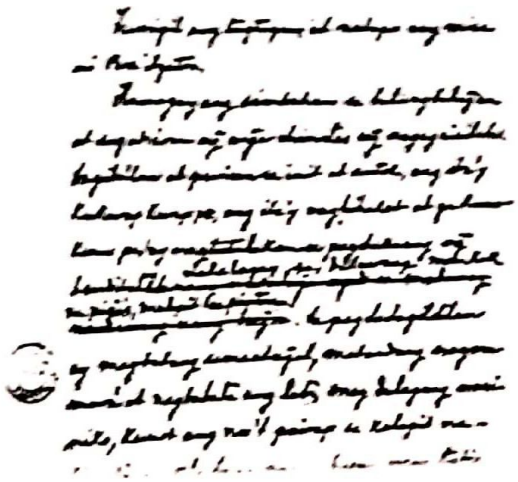
Jose Rizal and the Invention of a National Literature



Rizal's manuscript of Makamisa

IN 1880, Jose Rizal, then a nineteen-year-old student, won first prize in a literary contest in Manila. His winning piece, an allegorical essay entitled *El Consejo de los Dioses*, narrates a council of the gods in Mt. Olympus to determine who, among Homer, Virgil, and Cervantes, is the better writer in terms of art and virtue. Cervantes is judged the winner for the premium he places on social reform and the rule of reason. Speaking through Minerva, Rizal praises *Don Quixote* as "the magic hand that strongly guides human passions," "the whip which punishes and corrects without bloodshed." With Cervantes, Rizal says, "Truth came back to occupy its place, announcing a new era to the world, then corrupted."[1]

It is a young student's essay, earnest in its display of European learning, and even colonially "patriotic" in the preeminence assigned to a Spanish writer. Yet, it is slyly subversive as well. One imagines Rizal saying that the Philippines itself needed a Cervantes, when he praised the Spaniard for what he did in a society ruled by "the obscurity of intelligence,"

> .... affected by a kind of madness, made more dismal and frantic when stupid authors with feverish imaginations write about it; bad taste was propagated everywhere and time was uselessly spent in pernicious reading...

To attribute to Rizal this intention is not just a case of hindsight (he would become his country's Cervantes), but a matter of the moment as well. The year 1880, when Rizal wrote the essay, was also the year the Propaganda Movement was born. A movement that emerged with the "events of 1872" (the Cavite mutiny and execution of the priests Jose Burgos, Mariano Gomez, and Jacinto Zamora), the movement waned in the face of repression but waxed again after 1880 when, under Marcelo del Pilar, *La Propaganda* was launched.

Rizal, as we know, was not untouched by these events. In the 1880s, however, the propaganda movement was still largely "assimilationist" in its call for colonial reforms, equal rights, and local autonomy. Writing in Spanish, praising a Spanish classic, inserting himself into European discourse, Rizal claimed parity with Spaniards as heir to a great Western tradition. (The claim was rebuffed. The Spanish jurors in 1880 sought to hide the fact that the winning essay was written by an *indio*.) Even Rizal's call for "social correction" was not radically new since it was already a theme sounded in the *costumbrista* writings of peninsular and Creole authors in Manila at the time. While it can be said that, raised by an *indio*, Rizal's critique had a different critical edge, the literary space Rizal and like-minded Filipinos operated in, or sought to claim, was still Spanish-colonial, pre-national space.

This space was dominated by Spanish and Creole writers based in Manila — men like Jose Felipe del Pan, Francisco de Paula Entrala, and Antonio Vasquez de Aldana — a small, self-conscious intellectual elite that had the run of the secular press and were assured, by reasons of race, of their right to speak.[2] Their ambitions were Spanish. They imagined themselves Spain's enlightened voice in the colony and aspired to be recognized as such in the metropolis itself. But they also cultivated native "disciples" (*literatos* like Isabelo de los Reyes and Pascual Poblete) who shared their ideas of modernity but would eventually push these ideas in other political directions.

The space of literature is not fixed and immutable, but a site of incessant struggle, innovation, and challenges to authority.[3] Hence, histories of Philippine nationalism built on neatly segmented, dichotomous understandings of history — assimilationist/separatist, reformist/revolutionary, Rizal/Bonifacio — misrepresent a complex and dynamic continuum in which ideas can simultaneously exist and one position is already prefigured in another.

In 1880, Rizal stood at that point in time when the country's literary scene was qualitatively changing from "pre-national" to one that would, in the course of events, become distinctly "national" in its ambition. Here I would like to describe the series of intellectual moves that brought about this change and created the lineaments of a "national" literature.

IN inventing a national literature, the first move is that of asserting difference, done typically on the basis of a claim to a distinct culture, history, and identity.

To assert difference was to disengage from a dominant discourse that rendered one voiceless and invisible, carve out autonomous space, and lay claim to one's own resources for creative production. It involved claims

to a deep "native tradition" and a wealth of local linguistic and cultural resources. Asserting difference was a dominant theme of the Propaganda. It inspired the effort of Rizal and colleagues, like Pedro Paterno, T.H. Pardo de Tavera, and Isabelo de los Reyes, in embedding the Philippines in a "high" and "ancient" Malay civilization; in studying and extolling the virtues of local languages; and in harnessing the "popular" and the "folk" as resources for the creation of an integral culture.

Though schooled in the European manner, Rizal had a studious interest in local cultural productions, as shown in his references to folklore, the *pasyon* and *komedya*, and Francisco Balagtas. His familiarity with vernacular literature was evident in 1887, when he delivered in German a lecture on Tagalog metrical art before the Ethnographic Society of Berlin, and in 1890 when he defended the integrity of Tagalog theater against the attacks of the Spanish academician Vicente Barrantes.[4]

Rizal was the first to attempt to write a "national" history that would disengage the country from being treated as a mere appendage to Spain. Though what he produced, lacking the time, was a "shadow-history" in the form of a critical annotation of Antonio de Morga's *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* (1890), still it stands as the first attempt by a Filipino to rehearse a national history of the Philippines.

Rizal recognized the importance of local languages as a cultural resource. Even in his last years, he had plans to study Bisayan, Subanon, and Mangyan, publish a Tagalog grammar, and produce a "universal" dictionary of Philippine languages. He also considered writing a treatise on native aesthetics. In his reply to Barrantes in 1890, he said:

> We shall make a thorough study of matters like Tagalog art and Philippine literature when brighter days reign. Then we shall talk of purely native [*puramente indigeno*] dramatic presentations, which of them are the exotic ones [*exotica*] brought by the Spaniards; which, the product of the combination of both [*producto de esta mezcla*]; which the most outstanding of all, etc.[5]

The "brighter days" when he would write a treatise on Filipino aesthetics did not come for Rizal. Literary discussions were driven by pressing events, enmeshed in a wider polemic on racism and domination. In this polemic, literature was a site of contestation on the natives' capacities of reason, imagination, and creativity, a debate that raised important questions on the relationship of the "indigenous" and "foreign," and the native's "originality" and "assimilative power." In the highly charged polarities of the time, there was little space for a serene disquisition on aesthetic methods and principles, and many questions had to wait.

Rizal and the early nationalists were also caught up in a certain

ambivalence. On one hand, they were claiming, for Filipinos, a personality and visibility *within* the empire, as an autonomous province or region in an idealized federal republic — like Galicia or Catalonia in the peninsula or, overseas, Cuba and Puerto Rico. When they extolled their Malay heritage, the richness of local languages and literatures, it was to seek recognition as an equal, if distant, member of Greater Spain. On the other hand, they were resisting assimilation into Spanish-imperial literary space that would ignore or erase difference, by staking out the cultural autonomy of a nation that could, if events dictate, become a separate nation-state.

In either case, the assertion of difference would lay the ground for the emergence of a national literature.

RIZAL appreciated that a people's literature must be grounded in their own history and store of social, psychological, and linguistic resources. Yet, in a second and simultaneous move, he recognized as well that this literature can only grow through a vital conversation with the rest of the world.

For Rizal and his contemporaries, to "internationalize" was not an option but a necessity. Colonialism incorporates native subjects into a "world-system" and puts them in a position where they have to engage with an external power. They recognized, moreover, that in the work of nation-creation, they had to begin with the living reality of a culture already contaminated, *and* vitalized, by the intrusion of foreign elements. What, after all, can be said of a national literature that has for its first known authors a seventeenth-century printer who wrote a manual for learning the Spanish language and an eighteenth-century priest who penned a book of classical epigrams in Latin?[6] A literature that has for its vanguard authors — like Paterno, Pardo, and Rizal — who were more fluent in Spanish than in the local languages? It is fitting that Isabelo de los Reyes, in attempting to produce an archive of popular knowledge in the Philippines, would produce, in *El Folk-Lore Filipino* (1889), a work filled with Hispanic elements, hybrid and open-ended.[7]

Rizal positioned himself between the "inside" and the "outside." Discussing Tagalog poetry, Rizal took an insider stance in correcting Spanish misinterpretations, arguing that Tagalog poetry had its own rules of practice. Responding to Barrantes' attack on Tagalog theater, Rizal said that Barrantes "does not know a single thing about Filipino writing" and is ignorant of Asian theater traditions. Yet, Rizal was also driven by the need to make his country's literature comprehensible in the world. His orientation and methods were Western and literate when he discussed questions of syllabication, rhyme, meter and stanza in Tagalog poetry.

Rizal knew that a nation's literature is not just what it once was but what it has — and can — become. It must not only demonstrate that it has

a past but a future. Thus Rizal asserted that Tagalog literature is living and dynamic. In dismissing Barrantes' claim that Tagalogs lack the "assimilative spirit," Rizal pointed to the testimonies of Spaniards themselves about the natives' gift not just for imitation but creative assimilation. He was clearheaded about the fact that a nation's literary capital is built up not just by harnessing the local but by appropriating the foreign, diverting and absorbing its best elements in creating the nation's literature.

Hence, the passion with which Rizal and his contemporaries devoured foreign literatures and languages, and engaged in projects of annotation and translation. Rizal spoke of his desire to translate European classics into Tagalog, and found the time to translate Hans Christian Andersen and Friedrich Schiller. A polyglot (he knew twenty-two languages, it is said), he was familiar with writers from Cicero and Dante to Hugo, Byron, and Heine. Even from his exile in remote Dapitan, we find him writing to a friend in Europe asking for books by Russian authors.

Yet, for all this, Rizal had a very strong sense of location, of where he was in the world, where he was speaking from, and what knowledge was to be harnessed for. Of colonialism, he had written: "The existence of a foreign body in another endowed with strength and activity is against all natural and moral laws. Science teaches us that either it is assimilated, it destroys the organism, it is eliminated, or it is encysted."[8] This could well be Rizal speaking on the question of foreign literary influences. Rizal traveled widely, learning all he could, but the horizon towards which he moved was always that of his country.

FINALLY, Rizal recognized that a country's literary capital is not just a collection of texts but a living discourse. Literature — to borrow the words of Octavio Paz — "is not so much the sum of individual works as the system of relations between them." It is "a field of affinities and oppositions," "intellectual space" where, through the medium of criticism, works meet and enter into active dialogue with each other.[9] Hence — in the third move in creating a national literature — Rizal argued that a broad and vital conversation *within* the nation must be enabled through an infrastructure of publishing, literary societies and academies, and an active community of writers, critics, and readers.

Rizal knew that a national literature is not created by a single author but by a strategic discursive community. In this sense, he spoke frequently of the need to widen literacy and public education. It was this sense of a collective undertaking that drove Rizal to propose in 1883 an anthology of essays to be contributed by members of the Circulo Hispano-Filipino in Spain, and to lay the groundwork in 1889 for launching an *Association Internationale des Philippinestes* in Paris. While both projects did not materialize, it is clear

what Rizal was about. He was interested in making visible a community of *Filipino* writers and intellectuals. It was in this context that he repeatedly urged Filipinos in Europe not only "to buy, read, but critically, the books about the Philippines" but to "buy books by Filipinos; mention now and then names of Filipinos like [Pedro] Pelaez, [Vicente] Garcia, [Jose] Burgos, Graciano [Lopez Jaena], etc.; quote their phrases."[10]

He recognized that writing is an exercise in authority, and in the contest over authority Filipinos must not only be active participants, they must — particularly in matters pertaining to their country — exercise command.

Rizal exercised command when he wrote *Noli me Tangere* (1887) and *El Filibusterismo* (1891). Always the deliberative writer, Rizal had suggested that his annotations of Morga traced the lineaments of the country's past, the *Noli* dealt with its present, and the *Fili* pointed to its future. The first attempt to "textualize" the imaginary body of the nation, these novels have rightly been called the foundational fictions of the Filipino nation.[11]

RIZAL did not close the circle. He left (as perhaps all writers do) a lot of unfinished business. Here it is instructive to dwell on the enigma of his third, unfinished novel. (Now referred to as *Makamisa*, it was written in 1891–1892, after the appearance of the *Fili*.)[12]

What moved Rizal to write a third novel? The first reason, he said, was to write a novel in Tagalog, addressing Tagalog readers rather than Europeans. At the time, Rizal was on his way back to the Philippines, and the propaganda movement itself was beginning to shift, away from addressing the Empire (and Europe) towards speaking to Filipinos themselves. At the time Rizal embarked on his third novel, he was in fact assisting his brother Paciano in translating the *Noli* to Tagalog.

Of his third novel, he wrote: "If I write it in Spanish, then the poor Tagalogs to whom the work is dedicated, will not get to know it, though they may be the ones who need it most."[13] As it turned out, Rizal began his third novel in Tagalog but then shifted to Spanish. In a letter to Blumentritt from Hong Kong on 20 April 1891, he said:

> ... I have already given up the idea of writing the third part in Tagalog for it would not be appropriate to write a work in two languages as they would be like the sermons of the friars. So I am writing it now in Spanish.[14]

Rizal's language shift is not as simple as it seems. To begin with, even in the *Noli* and the *Fili*, Rizal was addressing — in the form of "double address" — Filipinos as much as Europeans, and subsequently the medium of translation would enable his novels' circulation across languages. Yet, he

recognized not only that the political moment called for a more direct form of address to his people, he appreciated that a national literature cannot exist that does not speak to the people in their own language.

In choosing to write in Tagalog, Rizal could not quite reconcile the difficulties of "internal translation," of rendering European thoughts in Tagalog ("like the sermons of the friars").[15] Judging his skills, not wishing to write in Tagalog as the friars did, he shifted to Spanish — perhaps with the intention of retranslating in Tagalog — and then abandoned the novel.

It is beguiling (and not entirely facetious to say) that what survives of Rizal's last novel is not in Tagalog or Spanish, but a bilingual and hybrid text. Indeed, the problem of language would persist, long after Rizal, as one of the central issues in the formation of the national literature.

His second motive, Rizal said, was to write "a novel in the modern (*modernen*) sense of the word — an artistic and literary novel." "This time," he said, "I want to sacrifice politics and everything for art."[16] It is not clear what Rizal means by these words. I surmise that he was reacting, perhaps too peevishly (Rizal did not take kindly to criticism) to attacks against his novels' polemical excess and stylistic imperfections. Smarting from the criticism, he resolved to write a novel more "artistic and literary," distanced from the polemical imperatives that drove the writing of the *Noli* and the *Fili*.

The comments on these novels by Barrantes, Rizal, and Antonio Luna are interesting for the attention paid to whether the novels succeeded as *novels*, or (more precisely) novels in the *European* manner.[17] Thus, Rizal faults Barrantes for errors of misreading, in confusing the views expressed by characters in the novel with those of the author. For his part, Luna defended Rizal's work by situating it in the context of the European novel's evolution from classicism to romanticism to realism. Putting Rizal in the company of Hugo, Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, and Maupassant, Luna praised Rizal's "extraordinary realism" in capturing the dynamics of a society's development. Rizal, he said, is "a modern novelist who sacrificed incomprehensible beauty [of the Romantics] to plain truth [of the Realists]" in depicting a "corrupt, weak society."

It may be said that in defending the novels on literary grounds, Rizal and Luna were saying (in the "internationalizing" mode of the Propaganda) that Filipinos can write novels as well as Europeans can. They were aware as well that the novel's "truth" depends on how well it succeeds as a novel in formal terms. In any case, as Rizal sought to write for Tagalogs in their own language, he was acutely conscious — in a case of "double vision" — of how he had to contend with the demands of a foreign form as well as expectations that transcended the purely local. He knew that his novel, whatever language he chose to write it in, would be judged in the end in comparison with novels written elsewhere in the world.

Rizal's third motive was to write a novel that would deal "exclusively with the usages, virtues, and defects of the Tagalogs." He wrote:

> ... this time politics (*politik*) will not occupy much space in it. Ethics (*ethik*) will play the principal role. It will deal only with the usages and customs of the Filipinos; there will be only two Spaniards — the curate and the lieutenant of the civil guard.[18]

As Rizal had turned to writing for Tagalogs in their own language, Rizal (again one surmises) meant to write of Tagalog society in its own terms, integral and autonomous, rather than a reflex of the colonial encounter. (Was this what Rizal had in mind when he spoke of "ethics" and said to Blumentritt, "I am sorry I cannot write it in Spanish, for I have found a very beautiful theme."?[19])

As it turned out, Rizal was stymied not only by the problem of language but the challenge of representing something that did not quite exist in a form amenable for treatment as a realist novel instead of, say, a romance, pastoral, or myth. How does one represent in the "classic," distinctly bourgeois form of a nineteenth-century European novel a nation as yet inchoate, in the throes of being born? Thus, Rizal came face to face with the impossibility of writing a novel outside of the present and outside of history.[20] Writing *Makamisa*, he did not only struggle with Tagalog but gravitated (as the extant fragment of *Makamisa* shows) towards composing what seems a reprise of the *Noli*.

When Rizal abandoned his third novel, he may have thought that it was a novel to be written in another time and perhaps by writers other than himself. He had a good sense of how literature — its writing, its reading — is intimately implicated in history. He said as much when he peevishly declared that the *Noli* "cannot be judged, because its effects still persist." Only when crime, immorality, and prejudice disappear, he said, "when Spain ends the condition of strife by means of open-hearted and liberal reforms; finally, when all of us have died and with us our pride, our vanity, and our petty passions, then Spaniards and Filipinos will be able to judge it with calmness and impartiality, without bias or rancor."[21]

Though aborted, Rizal's "turn to the native" is not vain, if taken as a sign of the desire for a literature more deeply anchored in the realities of home. It reminds us as well, over a century later, that, in representing the nation, language, artistry, and form are problems that continue to challenge Filipino writers. At a time when Rizal's *Noli* and *Fili* have been "monumentalized," it is one of history's fine serendipities that, in the end, Rizal left us a novel that is unfinished — which is what the national literature must always be.

WHERE are we now?

The literature that Rizal and his contemporaries tried to bring about was vigorously promoted in the work of state-building that began with the establishment of the Malolos Republic and continued under the new conditions created by U.S. colonial rule.

In the early twentieth-century, there was wide interest in the issue of national identity ("the Filipino Soul"), and in creating the conditions for a national literature to flourish. Hence, the surge of literary and journalistic publishing, the promotion of local languages and drive for a "national language," the proliferation of literary societies, the dissemination of native culture in the schools, the writing of national literary histories, the codification of local poetic practices, and the canonization of exemplary writers (such as Rizal himself).[22]

Such promotion has succeeded in turning an artificial construction into an object of shared learning and belief. While acknowledging the utility of such a construct, we must continually interrogate its formation — the processes of selection, essentialization, subordination and exclusion in its making, the role of the state and cultural "authorities" in its definition and deployment, and the shallow pieties it has encouraged.

Nation-formation is a continuing process, and such a construct as the national literature must remain unstable and unsettled, for it is when it is so that it is most open and creative. I do not think we have unsettled it enough.

The issues Rizal faced at the close of the nineteenth century continue to challenge Filipino writers at the beginning of the twenty-first. To assert difference: difference not merely for the sake of being different, but difference that meaningfully revises and renews not only how we see ourselves but how others see us and themselves. To reconcile "internationalizing" and "nationalizing" positions: recognizing, on one hand, the danger of being absorbed and lost in the discourse of dominant others; on the other hand, the danger of being trapped in a conversation that does not open out into the world; in either case, the prospect of being barely visible in the world. To widen the social and material space that allows us to do our work and be read and heard.

And, yes, to write, write, write.