

THE IMPULSE TOWARD MODERNITY AND
THE WASTE LAND IN TAGALOG TRANSLATION:
RECEPTIVITY AND RESISTANCE IN THE REWORLDDING
OF A MODERN CLASSIC

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The 1960s was a volatile decade in the Philippines. A resurgent nationalist movement was on the rise and the political establishment was seeking to ride on it to keep itself in power. The decade opened with a new President at the helm of government. Diosdado Macapagal had ridden on the nationalist revival to win the election and there was optimism among voters that the nation was on its way out of neo-colonialism. During his term, Macapagal had moved Independence Day from July 4, which the U.S. had picked for the colony it was “freeing,” to June 12 to honor the 1896 Revolution. That nationalist ploy did not earn him the goodwill of the U.S. In 1962, obviously to ingratiate himself to the U.S., he put an end to import control which had kept foreign business companies from exporting their profits to their respective home countries. The move caused the devaluation of the peso and the economic disaster it brought to the country subjected the Philippines to the control of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The nationalist rhetoric of government gave impetus to a consciousness of “national identity” among the intelligentsia, and such consciousness had its impact on writers. In the academe, youthful activists were studying the ideas of the veteran statesman Claro M. Recto and picked up his anti-colonial outlook on the government’s foreign policy which generally reflected subservience to the the U.S. State Department. Teodoro A. Agoncillo’s textbook on Philippine history focused on the emergence of the Filipino nation. A new historian on the scene, Renato Constantino was was developing a “history from below,” with the

Filipino masses at its center. Creative writers in campuses gravitated towards militant youth activism and young writers assumed a new temper. Initially, their sympathy came with a “nativist” slant that explored “Filipino-ness.”

In line with poet-critic Alejandro G. Abadilla’s scathing critique that poetry had not freed itself from its 19th century captivity under Francisco Baltazar, an impulse to modernity began to take shape. The impulse emphasized acceptance of urban life as subject matter and the abandonment of sentimentalism associated with an idealizing rural outlook. Abadilla, since the publication of his free verse poem “ako ang daigdig” [i am the universe] in 1940 had been advocating a “modernist” practice for Tagalog poets of the 20th century. He was on the way to creating a following during the Japanese Occupation when the Japanese authorities took over *Liwayway* magazine and placed it under the editorial control of a younger staff sympathetic to Abadilla’s poetics. The return of the American forces in 1945 cut short the term of the revisionist young staffers. The *Liwayway* was restored to its private owners and the restoration saw the return of “veteran” staffers who proved hostile to the “modernist” leaning of the contributors. In the waning years of his career, Abadilla continued his advocacy of his version of the “modern.”

In the meantime, writers fresh from college had arrived in the literary scene with an updated critical outlook on the “modern.” The University of the East occupies a central location among the educational institutions in that section of Manila that had come to be called “the University Belt.” In the 1960s, U.E. served as a hub of the organized student movement in the University Belt, and its student organ known as *Dawn* was run by progressive students who opened the pages of the newspaper to essays and poetry by young, adventurous writers. Virgilio S. Almario and Rogelio Mangahas were graduate students in U.E. who had imbibed through private readings fresh ideas about literature. Almario was a high school teacher in his home province of Bulacan, and he had been introduced to the poetry and criticism of T.S. Eliot by an American Peace Corps volunteer teacher assigned to the same high school. In turn, Almario had introduced Mangahas to the writings of T.S. Eliot, and together they had taken under their literary wings an undergraduate poet quite eager to be converted to new ideas about poetry. The third member of what was to be identified as a “triumvirate” was Lamberto E. Antonio.

The three U.E. poets had earlier been published in the anthology *Manlilikha* (1967) and their triumvirate became a powerhouse attracting student writers from other schools to come out with “modern” poems in the manner of the triumvirate. It was not a simple case of young poets imitating the works of the U.E. poets. Almario had access to a section in *Dawn* where he published occasional critical reviews of the works of elder poets, targeting usually the sentimentality and inconsequentiality of their subject matter. It was thus that Almario had come to wield a strong influence in the spread of ideas from New Criticism among young writers.

The creative output of the young poets who had responded positively to the impulse to modernity made it possible for readers familiar only with the works of elder poets to begin to accept the poetic practice of the new poets. There were, to be certain, readers who felt offended by the obscenities and cusswords in the poems directed at corrupt bureaucrats and outmoded social institutions, and there were those who complained about the loss of melliflence that so endeared traditional poetry to the mass audience. By and large, however, offenses against language and good taste tended to be forgiven, compensated for by the timeliness and relevance of content, and the “modern” prevailed.

In 1966, a poet who wrote in Tagalog, English and Spanish was awarded by the Institute of National Language the coveted title of “Makata ng Taon” [Poet of the Year] for his poem “Oedipus Rex: Siglo XX” [Oedipus Rex: 20th Century]. He was Federico Licsi Espino, who had previously put out a book [*In Three Tongues*] consisting of poems in Tagalog, English and Spanish. The poet was also a translator interested in popularizing among Tagalog writers poets from America, England and Europe identified as masters of modern poetry, among them T.S. Eliot, Charles Baudelaire, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Salvatore Quasimodo, Dylan Thomas, Eugenio Montale, Boris Pasternak, Andrey Voznesensky, Yegeny Yevtushenko, and Federico Garcia Lorca. Sample poems from these poets appeared in an anthology significantly titled *Makabagong Panulaan, mga Hiyas ng Parnasong Pandaigdig, 1974* (Modern Poetry, Gems of the Global Parnassus).

In Tagalog poetry, Espino had built a bridge between modern poetry in the West and the output of new Filipino poets responding to the impulse toward modernity. At this stage in the history of translation in the Philippines, rendition of foreign-language writing was still from English translations in

what has been designated as “bridge translation.” At best, therefore, many of the foreign (non-English) poems in *Makabagong Panulaan* function as introduction to the poets rather than a serving up of the technical and stylistic qualities of the original works. Espino himself recognized the limitations of his translations, calling them “halaw,” meaning “adapted from,” “based on,” sometimes “inspired by.” As far as the cultural need Espino’s labors was trying to fill, it was enough to link the creative efforts of the young Filipino “moderns” with the practice of modern poetry from writing communities that had pioneered in the genre. Along with the creative outpour of the U.E. poetic triumvirate, Espino’s translations prepared the groundwork for the reception of the project to translate Eliot’s masterwork into Tagalog.

That the project was started in the last half of the 1960s has to be noted because then was a period when the political atmosphere in the Philippines was taking a turn that would cause writers to repudiate the drive to emulate Western writing in asserting “Filipino-ness” in modern times.

T.S. Eliot, in 1922 when *The Waste Land* came off the press, had witnessed the brutality of the First World War and the crumbling of genteel social institutions under the impact of industrial capitalist culture. The poem has been read as a lament for Western civilization itself at a time of cynicism and despair. Initially critics and fellow poets were at a loss as to how to approach the leitmotifs embedded in Eliot’s verse that stir up nuances of disillusion, skepticism, wry humor and irony in portraying a society in which fragments of memories of the past and a stoic look at the arid present mingle and intersect. The innocent fun of childhood of the young girl Marie atop a sled on a mountain slope and the youthful charm of “the hyacinth girl” in spring-time in “The Burial of the Dead” give way quite early in the poem to the self-indulgence of the decadent lady of leisure at her boudoir, annoyed by “the wind under the door” in “The Game of Chess.”

The Waste Land is full of many voices, most of them disembodied, and what they are saying do not connect, ironically reminding the reader of the characters in the *Divina Commedia* who, as individuals, recount their past life with Dante as listener. Each of the voices in *The Waste Land* has an implicit story to tell but with no one listening. The final verse paragraph in “What the Thunder Said” sums up the bleak realization by the desolate persona (perhaps he is Eliot himself) that he can only look forward to the nothingness of Nirvana:

I sat upon the shore
 Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
 Shall I at least set my lands in order?
 London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie
 These fragments I have shored against my ruins
 Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe
 Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih

Sa pasigan nakaupo akong
 Namimingwit, nasalikuran ko ang kapatagang tigang
 Dapat sigurong isaayos ko ang aking lupain?
 Gumuguho ang London Bridge gumuguho gumuguho
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon—Ay, layanglayang layanglayang
Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie
 ito ang mga pirasong naamot ko sa aking mga guho
 Aba, i, aco ang casangkapan ninio. Baliu na naman si

Hieronimo

Datta. Dayadham. Damyata.

Shanti shanti shanti

The posture of despair and pessimism of the central intelligence in *The Waste Land* proved to be attractive to young poets who were witnesses to the betrayal of hopes for social change in the opening years of the decade. Macapagal got elected to the presidency on the strength of the promise in the shibboleth “the unfinished revolution” which evoked the optimism of the 1896 Revolution. When Macapagal abolished import control upon his assumption of the presidency, his action was inevitably interpreted as a concession to American investors in the Philippines, a move that signalled continuing subservience of the government to imperialist control by the U.S.

Rogelio Mangahas, in 1967, wrote “Sa Pamumulaklak ng mga Diliwariw” [At the Blossoming of the Diliwariw Shrubs], its opening lines echoing Eliot’s “April is the cruellest month...”: “Ang abril ay marikit na kalupitan/ ng kalikasan.../ ngunit ako’y mamamasyal na walang balanggot/ at hubad ang mga paa...” [April displays the cruel beauty/ of nature.../ nevertheless I will take a walk bareheaded/ feet unshod...]. Mangahas in the poem creates

contrasting images of beauty and drought to dramatize loss of tradition fondly remembered, the dispersal of families, communicating extreme ennui induced by urban life in the persona of the poem.

In the 1967 anthology *Manlilikha*, Lamberto E. Antonio characterizes the city as a jungle into which a young villager from a farming community has been waylaid by a deceiving light in the poem “Sa Gubat ng Lunsod: Dilim ang Liwanag” [In the Jungle of the City, Dark Is Light]. Mangahas, Almario and Antonio, all three, had grown up in a provincial setting, each one a city resident steeped in the agrarian culture that nurtured their childhood.

Whence come the images of dark and despair that suffuse their poetry? The poets of the triumvirate were young men who had come to Manila to pursue a college education, and education had made them over into middle-class city residents. The colonial educational system perpetuated by the use of English as medium of instruction had infused their consciousness with the ability, in spite of their peasant background, to identify with the moods and thematic fashions of Western poetry to which college had introduced them. It would be instructive to point out that the loss the poems are lamenting are culturally light years away from the loss Eliot and company mourn over. Where Eliot in *The Waste Land* was looking back to the feudal-aristocratic culture that was then being swamped by the popular culture of the 20th century in the West, Filipino poets were missing the innocent certainties of the uncomplicated culture of their rural background. The mood of dark despair may have been borrowed from Western poetry, but the sense of loss is authentic. Given their bourgeoisified sensibility as middle-class poets, their receptivity to the world of *The Waste Land* is easy to understand.

The strongly “nativist” strain in the U.E. poets’ alienation from urban life hints at contradictions inherent in their sensibility as modern poets coming from a rural background. Mangahas takes us to the farmlands of Nueva Ecija and describes the aridity of summer when the diliwariw shrubs are in bloom. Almario is restive in the city away from the warmth and innocence of the camaraderie of village life in San Miguel, Bulacan. Antonio is oppressed by the stark contrast between his childhood expectations of the city as a boy in the province of Cabanatuan in Nueva Ecija, and the vulgar realities that obtrude in his dream-world during his sojourn in the city. For their readers, the “nativist” strain may be seen to point beyond the issue of identity as Filipinos to sharpened awareness of the cultural divide yawning between life in the post-industrial

society of the West and existence in the semi-feudal, semi-colonial society of a Third World country like the Philippines. Here we begin to understand the resistance in a translation into Tagalog of *The Waste Land* which decries the depredations of war and industrialism in European society that, in a Philippine setting, have so far only touched the marginal urbanized center of the capital city of Manila.

The cultural distance between Eliot's *Unreal City* and the Philippines accounts to a great extent for the difficulty in putting into Tagalog the passage that opens "A Game of Chess." The passage presents to us Eliot the master-poet taking us on a syntactical tour de force as he describes the boudoir of the neurotic lady. The piling on of detail upon detail in the description presents problems in diction and cultural reference that the Tagalog language must contend with in pursuing Eliot's efforts to inscribe the decadence of the setting and thus suggest the neurosis of the lady in the room.

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
 Glowed on the marble, where the glass
 Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
 From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
 (Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
 Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
 Reflecting light upon the table as
 The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
 From satin cases poured in rich profusion.

Ang Silyang kinauupan niya, parang binuling trono,
 Ay kuminang sa marmol, at ang salamin,
 Na may haliging inukitan ng namumungang baging
 Pinangungublihan ng isang ginintuang Cupidong nakasilip
 (May isa namang tinakpan ng pakpak ang mata),
 Dinoble ang ningas ng kandelorong may pitong sanga
 At nagsalin sa mesa ng liwanag
 Na sinalubong ng kislap na nagbangon sa alahas
 Na masaganang umapaw sa mga kahitang satin.

A point of contact between Eliot's poem and the translation is the lower-class culture of the Cockney chatterbox in the Pub Scene in "A Game of Chess" and an urban-poor woman relating her conversation with a friend about Lil and the set of dentures her soldier-husband had paid for. In Eliot, the passage

poems from Asia, Latin America, Europe and Africa titled *Kamao* [Clenched Fist]. What was subsequently designated as “The First Quarter Storm” (FQS) had opened a revolutionary period in the history of activism in the Philippines, introducing a new literary ideology which was to challenge the hegemony of the New Criticism in critical writing in the Philippines. Where before, in the final years of the 1960s, Tagalog writing had aimed at reproducing modernity in the creative output of its poets, the new aesthetics brought by the National Democratic Movement into the literary scene sought to mobilize writers to help build a society in which the Filipino masses shall have been liberated from the shackles of feudalism and U.S. imperialism. A militant organization of writers had arisen which called itself *Panulat para sa Kaunlaran ng Sambayanan* [Writing for the Advancement of the People], and poets like Mangahas, Almario and Antonio had abandoned the “impulse toward modernity” to join the struggle for a liberated society.