainous hinterland. As Jonathan Friedland observes, 'Ng does not have to struggle with the role of discomfited quisling for long. He is conscripted by his rifle-wielding friends.' (Friedland 59) He is recruited for technical purposes, as a putative inheritor of the Chinese craft of explosive devices. To his own surprise, he will live up to the reputation of his ancestors. He becomes an artificer and master bombardier, an elite craftsman and planter of booby-traps. At first, Ng cannot see himself in the role of active combatant. He feels excluded, alienated and disappointed in his hope to find in his war-hardened comrades 'a bridge…of memory to a past of normalcy and safety' (142). But soon Ng is helped to discover his true vocation, as it were, and a new role as he 'becomes a reluctant, and then expert, jungle fighter' (Friedland 59). 'The Cynical Chinaman'(146), so convinced of the ultimate futility of all human endeavour, learns that in conditions of mortal danger nothing is futile any more. His narrative of resistance becomes 'an irresistible reminder of the struggle between nations as a conflict of bodies, a life-and-death struggle from which the abstract or the emblematic offers no escape.' (Ho 90).

Invoking his inborn practicality and instinct for survival, Ng self-deprecatingly describes his missions and actions as technical achievements rather than selfless heroism. He continues to pose as 'the useless Chinaman', claiming that cowardice and fear can easily pass for courage. From his mundane, cynical positioning as *l'homme moyen sensuel*, he cannot share Osvaldo's idealistic steadfastness and belief in martyrdom. When Osvaldo states his confidence in the victory of their cause, Ng does 'his best to look convinced' (146). However, he later discovers that the truth of these words has been branded in his mind, like a motto for his people's struggle: 'But nothing can stop the march of a people seeking their freedom. Nothing and no one.' (146) He seems more convinced by the other argument of Osvaldo's truth, namely 'that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.' (141) Ng reflects with bathos on his new public responsibility and dignity as a planter of crafted explosive devices as perfectly fitting a Chinese hotelier with a flair for intellectual games. He also relishes being the possessor of the occult knowledge and art of his racial heritage, which avenges his comrades' (and his own) initial contempt for 'a Chinaman who wasn't good with his hands […] the only stupid Chinaman I know' (158). Even now, the impulse of self-pride is qualified by his mockery of his parodic, inadequate body, set in contrast with the heroic body of the nation. However, through this newly discovered usefulness and endurance of his body, tested and steeled in the wilderness, he becomes organically attached to the resistant body of the nation.

Beyond the considerations of survival, there is also a spiritual side to this bond. Ng's growing sense of national affiliation is bound up not only with his increasing loyalty for, and identification with, his resistance contingent, but also with the unifying passion driving them all onwards – hate for the oppressor. His spite, as he calls it, binds him to his fellow Danuese in a different brotherhood of blood, 'bringing retribution home' (172). His identification with this resistant soul of the nation, with its communal passion and dream of freedom, is reflected in his new self-awareness as a healthy, functional cell of the nation's body, heart and mind. His assertion of his personal and national identity is rooted in a common ideal expressed through concrete action – I fight back, therefore I am: 'I liked the spite. Spite is for the weak,

and I knew myself to be weak. It was clever, and I was cleverer than the enemy. By far. In the most dramatic way it was a reminder to them of my existence.' (168)

The fast-moving rhythm of the narrative, which conveys the chaotic frenzy of guerrilla warfare, mixes the suspense of physical combat and the trivia of physiological survival with the flow of Ng's reflections on human psychology and behaviour. With keen psychological insight and philosophical depth, he analyses the inner resorts and demeanours of those around him, trying to capture the essence of their extraordinariness. His portraits of Osvaldo, Doctor Maria, X. Ray, the Corporal, Martinho, though not fully idealised, are informed by unmitigated admiration, even when he dissents from their ideas or is dissatisfied with their actions. He establishes an uncanny dichotomy, wherein all the others are presented as paragons of virtue and courage, in stark contrast with himself and his petty, mean, cowardly mind-set. Comparing the motivation of those who defect from the resistance with his own moral fibre, he reflects on how his decision to stick to Osvaldo, in reality dictated by cowardice, can pass, paradoxically, for courage. He describes them as 'worse than yours truly, who could be credited with possessing some intelligence even if he was a true coward: in fact, cowardice enhanced the workings of the brain.' (209) Again, the derogatory emphasis on his small-mindedness is only meant to enhance the superior moral stake of Osvaldo's sense of mission.

Ng is fascinated by the dynamics of human interaction, by how people relate and respond to the difference in others or to changing contexts and crises, or how they fit into the dichotomous paradigms of strength and weakness, heroism and cowardice, self-abnegation and selfishness, idealism and pragmatism, loyalty and betrayal. He does not envisage these categories as fixed, but fluid, accommodating the vagaries of the self as challenged by other, adverse personalities, values and circumstances. Though he is obsessed with capturing the essence of his others, he realises that such essence is not only elusive, but also liable to constant change and revision, since everyone seems to be 'undergoing a novel revaluation of the self' (237). His contention is that all human interaction is about imposing one's self-image and worldview on the others, while constantly negotiating the grounding of difference. Ng muses: 'Such is the mystery of another, the gap between their version of themselves, and the image we have of them.' (226)

The largest part of the narrative details the trials and tribulations of the ragged, famished guerrillas, in an account blending the picaresque adventure and war documentary, in a kind of military-political thriller. Ng recounts with gusto the frantic fighting of their guerrilla war, a total war mobilising women and children alike. This survival story of an intelligent, resourceful, single-minded bunch is reminiscent, as Friedland remarks, of 'a "Boy's Own" kind of life on the run', in which Osvaldo, the brilliant tactician, leads his merry band like a Maoist Robin Hood.' (Friedland 59) Martin Fletcher holds the same view: 'There is a *Boy's Own* relish in the description of attack and counter-attack. Ng, ever the cynical observer, reflects ruefully that it's all 'a kid's dream come true: elder-led delinquency.'' (Fletcher 36) The band is far from merry, however. Confronted with slow starvation and even the spectre of cannibalism, they are reduced to the primitive condition of 'nomads and foragers' (181), or to the ignoble position of looting the food stocks of poor villagers. Extinction becomes imminent as they are being hunted down by the *malai* planes dropping napalm. Ng ironically comments on the provenience of the planes: 'The planes were from the

Americans, by the way, and about as good a gift as ever was given.' (181) As the feeling of fighting a losing battle sets in, idealism begins to disintegrate and disagreements escalate to irreconcilable conflicts. Martinho, who lacks his brother's idealism and gift for martyrdom, accuses Osvaldo of having turned into 'the Robespierre of our Revolution [...], devouring its children', a fanatic who 'has lost all sense of accountability to us or to God.' (225) Martinho and his followers desert from the decimated, emaciated and starving army, while Osvaldo's resistance takes the erratic, absurd course of a desperado's racing to the death. Against all odds, Osvaldo defies the fragility of bodily existence with the force of his willpower, expecting that his soldiers will rise to the challenge. And many of them do. The physical degradation their bodies have to endure seems to steel their will to fight back.

By another ironic quirk of fate, Ng is taken from their midst, and thus spared the test of proving the measure of his courage or cowardice. He is captured, interrogated and then safely employed in the house of a *malai* officer. By virtue of his chameleonic disposition, Ng can be many things to many people, but never a hypocrite: 'I'm not proud', he says (318), but goes on to rationalise his restoration to a civilised existence. The futility of his struggle and privations is highlighted by the reality of the *malais*' hold over the island: 'The 'man of the world' had become, if not a rude caveman, then a sorry Rip Van Winkle figure. My physical hunger could be quite quickly assuaged, my mental starvation was a different matter.' (318)

Inevitably, what is left of Osvaldo's FAKINTIL is eventually captured. Ng is asked to identify each of his former comrades. He is confronted with the ultimate challenge, that of face-to-face betrayal. Caught in a life and death situation, which supersedes any notion of right or wrong, he identifies them one by one. In order to spare him further shame, Osvaldo greets him first, thus graciously acknowledging their previous acquaintance. It is the last but one selfless gesture of the heroic leader. Osvaldo's last act of resistance is to detonate a grenade and blow himself up, together with the *malais* next to him, including the demonic Rebus, thus denying his enemies the satisfaction of executing him. Ng comments on the symbolic significance of Osvaldo's gesture: 'Bound, starved, beaten, he was still the master of himself. That was his primary motive. But final though the action was, it was no abdication either. He thought of the future which no longer contained him but which he could still control […] That was his Osvaldo Oliveira and his greatness.' (389) Ng is awed not only by Osvaldo's exemplary claim to self-mastery and freedom to strike back and hurt his enemy, but, first and foremost, by his magnanimous care not to hurt his friend's honour and self-esteem. With his last breath, Osvaldo salvages Ng's sense of self-worth and belonging.

If all his friends die heroic deaths, for Ng there is no such honourable release. Therefore he asks his masters to grant him his freedom. He knows too well they cannot refuse him, as he saved their son from the hands of one of his fellow guerrillas. He is thus restored to his cherished old self, that of 'the man of the world'. Ng visits the Mother Country, as if he wanted to sanction his independence from it, then the United States. Eventually he takes refuge in Brazil, where, under an assumed identity, he finds a safe haven to start afresh.

While in New York, he takes a symbolic pilgrimage to the United Nations building, the iconic image of world peace and solidarity. His frustration at not seeing Danu's flag among those of the world's free nations is compensated for when he notices, with spiteful glee, the absence of the *malai* flag. He meets with Joaquim Lobato, FAKOUM's former foreign minister, who had the luck of being abroad on Invasion Day. Lobato, now a tireless,

and already tired, lobbyist for the Danuese cause, imparts to him the bitter truths of the invasion: 'They didn't want a new left-wing government sitting on the canal-bank' (404). Astounded by the petty motives underlying the great tragedy of his people, Ng confesses that this 'changed [his] understanding forever.' (404) In his rage, he even considers giving the world a piece of his mind – by means of an explosive piece of his craft.

In his attempt to make a fresh start, Ng renames himself after the old electricity generator at his hotel in Danu. Thus, the new-born Mr Kawasaki is only a palimpsest of his Danuese past. He discovers that he cannot overwrite the script of his Danuese identity. Ng's epiphany of identity lies in his realisation that his identity, like that of his island, can never really be suppressed or erased. He experiences a rare moment of grace when he realises that he can only imagine himself as a part of the larger self of the nation: 'That was neither an end, nor a beginning. If I thought I could unmake my old self so easily I was a fool. I could not terminate Adolph Ng so conveniently. I was trying to accomplish within my own small person what the *malais* hadn't been able to do to a nation. An identity and a history cannot be obliterated with a switch of a name or the stroke of a pen.' (406)

Ng drops his self-derisive, cynical tone. His new sense of self is articulated in earnest gravity, and his self-discovery coincides with a lifetime commitment. On revising the crude facts of Danu's predicament, his tone acquires the cathartic resonance of the chorus in an ancient tragedy: 'Before the invasion there were seven hundred thousand Danuese. Now there are less than half a million. If that isn't genocide I don't know what is.' (407)

Ng's piety before the martyrdom of his country mingles with the hope that history is not only about dead ends, but also about new beginnings, that no genocide can stifle a people's dream of freedom: 'you can't kill everyone. It isn't over [...] there's always someone else who will step forward. Even a tiny society like ours has the capacity to throw up any number of superior people.' (407). His narrative is a tribute to them, an attempt to bring them alive to the eyes of the world, to symbolically re-member his nation's dismembered body.

On the novel's last page, Ng offers his reader an exquisite definition of heroism, a glimpse of the human face of history and the potentialities of collective agency. In his view, what is usually called courage is merely people's capacity to sublimate their ordinariness as they face up to the extraordinary. This also explains the cryptic title, whose pessimistic suggestion is now given a more hopeful twist: 'There's no such thing as a hero – only ordinary people asked extraordinary things in terrible circumstances – and delivering.' (407) After this simple, yet sublime eulogy to human endurance and sacrifice, reminiscent of the awe-inspiring ending of a classic heroic epic, who can say that the tragic mode is lost on the postmodern novel, so sceptical of absolutes? For all the ironic, often bathetic perspective of its narrator, the story eventually yields the teller's ultimate disbelief in the redundancy of self-sacrifice. The mock-heroic inflexions give way to an earnest profession of creed whose humanistic appeal, as much political and diplomatic as artistic, illustrates the sense of mission informing the hybrid category of the postcolonial epic.

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