Rizal's serious-comic novels

The author's choice

Rizal's novels are read by many interpreters as a portrayal of Philippine society suffering under the yoke of Spanish rule. However, the term 'Philippine society' can only be used in a limited sense. Although the locations of the author's two novels, with their manageable social groups, are relatively numerous, they are to be found in a single province on the main island of Luzon, and, in addition to the Spanish protagonists, they present – apart from Spanish colonialists – mainly people of different origins and social status living in this region. On the other hand, at the time of the novel's action (ca. 1880–1890), the archipelago's countless islands were inhabited by culturally diverse communities, without important organisational or ideological commonalities.

It is no mystery why Rizal chose the sophisticated form of the novel to bring the Filipino-Tagalog world he knew from memory and visualise it in vivid images. Polemics and critical essays offer no space for the creation of a polyphonic, dynamically moving world in which remembered experience can be embodied in a colourful cast of characters. Novellas and short stories offer snapshots and therefore cannot do justice to what the reader expects if he wants to engage with the pictures of a complex society entangled in contradictory actions. A successful novel, on the other hand, can offer a high degree of authenticity and, in the end, perhaps even a portrait of a fictional character who, as he goes

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through rough adventures, invites the reader to identify with him on a trial basis. This is particularly probable when the story that unfolds in the novel tells of a hero's struggle with more or less openly antagonistic forces that he either overcomes or succumbs to.

Epic fiction allows the author to distance himself from his ego and from his opinions by introducing an indeterminate or collaborative narrator. Thomas Mann, who ennobled the novel as an art form, celebrated this freedom by invoking an Apollonian figure of irony in whose light the fictional world appears in a dazzling, i.e. ambiguous "objectivity":

> The art of the epic is 'Apollonian' art, as the aesthetic term goes, because Apollo, the far-sighted, is the god of distance, the god of detachment, of objectivity, the god of irony.[1]

In the polemical essay, on the other hand, which takes up the contemporary challenges and can also use narrative forms, the author himself has to stand on the battlefield and is exposed to the consequences of his attacks without any distance. The mask of the pseudonym, which Rizal occasionally used, only protected him for a short time, as the experienced reader would soon be able to identify the author behind the mask by his individual style.

In the fictional cosmos the narrative follows neither biography nor history, which is peppered with dates. Instead, it creates a world in which space and time, people and objects have a virtual existence. However, this condition of existence, which is linked to the author's power of invention, does not limit the experiential content of the narrative; on the contrary, the veil of fiction can even be torn open for a moment here and there. When the author proclaims that his story will reveal the (imported) "disease" that afflicts him and his countrymen, he can rely on the thrust of his discursive style, which favours analy-

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1 "Die Kunst der Epik ist 'apollinische' Kunst, wie der ästhetische Terminus lautet; denn Apollo, der Fernhintreffende, ist der Gott der Ferne, der Gott der Distanz, der Objektivität, der Gott der Ironie." Thomas Mann: Essays I. Ausgewählte Schriften zur Literatur, ed. Michael Mann. Frankfurt a.M. 1977, 347

sis and polemic. I mention here only his unsparing indictment of the notorious incompetence of the Spanish colonial administration, published in *La Solidaridad* on 15 December 1890 under the title "Como se gobiernan las Filipinas" (*How the Philippines are governed*). Rizal's choice of epic narrative, however, was not only intended to widen the circle of his audience to include the diffuse readership that expected more from the book than just topical political commentary, but also to present the plight of his country – as he himself wrote – in a "series of images" (*cuadros sucesivos*).

The choice of a type of fiction known as the episodic novel was also in keeping with this intention, as it allows the narrator to move between unconnected settings and groups of actions. Rizal categorised the novel narrative as belonging to the rhetorical *genus mixtum.* In the ancient textbooks of rhetoric, this genre formed the middle between the 'high' (epic, tragedy) and 'low' (satire, comedy) registers of style and representation, thus participating in both, free and unbound to alternate between all registers and enrich them with new ones. The novel, as the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin concludes, is therefore not only the genre par excellence when it comes to embodying the 'serious-comic', but also when it comes to resolving the apparent contradiction between experience and invention in a narrative, yet protean and mutable form. Here, invention is as free in the processing of experience, as the latter – subjective as it is – provides brooding self-consciousness with the material for ever more expansive, ever more daring inventions. In short, the novel is the literary genre with the greatest potential for the critique of authority, since it has dethroned classical normative poetics in order to suggest by the plot the search for paths that run on this side of fatum, but through the unpredictability of the contingent.

With regard to *Don Quixote,* Rizal speaks of 'punishing and laughing' literature, while Bakhtin, referring to Dostoevsky's enthusiasm for *Don Quixote,* speaks of the 'serious-comic genre'.[2] The adventures

2 In a sketch from Rizal's student years with the title *Il consejo de los deoses* (The Court of the Gods), the goddess Minerva judges over Cervantes' famous novel: "El Quijote, su parto grandioso, es el látigo que castiga y corrige sin que derrame sangre, pero excitando la risa; es el néctar que encierra las

of *Don Quixote* are thus something of a source of inspiration for this never-ending series of enchanting novels, in which the reader can observe from a safe distance the comic and at the same time painful clashes between the rebellious imagination and prosaic reality. And all of this often takes place before the reader's eyes – as Dostoevsky puts it – in the light of "the most bitter irony".[3]

The serious-comic (Greek σπουδογέλοιον/spoudogéloion) narrative prose can be traced back – as can be seen in Bakhtin – to an old tradition of satirical writing, which is associated with the name of the Greek philosopher Menippos of Gadara (3rd century BCE).[4] Nevertheless, since the Renaissance at the latest, the 'Menippean satire' named after this Cynic (also known as 'Menippea') has produced a variety of forms that do not conform to a single, rule-based literary model or even normative expectations. Rather, it is the freedom that contributes to the attraction of the Menippea as an unprecedentedly flexible form of narrative: the licence to mix styles and switch between time and space on the fly, the self-ironic questioning of the role of the narrator, the blurring of the boundaries between dialogue and gossip, the breaking out of the illusionary space of fiction and, last but not least, the satirical tone that exposes the sacred and the sublime, heroism and the arrogant gesture of power to laughter.

A typical Menippean character, for example, is the wise jester Tasio in *Noli me tangere,* who wittily comments on the discord among Filipi-

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virtudes de la amarga medicina; es la mano halagüeña que guía enérgica a las pasiones humanas." (*Don Quixote, his [Cervantes'] great birth, is the whip that punishes and corrects without bloodshed, but excites laughter; it is the nectar that contains the virtues of bitter medicine, it is the flattering hand that energetically guides the human passions.*) J. Rizal: Obras Literarias II: Prosa. Manila 1961, 6

3 Quoted from M. Bakhtin: Probleme der Poetik Dostojevskijs. Berlin 1985, 143

4 See the article "Menippos" in New Pauly online: https://referenceworks.brill.com/display/db/npoe/. For information on the literary history of the Menippea see W. v. Koppenfels: Der Andere Blick oder Das Vermächtnis des Menippos. Paradoxe Perspektiven in der europäischen Literatur. München 2007

nos and, like the narrator in Voltaire's *Candide,* recommends tending the garden as a remedy. Rizal liked to take advantage of Menippea's liberties, using the carnivalesque strategies of disguise. Several of his texts serve as examples: The Tribunal of the Gods (*El consejo de los deoses,* 1880), The Thought of a Filipino (*Pensamiento de un Filipino,* 1884), a monologue by a man who, for the sake of his own peace of mind, wants to stay out of the dispute between progressives and clerics, the dream vision of Fratre Rodriguez (1889), the travesty of defence against Vicente Barrantes (1889/90) and the visit of the Lord to the Philippines (*Una visita del Señor a las Filipinas*), which drives Peter to flee and puts Jesus behind bars.

A key text in the Menippean style is a partly autobiographical, partly parodic text entitled *Llanto y risas* (Tears and Laughter), which Rizal used and varied in different contexts. The serious comedy here is attributed to those eccentric bodily reactions that change according to the circumstances, for which the Mexican poet Juan de Dios Peza, a contemporary of Rizal, found a few verses that hit the nail on the head better than any other, however ingenious explanations:

> El carnaval del mundo engaña tanto,
> que las vidas son breves mascaradas;
> aquí aprendemos a reír con llanto
> y también a llorar con carcajadas.[5]
>
> *The carnival of the world is so deceiving,*
> *that lives are short masquerades;*
> *here we learn to laugh while crying*
> *and likewise to cry while laughing.*

5 Juan de Dios Peza: Poesias Completas. Recuerdos y Esperanzas. Paris 1898, 22–24. I quote (and translate) here the last stanza of Dios Peza's poem *Reír llorando* (Weeping Laughing), which he dedicated to the English actor David Garrick.

Place, time and personnel of the plot

So far I have spoken of two novels when referring to the novel-dichotomy, an arrangement that I will largely maintain. It is true that *El Filibusterismo* links up with *Noli me tangere,* takes on some of the characters from it and explicitly appeals to the reader's memory. However, it is easy to read the second book without any knowledge of the first. According to the characters in the novel, there is an interval of thirteen years between the events narrated in the two books. The gap between the publication dates of both books – the production time of the second novel – is just under four years. The narrative time, which is represented in a novel as a list of hours, days, weeks, months or years, can be capricious, uncountable or undefined. In *Noli me tangere,* apart from the epilogue, the action takes place consecutively between the end of October (preparations for All Souls' Day) and the end of December (Christmas). The events of the sequel, *El Filibusterismo,* also take place in the comparatively cool months of December and January, and towards the end recall the "Deadly January" of the Cavite insurrection of 1872.

When discussing the different tenses used in the novel, one should not forget the external, historical time to which the narrative events can be related as a frame of reference. Do the stories describe Philippine society around 1882 (Rizal's departure for Europe), around 1887 (the year of publication of *Noli me tangere*) or around 1891 (the year of publication of *El Filibusterismo*)? The interval of thirteen years mentioned by the characters in the novel is of no help here, since it belongs to the interior of the fictional world and plays with the meaning of the 'number of death', which is rooted in popular numerical mysticism: '13 years ago to the day', it says in one chapter, Ibarra died (*Fili* 22), and on another page with the same wording, '13 years ago to the day', Basilio's mother died (*Fili* 38). Obviously, the events depicted in the novel take place in Rizal's present and can therefore be read as a commentary on time, which excludes neither the past nor the future, but rarely addresses them explicitly. Rizal occasionally spoke of the "last ten years" as a time frame, which roughly corresponds to the decade between 1880 and the publication date of the second novel.

The settings are also carefully chosen. While the events in *Noli me*

tangere take place mainly in the fictional village of San Diego, in *El Filibusterismo* the focus is on Manila's urban society. A carriage ride from the city takes the reader to the village, while a detour by boat up the river and back through the villages takes the reader to the city. In the village, the clergy rule unchallenged; in the city, they come into conflict with the urban milieu and rebellious students. Not only the settings, but also the power games of the colonialist profiteers are closely related. This is also true of those who try to find a way out, whether through patience or violence, and fail miserably. In *Noli me tangere*, the hero, who appears in the guise of a reformer, is broken by the intrigues of the *frailocracia*. In the sequel, in which, masked and under a false name, he plans a campaign of revenge disguised as a revolutionary, he fails because of himself.

Both books often talk about the abyss, but what is missing is the bridge that would allow the country and the community to be saved from the fall. In *Noli me tangere* the sage Tasio comments on this sinister threat with the following words:

> The government has no idea of a stable future. The government is the arm, the monastery the head. Out of habit, it drifts from abyss to abyss, becomes a shadow of itself and loses its meaning; weak and incapable, it places everything in venal hands.[6]

The relationships between the various characters and groups of protagonists in the novel are abysmal too: in the sense of social strife, open deceit and insidious violence. None of them has a happy ending, which, despite the ironic tone, gives the novels the character of an unfinished story, the reasons for which are left to the reader to discover. At no point do the novels provide examples of the social resource of solidarity that is needed to effectively limit the excesses of an unbridled power.

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6 "El Gobierno no sueña en ningún porvenir robusto, es un brazo, la cabeza es el convento, y por esta inercia con que se deja arrastrar de abismo en abismo, se convierte en sombra, desaparece su entidad, y débil e incapaz todo lo confía a manos mercenarias." Noli me tangere 1887, 139

Against the abuse of power

Menippean effects ensure that the difference between reality and appearance is blurred, and that the apparently simple reason for what is said is suddenly cast into twilight. These effects can also be found where one character or another, in the role of a trained speaker, intervenes in the narrator's action to address both a fictional counterpart and a potential reader. I would like to point out here that this dual engagement is a striking feature of the literary eloquence that characterises the successful political novel.

The prerequisites were there, for Rizal had received a solid rhetorical training in the schools of the religious orders, which he was able to use in a variety of ways with his own creative freedom. In the novel, the author's trained eloquence not only plays a role in the shaping of speech and counter-speech, but is also evident in those longer speeches which, although intended for the audience immanent in the fiction, at the same time speak to the potential reading public beyond the boundaries of fiction. These include the political reflections of the novel's outsider characters, such as the foolish sage Tasio, the outlaw Elias or the hermit Florentino. But they also include the inhuman inflammatory speeches of the vengeful Simoun (alias Ibarra) in *El Filibusterismo* and the All Souls' Day sermon of the monk-priest Dámaso in *Noli me tangere*. These speeches are successful examples of eloquence gone astray or turned into parody, which either misses the ears of the pious listeners or frightens them.

In short, in the narrative prose of the novel, literary eloquence works not only through persuasion, as in pragmatic speech, but also through the juxtaposition of antagonistic points of view embodied in speech and counter-speech, or – in the parodistic variant – through the grotesque exaggeration (hyperbole) of the speaker's persuasive intention. However, in those cases where Rizal's narrator lets the persuasive speech seep like a threat into the souls of the poor villagers, the author is usually a cleric who abuses the power of his words for the sake of mammon. In the chapter entitled "Sisa" (No. 16) of *Noli me tangere,* the narrator prepares such a scene in the form of an accusatory speech, the wording of which blurs the line between the simulated voice of the narrator and the real author:

> But the poor man, the pauper who barely earns enough to live on and has to bribe the directors, scribes and soldiers to let him live in peace, does not sleep as peacefully as the artisan poets think they do but never have suffered the hardships of misery. The poor man is sad and pensive. […] He prays in the language of his misery; his soul weeps for himself and for the dead whose love was his good. His lips may utter salutations, but his mind cries out complaints and lamentations. […] And you, Religion preached for suffering humanity, have you forgotten your mission to comfort the oppressed in their misery and to humble the mighty in their pride, and would you now only have promises for the rich, for those who can pay you?[7]

Basilio's mother, the penniless Sisa – the story continues – thinks to hear the preacher's voice during a sleepless night, urging her not to spend the coin she has saved for her children, but to give it to the church. "You must sacrifice yourself," says the voice, "Starve! Heaven is dear!" – which forces the narrator to conclude that it seems certain that the poor will not go to heaven! The poor in *El Filibusterismo* even go much further, blatantly denouncing religious teachers as great deceivers:

> Oh, God, oh God! said a poor woman, emaciated by dint of fasting; before You there is no rich man, no poor man, no white man, no black man … You will do us justice! – Yes, replied her husband; as long as the God they

7 "Pero el pobre, el indigente que apenas gana para mantenerse y tiene que sobornar a los directorcillos, escribientes y soldados para que le dejen vivir en paz, ése no duerme con la tranquilidad que creen los poetas artesanos, los cuales tal vez no hayan sufrido las carencias de la miseria. El pobre está triste y pensativo. […] Reza en el idioma de su miseria; su alma llora por sí y por los seres muertos cuyo amor era su bien. Sus labios pueden proferir salutaciones, pero su mente grita quejas y lamentos. […] Y tú, Religión predicada para la humanidad que sufre, ¿habrás olvidado tu misión de consolar al oprimido en su miseria y de humillar al poderoso en su orgullo y sólo tendrías ahora promesas para los ricos, para los que pueden pagarte?" Noli me tangere 1887, 73

> preach is not pure invention, a deception! They are the first not to believe in him![8]

While the poor woman repeats the mantra that all men are equal before God, the man expresses the radical suspicion of priestly fraud. However, the narrator has another arrow in his quiver, dedicated, so to speak, to the secular counterpart of the same medal. If on the one hand the clerical hypocrites are the target, on the other hand it is the political rulers. When the girl Julí wakes up from her nightmares, crying with fear, the narrator says:

> And in the meantime, those who were so happy with the fate of the people, those who ordered legal murders, those who violated justice and used the law to support violence, slept in peace.[9]

Criticism of religion and criticism of power go hand in hand in such passages. The criticism is aimed at the age-old nepotism between the Church and the Crown, which is peculiar to Spanish colonialism. The narrator does not directly take sides, but like the "limping devil" in Luis Vélez de Guevara's satirical novel of the same name, gives the reader a bird's-eye view of the parlours, bedrooms and hearts of his characters and asks disturbing questions.[10] "Dark is the night, quiet sleep the neighbours", begins the chapter on Sisa in *Noli me tangere,* only to let the gaze wander over the poor and the rich, the power-

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8 "¡Ah, Dios, ah Dios! decía una pobre mujer, demacrada á fuerza de ayunar; delante de tí no hay rico, no hay pobre, no hay blanco, no hay negro …. tú nos harás justicia! – Sí, le contestaba el marido; con tal que ese Dios que predican no sea pura invencion, un engaño! Ellos son los primeros en no creer en él!" El Filibusterismo 1891, 235. Translation by J. Ventura Castro.

9 "Y entre tanto los que disponían tan alegremente de los destinos de los pueblos, el que mandaba los asesinatos legales, el que violaba la justicia y hacía uso del derecho para sostener á la fuerza, dormían en paz." El Filibusterismo 1891, 233. Translation by J. Ventura Castro.

10 Luis Vélez de Guevara: The Limping Devil – El Diablo Cojuelo. Bilingual Edition. Translated & Annotated by Robert S. Rudder and Ignacio López-Calvo. Doral, FL: Stockcero 2018

less and the powerful, and finally through the shack and the troubled thoughts of the widow Sisa. Here the narrative not only simulates the ghostly flight, but also involves the reader in the internal perspective of the causes of poverty distorted by religious blindness and the abuse of power. The criticism of the alliance between the Crown and the Church, which I mentioned before, is unfolded here in perspective, embedded in the fictional experience of the narrated characters.

Before the following chapter (No. 17), which continues the story of Sisa, the author – note: not the narrator! – has inserted the well-known title *La vida es sueño* (Life is a dream) from a 17th-century tragicomedy by Pedro Calderón de la Barca. The dreams that haunt Sisa's son Basilio in this chapter belong to both spheres of experience, the serious and the comic (the tragicomic). In the first dream, he witnesses his brother's violent death at the hands of a priest; in the second, he finds himself in a bucolic fairy-tale world where his brother is alive and well, sitting in a tree and in a bell at the same time. At this point, the narrator takes the liberty of citing Hans Christian Andersen's *Sandman,* called Ole-Lukøie (eye-closer), as the author of the dreamed fairy tale. Rizal, it will be recalled, translated Andersen into Tagalog. For the nightmare, on the other hand, the author once again seems to feel personally responsible, shouting an almost mystical commentary from outside into the world of fiction.

In a footnote (*Noli,* page 79) he wonders whether it is a matter of "dream or reality" (*sueño ó realidad*), since the violent perpetrator in Basilio's dream is probably a Franciscan, but in the author's world he is an Augustinian, even known by name, who has the reputation of being a thug. It seems as if the author himself is speaking at this point, because the footnote is marked with the abbreviation "N. del T.", which means nothing other than 'Nota del Traductor', and this of course adds to the confusion, since a translator has no business here. The reader, however, has a choice: either to accept the author's careless handling of his text, or to take the formula "dream or reality" seriously, as if it were a magic spell, alluding to a fundamental ambivalence that runs like a common thread through Rizal's world of experience and fiction.

However, at the point where one might expect the author to make a direct statement about his intention to instruct or persuade, in the dedication to his countrymen that precedes the novel *Noli me tangere,*

Rizal holds back. His intention, he says, is to describe unsparingly the state of Philippine society, which is marked by a cancerous tumour. In medicine, symptom description and diagnoses are usually the necessary prerequisites for appropriate prescriptions and therapy recommendations. The author, however, expressly refrains from this and advises his readers to think for themselves about the nature and origin of the remedies. This corresponds to the speaker/narrator's appeal to his listeners/readers to form their own judgement.

Rhetoric of carnivalesque eloquence

Rizal's *impartialité* refers to this, a term that resembles like a twin the 'objectivity' favoured by Thomas Mann, but here in the sense of impartiality prohibiting the speaker/narrator from passing an unmediated judgement on the facts narratively presented. As the Roman historians (and Rizal) knew, a good orator is characterised by a combination of *fides et eloquentia,* credibility and eloquence. I am not at all suggesting that Rizal's narrator is guided by this ethos. But the author, Rizal himself, did it, claiming that everything in his novel was true. But if the narrator, or even the characters in the novel, were to submit to such an obligation, the masquerade on the narrative stage would become a lie, and it would prove right those grumpy know-it-alls who don't want to distinguish between fiction and fact.

A special feature of Rizal's novels is the link between the plot and the calendar of the church year: in *Noli me tangere* with All Saints'-Day and All Souls'-Day, in *El Filibusterismo* with Christmas. In many Catholic countries, the so-called threshold times, which can last several weeks depending on local tradition, have always been among the most popular occasions for day-long celebrations. All the souls – young and old – of the village or town communities take part in the preparation and performance of processions, passion plays, masses, recitals, dances, concerts, banquets and fireworks; every guest, no matter how foreign – rich or poor, friend or foe, Filipino or Spaniard – is also welcome (*Noli,* p. 143). During these days of celebration, the streets and squares become a fairground and a stage on which everyone, more or less masked or disguised, can pose and, whether in the role of jester or

penitent, enter into a kind of magical contact with a world other than the everyday world.

Mikhail Bakhtin explained this playful search for a different experience as the need to temporarily step out of everyday life without having to leave. The folk festival – whether religious or secular – 'carnivalises' the orderliness that has become fossilised in hierarchies and habits by placing it in a state of ritually stylised anarchy for a limited period of time. What is neatly separated for the sake of the prevailing order – the high from the low, the sacred from the profane, wisdom from folly, purity from impurity, etc. – is mingled together in this period between the seasons, thus taking on a highly ambiguous meaning. Rizal has devoted atmospherically dense descriptions to these carnivalesque events.

In the serious-comic novel, the Menippea lives on in the sublimated form of carnivalesque narrative strategies. Rizal encountered this tradition in Boccaccio's novellas, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Voltaire's *Candide*. Although the literary theorist Bakhtin drew his evidence from ancient European festival culture and its ritual dynamics, he seems to want to describe the need for the playful inversion of everyday order as a universal phenomenon. He explains the carnival attitude with the concept of a 'concrete-sensual form' of emotional expression that could be observed 'worldwide', while its performatively generated appearance would transcend the boundaries between the neatly separated realities managed by everyday common sense, in order to place all orders into a twilight of 'ambivalence'.[11]

This is not the place to elaborate on this theory. I mention it here because it opened my eyes to Rizal's intuitive appropriation of those narrative forms that manage to leave that inner contradiction without

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11 M. M. Bachtin: Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo (1963), Sobranie sočinenij v semi tomach, tom 6 Raboty 1960-x–1970-x gg. Institut mirovoj literatury, im. M. Gor'kogo Rossijskoj akademii nauk. Moskva: Russkie slovari jazyki slavjanskoj kul'tury 2002, 138. – The satirical style of writing is not limited to the European literary tradition, but is part of world literature, cf. Zhang Longxi: The Poetics of World Literature. In: Theo D'haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (Hg.): The Routledge Companion to World Literature. London & New York 2012, S. 356–364

a neat resolution to which Bakhtin's alludes with the central concept of 'ambivalence'. The linguistic forms of such ambivalences are well known and are explained by Bakhtin primarily in terms of their rhetorical registers of expression and style; for example: ambiguity, parody, travesty, mystification, mundus inversus, and not least – I would add – the genre syncretism, which gleefully disregards the academic boundaries between the social novel, the thesis novel, the artist's novel, the Bildungsroman, the adventure novel, the picaresque, or the romance novel.

Such forms of subversive writing can be found in many of Rizal's literary texts, especially in his 'Romandyptichon'. The entry of the saints into the community – the so-called *paseo* – at the beginning of the religious holidays is part of both All Saints'-Day and Christmas. Rizal's narrator invests in both novels a great deal of space to such an event. In *Noli me tangere* a separate chapter (Chapter 38) is devoted to the procession that passes through the village for the fourth time; in *El Filibusterismo,* Basilio's carriage is caught in the middle of the Christmas procession that takes place on 5 January and re-enacts the entrance of the Three Kings (Chapter 5). The narrator describes the folklore in passing, but pays particular attention to the decorations, the lighting, the music, the bustle of the festivities and the wooden statues of saints that pass by. The narrator deceives the reader, who is eager for ethnographic descriptions of Filipino festival culture, by promising to satisfy his curiosity with feigned friendliness, but then presents him with two parodies of local newspaper reportage in a chapter entitled *Correspondencias* (*Noli,* chapter 28). The motto is: 'Everyone talks about the fair as they like' (*Cada uno habla de la feria como le va en ella*).

The narrator's comments are usually mocking and the observers' judgements ironic, if not sarcastic. The figures of the saints generally have a sad expression, the reason for which, as the text suggests, is their escort. In fact, in one exemplary passage, Saint Joseph "with a resigned and sad expression" is accompanied by two soldiers of the Civil Guard as if they had arrested him (*Fili,* p. 33 ff.). But then the narrator focuses on the wooden figure of the Virgin Mary, who follows Joseph at his heels. Not only is she dressed like an ancient *divina pastora,* but she also hides her sacred head under a "*sombrero de frondeuse*". She

too, the most beautiful, according to the narrator, "wears a sad expression, like all the images that Filipinos make" (*triste igualmente de espresion como todas las imágenes que hacen los filipinos*). But her accessory, the 'rebel hat' (*sombrero de frondeuse*), speaks another language, giving her the flair of an activist ready to take to the barricades like the women of the Paris Commune. The travesty has a double meaning here: literally, it stands for the disguise of Mary as the divine keeper (*divina pastora*), but figuratively it stands for the reinterpretation of the Good Virgin as a rebel, who even – as the text says – seems to be ashamed of the deformation of her figure by the rags that have been slipped under her skirt to reveal her impending motherhood.

The narrative play with ambivalences is, as Bakhtin argues, typical of the carnival experience, whose vanishing points are to be sought in the imaginary worlds of popular festive culture. Basilio senses the "delicious atmosphere of a joyful family celebration" (*Fili,* p. 35: *un aire tan deliciosamente de fiesta alegre y familiar*) as he wanders through the Christmas village. But nothing is the same as it used to be: poverty, he thinks, has increased because the rice harvest has failed, the deadly cattle plague has ravaged the draught animals, the rent keeps rising arbitrarily, and the Guardia Civil attacks are rampant.

Who is the Lord, who the Work?

What Basilio thought about the prevailing arbitrariness is then summarised in the fairground chapter (17) in the middle of the novel in a detailed picture of the topsy-turvy world. Here, one of the fairground stalls offers Filipino society for sale in the form of peasant-like carved wooden figures. Everyone is there, "in all sizes and shapes, types, races and professions of the archipelago, Indios, Spaniards, Chinese, mestizos, monks, priests, employees, mayors, students, military personnel, etc." The onlookers can recognise themselves in them. There is also the Guardia Civil, who escort a man in handcuffs who bears the title "*Pais del Abaká*" (land of the Manilahemp) and looks "as if he were being taken off to be shot" (*Fili,* p. 129). The wood-carved Manila monks on sale in the stall seem to belong to another world, if one takes the text literally:

> No, the friars of the Filipinas were different [unlike the European monks]: elegant, handsome, well-dressed, their tonsures well cut, their features regular and serene, their look contemplative, expression saintly, somewhat pink in the cheeks, a bamboo in one hand and little leather shoes on their feet, making you want to adore them and put them under a bell jar. In place of the symbols of gluttony and drunkenness of their brothers in Europe, those of Manila had the book, the crucifix, the palm of the martyr; instead of kissing simple peasant girls, those of Manila, gravely bowing and almost kneeling, gave their hand to be kissed to children and to adults; instead of the full pantry and dining room, their localities in Europe, in Manila they have the chapel and the study desk; instead of the mendicant friar who goes from door to door on his donkey and his sack asking for alms, the friars of Filipinas pour out gold with full hands among the poor indios …[12]

The beautiful world of wood-carved monks that the narrator describes was probably – if you put yourself in the shoes of the maker and seller – a tempting proposition, for a well-carved and neatly painted religious figure was and still is highly prized by Filipino Catholics. Those who could afford it had a shrine or chapel at home, where an array of wooden fetish figures from the Christian or mystical pantheon awaited worship by the householder. In *Noli me tangere* (Chapter 6), the nar-

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12 "No: los frailes de Filipinas eran otros: elegantes, pulcros, bien vestidos, el cerquillo bien cortado, las facciones regulares y serenas, la mirada contemplativa, espresion de santo, algo de rosa en las mejillas, baston de palasan en la mano y zapatitos de charol en los piés, que dan ganas de adorarlos y ponerlos bajo campanas de cristal. En vez de los símbolos de la gula é incontenencia de sus hermanos en Europa, los de Manila tenían el libro, el crucifijo, la palma del martirio; en vez de besar á las simples campesinas, los de Manila daban de besar gravemente la mano á niños y á hombres ya maduros, doblados y casi arrodillados: en vez de la despensa repleta y del comedor, sus escenarios de Europa, en Manila tenían el oratorio, la mesa de estudio; en vez del fraile mendicante que va de puerta en puerta con su burro y su saco pidiendo limosna, el fraile de Filipinas derramaba á manos llenas el oro entre los pobres indios …" El Filibusterismo 1891, 128. Translation: Jovita Ventura Castro: The Revolution (El Filibusterismo). Manila 1992, 181

rator describes such a collection of devotional objects in Captain Tiago's house with exuberant irony.

He attested to the master of the house a "noisy, sensational piety" (*ruidosa devoción*; *Noli,* p. 29), as well as an enormous respect for the animistic animation of the wooden or clay figures set up in his arsenal of fetishes, which he feared would occasionally erupt. In the above quoted text dedicated to the Kiapó Mass (*Fili,* chapter 17), the narrator is not content with a meagre description either, but conjures up the demon of comparison in order to use it to morally elevate the Filipino monks – their wooden idols, mind you – above their European counterparts. When Rizal wrote this, he could not have known that, after his violent death, he himself would be categorised as a wooden figure among the household gods worshipped by devout families, and eventually even in the canon of saints of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente.*[13]

A few chapters later, the book provides a counterpoint to the apotheosis of the wooden monk idols. In the 25th chapter of *El Filibusterismo,* entitled "Risas – llantos" (*Laughter – Tears*), a student party is held to celebrate a defeat: The students had failed in their fight for an *Academia de Castellano* because of the opposition of the monks. In the midst of their celebration, which is accompanied by laughter and tears, the student Pecson launches into a speech – similar to a carnival sermon – to emphasise the omnipresence and indispensability of the monk in the life of the Filipinos. Without the monk, he warns his listeners, the Filipino house would collapse, the Filipinos would be bored for lack of the daily immorality staged by the clergy "after Boccaccio and La Fontaine". Pecson's mocking speech culminates in the quintessence:

> The friar is the Father, the indio the Word (*El fraile es el Padre, el indio el Verbo*); the former the artist, the latter the statue, because everything that

13 Quennie Ann J. Palafox: Jose Rizal, a Hero-Saint? National Historical Commission of the Philippines 2012. http://nhcp.gov.ph/jose-rizal-a-hero-saint (9. 6. 2022)

> we are, everything that we think and do, we owe to the friar, his patience, his work, his perseverance of three centuries to modify the form that Nature gave us.[14]

The student's speech puts the world, which has just been turned upside down, back on its feet and at the same time presents a prime example of well-formed ironic double meaning: the indio is allowed to carve a friendly little monk out of crooked wood for domestic use, after the monk, as the true creator and artist, has transformed the man living in the Philippines into an indio down to the marrow with his modelling hand. Rizal puts an allusion into the student's mouth – wrapped in the parodically alienated address of devotion – that would become one of the topoi of later criticism of colonialism: the colonialist potentate as the inventor and creator of the colonised. In *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), Frantz Fanon describes the consequences of this for the self-perception of the subjugated:

> Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: "In reality, who am I?"[15]

No matter how violently the students attack the monk teachers in the quoted chapter, the fear and violence spread by the regime has – it seems – made most of them despondent. For they break off the feast and run away when they suspect they are being watched by the monks' spies.

But there is one exception. He appears in the 27th chapter, called *El fraile y el filipino* (The Monk and the Filipino), in the person of the stu-

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14 "El fraile es el Padre, el indio el Verbo; aquel el artista, éste la estatua, porque todo lo que somos, lo que pensamos y lo que hacemos, al fraile se lo debemos, á su paciencia, á sus trabajos, á su constancia de tres siglos para modificar la forma que nos dió Naturaleza!" El Filibusterismo 1891, 200. Slightly modified translation by J. Ventura Castro 1992, 257

15 https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8781407-because-it-is-a-systematic-negation-of-the-other-person (11. 11. 2024)

dent Isagani. He is the Filipino who takes up the sculptor's parable of the divine monk in order to advance the dialogue in an argument with the Dominican Fernandez, who is considered a liberal.

The old, somewhat hackneyed motto at the beginning of the chapter is *Vox populi, vox Dei* (The voice of the people is the voice of God) and seems to anticipate the victory of the Filipino student over the Spanish monk. Isagani is extremely eloquent and, in another chapter of the novel (Chapter 24), he has already distinguished himself as an enthusiastic advocate of progress and a friend of the unbridled industrialisation of the Philippines. Here he confronts his opponent directly, putting him on the defensive and calling him to account as the representative of the monastic regime in the educational institutions. Towards the end of the dialogue, he raises the question of guilt:

> You have made us what we are. A people that is tyrannised is forced to be hypocritical; he to whom truth is denied, indulges in lies; he who makes himself a tyrant, breeds slaves. There is no morality, you say, let it be so! Although statistics could refute you, because crimes are not committed here like those of many other peoples, blinded by their moralising airs. But, and without wanting now to analyse what constitutes character and to what extent education affects morality, I agree with you that we are defective. Who is at fault for this? Either you who have in your hands our education for three and a half centuries, or we who submit to everything? If, after three and a half centuries the sculptor was not able to do more than a caricature, he must really be stupid.[16]

16 "Lo que somos, ustedes lo han hecho. Al pueblo que se tiraniza, se le obliga á ser hipócrita; á aquel á quien se le niega la verdad, se le da la mentira; el que se hace tirano, engendra esclavos. […] No hay moralidad, dice usted, sea! aunque las estadísticas podrían desmentirle porque aqui no se cometen crimenes como los de muchos pueblos, cegados por sus humos de moralizadores. Pero, y sin querer ahora analizar qué es lo que constituye el carácter y por cuanto entra en la moralidad la educacion recibida, convengo con usted en que somos defectuosos. ¿Quién tiene la culpa de ello? O ustedes que hace tres siglos y medio tienen en sus manos nuestra educacion ó nosotros que nos plegamos á todo? si despues de tres siglos y medio, el escultor no ha podido sacar más que una caricatura, bien torpe debe ser." El Filibusterismo 1891, 210 f. Translation by J. Ventura Castro 1992, 268.

Looking over Isagani's shoulder at the author, the expert speaks here. For Rizal was a talented sculptor whose hand has moulded several fine terracotta figures. Isagani replies to the monk's objection that it is probably due to the poor material by saying that it is all the worse, because in this case the sculptor is behaving like a liar and thief, being paid for sloppy work.

The text explicitly states that the student emerges victorious from the argument with the monk. But is this true? The ambiguity of the story told in the novel, which Rizal's friends, after reading the book, found a disturbing and inappropriate riddle,[17] is particularly present in this central chapter. Although Isagani shows courage in his unwavering speech, his arguments are feeble, resigning himself to the indolence of his generation or, as can be read elsewhere, blind to reality, indulging in future fantasies. Unlike Pecson, who used the sculptor's parable satirically, Isagani even gives his opponent an advantage with this parable, since the figurative speech affirms the coloniser's reifying attitude towards the colonised. It is no coincidence that the monk refers to the indigenous people as "masa mala" (*bad modelling clay*), a reifying inhuman expression that Isagani echoes without contradiction. He simply wants to replace the sculptor, but in no way objects to the dependence on the arrogant Spanish paternalism.

In the monk's opinion, the argument between him and the Filipino finally ends inconclusively. The two adversaries politely take leave of each other, exchanging compliments. A short time later, Isagani is under arrest.

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17 In a letter to Rizal dated 2 October 1891, Graciano Lopez Jaena praises the novel, but considers it politically weak because it contains no encouraging message, but fobs off his compatriots in the Philippines with a riddle that they cannot solve and therefore drives them into despair: "Temo que nuestros paisanos de allá no lleguen á acertar ni atinar la solución del enigma y languidezcan en su desesperación." Epistolario Rizalino III. Manila 1933, 239.