

The Spectre of
Comparisons

Nationalism, Southeast Asia,
and the World



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that a worker, who had been quoted in an international magazine as saying that on the hacienda horses ate better than the hands, had been "summoned" by management. He had had to retract the slander. But one of the interviewees concluded: "Of course it is true. The horses get Australian grain and eggs, while we hardly have the meat."¹⁰⁰ All those interviewed either refused to give their names, or asked not to be identified.

The First Filipino

Few countries give the observer a deeper feeling of historical vertigo than the Philippines. Seen from Asia, the armed uprising against Spanish rule of 1896, which triumphed temporarily with the establishment of an independent republic in 1898, makes it the visionary forerunner of all the other anticolonial movements in the region. Seen from Latin America, it is, with Cuba, the last of the Spanish imperial possessions to have thrown off the yoke, seventy-five years after the rest. Profoundly marked, after three and a half centuries of Spanish rule, by Counter-Reformation Catholicism, it was the only colony in the Empire where the Spanish language never became widely understood. But it was also the only colony in Asia to have had a university in the nineteenth century. In the 1890s barely 3 per cent of the population knew "Castilian," but it was Spanish-readers and -writers who managed to turn movements of resistance to colonial rule from hopeless peasant uprisings into a revolution. Today, thanks to American imperialism, and the Philippines' new self-identification as "Asian," almost no one other than a few scholars understands the language in which the revolutionary heroes communicated among themselves and with the outside world—to say nothing of the written archive of pre-twentieth-century Philippine history. A virtual lobotomy has been performed.

The central figure in the revolutionary generation was José Rizal, poet, novelist, ophthalmologist, historian, doctor, polemical essayist, moralist, and political dreamer. He was born in 1861 into a well-to-do family of mixed Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and Tagalog descent: five years after Freud, four years after Conrad, one year after Chekhov; the same year as Tagore, three years before Max Weber, five before Sun Yat-sen, eight before Gandhi, and

100. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, Jan. 23, 1988. The end of the final sentence is clearly garbled, and probably should read "anything to eat," or "any meat."

nine before Lenin. Thirty-five years later he was arrested on false charges of inciting Andrés Bonifacio's uprising of August 1896, and executed by a firing squad composed of native soldiers led by Spanish officers. The execution was carried out in what is now the beautiful Luneta Park, which fronts the shore line of Manila Bay. (On the other side of the Spanish world, José Martí, the hero of Cuban nationalism, had died in action the previous year.) At the time of Rizal's death, Lenin had just been sentenced to exile in Siberia. Sun Yat-sen had begun organizing for Chinese nationalism outside China, and Gandhi was conducting his early experiments in anticolonial resistance in South Africa.

Rizal had the best education then available in the colony, provided exclusively by the religious Orders, notably the Dominicans and Jesuits. It was an education that he later satirized mercilessly, but it gave him a command of Latin (and some Hebrew), a solid knowledge of classical antiquity, and an introduction to western philosophy and even to medical science. It is again vertiginous to compare what benighted Spain offered with what the enlightened, advanced imperial powers provided in the same Southeast Asian region: no real universities in French Indochina, the Dutch East Indies, or British Malaya and Singapore till after World War II. From very early on, Rizal exhibited remarkable literary abilities. At the age of nineteen he entered an open literary competition, and won first prize, defeating Spanish rivals writing in their native tongue.

He was growing up at a time when modern politics had begun to arrive in the colony. More than any other imperial power, nineteenth-century Spain was wracked by deep internal conflicts, not merely the endless Carlist wars over the succession, but also between secular liberalism and the old aristocratic-clerical order. The brief liberal triumph in the Glorious Revolution of 1868, which drove the licentious Isabella II from Madrid, had immediate repercussions for the remote Pacific colony. The revolutionaries promptly announced that the benefits of their victory would be extended to the colonies. The renewed ban on the Jesuits and the closure of monastic institutions seemed to promise the end of the reactionary power of the Orders overseas. In 1869, the first "liberal" Captain-General, Carlos María de la Torre, arrived in Manila, it is said to popular cries of "Viva la Libertad!" (How unimaginable is a scene of this kind in British India or French Algeria.) During his two-year rule, de la Torre enraged the old-guard colonial elite, not merely by instituting moves to give equal legal rights to natives, mestizos, and peninsulars, but also by going walkabout in Manila in everyday clothes and without armed guards. The collapse of the Glorious Revolution brought about a ferocious reaction in Manila, however, culminating in 1872 in the public garrotting of three secular (i.e. non-Order)

priests (one creole, two mestizo), framed for masterminding a brief mutiny in the arsenal of Cavite.

The Rizal family was an immediate victim of the reaction. In 1871, when José was ten years old, his mother was accused of poisoning a neighbour, forced to walk twenty miles to prison, and held there for over two years before being released. His elder brother Paciano, a favourite pupil of Father Burgos, the leader of the garrotted priests, narrowly escaped arrest and was forced to discontinue his education. Under these circumstances, in 1882, with his brother's support, José left quietly for the relative freedom of Spain to continue his medical studies.

He spent the next five years in Europe, studying on and off, but also travelling widely—to Bismarck's Germany and Gladstone's England, as well as Austro-Hungary, Italy, and France—and picking up French, German, and English with the ease of an obsessive and gifted polyglot. Europe affected him decisively, in two related ways. Most immediately, he came quickly to understand the backwardness of Spain itself, something which his liberal Spanish friends frequently bemoaned. This put him in a position generally not available to colonial Indians and Vietnamese, or, after the Americans arrived in Manila, to his younger countrymen: that of being able to ridicule the metropolis from the same high ground from which, for generations, the metropolis had ridiculed the natives. More profoundly, he encountered what he later described as "el demonio de las comparaciones," a memorable phrase that could be translated as "the spectre of comparisons." What he meant by this was a new, restless double-consciousness which made it impossible ever after to experience Berlin without at once thinking of Manila, or Manila without thinking of Berlin. Here indeed is the origin of nationalism, which lives by making comparisons.

It was this spectre that, after some frustrating years writing for *La Solidaridad*, the organ of the small group of committed "natives" fighting in the metropole for political reform, led him to write *Noli Me Tangere*, the first of the two great novels for which Rizal will always be remembered. He finished it in Berlin just before midnight on February 21, 1887—eight months after Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill was defeated, and eight years before *Almayer's Folly* was published. He was twenty-six.

The two most astonishing features of *Noli Me Tangere* are its scale and its style. Its characters come from every stratum of late colonial society, from the liberal-minded peninsular Captain-General down through the racial tiers of colonial society—creoles, mestizos, *chinos* ("pure" Chinese) to the illiterate *indio* masses. Its pages are crowded with Dominicans, shady lawyers, abused acolytes, corrupt policemen, Jesuits, small-town caciques, mestiza school-girls, ignorant peninsular carpetbaggers, hired thugs, despairing intellectuals, social-climbing *dévôtes*, dishonest journalists, actresses, nuns, gravediggers,

artisans, gamblers, peasants, market-women, and so on. (Rizal never fails to give even his most sinister villains their moments of tenderness and anguish.) Yet the geographical space of the novel is strictly confined to the immediate environs of the colonial capital, Manila. The Spain from which so many of the characters have at one time or another arrived is always off stage. This restriction made it clear to Rizal's first readers that "The Philippines" was a society in itself, even though those who lived in it had as yet no common name. That he was the first to imagine this social whole explains why he is remembered today as the First Filipino.

The novel's style is still more astonishing, for it combines two radically distinct and at first glance uncombinable genres: melodrama and satire. For all its picaresque digressions, the plot is pure opera. The novel opens with the wealthy, handsome, and naively idealistic mestizo, Don Crisóstomo Ibarra, returning from a long educational sojourn in Europe with plans to modernize his home town and his *patría*, and to marry his childhood sweetheart, Maria Clara, the beautiful mestiza daughter of the wealthy *indio* cacique, Don Santiago de los Santos. At first he is welcomed with respect and enthusiasm, but the clouds soon gather. He discovers that his father has died in prison, framed by the brutal Franciscan friar Padre Damaso, and that his body has been thrown into the sea. Later he will learn that Damaso is the real father of his bride-to-be. Meanwhile, the young parish priest Padre Salvi secretly lusts after Maria Clara, and has covered up the murder of one of his young acolytes. Gradually, Ibarra also learns of the sinister origins of his own line in a cruel, carpetbagging Basque, who, after ruining many local peasants, hanged himself. He makes friends with Don Tasio, the local freethinking *philosophe*, with liberal-minded local caciques, even with the Captain-General himself, as well as with the mysterious *indio* rebel Elias. (The dialogues between the two men on whether political reform is possible in the Philippines or a revolutionary upheaval inevitable continue to this day to be a part of Philippine progressive discourse and historiography.) Meanwhile, the friars and their various local allies scheme to abort Ibarra's marriage and his plans for establishing a modern school in his home town. Finally, Padre Salvi, learning of a planned rebel attack on his town, frames Ibarra as its instigator and financier. The young man is imprisoned in a wave of antisubversive arrests, torture, and executions, but escapes with Elias's help, and ends as an outlaw. Maria Clara, to avoid being forced into a loveless marriage with an insipid peninsular, chooses to become a nun, and compels her real father, whom she confronts with his adultery, to help her take her vows. She disappears into a convent where, however, Padre Salvi has managed to get himself appointed as spiritual adviser, so that "nameless horrors" lie in wait for the unfortunate girl.

So far, so Puccini, one might say. Yet this melodramatic plot is interspersed not only with brilliant sketches of colonial provincial society, but with the novelist's own unquenchable laughter at the expense of his own inventions—so that *Tosca* changes into Goya's *Caprichos*. Consider the famous opening of the novel:

Towards the end of October, Don Santiago de los Santos, popularly known as Capitán Tiago, was hosting a dinner which, in spite of its having been announced only that afternoon, against his wont, was already the theme of all conversation in Binondo, in the neighbouring districts, and even in Intramuros. Capitán Tiago was reputed to be a most generous man, and it was known that his home, like his country, never closed its door to anything, as long as it was not business, or any new or bold idea.

Like an electric jolt the news circulated around the world of social parasites: the pests or dregs which God in His infinite goodness created and so fondly [*carriñosamente*] breeds in Manila. Some went in search of shoe polish for their boots, others for buttons and cravats, but all were preoccupied with the manner in which to greet with familiarity the master of the house, and thus pretend that they were old friends, or to make excuses, if the need arose, for not having been able to come much earlier.

This dinner was being given in a house on Anloague Street, and since we can no longer recall its number, we will try to describe it in such a way as to make it still recognizable—that is, if earthquakes have not ruined it. We do not believe that its owner would have had it pulled down, this task being ordinarily taken care of by God, or Nature, with whom our government also has many projects under contract.¹

Or consider the opening of the novel's final chapter ("Epilogue"), which comes immediately after the story has reached its grim, gothic conclusion:

Many of our characters being still alive, and having lost sight of the others, a true epilogue is not possible. For the good of the public we would gladly kill [*matariamos con gusto*] all our personages starting with Padre Salvi and finishing with Doña Victorina, but that is not possible . . . let them live: the country, and not we, will in the end have to feed them.

This kind of authorial play with readers, characters, and reality—which reminds one of Machado de Assis's sardonic *Memorias póstumas de Bras Cubas* published five years earlier—is quite uncharacteristic of most serious nineteenth-century novels, and gives *Noli Me Tangere* a special appeal. It is what has always doomed nationalist attempts to put the book on stage or

1. *Noli Me Tangere* (Manila: Instituto Nacional de Historia, 1978). The translation is my own.

screen. It was surely this same laughter that earned Rizal the implacable enemies who brought him to his early death.

It is impossible to read *Noli Me Tangere* today in the way a patriotic young Manileño of 1897 would have read it: as a political hand-grenade. We all have the spectre of comparisons crouched on our shoulders. It was only the second novel ever written by a putative Filipino, the first being minor, experimental trash. So what about other great colonial novels by the colonized? There is nothing in the Americas, nothing in the rest of Southeast Asia, nothing in Africa till three-quarters of a century later. What about the comparison with metropolitan Spain? It has been said that Rizal borrowed heavily from Galdós, in particular from his 1876 anti-clerical novel *Doña Perfecta*. But Rizal's novel is so superior in scale and depth that this "borrowing" is very doubtful. In his voluminous correspondence Rizal never mentions Galdós—whose opinions on colonial questions were wholly *bien-pensant*. The one Spanish writer for whom he had a passionate admiration was not a novelist at all, but the brilliant satirical journalist José Mariano de la Larra, who had committed suicide in 1837, at the attractive age of twenty-eight.

And Tagore, Rizal's exact contemporary? Here one sees a profound contrast. Tagore was the inheritor of a vast and ancient Bengali literary tradition, and most of his novels were written in Bengali for the huge Bengali population of the Raj. The mother tongue of Rizal was Tagalog, a minority language spoken by perhaps two million people in the multilingual Philippine archipelago, with no tradition of prose writing, and readable by perhaps only a few thousand. He tells us why he wrote in Spanish, a language understood by only 3 per cent of his countrymen, when he invokes "tú, que me lees, amigo o enemigo"—"you who read me, friend or enemy." He wrote as much for the enemy as the friend, something that did not happen with the Raj until the work, a century later, of Salman Rushdie.

Rizal could not know it, but there were to be huge costs involved in choosing to write in Spanish. Five years after his martyrdom, a greedy and barbarous American imperialism destroyed the independent Republic of the Philippines, and reduced the inhabitants once again to the status of colonial subjects. American was introduced as the new language of truth and international status, and promoted through an expanding school system. By the eve of World War II, it had (narrowly) become the most widely understood language in the archipelago. Spanish gradually disappeared, so that by the time a quasi-independence was bestowed in 1946, it had become unreadable. Not merely the novels, essays, poetry, and political articles of Rizal himself, but the writings of the whole nation-imagining generation of the 1880s and 1990s had become inaccessible. Today, most of the work of the brilliant anticolonial propagandist Marcelo del Pilar, of the Revolution's architect Apolinario

Mabini, and of the Republic's tragically assassinated general of genius Antonio Luna remain sepulchred in Spanish.

Hence the eerie situation which obliges Filipinos to read the work of the most revered hero of the nation in translation—into local vernaculars, and into American. Hence also a politics of translation. Translations of *Noli Me Tangere* into most of the major languages of the Philippines were bound to fail, not merely because of the absurdity of the many Spanish characters "speaking" in Tagalog, Cebuano, or Ilocano, but because the *enemigo* readers automatically disappear, and the satirical descriptions of mestizos and *indios* speaking bad Spanish, and Spanish colonials slipping into bad Tagalog, become untranslatable. The most important American translation, done by the alcoholic anti-American diplomat Leon Maria Guerrero in the 1960s—still the prescribed text for high schools and universities—is no less fatally flawed by systematic bowdlerization in the name of official nationalism. Sex, anticlericalism, and any perceived relevance to the contemporary nation are all relentlessly excised, with the aim of turning Rizal into a boring, long-dead national saint.

Which brings us to the present translation, more or less timed for the centenary of Rizal's execution. A few years ago, Doreen Fernandez, one of the Philippines' most distinguished scholars, deeply disturbed by the corruption of Rizal's texts, went in search of a compatriot linguistically capable of making a reliable translation. She eventually found one in Soledad Lacson-Locsin, an elderly upper-class woman born early enough in this century for Rizal's Spanish—by no means the same as 1880s Madrid Spanish—to be second nature to her. The old lady completed new translations of both *Noli Me Tangere* and its even more savage 1891 sequel *El Filibusterismo* just before she died.

In most respects, it is a huge advance over previous translations, handsomely laid out and with enough footnotes to be helpful without being pettifogging. But the barbarous American influence is still there, to say nothing of the basic transformation of consciousness that created, for the first time, within a year or so of Rizal's execution, a national idea of "the" Filipino.

In Rizal's novels the Spanish words *filipina* and *filipino* still mean what they had traditionally meant—i.e. creoles, people of "pure" Spanish descent who were born in the Philippines. This stratum was, in accordance with traditional imperial practice, wedged in between *peninsulares* (Spain-born Spaniards) and mestizos, *chinos*, and *indios*. The novels breathe nationalism of the classical sort, but this nationalism has to do with love of *patria*, not with race: "Filipino" in the twentieth-century ethnoracial sense never appears. But by 1898, when Apolinario Mabini began to write—two years

after Rizal's execution—the old meaning had vanished. Hence the fundamental difficulty of the present translation is that *filipino/filipina* almost always appear in the anachronistic form of Filipino/Filipina: for example, “el bello sexo está representado por españolas peninsulares y filipinas” (“the fair sex being represented by peninsular and creole Spanish women”) is rendered absurdly as “the fair sex being represented by Spanish peninsular ladies and Filipinas.”

The other problem is a flattening of the political and linguistic complexity of the original, no doubt because Mrs. Lacson-Loecin was born just too late to have had an elite Spanish-era schooling. When Rizal had the racist Franciscan friar Padre Damaso say contemptuously, “cualquier bata de la escuela lo sabe,” he mockingly inserted the Tagalog *bata* in place of the Spanish *muchacho* to show how years in the colony had unconsciously creolized the friar's language. This effect disappears when Mrs. Lacson-Loecin translates the words as “any schoolchild knows that.” Rizal quotes three lines of the much loved nineteenth-century Tagalog poet Francisco Balagtas in the original, without translating it into Spanish, to create the necessary intercultural jarring, but quoting the poem in the same language as the text surrounding it erases the effect. The ironical chapter heading “Tasio el loco ó el filósofo” shrinks to “Tasio,” and one would not suspect that the chapter heading “A Good Day is Foretold by the Morning” was originally in Italian. The translator also has difficulties with Rizal's frequent, sardonic use of untranslated Latin.

There are a few prophets who are honoured in their own country, and José Rizal is among them. But the condition of this honour has for decades been his unavailability. Mrs. Lacson-Loecin has changed this by giving the great man back his sad and seditious laughter. And it is badly needed—if one thinks of all those “social parasites: the pests or dregs which God in His infinite goodness created and *tan cariñosamente* breeds in Manila.”

Hard to Imagine

In the difficult late 1950s, the domestic controllers of the Philippine state began preparations for an elaborate centennial celebration of the birth of Dr. José Rizal on June 19, 1861. Not only was Rizal the greatest national martyr—having been executed by the collapsing Spanish colonial regime in 1896—but he was also a highly gifted poet, historian, scientist, journalist, linguist, satirist, political activist, and, above all, novelist. It had long been generally agreed that his two novels, *Noli Me Tangere* (published in Berlin in 1887) and *El Filibusterismo* (published in Ghent in 1891), are the *chefs d'oeuvre* of Philippine literature, and had a central role in the “awakening” of Filipino nationalism. Unluckily, the “First Filipino” had composed these works in Spanish, the lingua franca and language of cultivation of the late Spanish-colonial period. Still more unfortunately, the American colonial regime of 1899–1942 had by the end wiped out—not wholly intentionally—the local use of Spanish except in a few rich mestizo and creole families, instilling in its place American. Thanks to the spread of public education under Washington's auspices, American ended up (slightly) more widely understood than any of the Philippines' indigenous vernaculars.¹ One result of these developments was that, by the 1950s, Rizal's two novels had become inaccessible in their original form. English translations did exist, but these had been composed, some even by foreigners, in the colonial era.² It therefore

1. According to the last colonial era census (1939), 26.5 per cent of the sixteen million population of the Philippines could speak English, 25.4 per cent Tagalog, and 2.6 per cent Spanish (Andrew B. Gonzales, *Language and Nationalism: The Philippine Experience So Far* [Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1980], p. 62).

2. The best and best-known of these are the versions of Charles E. Derbyshire and Jorge Bocobo.