**OUR TASK: TO MAKE RIZAL OBSOLETE**

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The validity of Rizal's teachings today, sixty-three years after his death, is both a measure of his greatness and of our lack of greatness as a nation. The importance of Rizal's ideas for our generation has a two-fold basis -first, their applicability to present-day problems, and second, their inspirational value.

Rizal holds a mirror to our faces and we see ourselves, our vices, our defects, our meanness. Because the conditions he describes are the very conditions we see around us, and the characters he portrays are people we continue to meet, we readily respond to his earnest desire for basic changes in our society and in ourselves. One hand holds a mirror to shame us and the other points the way to our regeneration. Yet, the truth is that the mirror is not meant to reveal our image, but the image of the people and the society of Rizal's time. The fact that Rizal's aim was to depict the society in which he lived, and the fact that we nevertheless find that he is also speaking about the society in which we live, have given rise to two school of thoughts about Rizal.

# Two Extremes

One group reasons out that because Rizal is still applicable today, he must have possessed uncanny powers of prophecy. Furthermore, because he is still valid today, Rizal will be valid for all time. In their sincere reverence for our national hero, they have transformed him into a demigod whose teachings will constitute the final word**,** the definitive Bible, on any and all aspects of Filipino life now and in the future.

The other group pays lip service to Rizal's memory, professes to love our hero by conceding his greatness, but in reality emasculates his teachings by emphasizing only what it considers the harmless and non-controversial aspects of his life and works. Some in this group claim that the conditions Rizal wrote about no longer exist today. Others even go so far as to say that Rizal's characters in his two novels were pure fiction, without basis in fact.

# A. "Devitalized" Rizal

Both groups distort the meaning of Rizal for our people, those who want to strain out of the real Rizal all that is vital and forceful, leaving a sterile, almost meaningless hero, are those who find the truths he spoke, unpalatable and dangerous even now. A "devitalized" Rizal is what they would offer our people as a concession to the abiding love which Filipinos feel for their national hero. Perhaps, if they had their way, some would prefer a "safer" hero. In fact, there have been attempts to foist upon our people another national hero by means of propaganda and awards carrying his name.

Such moves will not succeed because, to merit the hero worship of present and future generations, a man must stand on solid achievements and not on a hollow reputation built up by high-pressure salesmanship. History will be the ultimate judge of whether a leader will emerge as a hero or prove to be a mere passing fancy. History enshrines the true heroes and mercilessly exposes the fakes.

Some true lovers of Rizal are also guilty of distorting his meaning for us. When they extol Rizal's prophetic vision and proclaim that his teachings will forever be valid, they fail to view society as a dynamic system. Without perhaps being conscious of it, they really proceed on the assumption that the Filipinos as a people will forever remain backward, poor, ignorant and corrupt. Their static concept of Rizal is a denial of the dynamic implications of his life, his works, and his death.

Rizal was a product of his times, but unlike lesser mortals, he could stand apart from his society and describe it clearly and dispassionately. Thus he is the best commentator of Philippine society during the latter part of the 19th century. That the comments he made on that period are applicable to ours shows that Philippine society has changed very little from his time**.** Rizal's works exposed the defects of Philippine society during that period. He might as well have been writing about our time, for all around us we see the same backwardness, the same preponderance of intolerance, the same prevalence of ignorance, the same display of opportunism and corruption, the same lack of nationalist sentiment, and the same disunity when we should be working together in pursuit of common national goals. Rizal never intended that his works should mirror the ills of the Philippines a century hence; but if they do, it is because, as a people, we have progressed little and learned less from our colonial past.

# B. Mirror of the Past

Rizal would be horrified and greatly saddened to learn that we are celebrating his centennial precisely by extolling his validity for our times. His zeal as a social reformer, his dedicated efforts to improve his countrymen, all his patriotic labors were directed toward one goal - reforms. If we revere Rizal, if we wish to honor him, if we want to follow in his footsteps, our task is clear. That task is to make Rizal obsolete. To do this, we must eradicate the ills of present- day society so that Rizal's teachings will become what they were meant to be, a mirror of the past; and the future Philippine society, a realization of Rizal's dream.

Rizal would then be obsolete as a critic of the present although he will forever remain the courageous and wise commentator of the past whose life and works guided his peole to worthy achievements. In that bright Philippines of the future, Rizal will still be a great hero because he spurred us to reform ourselves and achieve greatness as a people and not because, as some of his more fanatical adherents wrongly believe, he is the fountain of all wisdom for all situations.

# Tulisanes in Cadillacs

Why is Rizal our national hero? A hero is he who best understands the society in which he lives, who knows the problems and aspirations of his people, who by his teachings and his labors, concretizes these problems and aspirations so that the vague discontent and the hazy strivings towards something better in the people's minds are crystallized into a clear pattern of action with definite goals. Rizal is still very much our hero because he crystallized for his generation as well as for ours most of the great problems of Philippine society.

In page after page of his *Noli Me Tangere* and his *El Filibusterismo* we read indictments of our present society. In chapter XI of *El Filibusterismo*, Simoun, addressing the friars and the military and civil functionaries, said, "The evil is not in that there are *tulisanes* in the mountains and uninhabited parts --the evil lies in the tulisanes in the towns and cities." when we consider the widespread corruption in our society today, we can agree with Simoun's verdict. For after all, what is a tulisan, essentially? He is a man who disregards and is contemptuous of the law, and who, by fair means or foul, is bent on getting for himself whatever he desires regardless of the consequences to society of his his anti-social actions.

Today, those who profit from the people's money, those who make of government a milking cow, those who derive income by dishonest means, the civil functionaries who merely watch the clock, the teachers who neglect their duties, the officers of the law who mulct and extort, the hoardersm the profiteers -these are all tulisanes of the towns and cities.

The evil which Rizal pointed out is compounded in our society because, corrupt as we are, we do not outlaw these tulisanes, we do not ostracize them. Instead, we admire them as practical men who know how to live. We fawn upon them because they are not Don Quixotes, idealists or visionaries but ruthless men whose doctrine is "the Devil takes the hindmost," and we respect men once they have achieved material success, no matter what the means. Truly, the tulisanes are not only in the mountains. They are among us, riding around in Cadillacs.

# The Pelaezes of the Present

The techniques of enrichment exposed by Rizal during his day find their counterparts in present- day society. The incident involving the shrewd Don Timoteo Pelaez in El Filibusterismo no doubt will seem familiar to many of our "Dons" and "Honorables." Don Pelaez was able to bribe the authorities into proclaiming a decree which ordered the destruction of houses of light materials. How did this favor the good Don Timoteo? Simple, he had just received a shipment of galvanized iron. A hitch developed however. The order for the destruction of the houses was to take effect a month later. This worried Don Timoteo because his competitors' shipment might arrive on time. Then it was discovered that the owners of the houses, inconsiderate wretches, were too poor to buy the galvanized sheets. But no matter, Don Timoteo's business friends shrewdly suggested that he buy the houses at a ridiculously low price, have the decree rescinded, and then resell them at an enormous profit. Whether Don Timoteo followed this excellent advice or not, Rizal does not say; but the mere fact that the suggestion was made, and made so matter- of-factly, is proof that these devious business practices were the rule rather than the exception. No one can say we have run out of Don Timoteos in our time.

# One-Armed Bandits

Rizal's generation had its own quota of "fixers" and influence peddlers. In Chapter XLIX of the *Noli Me Tangere*, Rizal introduces us to the one-armed man, who upon hearing that the wife of Capitan Tinong had presented the Capitan General with a ring worth P1,000 because of Tinong's fear that he might be implicated in the case of Ibarra, hurriedly left the gathering in order to put his vicious plans into operation. Soon after we find Capitan Tinong taken to Fort Santiago together with other men of position and property.

Rizal hints that the one-armed man was engaged in the nefarious trade of first scheming to imprison men of means and position and later working for their release for a certain price. The government employee who purposely enmeshes the citizen in red tape so that he may "facilitate" or 'expedite" matters for a consideration, is perhaps only a pickpocket edition of the one-armed man but his crime is of the same nature.

Rizal of course did not foresee the existence of influence peddling and fixing as a thriving profession today. (So thriving that I am surprised these ladies and gentlemen have not yet formed an Association of Fixers of the Philippines.) But the fact remains that one more evil in Rizal's Philippine society is still with us.

# Borrowed Defects

One of the tragedies of our country today is that, though formally independent, our people can understand each other (though imperfectly at that) only by means of a language not their own. This is the result of centuries of colonial rule, and we are all victims. Rizal considered our need for a foreign language as our general medium of communication, both ridiculous and pathetic. he warned strongly about the dangers of a foreign language taking the place of our own. In chapter VII of *El Filibusterismo*, Simoun in replying to the arguments of Basilio, who like other students was working for the adoption of Spanish as a common language, admonished the young man thus:

*....Spanish will never be the general language of the country, the people will never talk it, because the conceptions of their brains and the feeling of their hearts can not be expressed in the language --each people has its own tongue, as it has its own way of thinking. What are you going to do with Castilian, the few of you who will speak it? Kill off your originality, subordinate your thoughts to other brains, and instead of freeing yourself, make yourselves slaves indeed! he*

*among you who talks that language understands it, and how many have I not seen who pretended not to know a single word of it! ...One and all you forget that while a people preserves its language, it preserves the marks of its liberty, as a man preserves his independence while he holds to his own way of thinking. Language is the thought of the people.*

Our language problem is still unresolved. The Basilios and Isaganis whose mission was to propagate the foreign language in order that Filipinos might out-Castilian the Spaniard still with us, this time pretending that their tongues trip over the long Tagalog words and are at home only in English.

# Without Defenses

When Rizal gave utterance to his views on the national language, he was not speaking as a chauvinist or a sentimentalist. Being himself a linguist, he could not have been against our learning of other languages, but only after we had fully mastered our own. It is good to understand and be understood by other peoples but it is essential that we understand each other first. Some may think that this insistence on the use of our native tongue is merely sentimental and therefore an impractical notion.

We need only consider a few of the many evil consequences of our acceptance of a foreign language as our common medium of communication to realize that Simoun's angry reply to the students was true then and is even more true today. Many have condemned our thorough Americanization but only a few realize the large part which our adoption of English has played in this development which we deplore.

By using a foreign language as our basic means of communication, we lay ourselves open, without any defenses, to the incursions of a foreign culture. Where the language barrier have served to temper the flow of this cultural invasion, affording us the opportunity of intelligent, deliberate, and selective assimilation, the irresistible influx of foreign culture for which our use of the foreign language has opened the way, has swept aside our native traditions, manners and values.

We are an uprooted race with very tenuous connections to our past, and consequently we have lost much of our national pride. We have adopted foreign standards and values which are perhaps appropriate for a country with a highly developed economy but certainly not for a struggling one like ours. We assiduously try to be Occidental in thinking and manners and this has distorted our policies especially toward our Asian neighbors. Needles to say, our fellow Asians do not have a high regard for us.

Furthermore, because our command of this foreign language is inadequate, we imbibe only the most banal aspects of its culture. Its cultural achievements are beyond our comprehension. Instead of processing the best of both cultures as defenders of English like to claim, the majority of our people are acquainted only with the less edifying aspects of the foreign culture and have stifled the development of their native culture or influenced its meager development in a deplorable imitation of the foreign.

Our native literature has not developed because we prefer foreign dime novels and comics. Our native theater was smothered in its infancy by our preference for American movies. On the other hand, the poor showing of Philippine films in competition with other Asian films may perhaps be traced to our loss of national individuality so that our films are only Tagalog versions of American movies, without distinct national flavor. Our native music has not had the chance to flower, because we are enamored with rock and roll. Truly, we have bartered our heritage for a mess of pottage and we are choking on it.

# Our Intellectual Captivity

The predicament of our student population whose scholastic life is one of continuous struggle with the English language is one more case that bears out Rizal's thesis. Those who are honest among us will have to admit that our inadequate grasp of the nuances of the language is the greatest obstacle to our acquisition of knowledge.

The hordes of semi-literate professionals that our educational system produces, year in and year out, are eloquent proof of the need for a change in our medium of instruction. Rizal was against the adoption of Spanish as the common language of our people. In the words of Simoun, which I quoted previously, Rizal clearly states his belief that the use of a foreign tongue as our common language would result in our intellectual captivity. We have not heeded his warning. Instead our patriotic lawmakers have even imposed 24 units of Spanish on our already bewildered student population.

The social problems of Rizal's times are still our problems. It is not surprising that the people of Rizal's novels still live in our midst. Rizal drew them from real life; they are as real today. The Dona Victorinas who belittle the Filipinos and pretend to be Occidentals, the Capitan Tiagos who fawn upon and cringe before the powers that be, wining and dining them, and suffering their contempt so long as their businesses continue to prosper, never giving the plight of their fellowmen a moment's thought, the Senor Pastas who persist in a life of compromise and conformism --these are only a few of Rizal's gallery of characters who still inhabit the world our hero left so many years ago.

# Foreigners' Paradise

We exhibit the same attitude toward Westerners which Rizal sought to expose in his works. In our country today, the foreigner out to make his fortune has the best chance of success. Many doors of opportunity are open to him. Because we have gotten used to regarding the white man as our superior, we have accorded him more privileges than he would enjoy elsewhere.

Rizal must have seen many instances of this same attitude during his time, for many inhibits in his novels are good examples of this defect in our character. There was the case of the Spanish tax collector who was accidentally killed by Don Rafael Ibarra. Here was an illiterate Spaniard who was given a fairly responsible job for which he has not the slightest qualification simply because he was a Spaniard and must therefore not demean himself with manual labor. Then there was the case of Don Tiburcio de Espanada who was accepted as a physician and charged high fees only because he had come from Spain, where, incidentally, the sum total of his medical experience had consisted in dusting off the benches and lighting the fires in a hospital. However as in the case today, too, this lame, toothless but white man was considered a better marital catch than any better educated native.

Many of the important foreigners in our society today are prototypes of Don Custodio de Salazar y Sanchez de Monteredondo, a character of Rizal's's El Fibusterismo who was considered learned and influential in this country, but who was a small and insignificant person in his native land.The Custodios of today wield great power in the economic, social and political life of our country, but like Rizal's Don Custodio, it is doubtful if these personages, had they remained in their homelands, could command a second look in the side streets of their neighborhood.

# Broken People

In the current move of the nationalist elements to instil the Filipino First ideal among our people, Rizal's words on the subject are most applicable. those elements in our country who are still resisting the resurgence of nationalism should read Rizal's *The Philippines A Century Hence* and The Indolence of the Filipinos for in these essays he tried to show that centuries of systemic brutalization had transformed the proud, free Filipinos into a servile slave without individuality and pride. Rizal describes our degeneration in these words:

*...They gradually lost their ancient traditions, their recollections; --they forgot their writings, their songs, their poetry, their laws in order to learn by heart other doctrines, which they did not understand, other ethics, other tastes, different from those inspired in their race by their climate and their way of thinking. Then there was a falling off, they were lowered in their own eyes, they became ashamed, of what was distinctly their own, in order to admire and praise what was foreign and incomprehensible, their spirit was broken and they acquiesced.*

Rizal did not want us to acquiesce. He sought to instill in his countrymen a sense of pride in their past so that, proud of what had been, they would want to make the present and the future worthy of the past. When we try to re-establish our roots, when we try to rediscover our culture today, we are accomplishing what Rizal wanted his contemporaries to accomplish.

In *The Indolence of the Filipinos*, Rizal rebuked his countrymen for their lack of nationalist sentiment by stating that "A man in the Philippines is only an individual. he is not a member of a nation." Many Filipinos today, like the Filipinos Rizal was referring to, are working merely for their own interests, hardly taking into consideration the common good. Little men preoccupied with the pursuit of their petty personal goals, their apathy towards national questions spring from their circumscribed perspective and from their fear of arousing the powers that be.

Like the people of Cabesang Tales' town, many of our compatriots would rather be on the safe side, protecting their own interests, even though this would mean acquiescing to some injustice perpetrated on their fellowmen. Conditioned to submission, resigned to foreign domination, their timidity, their vacillation dissipates the efforts of their more resolute countrymen to regain for all Filipinos the control of our national life.

# Basilios in Our Midst

Rizal's Basilio is the prototype of these weak men. Basilio forgot his past, the murder of his brother Crispin, and the death of Sisa, his mother. These personal misfortunes were not enough to motivate him to work so that others would not be victims of the injustices his family has endured. He refused to join Simoun, not so much from disapproval of the latter's methods as from a personal indifference toward what he termed "political questions." His rationalization and this is a common one today, was that he was a man of science and therefore it was not his job to concern himself with anything more determined than the healing of the sick.

Instead of making him more determined to defend his fellowmen from oppression, Basilio's personal experience with cruelty and injustice turned him into a timid man who wanted only to be left in peace in his little corner of the earth, enjoying a modicum of success. Only when this personal ambition was thwarted by his imprisonment after the incident of the pasquinades did Basilio decide to join Simoun. And even then, his aim was to avenge himself and not to help his fellowmen.

# From Asocial to Anti-Social Behaviour

If we read Rizal carefully, we will soon realize that his dream for our country can be attained only by a dedicated, hard-working, socially responsible citizenry. It is tragic, therefore, that there are so very many Basilios among us today. Basilio was essentially good. He was hard working, did no one any harm. In an already stable and prosperous country, such citizens as Basilio might be desirable; but in Rizal's Philippines as well as in ours, where so many reforms are still needed, we should have men with social conscience who will consider it their obligation to do more than just obey the laws.

The Basilios will never move mountains. Instead, their desire for the fulfilment of their personal ambitions will make them temporize with tyranny, compromise with oppression, cross the street to avoid seeing injustice, look the other way to ignore corruption. Our students, our professionals today, often exhibits the qualities of Basilio. At best, they try to do their jobs competently but are indifferent to the issues and the problems that face our country.

Those who start like Basilio but who do not possess his essential goodness degenerate from asocial individualism to definitely anti-social behavior in pursuit of their individualistic goals. They may hoard essential commodities and sell them at exorbitant prices, unmindful of the misery they are bringing to their countrymen. They may become dummies for foreign interests, corrupt government officials, servile mouthpieces of alien groups, ten percenters, influence peddlers, and cynical racketeers whom our corrupt society rewards with material wealth and even prestige.

# Nation of Rizals

Rizal was never like Basilio. He too suffered injustice early in life when he saw his mother unjustly imprisoned; but far from making him timid and afraid; it spurred him to work for justice and freedom, not for his family but for all Filipinos. Not only his death, but more importantly, his whole life gave evidence of his constant preoccupation with the problems of his country, his involvement in the movement against oppression, ignorance, poverty and degradation. Rizal's personal goals were always in accordance with what he considered to be the in best interest of the country. It is in this sense that we can say we need a nation of Rizals. But we do not need a hero to die for our country. We need a nation of heroes who will live and work with patriotic dedication to realize Rizal's dream.

As long as we can still marvel at the contemporaneousness of Rizal, at his "timeliness," we must admit that many years after he has presented the problems, we have not yet taken the basic steps towards their solution. When a new generation of Filipinos will be able to read Rizal as a mirror of our past and not as a reproach to our social present, only then can we say that we have truly honored Rizal because we have made him obsolete by completing his work.

# From Dream to Reality

We are still backward, ignorant and to a great extent, unfree. That is why Rizal can still speak to us with the same sense of urgency and immediacy that he produced among his contemporaries. When he is no longer valid, we shall have become a truly great nation and Rizal will no longer be read for the social truths that he reveal. But to make him obsolete does not mean to forget him. On the contrary, only when we have realized Rizal's dream can we really appreciate his greatness because only then will we realize the great value of his ideals.

When Rizal becomes obsolete, our society will no longer be infected with Dona Victorinas, because the triumph of nationalism will make us proud of our race. There will no longer be any Basilio because each and every one will consider his manhood to be concerned only with personal, material success. We shall have no more Simouns motivated by personal revenge. Philippine society will frown on the Pasta and the other fawning and obsequious minor officials whose only interest is to retain their sinecures. A reorientation of our ways and our thoughts along nationalist lines will fulfill the dreams of Rizal and at the same time make them obsolete as goals because the dream has become a reality.

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