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 anti-colonial 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 19th 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-20th-century Philippine history. A virtual lobotomy has taken place.

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, Tagalog descent: five years after Freud, four years after Conrad, one year after Chekhov; the same year as Tagore; five years before Sun Yat-sen, three years before Max Weber, eight years before Gandhi, and 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 shoreline 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 organising for Chinese nationalism outside China, and Gandhi was conducting his early experiments in anti-colonial 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 satirised 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 South-East Asian region: no real universities in French Indochina, the Dutch East Indies, or British Malaya and Singapore till after World War Two. From very early on, Rizal exhibited remarkable literary abilities. At the age of 19 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, 19th-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

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First Filipino – A review of José Rizal’s “Noli Me Tangere”

Saturday 15 August 2015, by ANDERSON Benedict (Date first published: 16 October 1997).

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 élite, 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
spectrum 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 21 February 1887 – eight months after Gladstone’s first Home Rule Bill was
defeated, and eight years before Almayer’s Folly was published. He was 26.

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’ Chineses) to the illiterate indio masses.
Its pages are crowded with Dominicans, shady lawyers, abused acolytes, corrupt policemen, Jesuits,
smalltown caciques, mestiza schoolgirls, ignorant peninsular carpetbaggers, hired thugs, despairing
intellectuals, social-climbing dévotes, 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
melodrama. The novel opens with the wealthy, handsome and naively idealistic mestizo, Don Crisostomo Ibarra, returning from a long educational sojourn in Europe with plans to modernise his home town and his patria, 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, cartet bagging 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 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 hometown. 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 anti-subversive 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 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 very fondly 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 recognisable - 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."

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 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 Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas (published five years earlier) – is quite uncharacteristic of most serious 19th-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 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 colonised? There is nothing in the Americas, nothing in the rest of South-East 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 anticlerical 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 28.

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 ó 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 Two, 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 ‘90s had become inaccessible. Today, most of the work of the brilliant anti-colonial 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 León Maria Guerrero in the Sixties – still the prescribed text for high schools and universities – is no less fatally flawed by systematic bowdlerisation 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* (native 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 20th-century ethno-racial 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 is 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-Locsin was born just too late to have had an élite 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 creolised the friar’s language. This effect disappears when Mrs Lacson-Locsin translates the words as ‘any schoolchild knows that.’ Rizal quotes three lines of the much-loved 19th-century Tagalog poet Francisco Balthazar 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 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-Locsin 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 very fondly breeds in Manila’.

**Benedict Anderson**

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**Letters**

*Vol. 19 No. 22 · 13 November 1997*

It was gratifying to see Benedict Anderson write a political as well as a literary analysis of the latest translation of José Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere* (LRB, 16 October). Although Rizal is not that well known internationally, he has not really been ‘unavailable’ in the Philippines. When the Americans took the country over they found him an ideal hero to promote since he had not – unlike Bonifacio, Mabini, Aguinaldo and others – advocated revolution or independence. The national literature has long been replete with writings by and on Rizal. Like Martin Luther King (but not, say, Jesse Jackson), he was a safe figure for the establishment to celebrate.

As Anderson notes, Rizal wrote mainly in Spanish, for he wished to address his ‘enemies’ as well as his ‘friends’. In the Philippines, unlike Latin America, Spanish never became a language of the people. One
reason is that when the Spaniards settled the Philippines, there were already populations with well
developed languages and alphabets, and the Spaniards were never more than a small minority. Nor did
they establish a public school system (although they did establish universities, and much earlier than the
19th century cited by Anderson – Santo Tomás, founded in 1616, is 25 years older than Harvard), and
pedagogically inclined parish priests and native Filipinos taught the catón in the local languages. Spanish,
too, was overwhelmingly the language of the (print) media and government, so that the educated and
those wishing to read had to know it, much as the Arab intelligentsia in Algeria had to know French. But
the real tragedy was the low level of literacy in any language, which the Americans raised when they
established a public school system, albeit in English.

Anderson (like Rizal) perhaps makes too much of ethno-racial parallels with Latin America. True, there
were ‘peninsulares’ and ‘filipinos’ – people of ‘pure’ Spanish descent born in the Philippines – but the
latter were few compared with their Latin American counterparts. There was never a movement of ‘white
filipinos’ to secede from Spain. Also unlike most of Latin America, the Philippines was ruled during much
of its colonial history through the viceroy in Mexico rather than directly by Spain. Such esoteric
distinctions, in any case, were lost on the vaster native population. This is shown by the fact that, as
Anderson has noted, by the time Mabini was writing, a mere two years after Rizal’s execution, the ‘old
meaning [of “filipino”] had vanished’.

It is interesting to note that although the term ‘mestizo’ has practically the same meaning in the
Philippines and Latin America, it denotes someone with part Indian ‘blood’ in the latter, and someone with
part Spanish (or Chinese) blood in the former. The definitions are identical but the perspectives are not.
The culture of the Philippines is a blend, whereas the Latin American establishment remains Spanish with
its native population marginalised.

Ruben Mendez
UN Development Programme

Vol. 19 No. 24 · 11 December 1997

For weeks now, I have been puzzling over a curious line in Benedict Anderson’s review of José Rizal’s Noli
Me Tangere (LRB, 16 October). Since Rizal wrote in Spanish, Anderson claims, ‘he wrote as much for the
every enemy as the friend, something that did not happen with the Raj until the work, a century later, of Salman
Rushdie.’ I surmise that the colonists are the enemies and those with the same mother tongue are friends,
but I am still left with questions. Since (as Anderson notes) far more of his enemies than his friends knew
Spanish, wasn’t Rizal writing more for his enemies than his friends? Whatever the merits of post-colonial
theory, surely Rushdie’s work appeared after the Raj? Innumerable Indians before Rushdie wrote for their
enemies, from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee to A. Madaviah, who wrote four novels in English for the
express purpose of enlightening the British. I believe Tagore won the Nobel Prize for his English-language
writings. Many of these writers also wrote in their own languages – and their bilingualism much better
suits the phrase ‘as much for the enemy as the friend’. Nor is Bengali an ‘ancient’ language any more
than, say, French, and there’s something odd about the remark that Tagore wrote for the ‘huge Bengali
population of the Raj’. Surely Tagore wrote for the huge Bengali population of the world?

V.K. Mina
New York

Vol. 20 No. 3 · 5 February 1998

V.K. Mina is wrong in stating that Rabindranath Tagore ‘won the Nobel Prize for his English-language
writings’ (Letters, 11 December 1997). He was awarded the prize for work written in Bengali.
Miguel Orio
Nederland, Colorado

P.S.

http://www.lrb.co.uk/v19/n20/benedict-anderson/first-filipino