COMMENTARY ON THE PROMISE OF THE FOREIGN

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Abstract
Guided by key Heideggerian insights, this review focuses on two points: 1) the relationship between what is foreign and what is one’s own; 2) language and history. The promise of the foreign belongs to the allure of the unknown, and the impulse to know the unknown belongs to the “de-distancing” character of the human—the tendency of human beings to bring things to nearness, thereby negating the distance that stands between them and the things they encounter in the world. Rafael has shown that the Filipinos were driven by the desire to bring what is foreign (in their case, Spain) near to them (e.g., by way of assimilation) in order to own and be owned by what otherwise remains distant and alien. But along with the promise of the foreign comes the risk of betrayal. The betrayal of the promise is ultimately the result of the mistaken fundamental assumption that one can get around language and history. The important and fascinating work of Rafael serves as a warning against an even more tragic betrayal: the betrayal of one’s own history, which includes not the just the past and the present, but even more that which is yet to come.

About the Author
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“The distance to my fellow-man is for me a very long one.”
— from Kafka’s notebooks

The following commentary on Vicente Rafael’s The Promise of the Foreign focuses on two points. The first is on the relationship between what is foreign and what is one’s own. The second is on language and history. This commentary will rely mostly on Heideggerian insights, which perhaps can be justified only by the fact that Rafael himself acknowledges the influence of the philosopher, albeit in a little endnote in the introduction (195).

Let me now begin with the relationship between what is foreign and what is one’s own. Because the subject of Rafael’s study is colonial Philippines, specifically Spanish Philippines, it might appear that identifying what is foreign (Spanish/Castilian) and
what is one’s own (in the case of Rafael’s work, what is native or local, namely, Filipino/Tagalog), as well as recognizing what happens when the two come into contact and interact with each other, is quite convenient. But because Rafael’s conception of language and translation extends far beyond their customary meanings, or better yet, is more primordial or orinary, his fascinating work on Spanish Philippines therefore offers possibilities of understanding human beings as such, insofar as, in the words of Rosalind C. Morris, there is a “foreignness in us all” (blurb, back cover).

The insight that there is a foreignness in all of us is important not only because we now live in the postcolonial era, which has the character of “post-” only because the colonizers are gone but in which the dynamics of colonization is arguably still at work. It is important more so because, as we saw above, with or without colonizers this foreignness still remains. The colonial experience, it can be argued, only serves as an instance (a very important instance, one might add) where a people, confronted as it is by the foreign, becomes more acutely aware of questions of identity and the difficult decisions that such questions often necessarily demand.

The promissory relationship between the Philippines and Spain was maintained by various forms of transactions, mainly by way of the Castilian language, as Rafael shows in his close reading and analysis of Filipino novels, the *comedia*, revolutionary newspapers, the *pacto de sangre*, etc. The Castilian language, as Rafael sees it, “presented an array of possibilities,” and precisely “to seize upon these possibilities was to recognize and respond to the promise of the foreign.” For Rafael, these “acts of recognizing, responding, and thereby assuming the responsibility for what comes before and beyond oneself” constitute “the practice of translation” (14).

All three—the foreign, promise, and translation—involve distance. There is the distance between one’s own identity and that of the foreign. There is the distance between the present dispensation and a promise (which, as we have seen, is always something that is to come). Finally, there is the distance between two languages involved in any translation. Thus, because all three cases involve distance, so too, all three cases involve something like a bridging of gap, of distance. This bridging of distance manifests what Heidegger calls the “de-distancing” character that belongs essentially to the human being (*Being and Time* 97-102). Heidegger claims that human beings cannot tolerate distance. Human beings want to shrink distances, to negate what they experience to be the limiting force of distance, and this by various technological ways (usually in transportation and communication).

The urge to bridge distances is partly due to the allure of the unknown. But with the
allure of the unknown comes the risk. Or better perhaps, part of the allure of the unknown is precisely the risks that come with it, as Rafael has amply and vividly shown in his study. Bridging the gap between the foreign and one’s own may bring with it the promise of a new and richer identity. But it may also lead to betrayal and therefore a disruption in the unfolding of one’s own identity.

Let me now consider the question of language and history. It is quite evident that Rafael takes language, and therefore translation as well, in its wider and more originary sense. We can see this, for instance, when he speaks of “ways of doing and making do, rhetorical practices, mechanical instruments, and repetitive gestures that could be summed up as the technics of translation” (14-5). Thus, although Rafael, in identifying Castilian as the lingua franca of the Spaniards and Filipinos, initially means by language the medium of verbal communication (both written and oral), he nonetheless understands by language something that goes beyond its merely anthropological and instrumental interpretation.

For Heidegger, language is not solely or even primarily a means of communication or expression. When thought through its essence, one can see that language is the house of Being, by which I understand Heidegger to mean that it is in language that all that is, and all that can be, can be made manifest, communicated, preserved, and safeguarded. Furthermore, reversing the dominant interpretation of language as a means of expression, it is language itself that speaks (Pathmarks 239). The “use” of language as a means of expression only comes after or is made possible by the fact that something has spoken to us human beings beforehand, that something made itself manifest in a meaningful way. That we can recognize something like a “horizon of being” (Horizont des Seins) or “referential context” (Verweisungszusammenhang) within which we can express anything at all or communicate allows us to see that the possibility of expressing anything or communicating rests on the prior experience of meaningfulness (Being and Time 398, 66).

We can also see that it is language that makes possible the telling of history, indeed makes possible history itself insofar as history involves the telling of stories that are handed down from one generation to another and continue to shape the lives of peoples in a decisive way. Now, there is something common—and common in a very essential way—between being, language, and history in that there is something in all three that escapes every attempt to objectify, manipulate, predict, and control each of them. Neither being nor language nor history can be completely objectified or placed under the control of human beings. Heidegger calls that which escapes every sort of control and objectification simply das Unumgängliche, “that which is not to be gotten around.” In “Science and Reflection,” Heidegger writes: “Here something disturbing manifests itself. That which in the sciences
is not at any time to be gotten around—nature, man, history, language—is, as that which is
not to be gotten around \( \text{das Unumgängliche} \), intractable and inaccessible \( \text{unzugänglich} \) for
the sciences and through the sciences (Question Concerning Technology 177).

Though perhaps not explicitly, Rafael has also shown the slippery character of both
language and history precisely by uncovering the risks involved in the act of translation
and the writing of history. He has shown that somehow there is always something that
remains untranslatable, something that always remains open and indefinite in the writing
of history. Rafael in fact ends his book saying that the promise of the foreign “continues
to call, periodically issuing from the sources that we can never fully locate, in languages
just beyond what we are capable of translating, and often at the fringes of what is socially
recognizable. It is a call that remains to be heard” (182).

That which we can never fully locate, that which lies beyond our capability
to translate, that which often escapes social recognition, is not this precisely \( \text{das
Unumgängliche} \), “that which is not to be gotten around”? The possibility for the promise
of the foreign to make itself known as a call that remains to be heard rests on the historical
character of human beings, which likewise cannot be gotten around, cannot be fully
understood. J. M. Coetzee himself seems to see this when, in attempting to answer the
question of what a classic is, he writes: “Historical understanding is understanding of the
past as a shaping force upon the present. Insofar as that shaping force is tangibly present
in our lives, historical understanding is part of the present. Our historical being is part
of our present. It is that part of our present—namely, the part that belongs to history—that we
cannot fully understand, since it requires us to understand ourselves not only as objects of
historical forces but as subjects of our own historical self-understanding” (13).

Now, if there is something in being, language, and history that is not to be gotten
around, it only means that there is something in the human being itself that is not to
be gotten around insofar as the human being is the one being who stands in relation to
being (as the one for whom being itself is a question) (Heidegger, Being and Time 10), the
one being who alone has language and is in language, and the one being who alone is
essentially historical. This insight allows one to see that the betrayal of the promise of
the foreign that Rafael has shown in his careful study of Spanish Philippines consisted
precisely in the assumption by the Spanish colonizers that they could get around the
Filipinos, that they could get around language (both Castilian and Tagalog), and that they
could get around the history (and hence destiny) of the people they had chosen to colonize.
But alas, as we have seen, there is no getting around language. There is no getting around
history. There is no getting around a people.
Rafael’s study thus portrays the folly of any attempt to get around that which in the first place is not to be gotten around. But now that the colonizers are gone and the Filipinos live in the postcolonial era, the greater danger lies in the possibility that Filipinos get around their own language, their own history, and their own destiny. That, as Rafael shows, a part of the Filipino people’s past is a call that remains to be heard should remind them that marching blindly into the future, without taking heed of their own history, could lead to a betrayal far more tragic than that carried out by the foreign. For what could be more tragic indeed than betraying one’s own?
WORKS CITED


