Framing Faith: Rendering Religiosity in Sapardi Djoko Damono's Poems

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Introduction: Sapardi Down to Earth

Sapardi Djoko Damono, a poet-cum-writer-cum-critic-cum-translator-cum-university professor-cum-humanist, gained both national and international recognition for his intellectual humility, mostly evident in his lyrical poems that express his personal feelings in clear and simple stylistics. As an avid reader of Karl May and William Saroyan, Sapardi's interest in writing began when he was still in junior high school. In *Sapardi Djoko Damono: Karya dan Dunianya*, Sapardi recalls that he sent his first story written in Javanese to *Taman Siswa*, a children's magazine in Solo. The story that he thought was not only worth publishing but also honest was a personal narrative on a harmonious relationship between Sapardi and his stepmother. However, to his surprise, the story was rejected by the magazine's editor who argued that it was not publication-worthy because it was unreasonable, fallacious, ill founded, and un-Javanese. Stories about mean and cold-hearted stepmothers were highly valued and saleable, but stories about warm-hearted and empathetic stepmothers were against the generally accepted social formula. In the eyes of Javanese readers, Sapardi's story could never happen in neither reality nor imaginative works.

Such rejection, of course, disappointed him, but only then did he realize that there were parts of his life that did not make sense in the eyes of many. This, in turn, generated a new attitude in Sapardi's life. He embraced the "irrationals" which, in time, had him grow

a new perspective and helped him write incessantly. His first collection of poetry, *Duka-Mu Abadi*, was released in 1969, which is said to mark the birth of contemporary lyric poetry in Indonesia. In the collection, Sapardi exerts himself in tracing a different path to understand man's relation with nature, love, and God. He argues that poetry is an effort to create a small world, a domain that can be used for imagining, understanding, and enlivening a bigger world with a deeper meaning. It is a borderless playground in which he freely plays not only with words but also with meanings.

As an imagist, Sapardi employs the language of common speech and takes the liberty to create new rhythms and subject matters. He presents clear, concentrated, and precise images, all of which are borne out of daily inspiration. His childhood that was filled with nothing other than ordinary events becomes his source of inspiration in writing poetry and serves as a personal reminiscence of ordinary experience. He experiments with his past and writes prolifically about it. Several hundreds of his poems were compiled in the poetry collection mentioned in the above. Five years later, Sapardi published two poetry collections, *Mata Pisau* and *Akuarium*, followed by *Sihir Hujan* in 1984, *Perahu Kertas* in 1993, *Hujan Bulan Juni* in 1994, *Arloji* in 1998, *Ayat-ayat Api* in 2000, and *Mata Jendela* in 2001. Two short story collections, *Pengarang Telah Mati: Segenggang Cerita* and *Membunuh Orang Gila*, were published in 2001 and 2003, respectively. Harry Aveling translated 19 of Sapardi's poems into English and included them in *Contemporary Indonesian Poetry*, an anthology of Indonesian poetry first published in 1975. In 2005, to mark 40 years of Sapardi's excellence as a poet, more than 130 poems, written in the period between 1961 and 2001, were translated into English and anthologized in another volume, *Before Dawn*. The translator and editor of the book, John McGlynns, admits that "with an elegance and clarity few other poets possess, Sapardi puts into words emotions which every reader must surely face—yet may not be able to express, at least in words so fine. Sapardi speaks for all of us… Sapardi, almost alone among his poetic brethren, gives voice to the gamut of emotions every person feels but only select few can verbalize" (xii).

Correspondingly, Nirwan Dewanto, in his essay "Titik Tenga," states that Sapardi's poetry can be a pivotal point that stands in between two extremes. Every time we feel that we are driven a little bit to the left where Indonesian poetry is filled with intentional authority that confines the readers' interpretation; or a little bit to the right where poetry can become very dark and hard to understand, Sapardi's poems bring us back to moderation where the relationship between the poet and the readers are mutually maintained (1).

Sapardi believes that poetry is open to interpretation, and he fully understands that the poet shall not interfere in the process. Readers can take the liberty to scrutinize whatever motivation the poet had when writing the poem, or even to simply overlook it and focus more on examining what textual features are present before them. What makes poetry democratic is the way that authority is attached to the freedom of choice and of interpretation according to one's belief, and not in the authority imposed by the poet. Sapardi, too, believes that in poetry there shall not be *kepongahan* or arrogance (57). Being very modest, Sapardi admits that he himself has to read his poems over and over again prior to letting his readers peruse his poetry. Each of his poems, he argues, offers different insights at every reading. He understands that this is because he has yet to completely master language due to its *kenakalan* (playfulness), which makes it refuse to succumb entirely to the author's mastery. Interestingly, such playfulness that insinuates non-authoritativeness is a situation also commonly faced by the readers. This suggests that poetry poses equal "difficulties" for both poet and readers, which can lead to either elevating the readers to the heavenly position where the Author stands or getting (H)im to step down to the mundane readerly ground.

Faith Lost, Liberty Regained

Sapardi's "spiritual acuity," borrowing Jeihan Sukmantoro's words in his Foreword (x) to *Before Dawn: The Poetry of Sapardi Djoko Damono*, does not mainly lie in daily religious praxis but in his poetry. It is through textual elements that he maintains his relationship with God and practices his faith. The poems

discussed in this section are the most relevant for scrutiny as they bring the central theme that Sapardi focuses on, and elaborate on the progression of Sapardi's religiosity, his view on it, and how it changes over time. This progression is also present in the two translations by Aveling and McGlynn even though they are published decades apart. The first poem, "Tentang Tuhan" (About God), shows Sapardi's traditional view on faith and underlines his relationship with god as creator and creation, which is hierarchical and undemocratic.

Tentang Tuhan

Pada pagi hari Tuhan tidak pernah seperti terkejut dan bersabda,
"Hari baru lagi!" Ia senantiasa berkeliling merawat segenap ciptaan-
Nya dengan sangat cermat dan hati-hati tanpa memperhitungkan
hari.
Ia, seperti yang pernah kukatakan, tidak seperti kita sama sekali.
Tuhan merawat segala yang kita kenal dan juga yang tidak kita kenal
Dan juga yang tidak akan pernah bisa kita kenal.

In "Tentang Tuhan," Sapardi's religiosity is palpable in that he believes that God "merawat segenap ciptaan-Nya... yang *kita* kenal dan juga yang tidak *kita* kenal" (takes care of all His creations… the creations that we have knowledge about and those we do not have knowledge about). In this poem, God is glorified as Sapardi acknowledges His might and authority, recognizes his own inferiority, and intimately describes Him as *cermat* (attentive) and *hati-hati* (cautious). While showing love of God, Sapardi takes the liberty to use the generic pronoun *kita* (we or us), which, in Indonesian grammar, is a first person plural personal pronoun that functions syntactically as both subject and object. As opposed to another generic pronoun, *kami*, *kita* is always inclusive and therefore implies that the author is attempting to get the readers to view divinity the way he views Him. If seen as an analogy, what

Sapardi as the Author-Function is trying to convey in the poem is that such traditional intimacy is to be mutually maintained between him as a poet and his readers who access his creations.

The intimacy, however, does not appear in "Dua Sajak di Bawah Satu Kata," which illustrates Sapardi's harsh but honest interpretation of the first murder in the history of mankind. In the poem, Sapardi no longer glorifies the Divinity, but instead is a distance from where he was in "Tentang Tuhan," especially when he challenges the traditional view that assumes the murder's motives to be simply jealousy and anger. Seeing it differently, Sapardi assumes that it is more complicated and that God himself had a hand in it. Furthermore, the fact that Harry Aveling and John McGlynn translated the poem two decades apart also contributes to the complexity of the issue, particularly in terms of spatial and temporal distances.

The following is the poem, together with two versions of its translation, by Harry Aveling and John McGlynn, respectively:

Dua Sajak di Bawah Satu Nama	Two Poems with the One Title	Two Poems with One Name
1	1	1
darah tercecer di ladang itu.	the blood spills in the field.	blood stains the plain.
Siapa pula binatang-korban kali ini, saudara	Who is the sacrificial-animal this time, brother?	And who, my friend, is the sacrificial animal this time
lalu senyap pula. Berapa jaman telah menderita semenjak Ia pun mengusir kita dari Sana	Then silence. How many ages have suffered since He drove us out of There	and from whence this silence. How many ages have suffered since He banished us from There
awan-awan kecil mengenalnya kembali, serunya:	the small clouds recognize it, they shout:	small clouds recognize him and cry:
telah terbantai Abel, darah merintih kepada Bapa	Abel has been butchered, his blood cries out to God	Abel has been slain, his blood calls to the Father
(aku pada pihakmu, saudara, pandang ke muka masih tajam bau darah itu. Kita ke dunia)	(I am on your side, brother, look ahead though sharp the smell of the blood. We go to the world)	(I am on your side, my friend, looking straight ahead with the smell of blood still strong. We go into the world)

2	2	2
kalau Kau pun bernama Kesunyian, baiklah tengah- hari kita bertemu kembali: sehabis kubunuh anak itu. Di tengah ladang aku tinggal sendiri bertahan menghadapi Matahari dan Kau pun disini. Pandanglah duabelah tanganku berlumur darah saudaraku sendiri pohon-pohon masih tegak, mereka pasti mengerti dendam manusia yang setia tetapi tersisih ke tepi benar, Telah kubunuh Abel, kepada siapa tertumpu sakit-hati alam, dendam pertama kemanusiaan awan-awan di langit tetap berarak, angin senantiasa menggugurkan daunan; segala atas namamu: Kesunyian	if You are Non-being, it is well that we meet in the middle of the day: after I have killed him In the middle of the plain I remain alone enduring beneath the sun and You are here too. Look at my two hands stained with the blood of my brother the trees remain stiff, they understand the bitterness of a faithful man swept to one side true. I killed Abel of nature's bitterness, of humanity's first hatred the clouds in the sky still move, the wind still fells the leaves; all in your name: Non-being	if Your name is also Silence, let us meet again at midday, after I have killed that man. In the middle of the plain I am left alone fending off the Sun and You are here too. Look at the palms of my hands stained with the blood of my own brother the trees stand firm, no doubt they understand the hurt of a loyal son shunted to the side it's true. I did kill Abel, upon whom lies nature's heart break, humanity's first revenge clouds in the sky continue to pass, the wind forever causes leaves to fall; all in your name: Silence

In the poem, the authority that God possesses vanishes as He resorts to *Kesunyian* (silence) and gives no response at all to the lyrical I, most certainly Cain, when he assertively asks Him to *bertemu di tengah hari sehabis kubunuh anak itu* (meet at midday after [he has] killed Abel). Unlike the devout and obedient Sapardi/author/lyrical I/Cain in "Tentang Tuhan," the Sapardi/author/lyrical I/Cain in "Dua Sajak di bawah Satu Kata" questions God's authority with which God could have prevented the killing, instead of dissociating Himself from both Cain and Abel. He also takes advantage of the silence to directly challenge God by employing an imperative sentence. The enraged Cain says "Pandanglah dua belah tanganku berlumur darah saudaraku sendiri" (Look at my two hands stained with the blood of my brother), as if trying to show God that he is just a marionette manipulated from Above by divine strings attached to its jointed limbs. His malice is not an attribute that he willingly dons, but is rather a trait that God made him wear. In addition to His silence, God is also denounced

for causing ages of suffering since He "mengusir kita dari Sana" (banished us from There). Cain's grudge is so apparent that the trees that stand firm understand the "dendam manusia yang setia tapi tersisih ke tepi" (the bitterness of a loyal son shunted to the side). In addition, the English translation versions contribute to this worsening bitterness and overwhelming divine silence. McGlynn translated "Kesunyian" into Silence as other Indonesian-English translators would; Aveling, however, took a different path by bringing *kesunyian* into his translation domain, examining the context where it resided, and renaming it as "Non-being".

Speaking of translation as a process, Peter Newmark, in *A Textbook of Translation*, argues that translation is understood as "rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text" (5). A good translation, therefore, is a natural translation, one that enable readers to forget that the text has gone through a process of translation, and to understand what the author is trying to convey. With this in mind, anything that is said in one language can be said in another, unless the form is an essential element of the message or the word has yet to have a proper equivalent in the target language. Addressing the issue of proper equivalents, Lawrence Venuti resorts to domestication as an act of "sending the writer home" as his foreign text is ethnocentrically reduced to a target-language cultural value (20).

But this does not happen to Sapardi's poetry. As has been said in the introduction, Sapardi's poetry is composed of simple stylistics—it employs the language of common speech and presents clear, concentrated, and precise images. Seldom would a reader or an Indonesian-English translator be put in a predicament of understanding Sapardi's individual words or of finding appropriate lexical equivalents in the target language. It is at this point that we are compelled to give domestication a new definition. Sending Sapardi back home and reducing his text to meet target-language values would not be necessary. Instead, the translation should be made as second homes in which new values are the reinforcement of the already existing values, if there are any.

Going back to *Kesunyian*, the word has exact equivalents in English. When one looks up the word in an Indonesian-English dictionary, either concise or advanced, he or she will certainly read "silence" immediately. Never will the entries directly state or even insinuate "non-existence". Accordingly, when reading Aveling's translation, it is likely that readers will at first be faced with mild confusion because silence is typically synonymous with muteness, taciturnity, quietness, or speechlessness, but never with non-being. However, when one takes into consideration the context in which the poem speaks of God's non-participation or absence in the history of the first blood ever drawn by man, to translate *kesunyian* into "non-being" does the poem as much justice as McGlynn's "tiGlynn's 'silence' do the poem"silence". It does not create a deviation, reduce meaning, or even send the original text home together with its content and meaning. Instead, it creates new "originals" (Venuti 1), brings the word home, and adds meaning to the idea brought forth by the poet. That means Sapardi's or Cain's protest against authority is amplified further by its translated versions. Within this context, God's silence is a proof of His non-existence, if not indifference.

Sapardi's unique relationship with God also shows in "Siapakah engkau" which speaks of Adam, the first man God created. In all Abrahamic faiths, the story of Adam has always been a tragedy that frames narratives about the expulsion from Eden, the fall of man, or the victory of evil. It revolves around a general theme of a transition from the state of innocent obedience to a state of guilty disobedience. Adam and Eve lived with God in the Garden of Eden but the serpent tempted them into eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which God forbade. After doing so, they became ashamed of their nakedness and God expelled them from Eden to prevent them from eating the tree of life and becoming immortal. According to Christian doctrine, the fall is closely related to original sin, the first sin brought into the world, which in time corrupted the entire natural world, including human nature, causing all humans to be born into original sin, a state from which they cannot attain eternal life without the grace of God.

Sapardi, however, offers a different insight. Through his poem, he tells the story from a different perspective and gives it a new narrative frame. The poem reads:

Siapakah engkau	Who are you	Who are you
aku adalah Adam yang telah memakan buah apel itu;	I am Adam who ate the apple;	I am Adam who ate the apple;
Adam yang tiba-tiba sadar kehadirannya sendiri, terkejut dan merasa malu.	Adam suddenly aware of himself, startled and ashamed.	Adam, who suddenly aware of his own existence, was startled and felt ashamed.
aku adalah Adam yang kemudian mengerti baik dan buruk, dan mencoba lolos dari dosa ke lain dosa;	I am Adam who realized good and evil, passing from one sin to another;	I am Adam, who came to understand right and wrong, and tried to escape from one sin to another;
Adam yang selalu mengawasi diri sendiri dengan rasa curiga, dan berusaha menutupi wajahnya.	Adam continuously suspicious of himself, hiding his face.	Adam, who always watches himself in suspicion, and tries to cover his face.
akulah tak lain Adam yang menggelepar dalam jaring waktu dan tempat, tak tertolong lagi dalam kenyataan: firdaus yang hilang; lantaran kesadaran dan curiga yang berlebih atas Kehadirannya sendiri.	I am Adam floundering in the net of space and time, with no help from reality: paradise lost; because of my mistrust of the Presence.	I am none other than Adam, who flounders in the net of time and space, unable to be saved from reality: paradise lost because of awareness and unbridled curiosity about his own Existence.
Aku adalah Adam yang mendengar suara Tuhan: selamat berpisah, Adam.	I am Adam who heard God say: farewell, Adam.	I am Adam who hears God's voice: farewell, Adam.

Instead of emphasizing sin, Sapardi shifts the focus and re-narrates the story of Adam being about [*kesadaran akan*] *kehadiran diri* (self-awareness) and *mengerti baik dan buruk* (understanding right and wrong). The paradise that he lost is the price he must pay for freedom to have the *kesadaran* (knowledge). According to Abrahamic exegeses, it is believed that Adam fell from heaven not because he had freedom but because he submitted to the power of non-principled love that drove them to violate God's spiritual law. However, Sapardi's Adam is "none other than Adam, who flounders

in the net of time and space…because of awareness and unbridled curiosity about his own Existence". The Adam took the liberty to choose to live outside of God's laws, and not to show reverence for providence. The reading of this Adam becomes more interesting as the poem progresses to the final lines that reads "Aku adalah Adam yang mendengar suara Tuhan: selamat berpisah, Adam." The first version of its translation in English reads, "I am Adam who heard God say: farewell, Adam," whereas the second translation reads "I am Adam who hears God's voice: farewell, Adam." The translations are written in different tenses: one past, the other present, each of which offers separate significance. Aveling's translation sees the event as a completed action in the past. God left Adam and banished him, together with Eve, from the Garden of Eden. He bid farewell to Adam the moment Adam was about to be sent to the worldly realm. McGlynn's translation speaks in a different tone. The fact that the original text was translated using the present simple tense may signify that the event is close and contemporary, eliminating spatial and temporal distance. The present tense is also an indication that Adam is forever forsaken—a condition that befalls every son of Man. "Siapakah Engkau," therefore, is in itself a translation or domestication of the generic teaching of the Abrahamic faiths on the story of Adam. The Adam who has always been distanced, and separated from us is about to be sent home. Aveling and McGlynn help Adam by providing alternative textual residences. Thus, the Fall is no longer about consequences of disobedience but is more emphasized on Adam's decision to go down to earth and return to his new home(s).

The story of Adam continues as he (dis)appears in "Jarak," one of Sapardi's intense lyrical quatrains. The poem stands as a chronological point in a longer narrative line, preceded by "Siapakah engkau," which was written three years earlier. The poem reads:

Jarak	Space	Distance
dan Adam turun di hutan-hutan mengabur dalam dongengan	Adam has gone down into the forest confused in legends	and Adam came down to the forest to disappear in myth
dan kita tiba-tiba disini tengadah ke langit: kosong-sepi	and we are suddenly here gazing into the sky: empty-silent	and suddenly we are here, gazing at the sky: empty and still

After God bid farewell to Adam in "Siapakah Engkau," he then "turun di hutan-hutan mengabur dalam dongengan" (came down to the forest to disappear in myth). The story of Adam is tragic not in the sense that he has been banished from heaven but in the fact that his story is simply an idealized conception of the creation of man. "Jarak", "Space", and "Distance" talk about how Adam occurred in the past, in the forest, in legends—temporally and spatially distanced with *kita* (us) who are suddenly here, gazing at the "empty-silent" sky. Both temporal and spatial distances particularly appear in the uses of present perfect tense and past simple tense in the two translations. Adam in "Space" indicates a continuing situation—a state that started at some time in the past and continues to the present. To put it differently, although "Space" gives information about Adam's prior action (going down into the forest), the focus is likely to be on the present consequences of that action (the fact that he is no longer present as he is now confused in legends). Whereas in "Distance", Adam can never be found as he disappears in myth, which implies neither the truth nor falseness of Adam's existence. The distances also affect the *kita* as we are cut off from heaven and disillusioned by the emptiness, and we somehow know that the tragedy has now befallen us. The fact that the sky where it all came from is *kosong*, *sepi*, empty, silent, insinuates that it is about time that we take the liberty to leave behind the myth and forsake the all-pervading Author who has forsaken the sons of man.

Paradise may have been lost, but liberty has definitely been gained.

Conclusion

The word religiosity is etymologically derived from the Latin *religionem* (nominative *religio*) which means respect for what is sacred; conscientiousness, sense of right; fear of the gods; divine service, religious observance; a religion, a faith, a mode of worship, cult; and sanctity.[1] As elaborate as it may seem, this definition, somehow confines human understanding of what is sacred and how the sacred is treated. It talks simply about a reverence for God, moral obligation, and fear, and thus signifies that the relationship between man and his Creator is constantly lopsided. It is more about fulfilling obligations; seldom is it about claiming rights.

For Sapardi, language that may manifest in poetry is always playful. In relation to its playfulness, it is perhaps compulsory that a more democratic definition of the word be included. Religiosity, according to Cicero, is indirectly derived from the Latin *relegere*—a word consisting of two morphemes (1) *re-* (again) and (2) *legere* (read)—which means to go through again (in reading or in thought).[2] This definition suits the analysis better as the poems discussed in this paper show how faith in god progresses. It begins with glorification, proceeds to denouncement, and ends with indifference. Each phase shows a new reading of faith as an aspect of life that roams in personal domains, and is no longer trapped in any formal or institutionalized frame. As for the translations, they help domesticate the divinity that has always been far from home, and provide means for religiosity to travel freely and transgress textual and social domains where reasons play bigger role than beliefs in myths.

Notes

[1] Online Etymology Dictionary, "religiosity".

[2] Online Etymology Dictionary, "religion".

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