

"One only dies once, and if one does not die well, a good opportunity is lost and does not present itself again." - Jose Rizal, Philippine Nation Hero.

While writing his novel *Noli Me Tangere*, Jose Rizal didn't want to alert his German landlady to the fact that he had been skipping a protracted series of meals. Rizal would conspicuously leave his apartment around lunch and dinnertime, then wander aimlessly through the streets of Heidelberg, often watching people in restaurants and bars devouring schnitzel, blutwurst and bratkartoffeln . When sufficient time had passed, Rizal would reappear in his apartment, giving his landlady the impression that the young Filipino medical student had gone out to eat. It was a frugality that was to become a curious hallmark of Rizal's biography, that and, of course, womanizing. In his brief life, Rizal courted multiple women: O Sei-San, Leonor Rivera, Segunda Katigbak, Consuelo Ortiga Y Rey, Leonor Valenzuela, Suzanne Jacoby, Tottie Beckett, Nelly Boustead, and his wife, Josephine Bracken. Though Rizal's amorous exploits elicit a misguided pride in his Filipino biographers, it's his frugality where they find real amusement, like the time he sent a letter to his sister saying he hadn't bathed in six months because baths in Europe were "terribly expensive."

Rizal's reputation for frugality can be pardoned given that he devoted most of his money to the purchase of over 2,000 books, which included a Spanish translation of *Lives of the Presidents of the United States*, Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales* (five of which he translated into Tagalog for his nieces and nephews), the complete works of Victor Hugo, and *Florante at Laura* by Francisco Balagtas. Shortly after his death, the (quite valuable) books became the object(s) of a vicious dispute between Rizal's widow and Jose Maria Basa, a Filipino exile in Hong Kong whom Rizal had entrusted with care of the books.

With regards to his own literary output, Rizal left us with half a dozen unfinished novels, including *Los Animales du Suan*, an allegorical tale set in a farm ruled by a great fat pig (an allusion to the Spanish clergy), castrated for about two years and awaiting slaughter for the Christmas mass. The work predates George Orwell's *Animal Farm* by about sixty years. It's Rizal's published novels, however, that earned him his reputation, and eventually, his execution. By the time his second novel, *El Filibusterismo*, was published, it had become a crime in most parts of the Philippines to be in possession of Rizal's writings. Leonor Rivera, one of Rizal's old girlfriends, went to the extent of burning all his letters to her. She deposited the ashes in a box with the initials "J.R." embroidered on top, which she kept through her marriage to an English engineer, and until her death. The box, slowly deteriorating, is kept at the privately owned Leonor Rivera museum in Camiling, Tarlac, where visitors can also view Rivera's pottery, jewelry, and a lock of her hair in a state of macabre decay.

Upon his return to the Philippines with a doctorate and two inflammatory novels, Rizal wrote "My father does not allow me to go out alone or eat in another house. The old man fears and trembles for me. They take me for a German spy, an agent of Bismarck, a Protestant, a Mason, a wizard, a soul halfway to damnation, etc. So I prefer to stay at home." Eventually,

Rizal was arrested for his novels, which were determined to be treacherous and uniformly heretic. Particularly troublesome was the dedication of *El Filibusterismo* to Mariano Gomez, Jose Burgos, and Jacinto Zamora, three priests implicated in the Cavite Mutiny and subsequently executed. Rizal's punishment was exile to Dapitan in the Southern peninsula of Mindanao. While in exile, Rizal won second prize of 20,000 pesos in the government-owned Manila lottery. He also set up a free clinic, constructed Dapitan's first water system, invented a brick making machine, and got involved in a feud with a Chinese merchant over the sale of women's stockings. On the fourth year of his exile, Rizal, a distinguished ophthalmologist, requested permission to travel to Cuba to provide medical aid to Spanish forces. It was en route to Cuba where Rizal was arrested, sent back to Manila and sentenced to death.

On December 30, 1886, Rizal, in a black suit and derby, his arms tied tightly behind his back, was transferred under heavy guard from Fort Santiago to Bagumbayan field near Manila Bay. The firing squad consisted of four Filipinos. Directly behind them were better armed Spanish soldiers, in case the natives were in dereliction of their fratricidal duties. Rizal's request to be allowed to face his executioners was denied. It was promised, however, that his head should be respected. A brass band was ordered to play so no one would be able to hear Rizal's last words. As the shots came, Rizal, through immense willpower and a desire not to die a traitor and a coward's death, turned and fell with his face to the sky. *Vivas* and laughter and applause were heard from the gallery of Spanish officers, friars and ladies. As Rizal lay bleeding under a seasonably cool sky, the brass band passed in front of his body and played the Spanish anthem *Marcha de Cádiz*. It was noted that the day of Rizal's execution, the day of his birth and the day he first left his native land for Europe all fell on a Wednesday.

Bibliography

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