



RIZAL AND THE JOIE DE VIVRE

By GILBERT S. PEREZ

What one should admire in Rizal is the richness of his life, his wealth of knowledge in various fields, his varied powers of appreciation which enabled him in the short space of three decades to live a life that very few if any of his contemporaries could duplicate. Rizal was an embodiment of "Joie de vivre", of finding happiness in many fields of action. The French expression, "Joie de vivre", is often very erroneously interpreted. Many believe that "Joie de vivre" means frivolity, revelry, and debauchery. That is not a true interpretation of the phrase. "Joie de vivre" means the enrichment of life and of living and the ability of finding happiness in different highways and by-ways of life as well as in the seclusion of one's home. It is in this that Rizal is unique among the great reformers of the world.

No study of the growth of liberal thought in the modern world can be complete unless Jose Rizal is included among the great leaders in this development. However, great reformers have invariably been individuals endowed with one-track minds. They have been usually so obsessed with their main objectives that they were oblivious of the life that was around them. They concentrated on their main tasks and few had the capacity or the ability to see any value in anything other than the great task to which they dedicated themselves. There were the three outstanding Oriental reformers—Rizal, Sun Yat Sen,

and Lenin (for I consider Lenin an Oriental and however I may hate or decry some of his philosophy, one cannot minimize the extent of his influence both on the Occidental and the Oriental world); of these Rizal is the only one of the triad that shines out as an example of one who not only reached his objectives but who also lived richly while accomplishing them. Rizal was not a recluse nor was he one who spent his days in meaningless revelry. He was a lover of beautiful women but no one can say that he was a libertine. His friendship with those with whom he came into contact was a joyous and worthwhile experience for both and was unsullied by guile or deception. He could cultivate a worthwhile friendship with a blonde from the Alps or with one from warmer climes and none carried wounds of disappointment or of disillusion. As a moralist we cannot forget his words of admonition to his countrymen in Madrid when he chided them severely and told them that what they did when abroad reflected either good or evil and as such influenced the foreign mind with respect to the Philippines and the Filipino people. As a commentary on the relationship of Rizal with his numerous women friends, it is pleasing to note that his conduct was such that there was no breath of scandal, no heartbreaks and disappointments in their relationship with Jose Rizal, the great scholar and above

all the perfect gentleman.

Don Isabelo de los Reyes in "La Sensacional Memoria" stated that Rizal sacrificed his native passions to his country. I do not believe that Rizal made this sacrifice. What he really did was to lead them into paths that would not interfere with his greater and more passionate love of country and love of fruitful and happy endeavor. It was not a question of sacrifice; it was merely a task of making his relationships contributive and not merely senseless and debilitating debauchery that would interfere with the tasks that he had assigned to himself. Not a narrow austerity but a controlled emotional set-up that gave him happiness without harming those things which were dearer to him than life itself.

Some may say that Rizal was a dillitante—a man endowed with such varied abilities and capabilities for enjoyment in many different lines and fields. However, there is something lacking in the word dillitante because it precludes any serious efforts in any one line. In this respect he was no dillitante because he did not sip, butterfly-like, here and there, unmeaningly and without thought or objective. He drank wholly or fully of the good things of life—whether it was with his pen, with his brush or with a definite trend in all that he tried to accomplish.

Retana clearly noted this outstanding feature of the character of Rizal but while he seemed to be praising the microscope of a scientist or the scalpel of a surgeon, and these were the varied accomplishments of Rizal, we can easily detect a note of malice and a barb of satire in his pseudo-eulogy, for although I recognize most emphatically the outstanding value of

Retana's work and the most excellent contribution that he has made to Rizaliana and in spite of the fact that I consider Wenceslao Retana to be one of the great bibliophiles not only in Spain but in Europe, I am regretfully led to believe that Retana never completely rid himself of his jealousy and dislike of Rizal even in after-life when he was writing a biography that was supposed to be an appraisal of the work of a man who in Retana's earlier years was his pet bete noir and his principal obsession.

The late Don Epifanio de los Santos once graciously presented me with a communication written by Blumentritt to a Manila newspaper that had published a most scurrilous attack on Rizal in an article signed with a pseudonym. This writer of the article was none other than Wenceslao Retana. Blumentritt was equally as bitter in his arraignment of Retana and lambasted him for not having the civic courage to write such an article under his own name instead of under a concealing pseudonym. The Japs unfortunately destroyed this letter but since reading it I could never entirely convince myself that Retana was ever able to completely rid himself of his former prejudices against Jose Rizal.

"As a physician, Rizal was not a Mariani; as an artist he was not a Gustav Dore; as a poet, he was not a Goethe; as an antropologist, he was not a Virchow; as an ethnologist, he was not a Ratzel; as an Filipinista, he was not a Blumentritt; as a historian, he was not a Macaulay; as a thinker, he was not a Nietzsche; as a naturalist, he was not a Buffon; as a linguist, he was not a Hervas; as a Malayologist, he was

not Nern; as a philosopher, he was no Zola; as a writer he was no Melendez y Pelayo, and as a geographer, he was no Reclus."

But hombre! Who ever claimed that he was? Certainly Rizal himself never had the egotism that would warrant such pretensions or such presumptions. Nor are his countrymen so naive as to exalt him to the rank of what Rizal himself would have sarcastically termed: "Sabro profundo en todas clases de sabidurias."

However, this veiled "desprecio" of Rizal in spite of its hidden satire, in spite of its veiled sophism, is in reality when properly studied, interpreted, and analyzed, in spite of the real intention of Retana, was the most remarkable eulogy that has ever been made with reference to Rizal because one who reads will by no means be impressed by Retana's ironical and multifarious negations. It is not that Rizal was not a Virchow. It is not that Rizal was not a Macaulay. The main source of wonder and admiration which Retana knew and could have mentioned if he wanted to was that one whom he had formerly considered a mere Indio "presundo y presuntioso" could in the short space of less than three decades have the intelligence, the sagacity, the ability, and the determination to qualify himself so eminently in so many different fields of cultural scholarship and of scientific achievement. Few and far between in the history of the world do men appear on the scene even with a modest store of ability in so many and so varied fields of human endeavor. Instead of a "desprecio" it was a supreme honor for Rizal even to be mentioned in connection with so many leaders in so many different lines of scholarly activity.

Rizal never aspired to leadership

in any of the fields mentioned, not because he lacked the ability or the intelligence but because to do this even in one line of work would not fit into his philosophy of life. His innate Joie de vivre, of enjoyment of the finer things of life, would not have permitted him to devote the years of his short life in the complete mastery of any one field. Life and living was too precious and there were too many avenues of happiness that were open to a man of his capabilities to sacrifice years of work that would be needed for perfection and leadership. If he were willing to spend the necessary time he could have become one of the world's greatest historians; he could have become one of the world's greatest scientists. He could have written 20 instead of only two best sellers. Furthermore, the tasks that he had assigned to himself in behalf of his people and his country would not permit him the luxury of spending too much of his valuable time to another equally time exhausting specialty. Besides, there were many others who had the time to do this without having to work for the eradication of evils that prevailed in their country. He had a task to perform and his own life to live and to enjoy. Furthermore, he was the only one who could do this task efficiently and I believe that he realized it. There could be many great historians, past, present, and future; there could be also great scientists for each generation; but there could be only one Rizal and nothing could or should interfere with the fruition of the plans that he had made for the betterment and for the enlightenment of his people. He did not aspire to be a great novelist and his novel might not have been a great one from a literary standpoint, but it was the mightiest

plea for justice and for the right that had been written since Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote her immortal *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and paved the way for universal human freedom. More of a political "feuilleton" than a romance it stirred the souls of men as effectively as an oration of Cicero or a Philippic of Demosthenes and led to the fruition of liberal thought in the Far East, just as effectively as Beaumarchais' *Barber of Seville* paved the way for the Liberty, Fraternity of a Republican France. Who cares whether nor not Rizal was as great a novelist as Melendez y Pelayo—whoever the literary marvel might be, the fact remains that what he wrote has influenced the history of his country and has made greater contribution to human liberty than any of the greater and better novels penned by better and greater novelists. Rizal might not and would not have written a *Les Miserables* but only Jose Rizal could pen an effective *Noli Me Tangere*. Only Rizal knew what lay hidden—unspoken in the heart of his countrymen; only he had the ability, the courage, and the determination to bring these hidden things out fearlessly into the open.

However, Rizal was a free soul—one who not only loved a book but loved different types of books, who appreciated human friendships and who delighted himself and his friends with his pen, his brush, and his sculptor's mallet. He could seek happiness with his microscope and find an emotional outlet in the study of nature and its wonders. Without this freedom to work for the interest of his country and to seek enjoyment and happiness in varied fields, Rizal would have been sunk in a sea of boredom and ennui. His unusual ability to make the most of the *Joie de vivre* is what adds to his fame and

his stature. When he finished his "Noli Me Tangere" and his "Fili" he turned his talents into other directions ever seeking experiences and accomplishments that would add to his richness of life and thereby make a greater contribution to his country and to his people.

A successful physician, yet he writes to Blumentritt from Dapitan and says: "Me voy agricultor porque aqui apenas me dedico a la medicina." "When my maquina de fotografia arrives I will take pictures of my 'bosque civilizado' which I am constructing with its lawns and steps and benches and I shall send copies of them to you, my friend and brother." To his scientist friends in Austria, he sent lizards, butterflies, and other natural history specimen, another pleasant outlet for happy endeavor. Rizal abhorred boredom because he realized that boredom was a vacuum, and a vacuum had no place in the life of Rizal. Even in his prisons he found ways and means to avoid boredom both in Dapitan with his scientific and teaching activities and in Fort Santiago with his pen. With such men "walls do not a prison make". If he had been deprived of his pen he would have found some emotional outlet in classifying the different types of hexapods that invaded the loneliness of his prison cell, for a man who loves is never entirely alone.

Furthermore, he did not build his life solely out of local material, strands that connected him with fellow scientists, friends and fellow scholars far across the seas and which enabled him to pluck a note here and there on the strands and receive comforting echoes from the Austrian Alps and from the Spanish Pyrenees. But with all of his cosmopolitan make-up Rizal never once forgot that he was a Filipino; he never wavered once in his love for his people and for his

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