THE HONOAREES OF RIZAL

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The national hero of the Philippines, Dr. Jose Rizal, great as he was, did not fail to give honor to others he believed deserved their due. Unlike other great men in history, his acts and writings reveal how he placed his honorees’ names in high pedestals of accolade. These people were his own race, which he always maintained as equal to or at par with other races.

**Father: Don Francisco Mercado Rizal**

First of these honorees was his own father, Don Francisco Mercado Rizal. Dr. Rizal did not simply praise his father; in fact he was so modest in giving praises. He affectionately called him “a model of fathers” as he was quoted in his biography by historian Gregorio F. Zaide. But it was evident in his writings while he was traveling that he always wanted that his parents be taken care of. Then in his last letter to his brother Paciano, dated December 29, 1896, a day before his execution, he said: “My dear Brother, Now I am about to die, and it is to you that I dedicate my last lines, to tell you how sad I am to leave you alone in life, burdened with the weight of the family and our old parents... Tell our father that I remember him! And how I remember my whole childhood, of his affection and his love. Ask him to forgive me for the pain that I have unwillingly caused him.” And on the following day, December 30, just two hours before his execution, Rizal wrote his father in part: “My beloved Father, Pardon me for the pain with which I repay you for your sorrows and sacrifices for my education. Goodbye, Father, goodbye...”

Perhaps the greatest evidence of how he honored his father was in his book, Noli Me Tangere, where, through the novel’s characters, for the desecration of the memory of his father, his main character, Crisostomo Ibarra, laid hands on a priest, Father Damaso, and almost killed the latter, were it not for the swift intervention of his beloved Maria Clara, who was obviously acting by instinct to prevent harm to her true father. Of course, the plot also confirmed how the son honored his father before it revealed how the author, Rizal, described the hero’s father through impressions of the other characters of the novel. And in a later chapter (Chapter XXXVII, Derbyshire’s translation), through the mouth of His Excellency, the Captain-General, speaking to Ibarra, Rizal the author said, “You have placed yourself in opposition to the religious orders, who must be respected on account of their influence and wealth. But I will protect you, for I like good persons, I like to see them honor the memory of their fathers. I loved mine, and, as God lives, I don’t know what I would have done in your place!”

Perhaps, with the exception of the Bible (where the Gospel accounts narrate how the Son Jesus Christ loves his Father and suffered death in full obedience and honor to His will), and to lesser degrees, works of great writers like Alexandre Dumas (in *The Count of Monte Cristo*) and Victor Hugo (in *Les Miserables*), I have yet to read another great person in history giving such an honor to a father, even indirectly through the books’ characters.

**Mother: Dona Teodora Alonso Realonda**
Second of Rizal’s honorees was his own mother, Dona Teodora Alonso Realonda. In his diaries, he described her thus: “My mother is more than a woman of ordinary culture; she knows literature and speaks Spanish better than I… She is a mathematician and has read many books.” (Zaide). He also honored her with a poem when he was fourteen, entitled “Mi Primera Inspiracion” (My First Inspiration). Then one of his main concerns when he was in Europe was to learn Ophthalmogy from the great specialists there so he could cure the failing eyesight of his own mother. And again, through his characters in the Noli, during “an idyl in the azotea,” (Chapter VII) when Crisostomo Ibarra was recalling to Maria Clara their childhood dialog about their mothers, Ibarra was saying, “Do you remember that stormy night when you saw me weeping alone by the side of my dead mother and, drawing near to me, you put your hand on my shoulder..., saying ‘You have lost your mother while I never had one,’ and you wept with me?” Then, in a beautiful three-stanza song in the novel, sung by Maria Clara during a picnic (Chapter XXIII, Fishing), the last two lines of the song ran:

“Death is the breeze that sweeps the strand,
Without a mother, home, or love’s caress.” (English translation by Derbyshire)

This is how Rizal honored his mother, or a mother, for that matter. The love and honor accorded by Rizal to his father and mother were a hero’s expression of how he obeyed God’s first Commandment on relations with human beings.

“Gomburza”

On February 28, 1872, three Filipino priests were executed at the Bagumbayan Field (now Luneta or Rizal Park) for charges of rebellion against Spain or the Spanish Government in the Philippines. Rizal was just about eleven years old, but he must have learned a lot about it through his elder brother Paciano. The three priests’ names were Mariano Gomez, Jose Burgos, and Jacinto Zamora, also referred to collectively as “Gomburza”. Evidently concerned about the injustice of the Spanish authorities, since the convictions of the crime charged were mysteriously doubtful, Rizal made the priests the object of his dedication when he later wrote his second famous novel, the El Filibusterismo, which was published in Ghent in September 1891. In his tribute to the three priests, Rizal risked his own life for honoring them in his book. Rizal’s dedication reads:

“To the memory of the priests, Don Mariano Gomez, (35 years old), Don Jose Burgos (30 years old), and Don Jacinto Zamora (35 years old). Executed in the Bagumbayan Field on the 28th of February, 1872.

‘The Church, by refusing to degrade you, has placed in doubt the crime that has been imputed to you; the Government, by surrounding your trials with mystery and shadows, causes the belief that there was some error, committed in fatal moments; and all the Philippines, by worshipping your memory and calling you martyrs, in no sense recognizes your culpability. In so far, therefore, as your complicity in the Cavity mutiny is not clearly proved, as you may or may not have been patriots, and as you may or may not have cherished sentiments for justice and for liberty, I have the right to dedicate my work to you as victims of the evil which I undertake to
combat. And while we await expectantly upon Spain to someday restore your good name and cease to be answerable for your death, let these pages serve as a tardy wreath of dried leaves over your unknown tombs, and let it be understood that every one who without clear proof attacks your memory, stains his hands in your blood!”

A very sublime and touching tribute indeed! Rizal’s daring in his books would later cost his life.

**Francisco Baltazar Balagtas**

No less than our national hero honors the greatest of Filipino poets, Francisco Baltazar Balagtas. Perhaps the average Filipino who studied high school in the Philippines, could remember Balagtas as the author of a great novel in verse, Florante at Laura, which was taught in Philippine high schools. But truly there is more to it than just a mere book in verse, and our national hero did not fail to see its greatness. Twice in the first of his immortal books, the Noli and Fili, Rizal made a reference to Balagtas and his novel. First, in Chapter VII of the Noli (An Idyll in the Azotea), as translated by Derbyshire, Rizal’s character Ibarra’s purported letter to Maria Clara before he left for Europe and now was being re-read by her as they met again after seven long years, as proof of her fidelity in keeping his letter, mentioned an instance in which Ibarra’s father was telling him when Ibarra was being sent abroad: “The day in which you lose me you will find yourself like a plant of which our poet Baltazar tells: grown in the water, its leaves wither at the least scarcity of moisture and a moment’s heat dries it up.” For those who would want to recall the original Tagalog verse, here’s what Baltazar Balagtas wrote

> “Para ng halamang lumaki sa tubig,  
daho’y malalanta munting di madilig;  
ikinaluluoy ang sandaling init,  
gayundin ang pusong sa tuwa’ maniig.” (Stanza 200)

In Chapter LXI – Chase on the Lake, still of Derbyshire’s translation, Rizal’s other character, Elias, told Ibarra, while they were in a banca trying to evade the sentinel standing on the bank of the Pasig River: “We’ll lose a few minutes,‘ he said in a low voice. “We must go into the Beata River to pretend that I’m from Penafriancia. You will see the river of which Francisco Baltazar sang.”

The Beata River of which the poet Baltazar wrote was mentioned in the 7th stanza of the Dedication (Paghahandog), “KAY SELYA”, of the book Florante at Laura. The stanza, in its original Tagalog, runs as follows:

> “Ang kaluluwa ko’y kusang dumadalaw  
Sa lansanga’t nayong iyong niyapakan;  
Sa llog Beata’t Hilom na mababaw,  
Yaring aking puso’y laging lumiligaw.”

The honor accorded to Balagtas by Rizal, himself a poet, was a recognition of greatness, and the Filipino might as well reread Florante at Laura, a masterpiece in Tagalog poetry as might a Shakespeare write in
English. This writer himself is pretty awed by the wealth of ideas expressed in the book, especially the stanzas from 197 to 203, which, under a separate title, deserves an oral stage delivery.

Juan Luna and Felix R. Hidalgo

While Rizal was in Spain in 1884, two Filipinos, Juan Luna and Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo, won signal honors at the National Exposition of Fine Arts, held in Madrid. They competed against many painters of Europe. Luna’s canvass, “Spoliarium” won First Prize (gold medal), while Hidalgo’s “Christian Virgins Exposed to the Populace” was awarded Second Prize (silver medal). The Filipino colony in Madrid tendered a banquet, held at the Restaurant Ingles for the double honors for their compatriots Luna and Hidalgo. Rizal was invited to deliver the principal speech. With Filipinos and Spanish notables present, Rizal, even if it was his first public address, delivered from memory a speech that “soared on the wings of his poetical eloquence, and held the hearers spellbound.” He saluted Luna and Hidalgo as the two glories of both Spain and the Philippines, whose splendor united both peoples. He concluded his memorable speech by offering a toast to Luna and Hidalgo, to the youth of the Philippines, to Mother Spain, and to the Filipino parents whose sons were in Europe.

Excerpts from Rizal’s speech, translated in English by Elizabeth Medina from the Spanish original account by historian Wenceslaw E. Retana, follow:

“Gentlemen: ... You see the whole, you judge the cause and hold out your hand to one such as myself, who wishes to join you in one single thought, one sole aspiration: the glory of genius, the splendor of the country. (Good, very good; applause)

“In effect, I shall state the reason why we are gathered. In the history of nations there are names that by themselves signify an achievement, that bring to mind affections and greatness. Names which, like magic formulas, evoke pleasant and smiling ideas; names which become something like a pact, a symbol of peace, a bond of love between nations. The names of Luna and Hidalgo belong among them – their glories illuminate two ends of the globe: the East and the West, Espana and Filipinas. Upon pronouncing them, gentlemen, I envision two brilliant arches, each rising from the two regions, that entwine above in the heights, impelled by the sympathy of common origin, and from that height they bind two peoples with eternal ties, two peoples separated in vain by the seas and space, two peoples in which the seeds of disunion do not germinate, BLINDLY SOWN BY MEN AND THEIR TYRANNY. Luna and Hidalgo are as much Spanish glories as much as they are Filipino. Just as they were born in the Philippines, they could have been born in Spain, because genius has no country, blossoms everywhere, genius is like the light, the air, it is the heritage of all – cosmopolitan like space, like life, and like God. (Applause)

“... To you Filipinas owes the beauty of the diamonds that stud her crown. She has given the stones, Europe has polished them. And we contemplate proudly, you your work, ours the flame, the breath, the materials provided. (Bravos).
“They drank there the poetry of nature, a nature great and terrible, and her cataclysms, in her evolution, in her dynamism. Nature sweet, tranquil and melancholy in her constant, static manifestation. Nature that leaves her imprint on everything she creates and produces. Her children take their imprint wherever they go... In the Spoliarium, through that canvass which is not mute, one hears the noise of the crowd, the shouts of the slaves, the metallic clanking of the dead bodies’ armor, the sobbing of orphans, the murmured prayers with as much vigor and realism that one hears the deafening noise of thunder amid the crashing sound of a waterfall or the awesome, terrifying shaking of an earthquake. The same nature that births such phenomena also intervenes in those brushstrokes. In contrast, in Hidalgo’s painting beats the purest sentiment, the ideal expression of mournfulness, beauty and vulnerability, the victims of brute force, and it is because Hidalgo was born beneath the brilliant azure of that sky, the lullaby of its breezes, amid the serenity of its lakes, the poetry of its valleys and the majestic harmony of its hills and mountains.

“For this reason, in Luna there are shadows, contrasts, dying light, the mystery and the horror, as resonance of the dark tempests of the Tropics, the lightning and the roaring explosions of its volcanoes. This is why Hidalgo is all light, color, harmony, sentiment, purity, as Filipinas is in her moonlit nights, in her quiet days, with her horizon that invites to meditation, cradle mostly rocking the infinite, and both of them, despite being so different, at least in appearance, are the same in their substance, just as all our hearts are the same despite our notable differences. Both, upon reflecting with their palettes the splendor of the tropical sunlight, transform it to rays of eternal glory with which they wreath THEIR COUNTRY – HUMANITY SUBJECTED TO SEVERE TESTS; UNREDEEMED HUMANITY; reason and aspiration in open struggle against personal troubles, FANATICISM AND INJUSTICE BECAUSE, sentiment and opinion will break open a path through even the thickest walls; because for them all bodies have pores, all are transparent, and if they lack the pen, if the printing press does not second them, then palette and brush not only will give pleasure to the eyes – they will also be eloquent orators.

“... Luna and Hidalgo belong as much to you as to us. You love them and we see in them generous aspirations, precious examples. The Filipino youth of Europe, always enthusiastic, and some other persons whose hearts remain youthful because of the disinterestedness and enthusiasm that mark their actions, offer a crown to Luna, a modest gift, small, yes, compared to our fervor, but it is the most spontaneous and freely offered gift of all the ones presented until now.

Therefore, I raise a toast to our artists Luna and Hidalgo, legitimate and pure glories of TWO PEOPLES! I raise a toast to those who have given them assistance along the painful path of art! I offer a toast that the Filipino youth, sacred hope of MY COUNTRY, may imitate such precious models and that Mother Spain, solicitous and attentive to the wellbeing of her provinces, may soon put into practice the reforms that she has long considered; for the furrow has been plowed and the earth is not barren! And finally, I offer a toast to the happiness of parents who, deprived of their sons’ affection, from those distant regions follow them with tearful gaze and beating heart through the seas and the distance, sacrificing on the altar of common good the sweet consolations that are so scarce in life’s twilight – precious and solitary winter flowers blooming beside the tomb’s snow mantled borders. (Warm applause, congratulations to the speaker).
A Profile in Patriotism

The reader might as well read the full text of Rizal’s speech and look at the copies of paintings to appreciate fully the meaning and significance of the accolades the national hero bestowed on Juan Luna and Felix Resurrection Hidalgo. At the same time that he was exalting the Filipino genius as being comparable to those in the rest of the world, his love of country, his desire for placing the Philippines in the level of comparable greatness with the other great countries like Spain was also revealing.

And Humility in Giving Honor

And for a great man as Rizal was, such acts of honoring others were reflective of his humility as a human person. Surely, it is greatness and humility to honor others, be they relatives, friends, countrymen, or foreigners. #

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