From a double point of view — that of the student of Rizal's educational ideas and that of the student of Philippine cultural history — Chapter 19 of *Noli me tangere* is an important document. On the one hand it purports to be a portrait of what primary education was like in Central Luzon (and perhaps in other Philippine regions as well) in the 19th century. On the other hand, the chapter embodies some of Rizal's own idea of what that education should consist in and how it should be conducted.

*The Romantic Setting*

The chapter opens in the romantic vein. There had been a storm the night before, but the morning after, "through Nature's hypocrisys," there was no sign whatever that there had been any turmoil. The large lake — the Laguna de Ba-i — looked placid and the surrounding hills tranquil, and the luminous rays of the upcoming sun produced an iridescent effect upon the water's surface.

That description of the lake at dawn, incidentally, is based on a boyhood experience. When Rizal was seven his father took him on a pilgrimage to the Virgin's shrine in Antipolo, and in those days (without today's road network) travel was by boat across the lake to where it empties into the Pasig River, thence to the town of Pasig, then to Cainta and Taytay to Antipolo. They left in the evening and spent the entire night in the open boat. In his youthful memoirs written ten years later, Rizal recalls the silence of the night and his fear of a water snake that had coiled itself around one of the boat's outriggers. "With what joy I welcomed the dawn!" he wrote. For the first time, he said, he saw "the luminous rays (of the sun) pierce the darkness and produce a brilliant
effect upon the water’s surface” (Memorias de un estudiante de Manila, Chapter 1).

In Chapter 19 of the Noli, this particular morning after a stormy night, two men were on a high promontory overlooking the entire expanse of the lake. One was Crisostomo Ibarra, newly arrived after many years in Europe. The other was a young school teacher of the parochial school, the only teacher in the only school in the town.

The subject of education is introduced with real novelistic adroitness. The school teacher had brought Ibarra to this promontory so that he could show him the spot on the lake where Ibarra’s father’s corpse had been hurled. The elder Ibarra had been buried in the cemetery in the absence of the parish priest, a Spanish Franciscan friar. Upon the priest’s return he ordered the body exhumed and thrown into the lake as that of an impious person who did not go to confession. Whatever the younger Ibarra might have felt when he learned of this desecration of his father’s corpse, he eventually came to a more tranquil acceptance of the fact. Being hurled into the lake, his father’s body had “sacred Nature” for his tomb. His father’s enemies were the people of the town and the parish priest. “I forgive them both,” says Ibarra, “the people because they acted in ignorance; the friar because I respect his character as a priest, and I also respect his religious order (la Religión) because of what it had done to educate society.” Ibarra feels that to bring to reality his father’s dreams regarding education would be much better than to weep for him or seek to avenge him.

That is the setting for the dialogue on education that follows.

The First Two Principles

The dialogue begins with Ibarra asking the schoolmaster how many pupils he has. The answer shocks him: more than two hundred pupils on the list but only twenty-five actually attending school. How explain that discrepancy? The schoolmaster says that there are several obstacles to having a good school in that town.

The first obstacle is the lack of a proper classroom. School is conducted in the basement of the rectory, in the garage for the friar’s carriage. The friar living upstairs objects to noise. If the reading of the lesson is a little louder than usual, the friar comes down and shout insults at the teacher.
The school teacher, recounting this to Ibarra, enunciates what must have been one of Rizal's educational tenets: "Pupils lose respect for a teacher when they see him treated contemptuously and he cannot do anything to vindicate his dignity. To be effective, a teacher needs prestige, a good reputation, moral force, and a certain freedom."

Here therefore at the beginning of the dialogue, we have two educational principles which might be restated as follows:

First: Effective teaching is best conducted in a place where the learning process can be done without disturbance or distraction. In short, a decent classroom is needed.

Second: To be effective, a teacher should have his students' respect. That is one side of the coin. The other side is brought out in Chapter 13 of Rizal's second novel, El Filibusterismo. It may be stated thus: To be effective, a teacher must not only be respected by the students; he must also respect his students.

Teaching a Language

Despite the difficulties of a lack of a proper classroom, the young schoolmaster tries to improve the manner of teaching the Spanish language. The prevalent system is to make the students learn the lesson by heart, memorizing passages from the books without understanding a word of what they are parroting. He tried to teach them conversational Spanish by learning phrases and the Spanish names of objects. (Rizal, writing in the 1880s, was anticipating the Berlitz and other methods of the twentieth century.)

This new method earns the disapproval of the parish priest who summons the teacher. What happens at that interview we shall see presently. For the present, the relevant point is that the teacher had to abandon his innovative method of teaching Spanish.

Interview with the Friar

What happens at that interview with the Spanish friar touches upon two important points in Philippine cultural history: first, the opposition of the friars (or at least of many of them) to the teaching of Spanish; and second, the contempt that many of the friars openly showed towards the native Filipino. Both points played an important role in the anti-friar agitation that was a factor in the Revolution of 1896.
Summoned to appear before the friar, the school teacher goes upstairs and greets the friar in Spanish, "Buenos días, Padre." The friar starts to extend his hand to be kissed by the teacher, but on hearing the greeting in Spanish he withdraws his hand and starts to laugh hysterically. "Buenos días! Buenos días! So you know Spanish, do you? Why don't you stick to your own language?"

There are two things dramatized in that scene. One concerns the issue of Spanish; the other, the friar's contempt for the Filipino. This last point would figure prominently in Rizal's other writings. We have dealt with this point elsewhere.¹

The Issue of Spanish

The Philippines of the second half of the 19th century had achieved a certain amount of economic progress.² The restricted Galleon Trade had been replaced by a more open international commerce. A middle class of prosperous Filipino families had emerged. Secondary and university education was open to a wider public, and more and more Filipinos were going abroad for further studies. There were more newspapers than before, and booksellers were beginning to stock books (including novels) from abroad. The medium for contact with the progress and culture of the outside world was Spanish, and more and more Filipinos were desirous of learning the language. A dramatic example of this was the group of women in Malolos, Bulacan, who defied the local authorities and established what amounted to a private school where they could learn Spanish. Rizal's letter (written in Tagalog) is well known in which he congratulated those women for their courage and initiative.³

Those who try to denigrate Rizal for being an ilustrado and extol Andres Bonifacio for being a "plebeian", should remember that Bonifacio got his ideas from reading books in Spanish.

³The letter to the women of Malolos (really a long treatise) is in Epistolario Rizalino, ed. T. M. Kalaw, Vol. II (Manila 1931), pp. 122-139.
It was a widely held belief on the part of Filipinos of all classes (indios, mestizos, orrioslos) that it was to their advantage to learn to speak and read and write in Spanish.

The Spanish regime in the Philippines, however, had what seemed to be a schizophrenic attitude on the matter. Officially, the government was committed to promote the diffusion of the Spanish language. It was the official language of all government agencies. Moreover, a new educational system had been put in place aimed at better instruction in Spanish in various subjects. The Colegio de San Juan de Letran and the University of Santo Tomas under the Dominicans, and the Ateneo Municipal de Manila under the Jesuits, were teaching Spanish to an advanced degree. Various schools for girls run by sisters or by "beaterios" were doing the same. The government was maintaining several normal schools for the better formation of teachers, the one for men under the direction of the Jesuits, the ones for women under various groups of sisters. There is no doubt, therefore, that the official government policy was entirely in sympathy with the desire of the Filipinos to learn Spanish.

But that policy was opposed by many of the friars, including some very influential ones. It seems that they were afraid that if Filipinos became proficient in Spanish, they would feel themselves equal to the Spanish friars and would no longer be submissive. To keep them in submission, keep them ignorant.

It is one of the ironies of history that a hundred years later, Filipino nationalists would agitate for the abolition of the teaching of foreign languages in the schools — including Spanish and English — and insist that Filipino youth should learn no other language than their own. (Even Shakespeare was to be read not in English but in Tagalog translation.) The Filipinos of Rizal's day had a different idea. They agitated for the teaching of a foreign language that would put them on equal footing with the rest of the world.

The opposition of many of the friars to the teaching of Spanish (as Rizal dramatizes it in this chapter of the Noli) was born of the same contempt for the native indio as their habit of addressing Filipinos with the contemptuous second person singular "tu," As such it became one more grievance that contributed to the anti-friar agitation that eventually led to the Revolution of 1896.
The Friar's Power

Could the school teacher not have stood up to the friar when the latter insulted him? Could he not have asserted his rights? Or, failing that, could he not have just walked off in dignified silence?

Rizal puts in the mouth of the teacher a description of how powerful the friar was in the Philippine society of that day:

What was I to do, I whose meagre salary is not even enough for my upkeep? To collect that salary I need the signature of the parish priest, and I have to travel to the provincial capital to collect the money. What can I do against the parish priest, the highest authority in the town in all matters — moral, political, civil? What can I do against him, protected as he is by his religious order, feared by government officials, rich, powerful, consulted, listened to, believed, kowtowed to by everyone? If he insults me, I must keep silent. If I talk back, I lose my job, and that would be the end of my career. Nor would it do any good to the school children if I stood up to the friar. On the contrary, all the townspeople would condemn me, call me names — accuse me of being proud, vain, badly brought up, and even anti-Spanish and a rebel.

In China and among the Chinese elsewhere (as in Taiwan) the teacher is highly respected. In the Philippines in Rizal's time people had apparently a low opinion of the teacher. He was not expected to know anything or to do anything (the schoolmaster said). All that was expected of him was to be submissive, to accept humiliation, to do nothing innovative.

Geography

There was another innovation that the schoolmaster tried to introduce. Instead of teaching merely what was in the books, he tried to let the students know something about the outside world. There was no geography text book and no maps. So he drew a map on the ground, a rough map of the province.

Could this be the germ idea that later on was to grow into that large relief map of Mindanao that Rizal and Father Sanchez constructed in the church plaza of Dapitan?
Abolishing the Whip

One of the school teacher’s innovations was to abolish corporal punishment and replace it with other incentives to better learning. Rizal’s horror of corporal punishment dates from his boyhood days in Biñan and the beatings that he and other boys got from a misguided tutor. That early aversion to the use of the whip must have been confirmed by the modern ideas he encountered in Europe. He puts in the teacher’s mouth the following reflection on corporal punishment:

The beatings that from time immemorial were considered necessary in a school as the only effective means of making students learn, far from helping the child, seemed to me rather to be harmful to him. I was convinced that it is impossible to think clearly when one is looking at a whip; fear and terror cloud the mind, especially that of a child endowed with a vivid imagination. For ideas to be firmly planted in the mind, exterior and interior serenity is required...

Apart from being pedagogically ineffective, corporal punishment (the teacher says) also has a bad moral effect upon both pupils and teacher:

I was also convinced that the sight of daily beatings in school killed all pity in the heart and extinguished the spark of dignity ... The sense of shame is destroyed and cannot be easily regained. When a child is beaten, he consoles himself that others also will be beaten after him. Later, he gets secret joy when he hears another child crying under the lash. The one who administers the beatings (for his part) does it at first with repugnance, but later he takes sadistic delight in causing pain.

Emulation

But if whippings and other forms of corporal punishment are abolished, how may children be induced to learn? To that question the schoolmaster answers: By arousing the child’s interest in the lesson, and by using incentives like the desire to excel.

Here again Rizal was drawing upon his youthful experiences, this time at the Ateneo. In that Jesuit school, the students in the lower grades were induced to learn their lessons in Spanish, Latin, Greek, mathemat-
ics and other subjects through contests. Rizal describes the system in Chapter 4 of the Memorias de un estudiante. The class was divided into two "empires," the Roman and the Carthaginian. Each "empire" had officials of various ranks, the highest being the "emperor." One was promoted to the various offices by excelling in the daily contests. The "emperor" kept his position as long as he could ward off all challengers. The moment a challenger defeated him, he had to yield the post to the challenger. When Rizal joined the class, he was put at the bottom, as was natural. Within a month he was emperor.

It was this boyhood experience that resurfaced in Rizal's novel where his fictitious schoolmaster abolishes corporal punishment and replaces it with the incentives of emulation. This, says the schoolmaster, induces self-confidence in the students and instills in them not only a desire to learn but also a desire to excel. It increases their sense of personal dignity.

Arouseng Interest

There was another thing in this chapter of the novel in which Rizal was probably drawing on his own experience. It was the fact that as a student at the Ateneo he had become interested in his studies not for other motives but because he found them interesting. Here is a passage from the Memorias de un estudiante (Chapter 5) in which he describes the subjects he took up in his fifth and last year in college:

In my fifth year I had the same success as in the previous year, although the subjects were different. Philosophy — strict, severe, inquiring into the causes of things — engaged my interest as Poetry had done . . . Physics uncovered the veil that had hidden things. It was like opening the curtain upon a vast stage on which the drama of Nature was being played. Movement, sound, color, light, electricity, a thousand varied phenomena, beautiful colors and delicate beauties — all these entertained my mind during my free hours. The polarization of light brought me to a world of mystery from which I have not yet emerged. Ah, how wonderful is science when a teacher can bring out its beauty!
That experience of his student days finds echo in the schoolmaster in the *Noli* saying to Ibarra:

I tried to make learning an interesting and pleasant experience for the children. I wanted to make the *cartilla* not a black book of tears from beatings but a friend in which the child can find wonderful secrets.

**Disillusionment and Fulfillment**

Those were the obstacles to good education that the poor schoolmaster in the *Noli* had to contend with. It was Rizal’s portrayal of how things were in those days. Ibarra, listening to this recital or woe, thought he knew better. “*No seamos pesimistas*” he said. “Let’s not be too pessimistic.” Ibarra himself had formed plans for a school in which all these new ideas would be given play. He saw no obstacles ahead. Alas, he was headed for terrible disillusionment.

But if the fictitious schoolmaster and the fictitious Ibarra of the novel were frustrated in their desire to reform the school system, Rizal himself was not. In Dapitan, away from the obstacles mentioned in his novel, he opened a school in accordance with his own ideas of what good education should be. We have described that school elsewhere.⁴

**Postscript**

There are some who say that this Chapter 19 in *Noli me tangere* is as historically false as Chapter 15 in *El Fílibusterismo*. They claim that Rizal’s description of how things were taught was a sheer fabrication with no basis in historical fact.

We will not contest that view. Instead, we might perhaps be permitted to intrude some personal experiences of our own. The schoolmaster’s frustrations in the *Noli*, whose every attempt to introduce improved methods was blocked by those in power, are to me entirely believable because I myself have had similar experiences.

When I was teaching literature in college, I introduced certain innovations which I was eventually forced to give up. For instance, on beautiful sunny days, I would take my students away from the classroom

⁴Bernad, *Rizal and Spain* Chapter 7, pp. 106 ff.
and we would sit on the grass under an acacia tree and there talk informally about the literary piece we were studying.

Also, I did not like the system of having to watch the students during the examinations. I told my students that I would feel insulted if I were undergoing the test and someone was watching me to make sure I did not cheat. "That," I said, "would be an insult." So I told the students that they were either honest and needed no invigilating, or they were not honest and therefore were not worth watching. So I would leave the classroom and stay in the corridor. If the students cheated, that was on their conscience. In my opinion, no one cheated. Students respond to a challenge.

I also held examinations in which the students were free to consult their notes or any book they wished. On one occasion I could not proctor the examination myself and someone was appointed to take my place. When he saw the students with open books and notes, he was shocked and reported the matter to the Dean. The Dean (an American from Baltimore) who had already put a stop to my holding class under the trees, also put a stop to my unorthodox ways of handling examinations.

Many years later I read in a Manila magazine an article describing the "innovations" in a certain institution where students sometimes held classes under the trees. I smiled to myself. "Innovations? I had done that many years before."

And one day many more years later, one of my former students, by then a grandfather, said to me, "They have cut down the tree!"

"Which tree?"

"The one where we used to hold class! They cut it down to make room for a building!"

He was angry. But I felt happy. My little experiments in college were after all appreciated. ☺