

# Transgression and Absolution in *Si Tandang Bacio Macunat* (1885)<sup>†</sup>



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In 1885, Spanish Franciscan Friar Miguel Lucio Bustamante (1842-1893) published *Si Tandang Bacio Macunat*, a *Tagalog* proto-novel scored by successive generations of Filipinists for its unabashedly anti-Filipino dramatization of the inappropriateness of education as a goal for the *indio*. José Rizal, in his own novel, *El Filibusterismo* (1891), through the character of the rebellious student, Placido Penitente, derides Bustamante's book, especially its claims that young men who forsake their hometowns in the province in favor of Manila invariably lose their souls, or that a little knowledge of Spanish transforms the Filipino into an enemy of both God and Spain.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, at the time of its first appearance, and (as Rizal's own negative assessments of the work indicate) certainly by the turn of the century, the work had gained considerable notoriety for what many were taking to be its portrayal of the Spanish colonizer's condescending, even hostile, disposition toward the *indio*, in the matter especially of the *indio's* quest for an education.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>Jose Rizal, *El Filibusterismo*, trans. by Leon Ma. Guerrero (Hongkong: Longmans, 1965) pp. 60, 83, 85.

<sup>2</sup>Subsequent evaluations of Bustamante's work, in history books and literary essays, have generally taken their cues from Rizal's damning appraisal of the book. Teodoro A. Agoncillo's curt dismissal of it exemplifies this point. He is especially critical of the friars' generally condescending disposition towards the *indio's* intellectual abilities, which, in his view, is responsible for imbuing in the *indio* a sense of his own inferiority. He is outraged by the fact that "Father Miguel Lucio Bustamante, writing his *Tandang Bacio Macunat* in 1885, expounded his theory, in fiction form, that the Filipinos were fit only to tend carabaos, to pray and to follow the advice of friars" (Teodoro

members of the *ilustrado* class took particular offense; for it appeared it was their efforts to increase and develop their wealth and political power that the book had trivialized, by predicting for it an outcome of misery and defeat.<sup>3</sup>

As clergyman and Spaniard, doubly a figure of authority, Miguel Lucio Bustamante recognized that, in a society wracked by dissension and conflict, and grown decidedly hostile to the Spanish frailocracy, there was good reason for him to be concerned. The liberal education reform law of 1853 had made the colonial educational system somewhat more responsive to the desires and needs of the *indio*, and this had brought about a general condition of ferment in the economic, political, and religious life of the colony, underwritten, predictably, by the much-expanded base of educated Filipinos.<sup>4</sup> Increasingly, the *indio*'s desire to learn more, to explore what lay hidden beneath the surface of things, was becoming a threat to the power, of the State certainly, but also of the Church, to the extent that it fueled anti-clericalist sentiments that congealed into an actual challenge of monastic supremacy. As a way of putting up a defense, and restoring the cause, of his own colonizing class, but also of containing the devastating fallout from various reform movements that, throughout the last three decades of the nineteenth century, had sprung up in the Philippine colony, Bustamante turned to writing fiction. For through literature, thought Bustamante, would the battle for the people's hearts and minds be won.

To make certain his message would be intelligible to the audience for whom it was intended — that, quite the reverse of being to the *indio*'s advantage, the possession of an education is a threat to his happiness

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A. Agoncillo, "The Development of the Tagalog Language and Literature," in Epifanio San Juan, Jr., ed., *Introduction to Modern Pilipino Literature* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1974), p. 13). Agoncillo, obviously, imputes to the text a power to directly and immediately create, in its *indio* reader, feelings of inferiority *viz-a-viz* the colonizer. The text, according to this view, possesses the power to shape the *indio*'s perception of himself. The *indio*, for his part, passively receives the text's message.

<sup>3</sup>Read, for example, the accounts in O.D. Corpuz, *The Roots of the Filipino Nation* (Quezon City: AKLAHI Foundation Inc., 1989), pp. 145-205; Renato Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited* (Quezon City: Tala Publishing Services, 1975), pp. 126-128, among others.

<sup>4</sup>Encarnacion Alzona, *A History of Education in the Philippines (1565-1930)* (Manila: University of the Philippines Press, 1932), pp. 63-65.

and well-being — Bustamante came to the decision to deliver it in Tagalog, the language he had in common with his Filipino readership. This way also, he hoped to be able to ingratiate himself to them, not as some aloof Spaniard unconcerned that he might be going over the heads of the *indios*, but as a man of God intensely interested in entering into a meaningful conversation with them.<sup>5</sup> What is more, he would devise a story of intrinsic interest to them, just because it would tell of a Filipino family's rise to fortune, but then also of its loss of it, as a consequence of their refusal to understand that the possession of an education would be inimical to their interests. Little did Bustamante anticipate the public outrage against the resulting novel, an outrage so intense as to have caused its withdrawal by the authorities from general circulation.<sup>6</sup>

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To an audience accustomed to such moralizing literary apparatuses as the *awit* and *corrido*, and for whom reading was tantamount to the complicated process of symbol hunting, *Si Tandang Bacio Macunat* came across as yet another fable, that is, as a story told to exemplify a general lesson about life. Indeed, a cursory reading of the text yields this conventional meaning. Prospero, an ambitious youth from the *indio* middle-class, takes leave of his family, and travels to the city to get an education. However, in the course and as a result of his quest, he becomes a burden and a source of shame to his family. Tandang Bacio Macunat, the character the unnamed narrator meets as the story begins, is the perfect foil to the ambitious middle-class character. Bacio, who is born to plow the field, remains content with his lot and does not feel sorry for himself for lacking an education. In this polarity, Prospero represents the foolish *indio* who is corrupted by the city,

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<sup>5</sup>The early friars saw the need to learn the language of the *indio* and published a large number of texts in Tagalog — dictionaries, doctrines, translations, among others. Among them were Juan de Noceda and Pedro Sanlucar (*Vocabulario de la Lengua Tagala*, 1734); Francisco de San Jose (*Memorial de la Vida Cristiana*, 1835); Alonso de Santa Ana (*Explicacion de la Doctrina cristiana en lengua tagala*, 1853); and Antonio de Borja (*Aral na tunay na totoong pagaacay sa tauo, nang manga cabanalang gaua nang manga maloulalating santos na si Barlaan at Josaphat*, 1837), among others.

<sup>6</sup> *A History of Education in the Philippines*, pp. 96-97.

whereas *Tandang Bacio*, the hardy tiller of the soil, symbolizes the individual who would rather live in genteel poverty than succumb to the blandishments of the strange life offered by the city. This, in a nutshell, is the story woven by the author.

To bring the reader's understanding of this complicated narrative into an unproblematic relationship with the conventional reading of it, a number of intriguing questions which have to do both with the text's structure and the very act of reading and generating meanings, are glossed over. But should the conventional argument not be something we ought to problematize? Must the text be regarded as a completely coherent discourse that will brook no contradiction? Might the text not be riven by certain fissures not easy to bridge over? Does the text say one and only one thing? Is the meaning read into the text by traditional criticism its definitive meaning? By approaching the text from other perspectives, would it not be possible to generate an interpretation of it capable of posing a legitimate challenge to its historically constituted and privileged interpretation?

In view of such questions, I shall argue it should be possible to see in *Si Tandang Bacio Macunat* something other than an anti-Filipino treatise rooted in racial prejudice and in the desire to perpetuate colonial rule. I will show that into the text's immense complexity, we can read meanings other than the canonical one. This view of a text's multiplicity of meanings is rooted in the belief that literature which, of necessity, constitutes reality through language, is never transparent and uni-dimensional, but offers various meanings — manifest and latent — contained within a vast network of antagonistic or associative ideas and images, not all of which the author himself, when he produced the work, can claim to have had in mind. Indeed, a text's "other" meanings are most often generated by the application of various critical perspectives. What I propose to do in this study is offer a number of readings by which might be exhibited numerous dimensions and facets of the work ignored by its more orthodox interpretations.

### *The Text's Structure of Desire*

The narrative appears to be riddled with strong desires, the fulfillment of which is almost always deferred if not subverted, and that invariably clash covertly or overtly. These contradictory desires are framed in a

series of narratives each of which is rendered by a different persona. Much like its European counterparts, *Si Tandang Bacio Macunat* makes use of framing in order to tell a number of stories. But unlike Boccaccio's *Decamerone* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, where every character has a specific tale to tell, *Si Tandang Bacio Macunat* is a major narrative containing numerous other narratives. Although the different stories which can be found within the larger narrative ostensibly function to reinforce the work's overarching theme, analysis shows that a number of voices which come from the stories subvert rather than reinforce its conventional meaning. What is interesting to note about such probing and questioning voices is that they are difficult to still and suppress.

In an effort to familiarize himself with his surrounding environment, the narrator, who remains unnamed, embarks upon an exploration of various towns around Manila. He comes, in the course of his travels, across Gervasio Macunat, a humble farmer who turns out to be possessed of a lovely, home-grown wit. This narrative frame forms the larger frame within which Bacio relates his life-history. He is provoked to do so by the narrator's casual mention of his belief that had Bacio only gone to Manila he might, instead of remaining a poor farmer, have actually met with success, becoming a *directorcillo* perhaps, or a member of the tribunal. In other words, by providing his life history, Bacio is able to act upon his desire to prove false the commonplace notion that a formal education gives one the power to ascend to a higher position in society.

Bacio's desire to reveal his own past, and thus enable the unnamed narrator to understand the present, steers the narrative upon the path of Bacio's cumulative experiences, going all the way back to his childhood and the period of his adolescence. Two authority figures dominate this part of the chronicle — his *indio* teacher whom the young Bacio had greatly admired and feared, and his own father. He expresses his affection for this teacher, stating that while he might not have received his training in the big city, and had not been, as a consequence, literate in Spanish, he had been held in the highest esteem by all:

*Yaon pong matandang yaon ay totoong quinacaibiga't  
quinagalangan nang buong bayan, бага man hindi siya marunong  
ng uicang castila, na paris nitong manga maestrong bagong litao  
ngayon, na ang pangal, i, normal, cahima't casing-itim co, o maitim*

*pa sa aquin, ay nagsosoot nang levita o cung ano cayang tauag doon sa mga isinosoot nilang damit, at naquiquipantay sila sa manga Capitan at sa manga Cura pa, na (tabi sa di gayon,) tila, i, cung sino silang mahal na tauo.<sup>7</sup>*

The *indio* who goes to a school for teachers is negatively described — ambitious, deceitful, and arrogant. Because he thinks the world of himself, what difference is there between him and the *capitan* and the *cura*, the two most powerful individuals in town.

He describes his father as a strict man who apparently, together with a total and unflinching obedience, had demanded of his son a detailed daily account of everything that had transpired in class. He describes as well, in great detail, his family's everyday life, underscoring the centrality to it of obedience to God and to one's parents. There can be order in the community when its members assume their designated places, and carry out their responsibilities, within its natural hierarchy. The refusal to cooperate in this matter is a form of suicide.

*Ang manga tagalog, ang mga indio baga, aniya, na humiualay caya sa calabao, ay ang cadalasa, i, naguiguing masama at palamarang tauo sa Dios at sa Hari. (p. 18)*

Bacio makes this remark following his account of his marriage to Silia and of their many children. This observation encapsulates the attitude of the old farmer toward his own life and role in society — as an *indio* and farmer, he feels duty-bound to remain in the field, ubiquitous carabao in tow. Were he to break away from this position, he would be guilty of rebellion against God and King.

The vehemence with which the old man utters these words must be examined in light of what he is, of what he has done or has not done, and perhaps of what he would like to impress upon his interlocutor's mind. Surveying his past, as through a glass darkly, he has selected from it those parts he will be using to construct his biography, which is the biography of a poor man — of a person so lowly that even with respect to his guest he is clearly the subordinate. It is partly to acknowledge his

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<sup>7</sup>Miguel Lucio Bustamante, *Si Tandang Bacio Macunat*. ed. by Virgilio S. Almario (Quezon City: Sentro ng Wikang Filipino, 1996), p. 8. All subsequent quotations from the text will be taken from this edition.

inferior status that Bacio disparages those of his own kind desirous of discovering a hitherto unexplored world, which in his own mind has taken on the image of the mysterious city.

The central figure of escape and fall in Bacio's narrative is that of the *maestro* who goes to the city and who, upon his return, behaves as though he had into the lord's manor been born. Bacio, however, is not and cannot be what educated *indios* have become — individuals who aspire to power, with the potential, owing to their new knowledge, to dislodge the traditional wielders of power from their privileged position. He will remain what he always has been, a person incapable of comprehending his own exploitation, without the courage to step away from his carabao. The lowly farmer, desirous of pleasing his educated and well-traveled guest, affirms his subordinate position, and in the process distantiates himself from the ambitious and educated *indio*. The guest, who remains an outsider in many ways, is a figure of authority to whom the story is told. He is only one of the many symbols of that authority Bacio appears to be living his unremarkable life in complete subservience to.

What is interesting to note is the adversarial position taken by the narrator in the discussion of the advantages and disadvantages to the Filipino of a higher education. It is the unnamed narrator who takes the affirmative side even as he argues that knowledge of the colonizer's language might serve as a supplement to whatever it is that Bacio's children learn in school. Bacio insists, however, that the *indio* and the Spaniard do not have anything in common; the monkey dressed in a man's clothing, remarks Bacio, remains a monkey. The narrator persists in his belief that knowledge helps a person improve his body and soul. It is this narrator, regarded by some to be the author's *alter ego*, who explains the benefits that might accrue to the *indio* through education. This is the voice, articulating a position so unlike that espoused by the *indio*, which the text has allowed to surface and which it can neither deny nor silence. It is a situation where the normal expectations concerning the terms of a binary opposition are reversed.

The desire, so vociferously adumbrated by Bacio in his own account of his life, leads Bacio to dig up, literally and symbolically, to resurrect, as it were, a small book — *ang munting libro* — passed off as a truthful account of events that actually happened and were written down by Bacio's father, an eyewitness to that life. The narrative structure

complexifies, with the reader being positioned further away, temporally speaking, from contemporary events, as he is transported back to the first few decades of the nineteenth century, when the events narrated in the book were supposed to have taken place.

Bacio warns the narrator of the many mistakes that had found their way into the manuscript as a consequence of the fact that his father had been uneducated (he was ignorant, *hangal*), and that he was bound to spot. The entire account is thus rendered problematic, riddled, as it were, with errors. Once again, in face of his guest's perceived superior status, Bacio speaks of himself and of his father deprecatingly. Nonetheless, the manuscript contains a truth to which he himself could bear witness, because he knew the people involved in the story. The veracity of the account is thus established, through the double invocation of the authority and truthfulness of his father, an eyewitness-chronicler, and of Bacio himself. Bacio explains:

*[I]to pong casulatan, ay guinawa nang aquing tatay, at palibhasa, i, capoua co ring hangal, ay segurong-seguro po, i, maraming mapipintasan ninyong salitang hindi matotowid. Datapua, t, cung sa laman, po, ay totoong totoo ang nalalaman dini; at cng caya, i, pinatotohanan co, sapagca, t inabot co, at naquilala co ring ang lahat nang tauong nasasambit dito sa tinatangnan cong libro. (p. 22)*

This little book should be taken as a separate text with its own unique specificities as a narrative that revolves around the family of Andres Baticot, his wife Maria Dimaniuala, and their children, Felicita or Pili, and Prospero or Proper. Bacio's father, the story's narrator, is Pili's cousin, and is presented as somebody who has no ulterior motive for falsifying the account. He takes the first person point of view, making no attempt to camouflage his involvement in his own chronicle, endlessly intruding into it, interjecting, conducting a running commentary, criticizing, posing a series of questions, predisposing his reader toward a certain position vis-a-vis the unfolding narrative, and, generally speaking, assuming a God-like attitude and point of view. In this section of *Si Tandang Bacio Macunat*, the reader becomes privy to narratives simultaneously rendered with signs and traces crisscrossing each other in dizzying configurations of patterns.

Based on Bacio's account of his father in the former's story, the father's actions in the small book are almost predictable. Having lived



in the *barrio* since birth, and having imbibed the values and mores of the community, Bacio's father appears as a man set in his ways — intractable, inflexible and judgmental. As his narrative begins, however, he has nothing but praise for his cousins, Proper and Pili:

*Mahusay na mahusay ang asal nitong dalawang magcapatid, na si Pili baga, at si Proper. Marurunong din sila nang manga catungcululan nang taong cristiano at nang iba pang nauucol sa pagcabuhay, at sa paquiquipagcapwa tauo. Ano pa? ang pananamit nilang magcapatid, at ang quilos nang canilang catauan, ay tapat na tapat, na ualang cahalong capalaluan o calibugan. (p. 24)*

Proper and Pili, in this view, are two morally upright Christians who are pleasing to God and to the community. It is interesting to point out the stress laid on the harmony between what they do and how they dress, displaying neither pride nor arrogance nor overt sexuality.<sup>8</sup> Bacio's father subsequently attempts to discover the reason for the destruction of this fine young man. He refers to Proper's father as a major element in the process of moral disintegration that overtakes Proper. Written after the fact, the narrative puts the blame squarely on the *cabeza*.

As the story begins, Pili is worried at the prospect of her brother's journey to Manila for his education, at their father's instance. The reason is made explicit:

*[N]ang siya, i, magaral-aral sa Maynila nang iba't ibang hindi napag-aralan dito sa atin na para-para tayo, i, manga hangal, na ualang nalalamang iba cundi cumain at mag-araro. (p. 26)*

*Hangal* in this context is used to refer to those whose existence consists solely of working and eating, their lives presenting no opportunity for exploring other worlds. Proper deserves more than what the *barrio's* stultifying existence can offer. The *cabeza* knows that Proper knows how to read, count, and pray; for him, however, this is not enough for his son. What his son can learn in Manila is "*caunting paquiquipagcapwatauo.*" In this town, on the other hand, everyone is ignorant of

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<sup>8</sup>Juan de Oliver, *Declaracion de la Doctrina Christiana En Idioma Tagalog* (Quezon City: Pulong Sources of Philippine Studies, 1995), p. 161. The author offers an exhaustive discussion of the nature and manifestations of the seven deadly sins of which pride is the most serious.

and untutored in the art of dealing with other people. Education in the city would compensate for this deficiency; it would assist his son greatly in getting ahead in the world.

The father's wish to have his son educated in the city is met with skepticism by a number of people. Pili imagines all sorts of bad things befalling her brother. Heaven, for her, is something it ought to be possible to attain to, even in the absence of a formal education. The parish priest, an acknowledged figure of authority, calls the *cabeza's* motives for sending Proper to Manila into question. He calls it arrogance, a mere wanting to show off to the community his financial capability for undertaking such a move. He attributes it to pride, the deadliest of sins. What is more, he expresses his doubts concerning Proper's intellectual ability (*may capurulan ang ulo*). He predicts that once Proper is settled in the city, he will have no motivation to learn anything, but will be given over instead to wickedness and debauchery.

But what these arguments presuppose has little to do with the notion that education is bad for the *indio*. Pili is worried, with good reason, because she herself has not been exposed to a life other than her own bucolic world, and the city is for her a strange, mysterious universe where the agents of sin stand ready to pounce upon the trusting *provinciano*. Her concern is understandable because it springs from her genuinely sisterly affection and love for Proper, which makes her want to erect a thick, protective wall around him. For his part, what the parish priest argues is that Proper does not have the intellectual aptitude for the rigors of a higher education, and that the *cabeza's* action is likely just another instance of a landed middle-class *indio* display of arrogance. He is nervous about the message the *cabeza's* action would send other middle class families in town; it might set them thinking about sending their own children to the city for an education. Then, instead of a handful of city-educated individuals, the town would have an increased number of such people. In his opinion, for every one thousand *indios* who go to school, a good nine hundred and fifty stand to learn absolutely nothing. Such objections notwithstanding, the *cabeza* remains undaunted and sends Proper off to Manila with his blessings.

In Manila, as a result of the wrong choice of company, Proper does fall into a life of vice and debauchery. This, however, is the consequence of the weakness of his own will, not of the education he has received. Before the narrative embarks on a detailed description of Proper's mis-

adventures, he is presented as composing a letter of his family in which he compares himself to a blind man who has now regained his sight because of his new experiences. He now is in a position to speak with authority about the novel and exciting things he has seen in the city. More importantly, he understands and can now articulate the radical difference between his former life and the life that he finds in Manila:

*Ngayo, i, naquiquiquilala co, na ang ating manga ugali diyan sa ating bayan, ay malayong malayo sa manga ugali nang tauong civilizado. Caya ang pananamit, ang pangungusap, ang paquiquipagcapuatauo, ang manga quilos, at ang iba't iba pang asal nang manga tagarito, i, malayong malayo sa naquiquita, t, inaasal diyan sa canilang bayan. (p. 46)*

Manila represents a new world to which the sheltered young man has been exposed, and it is inevitable that he should be overwhelmed by all these novel impressions. But more than his uncritical absorption of details of sight and sound is his realization that there is another mode than he had previously been accustomed to, of speaking, of behaving, and most importantly, of thinking. Indeed, there are other sets of values and behavior patterns that differ dramatically from those observed in the world he knew. Manila is the world of the *civilizado*, the binary opposite of the *hangal*, as exemplified by his friends and neighbors at home. It is easy to understand why Pili, the conformist and unadventurous character, is deeply disturbed by this letter; she realizes with the proverbial shock of recognition that her brother has discovered another and presumably more exciting mode of existence.

In recounting Proper's relationship with his parents, the narrator makes a thinly veiled criticism of the parents' inability to read between the lines of their son's letter. He assumes an air of superiority as he finds fault in the parents' naive reading of Proper's text:

*Ano pa't hindi marunong na cumutcot at humanap sa ilalim nang manga salita ang tunay na cahiulugang natatago sa licod nang manga paimbabaoang wica. Ang balat lamang ang canilang tinitingnan, at hindi nila inuusisa ang nasacailaliman. (p. 48)*

The narrator dismisses the parents as "*manga tauo sa una.*" In the process, he allows the reader some insights into his character as dismissive of old people, as superior to the rest of the folk, as judgmental.

This harsh dismissal of Proper's parents' inability to understand their son's duplicity, does not cover over what the book has just allowed to rise to the surface, however briefly. This a view of the world into which Proper has been thrust — one of rationality, decorum, propriety, novelty. This is a world of many discourses, and of exciting exchanges, such as Proper describes in his letters to his family.

The citified young man returns to the *barrio* and is described in highly pejorative terms, as if to mock the young man who is so lovingly described at the beginning of the book:

*Uahi ang buhoc, quilang ang sombrero, mapungay ang tingin,  
maputi ang matigas na salual at baro, batitos ay maquintab at  
maquipot, at pinangungusapan pa niya ang cabayo sa uicang castila.*  
(p. 74)

Proper has become the Other, an object of intense curiosity among the *barrio* folk, but also of fun tinged with envy. He has been to a world the rest can only imagine. For Bacio's father, the young man is his exact antithesis, he being tied to the narrow world of the farm. Such a negative portrait of Proper could only have come from a man resentful of his own lack of the resources and the opportunity to forsake soil and carabao for city and education. As a point of view, he has filtered and conditioned any reader's impressions of Proper.

The rest of the story depicts the progressive deterioration of Proper, his excessive drinking, gambling, womanizing. Eventually he is brought before the authorities on charges of theft and adultery. The effect upon the family of the spectacle of a beloved son and brother with nothing else on his mind than to follow up on his determination to bring about his own destruction is devastating. The *cabeza* is forced to sell off his property in order to raise bail for his son out. His wife suffers the anguish of a mother helpless before the spectacle of a loved one sinking deeper and deeper into a condition of viciousness. The *cabeza* dies an utterly broken man. Proper languishes in prison and eventually dies there. Pili, bereft of any hope and comfort, nurses a broken heart, later losing the will to live.

It is easy to view the narrative penned by Bacio's father as a means to affirm the thesis of the larger narrative, as told by the narrator. In this view, all the stories cohere, with the different levels merely reinforcing each other. This has been the conventional reading of the text, as

mentioned earlier. The father's narrative, comprising a good two-thirds of the text, would appear, then, to constitute its principal theme, played out in the exchange between *Tandang Bacio* and the narrator, namely, that education is fatal to the *indio's* interests. This would explain the small book's inordinate focus upon, and graphic description of, Proper's misbehavior. The reader is encouraged to react in disgust to the picture presented of this dissolute young man bereft of any positive quality.

Upon closer examination, the ending which constitutes a series of highly charged emotions, not to mention several pathetic deaths, is traceable to the different forms of desire that overtook all of the characters in this small book. The father's desire to prepare a son for a life not tied to the soil leads to a great deal of complications exacerbated by clashing opinions in the family. The mother's desire to help an erring son leads her to defend an unregenerate child. Pili's desire to spare her brother from all harm renders her almost will-less, completely dominated by and subservient to the parish priest. This clash of desires makes for an engrossing narrative that eventually shows how pivotal Proper's role has been in arousing such strong desires in the characters that surround him.

In word and in deed, Proper is presented in the small book as a weak-willed prevaricator and lecher. His own letters constitute a particular discourse that reveals the changes in the young man's consciousness — his initial shock and disbelief, his hesitation, his willful and deliberate fabrication of lies. The restlessness and demonic intensity that characterize his activities compete with the growing sense of desperation and anger experienced by the other characters. While in pursuit of his lustful desires, Proper is driven to tempt fate; ultimately he is destroyed by his own morally flawed character and the fatal excesses to which it gives rise.

### *Morality and Class Consciousness*

It is quite clear that like other nineteenth century texts, *Si Tandang Bacio Macunat* follows the structure of a morality play. It is framed against two contrasting worlds — that of the sordid, duplicitous, immoral, confused, and that characterized by its passion for restraint, order, harmony, and the single-minded search for God. Pili, the *cabeza*, the parish priest

present a stark contrast to Proper and his friends. As would be expected of a morality play, only two types of characters — good and evil — appear in this narrative. In the fierce struggle between them, evil is vanquished, and the good, or righteousness is rewarded, if not on earth, then in heaven.

From a moral perspective, Bustamante's text serves a didactic function. Not unlike *Urbana at Felisa*, it issues in a series of moral guidelines from which the reader was expected to take his cues.<sup>9</sup> Not unlike de Castro's epistolary work, it encompasses different events in the lives of several characters from two different generations, and with conflicting perspectives and experiences.

The text is also structured along lines of class. Bacio is a lower class *indio* and farmer. Proper traces his lineage to the newly emergent, power-broking middle class. In his narrative, Bacio repeatedly underscores his poverty; he makes a point of saying that his father owned not one piece of land. Proper is the scion of a land-owning family; he lives in a grand house and wears expensive jewelry — precisely what he and his family lose as a consequence of his wicked ways.

Of similar note is the detailed description provided by Bacio's father of the gradual loss by the *cabeza* of his possessions, his power, his prestige, as well as of his wife's forced sale of her prized possessions just so she could help her son out. In the end, the once proud and wealthy family is reduced to destitution. When Pili dies, she owns absolutely nothing. The story ends with the loss by the entire family of everything they had ever possessed, their reputation and their lives included.

For a text commonly read as a moral treatise, the intense preoccupation with material wealth and its quantifiable dimensions suggests that a more historical and sociological approach can be useful in further understanding the complex interplay between the individual and society, and the crucial role of such categories as class and ideology in the constitution of the fictional text. Such a critical perspective should enable the reader to situate the text against the concrete socio-economic realities of the first half of the nineteenth century — the profound so-

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<sup>9</sup>Modesto de Castro, *Ang Pagsusulatan nang Dalauang Binibini na Si Urbana at Felisa na Nagtuturo ng Mabuting Kaugalian*, rev. ed. (Manila: Libreria Martinez, 1938). This text has been a source of guidelines on ethics and etiquette for numerous generations of Filipinos since its publication in 1864.

cial changes sweeping all over the land, particularly Manila and the adjoining provinces. By so doing, the reader overcomes his tendency to view the text exclusively as a moral treatise, and to view it instead as shaped by class antagonisms.

### *The Text as Transgression and Absolution*

I wish now to bring attention to bear on the role in the story of the *cura parroco*, focusing on his relationships with the other characters. According to the conventional reading of the work, the priest is cast as villain. His outlook on the *indio's* intellectual ability is completely negative, and, of course, he has nothing good to say about the arrogance of the middle class, and the general inability of the lower and middle classes to know their place in the scheme of things. Even so, the *cura parroco* is a central figure of authority. Everyone must defer to him, on account of his learning, as well as of his sacred vocation to serve as mediator between God and his creatures.

In Bacio's father's account of things, the parish priest argues with the *cabeza* against the wisdom of sending Proper to Manila to study. As Pili's adviser and confessor, he listens to her and gives her his advice. He appears in the text as a counterpoint to the *cabeza's* perspective. Because we find him officiating at the burial rites for Pili, he must have been around for the burial rites of her parents as well, who died before her.

Now, the administration of the Church's last rites necessarily carries with it the notion of forgiveness for all the sins committed, with the fervent hope that the departed will enter the kingdom of heaven. This power has been bestowed on the priest as an essential part of his vocation and is an important signifying practice in the system of beliefs subscribed to by Christians. But it is also true that the notion of forgiveness is preceded by the penitent's act of confession, where the individual lays bare his/her soul to the priest and admits his worthlessness. In the process, s/he exposes his weaknesses and faults and articulates his various transgressions of law in word and deed.

In the narrative, the priest takes on all these roles and much more, for he not only listens and absolves; he tells the people what to do about their problems and tribulations. In the story, Proper is depicted as having committed grievous sins against himself, his family, and his neigh-

bors; Proper offends against the priest as well, by disobeying the latter's wishes. In the narrative detailing Proper's dissolute ways, the impression created is similar to the process when, within the confessional box, a sinner describes his/her sins in graphic terms, while the priest listens and tries to discern. When Proper dies, miserable and alone in the cold prison, he is meted out a most ignominious punishment, as he is shunned by friends, and becomes unsure of God's forgiveness. He is certainly not shown receiving the last rites from a priest as he himself lies dying. There is transgression but the desired absolution does not follow and thus the ritual remains incomplete.

There are reasons why Proper dies without any forgiveness from the institution tasked to absolve transgressors. Proper's sins are rooted not only in lust, untrammelled sensual appetite, in short, sins traditionally identified with the body. He has committed a more serious sin—the desire to know, to see what lies beyond the narrow world of the barrio. Like Satan, Prometheus (the son of a Titan who was punished by Zeus for giving fire to humankind), Daedalus (whose son Icarus died as his wings made by the father melted as he flew near the sun), Proper committed the unpardonable sin of pride for which punishment must be meted out.

In the early part of the small book, the priest argues that the *cabeza's* decision to send Proper to Manila is rooted in pride. Because both the *cabeza* and Proper have challenged the priestly power to legislate, they must be punished. Pride, indeed, is the most serious of all the seven vices, for it sets up an individual as superior to the rest of mankind. The profligate young man dies only after he has turned his back on the community, including the priest, and only after he has committed all the sins with impunity. Part of the ritualized punishment is to die without the benefit of the last sacraments. The *cura parroco* wins out in the end against the young *indio* who has refused to heed his priestly advice.

A repetition of the same ritual of transgression and punishment is evident at other narrative levels, in a story the structure of which is not unlike that of a complicated Chinese box — the progressively smaller boxes within the large box. *Si Tandang Bacio Macunat* features narratives within narratives, characters endlessly listening, getting more curious and obsessive, talking ceaselessly and unabashedly revealing themselves to total strangers, and creating numerous discourses in the process.



Initially, the narrator runs into Bacio who starts to confide in this total stranger. The narrator, intrigued by the farmer's emotional outburst, eggs the latter on, to speak and to reveal the self in a situation similar to the experience undergone by the priest and the penitent within the confessional box. Then both the unnamed narrator, now armed with some insights into Bacio, and Bacio constitute the audience for the tale unfolded by Bacio's father. The movement has brought the reader from the oral to the written stage where texts committed to writing can be studied more rigorously because they are there imprinted forever.

The narrator and the farmer now become the manuscript readers as they experience vicariously the experiences of the characters in the small book. Inside the tale are the endless confessions, literal and figurative, which the characters have to make, whether out of desperate need or as ritual for atonement. Indeed, here is a story demanding to be read/heard not only by the characters in the fictional construct (Bacio and the narrator), but equally importantly, by the text's intended readers in the late nineteenth century. In and through their reading of it, they enter into a dialogue with it, even as they confronted the text in its presence and filled in the gaps between the words of the various narratives.<sup>10</sup> As a result of this reading, the various meanings of the text — intended and otherwise — are generated, from the most acceptable and thus easiest to “canonize” to the least acceptable, because it is unorthodox and, hence, subversive.

In this intricate relationship between Miguel Lucio Bustamante, priest and author, and his readers, the final structure and ritual of confession is manifested and eventually played out. The reader goes over the text, continuously engaging it in various ways, reaches the end and leaves it behind. What happens in their consciousness is a complex process where thoughts revolving around escape and liberation, depicted

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<sup>10</sup>There are theories of reading, especially those by Wolfgang Iser, which deal with the processes that take place in the reader's consciousness in the act of reading. See, for example, Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” in Ralph Cohen, *New Directions in Literary History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974); Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader* (London: Methuen, 1987), and D. W. Fokkema and Elrud Kunne-Ibsch, *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1978), among others, for a discussion of the various streams in reader-response and reception theories.

in the text in the journey undertaken by Proper, are shown as dangerous. But before the certainty of a conclusion is reached, the reader must first be an accessory to Proper's crimes and plunge into the depths of despair as s/he follows Proper's descent into hell.

Unlike Proper, however, the reader is plucked out of the abyss as Bacio and the priest take over to proclaim that order is restored to a fallen world. The reader is enjoined, by the text's ending, to go forth and sin no more. The author/priest, burdened with the serious responsibility of containing threats to the existing order, has achieved the mission entrusted to him in the colonial system. Whatever discord, imaged in the space created for dissent, shaped the text at some points has now been smoothed over in an authoritative gesture of closure. The father/priest affirms the Law. As the book ends, Bacio takes center stage and explains the need to preserve things as they are:

*... ang Hari, ay mangasiua sa canyang pinaghaharian, ang  
anloagui, ay maghasa nang maghasa nang caniyang manga pait  
at catam; ang ama,t, ina, a mag-alila sa canilang manga anac;  
at ang mga indio, ay mag-alaga nang canilang calabao. (p. 116)*

This, then, is a major strand in Bustamante's work — the complex structure that is a series of confessions through which the readers, ranging from the original to the contemporary — could realize how desires are forms of transgressions that need to be absolved. If absolution cannot be given within the paradigm, then the recalcitrant character must die unforgiven. Between the awakening of desire and the actual fulfillment is an awesome gap, full of terrifying pitfalls. In Bustamante's work, some desires are fulfilled (the priest feels vindicated insofar as he is convinced of the righteousness of his cause), while most others are thwarted either by the characters' own weaknesses or by some impersonal forces beyond their control imaged in the intrusive and powerful presence of the parish priest.

Tandang Bacio claims he would like to lead a simple life, but it is more likely that any desire to improve his material condition has been aborted by socio-economic forces that shape the people's lives. Subservient to authority figures (the priest and the father) and bereft of formal education which could have led to enlightenment, he could interpret man-made and ideologically-determined conditions as manifes-

tations of God's will. That the poor will always be with us is a truism that the Church did not refute in the nineteenth century; on the contrary, its teachings affirm this idea in numerous ways.

Furthermore, what must be regarded a natural right — the search for knowledge — has been dismissed in the text, by Bacio several times, but also by the parish priest, as mere ambition rooted in pride. Because the text written by a priest cannot allow the flowering of an idea that seeks to promote universal education at this particular juncture in history, the concept must be displaced and the character symbolizing it severely punished and ultimately destroyed. Thus the chilling account of a man's descent into hell becomes the most prominent episode in the complex narrative.

In retrospect, Tandang Bacio has been spared this tragic fate because he has chosen to conform, a decision articulated early in the book. He makes his act of confession to the narrator and figuratively leaves the confessional box, as the book ends, secure in the knowledge that his decision to cling to his farm and his carabao, and knowledge be damned, is the only correct one.

There is no doubt that Bustamante's *Si Tandang Bacio Macunat* is a significant text written at a particular point in our history as colonials. By confronting certain crucial issues and transmuting them to frame a literary construct, the author manifested his understanding of the complex ways in which his discourse could be put to use within a particular ideological system. In the history of its reception, the text has been accepted as a discourse of colonialism, even as it has sought to contain threats to the ruling power by arguing that education results in moral decay.

The analysis presented in this essay sought to problematize certain taken-for-granted interpretations of the text which have been privileged since the late nineteenth century. What the paper has done is to put forward a series of readings, among the many possible readings that such an impressive and rich text can generate, for the purpose of bringing to light the immense complexity of this fascinating piece of historical writing. ↪