

An encounter with Father Ferriols

*Preciosa de Joya**

It was on my very first visit to the philosophy department that I fortuitously met Fr. Ferriols. I was a sophomore and had just decided to switch from political science to a philosophy major. As I handed in my form to the secretary, Fr. Ferriols stood nearby and, being a curious fellow, he asked me who I was.

Surprised at being questioned point-blank, I fumbled for an answer and blurted out my name, which was unremarkable. I was certain that it could only lead to an awkward silence, marking the premature end of our conversation. But to my surprise, it evoked the memory of someone he knew back in college. He asked me if I was related to a certain Antonio de Joya who had become a ‘big shot’ in the advertising business. While my parents had mentioned the name, I knew nothing about my grand-uncle, and was amused to learn about a distant relative from a stranger. What intrigued me was that Fr. Ferriols distinctly remembered “Tony” as an *inglisero*, an English speaker, who could hardly utter a word in Filipino.

‘Unlike you,’ he said, ‘your Filipino is much better.’ I couldn’t see why that mattered. Filipino was mainly the language we spoke at home, which I grew up with and spoke while playing with kids in the streets of our *barangay*. But this stranger was clearly trying to convey the value of my aptitude in this language. As though to dis-

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pel my doubts, he then looked at me straight through his thick-rimmed glasses and uttered *bagay ka rito*, ‘you’ll fit right in here’, in a prophetic tone.

At the time, I didn’t know that this unassuming professor in a pair of faded, folded jeans and slippers was an institution in Ateneo de Manila University. Fr. Ferriols, or *Padre* as his students called him, was himself a ‘big shot,’ though he would never have admitted it. He always made fun of the expression in class, giggling naughtily as he translated it literally as *malaking putok*, meaning a strong whiff of body odour.¹ For Ferriols, language was not just words and grammar rules; it was alive and occasionally tickled with a sense of humour. At times, it packed a heavy punch, as when Ferriols responded to an *inglisera* student who complained about him insisting on teaching philosophy in Filipino. The story goes that the feisty professor looked at the student sternly and shouted, *Putang ina mo!*, ‘Your mother’s a whore!’ One could just imagine that poor student in a state of shock. But they say that, soon after this outburst of profanity, Ferriols smiled at the student and said, ‘See, did you not feel that a lot more?’²

In our university, Ferriols was our Socrates and so much more. He was a pivotal force in the Filipinisation movement in the Ateneo, and one of the first professors to challenge the American Jesuits’ rule of only teaching in English.³ While his decision to teach philosophy in Filipino was a clear expression of support for the student movements of the 1970s, Ferriols himself felt that his ideas were often oversimplified and reduced to a political stand against the Americans. In fact, his indefatigable commitment to philosophising in Filipino was neither a rejection of the foreign, nor a simple injunction that students know themselves and their cultural heritage. It was instead driven by his desire to teach people to be open to the gift of encounter. This resolve was obvious to all who witnessed Fr. Ferriols, struggling with Parkinson’s disease, literally inch his way to the classroom until his retirement at age 89.

For an encounter to be possible, the choice of language was crucial. Ferriols believed that a Filipino who philosophises in Eng-

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lish, or in any foreign language for that matter, ‘divorces reflection from the ordinary person.’²⁴ In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he asks:

If a person whose knowledge comes largely from books...attempts to philosophise in the language that is different from that spoken by jeepney⁵ drivers, street-sweepers, or street food vendors—can it still be said that that person is moving within the ambit of truth...or a lie[?]⁶

One can infer from Ferriols’ stern warning that a person who gives precedence to a language that plays no part in the life of ordinary folk runs the risk of refusing the wisdom that dwells in their own vernacular. Using this language has the unique potential to ‘bring us together with’ other users (*makasalimuha ang iba*) who contribute to its growth. Turning away from this, Ferriols asserts, is a form of self-deception insofar as it denies the fullness of reality, preventing ordinary people from taking part in the creation of knowledge and ourselves from being touched by a living language.

This awareness of reality and being faithful to what was really happening was of great concern to Ferriols. This was in reaction to what he saw as the main obstacle to thinking, namely the habit of getting caught up in our definitions and constructed world of ideas. To free oneself from being ‘stuck in a concept’, Ferriols would always encourage his students to ask, *Meron ba?* ‘Is it really there?’ Ferriols coined the term *meron*, drawing it from the Filipino word *mayroon* (‘to have’), which he used as a metaphysical construct for the richness of existence. This term has often been equated to ‘being,’ but Ferriols always insisted that *meron* was not a mere translation of a foreign concept but the reflection of Filipino experience, one emerging from our own vernacular:

It is not an unusual thing. We see it in any language. Heidegger says that *Sein* always has that moment of yes and no, in any language. And I saw that, in all Filipino languages, there is a moment of a yes and a no. In Tagalog, *meron* and *wala*, in Bisaya, *naa* and *wala*, in Ilokano, *atda*, *awan*, in Bikolano, *mayo*, *igwa*, in Pangasinan, *agkapu* and *wala*. [In this last example], *wala* is *meron*, and *agkapu* is *wala*. That is why, when I was using *meron*, in my thinking, I was returning [it] to its primary root... The root is, look at what is really happening before it became a concept. And if you are locked in concepts, use *meron* to get yourself out of [them].⁷

In my years of teaching, I witnessed *meron* being ironically reduced to a concept. Students, especially those looking for an easy way to pass their philosophy course, latched on to a definition that they could easily parrot back during their oral examination. It took time for some of them to realise that *meron* was not so much an idea conveying the richness of existence as a way of seeing, of being constantly disturbed and touched by reality.

I remember approaching Ferriols in my senior year to ask whether he would supervise my undergraduate thesis. I had a brilliant plan to study the works of the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky. I was excited when he readily approved, saying that it was a good project which no undergraduate student had ever done before. But a few months later, after realising the amount of work it would entail, I came to see Ferriols again to say that I had changed my mind, and that I was withdrawing my proposal. *Pasensya na po*, I courteously said, which translated in the simplest way means ‘I’m sorry’. I will never forget what Ferriols replied that day. He gently corrected me, saying, *Pareho tayo magpapasensya, hindi lang ako, ikaw rin*. Translated literally, these words would seem to suggest that both of us—not just him but I as well—would have to be sorry. It was not something one would usually hear or say, but it was precisely because of their strangeness that I found his words disturbing and cryptic. It struck me how easy it was to blurt out the word *pasensya* (*paciencia* in Spanish, ‘patience’ in English) when seeking forgiveness, without really being aware of the weight of one’s words.

Until then, I had been oblivious to the fact that saying *pasensya po* really meant asking for patience from a person one wronged or, in my case, whose expectations I felt unable to meet. In seeking forgiveness, was I simply asking for patience? For Ferriols, I too would have to learn to endure my own failing and grant myself time—a share of the future, a possibility—to have the courage to one day fulfil what I was then unable to.

Notes

- 1 *Malaking putok* is a literal translation of ‘big shot’, but *putok* is also a colloquial expression for an ‘explosion’ of bad smell, of body odour.
- 2 Jim Libiran, ‘Anong Meron sa Wala’, in *Kwento, Kwenta, Kwarenta* (A Conference Tribute to Fr. Ferriols, S.J.), Ateneo de Manila University, August 2009.
- 3 After reopening the Ateneo in August 1898, the Jesuits gradually changed the system of instruction from Spanish to English in the hope of maintaining the Ateneo’s reputation as Manila’s ‘premier school’. In a world where English was becoming the *lingua franca*, it was believed that the use of Spanish in the classroom was only depriving Ateneo of ‘a golden chance to be of real service to the people.’ In 1921, the Philippine Mission was entrusted to the American Jesuits of the Maryland-New York Province, and Ateneo, as part of its Americanisation, became an English-speaking school. For more details, see Jose S. Arcilla, S.J., ‘Ateneo de Manila: Problems and Policies, 1859-1939’, *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (1984): 377-398.
- 4 Roque Ferriols, S.J., interview, 2009.
- 5 *Jeepneys*, initially made out of repurposed U.S. Army Jeeps, are a popular means of transportation in the Philippines.
- 6 Roque Ferriols, S.J., *Pambungad sa Metapisika* (Quezon City: Office of Research and Publications, Ateneo de Manila University, 1997), 236.
- 7 Ferriols, interview, 2009.