

CLEAR AS MUD: RE(AD)DRESSING POETRY

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My title "Clear as Mud" is also the title of a poem I wrote after receiving as a gift the book *Stunned Mullets & Two-pot Screamers*, actually a dictionary of Australian colloquialisms. At a symposium in Perth, I had talked about cultural sameness and difference between Australia and the Philippines¹ although my knowledge of Australia then and now is without doubt wanting. The only prolonged interaction I ever had with Australians prior to conferencing in Perth is around five decades ago at backyard barbecues on campus in the University of the Philippines (UP) at Los Baños where I grew up. Back then the campus was host to American visiting professors and international consultants connected to the UN, probably with the FAO, since Los Baños was the campus for the exclusive study of agriculture and forestry. I suppose the gift of a dictionary was to introduce me to Australian English. As appreciation I tried as I sometimes do to write a poem the gift inspires:

Clear as Mud

Ano daw... Ano daw?

The big wet's come down from up
north from Asia throwing a wobbly
you could say acting a bit wonky
like a two pot screamer sloshed
so daggy but within cooe of landfall
you could drop a clanger or chuck
a U ie back to Never Never or face
it mate don't be a wuss let piss

and wind pass Now the wog won't
choof off but still the rellies come
now don't you go crying blue murder
over nothing tell them you're neither
a freshie nor saltie tell them you're
a stunned mullet one night drinking
with the flies thrashed about grabbing
forty winks and all that tell them So
what if you're green around the gills
so do the big spit these mozzies
can be aggro if you let them

or did you want to go
down the gurgler with them
paper Aussie seekers?

I selected and strung together colloquialisms to mimic an Australian giving advice to a mate on the issue of migration. I had two Filipinos overhear them by including their condensed conversation as an epigraph: "*Ano daw... Ano daw?*" ("What he/she said is... What did he/she say?"). My apprehension at using bits of Australian English was that I was overloading the poem with phrases the meanings of which I myself as a non-Australian had to take note, and that a typical Australian—if there is one—does not speak in this manner. I had the Australian poet and professor Dennis Haskell read the poem and expected criticism for the misuse of language; instead he suggested I create an event, a context, which I already had if the epigraph is taken to be part of the poem. In this way, the declarative "*Ano daw*" written in Filipino indicates that one Filipino has access to Australian English, while the interrogative "*Ano daw?*" indicates the opposite since the English the other Filipino knows is not quite the English heard. Written mostly in English, hopefully Australian English, my poem is clear as mud except to the reader with access to both languages.

The Bilingual Self

What I would like to illustrate here is that, for me, translation is more than a crossing over from one language to the other; it is, like

the poem, the crossing or border itself. Put differently, in writing poems, what I do is not so much poetry *in* translation but poetry *as* translation. My writing and writing life lends support to Edwin Gentler's proposal of "rethinking translation not as a product—a translated text—nor a process—a carrying/ferrying a text across a divide—and instead considering it as the very foundation upon which cultures and languages emerge". To him, "translation is not a form of importing a text from the outside, but rather drawing upon reserves and experiences from within each individual and one's own multicultural heritage. In this context translation is not a mechanical activity applied to a text, but the very living substance of both the source and target text, a living malleable, formable matter."

Such an approach presupposes a background like mine: I am Filipino and thus at least bilingual. Philippine colonial history has made us versatile in English, mostly in the dark in Spanish, inventive in Filipino and in any of the more than 170 native languages we are born to or raised in. In the Philippines, there are no apparent rules for code switching, mixing, and altering language, one does it "naturally" in colloquial speech. However, this assumes at least adequate competence in the performed languages, one in which grammar rules and speech patterns more or less follow that of the primary language, whichever at the moment it is.

It is crucial to understand how as a bilingual writer one views the language one writes in. We have language purists within our midst, and we Filipinos pride ourselves at being good in English, yet what kind of English would this be? In all probability, this would be Philippine English and its varieties, not any other kind of English. As I see it now, it is doubtful that we ever wrote in English, if by English we mean standard English or American English if there is such a monolith. At the onset of American colonization in the Philippines, when the Filipino student got his or her first taste of the language, English was taught primarily by Filipino teachers trained by Americans teachers, a fact which can lead us to conclude that from the very beginning, our English has always been mediated and that all features of English were never completely replicated at any time. As for spoken English, as recounted by Maurice P. Dunlap

in 1913, English in the capital city Manila as spoken by Americans themselves was already a hybrid variety, a mix of English, Spanish, Filipinisms and traces of Chinese.

I write in English because it is the language I am most comfortable in and know best. I now qualify this as Philippine English. I grew up surrounded by English but an international kind. I went to a school that in my third grade received significant financial aid including book donations from the Ford Rockefeller Foundation, which probably means that my early education was in many ways American. My parents spoke to us—when they did—in Tagalog, the language of Los Baños and my father's native language, but never in Spanish although both were fluent, and never in Cebuano, my mother's native language. English was a given; it was the language of science after all, of chemistry for my father and medicine for my mother. All permitted reading material at home, ranging from comic books to *Scientific American* were in English. We also listened to the radio and saw movies only in English. In truth, beneath the surface of the English I knew lived another world. I had not been attentive to this double because I had not been made conscious of its existence.

In the past, I was not inclined toward writing poems like “Clear As Mud”, but the dilemma of having to reconcile the languages and cultures one lives and lives in must always have been begging to be addressed. Anita Desai relates how she herself was “pursued by a sense of leaving other parts of (her) tongue locked, unused”. She asks: “What about the Indian languages I used everyday? What about German, my ‘family secret’? It created a lingual unease, this need to bring them to my writing” (15). A similar unease with a double life possibly led me to write “Lost, (after People Power)” in 1986, the year of the historical event itself. Like other participants in the successful revolt against the Marcos regime, I had experienced the euphoria that came with the end of a dictatorship at the same time anxiety over the vacuous mess it left behind. I also remember the poem as the first occasion when I interspersed with English words in Spanish, in “Santissima/stop the war/and be dead serious/for once” and “Puñeta,/get this straight:/da balas are for real,” although rather timidly. It was also a first attempt to enjamb lines, such as:

... swear
not to look back
no, no
turning back
now and shame
to give
up or in to
—what?

to create the effect of breathless expectancy mixed with dismay. At the time of writing, the poem just flowed out of my mouth, but as a beginner at writing I did worry over its reception. After all, this was a time when Philippine English was thought to be English, when Spanish was still an official language, and the more accommodating national language Filipino was just about to be invented.

Apart from living the moment, I now believe that writing the poem released me from the restrictive world of the English I grew up in and loved—although it took twenty years of absence from writing before I could begin to understand this. In an instant, I was initiated and transported dramatically into a life where the “balas are for real”. It opened my eyes to the fact that the life I had lived as a child, idyllic though it was, was an illusion, a single-sided reality. In hindsight, however, I must have known it all along because prior to “Lost”, I had written poems such as “Sushi”, a mock haiku about Japayukis, very young Filipino women sent to Japan to work as entertainers, and “Tyrannus Redux (or Oedipus at the Beer Garden)”, a long poem about Philippine political and social conditions prior to 1986 when life was “a long dancefloor skirmish”, “the plague wound round the neck” and where “only the cash registers”, all combined.

The Self Translated

Every poem is a site of translation, the kind Eva Hoffman calls “self-translation” or a translating of the self. It is a term she used on herself when going over her childhood experiences in English so that she “now could pick up the other part of the interrupted story and grow up in Polish” (“P.S.” 54). To her, emigration created

an “abrupt rupture”: a “dislocation, disorientation, self-division”, then “a shifting and blurring of the inner landscape”, and finally “the loss of the very sense of loss” (“The New Nomads” 46-47). I am going about the experience somewhat like the “inner émigré” that Seamus Heaney had once described himself.

In going over one’s childhood in English, Hoffman warns against “the siren call of nostalgia and, possibly, regression” (“P.S.” 54). In effect we do not return to our childhood; we re-view it in the language of the present. We do not psychically kill the past self, instead we allow that self to inhabit the present so that an altered yet transforming relationship with poetic language can begin to happen. As André Aciman remarks, we “rewrite the present so as not to write off the past” (21). Anita Desai recalls from experience that “one needs to make oneself porous and let languages and impressions flow in and flow through, to become the element in which one floats. Once one has torn up one’s roots, one becomes a piece of driftwood, after all, or flotsam. It is the tides and currents that becomes one’s fluid, uncertain home” (17).

Like Hoffman, we have to acknowledge where we are coming from to effect a transformation. No matter how we Filipinos choose to run away from or ignore our colonial past, it is in our genes. It is evident in our language, values and beliefs. I suppose I am more acutely aware of this condition than the present generation. My poem “In the Fifties” is about how my generation had been willing to give up a life of “rooster calls” and “salted fish” in exchange for an American one. This desire was so inculcated in the 1950s that I know that even the Reading textbook characters Pepe and Pilar’s pet dog Bantay, whose name means “guard” as a noun and verb, gives up its position as such to accommodate the American dog Spot. In this regard, I am cautious about the current trend in poetry of the new avant garde picked up from MFAs and international writing programs in the United States, partly because it hints of a neocolonial mentality and also because in cases I have come across there is little evidence of individualistic human creativity—or is all this consistent with contemporary experimental poetry?²

I do write poems that reference the United States, our colonial homeland and now home to a few family members. In “Balikbayan-in-the-Box”, a short winter visit provides an unexpected opportunity to come face to face with one’s sense of national identity—or a myopic version of it. Filipinos can be found the world over and if there is one thing they share, it is a balikbayan box in which to cram anything of perceived value to send back to relatives in the Philippines. I intended the poem, through its one-suitcase narrator and her capitulation at the poem’s end to send one home, to support the claim that sometimes one needs to be away to have a more grounded perspective of home. In another poem “Toast”, in an even shorter stay in the other colonial homeland Spain, the historic “*el pacto de sangre*,/the blood compact/that seals a friendship” is recalled in friendships newly formed. As Aciman says of his own recollections, “finding parallels can be more compelling than finding a home, because without parallels there can’t be a home, even if in the end it is the comparing that we like, not the objects we compare” (30).

In the poem “Lola Coqueta”, I took inspiration from my step grandmother, purportedly a local vaudeville singer whom my grandfather married and sent to convent school to learn some manners. Beyond autobiography, the poem is about a grandmother giving advice to a granddaughter to marry for material security rather than for love, an “Asian” view of marriage to which the grandmother herself apparently conformed. It is a dramatic monologue as well as one that relies on syllable count. A syllable poem, a traditional Filipino form,³ is better able to accommodate transliterations and other linguistic alterations in Spanish, Filipino and English to effect more successfully in English a grandmother’s pretensions at speaking Spanish:

Ay, the things you must do
to ensure a wedding—
un poco pintura
y polvo, champaka
on the shy skin...
...

for what is a woman,
haber, but nada without
the grip of a man on
her life—

Or is her garbled speech simply another variety of Philippine English? I think “a tolerance even a predilection for ornament and flourish” that is the language personality of Spanish (Boehm 26) and enhanced further by Tagalog poetry’s nineteenth century predilection for affectation and bombast add nuance and credibility to the grandmother’s speech. The epigraph, “*No hay Sabado sin sol/ como no hay vieja sin amor*” or “No Saturday without its sun, no old woman without love”, once a popular saying in Spanish, suggests the grandmother did marry for love after all, a predictably Filipino choice.

Love poems are a staple in the Philippines, as can be seen in an early compilation *Love Sonnets by Eleven Prewar Poets* (1973); another anthology *One Hundred Love Poems. Philippine Love Poetry Since 1905* (2004) is devoted to the subject across a hundred years of English in the country; and still another *Love Gathers All* (2002) consists of love poems from the Philippines and Singapore, part of Singapore’s conciliatory move to mend floundering diplomatic relations with the Philippines at the time, the Singapore poet and coeditor Alvin Pang admits.⁴ Coming to terms with literary traditions from which one writes, or writes away, or writes back to, is a way of becoming the element in which one floats.

It took a while for me to write a poem about my mother’s home province. I wrote “Cebu” to redress an inherited snub I had felt guilty of. When I was growing up, my father would constantly tease my mother and her relatives about Cebuano peculiarities, including speech habits that don’t quite match those of the Tagalogs. Back then it was commonplace to pick on insular difference rather than archipelagic interconnection, an attitude which in part could account for apparent Tagalog-based Manila snobbery. Interestingly, the capital city Manila (now Metro Manila) has always been a city of local migrants like myself—of varying social, political, economic, religious, and indigenous backgrounds—and

is representative of the fluid yet fixed cultural interchange that is characteristic of the Philippines. I suppose in our unending—and perhaps futile—search for a “fixed identity”, for what is Filipino, “multiplicity must be set against at least a notional singularity to have any meaning”, as Robert Young puts it (4).

“Cebu” is not really about my mother but a photograph of her classmate in medical school who was tortured and killed by the Japanese during World War II. I had wanted to acknowledge her heroism as a Cebuano and thus also a Filipino, at the same time put in the limelight my mother who like so many women during her time and at present put their careers on hold or at a snail’s pace because of marriage and motherhood:

When I meet an army
of uncles and aunts
and giggly cousins
speaking her language
without pain of betrayal

it is to salute her
who has brought us to port.

The Poem Translated

Hoffman reminds us that “on (a) fundamental level, a culture does not exist independently of us but within us. It is inscribed in our psyche, and it gives form and focus to our mental and emotional lives” (“The New Nomads” 50). In a similar sense, Charles Simic says, “I am a poet, the kind they call a lyric poet. A lyric poem is the voice of a single human being taking stock of his or her own existence.... The poem is both a part of history and outside its domain” (135). In this connection, I have come to acknowledge that writings in English and translations into English, of “western” texts so far, can be accessed notionally but not always practically. When, for example, is the darkest evening of the year, why is April, our summer, the cruelest month? Likewise, from a perspective unlike mine, in my poem “Typhoon” which is about the aftermath of the 2013 super typhoon Haiyan, the comment “evacuation/ could have meant survival” can be read as a tautology rather

than the experiential truth that it is: many of the drowned were reportedly at evacuation centers. Nature's wild side, as experienced in typhoons, floods, drought, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes, is shared factual matter that contributes on a significant scale to our subconscious sense of uncertainty, impermanence, absent presence, and consequently, an observed idealism and spirituality. Interestingly, the first English poem by a Filipino Ponciano Reyes, published in 1905, is about a flood and titled as such ("The Flood"), and the first Tagalog poem by "una persona Tagala" (anonymous, "by a Tagalog") in 1605 is "May Bagyo Ma't May Rilim," about a storm and accompanying darkness.

When possible I try to locate my poems in the Philippines and in Southeast Asia of which it is a part and by extension Australia. We ourselves in the region have a tendency to take for granted those closest to us, and as such we can become estranged from them. My poem "Rindu" ("longing") is written in English but mixed with Bahasa Indonesia, a language of neutral significance to me. Some lines in bahasa are from actual poems in the bilingual poetry anthology *Secrets Need Words*: "*Aku ingin/mencintaimu dengan sederhana*."⁵ "I want/to love you simply" and "You live in me./ outside me./ *Kamu hidup di dalam/dan di luar diriku*."⁶ I intended the poem to be a kind of mirror poem in which language is the mirror that reflects but not necessarily tells the truth about a love relationship. In including a language not my own, I was given generous support by the anthology's editor and translator Harry Aveling who suggested that to keep to my concept I should change one word in the line "*Kita tiada sebelum kita bertemu lagi*" or "we do not exist *before* we meet again" which does not make too much sense as translated in English. My original word for "*sebelum*" was "*sampai*" meaning "until," or as applied, "we do not exist *until* we meet again". As it is now, in the final lines "We do not exist" and mirrored as "*Di bahasa Inggris, kita tiada*", in English which is the primary language of the poem, both lovers exist but as separate entities; in bahasa, which is no one's language, both exist only *as* and *when* lovers. The poem's formal structure is inspired by the *wayang kulit* or shadow play, although of course there are mirror poems everywhere.

I also thought to transform the language of my poetry by means of images and symbols that are not only adequate to our predicament but specific to the region, such as the champaka flower, the kapok, even dingoes. I did chance upon the champaka image in a few poems by an early poet Angela Manalang Gloria and by the Singaporean Edwin Thumboo, so that in “Letter to Mr. Thumboo”, about shared parental loss, I tried to build on such geographic and literary connections. I am particularly fond of the kapok, which is both the cotton tree and the cotton itself. My mother used to make pillows out of it, and during summer it falls like puffs of snow on my workplace the UP Diliman campus. I have used the image in the poems “Kapok” to describe a received email message about illness and in “In Salzburg” to account for geographic and emotional distance. Initially I thought the kapok a local tree, but there is a huge one at the Singapore Zoo with the following inscription: “The kapok tree was held sacred by the ancient Mayans who believed the soul of the dead would climb the tree to reach Heaven. The Mayans also believed that spirits reside in kapok trees.” Such detail has remarkable poetic potential—unless already realized—in the languages of Mexico, Central America, South America, the Caribbean, and the west of Africa, its places of origin, and also in English.

Bilingual poems can offer a way of seeing beyond a thinking or perception that is given voice by only one language. And whether written in one language or juxtaposed or superimposed on others, there is in them, as Stephanie Norgate observes, “always another voice beyond the voice being used, where a voiced statement and a powerful image can both embody and yet deny the fluidity of poetic thinking” (4).

Image acts on the mind, but as Seamus Heaney often points out, “poetry depends for its continuing efficacy upon the play of sound not only in the ear of the reader but also in the ear of the writer” (“The Makings of a Music” 78). Bayani Mendoza notes Filipinos are drawn to “pensiveness and dolor” in music, to sounds associated with pain, distress and suffering. The Tagalog song form tagulaylay (tagloy, “lament”; alaylay, “sustain”), for example, is a “lengthy melodic succession of monotonous lamentations”;

and because suitable, it was adapted to the Pabasa or the reading (that is, chanting) of the Passion of Christ during Lent (quoted in Aguilar). In relation to poetry written in Tagalog, Bienvenido Lumbera quotes a nineteenth century Spanish grammarian who noted that “*El estilo poético de los tagalogs es siempre melancólico como sus cantares, triste como sus bosques*” (91). (The poetry of the Tagalogs is always melancholic like their songs, and sad as evoked by their forests.)

I have a poem “Zoo Sonnet” which is about a visit to the zoo as well as a recollection of travel to the United States. It can also be about bears, the seasons, even a postcolonial moment. Above all, I did intend the poem to sound of love “forever on hold” and love orphaned and that something beautiful can come out of past and present tragedies:

Zoo Sonnet

You love the show: the way Alaska floats
like ice blocks from a factory, its lake
a see-through pool, green as a pine treeline,
or blue, perhaps, as the sky can be in
winter. We who know only two seasons,
who have no word for *snow*, who never fly
south, crowd around the arctic moment as
though it might give us the slip, never to
pass our way again. Once in Anchorage
on a diverted flight home from New York,
we marveled at the white and very tall
bears, such majesty forever on hold
behind the glass, which now frames the orphan
in the backlight, asleep, away from home.

Heaney says that “in lyric poetry, truthfulness becomes recognizable as a ring of truth within the medium itself. And it is the unappeasable pursuit of this note ... which keeps the poet’s ear straining to hear the totally persuasive voice behind the other informing voices” (*Crediting Poetry* 50-51). In the end, no matter the language and culture in which it is written, I believe, and as

Heaney insists, poetry needs to be “true to the external impact of reality and ... sensitive to the inner laws of the poet’s being” (21). He admits that he himself as a poet had been “straining toward a strain” (51) in the effort to “want the poem not only to be pleasantly right but compellingly wise, not only a surprising variation played upon the world but a retuning of the world itself” (20).

I do lean toward poems of lived experience and which communicate both intellectual and emotional meaning. I am drawn to seemingly simple and effortless written expression which I believe is the hardest kind of writing. Whether I write from childhood experience or life in the Philippines or from the world of which we all are a part, what I would like to highlight artistically in poems is our interconnectedness, our capacity for empathy, our humanity.

Notes

¹ See Isabela Banzon, “Writing the Ordinary: Poets in Conversation,” *Westerly*. 56:1 (July 2011) 35-42.

² See *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, eds. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (2012), Routledge, 2015.

³ The syllable poem is traditional, but as Rosario Cruz Lucero clarifies, it is not an indigenous or pre-Hispanic form, personal interview, 31 Mar 2015.

⁴ Alvin Pang stated this during an open forum at the “Fourteenth Biennial Symposium on Culture and Society in the Asia Pacific,” The University of Western Australia, Perth, 2011; the diplomatic rift resulted from the execution of the Filipino domestic helper Flor Contemplacion found guilty of murder.

⁵ See “Aku ingin” by Sapardi Djoko Damono, in Harry Aveling’s *Secrets Need Words*.

⁶ See “Enkau angin” by Sitok Srengenge, in Harry Aveling’s *Secrets Need Words*.

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