Hero of the Nation and Citizen of the World

Preliminary note

"Hero of the Nation" is a great, almost adulatory title that makes the person so described seem larger than life and thus distant from it. Whether the same can be said of "Citizen of the world" probably depends in which world you see yourself. After all, the philosopher Immanuel Kant appreciated the cosmopolitan as the representative of a community of nations encompassing the whole planet; well, that doesn't exactly sound like a national hero. Rizal was an indefatigable "Weltenwanderer" (traveller of the world), unrestrained by political or imaginary borders. When he and his friends called themselves "Philippiner", it was not an expression of national pride, but simply the name given to a group of young Creoles, Malays and mestizos living in Spain and committed to criticising colonialism.[1]

In the following pages I will not go into any further detail about these titles and designations. My modest intention is to give the reader a close-up portrait of José Rizal and leave it to him/her to decide which title to award him.

1 "Wir müssen alle der Politik etwas opfern, wenn auch wir keine Lust daran haben. Dies verstehen meine Freunde welche in Madrid unsere Zeitung herausgeben; diese Freunde sind alle Jünglingen, creolen, mestizen und malaien, wir nennen uns nur Philippiner." Letter to Blumentritt, 13 April 1887. The Rizal–Blumentritt Correspondence, Vol. 1. Manila 1992

Hero of the Nation and Citizen of the World.
In: Dietrich Harth: Hero of the Nation and Citizen of the World.
Tracing José Rizal. Essays and Miscellanea. Heidelberg 2025, pp. 25–51.
https://doi.org/10.11588/heibooks.1635

A brief outline of Rizal's life story

On 19 June 1861, José Rizal was born the seventh of eleven children to a relatively wealthy mestizo family that ran a hacienda in Calamba, a village on the main Philippine island of Luzon. Spanish Dominican friars had craftily taken possession of land and village, and Rizal's family were among the tenants.

The young Rizal attended the school controlled by the monastic orders, enrolled in medicine at the Jesuit University in Manila and left for Europe at the age of 21 to continue his studies in Madrid. Two years later, he graduated in medicine from the central university there and shortly afterwards obtained a degree in history, languages and literature. While still in Madrid, he began work on an extensive novel about his homeland entitled *Noli me tángere,* which he published in 1887 in a Berlin publishing house.

Apart from that, he still had time to train as an eye surgeon with specialists in Paris, Heidelberg and Berlin. From Heidelberg, he began a ten-year correspondence with the grammar school professor Ferdinand Blumentritt, who lived in Leitmeritz in Bohemia and was the best expert on the Philippines at the time. Thanks to Blumentritt's letters of recommendation, Rizal gained access to the most renowned anthropologists and ethnologists in Germany. I may mention for example Adolf Bernhard Meyer, director of the Ethnographic Museum in Dresden, the so-called 'father' of German ethnology Adolf Bastian, and Rudolf Virchow, universal scholar at the Charité and reform politician in the Reichstag. The latter made Rizal a member of the highly renowned "Berlin Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte" (*Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory*), an extraordinary honour for the young Asian.

In the summer of 1887, Rizal set off from Berlin on a long journey that took him to Leitmeritz, Linz, Vienna, Geneva, Rome and finally Marseilles, from where he took a steamship back to his homeland, which he had to leave again very quickly. The publication of his novel *Noli me tangere* infuriated the Spanish colonial power, not least the clergy. He was denounced and threatened, fled from Hong Kong via Japan and the USA to Europe, stayed briefly in London, worked in the reading room of the British Museum on a critique of an old Spanish

chronicle of the Philippines, travelled between London, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, began a sequel to his novel, which he provisionally completed in Biarritz and published in 1891 – he was barely 30 years old – in a publishing house in Ghent, Belgium: *El Filibusterismo.*

Between all these travels, from which he wrote letters almost every day and kept a diary, he still found time to establish, together with his Filipino friends and comrades-in-arms, a periodical critical of colonialism called *La Solidaridad,* which he diligently supplied with sharp essays and invectives attacking the arbitrariness and brutality of the Spanish colonial regime. He also became a member of a Spanish-Philippine Masonic lodge, drew up plans for secular educational institutions in his homeland based on the German model, drafted the programme for an international academy of Philippine sciences, and tried to organise journalistic resistance to the colonial regime in small groups.

In the summer of 1892 – he was back in his native Philippines – Rizal secretly met with like-minded people to launch a reform initiative under the name "Liga Filipina". He was denounced, arrested and deported into exile in Dapitan on the island of Mindanao. (A long way from Manila: 865 kilometres as the crow flies.)

In August 1896, the fourth year of his exile, Filipino rebels attacked a Spanish military camp near the capital, Manila. It was the bloody beginning of the struggle for independence. Rizal, who rejected violence on principle and warned his countrymen against the revolutionary uprising, was arrested by order of the governor-general as the alleged mastermind of the revolution and tried by a Spanish court-martial. Charged with treason and incitement to rebellion, he was sentenced to death by firing squad and executed at the age of 35 on 30 December 1896 at the gates of the capital to the applause of the so-called 'fine' Spanish society.

In a long farewell poem written on death row, he wrote: "Voy donde no hay esclavos, verdugos ni opresores, / donde la fe no mata, donde el que reina es Dios." (*I'll go where there are no slaves, tyrants or hangmen, / where faith does not kill and where God alone does reign*).[2]

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2 J. Rizal: Poesias. Manila 1961, 139. Translation by Encarnación Alzona: Rizal's Poems (Writings of José Rizal Vol. III/1). Manila 1962, 154

How Rizal was seen by his adversaries

A few days before Rizal's execution, in December 1896, a Spaniard named Nicolás de la Peña, in a postscript to the court martial's verdict, characterised the condemned Filipino as follows:

> Rizal, a student of the natural and physical-chemical sciences (*de las ciencias naturales y de las fisico-químicas*) by profession, was industrious and active like no other of his countrymen, a tireless traveller in Europe and speaker of several living languages; admired by his uneducated compatriots, celebrated by his teachers and his friends of different origins, he embarked on the path of the humanities and sociological studies (*ciencias morales y estudios sociológicos*) […]. He vigorously spread among the inhabitants of these Spanish regions sentiments of disloyalty and betrayal, doctrines contrary to national unity, ideas hostile to Spanish sovereignty, in order to trust in the salvation of his own existence in the dark moments of battle and death.
>
> Rizal is not a tribune of the people. His speeches […] are full of vulgar stuff that might have been effective with the masses half a century ago, but today deserves only the greatest ridicule. Rizal is neither a competent writer nor a profound thinker. His writings […] betray a highly imperfect command of language and little intellectual energy. And yet Rizal became the spokesman of the rebellion (*el Verbo del Filibusterismo*), the cleverest head of the separatists, the idol of the ignorant crowd and of uneducated people who saw in this permanent troublemaker a supernatural (*sobrenatural*) being that they called *Supremo.*[3]

The author of these lines, Nicolás de la Peña, was not just anybody, but the attorney general who argued the case against Rizal before the court martial. I have quoted this passage to show that even during his lifetime, Rizal had a contradictory image that has fuelled all kinds of speculation about his life and work to this day. On the one hand, if we follow de la Peña's description, he was a connoisseur of many

3 My translation from the Spanish transcription by W. E. Retana, edited by H. de la Costa: The Trial of Rizal. Manila 1996, 73

languages and sciences; on the other, a witless literary dilettante; on the one hand, an evil traitor and seducer of the people; on the other, a clever strategist and a charismatic authority revered by the people. This ambiguous characterisation should have made the attorney general reflect on his own words. But the man was incapable of doing so because, as a functionary of the state authority, deciding over life and death, he embodied the divine sovereignty of the Spanish Crown. This sovereignty demanded a special kind of blood sacrifice in order – it believed – to keep itself alive, even if this sacrifice was to be made against better judgement. Making an example of such a well-known and respected Spanish subject as Rizal also marked the birth of a cult of martyrdom that continues to influence Filipino public opinion today.

An unbiased reading of the court records shows that Rizal, a physician and writer, was innocent and even in the safe custody of the Spanish Crown when the revolution broke out. Even the role he was accused of playing as a spokesman for the revolution did not apply to him, since he rejected violence with good reason and passionately advocated the recognition of the Philippine archipelago as a semi-autonomous overseas province of Spain. As for his support for the non-violent struggle for freedom, he did not seek moral justification in a catalogue of behaviour prescribed and supervised by the clergy. Rather, he relied on an inner sense that, as he confidently wrote, spoke to him with 'the voice of his conscience' (*la voz de mi conciencia*) and weighed up what was right and what was wrong. Rizal's immediate political goal was not *independencia* in the sense of state sovereignty, but self-determination on an equal footing with the Spanish metropolis, with what he called the "Motherland".

Of course, he had attached political conditions to his dream of non-violent transformation. These included:

1. the demand for voting representation in the *Cortes* (the Spanish parliament),
2. agrarian reform based on equitable land distribution (a colonial legacy in the Philippines that continues to cause conflict today),
3. freedom of speech and of the press, respect for human rights, and last but not least

4. the secularisation of educational institutions, i.e. taking schools out of the hands of the bigoted monastic orders (Dominicans, Franciscans, Augustinians, and Jesuits).

When Rizal visited the 1889 Paris World Exhibition, celebrating the centenary of the French Revolution (marking the birth of the Eiffel Tower), he was able to read the original version of the famous 1789 *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*.[4] Article 11 of the Declaration reads: "La libre communication des pensées et des opinions est un des droits les plus précieux de l'homme." (*The free exchange of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious rights of man*). This normative phrase must have struck a particular chord with him. In any case, he soon set about translating the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* into his mother tongue, Tagalog.

About language and translation

Like Indonesian and Malay, Tagalog belongs to a geographically widespread 'Austronesian' (Wilhelm Schmidt) language family. At the time of Rizal, it was one of the numerous languages in the archipelago and was spoken on the island of Luzon alone. Since the 1930s, Tagalog has formed the basis for one of the official languages spoken throughout the archipelago; the second current official language is American English; Spanish is spoken only in specialised circles.

Rizal was a language genius, with a written and spoken command of several European languages in addition to Spanish and Tagalog: Latin, German, French, Italian and English. He had studied the three so-called sacred languages, Greek, Hebrew and above all Latin; he spoke and wrote the latter effortlessly. In his novels, Creole languages native to the Philippines are occasionally quoted alongside Vulgar Latin. All this explains his interest in the history of languages and in

4 https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/le-bloc-de-constitutionnalite/declaration-des-droits-de-l-homme-et-du-citoyen-de-1789 (31.10.2024)

criticism, not only of etymology and grammar, but also of orthography. He was also fully aware of the political importance of a common language uniting the peoples of the archipelago. Such questions were a constant theme in his correspondence with Ferdinand Blumentritt.

Rizal's polyglotism also gave him the opportunity to study and quote in the original authors and books that a mere mortal would not even have picked up. It is no wonder that he was attracted to metropolitan libraries and bookshops wherever he travelled and that he amassed a private collection of more than 2000 books over the course of his eventful but short life, including complete editions of works by Voltaire, Johann Gottfried Herder and the French physiologist Claude Bernard.

Criticising the arbitrary and violent acts of the Spanish colonial rulers – both secular and clerical – did not prevent Rizal from appropriating the oppressors' language of domination as a literary medium. Why? The answer is simple: Spanish was and is a world language with an overwhelmingly large literary library that ranks high in the establishment of tradition. Tagalog, on the other hand, was a regional language limited to the island of Luzon with a very limited literary production. In addition, Rizal was socialised in Spanish at the schools of the monastic orders and familiarised himself with the formal education of European origin. He used the Spanish language in its Filipino variant due to the well-founded opinion that he could reach both his friends and his enemies among the Spaniards through it.

Although the Filipino version of Spanish was related to the Castellano written by Cervantes, it was not identical. The colonial Spanish had originally arrived in the Philippines with the Spanish conquistadores from Central America, bringing with it all sorts of varieties of Mexican indigenous languages, which were then enriched by further creolisation in the Pacific islands, including the hybrid variants of Tagalog. Rizal wanted to regulate the grammatical, lexical and orthographic aspects of Tagalog, the everyday language spoken by the majority of his compatriots, to such an extent that it could be used to spread the popular education he dreamed of, a project that immediately makes sense. It may be that this encouraged him to inform himself about the methods of German school teaching during a stay

in Saxony, the birthplace of the "Duden".[5] He had great plans for education and drew up the prospectus for a modern, i.e. secular Colegio, whose curriculum – to name the involved subjects – would include Spanish, English, French, German, Chinese and Tagalog in addition to maths, rhetoric, political economy, world history, civil law, music and dance.

On 31 March 1890, he wrote enthusiastically to Blumentritt from Brussels:

> I'm going to start a school and if you can stand the climate, you'll be the headmaster. I'm sure all the boys, the best in the country, will come to us. Blumentritt Rizal will remain like Goethe and Schiller, like Horace and Vergil, like the two Humboldts [in] the memory of the philp. people.[6]

Rizal consciously pursued a linguistic and literary policy that was critical of colonialism in two directions. His aim was to make his literary and essayistic criticism of colonialist despotism heard both by his fellow countrymen, whom he wanted to 'awaken', and by the Spanish public in the 'motherland'. He obviously succeeded in this, albeit with mixed results. In the metropolis, his texts were applauded by local republicans fighting for a modern Spain, while in the colony, the feudalistic, ossified regime rewarded his fearless words with persecution, exile and death.

Another aim of his language and literary policy concerned the (what I would call) ennoblement of the Tagalic language through translation. Among other things, he himself translated some of Hans Christian An-

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5 The "Duden" was first published 1880 in Leipzig by Konrad Duden as *Vollständiges Orthographisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (Complete Orthographic Dictionary of the German Language) and became the basis of standardised German orthography in the following decades.

6 "Ich werde eine Schule gründen, und wenn du das Klima ertragen kannst, wirst du der Direktor sein. Ich bin sicher alle Jungen, die besten des Landes kommen zu uns. Blumentritt Rizal werden wie Goethe und Schiller, wie Horatius und Vergilius, wie die zwei Humboldt [im] Gedächtniss des philp. Volkes bleiben." Escritos de José Rizal: Cartas entre Rizal y el profesor Fernando Blumentritt. Manila 1961, 638

dersen's fairy tales from German, as well as Friedrich Schiller's freedom drama *Wilhelm Tell* into Tagalog. He had already translated some lines from Schiller's verse parody *Shakespeares Schatten* into Spanish and used them as a motto on the title page of his novel *Noli me tangere*.

In a long letter written in London on 8 June 1888 to his former host, the "dear Pastor Ullmer" in Wilhelmsfeld near Heidelberg, he declared:

> Now I am here again […], breathing the free air of Europe. My compatriots consider me very lucky to have come back alive from the Philippines. Schiller's "Taucher" comes to mind: What monsters I have seen, what dragons and salamanders have stretched their claws at me, but with God's help I have surfaced again. But I want to try that twice.[7]

What is Schiller's ballad "Der Taucher" (*The diver*) about? I quote from stanzas 18 and 19,[8] in which the young diver who has resurfaced from the depths describes what happened to him in the abyss:

> Da zeigte mir Gott, zu dem ich rief
> In der höchsten schrecklichen Not,
> Aus der Tiefe ragend ein Felsenriff,
> Das erfasst ich behänd und entrann dem Tod …
>
> Das Auge mit Schaudern hinuntersah,
> Wie's von Salamandern und Molchen und Drachen
> Sich regt' in dem furchtbaren Höllenrachen …

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7 "Nun bin ich hier wieder […], die freie Luft Europas atmend. Meine Landsleute halten mich für sehr glücklich, lebendig aus den Philippinen zurückkommen zu können. Schillers Taucher kommt mir ins Gedächtnis: Was für Ungeheuer habe ich erblickt, was für Drachen und Salamander erstreckten auf mich ihre Krallen, aber mit Gottes Hilfe bin ich wieder aufgetaucht. Doch will ich das zwei Mal probieren." J. Rizal: Correspondencia epistolar IV. Cartas entre Rizal y otras personas, ed. Comision Nacional del Centenario de José Rizal. Manila 1961, 106/107 (Facsimile)

8 English translation in: https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/diver-ballad (31. 10. 2024)

Then God pointed out – for to Him I cried
In that terrible moment of need –
A craggy reef in the gulf's dark side;
I seized it in haste, and from death was then freed.

With shuddering awe 'twas seen by the eye
How the salamanders' and dragons' dread forms
Filled those terrible jaws of hell with their swarms.

The king in Schiller's ballad insists on a second dive and throws the golden cup back into the flood. The last line announces the death of anyone who dares to do it a second time:

Es kommen, es kommen die Wasser all,
Sie rauschen herauf, sie rauschen nieder,
Den Jüngling bringt keines wieder.

And the waters are pouring in fast around;
Though upwards and downwards they rush and they rave,
The youth is brought back by no kindly wave.

Rizal's attempt to translate the German liberation drama of *Wilhelm Tell* into the language of his countrymen, who could neither read nor write Spanish, was probably inspired by the words of the "Rütlischwur" (the oath of the Swiss confederates) in the poet's insistent language:[9]

Nein, eine Grenze hat Tyrannenmacht,
Wenn der Gedrückte nirgends Recht kann finden,
Wenn unerträglich wird die Last – greift er
Hinauf getrosten Mutes in den Himmel,
Und holt herunter seine ew'gen Rechte,
Die droben hangen unveräusserlich
Und unzerbrechlich wie die Sterne selbst –

9 English translation by Theodore Martin. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6788/6788-h/6788-h.htm (31.10.2024)

Der alte Urstand der Natur kehrt wieder,
Wo Mensch dem Menschen gegenübersteht –
Zum letzten Mittel, wenn kein andres mehr
Verfangen will, ist ihm das Schwert gegeben –
Der Güter höchstes dürfen wir verteid'gen
Gegen Gewalt – Wir stehn vor unser Land,
Wir stehn vor unsre Weiber, unsre Kinder!

Yes! there's a limit to the despot's power!
When the oppressed looks round in vain for justice,
When his sore burden may no more be borne,
With fearless heart he makes appeal to Heaven,
And thence brings down his everlasting rights,
Which there abide, inalienably his,
And indestructible as are the stars.
Nature's primeval state returns again,
Where man stands hostile to his fellow-man;
And if all other means shall fail his need,
One last resource remains – his own good sword.
Our dearest treasures call to us for aid
Against the oppressor's violence; we stand
For country, home, for wives, for children here!

The lines I have emphasised are quoted by an outsider in Rizal's novel sequel *El Filibusterismo* with great pathos, but also with equally great resignation. In this book, which Rizal finished shortly after his 30th birthday, the revolutionary who rebels with brute force fails. Unlike the Swiss confederates in Schiller's drama, he wants to take revenge for selfish reasons, but not to defend the human right to have rights. The terrorist credo of the vengeful rebel invented by Rizal is therefore: 'Force takes precedence over law', and this makes the rebel common with those colonial powers who bent written law to their advantage, denied it to their subjects or callously disregarded it.

Colonialism's social cancer

My digression on Rizal's linguistic and translational work has led me to the centre of a controversy on the political motives behind his reform and translation efforts, which I would like to explore in more detail below. This controversy has to do with the well-known pros and cons that can stir the minds of politically committed spirits when it comes to the question of whether the struggle for freedom should immediately resort to direct violence against the oppressors or rather build up resistance against them through patient mole work. Rizal himself indicated what he had chosen: "Ahora el instrumento principal del corazón y de la cabeza es la pluma" (*Today the pen is the main instrument of the heart and the head*) he wrote in a letter to one of his comrades-in-arms.[10] In Rizal's case, the pen deserves its own consideration. Not only did he use a pen, or more precisely a steel nib (*pluma de acero*) and ink, as a writer, but also as a skilful draughtsman who had enough talent to translate the sketched object of perception into three-dimensional forms.

However, I am not talking about mole work in the sense of intimidating propaganda or agitation. Rizal's 'Maul-Würfe' – his texts thrown onto paper with the pen – are accusatory, sometimes polemical, mostly critical, often unmasking. The steel pen, he wrote in a poem, had long since renounced its romantic vigour and demanded irony and witty humour, even in poetry. Rizal's most important stylistic devices, often used with great acuity, are unmistakably satire, parody, irony and caricaturing exaggeration.

Here is a sample, an excerpt from a prayer of thanksgiving and supplication addressed to God, entitled "Llanto y risas" (*Tears and Laughter*):

> Blessed art Thou, God of freemen. […] I thank Thee for so many good things that Thou hast created, for the kindness Thou dost shower on me alone, favouring the existence of so many calamities to make me laugh; in

10 Epistolario Rizalino II. Manila: Documentos de la Biblioteca Nacional de Filipinas 1930, 21

the same way Thou hast created great and numberless celestial bodies so that the earth can see little lights when the sky is [no longer] cloudy, so that our military officers would have something to put on their sleeves after having killed our brothers! Permit me, Thou who canst forestall everything, Thou whose earthquakes, typhoons and locusts help the others to impoverish us, permit me to address to Thee my entreaty. Thou who hast said that to enter heaven one must be poor, Thou who hast promised to look after those who thirst for justice, keep for our welfare Sagasta [prime minister in 1885] and all the Conservatives, those who deny us the Penal Code, the friars of the four corporations [i.e. the monastic orders] and those who may join them in time, the Guardia Civil, the carabineers and the government employees! Do not forget, above all, to send us every fortnight the worst left-overs Spain has to offer, like the rascals, the dissolute, the hypocrites, the lazy, the ignorant and the hungry; turn everything into an office, put a tax on anything, place at every street corner a censorship office and twenty spies; forbid us to read, write and speak, make us blind, deaf and mute, and leave us only enough strength to clap our hands and to work.[11]

11 "¡Yo te doy gracias por tantas cosas buenas que has creado, por la bondad que me dispensas a mí solo, favoreciendo la existencia de tantas calamidades para hacerme reir, así como creaste grandes e innumerables astros, a fin de que la tierra vea lucecitas cuando el cielo ya no está nublado, a fin de que nuestros militares tengan algo que ponerse en sus mangas, después de matar a nuestros hermanos! Permite, Tú que todo lo previenes, Tú cuyos terremotos, baguios y langostas ayuda a los otros para empobrecernos, permite que Te dirija mi súplica. ¡Tú que dijiste que para entrar en el cielo hay que ser probre, Tú que prometiste Tu mirada a los que tienen sed de justicia, conserva, para nuestro bien, a Sagasta y a todos los conservadores, a los que nos niegan el Código Penal, a los frailes todos de las cuatro corporaciones y a los que con el tiempo puedan ir allá, a los guardias civiles, carabineros y empleados! No Te olvides sobre todo de enviarnos cada quincena todo lo peor que en España sobre, como calaveras, perdidos, hipócritas, holgazanes, ignorantes, hambrientos; haz de todo una oficina, levanta a cualquier cosa un impuesto, pon en cada esquina una censura y veinte espías; prohíbenos leer, escribir, hablar, vuélvenos ciegos, sordos y mudos, y sólo tengamos fuerzas para aplaudir y trabajar." Escritos políticos e historicos por

Oh yes, this is a sharp reckoning with hypocrisy, an unmasking in the form of a parody of sanctimonious prayers of thanksgiving and supplication. The bitterness that speaks from this text has to do not only with the failure of the reforms demanded by the Filipino elites and by the liberals in the Spanish government, but also with the terror that Rizal, as the accuser of arbitrary and lawless colonial rule, and his family, taken into clan custody by the executive power, had to suffer.

Anyway, the quoted excerpt, which is heavily abridged here, may also demonstrate Rizal's virtuosity in handling those literary forms whose exemplary patterns can look back on a very long tradition of criticism of power and religion. Among the classics of satirical criticism of power that were banned but were nevertheless quoted or mentioned by Rizal are

- Menippos of Gadara (3rd century BC),
- Lukian of Samosata (120–180): *Dialogues of the Gods, of the Dead and of Courtesans,*[12]
- Voltaire (1694–1778): *Candide*; *Dictionnaire philosophique* and more,
- Karl Julius Weber (1767–1832),
- Heinrich Heine (1797–1856): *Die Götter im Exil* and more,
- Ernest Renan (1823–1892): *Histoire des origines du christianisme.* Vol. 1: *Vie de Jésus.* [9]1863.

He wrote to Blumentritt, to whom Rizal owed the most important reading recommendations, from London:

> For a long time I had not read a book like [Karl Julius] Weber's, which I owe to you; for a long time in England I had longed for a new philosopher who could write about religion without prejudice, for the thinkers I had

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José Rizal. Manila: Comisión Nacional del Centenario de José Rizal 1961, 174 ff. Translation based on "Tears and Laughter". J. Rizal: Political and Historical Writings VII. Manila 1964, 173 f.

12 We only know about Menippus second-hand, e.g. from Lucian, whose texts were banned by the Catholic Church.

> read were militants, like Voltaire, Cantú, Renan, etc. I think I have found the right man in Karl Julius Weber.[13]

I think it is clear what Rizal means when he speaks of Voltaire, Cesare Cantù (the Italian universal historian) and Ernest Renan as "militants". For they were united by the struggle against the clergy, if not against religion in the sense of an institutionalised power that determined what a Christian could read and how he should live. The fact that Karl Julius Weber wrote about religion "without prejudice" may be true in so far as this freemason from the Hohenlohe region of Württemberg, in his study of the history of monastic life, wanted to concede certain cultural and historical merits to the monks. On the other hand, I have the suspicion that Rizal's sympathy for Weber was due to his undisguised willingness to criticise. For example, statements like the following:

> All superstition, hypocrisy, image worship and fanaticism originated in the monasteries. The unholy belief that all sins could be bought with pious donations, which the self-interest of the monks developed more and more every day, was the tomb of all morality.[14]

If I look at the monk characters in Rizal's novels set on the Philippine island of Luzon – and there are certainly quite a few of them – I find much in common with Weber's crude characterisation. These characters are backward but business-minded, they lease the land they have stolen before, demand alms and tribute at every calendar date of the

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13 Letter to Blumentritt from 18 August 1888. In: Cartas entre Rizal y el Profesor Fernando Blumentritt, 2 Bde. Manila: Comisión Nacional del Centenario de José Rizal, 1961 [Facsimile without page reference]

14 "Aus Klöstern kam aller Aberglaube, Werkheiligkeit, Bilderdienst und Fanatismus. Der heillose Glaube allein, dass man mit frommen Stiftungen alle möglichen Sünden loskaufen könne, den der Eigennutz der Mönche täglich mehr ausbildete, war das Grab aller Moralität." Karl Julius Weber: Die Möncherey oder geschichtliche Darstellung der Klosterwelt,1. Bd. Stuttgart 1819, 308

church year, barter away the absolution rituals devised by their superiors, beat their gullible 'flocks' into the Mass, are feared rapists because of their sexual greed, are fanatical followers of – as Rizal notes – "anti-human" penal teaching, and do not shrink from torture. Anyone who protests is hunted down by the Guardia Civil, will be abused and deported, or entangled in a web of intrigue, with the help of which they are finally brought to justice.

Rizal's novels are anything but subtle in their depiction of colonialist repression and blatant perversions. The story of the farmer Tales, whose wife and daughter are torn from his side by malaria while he is clearing a damp stretch of land, is gruesome; but no sooner do his fields bear fruit than monks lay claim to his land; he loses his case before a corrupt judge, whereupon he takes the law into his own hands against the new tenants, turns into a criminal outlaw and gang leader, is shot unrecognised by his own son, who has been conscripted into the Guardia Civil, after losing his daughter, who throws herself out of a window while fleeing from a rutting Spanish priest. The dramatic stages of this tale of woe run like a fateful leitmotif through the novel's sequel, *El Filibusterismo.* Every now and then, reading the book, one is reminded of the horror stories that the French author Eugène Sue – one of Rizal's favourite writers – tells in his novels about the Jesuits' reign of terror.

Unlike Sue's books, however, Rizal's stories do not contain pure fiction or second-hand quotations. In correspondence with his friends, he himself always emphasised the factual content of his novel-dyptichon. What Eugène Sue had read, fantasised and paraphrased was part of Rizal's personal experience: the cronyism between crown and clergy, or more precisely, between exploitation and paternalism; the harassment of a surveillance system that was still theocratically infiltrated, and the tenacious late feudalistic way of thinking among the elites of the mother country; not forgetting their merciless racism that degraded the nature of the colonised. What Weber called the "tomb of all morality", Rizal regarded in relation to his home island as an infectious form of moral corruption that damages the lives of all – the oppressors as well as the oppressed. In the dedication of his novel *Noli me tangere,* he addresses his fatherland with the following words:

> The history of human suffering records a cancer so malignant that the slightest touch causes irritation and provokes the most searing pain. As often as I conjured up your beloved image in the midst of modern civilisations, whether to rejoice in memories or to compare you with other countries, I saw your face marked by a similar cancer, by a "social cancer".[15]

"Noli me tangere/Don't touch me" means – as we know from our own experience since the Covid pandemic – "stay away from the infected person if you don't want to be infected". In Rizal's time, skin cancer was considered a contagious disease. However, the saying "Noli me tangere!" is known to have come down from the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the New Testament (John 20:17). These words are spoken by Jesus immediately after his resurrection to the woman (Magdalene), who is the first to see him and wants to touch him to assure herself of his physical appearance. The saying can therefore also be understood as a response to a test of truth. "Don't touch me," the novel urges the reader, "or you will see yourself as in a mirror and your eyes will be opened!"

The unmasking effect implied by this can be illustrated by a scene from *El Filibusterismo* (Chapter 18): A magician is performing at the annual fair, and the monks are invited as spectators, including one of the rapists, a Franciscan (Salví). An ancient Egyptian mummy mask emerges from the eerie darkness of the stage into the gloomy light and, with a hollow voice, tells a tale of seduction, rape and murder that takes place at Pharaoh's court, but actually concerns the Franciscan present. The monk feels caught out and falls unconscious as soon as he makes eye contact with the Egyptian mask. The narrator comments on the events with the words of David's Psalm 41(8): "Abyssus abyssum invocat/The abyss calls the abyss". If this formula is taken literally, it becomes clear what Rizal wanted to achieve with his novels: to inspire

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15 "Regístrase en la historia de los padecimientos humanos un cáncer de un carácter tan maligno que el menor contacto le irrita y despierta en él agudísimos dolores. Pues bien, cuantas veces en medio de las civilizaciones modernas he querido evocarte, ya para acompañarme de tus recuerdos, ya para compararte con otros países, tantas veces se me presentó tu querida imagen con un cáncer social parecido." J. Rizal: Noli me tángere. Berlin 1887, 440

readers to look in the mirror, that is, to make them reflect upon the injustice of colonialist oppression and their own reticence.

The secret of illegible writing

Rizal's novels belong in a special way to political literature. The biblical quotations alone, which are remarkably often placed in unusual contexts, signal proximity and distance to a cultural heritage that is in a state of decay, an absolutely undogmatic approach. The novels castigate the administrative colonial regime built on injustice and the abuse of religion that flourishes under its protection, thus criticising power and religion at the same time. But they do not show a way out, they do not outline a political agenda. Rizal leaves that to his pragmatic, reformist writings. The fictional space of the novel, on the other hand, serves him as a field of experimentation in which contradictions, trickery and deceit play a leading role, the whole misery of authoritarian, distorted, mendacious and grotesquely meaningless communication. The reader, I can assure you, will have to arm himself with patience if he wishes to follow Rizal's schedule.

But when it comes to the search for truth, the outsiders in the novels have the floor: the village philosopher (Tasio), who has the reputation of a fool, the innocently persecuted dissident (Elias), who lays down his life for the fugitive Ibarra, and the priestly hermit (Florentino), who explains to the dying terrorist (Simoun) that not brute force, but the fight for justice is the only viable way to set limits to the injustice of the oppressive regime and to protect oneself from the contagion of social cancer.

The village philosopher, one of the narrator's most interesting inventions, is mocked by the villagers as a fool, not least because of his book learning. This leads to a book-burning organised by the pious after his death. A fate that also befalls the very book in which this story is set. For the Spanish monks of the orders ruling the Philippines could not fail to recognise themselves in the satirically inflated characters of the Noli novel, and they immediately reacted in the old manner with a ban and auto-da-fé.

What drove the "frailocracia" – as Rizal called the monk's rule –

into a rage? Let's look over the shoulder of the village philosopher: we see him sitting among his books in his room, dipping his pen into the inkwell and gliding it over the paper. But his handwriting is very peculiar, we can't decipher it because it resembles ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. Asked what it meant, the philosopher replies:

> I don't write for this generation, I write for other times. If my contemporaries could read me, they would burn my books, my life's work. But the generation that deciphers these signs will be educated and understand me. They will say: 'Not everyone slept in that night of our ancestors.'[16]

When he's not writing for posterity, the village philosopher is an Enlightener of the first order. On the night before All Souls' Day, he tells a young couple about the origins of this festival commemorating the dead, which is celebrated in the cemetery as the *Dia de los Muertos* in Mexico, and about the true background to the myth of purgatory. It is a long narrative from the annals of council and church history, peppered with historical names and dates. And it is a fraudulent story, designed to talk the faithful into paying for many masses, with the help of which – the clergy claim – they could shorten the sweaty stay in purgatory for the souls of their deceased. But ultimately this amounts to a gamble, explains the philosopher. Because according to the Gospel of Mark (16:16) 'He who believes and is baptised will be saved; but he who does not believe will be damned', so that only a few Catholics would be saved, while for every single blessed person there would be hundreds, if not thousands, who would fall victim to damnation. The village philosopher considers this to be 'blasphemy' and replies to his listeners when they argue with providence:

> The Creation, i.e. Man, is a contingent and not a necessary being, and God should not have created him, no, if, in order to make *one* happy, he should

16 "Porque no escribo para esta generación, escribo para otras edades. Si esta me pudiera leer, quemaría mis libros, el trabajo de toda mi vida; en cambio, la generación que descifre estos caracteres será una generación instruida, me comprenderá y dirá: *¡No todos dormían en la noche de nuestros abuelos!*" Noli me tángere 1887, 135.

> condemn hundreds to eternal misery, and all of them for inherited faults. No! If that were true, drown your son who is sleeping there.[17]

No wonder the monks wanted to get rid of such statements, even if they appeared in the guise of fiction. It made no difference to them whether the words came from the mouth of a character in a novel or from the inventor of that character. One monk, an Augustinian, attacked Rizal in a series of short polemical writings, ignoring the categorical difference between the voice of a fictional character, the voice of the narrator and the voice of the author. To him, it was clear that whoever criticised the clergy and monasteries in the world of the novel was a mouthpiece of the author.

However, Rizal responded to this attack with a satirical story in which the village philosopher complains to the patron of the Augustinian order, the church father Augustine himself, about not being taken seriously:

> There is (*explains the philosopher in Rizal's fiction*) an unfortunate person from your Order on earth who has already spouted all kinds of nonsense, including the following: An Indio named Rizal is supposed to be responsible for what I said during my earthly existence. And only because this Rizal wrote down my words in a book he had written. If you were to agree with this argument – as you will realise for yourself – then Rizal would also have to share the ideas expressed by the monks, the gendarmes, the governors etc. in his book and be responsible for their contents. That would be like taking everything that you, Sanctissime Doctor, have put into the mouths of heretics, pagans and, not least, Manichaeans, for your own convictions.[18]

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17 "La creación, el hombre es un ser contingente y no necesario, y ese Dios no debía haberle criado, no, si para hacer feliz a uno debía condenar a centenares a una eterna desgracia, y todo por culpas heredadas o de un momento. ¡No!. Si eso fuera cierto, ahogue Ud. a su hijo que allí duerme." Noli me tangere 1887, 68 f.

18 "Hay allá en la tierra un infeliz de vuestra orden que ha cometido entre muchas tonterías, las siguientes: […] Que quiere hacer solidario a un indio llamado Rizal, de lo que yo en vida terrenal he dicho, solo porque este

All I can say is: Well spoken! Although not everyone might see it that way. For the complaint of the village philosopher – doesn't it sound as if he wants to compare the theological writings of the Church Father with fiction? And wouldn't that be to deny theology the nobility of metaphysics? I am not asking these questions out of the blue: as a reading citizen of Civitas Terrena, I have discussed them in dialogue with Rizal. Rizal himself, in fact, commented on them extensively in his correspondence with a Jesuit who tried to persuade him to publicly repent and retract his and his novel characters' criticism of what the Jesuit saw as the unjustly generalised abuse of catholic religion.

At the time of this correspondence, Rizal was in exile on Mindanao, near the sleepy town of Dapitan, of which he wrote, sarcastically, that it could certainly rival the greatest cities in the world in importance.

A plea for doubt

On the one hand, Rizal did well during his four years in exile: he was allowed to explore the surrounding area, taught the village children in a school pavilion built under his supervision, set up a dispensary, improved the farmers' irrigation system, played the lottery and won, bought land and became a prosperous farmer himself. On the other hand, there was strict surveillance by official police informers, and he, the inquisitive traveller, suffered from the stationary existence forced upon him in a narrow-minded world and from the lack of stimulating sociability. "My wings broken", he writes in a poem, "my dwelling place

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Rizal lo hizo constar en un libro que escribió. Como veis, si se sigue este razonamiento, Rizal seria también solidario y participaría de las ideas vertidas por los frailes, guardias civiles, gobernadorcillos, etc.; y vos, santo Doctor, lo seríais también de las palabras que ponéis en boca de los herejes, paganos y sobre todo de los maniqueos." J. Rizal: Obras literarias II: Prosa. Manila: Comisión Nacional del Centenario de José Rizal, 1961, 76 f. – The philosopher speaks to Augustine in this literary 'vision'. In order to make clear what the wider context, not quoted here, tells the reader, I have expanded my translation by a few phrases, D. H.

destroyed, / my faith sold to others and ruins everywhere" (*Vénse rotas mis alas, deshecha la morada, / la fe vendida a otros y ruinas por doquier*).[19]

In short, Rizal had time to reply to the Jesuit priest's arguments in detailed letters. Among the Jesuit's accusations was that Rizal was an ungrateful apostate who had betrayed the Catholic faith in Germany and converted to Protestantism. In a letter dated November 1892, Rizal replied to the challenger with an anecdote that is quite thrilling:

> Rizal a Protestant! A laugh resounds within my breast that I only hold back out of respect for Your Reverence. Your Reverence should have heard my discussions with a Protestant priest, in the long summer twilights, there in the solitudes of the Odenwald forest. There, in calm and cool conversation, talking freely and openly, we spoke of our respective beliefs in the morality of the peoples and the influence on them of their respective creeds. A great respect for the good faith of the opponent and for the most opposite ideas that necessarily follow from the diversity of race, education and age almost always led us to the conclusion that religions, whatever they may be, should not make men enemies of one another but brothers and good brothers. From these conversations, that were repeated almost every day for more than three months, I do not believe I have taken anything, if my judgment does not deceive me, other than a profound respect for every idea sincerely conceived and practised with conviction. Almost every month a Catholic priest from a small village on the banks of the Rhine came to visit the pastor, and this priest, a close friend of the Protestant, gave me an example of this Christian brotherhood. They considered themselves to be two servants of the same God, and instead of spending their time quarrelling with each other, each did his duty, leaving it to his Lord to judge later who had best interpreted his will.[20]

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19 Alfredo S. Veloso: The Complete Poems of José Rizal in Spanish and English. Manila 1961, 136

20 "¡Rizal protestante! Retoza dentro del pecho una carcajada que sólo el respeto por cuanto dice V.R. puede con tener. Hubiese V.R. oído mis discusiones con un cura protes tante, en los largos crepúsculos de verano, allá en las soledades de Odenwald. Allá, en conversación pausada y fría, teniendo la palabra libre, hablábamos de nuestras respectivas creencias de la morali-

I think it is worth recalling the 11th article of the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen,* which declares the free exchange of ideas and opinions to be one of the most noble human rights. Rizal uses the Wilhelmsfeld story to claim this right against those powers that preached intolerance in Spain (until the Franco era), but above all in the colonies, and persecuted those of other faiths as heretics. In his words, Rizal teaches the Jesuit challenger a lesson, the core of which is the demand to recognise an ethos of brotherhood (fraternity) anchored beyond all theological quibbles and fundamentalist doctrines. This by no means excludes the recognition of a 'Supreme Creative Being', as the further course of the epistolary dispute shows. However, Rizal becomes clear: it was not doctrines of faith but reasons of rationality (*raciocinio*) that led him to recognise a supreme, yet at the same time incomprehensible being.

> What [he asks in the correspondence] does mankind want with more Bibles and Gospels? Do you not think that men have done very badly in seeking the divine will in scrolls and temples, instead of in the works of nature and in the sublime vault of heaven (*las obras de la Naturaleza y bajo la augusta boveda de los cielos*)? [Why] interpret dark passages or obscure phrases, which only provokes hatred, war and discord? Wouldn't it be

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dad de los pueblos y la influencia en ellos de sus respectivos credos. Un gran respeto á la buena fé del adversario y á las ideas más opuestas que la diversidad de raza, educación y edad tenían necesariamente que hacer surgir, nos conducía casi siempre á la conclusión de que las religiones, cualesquiera que fuesen, no deben hacer de los hombres enemigos unos de otros sino hermanos y bien hermanos. De estas conferencias que se repetían casi todos los días por espacio de más de tres meses, no creo haber sacado otra cosa, si mí criterio no me engaña, que un profundo respeto á toda idea sinceramente concebida y con convicción practicada. Casi todos los meses venía allí á visitarle un cura católico de un pueblecíto de las orillas del Rhin, y este cura, íntimo amigo del protestante, me daba ejemplo de esta fraternidad cristiana. Se consideraban como dos servidores de un mismo Dios, y en vez de pasar el tiempo riñendo entre si cumplía cada uno con su deber, dejando á su señor el juzgar después sobre quién mejor ha interpretado su voluntad." Epistolario Rizalino IV. Biblioteca Nacional de Filipinas. Manila 1936, 64 f. (11 November 1892)

> better to study the gifts of nature in order to better organise our lives according to its eternal laws, to use its powers for our perfection (*perfeccionamiento*)? When did people actually start to fraternise?[21]

Rizal's questions are clear. His opponent, however, did not want to deal with them, but insisted on his dogmas. This became too much for Rizal and he broke off the correspondence with the words: "Dejemos á Dios lo que es de Dios y á los hombres lo que es de los hombres."[22] (*Let us leave to God what belongs to God and to men what belongs to men.*). In other contexts, he spoke of "*religiosidad*" (religiosity) in the sense of a pragmatic ethic, the normative content of which does not need to be enforced by a system of rewards and punishments. In his eyes, the offensive rejection of a religion that had perfected this system to the advantage of its representatives was necessary in order to get to the root of the fundamental evil of moral corruption, which he called 'social cancer'. He summed up the extent of his contempt for the priestly deception that his novels denounce with a statement that has the potential to live on as a maxim: "Your mission is to baptise the pagans, but mine is to dignify the people."[23]

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21 "¿Que mas Biblia y que mas evangelios quiere la humanidad? ¡Ah! ¿No cree V.R. que los hombres han hecho muy mal en buscar la voluntad divina en pergaminos y templos en vez de buscarla en las obras de la Naturaleza y bajo la augusta bóveda de los cielos? En vez de interpretar pasajes oscuros, o frases oscuras que provocaban odios, guerras y disensiones. ¿No era mejor interpretar los hechos de la naturaleza para amoldar mejor nuestra vida a sus inviolables leyes, utilizar sus fuerzas para nuestro perfeccionamiento? ¿Cuando han empezado a hermanarse de hecho los hombres sino cuando han dado con la primera pagina de la obra de Dios?" Epistolario Rizalino IV, 119

22 Raul J. Bonoan: The Rizal-Patells Correspondence. The Hitherto Unpublished Letters of José Rizal and Portions of Fr. Pablo Pastells's Fourth Letter and Translation of the Correspondence together with a Historical Background and Theological Critique. Manila 1994, 115

23 "Ihre [der Missionare] Mission ist, die Heiden zu taufen, meine aber ist, die Menschen zu würdigen." Letter to Blumentritt dated 2 February 1890. The English translation in *The Rizal–Blumentritt Correspondence* II (Mani-

The enlightener's message

My intention was not only to portray Rizal as a partisan of independent thought, but also to emphasise his position as a late Enlightenment thinker in the struggle against the exploitative and at the same time backward-looking powers of European colonialism. Of course, it is not a question of categorising him as belonging to the epoch around 1800 known as the 'Late Enlightenment'. Rather, I wanted at least to hint at the intellectual charm of independent thinking that characterises Rizal's writings and letters. As a critic of colonialism, he unmasked the abuse of religion in the service of colonialist exploitation and oppression with satirical acuity. As an enlightened sceptic, he defended a way of free religiosity that knew neither cultic constraints nor theological dogmas nor the pharmaceuticals of paradisiacal rewards or terrifying punishments in hell. And as a theologically trained rationalist, he understood 'God' as a cipher of transcendence, the meaning of which man cannot comprehend, but at best can only guess at.

Rizal's view can be compared to what the German Enlightenment philosopher Lessing called "natural religion". This refers to a religious ethos that requires neither 'scrolls and temples' (Rizal) nor eschatological 'punishments and rewards' (Lessing), which the clergy use as a means of discipline to keep the lives of the faithful under control. The centre of strength of this ethos lies – according to Lessing's *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (The Education of the Human Race) published in 1780 – in the hope of a

> time of fulfilment, since the more convinced a person's mind feels of an ever better future, the more he will not need to borrow motives for his actions from this future, since he will do good because it is good.[24]

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la 1992, p. 328) "Your mission […], but mine is to make men worthy" is misleading, for the German verb "würdigen" refers to the *recognition* of others, not to their improvement.

24 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: Werke, Bd. 10, 1778–1781. Ed. A. Schilson and A. Schmitt. Frankfurt a.M. 2001, 96

Doing good for good's sake is a maxim that applies to everyone, regardless of origin, faith or social status. The maxim does not exclude the idea of a Divine or Supreme Being. What it does exclude is submission to the authority of a dogma or a church. Seen in this light, the demand to do good for its own sake stands for a universal imperative or, in other words, for a valid cosmopolitan ethos. Rizal's criticism of the absolute claim to truth backed by Scripture and the clergy as her exclusive interpreters, as expressed in his correspondence with his Jesuit adversary, is based on this ethos. I think that this attitude is not least evident in his struggle for the recognition of Human Dignity and Human Rights.

Yet, the comparison with Lessing's "natürliche Religion" cannot console us for what happened to Rizal posthumously. When, in 1902 – six years after his death – a church was founded in the Philippines, the *Iglesia Independiente,* that turned its back on run-down Catholicism, Rizal was one of the first martyrs to be canonised in this new 'temple'. By then, with the active support of the new US colonial regime, the state-sponsored personality cult had begun to emerge, which continues to feed a growing idol industry based on the brand name of the national 'saint'. Every Philippine government, no matter how corrupt, has taken full advantage of this offer. In 1956, over the objections of the established Catholic Church and religious leaders, the government finally passed a Lex Rizal, making the author's novels – in whatever translation and edition – compulsory reading in all schools and universities. Absurdly, the law also dictated the patriotic and moral aspects through which the work was to be read and interpreted.

Rizal, when he was still walking the earth, wrote repeatedly and prominently about how close laughter and tears lie. And what about my allusion at the end of the last paragraph? Is it not a case of tragic irony, compared to the independence of thought for which Rizal fought with his steely pen? Should I cry or laugh, or do both at the same time? Rizal himself gives an answer to this question, based on his own experience, which sounds rather subjective. But it is an answer that says much more than a supposedly objective testimony from the outside, even if it speaks to us from the past. In the autobiographical text entitled *Llanto y risas,* from which I have already quoted, we read:

My homeland's breezes preserve my sighs, in her fountains are my teardrops, on the leaves of her canes, palms and trees I have written my complaints and remembrances. She offers me a sweet death and, nevertheless, far from all that I love, in a foreign land, among indifferent and unknown people, I do not weep for her; I am frightened by her outstretched arms. My eyes are dry and I laugh. I laugh when I think of her miseries, when I hear the complaints of my brothers, when I see the dark mist that covers their horizon. I laugh when I see my people, brutalised and deceived with grand theories and dazzling words, when I hear how some demand freedom and reason while others set obstacles and routine, some want human rights, brotherhood and rule of law, and others exceptions from them![25]

25 "La brisa de mi patria guarda mis suspiros, en sus fuentes hay gotas de mis lágrimas, en las hojas de sus cañas, palmeras y árboles he escrito mis quejas y recuerdos, ella me ofrece una dulce muerte, y sin embargo, lejos de todo lo que amo, en extranjero suelo, entre gente indiferente y desconocida, no lloro por ella, me espantan sus tendidos brazos. Mis ojos esan secos y yo me río. Me río cuando pienso en sus miserias, cuando escucho las quejas de mis hermanos, cuando veo la oscura niebla que cubre su horizonte. Me río cuando le veo a mi pueblo embrutecido y engañado con grandes teorías y deslubrantes palabras, cuando oigo pedir libertad y razón para unos, trabas y rutina para él, leyes humanas, fraternidad, derechos para aquellos, ¡para él excepciones!" Escritos políticos 1961, 174. Translation based on "Tears and Laughter". J. Rizal: Political and Historical Writings VII. Manila 1964, 172 f.