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French Influence on the Philippine Novel: 1882-1921

SOLEDAD S. REYES

It is the purpose of this note to explore the role of French writing in shaping aspects of two Philippine literary genres; the novels of Rizal and the novels written by Tagalog writers in the first two decades of the twentieth century. There are other literary types in the Philippines which could have been influenced by other genres in French literature. Some examples are the *awit* and *corrido* (the Philippine versions of the medieval romance) and the narratives that deal with the matter of France, the short story both in English and in the vernacular, poetry and drama. But I have chosen to limit myself to the novels of Rizal and the Tagalog novels of 1905-21. The task at hand (it is a formidable one) is to show that there has been some form of interaction between the two bodies of writing. Rather than demonstrate specific points of convergence, for example, in terms of similarities in plot, character, or theme, between two groups of novels, I will point to certain recurring trends and/or characteristics of the novel in the Philippines from 1880 to 1921 that could have been conditioned by specifically French literary movements. The act of producing any text is an exceedingly complex process which takes into account a number of factors, both literary and extra-literary, that constitute the institution of literature. Moreover, any text possesses its own specificity which no method of comparative literature can adequately explain. In other words, the study of influence stops short of explaining a text and the manner in which it has been produced and is consumed in highly specific contexts.

This note is exploratory and introduces, even as it limits itself to suggesting possible influences that have been derived by our own writers as they expose themselves to a foreign body of texts. The re-

lationship cannot be called dialectical in the absence of any real interaction between French writers and Filipino writers. It appears that the Filipino writers in search of models saw in French writing certain qualities and structures which could be creatively transformed to suit their own purposes. What they did eventually with what they appropriated cannot be unravelled by a mechanistic and deterministic approach to literature.

RIZAL AND FRENCH LITERATURE

Jose Rizal wrote two novels—*Noli Me Tangere* (1887) and *El Filibusterismo* (1891)—during his life as an exile in Europe. When he left the Philippines in 1882, after studying at the Ateneo de Manila and at the University of Santo Tomas, he left behind a country where the people's reading fare consisted of religious poems and the ubiquitous awit and corrido. Poetry—both lyrical and narrative—dealt with nonworldly concerns (as in the popular religious works) and events and characters that were frequently derived from foreign and often exotic settings. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the writers were still not in possession of a genre with its particular conventions which could enable them to directly confront various facets of social reality conditioned by the colonial experience.

It is against this historical context that Rizal's feat as a novelist must be viewed, for in this light, Rizal appears as a pioneer writer who deliberately wrote two novels—not essays, not treatises, not tracts—in order to achieve his purpose:

I have tried to do what no one has been willing to do; I have had to reply to the calumnies which for centuries have been heaped upon us and our country; I have described the state of our society, our life, our beliefs, our hopes, our desire, our laments, and our grievances; I have unmasked the hypocrisy, which under the cloak of Religion, came among us, to brutalize us . . . I have unveiled what lay hidden behind the deceptive and brilliant words of our government; I have told our compatriots of our faults, our vices, our culpable and shameful complacency with these miseries.¹

Written in French to Felix Resurrection Hidalgo who was then living in France, this letter testifies to the reason that compelled Rizal to turn to literature to delineate the conflicting forces constituting Philippine society at that time. In yet another letter to his friend

1. Letter to Felix Resurrection Hidalgo quoted in John N. Schumacher, S.J., *The Propaganda Movement: 1880-1885* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1973), p. 75.

Ferdinand Blumentritt, Rizal informed the latter that he had originally wanted to write his novel in French to make the country's plight known to the world, but he later decided to write it in Spanish, because he wanted to write for his countrymen. It was only after the Filipino people themselves had opened their eyes to their plight and done something about it that many writers would "rise up who can present my fatherland to proud Europe, as a young damsel enters society after she has completed her education."²

Rizal's interest in and preoccupation with European literature, and more specifically French writing, from which he derived certain influences dated back to his student days at the Ateneo de Municipal when he read Chateaubriand's *El Ultimo Abencerraje* and Alexander Dumas' *Count of Monte Cristo*.³

While Rizal was in Madrid, there is proof that he spent what little money he had on books, among which were the works of Eugene Sue and Alexander Dumas, father and son, and Victor Hugo, three of the most popular writers of the Romantic period in French literature. By the time Rizal went to Paris in 1885, a city to which he would return several times, these writers were all dead, but their popularity remained, especially among the common people.

It is difficult to gauge the impact of these novelists on the consciousness of Rizal in the absence of a comparative study of their works. But it is quite clear that Rizal had read Eugene Sue's fiercely anticlerical work, *The Wandering Jew*, in 1884 while he was still in Madrid and over which he became exceedingly enthusiastic.⁴ When he left Madrid for Paris in mid-1885, the *Noli Me Tangere* was already half-completed, and during his stay in Paris he continued to work on this first novel. In a letter to Rizal written on 2 October 1891 by Graciano Lopez-Jaena, the propagandist's familiarity with the aforementioned French writers was made explicit. In a critique of Rizal's two novels, Lopez-Jaena frames the texts against the works of both Dumas and Sue. He said: ". . . you begin the novel very alluringly like Dumas and you conclude it drily like Sue." It is instructive to quote Lopez-Jaena's letter more fully in order to show a fellow propagandist's perceptions, not only of Rizal's texts but also of the French novels:

Your beginning in your recent publication is sublime, poetic, like the red clouds of dawn that spread on the horizon, brilliant, clear, announcing a

2. *Epistolario Rizalino*, V. 291-92, 26 August 1988.

3. Jose Baron Fernandez, *Jose Rizal: Filipino, Doctor and Patriot* (Manila: Manuel Morato, 1981), p. 35.

4. Jose Rizal, *Dos Diarios*, pp. 78-79.

good and beautiful day; however your conclusions is like the evening twilight, saturated with heavy mist.

You begin by encouraging heroic passions, infusing inspiring alluring, beautiful hopes, golden illusions, dragging the masses towards glory, and to end by filling the mind with black shadows making the heart overflow with cruel anguish.

Your beginning, like Dumas' is light, much light, magnificence, hope, gay dawn of day, rose-colored future, glory, immortality; but your ending, like Sue's, shrivels the heat, plunging the mind into the nebulous abyss of despair.⁵

In his analysis of *Noli Me Tangere*, the Jesuit historian John N. Schumacher argues that the influence of Sue's work, if any, "would seem to be in little more than the idea of using a novel as a vehicle for his purposes."⁶ Schumacher further argues that it was with Benito Galdos' *Doña Perfecta* that Rizal's novel exhibits actual points of similarity in plot.⁷ But what is important to stress at this point is not whether or not Rizal's plot showed distinct affinities with Sue's work, or for that matter, the texts of other French writers. What is more crucial is to show in what possible ways Rizal could have allowed his imagination and his craft to be shaped by what he was reading in his formative years and during his stay in Europe.

The age of Romanticism swept over many countries of Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Simplistically put, the movement was an inevitable reaction against the stultifying influence of neoclassicism. In France, it manifested itself as a revolt against classicism which shaped much of seventeenth and eighteenth century literature produced in compliance with the canonized views related to the need for order, harmony and reason. Racine, Descartes, Pascal, among others, were the revered writers. Madame de Stael was one of the first to question this emphasis on the Law, on the Universal in her key work, *De La Litterature* (1800) by arguing the crucial importance of social surroundings on literature, which was a blow to classicism and the notion of absolute art. From Germany came the influence of such philosophers as Immanuel Kant and Goethe; from England came Walter Scott and the historical novel, which exhibited an inordinate fondness for the past. Romanticism blossomed fully in the first three decades of the century with plentiful harvests in all the genres.

5. *Rizal's Correspondence with Fellow Reformists*, II (Manila: National Heroes Commission, 1963), pp. 609-10.

6. Schumacher, *The Propaganda Movement*, p. 81.

7. *Ibid.* See other studies of Rizal's novels in *Rizal: Contrary Essays*, eds. Pertonilo Bn. Daroy and Dolores Feria (Quezon City: Guro Books, 1968).

There are varieties of romanticism as they manifested themselves in many countries. Yet, it is still possible to extract certain recurring tendencies from these diverse works which could be used to offer a definition of this complex term. In his study of Popular French Romanticism, James Smith Allen clarifies the meaning of the term:

The yearning to believe despite a faithless society, the despair of living in a rapidly changing and uncertain world, the recognition of time and history through personal memory, the enthusiasm and energy admired in dynamic historical figures.⁸

Moreover, the romantic tendency is to be seen in the desire of the self to overcome the split between the ego and the world, between conscious and unconscious. Freedom from restraint and from oppressive rules also characterize this tendency.

Because there was a new perception of literature, there was need for a new mode, a new way of constructing the world—dramatic stories, colorful contrasts, rhetorical rather than referential language, unusual settings, characters bathed in shadows, and sometimes an air of unreality surrounds these characters. The novels of Hugo, Dumas, Balzac, the father of realism, among others exhibited these qualities.

But if it is true, as Northrop Frye argues in *Secular Scripture*, that realism is the displaced version of romanticism, then it is easy to understand why eventually, romanticism gave way to realism, a movement which seeks to mirror life as it is.⁹ By the second half of the nineteenth century, in the works of Flaubert, Balzac, Stendhal, we discern the writer grappling with social ills with more attempt at verisimilitude. The tendency, earlier found in Dumas, father and son, to use their writing for polemical reasons reached its height with the works of Emile Zola who with sleuth-like fidelity to details, sought to reflect the life of the poor and the downtrodden.

Running through the novels written in the first three quarters of the nineteenth century is this undisguised contempt for authority which in a number of cases was wielded by ruthless men to imprison the novels' heroes—Dantes in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's most celebrated work *Les Miserables* which also recounts the pain and agony at the barricades put up in 1832, and others. The works of both father and son—Alexander Dumas—also manifested their subversive quality even as they unflinchingly ex-

8. James Smith Allen, *Popular French Romanticism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1981), pp. 26-27.

9. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

posed society's hypocrisy and injustice. It was as if the texts had become a site of fierce conflicts between the individual and society characterized by greed and violence. As Smith observes, these works are important because they yield certain insights into the political, social, and economic changes taking place in France in the nineteenth century.¹⁰

With such a creative and dynamic literary tradition within reach and from which a concerned writer could draw certain conventions and structures already crystallized for him by writers from all over Europe, it was not surprising that Rizal decided to write his novels. Critics and historians have analyzed Rizal's works as representations of life in the nineteenth century. There is no reason to doubt the validity of such a canonized interpretation. But perhaps it is time to examine these texts, not solely as mirrors of life, but as a series of conventions constituting particular modes of writing—realistic, romantic and even naturalistic. What must be considered is the texts' specificity as product of a particular consciousness at a definite historical moment. French literature with all its energy and exuberance seemed to have been one decisive factor that could have shaped the chaos that was the reality which confronted Rizal in the 1880s. By oscillating between different contexts—French, Philippine history, dominant ideologies, Rizal's own historicity and text, further studies on Rizal and the moments before and during the production his texts will invariably help generations of readers gain insights into the complex process of literary influence.

THE TAGALOG NOVEL AND FRENCH TEXTS

The Tagalog novel emerged only in 1905 during the first decade of American occupation, but its acceptance as a new genre was short of phenomenal.¹¹ By the second decade the number of novels published in book form had increased dramatically. Iñigo Ed. Regalado, a noted novelist and critic, believed that 1905–21 were the golden age of the Tagalog novel.¹²

Many factors can be cited to account for the immense popularity of this type of reading. But what should interest us here, is the importance of French writing in the development of the Tagalog

10. Allen, *Popular French Romanticism*, pp. 226–27.

11. This is discussed in Soledad S. Reyes, *Ang Nobelang Tagalog (1905–1975): Tradisyon at Modernismo* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1982).

12. Iñigo Ed. Regalado, *Ang Pagkaunlad ng Nobelang Tagalog* (Manila: Institute of National Language, 1938).

novel. In retrospect, the influence of French texts on the first generation of novelists is situated in the following areas: Rizal's own discourse, the actual translations that the Tagalog writers did of French works, the possible influence of a few selected French novels vis-a-vis a number of prominent Tagalog novelists.

With Rizal's tragic and heroic death, the voice of the hero had apparently been stifled. But this was not so, for by the first century Rizal continued to speak to his people as his texts outlived the author's life. Moreover, Rizal was associated with such lofty ideas as patriotism, sacrifice, nationalism, and the need to protest the continued colonization of the people. For here was a new enemy—the Americans—bent on transforming a society and a people who did not want them in the first place. For a generation of writers looking for models for their own literary production, Rizal was an excellent choice since his texts were outstanding exemplars of the novel as protest. In Rizal the writers discerned a hero who used his pen to wake a long slumbering people to their brutalization and oppression.¹³

Ibarra and Simoun were the prototypes of the hero who acts on behalf of his suffering countrymen. The situation explored in the two novels—the idealistic almost naive *ilustrado* coming home to a society staggering under the weight of its own failures and follies, then discovering to his shock that any move to improve his countrymen's lot was most unwelcome, only to flee from this society and eventually to come back under mysterious circumstances to exact his revenge and ultimately to die penitent—provided a perfect structure for a number of novels yet to be realized.

The times had changed but the circumstances remained the same: a people being tyrannized by foreign exploiters and by their own leaders. Fueled by intense hatred for those insidious forces preying on Philippine society, writers such as Faustino Aguilar, Lope K. Santos, Iñigo Ed. Regalado, to name a few, could not but be moved by Rizal's justly celebrated novels. These writers were themselves born in the 1870s, and some of them actually fought during the Revolution, against Spain and against the United States. Thus, they had first-hand accounts of what transpired, and in their collective memory were lodged sharp impressions of the past. Further, they were at the forefront of labor movement during the 1900s, as they exercised their rights as journalists for the various newspapers of the period.

They were educated men mostly belonging to the middle class;

13. See Soledad S. Reyes, "The Impact of Rizal's *Noli* and *Fili* on 'Reform and Revolution in the Tagalog Novels'" in *The Noli Me Tangere: A Century After*, ed. Soledad S. Reyes (Quezon City: Phoenix Publishing House, Inc., 1987), pp. 69-80.

they had college education at the Ateneo Municipal, Colegio de San Juan de Letran, Universidad de Santo Tomas, to name a few. They were well-read and knew the works of Chateaubriand and Tolstoy, Dante, Milton, Shakespeare, Benito Galdos and other Spanish writers. They translated what they read from Spanish to Tagalog. Some of the texts they translated and published were Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, C. Braeme's *Asucena*, Carolina Invernizio's *Historia de Una Costurera*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. But what is more significant is the fact that they translated some French novels not only once but twice. The most popular French texts were Dumas' *Camille* (translated as *Sa Gitna ng Lusak* [1915]), Saint Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (translated as *Paolo at Virginia* [1932] by J. Cruz and as *Naluoy na Pagsinta* [1917] by Regalado); *Les Miserables* (translated as *Ang mga Imbi o si Juan Valjean* by Aurea Santiago, translated also by Patricio Mariano); Eugene Sue's *Myteries of Paris*, Dumas' *Amoury*, Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Carlos de Bernard's novel translated as *Timpalak ng mga Puso* and other works.

It is important to note that for the most part, these French texts were popular works, not necessarily artistically pretentious. Of Saint Pierre's *Paolo et Virginie*, critic Cazamian has this to say:

... the imaginative as well as the descriptive strains are happily blended in the novel of Paul et Virginie, which stirred the reading world at the end of the century, in the turmoil of the Revolutionary years. All the charms of sensibility, the sad pleasures of melancholy, are here turned to artistic uses. These may provoke our impatience, as being too obvious, and too futile, or even cheap, yet the mixture of human warmth sincerity, and unashamed pathos is enough to melt the wariest of hearts.¹⁴

On Eugene Sue's popular works, Cazamian has the following criticism:

[They] are somewhat crude, and stand very near the borderline of literature; but they deserve mention because of their vigor and the vivid depiction of the Parisian underworld.¹⁵

In general, the works of Sue, Dumas and Jules Verne are not in the list of great books in France, as chosen by critics like Cazamian and A. Raitt.¹⁶ The latter critic concedes that the list of best sellers is

14. Louis Cazamian, *A History of French Literature* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 281.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

16. A. W. Raitt, *Life and Letters in France: the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. xx.

bound to include some works of Hugo and Balzac and all those mentioned above, but will not include Stendhal and the Goncourts and possibly Flaubert, a special favorite among twentieth century critics because of his objective, ironic depiction of human foibles.

The implication for our attempt to understand French influence on the Tagalog novel of 1905-21 is that the earliest Tagalog writers preferred popular rather than artistic works such as *Madame Bovary*. They were more interested in texts where passions are described vividly, where all the nuances of emotions are savored, where characters call attention to their suffering and pain. Subtlety, wit, understatement, were not attractive to these writers. Their preferences included *The Three Musketeers* and *Notre Dame de Paris*, and of course, that narrative of great love, *Camille* which should be taken as possibly one of the most frequently translated works in the first decades.

It is also important to note that the translated texts also dealt with panoramic views of society in turmoil, of individuals being falsely accused, of protagonists becoming bitter, but being eventually saved because they realized the need to forgive those who persecuted them. *Les Miserables* was one such narrative of suffering and passion contextualized against a whole society on the verge of destruction which only a revolution could arrest.

As noted in the earlier section of this note, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact areas where French influence had its impact on a given text. Being nontransparent and very "slippery," a text will not yield itself easily to any attempt to locate the point of convergence between say, for example, Dumas' *Camille* and Aguilar's *Busabos ng Palad* (1909). But it is a fact, and this is borne out by a cursory survey of the Tagalog novel in the first decade, that our writers displayed an inordinate fascination with the fallen woman—the mistress, the prostitute, the *kalunya* or the *querida*. It is possible that the writers were merely dealing with a system where women were viewed as objects of men's lust; or that there were a number of cabaret and prostitution houses that arose in Manila in the first decades of the American occupation. But it is also possible that Dumas' text was so overwhelming that it could have influenced a number of novelists to explore a similar influenced a number of novelists to explore a similar situation but transformed it into the Philippine context.

Dumas' Marguerite Gautier was apparently a model for a number of the early Tagalog novelists. In countless novels, the Tagalog novelists reworked this basic theme of the prostitute with the golden heart. In Aguilar's *Busabos ng Palad*, for example, Rita is forced into prostitution by her own relative. She is saved from her plight by Celso, her childhood sweetheart. Rather than leave her behind, Celso

risks society's censures and his family's wrath. In the end, she dies but only after denouncing religious hypocrisy to the priest who has been asked to give her the last rites. She leaves behind Celso who eventually loses his mind.

Other Tagalog novels which explored the inner world of "fallen women" and society's attitude towards them are Juan Arsciwals' *Luha ng Makasalanan* (1909), Rosauro Almario's *Ang Mananayaw* (1910), Regalado's *Sampagitang Walang Bango* (1918), Ruperto Cristobal's *Ang Bulaklak sa Kabaret* (1920), Regalado's *May Pagsinta'y Walang Puso* (1921), and other novels written in the 1920s and 1930s. The preoccupation with these women, objects of society's scorn and contempt, by 1950 becomes institutionalized as these characters appear in films, on television, in the *komiks*, even as they constitute a powerful image which probably owes a lot to the immortal love story of Camille and Armand.

The other strand that shaped many Tagalog novels appears to have come from the novel of social protest personified by *Les Miserables*. In this particular classification, a common denominator is the strong tendency to delineate powerful social forces that symbolize injustice and oppression. The narratives frequently revolve around heroes as revolutionaries. In some cases, the novelists seek to reconstruct the events that took place during the Revolution against Spain and the war against the United States. It was not the distant past but the immediate past which the novelists returned to again and again because these were the events to which they had been witnesses. The novels then appear as vehicles for exorcising a bloody past.

Among the works that manifest a clear historical sense are Francisco Laksamana's *Anino ng Kahapon* (1907), Sevilla's *Pag-ibig ng Isang Heneral* (1908), Antonio Abad's *Bakas ng Himagsikan* (1910), Roman Reyes' *Pusong Walang Pag-ibig* (1910), Julian Cruz Balmaseda's *Ang Taong Labas* (1912), Juan Arsciwals' *Lalaking Uliran at Tulisan* (1914), and others. As important as these novels is Jose Diaz Ampil's *Hantik* (1906) which fellow novelist/critic Ruperto Cristobal thinks was influenced by *Les Miserables*. Cristobal says:

Dahil sa mga nobelang sosyo-politiko noong araw ang bayan ay nagising sa mga kasamaan ng pangasiwaan at sa pagkagahaman ng mga alagad ng simbahan, bagay na siyang pinagsimulan ng kilusan ng pagkakaisa ng mga taong bayan at pagbabangon ng himagsikan. Gayon na lamang ang bisa ng mga aral ng mga nobela noong araw na sa mga kilusang bayan ay nagsisilbing sanggunian at patnubay . . . ¹⁷

17. For an introduction to the works of major contemporary French thinkers, see John Sturrock, *Structuralism and Since* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show the possible influences exerted by French writing on Rizal and on some Tagalog novels, directly and indirectly. Through direct contact as in the case of Rizal and from translated works, French literature was made accessible to a people whose previous exposure to literature consisted of religious poems, novenas and the awit and corrido. Through the texts translated by Gerardo Chanco, Patricio Mariano, and Rosendo Ignacio, more Filipinos became aware of the riches of other bodies of writing. The writers in search of models found at their disposal a new series of conventions, novel techniques and different modes of constructing reality.

This exposure to what was popular and acceptable to the mass audience and the consequent utilization of new modes and conventions did something to Philippine literature in general. The writers took in what they thought was desirable and relevant to their own quest for models. The French influence was fruitful because whatever the writers derived from the foreign texts was merged with the indigenous in order to produce a large number of texts that in the final analysis are illustrations of the Filipino sensibility.