

LITERARY SECTION

THE MARGINALIAD: READING GINA APOSTOL'S *THE REVOLUTION ACCORDING TO RAYMUNDO MATA*

Paul S. de Guzman
paul.s.deguzman@gmail.com

Abstract

This review, which discusses Gina Apostol's second novel, *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* (Anvil Publishing, 2009), raises two main points. First, it looks at how the novel uses various devices to fragment and distort the narrative, and how using such devices allows the novel to dramatize its own dependence on and misgivings about narrative cohesiveness. Second, the review looks at how the novel uses humor and wordplay to lighten the book's serious subject matter. Also tackled in the review is the influence on the novel of other texts, particularly the Gospels, the stories of Jorge Luis Borges, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*.

About the author

Paul S. de Guzman majored in journalism at the University of the Philippines Diliman, and was a fellow at the UP and Dumaguete National Writers' Workshops.

Miente bastante, no se puede confiar en el.

— attributed to Rizal,
in *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata*¹

The subjects of this book have at one time or another been called bandits, ignoramuses, heretics, lunatics, fanatics, and, in particular, failures. Not only has this been a way in which the "better classes" keep these people in oblivion; worse, this signifies a failure or a refusal to view them in the light of *their* world.

— Reynaldo Ileto,
Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1810–1910

¹ The unscrambled version of the cipher, "Noamla berlemla, mi ra puada vimgoes am at," which appears as an epigraph in the novel; roughly translates to "He lies easily; you cannot trust him."

It is perhaps no accident that the very title of Gina Apostol's second novel, *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata*, calls to mind evangelical accounts of Jesus' life, what those accounts claim to possess, and what readers of those accounts are prepared to believe: the "good news," the story of salvation, a monadic "gospel truth."

And for every gospel is an evangelist: Raymundo Mata, an eyewitness to the birth of the nation and its supposed chronicler, has repeatedly found himself, often reluctantly, in the company of the most illustrious heroes of the revolution—a Zelig, or, if you are "less in the know ... 'our version of Forrest Gump'" (Apostol 170) digitally grafted into a history textbook or Photoshopped into archival photos.

Ostensibly, Mata's account comes from "an assortment of unpaginated notes and mismatched sheaves packed in a ratty biscuit tin" (Apostol 2). These pages show snapshots of various periods of Mata's life—a childhood spent obsessing over bodily functions; his discovery of sex during his teenage years; his initiation into Freemasonry and the Katipunan; his visit to Jose Rizal in Dapitan.

There is another level to Apostol's book, the basement to the *piano nobile* of Mata's story, or, if the novel were the *vapor* Tabo, the lower deck: when they're not busy engaging in squabbles, a pseudonymous translator and two academics with alliterative names provide occasionally useful commentary on the main text. Their petty arguments, which literally appear underneath Mata's story, can get so heated that they tend to overwhelm the rest of the manuscript. The annotations often threaten to colonize the space on which they are printed, reducing Mata into his own story's marginal character.

The two academics—the Filipino-American Diwata Drake and the flaky Estrella Espejo—never get to see the pages on which Mata's accounts are originally written; they only base their comments on the drafts of and notes to the translation provided by the mysterious Mimi C. Magsalin and her publisher, the equally alliteratively named Trina Trono.

At first Drake and Espejo get along well enough; eventually the two have a falling out, resulting in accusations of attempted murder, a court case, Drake's traveling from one part of the world to another, and Espejo's being committed to the Quezon Institute and Sanatorium (which in this book has been relocated to Tacloban and transformed into a nuthouse).

Drake's interest in Mata's story is primarily diagnostic: she sees him as another fascinating case for her investigations into the Philippine Revolution, using, as a theoretical framework, what she calls Claro Mürkian psychoanalysis (a joke, of course, played in this novel by Lacanian psychoanalysis). The sad, mad nationalist historian Espejo, meanwhile,

is someone who swears by the authenticity of Mata's story, ignoring, or too blind or too mad to see, the levels of mediation that interfere with the text. Espejo is perhaps Apostol's homage—the mirror version, if you will—to Charles Kinbote in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, the man who sees only Zembla, his beloved country, in the poem "Pale Fire."

And then one by one, the cracks in Mata's story—or is it Magsalin's version of Mata's story? or the scholars' interpretation of Magsalin's translation?—begin to reveal themselves.

Perhaps it is instructive to read *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* as an homage to the parables and paradoxes of Jorge Luis Borges, a blind man lovingly alluded to in the pages of the book. I'm thinking in particular of the story, "El Evangelio según Marcos," or "The Gospel According to Mark," where a young man named Espinosa, forced by a flood to stay in a ranch with the family of an illiterate, unchurched farmhand, decides to read to them from the Gospel of Mark. So enraptured is the family by the story of a man who allows himself to be killed so that others may be saved, that the family is moved to build a cross for Espinosa.

That Espinosa might save them too is the grand—or grander—narrative that inspires the farmhand and his family into blind faith in the agency of *story*. Joan Didion, in the celebrated first sentence of *The White Album*, ascribes to storytelling a life-giving power; Borges's story celebrates and warns how story-telling can be a kind of religion, claiming to give life and to save lives—but, paradoxically, only if we offer it our lives first.

And so in Apostol's novel we get Raymundo Mata, reading Rizal's *Noli Me Tángere* for the first time, unable to see the experience as anything but cataclysmic. "[It was a] typhoon, an earthquake," he writes. "The end of a world. And I was in ruins. It struck me dumb. It changed my life and the world was new when I was done" (121).

Meanwhile, Espejo, the madwoman in the novel's basement, sees her having read Mata's accounts as nothing less than "a miracle" (267). Lying in bed and hooked up to a respirator, she sees Mata before her, commanding her to rise, as if he were Jesus and she Lazarus, newly resurrected. Mata promises her nothing less than healing: "When the word is made flesh, he breathed: you will be well" (267).

And if stories could bring about personal transformation, perhaps the same could be said about their effect on the course of history. It is unthinkable for a Filipino to call himself a nationalist and not to believe that the *Noli* played a pivotal role in the Revolution of 1896, and so Mata himself experiences a heightening of his revolutionary fervor after reading the book. In the same way, the nationalist Espejo is convinced that Mata's "monumental paean to History" (267-68) fills in some of the great gaps in historical accounts of the revolution:

the last days of Rizal's exile in Dapitan and the small events surrounding the writing of his third novel; and where the Katipunan money went.

The possibility that Mata's account is an audacious hoax, or at the very least highly questionable document, hovers over the book, building up toward Drake's disappearance from the footnotes, and her triumphant reappearance as someone who questions the provenance of Mata's manuscript. She openly accuses Magsalin of malice: "The translator's hoax—yes, I use the word boldly, Mimi C., wherever you are—only stokes the fire of a cruel illusion: 'That a nation so conceived, from the existential exigencies of a young man's first novel, will find redemption in the phoenix of his lost words'" (277). At the very least Magsalin is made to take on the burden of proving the reliability of the Mata manuscript—pretty much like a dog breeder providing documentary evidence for a pet's impeccable pedigree.

"*Habeas corpus*," Drake demands. "Give us the body."

One of the key achievements of Apostol's novel is the way it manages to be both unapologetically intellectual and maliciously playful. After all, it takes both qualities for one to pull off a hoax—which, if one thinks about it, is just another word for fiction. In *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata*, Apostol gestures toward the many historical hoaxes that have been played on Filipinos: Jose E. Marco and the Code of Kalantiaw, Manuel Elizalde Jr. and the Tasaday, Marcos and his desire to present himself and his New Society as the inevitable high point of Philippine history, through the multivolume but unfinished *Tadhana: The History of the Filipino People*. In the past decade or so, even the sources long held to be authoritative texts concerning the people and events surrounding the Revolution of 1896 have been questioned, as in the case of historian Glenn Anthony May's *Inventing a Hero: The Posthumous Re-Creation of Andres Bonifacio* (1996).

In *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata*, Apostol uses fiction—which depends so much on the willful suspension of disbelief—to evoke the dangers posed by believable, narcotizingly (or analeptically) coherent stories, especially when they claim to be history. In telling the story, she herself avoids, sometimes a bit too insistently, the lulling effect of straightforward narratives, by employing a manic range of styles and techniques. The book's tireless pastiching of academic writing, the novel in diary form, the romantic mode as seen in works by Dumas, Hugo, and Rizal; and its torrent of allusions, jokes, and wordplay, display Apostol's considerable talent as a mimic—Mimi C.—and it is exhilarating to witness someone banishing the whole 'less is more' dictum from the confines of the novel.

Seeing and blindness provide the novel some of its most persistent metaphors. A night-blind character named Mata (with the nickname Bulag), Rizal the visionary ophthalmologist, an eyewitness account offered by a blind man, images of bats, and many others populate the book. They also give the reader one of the book's funniest gags: Raymundo Mata, on his way to an important meeting at secret location, is insulted by the superfluous blindfold he is made to wear. "[N]o, no, you must wear a blindfold, it is the rule. Fucking stupid rule it is to blindfold a blind man" (145). Rizal, when he finally sees Mata, gives the following gnomic diagnosis that makes him sound less like a doctor than a fortuneteller outside Quiapo Church: "You have a dark, empty area in the center of your vision" (213).

But as much as Apostol tries her best to leaven the seriousness of the book's subject matter with humor, *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* is an easier novel to admire than to enjoy—reading it is not nearly as fun as having read it. Not all the jokes work—the glossary section, called "A Translator's Abecedary of the Revolution," is particularly embarrassing, given its insistence in delivering a punchline at the end of every definition. Consider the definition for "Masons": "Godless" (17). Or the last line for "Epifanio de los Santos": "Invoke place-name to make knowing remarks about texts and revolution" (14). Or the definition for "Epithet": "Second most popular way of honoring heroes (most popular: street signs). Good for quiz shows and crossword puzzles" (14). Unfortunately, satire is not the funniest comedic form, given that it is more interested in teaching the reader a lesson than in making him or her laugh; in effect, a succession of satires packaged in zingy one-liners often sounds less like humor than items in a syllabus.

The profusion of defiantly dubious similes and metaphors may also inspire annoyance more than amusement. To Espejo, "[a]n hysterical patient on an hypothetical couch was just icing on the slanderous cake" (1). For Magsalin, "chunks of its [Spain's] conservatism regularly fell off like rotting teeth from the obsolete dentures of the King" (4). Of course, it is easy to explain these away as Apostol's wink-wink approximation of how Espejo and Magsalin would express themselves—note, for example, the pompous use of 'an' for 'hysterical' and 'hypothetical.' Of course the reader, depending on his or her level of generosity, has the final say on what to do with it: he or she either brushes them off, or takes them as an affront that he or she has been forced to figure out exactly how a cake can be slanderous, or how rotting teeth can fall off dentures.

More problematic is how Apostol relies a little too often on slips of the tongue to generate additional laughs. Presumably this device also shows how language shapes Mata's consciousness instead of Mata shaping his narrative through language, a nod to

the Lacanian/Claro Mürkian currents occasionally running underneath the narrative. So the reader gets Mata writing observations and assertions like, “No matter what I did, scribbling in my journal, reading Ovid, visiting the prosti—, I mean going to church” (115), or “History keeps laving my behind, I thought mournfully—I mean, History keeps leaving me behind” (135), or “It seemed quite a bosom; I mean, it seemed quite a pain” (175). These are the kinds of mistakes that occur in *spoken* language; in writing, they usually appear as erasures or deletions, instead of amendments introduced by a disclaiming “I mean.” And so the device comes across as a little forced.

For all its tireless tricking and treating, *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* is, ultimately, as much an affirmation of the power of story-telling as a warning against the magical thinking such stories can inspire. The book’s most moving moment comes at the end, in Drake’s epitaph. As Drake builds the case against Raymundo Mata’s story, Apostol also builds a case against the authenticity of her own narrative, exposes the fictiveness of her own book, disassembles every plank, every panel, every nail in this story house. But the story can be resurrected: a temple to be destroyed, and rebuilt, and made whole again.

WORKS CITED

- Apostol, Gina. *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata*. Pasig City: Anvil, 2009.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Gospel According to Mark." Trans. Norman Thomas de Giovanni. *The New Yorker*. 23 Oct. 1971.
- Didion, Joan. *The White Album*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.
- Ileto, Reynaldo Clemeña. *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1810–1910*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila UP, 1979.
- May, Glenn Anthony. *Inventing a Hero: The Posthumous Re-Creation of Andres Bonifacio*. Quezon City: New Day, 1996.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire*. New York: Vintage, 1962.