

# Translational Poetics: Notes on Contemporary Philippine Poetry in English<sup>1</sup>

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## The Question of Irony

It always feels awkward to be “here”—to write about being both a writer and a critic, especially since the genre in question is poetry.

Needless to say, “poet” is my unfinished aspiration.

In a country with so many “poets” posting poems online, reading in cafes, being anthologized, binge-drinking in cabalistic fellowship, conspiring against each other, and engaging in fervid debates about aesthetics, this specific demurral of mine isn’t anything like false modesty.

What it is, I suppose, is a kind of “self-awareness”—one prompted, on one hand, by a sense of belatedness in the face of the unimpeachable evidence left behind by the Great Dead; and on the other, by the conviction that to write in English as a Filipino living in the Philippines is an inescapably complicated thing.

To explain this point, allow me to invoke dear NVM Gonzalez, who took exception to the solicited observation of a guest British writer that Philippine literature in English didn’t seem to profess too much irony, judging by the sampling she’d just heard at a literary conference, one afternoon in Cebu City, sometime in 1997.<sup>2</sup> NVM had been nodding off in the muggy heat, but immediately after hearing this woman writer’s sheepishly registered observation, he perked right up and practically barked back: “I beg to disagree, madam. What can be more ironic than someone like me writing in your language?”

I was there when this interesting exchange took place, and I remember that the guest writer promptly apologized upon hearing NVM’s retort. Smiling

her brilliant smile, she returned the formality and very humbly said: “My apologies, kind sir. I have been put soundly in my place.” I remember that everybody in that room laughed, albeit nervously, because we all instinctively knew that something terribly important had just taken place, even if I could sense—with unease—that many of us gathered there were not exactly willing to understand the full extent of what it implied.

Just now I can recall that what this wonderfully talented British writer had heard were earnest personal stories and poems, about urban and rural poverty, the desire to reconnect with one’s past, the power of familial love, the persistence of sentiment, and other such familiar and relatable things. On the other hand, what she read was this exquisitely written passage about something wickedly wry and witty—a passage about the relationship between a terribly intelligent and self-conscious shrink and a simple-minded woman, who’d just given birth to their first child, with the hope that this would make her husband love her at last; needless to say, unlike the spellbound reader, this poor woman doesn’t know just how altogether doomed this foolish hope really is. Thus, the dramatic irony.

Of course, it’s inconceivable that this writer didn’t know where exactly she was—didn’t know how different this literature was, or who or “what” NVM and the other Filipino writers in attendance were, in relation to the identities of those Anglo-American (or even anglophone) writers that a famous British writer like her would naturally be familiar with. Of course, she didn’t really need to be reminded any of this by NVM. Just now, I’m thinking that her choice to disremember—or, at least, pretend not to know—what she inescapably knew must’ve simply been her way of being courteous, put on the spot as she suddenly was by the request from someone in the audience to give her impression regarding the literature that she had just “heard.”

But NVM simply had to do it, I suppose. He simply had to call her bluff, and make it known to her that he knew what she was doing—knew her choice to evaluate this literature unapologetically, from the perspective of her own literature, isn’t really a form of compliment in the end, because it is informed, and indeed it can only be informed, by that plainest and most undeniable of facts: history has deemed that, despite their use of a common language, she and NVM (and all other Filipino writers in English) are not and cannot ever be the same, and that it’s devastatingly (actually, painfully) ironic that most Filipinos can even begin to forget that.

It was we, the Filipino audience who were present when this discomforting incident took place, that needed to hear what NVM had to say. Finally, this

British writer, while unwittingly providing its occasion, was entirely external to this realization.

I'm thinking, then, of the unfinished task of Filipino writers to make English signify effectively—and convincingly—the most basic local realities they are seeking to represent, given the increasingly hybrid and multilingual conditions that they find themselves working in. In other words, spurred by NVM's demurral, I dare say that English in our literature remains an ironic language—ironic because, historically, it shouldn't even have been an option to begin with; and ironic because the everyday reality of most Filipinos isn't monolingual (or monocultural) at all. And so, the challenge of making English carry the weight of our people's intensely transcultural and syncretic situation remains altogether daunting.

Needless to say, this weight is nothing if not the weight of translation, and Filipino literature in English is nothing if not translational.

### **Philippine Poetry in English: The Scene Today**

I will be reckless—and brave—and say that, nowadays, there are basically two camps of anglophone poets working in the Philippines.

We can call one camp representational, and the other postrepresentational.<sup>3</sup> The former write verbal “imitations” of life, and usually work within the register of the didactic or the confessional. The latter churn out structurally complex and “procedural” performances that critique this mimetic function, and seek instead to foreground the materiality of the verbal medium, typically by preferring statement to image, and “thickening” the physicality of its words, which is meant to suppress the inner visualization afforded by conventional narration and/or description.

Obviously, this dichotomy isn't absolute, but it does, operatively speaking, hold.

We need to recognize, moreover, that this isn't remotely the same as those other, more “familiar” binaries: establishment vs. anti-establishment, traditional vs. new, and old vs. young.

Clearly, in the history of Philippine poetry in English, postrepresentational writing isn't a new thing at all. Jose Garcia Villa's modernist experimentations, that flamboyantly reduced the poem to sound, verbal icon, or even just punctuation, would be the fountainhead of this tradition in our literature. Across the decades, other “experimental” and/or “avant-garde” poems would be written by a succession of Filipino poets, doubtless influenced by

modernist exemplars like Stein, Pound, Eliot, etc. A few of the names that come to mind are the minimalists Alfredo E. Litiatco and Virginia Moreno, the surrealist Manuel Viray, the bricoleurs Cirilo F. Bautista and Ricaredo Demetillo, among others. And yes, these are all canonical names in the corpus of Philippine anglophone writing, in the same way that many of the postrepresentational poets of today have won prizes, are tenured academics, have multiple publications, and participate, in various capacities, in the business of institutional art-making.

It needs to be said, however, that the postrepresentational “tradition” hasn’t predominated at any one time in our literature—not in prose, not in poetry. In fact, a number of those who dabbled in “avant-garde” versifying or poem-making (for instance, Bautista and the younger Ricardo de Ungria) turned confessional or traditionally didactic (nationalistic and/or religious), soon enough in their literary careers ...

In contrast to the Western modernists, who turned their backs on the realist imperative in order to foreground the materiality and mediating power of the verbal medium, our poets and fictionists are still mostly referential or mimetic in their orientation, and this is possibly because the task of making English carry the complex meanings of a neocolonial culture describes a primary and ongoing struggle for most Filipino writers in English, still and all. Of course, this representational labor, specific and situated as it is, necessarily exceeds categories like realism, which themselves are specific and situated as critical concepts.

To my mind, the difference in the case of the current batch of Filipino postrepresentational writers is that they are, in the main, channeling contemporary appropriations of modernist precepts—mediated, for instance, by such present-day movements as Language Poetry and Conceptualism—as they have imbibed these in their formal educations (typically, in MFAs in avant-garde creative writing programs in the US), or informally, through their readings and exposure to hypermedia. These contemporary practices are, of course, already different from their modernist antecedents by virtue of their visibly “theoretical” bent—doubtless the result of the ascendancy, in academe, of Critical Theory, from the 1980s to the present.

It is precisely in regard to this theoretical imperative, this necessity to be self-reflexive and autocritical, that I find myself taking pause, and registering a specific demurral. And it is this: the modernist rejection of mimetic writing in the West was premised on a monocultural assumption; needless to say, this

is an assumption that we cannot remotely make regarding our own tradition of writing in English, which isn't plainly representational, precisely because it performs the ironic and complex operations of cross-cultural translation.<sup>4</sup>

To elaborate: Dickens's and Eliot's novels about nineteenth-century London were deemed realistic, because among other things their characters actually sounded like the Londoners of their time. By contrast, the typical scenes of slash-and-burn farmers or *kaingeros* and their children, talking to each other in standard English on the loamy fields of NVM's stories and novels (usually set in Mindoro island, in the central Philippine archipelago), were obviously not realistic scenes in this sense. They were translations, and precisely to this degree we cannot subsume them under the representational category of realism, short of falling into historical error. Indeed, the great and touchstone realists in the Western tradition—Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Dickens, Twain, Balzac—all wrote in their first languages, all wrote within monocultural empirical traditions, all described their worlds expansively and citationally, copying even the speech of their subjects' real-life counterparts, and describing (almost transcribing) their fictional situations thickly and convincingly. The context for realist utterances may either be deictic or fully described, but the point is that the social ground for realistic consensus must be linguistically unproblematic enough to facilitate representation. While it's true that the works of some of these standard realist authors may have been translated subsequently into English and taught as examples of realism (for instance, those by Balzac and Dostoyevsky) in the anglophone world, nevertheless we need to remember that none of this changes the fact that their subsumption into this genre was made on the strength of their having been deemed realistic by their own critics writing also in the same original language

I suppose I am faulting the present crop of local "avant-gardes" not so much for being viciously belligerent towards and intolerant of representational poetry (even if this kind of behavior is entirely reproachable, come to think of it), but for not being critically perceptive—or indeed theoretical—enough to realize that mimetic writing in English in the Philippines is already verbally complex, ironic, and self-reflexive, precisely to the degree that it isn't so much naively realistic or referential as translational.

Indeed, we can almost say that the typical Filipino text in English, being grounded in the historical irony of colonialism, is ironic, verbally involuted, representationally ambiguous, and self-reflexive, right from the get-go. The

“unnaturalness” of English as a language that precariously “coexists” in the heady flux of local languages in the Philippines makes it virtually impossible to be perfectly transparent to its meanings. It only follows that the poetry written in it simply resonates the postcolonial opacity— what critics have called, the “metonymic gap”<sup>5</sup>—between referent and sign. Little wonder, then, that thus far, Filipino poets writing in English have mostly eschewed the scrupulously self-referential or antimimetic manner of poeticizing. Wittingly or not, our anglophone poets have all along been producing complex and verbally self-reflexive poetry, even as they themselves may believe that, for the most part, they have simply been writing plainly descriptive or narrative verse. This complexity arises from the fact that such a text refers not just extra-textually (which is to say, mimetically, calling to mind objects in the world), but also meta- and inter-textually, referencing the panoply of influences, pressures, and paradigms of the neo/colonial history that helplessly frames it.

Inasmuch as the problem with writing in English in the Philippines is still largely about the problem of getting it to represent—which is to say, to translate—the plural realities and ironies of our lives, the allure of antimimetic forms of poeticizing has simply not proven strong enough for many of our poets. Just now, I’m thinking that the fact that many of our poets persist to write referentially may also actually indicate a kind of “prescience”: maybe they continue to write this way because they instinctively know how pointless postrepresentational writing in English possibly is ... Maybe it’s because they already understand that this kind of writing proceeds out of a concept of the fragmented or incongruent subject that is either much too luxurious or much too “redundant” to be entertained (for, after all, the “lyric self” in a Filipino poem in English isn’t so much a coherent whole as a split subjectivity). Indeed, it is possible that their refusal to valorize the fragmentation of multiple subject-positions—which, as we know, has been the logical conclusion of differential linguistics in the history of Western consciousness—as a “more positive” alternative to the “unified” self of our brand of referential writing, comes out of an unconscious realization that such would be a brute exercise in futility.

Allow me to be more specific at this point. Sometime last year, a debate ensued in social media between these two camps of poetic practitioners. The primary issue was suffering as a topic in poetry, occasioned by the horrific Maguindanao Massacre.<sup>6</sup> The bone of contention was the “proper” aesthetic approach for expressing rage against genocidal warlordism, and the impunity and corrupt governance that encourage it. Two online anthologies devoted

to this question had been assembled, more or less at the same time, and the “antimimetic” editors of one initiated an online critique of the “mimetic” editors of the other, invoking the modernist admonition against lyrically aestheticizing and therefore egotistically profiting from the pain and misery of others—an otherwise valid and interesting debate that, unfortunately, spurred more nastiness and personalistic rancor than a sustained and serious engagement in the local poetry scene.

It’s fair to say that the postrepresentational position in this regard still takes poetry as a legitimate albeit problematic response to the kind of ethical, political, and epistemological crisis that horrific events like the Maguindanao Massacre induce, if not intensify, in and around us. Nonetheless, given its ironizing agenda, it must passionately qualify that poetry’s unique and enduring relevance in this matter can only be limited and practically effete, because ultimately complicit.

Of course, this modernist position was eloquently articulated, in the last century, by the Marxist critic, Theodor W. Adorno, who memorably declared that “to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”<sup>7</sup> What Adorno possibly meant by this is that no matter how sympathizing, politicized, angry, or “committed” the enraged writer may be, by the very fact that he is able to write at all—actually, by the simple fact that he exists—despite and after all the horrific and unspeakable atrocities that humanity has inflicted and continues to inflict upon itself, he is already affirming, no matter how grudgingly, that selfsame and henceforth irredeemable humanity. Given the unimpeachable evidence that it is in the nature of human civilization to be evil, even its ensuing “civilized” gestures to condemn this evil may not, finally, absolve it of such a nature. In other words, for Adorno, because holocausts and genocides have already happened, humanity, in our day and age, is to be taken as simply and unquestionably suspect, and not even art—indeed, especially not art—can alter or mollify this suspicion.

The problem with this position, however, as it was “adopted” in the case of our poetry, is precisely its essentialist presumption that what is true in post-War European art must necessarily be true for us. After all, we need to remember that Adorno was really referring, in this passage, primarily if not exclusively to the West, whose imperialist foisting of a double-dealing humanism—alongside its rapacious capitalist expansionism—over the rest of the world he unfortunately failed to accentuate in his work. Moreover, we need to remind ourselves that in relation to the history of Euro-American territorial annexation—and its twin legacies of economic immiseration and

environmental catastrophe—we are not the guilty and “suspect” survivors. We have been, on the contrary, the hapless victims. Going back to the task at hand, we can therefore say that a “universal(ist) temporality” informs this curt dismissiveness of one kind of poetic practice (the simplistic and lyrically “sympathetic), in favor of another (the self-reflexive and formally ironic). Of course, in truth, this temporality is nothing more than an ethno-knowledge, to which the passage of Philippine poetic time, in this kind of unfortunate discourse, is being neocolonially forced to conform.

Clearly, the question this begs is whether it’s even vaguely true that in our country’s literary tradition, the poetic art has so exhausted the uses of the representational, and has found the mimetic so facile, habitual, and potentially inauthentic, that it must now turn to those antimimetic and self-referential forms just to defamiliarize the “automatized” reference—which is to say, just to register an ironically distantiated, complex, and difficult understanding of the perilous relationship between reality and sign. As was my argument earlier on, this simplistic position overlooks the representational complexity that the question of translation (and bilingualism) necessarily poses—a question that confounds that other, related claim that writing referentially in English about suffering is necessarily easy, straightforward, and propositional (and, therefore, suspect, inauthentic, and potentially exploitative).

## A Manifesto of Sorts

Obviously, I’m a “mimetic” writer: I choose to use English in my writing to represent experiences, even as it’s clear to me that this activity also presents, self-reflexively, its necessarily translational nature, in each and every one of its “utterances.” I normally don’t, however, register this ironic and presentational aspect in verbally “ethnic” terms. (Which is to say: I don’t necessarily “localize” my use of English, when I write.) I believe that all interpretations are finally contextual, and that in my case the more responsible readings of my seemingly “universal-sounding” poems will seriously take into interpretive account the specificities of the situations that “conditioned” them. And so, yes, I believe that the “metonymic gap” of postcolonial writing isn’t always textually registered (for it attends and conditions its existence), and that, in my case, particularity is always already implicit in anything I write, and that this is something its ideal reader keenly understands ...

I suppose it also bears saying that, in my case, the decision to write in English wasn’t altogether “unencumbered.” Precociously—and painfully—



aware of the “difficult difference” my ex-centric gender and sexual identity bestowed upon me, the attraction of this language was clear to me, right from the beginning, especially given the fact that my first language, Tagalog, only had *bakla* and other awful words to call me by. Hence, English (and the “openness” and externality it audibly betokened) offered me a possible escape from the shame that my native language (and culture), from as early as I can remember, extravagantly meted out to me.

I have been called, on a number of occasions, a “gay poet.” This is an ascription that I’ve learned to accept amicably enough, despite my profound misgivings about “poet,” which strikes me as a posthumously honorific and in that sense practically uninhabitable word. I don’t take this label to imply a “ghettoizing” in terms of the kinds of poems that I can write. Rather, I take it to mean that—inasmuch as I have come out as a gay person, in both my writing and my teaching—anything I write will mostly likely be viewed from the “optic” of this personally avowed fact. Since I don’t believe there’s anything wrong about being gay—and given the fact that I’ve been an advocate of LGBT rights for pretty much all my adult life, and that all persons are necessarily gendered and/or sexed, anyway—I can confidently say that the description “gay writer” doesn’t bother me all that much (as I said, it certainly doesn’t mean that I can’t write about global warming, the zombie apocalypse, or Marian apparitions, if I wish to).

Indeed, “gay,” to me, denominates a perspective and/or a subject-position, and not a topic or a theme. Because gayness is a “truth” that, once confessed in one’s work (and, consequently, in one’s public “selfhood”), can never again be disowned—for it inflects or “colors” every other text one composes, henceforth—strangely enough by this very same token I as a “gay poet” need not ever be confined to any one register of poetic articulation.<sup>8</sup> And so, to me, the gay writer (as such) is not at all required to write in the monotonous language of the autobiographical “I,” despite or precisely because of the necessarily “confessional” quality of his writings.

I have published six poetry collections, and am frenetically working on my seventh, which I’m thinking of calling *Likha* (a Tagalog word that at once means “creation,” “likeness,” and “image”). This will be my third book-length sequence—a form that I find particularly germane not only to my personality (which, as I’ve been told, tends towards the obsessive-compulsive), but also to the kind of poetic project I find specifically interesting and attractive, at this point in my writing life. The sequence affords me the opportunity to pursue

a kind of “postconfessionalism” that, in turn, allows me to talk about my life on one hand (yes, autobiography is still a concern for me), and on the other to temper this “decanting of personality” with a more abstract (if intelligent) design—by, for example, interweaving anecdote with commentary, the personal with the mythic, and the particular with the universal.

Postconfessionalism, to me, refers to a kind of self-aware poesis or “making,” in which the confessional “I,” the anguished “self” who expresses and unbosoms a personal shame, is understood as the performative effect of the repetitive citation of the confessional norm, and it is this very performativity that produces the illusion of autobiographical self-presence. Hence, it is a deliberate kind of autobiographical writing, that understands the confessional lyric in terms not of experiential accuracy, but rather of the artistically realized simulation of the supposedly faithful relationship between life and art. As a literary form, the postconfessional poem willfully aspires to create powerful personal fictions or “myths”—in my case, of the gay self—that will function as a kind of “hierophany,” an enabling (because inspiring) narrative that infuses this specific (in this case, minority) identity with meaning, and thereby champions it against the depredations of intolerance and fear.

As we know, the sequence is an ordered gathering of lyrics, or a lyric poem written in extenso. As a form it has, in fact, been appropriated in all sorts of wonderful ways by a variety of confessional poets, who have found its protracted and “iterative” quality entirely useful to the project of personal myth-making. In the sequence, each poetic unit or segment exists independently, at the same time that they individually and collectively participate in a larger project. Its complexity, therefore, derives from the paradoxical nature of its form: the lyric sequence is at once whole and fragmentary, continuous and discontinuous, one poem and many poems, lyrical and narrative, and a vertical (metaphorical) meditation on a single moment, and a horizontal (metonymic) movement across many moments.

I believe that a gay poet is a confessional poet to the degree that the “truth” of his non-normative sexuality functions as a central defining attribute of his consciousness and its “productions.” And yet, coming out as a gay writer must also entail the sustained creation of a powerful social fiction of non-normative sexual subjectivity—a “gay mythic self”—which (as I have said), once avowed, can never be neglected or disavowed anymore. Any other text the gay poet writes can only be gay, hence, in light of this self-affirmation,

which the extended form of the lyric sequence—I have discovered—offers the unique opportunity to repetitively and efficaciously enact.

Here are three poems from my last book, *Misterios*.<sup>9</sup> Two come from the sequence, “Poems from Amsterdam,” which was occasioned by my residency in this strange and exhilarating city. The third was prompted by something quite horrific, which I saw on the web one fateful day. As against the Adornian admonition, it is, sadly, a poem about beholding another person’s suffering (and yet its point, I’d like to believe, is precisely what this ghastly “privilege” must ethically entail).

## Poems from Amsterdam

XLIII

It just occurs to me  
I’m living in the crotch of sin city,  
and yet, here I am,  
typing away the evening,

forefeeling and foreseeing  
what I can otherwise choose to get  
in any of the 24-hour saunas;  
to pick up like take-out

from any of the pubs and coffeehouses  
all gesturing salaciously outside.  
Why am I writing  
at a time I should be living?

No easy answers, I’m afraid,  
short of lying through my teeth,  
already gnashing with excitement  
at the arrival of one more poem.

But just now,  
I can accept, probably, it’s fear.  
Not the kind that snares the eye  
and stuffs the body’s pockets

with thickly pulsing blood,  
but a palpable, physical fear.  
The kind that makes it a torment  
to step outside my flat,  
  
and risk brushing against  
the Other's speckled skin.  
Thus: a fear of the outré,  
of the body wholly different from my own,  
  
except that, I admit, it's as lengthy as me,  
which means I'm with my peers, at long last.  
Or perhaps, it's that I know  
exactly what I'm foregoing  
  
for the sake of something  
more enduring, more affectionate.  
The edge of sex blunts away  
with the ebbing moment;  
  
that of art stakes its claim  
past time's stiff clemencies,  
that round off a bounded life.  
I'm too mortal for brainless sex—  
  
not here, not now,  
when I get flushed and winded  
just ambling up the stairs,  
when ulcers punch holes in my tummy  
  
and push a sour taste up my mouth,  
and when I'm painfully aware  
I'm no longer who I was—  
before the soul, in cadenced breath,  
  
introduced itself to me  
one sun-shafted morning,  
with a name I sometimes think odd:  
my own. Or perhaps,

I'm merely being strategic,  
hefting one possibility in this hand,  
the other in the other, and being coldly  
rational about my choice—

to avail myself of the dearer  
and the rarer opportunity.  
Sex is as random as a sneeze  
back in my wheezing country,

whereas, my misty-eyed muse  
requires exile's dagger  
stuck deep into the flank—  
to stir awake, and quicken right up.

And isn't she being vengefully quick,  
rousing the blood, pinching the cheeks,  
causing hushed and velvety sounds  
to issue forth from mouths

in this clumsily torpid body,  
reacquainted with its pleasures once again.  
But then, surely, there's time left  
for one or two misadventures.

When, where, and with whom  
I'm not writing.  
Our life can't always be fodder  
for our art.

#### XLVIII

Every Thursday morning they come  
with their buckets, towels, and linen:  
Jakob and Kevin from West Africa,  
my apartment building's hired help.  
I'm shy around them, who make the bed,  
vacuum the floor, dust off tabletops

and chairs, spray and polish fixtures  
around the kitchen and in the toilet,  
scrubbing with a long-stemmed brush

the bowl I'm still finding unnerving—  
two-leveled, it does solve the problem  
of water splashing coldly back up

as what needs to drop does drop.  
But it assaults the senses, both the eye  
and the nose, for there it dryly is—

curled up or corn-cob-formed, which here,  
given my wholegrain diet, it mostly is.  
At least, up until I push the flush button,

and the strange obtrusive thing is shoved  
by strong gurgling water down the deep end.  
And yet, here they are, perfect strangers

poking around my possibly stained privies,  
cleaning after my mess. I make conversation  
every now and then, to soften the edge

of harsh judgment, to plug up the distance  
borne of both pigment and profession:  
strange weather we're having, hot sunshine

and cool drizzle, every ten minutes or so;  
I wonder how bugs survive icy winter;  
where's the closest street market from here ...

Between us, there's always a few open smiles,  
and let me confess that theirs are far prettier:  
even white teeth, confounding the plain fact

of their swart, stubbly faces. Today, happily,  
it's Kevin's turn to broach his own topic,  
which is home. Back in his beloved Ghana,

where both the Portuguese and the English  
turned the ochre earth to plunder for gold,  
and where the plunder of bad government

still marches on the people's bent backs.

His voice as he tells this turns stony  
as the ore-rich hills around his village—

but clay-soft, because despondent, as well.

I tell him it's the same in my own country,  
only we had the stout and lisping Spanish

with their missionary zeal, followed up  
by the latter-day Empire of the Americans,  
whose clever hand wields our lives still.

As we talk, I find myself fluffing the pillows,  
tucking the sheets under the bulky mattress,  
wiping off dust from the TV and shelves.

Between us: fellowship and recognition.

Here, in this affluent corner of old Europe,  
and exiled from our histories by its dreams,

despite or because of ourselves, we're the same.

## Torso

You must change your life.  
—Rainer Maria Rilke

Evil or good is always a choice,  
and so is the act of watching it.

On a website called *Ogrish* they lure  
like a menu of delectable fruit:

archived videos of various beheadings,  
documentaries of summary death.

One knows what it will be like, somehow:  
the mind can glance forward as pictorially  
as it can cast backward. Blood, certainly,  
squirting in ropy quivers of deep red.

The head rolling into a welcoming basket.  
On the mask-like face: a grimace or a grin.

Needless to say, in our barbarous times,  
enough snippets of casual gore float about.

From these, imagination can piece together  
a portrait that speaks, a kind of narrative.

But not here, not in regard to this vision  
and sound that transpire past all meaning:

art not only pales, but dies, before life,  
specially where life really dies, then and there.

No story can be told for this scene, this act  
and its guttural noise, its muffled pleadings,

the blindfolded man whose head is hacked off  
from the pliable throat to the neck's bony back.

And yet, from this will to see the world as it is,  
one emerges inflamed, moved by a new passion

to wish away this truth to a far-off difference,  
a place estranged from here, a black planet of ogres!

Secretly, one accepts that something of the Self  
has emptied into the abyss: the old person one was

has bled into extinction. And one recalls the poet,  
who beheld a quaint deity's headless form, and saw:

the broken thing alters the viewer, not the viewed.  
The hogtied torso changeless on video is what it is.

And one may not be. As with gods, so with mortals.



## Notes

1. This paper was read by the author at the “Making a Scene” panel on contemporary Filipino Poetry, The Read Lit District, National Book Development Board’s International Literary Festival, Ayala Museum, November 14, 2012.

2. I first wrote about this incident in my monograph, *At Home in Unhomeliness: Philippine Postcolonial Poetry in English*, published by Philippine PEN in 2007.

3. This is my own version of the “intrinsic/extrinsic” distinction in Anglo-American poetry, as proposed by T. V. F. Brogan, in T. V. F. Brogan, ed., *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 233–236.

4. As ascribed to our fiction in English, the “category mistake” of realism is one of my central arguments in the paper, “Translation and the Problem of Realism in Philippine Literature in English,” which I delivered at the Kritika Kultura International Conference on Translation, August 31, 2012, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City.

5. For Bill Ashcroft, postcolonial writing “alienates” the metropolitan reader—by installing its critical difference within the colonial discourse—in many ways, but the use of the “metonymic gap” is probably one of the subtler but more effective means. The insertion of the untranslatable word or passage within the otherwise intelligible sentence renders the articulation at once familiar and strange, marking out the text as “unassimilable” to metropolitan aesthetics on one hand, and its experiential origin as practically impenetrable on the other. The text thus becomes synecdochic of the difference that the postcolonial world that has produced it bears in relation to the colonial center that now seeks to understand and “account for” it. See Bill Ashcroft, *Postcolonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), 75.

6. The Maguindanao Massacre took place in the town of Ampatuan, in the province of Maguindanao, in the island of Mindanao, on the morning of November 23, 2009. Fifty-eight people were killed, including “journalists, lawyers, aides, and motorists who were witnesses or were mistakenly identified as part of the convoy” of the wife and sisters-in-law of Esmael Mangudadatu, vice mayor of Buluan town and political rival of Andal Ampatuan, the incumbent mayor. It was one of the last major scandals to shake the Arroyo administration, which was popularly perceived to be coddling the warlordist system that enabled this reign of impunity. Halfway into the term of the

incumbent president, Noynoy Aquino, this crime has remained unsolved. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maguindanao\\_massacre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maguindanao_massacre) (accessed December 12, 2012).

7. Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” *Prisms*, translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1981), 34.

8. I write at length about the political and aesthetic implications of a self-arrogated “gay” identification in “The Gay Self as Myth: Confessionalism and Myth-Making in Gay Lyric Poetry,” *Diliman Review* (Vol. 59, Nos. 1-4, 2012), 11–42.

9. J. Neil C. Garcia, *Misterios and Other Poems* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2005).