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Little Mansions: Some Aspects of Jose Rizal as a Novelist

ELLIOTT C. ARENSMEYER

ALTHOUGH great novels were written in the eighteenth century, the nineteenth has been justly called the century of the novel. Many were works of genius and many more were, "little mansions, not mighty edifices".¹ It is not surprising that among the titans of the age were lesser authors who produced one or two fine works and who qualify as sound and enduring authors. While the majority of these authors were found in Europe, the wider world began to produce works of fiction noted for their contemporary analysis of the social scene as their authors saw it in their own countries. Standing high among the creators of "little mansions" is José Rizal. Rizal qualified as a man of many parts but his greatest creative achievement was his two novels, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*. Rizal's heroism is that of the writer.²

A man may be said to be the sum of what he reads. Although during the nineteenth century books were imported into the Philippines, the main reading diet of literate Filipinos remained the *awit* and the *corrido*, Spanish medieval romances of the lives of heroes and saints which had been translated in-

¹ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., 1927), p. 17.

² Miguel de Unamuno, "Rizal: The Tagalog Hamlet," *Rizal: Contrary Essays*, Ed. by Petronilo Daroy and Dolores Feria (Quezon City: Guro Books, 1968), p. 5.

to the Filipino dialects. By the mid-century, plays called *mo-ro-moros*, *comedias*, *zarzuelas*, *carrillos* and *anárulos* had been introduced as suitable fare for the Indios.³ The ecclesiastical and civil authorities reviewed all projected publications under the Permanent Commission of Censors which had been established in 1856. In spite of these limitations Rizal managed to obtain a number of contemporary novels and histories. Biographers of Rizal point out that his household possessed the best library in town, but that must be, perforce, small praise. Rizal's mother was an educated woman for those times and early in his life instilled in him a lifelong affection for words and poetry as well as with an obsessive love for his native land. At the Ateneo Municipal, the best and most contemporary school in the Philippines run by the Jesuit fathers, Rizal read Alexander Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* and was morbidly inspired by this tale of remorseless vengeance pursued to its most logical conclusion. While at the Ateneo he read widely in the Greek and Latin classics as well as in Romantic authors of nineteenth century Europe; for example, Chateaubriand, who doubtless affected Rizal in his treatment of the New World inhabitant as the Noble Savage. Rizal also read many of Charles Dickens' novels and was to remain most affected by Dicken's feeling and eloquent championing of the oppressed poor of London. It is of interest to note that while on his first journey to Europe Rizal encountered an English girl who instantly reminded him of Dora Copperfield. It is, of course, the highest compliment you can pay an author when you are certain you have just passed by one of his characters.

Throughout Rizal's travel diaries and letters he mentioned a wide variety of European writers, ranging from Dante to Tolstoy. It was, perhaps, the German writers who most pleased him as he retained, until the end of his life, a passion for the order and romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth century German classics. It is safe to say that in his short literary career the authors most influential on his choice of emphasis and method of dealing with his subject were three giants

³ Teodoro Agoncillo, *Philippine History* (Quezon City: Inang Wika Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 127-128.

of Social Realism: Dickens, Honoré de Balzac and Emile Zola. There is no doubt that the all consuming passion of Rizal's life was the lightening of the colonial burden in the Philippines, but throughout his life the European intellectual experience ran as a constant background theme.

The novel is said to be a narrative arranged in time sequence.⁴ To tell a story is the fundamental purpose of the writer. In the end, a novel will stand or fall on the universal criteria of plot, people and purpose achieved. There are, of course, secondary considerations such as power of prophecy, pattern, fantasy, rhythm and style. All novels have a purpose, most present a point of view, and all should reveal a certain amount of life at their source. This is the basic difference between straight, historic narration and creative fiction. In the end a writer is judged by whether he has created or recorded. Comparisons between one author and another are often odious and always controversial. Thus, it is not valid to judge José Rizal against the achievements of his fellow writers, but it is wise to judge his novels according to the criteria above. In this fashion it is possible to decide if he has recorded or created.

Rizal wrote his two novels with a simple and direct purpose in mind: to bring his people out of their long medieval twilight dominated by the last medieval power in Europe, Spain, and into the dynamism and intellectual excitement of the nineteenth century European world. It is not an exaggeration to say that Rizal, in the end, died for Europe and was, from birth to death, a man of Europe.⁵ Although he spoke for an oriental people he was neither caught up in the passivity of the Indian Tagore, his contemporary in national feeling, nor in a torturous duality between an old, static culture and a new scientific pragmatism as were the Japanese intellectuals of the Meiji period. Rather, he was a Mazzini and a Zola . . . entirely measurable by Western standards. Rizal was the classic Good Man who was dedicated to the nob-

⁴ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 26.

⁵ Leon Ma. Guerrero, *The First Filipino* (Manila: The National Historical Commission, 1959), p. 95.

lest ends and possessed the art of forceful expression which had been developed by his Jesuit education. His years in Europe allowed him to develop all his faculties. His keen intelligence gave him amazing facility in languages and commendable ability in painting, sculpture and medicine. Rizal, then, is measurable in European terms and the purpose of his novels was to lay bare a sick and decayed society with all the humor and mordant facility of a fine novelist.

Neither *Noli Me Tangere* nor *El Filibusterismo* is content merely to tell a story, although both have taut and, by in large, satisfactory plots. The *Noli* seeks to expose the frailocracy of the Philippines and the foibles of governors and governed alike. It is a novel of both social and political criticism with satiric commentaries on a vast range of colonials and natives. The *Fili* is perhaps less neat in its purpose. It shifts from exposé to debate and while its plot is a real "cliff hanger" its purpose vacillates between Rizal's desire to reject anarchism as a solution and his desire to promote political upheaval as the only way for the Filipino to gain freedom. In the end the purposeful theme which runs through both books remains the vibrant anti-clericalism which Rizal chose, in much the same way which his great hero Voltaire chose, to expose all the evils of his world. Amidst the intricacies in *El Filibusterismo* of the student plots and twisted designs of the anarchist Simoun, the friar theme rides high.

Remove the friar, gentlemen, and you shall see the edifice of state tottering for lack of sturdy shoulders and hairy legs to support it; life in the Philippines will grow monotonous without the merry laughter of the playful and carousing friar...without the daily lively re-enactment of the tales of Boccaccio and La Fontaine.⁶

One of the basic criteria on which to judge the literary value of a book is whether the characters are round or flat. That is, are they constructed on a single quality or can they be easily identified by the reader in their varied qualities of characterization? In *Noli Me Tangere* it is Rizal's avowed purpose to expose the Friar. Thus we might expect his friar characters

⁶ José Rizal, *El Filibusterismo* (London: Longmans, Green Co., Ltd., 1965), p. 209.

to be flat constructions, bordering on caricature. To a certain extent the friars in the *Noli* are "types". They are exaggerations of evil and weakness, being lecherous, cruel, false, murderous and proud. The murder of the little boy, Crispin, by the parish priest is the most savage introduction possible to the *Noli*. Yet the Fathers Dámaso, Camorra and Sibyla are entirely human creations and possess an astonishing individuality. Rizal achieves this, in part, by his use of the homely details of their lives: their appearance, their eating habits and even their gait. Father Dámaso's chagrin at receiving only a chicken wing in his soup at the dinner at Captain Tiago's may make him appear querulous but it also raises him to an entirely human level. It is fair to say that the friars in *Noli Me Tangere* vibrate with enough vitality to save them from being flat creations. Their humanity, combined with their utter villainy, is diffused throughout the book. There are friars at every level of society and only the Filipino secular priest, Father Florentino in the *Fili*, is good. Nevertheless, without the friars *Noli Me Tangere* would not succeed as a novel and they must be counted as rounded creations.

The characters of Maria Clara and Crisostomo Ibarra/Simoun are but faintly realized. It is hard to say whether Rizal fell into the Victorian trap of having the "good girl" be vapid and uni-dimensional or whether she was an ironic commentary by the author on the colonial hybrid. This latter possibility is credible but it does not serve to make her character a satisfactory one to the reader. Ibarra undergoes a metamorphosis from one novel to the next and, in his dual role, serves the author's purpose well. As Ibarra he is the liberal reformer, perhaps Rizal himself at one stage of his development; as Simoun he is the destructive anarchist whom Rizal had encountered in Europe. There are qualities of the romantic hero in both Ibarra and Simoun but in neither characterization does the figure come to life nor does he rise to a two dimensional creation. Both Maria Clara and Ibarra remain flat.

In writing his two novels in tandem, so to speak, Rizal set himself a difficult task. He had to create at least one character who successfully spanned both novels and carried the au-

thor's theme by a self-development which was both realistic and satisfactory. In Basilio, Rizal found his best realized and most satisfactory hero. From Basilio's introduction in the bell tower of the church of San Diego to his last appearance in the streets of Manila, standing indecisive and terror-stricken with the knowledge of Simoun's deadly lamp, Basilio represents the Filipino in his best and worst aspects and so fulfills Rizal's final bitter analysis of the effects of colonialization summed up in Father Florentino's pronouncement at the end of *El Filibusterismo*, "... whoever submits to tyranny, loves it!"⁷ Basilio is a device but a well realized one. In his intelligence and diligence and determination to serve his people as a doctor he falls into the all too human trap of ambition and pride. Although he is willing to risk his medical degree by helping Simoun he is more motivated by revenge for Juli's death than for the cause of freedom. As he fades indecisively out of the book he is more real to us than Simoun whose end is only satisfactory from a moral point of view. Basilio best serves Rizal as a well developed link between the two novels and emerges as the most subtle and best realized of his characters.

One of the finer qualities in Rizal's two novels is the quality of humor. It is sometimes surprising to the twentieth-century reader to discover such a wealth of this quality in the nineteenth century writers. Who among us has not delighted in such comic creations as Joseph Sedley in *Vanity Fair*, Mr. Macawber in *David Copperfield* and Signora Neroni in *Barchester Towers*? What is doubly surprising to us is that José Rizal, reared in the sober and limited atmosphere of the colonial Philippines, possessed the touch of comic genius of his Victorian contemporaries in Europe. Surely the character of Doña Victorina must be elevated to the ranks of her European counterparts. She is a magnificent creation, combining satiric and original characteristics which are consistently raised above the level of caricature. On the surface Doña Victorina is the humorous embodiment of the Filipina who denies her birthright. Her fractured Spanish, heavy makeup to conceal her dark complexion, her obsessive desire to marry a Spaniard and her

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

total insensivity to her own absurdities could have made her a flat and limited creation. Rizal succeeds, however, in elevating her to a minor work of art. This is primarily achieved by her relationship with her poor, unfortunate husband, Don Tiburcio, himself a satisfactory comic character. The physical description of Doña Victorina recalls Dickens' Mrs. Skewton in *Dombey and Son* and is every bit as successful.

She was more than blowzy; she was overblown. Her abundant hair had dwindled down to a bun the size...of a head of garlic; her face was furrowed with wrinkles, and her teeth were growing loose. Her eyes had also suffered considerably; she had to screw them up frequently to be able to see a certain distance away. Only her character remained.⁸

By the single addition, "Only her character remained", Rizal redeems her from caricature. In his superbly balanced description of her intended husband, Don Tiburcio, Rizal further redeems himself from the charge of one level characterization. "He smiled with resignation and called to his aid the spectre of hunger...she was a pretentious, domineering, masculine old woman...but hunger was even more overbearing, nagging and demanding."⁹

Perhaps the quality which best links Rizal with his European contemporaries is the dark, sexual undercurrent which runs through the two novels. Today it is fashionable to point out that the Victorians (the term is here used to embrace all those novelists who wrote in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century) were far from being the prudish and repressed human beings that their stereotype has made them. Throughout the novels of Dickens, Zola, Flaubert and Tolstoy runs the theme of women's natural passions stifled and twisted in "good" society. Rizal was keenly aware of the nature of women; his own experience was varied and wide. In creating Salomé and Juli he portrayed children of nature who were freer to give themselves to the men they loved but, in Juli's case, were ultimately destroyed by sick sensuality. Maria Clara, aside from her dark paternity, is the conventional heroine

⁸ José Rizal, *Noli Me Tangere* (London: Longmans Green Co., Ltd., 1961), p. 268.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

whose body is sacred but whose mind is weak. In a lighter vein Rizal describes the aftermath of the wedding of Dofia Victorina and Don Tiburcio and achieves a sardonic commentary on the natural side of life.

She had a terrible stomach ache on the wedding night, and he, giving thanks to God, showed himself to be solicitous and considerate. The second night, however, he did his duty as an honorable man, and the following morning after gave himself a melancholy smile in the mirror, displaying his toothless gums; he had aged at least ten years.¹⁰

Throughout the two novels runs the almost obsessive theme of the carnality and lust of the friars. Rizal judges the evils wrought upon the Philippines by pointing out the tortured and hypocritical acts of the spiritual mentors of the Filipinos. Rizal is humorous, yet profoundly bitter, on the subject.¹¹ In one of the opening chapters of *Noli Me Tangere* Father Salví, tormented by dark thoughts, stalks Maria Clara and her friends as they paddle in a brook; "[their] small, rosy feet playing in the water aroused strange sensations in his starved body and unfamiliar thought and fancies in his feverish mind."¹² Rizal may have felt the unnatural state of the celibate Catholic clergy, especially as he sought to balance the natural aspects of the Filipino countryside with the artifice of Filipino-Hispanic society, but beyond that aspect he felt that the friars' lustful acts were a part of the hypocrisy and evil of Spanish colonial rule. From the act of Father Dámaso's fathering of Maria Clara to the rape and suicide of Juli, sexuality runs as a dark and recurrent theme in Rizal's two novels and serves to bring him closer to the Europe of his day.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

¹¹ Rizal's obsession with the friars may be said to have been caused by three factors. First, the problems which his family and friends had in Laguna as tenants of the Dominican estates, second, the extreme anti-clericalism which Rizal encountered in Spain and third, the analysis made by his own intellect of the political situation in the Philippines which led him to believe that the friars were the most serious enemies of reform and progress. See Guerrero, *The First Filipino*, p. 136.

¹² Rizal, *Noli Me Tangere*, p. 137.

So far we have seen that Rizal fulfilled the novelist's task of creating living, rounded characters. In so doing he completed his purpose of exposing the good and the bad, the weaknesses and the strengths and the real and the ephemeral in the colonial Philippines. Often the minor characters such as Doña Consolación, the Three Sisters, old Tasio and Isagani play a minor fugue on the main theme and thus enhance the completeness of the author's exposure. If we have not discussed the success or failure of the plots of the novels it is because, in the end, the melodrama of Maria Clara's fate, the dramatic end of Simoun and the deaths and disappointments of almost all the main characters are all part of Rizal's purpose. The plot fails to stand alone but that does not detract from the excellence of the books. What of the secondary criteria: the strength of prophecy, the pattern and rhythm, the style and, finally, the source of life at the core of the books?

A most satisfactory pattern and rhythm run through the two novels. From the beginning of the *Noli* to the end of the *Fili* this pattern is based on alternative scenes of town and country. For Rizal, Manila held the darkness of colonial rule and the worst of the sycophantic Filipinos lived in a kind of pseudo-European style in the heart of the city. In a description of Captain Tiago's house it is possible to see the absurdity of aping the conqueror's ways in a damp and humid tropical climate. By contrast, in the country scenes in and around Laguna de Bai all is fresh and natural. People live, as far as they are able, as they did before the Spanish came and the rhythm of their country lives is spoiled only by the constabulary and the parish priest. Although not all of the country Filipinos are good, witness the father of Basilio and Crispin, it is the eternal earth mother figures like Sisa and the pure and natural Salomé who carry out Rizal's intention of showing the innate worth of the Filipino. The scenes in *El Filibusterismo* are increasingly set in the city as the story of Simoun becomes more tortured and despairing. The scenes in Kiapo, at the University, in the sinister Chinese Quiroga's, house, and finally, as the tale comes full circle back to Captain Tiago's house, it is always the city where the darkest and most evil deeds are plot-

ted and executed. Through both books the river Pasig runs, symbolically polluted at the Manila end, "combining the functions of public bath, sewer, laundry, fishery, waterway and should the Chinese water-pedlar find it convenient, even as a source of drinking water".¹³ At the end of the *Fili* Rizal abruptly shifts the scene to the little known East coast of the Philippines and there the rhythm of city and placid countryside is sharply broken by the roar and thunder of the sea.

If the power of prophecy is a canon by which to judge the excellence of a novel it is easily established that Rizal succeeds. By seizing on and rejecting an assortment of heroes and anti-heroes Rizal sounds the warning which he himself understood in the end; the warning that everything fails which is founded on hate. The novels are both an incitement to revolution and an indictment against it.¹⁴ Perhaps it is fair to say that the prophecy is not an appeal but a description of the mental climate of revolt. Rizal found, at the end, that life itself has a universal relevance and he died with the last words of Christ on his lips, "Consummatum est". As Rizal forecast in the *Noli*, the Eliases of the Philippines were as doomed to defeat as the Simouns. Rizal was above all a writer and if his prophecy is larded with propaganda, an artist must take issue with political and social institutions.¹⁵ His aim is not merely to delight but to inspire. As he expresses an interest in freedom and reform he becomes a critic of society. Thus, all novels of social realism possess a high degree of prophecy.

The most difficult criteria by which to judge Rizal's success as a novelist is that of style. Rizal's books were written in Spanish, the florid and romantic Spanish of his day. The best English translation available freely admits of paraphrasing, reworking and incorporating.¹⁶ It is evident that all the transla-

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Austin Coates, *Rizal: Philippine Nationalist and Martyr* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 202.

¹⁵ Petronilo Daroy, "Politics as Literature," *Rizal: Contrary Essays*, p. 129.

¹⁶ The author of this paper accepts Leon Ma. Guerrero's translations of *Noli Me Tangere* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1961) and *El Filibusterismo* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1965)

tions are faithful to story and characters. How much of the highly humorous dialogue and clever juxtaposition is translatable is difficult to say. Nevertheless, the beauty of description defies bowdlerization and Doña Victorina remains Doña Victorina in *Andalusian* Spanish or Filipino English. Humor and truth shine above style and, where writers like Theodore Dreiser and Henry James seldom have humor to save them from their critics, Rizal's wit and eloquence rise above any peculiarities of style.

Rizal had always hoped to touch the heart of Europe with his novels, although the *Noli* was written essentially to "rouse the feelings of my countrymen".¹⁷ In addition, the book was written for Filipinos and Rizal hoped that, above all, it would be read by the Filipinos.¹⁸ It was Rizal's misfortune that the book attracted the most attention among the enraged rulers of the Philippines. The Europeans, aside from genuinely interested and sympathetic friends such as Blumentritt, had little opportunity to read either the *Noli* or the *Fili* as they were published in a limited quantity and in Spanish, never the common language of European intellectuals. Indeed, "The *Noli* and the *Fili*, proscribed in the Philippines, unread in the great world of Europe, had failed to arouse the international storm of indignation and sympathy for which he had hoped."¹⁹ In spite of his avowed purpose Rizal remained essentially a European intellectual and however much the two novels form part of the Philippine Independence movement, as novels they belong to Europe.

as the best English versions of the two novels available today. The explanation on Mr. Guerrero's methods of translating Rizal's Spanish is found in the introduction of *Noli Me Tangere*, pp. xv-xviii.

¹⁷ Guerrero, *The First Filipino*, p. 434.

¹⁸ Rizal wrote to his friend, Ferdinand Blumentritt, immediately after the publication, in Berlin, of *Noli Me Tangere*: "Es el primer libro imparcial y atrevido sobre la vida de los tagalogs. Los filipinos encontraran en el la historia de los ultimos diez años: . . . El gobierno y los frailes probablemente atacara la obra, rebatiendo mis argumentos: pero yo confio en el Dios de la Verdad y en las personas que han visto nuestros sufrimientos de cerca." Rizal, 21 Marzo, 1887, *Cartas entre Rizal y El Professor Fernando Blumentritt* (Manila: Comisión Nacional de centenario de José Rizal, 1961), pp. 106-107.

¹⁹ Guerrero, *The First Filipino*, p. 428.

At the core of both *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* lies a concern with the historic. Rizal the Scholar hoped to stir European memories with the historian's perspective, stir European hearts with polemics and win European reforms with his timely liberalism. At bottom, Rizal was a Protestant in his timely liberalism. He was also a Protestant in his shining belief in the supremacy of private judgment.²⁰ At the core of both novels is a reverence for European culture which is matched by a hatred for European colonialism. Possessing at once a deeply Victorian and Teutonic pedantry and scholarly scrupulousness he was saved from self-importance and his books from pomposity by an almost Renaissance humanity. If prophecy is a tone of voice, humility and humor must temper the writer if his tone is to be acceptable. The tone of the *Noli* is racy, pungent and relentless but at the core of both novels lies man himself, and through man, life.²¹

Thus far we have failed to fault Rizal on any of the criteria for the successful novel. What, then, keeps him from having constructed two "mighty edifices"? In the end it is the smallness of the stage. The London of Dickens, the Paris of Balzac and Zola and the vast Russia of Tolstoy play significant roles in the novels in which they appear. Without comparing Rizal as a novelist to these giants of European fiction we are bound to consider his place and the place of his characters on the world stage. As Charles Reade created a minor masterpiece out of medieval Europe in *The Cloister and the Hearth* so Rizal created two mini-masterpieces out of remote and distant islands. As medieval Europe is remote to us today so the Spanish Philippines was remote to the Europe of the nineteenth century. Rizal was handicapped by a European mentality when

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

²¹ In his essay, "Rizal as a Humanist," *The Background of Nationalism and Other Essays* (Manila: Solidaridad, 1965), pp. 40-49. Horacio de la Costa, S.J., assesses the value of Rizal's two novels in humanistic terms. The opening paragraph of St. Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* served as a model for the young Rizal during his years at Ateneo. Loyola's words were never far from the consciousness of those who had learned from the Jesuit fathers and they did, in effect, serve Rizal as a focus for life.

he wrote of his homeland and he failed to bring the two together in the same way Reade failed to make medieval Europe contemporary. Both *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* lack timelessness. They remain remote for the average reader. There is wit, humanity and beauty but the range is narrow. No one who has not lived in the Philippines, and indeed, made a study of her history, can ever fully appreciate the venality of the secular and religious Spaniards, the poignancy of the abused natives and the absurdities of a falsely joined Filipino-Hispanic society.²² It is not necessary to have lived in Dickens' London or Tolstoy's Tsarist Russia to feel the breadth and sweep of life in their novels. José Rizal, a brilliant, cosmopolitan and heroic figure dedicated his short life to the cause of emancipating his people and in so doing he sacrificed vision for phantasmagoria.²³ His satire is Swiftian but Swift was universal. Rizal belongs to the traditions of naturalism and realism and he even succeeded in harmonizing in himself the influences of Spain and Germany, the two extremes of European thought.²⁴ But the canvas was small where the man was not. In the end he created the "little mansions" which made the man greater than his literary works, neither of which quite achieved the perfection found in a writer of universal vision.

²² Rizal himself said in a letter to Blumentritt, "...no es facil contarle el contenido del libro a uno que no conoce bien nuestros condiciones." Berlin, 24 April, 1887, *Cartas Entre Rizal y El Profesor Fernando Blumentritt*, p. 150.

²³ This idea is based on a criticism of Dickens' found in W. J. Dawson, *The Makers of English Fiction* (London; Fleming H. Revell Co., 1905), p. 109.

²⁴ Coates, *Rizal: Philippine Nationalist and Martyr*, p. 355.