

The Planet as Homeland

Charlie Samuya Veric

A book of translations, *Balikbayang Mahal* or *Beloved Returnee* is about making history in unexpected places. Take, for instance, the following cases. The names of the dead haunt the poet-exile as dusk descends on Punta Spartivento—Juvy Magsino, Benjaline Hernandez, Eden Marcellana, Rafael Bangit, Alyce Claver. It is springtime in Den Haag and the memories of political detainees in Muntinlupa rise from the roof of the Christus Triumphator. The poet-exile remembers the Moslem insurgency in Mindanao in the land of the Pequot Indians as night falls. Here, the poet-exile finds himself in unexpected places where he comes to grips with the gathering forces of history. Everywhere he goes in the world, his country follows. To the poet-exile of *Balikbayang Mahal*, then, the vertigo of bilocation is an old reality.

The African American thinker W.E.B. Dubois has a similar concept; he calls it double-consciousness. The double-

consciousness that an African American confronts for being not quite American and not quite Negro is the same enabling predicament that the poet-exile faces. That is, the poet-exile is of a particular country, but not fully from it because he lives elsewhere. For this poet-exile as it is for African Americans, both of them children of diaspora, the doubleness of location is the doubleness of consciousness. The implicit argument in this proposition suggests the intimate dialectic between place and consciousness; the historicity of consciousness informs the materiality of place. Perhaps no other process captures this logic more than translation itself. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as the removal or conveyance from one person, place, or condition to another. And as the Latin origins of the term suggest, translation is transportation. To translate, in other words, is to transport. In *Balikbayang Mahal* the poet-exile transports the self from place to place and, accordingly, achieves the parallel transformation of consciousness. Thinking of America in Mindanao is, for this reason, not the same as thinking of Mindanao in America; the place shapes the production of consciousness.

For the poet-exile of *Balikbayang Mahal*, those two thoughts are complementary despite being dissimilar. For instance, he has suggested in his criticism that the aspiration of the Filipino around the world cannot be separated from the people's aspirations in the Philippines. As the essay included in the collection states: "Despite local differences and multiple languages, the submerged rallying cry of all Filipinos abroad, of all Filipinos overseas, is 'Tomorrow, see you in Manila!'" (125) Here, one sees the importance of the return to the homeland. This return, however, is yet to come. This future return, rather than arrival itself, is more important to the poet-exile. But those who insist on being in the homeland are wont to denigrate the idea of future return. The poet-exile must work against this denigration; he must insist that the longing to return, however suspended, fulfills a function.

For him, this insistence is the self-fulfilling labor of the negative. The longing to return, even as a promise to be broken, is no less powerful. In fact, this longing is empowering for it expands the domain of the possible. Take, for instance, the poem in which one sees the poet-exile standing on a wharf in the Italian lakeside town of Bellagio called Punta Spartivento. There the poet-exile thinks of the insurgency in his distant homeland and says: “Everyone will meet here at the Punta Spartivento of the revolution” (68). The revolution in the homeland is transported to a different place with a different history; consequently, a new sense of place and history is imagined.

This leads us to the other meaning of translation. The *OED* states that translation also means transference as in movement of translation in physics, the transference of a body, or form of energy, from one point of space to another. The poet-exile accordingly translates the law of revolution into the law of physics; politics is made to recognize the workings of the material universe. If the poet-exile cannot be in Manila today, let him imagine the revolution wherever he may be. It is only fitting that this poet-exile takes the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci as his “only mentor in the labyrinth of the garden of communism” (40). For in the language of Gramsci, place occupies an important role. It is prudent, then, to distinguish between war of position and war of maneuver. And clearly, the poet-exile takes the former in hopes of realizing the latter. Tomorrow, see you in Manila!

Thus, translation widens the terrain for the war of position. By transforming the revolution in the homeland into a consciousness that is recognizable anywhere in the planet, the book unifies the vernacular and international. As a book of translations, then, *Balikbayang Mahal* expands the domain of struggle and, consequently, makes the political work of translation visible. The majority of the poems in the collection were written in Filipino, but their translation into English,