Translation as Revision: On Translating My Own Poems

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It is always best to begin at the beginning.

I was born in a city in Laguna, to a father from the same city and a mother from a town in Bulacan. They were both educated during the American occupation, but to this day they would rather not speak English. In short, I was raised as a native Filipino, or, more precisely, a Tagalog speaker (Filipino, I must admit, was a term more political than practical for me for some time, but now it is the name I call my native tongue). I grew up listening to *Gulong ng Buhay, Botika sa Baryo*, and *Mga Kuwento ni Lola Basyang,* and reading *Liwayway, Pilipino, Filipino, Espesyal* and *Hiwaga*. I also enjoyed Junior Classics Illustrated comic books, and we eventually had *Lassie, Gilligan's Island,* and *The Dick Van Dyke Show* at home. And almost all of my classes from grade school to college required that I speak and write in English; I even edited the English newsmagazine and received the medal of merit for English in high school). But I still dream in Filipino.

And I write practically all of my poems in Filipino. And almost all of my poems are autobiographical; that is probably why they come to me in Filipino. The language I write in, in other words, has always been as important as the experience I write about.

Ironically, my relative success in writing Filipino poems eventually required me to translate them to English. In 1985, my Filipino poems gave me my M. A. in Filipino Literature (I was allowed to submit, in lieu of a work of criticism, a collection of my poems). The degree made me more

qualified for a Fulbright grant. To be accepted, however, into any creative writing program in the United States, I had to have my poems translated into English. A friend who grew up speaking Filipino but considered English his mother tonque translated them for me. The translations were, to say the least, terribly disappointing. It could have been the reason why I did not get into any U.S. university, even if I had been awarded a grant by the local Fulbright agency. I therefore vowed to do my own translations the next time I dared apply for another grant.

I had, after all, read Mildred Larson, and I decided to subscribe to her translation framework:

> Translation, by dictionary definition, consists of changing from one state or **form** to another, to turn into one's own or another language (the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1974). Translation is basically a change of **form**. When we speak of the **form** of a language, we are referring to the actual words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, etc., which are spoken or written. These **forms** are referred to as the **surface structure** of a language. It is the structural part of language which is actually seen in print or heard in speech. In translation the **form** of the source language is replaced by the form of the receptor (target) language ...
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> ... translation consists of transferring the meaning of the source language into the receptor language. This is done by going from the **form** of the first language to the **form** of a second language by way of semantic structure. It is **meaning** which is being transferred and must be held constant. Only the **form** changes. The **form** from which the translation is made [is] called the SOURCE LANGUAGE and the **form** into which it is to be changed [is] called the RECEPTOR LANGUAGE. Translation, then, consists of studying the lexicon, grammatical structure, communication situation, and cultural context of the source language text, analyzing it in order to determine its meaning, and then reconstructing this same meaning

> using the lexicon and grammatical structure which are appropriate in the RECEPTOR LANGUAGE and its cultural context. (Larson, 1984: 3)

I tried. But I soon discovered that doing Larson was much more difficult than understanding her. Even if I had a more-than-adequate grasp of the lexicon and the grammatical structure of Filipino (my source language) and American English (my target language), it was very difficult to deal with the communication situation and the cultural context. This was so even if, or maybe precisely because, I faced my own poems. For instance, it was not easy to find idioms in English for my very Filipino images. How could I, for instance, translate

> Takbo, bilis, takbo,
> Ayan na si Miss Pablo,
> Bagong plantsa ang uniporme
> Nakasubo na ang pito (*Baka Sakali*, 1989: 9)

and capture the playfulness of the Filipino in English? I tried:

> Run, quickly run,
> Here comes Miss Pablo
> With her uniform newly pressed
> And a whistle in her mouth.

I obviously wanted to be as faithful to the original as possible; after all, it way my poem and it came from my experience. But the English rendering is obviously unidiomatic. No American would say, "Run, quickly, run," not even an English-speaking Filipino. And can one be any less idiomatic than "A whistle in her mouth"? But I wanted to be faithful to the original as much as possible and did not really want the translation to read like an American poem, so I let my translation stay like that, along with the other poems I had translated into unidiomatic English.

"Aling Nena" (*Baka Sakali*, 15-16), for example, is about an old prostitute called "ale" partly because she is old, but mostly because of her very strong maternal instincts ("ale" can refer to an aunt, or a step-mother, too). I found no better word in English than "lady" even if it does not connote old age nor anything maternal. I decided to use that word to create irony, something which is not present in "ale."

The last line of the same poem has "Hindi ka susukuan," (literally, "Will not surrender to you") referring to Aling Nena's willingness to dance with anyone in her cemetery-home until he drops. I did not want to translate the line into "She won't give up on you," because this is very weak compared to the original Filipino. I could have used "Until you drop," but decided on "… until you die" because of the setting.

"Sige Na" (*Baka Sakali*, 17-18), a poem about a housemaid chaperoning a young woman to the latter's first ball, posed a problem with two crucial words, "mahalay" and "senyorita":

> Unang sayawan niya
> At lalabing-limang taon pa,
> Mahalay namang
> Padaluhin nang mag-isa.
> Hindi naman marahil
> Magmumukhang senyorita—

"Mahalay" literally means obscene, but it can also connote "not look good." I decided to use the latter meaning, at once losing the first connotation which added a sinister tone to the lines in Filipino. "Young mistress" for "senyorita" would have looked awkward, so I changed the construction of the sentence and ended up with "They won't figure out/ That she's with a housemaid." The reference to the maid is totally, and deliberately, absent in the Filipino poem. Moreover, "senyorita" carries with it a whole world of meaning impossible to express in just one or two English words. "Senyorita" literally means "miss," from the Spanish "señorita." In Filipino it is how many maids, in households that are either very wealthy or pretend to be very wealthy, call the daughter of the house; it can also refer to someone who expects to be waited on by everyone all the time.

Despite what the poems had lost in translation, I submitted some of them along with my application for a fellowship at the Hawthornden Castle International Retreat for Writers in Scotland, as well as for a Fulbright grant in 1988. Even if I knew that my translations were unidiomatic in American English, and much more so in British English, I convinced myself that my translations were valuable because my Filipino English, which was generally grammatically correct by American and British standards anyway, captured my own Filipino experience. In translation, after all, "we go beyond sense equivalents into the realm of connotations and cultural contexts." (Kintanar, 1989: 2)

I got the fellowship at Hawthornden in 1989 and the Fulbright in 1990. I figured that whoever reviewed the works I had sent must have been impressed by the Filipino experience captured in my rather quaint English. And so when I was compelled to translate some of my poems for a graduate class on "race, class and gender in literature" at the State University of New York in Albany, I tried to remain faithful to my original Filipino idioms and avoided translating them into American idioms. After all, my classmates included a German, a Korean, and Americans from different states. I wanted them to have a taste of Filipino culture not just through the subject matter of my poems, but also through my language. I wanted my poems to remain foreign to them so that they would be more curious about my culture, about my race.

Unfortunately, my classmates did not make any direct comments about the language of my translated poems. They did, however, become curious about my subject matter, and asked me to explain details that they found difficult to appreciate.

They wondered, for instance, why it was so important to end "Our Neighbors" ("Ang Aming Kapitbahay" [*Baka Sakali*, 19-21]) with the "Young American men,/ Not Marines/ but Mormons." While they realized that it alluded to the father of the house being a former "marine of the American armed forces," they, of course, completely missed the significance of the image of the young white American men, in white shirts and dark ties, spreading the Mormon gospel in neighborhoods all over the Philippines, as well as the figures that these Mormon missionaries remind even young Filipinos of: American soldiers marching in victory through the streets of Manila at the end of the Second World War and U.S. Peace Corps Volunteers charming their way into our public schools in the 1960s.

My classmates had no idea of the plight of our public school teachers so they asked me why in "Miss Immaculada" ("Si Miss Immaculada" [from an unpublished manuscript]), "planning lessons till dawn/ Severely weakened Miss Immaculada's lungs." How could they know how meager a public school teacher's salary was and how much she was expected to do? How could they know that there was actually a ward devoted to teachers in our Quezon Institute? How could they understand the full sexist implication of Miss Immaculada's name—a virgin and a martyr who "missed her chance"?

The totally sexist images (And now that my tender body/ Is about to ripen,/ My public will discover me"), as well as the allusions to places and events in recent Philippine history, of "Miranda Mendiola, Superstar" ("Miranda Mendiola, Pinakamarikit na Bituin" [*Baka Sakali*: 45-46]) that I knew most of my Filipino readers would instantly understand were absolutely alien to my classmates in Albany. They had, of course, no idea that the superstar's names referred to Plaza Miranda and the Mendiola Bridge (thus, "I will be the bridge/ Between their fears/ And most fervent dreams./ I will be the plaza/ Of their sufferings/ And strongest desires" and "Nor from a grenade blast on the plaza"). They did not know that in the Philippines, "superstar" was a term almost exclusively for female film stars, nor that Carmen Rosales, the first great superstar of Philippine cinema—a star of both sweetness and passion—called her fans, as Miranda does in my poem, "my public."

My classmates' questions and comments, as well as the details in my poems that they completey ignored, forced me to look at some of the details in my poems again, and compelled me to exhaust their implications. I saw, and explained to them, things that I had taken for granted when I wrote the poems because I wrote them for my own people, for people who knew these details as well, if not much more so, than I did. As Ivan Elgin says:

> Authors often have a tendency—which is very irritating to translators—to throw about casual, fleeting hints in reference to well known sayings, nursery rhymes or popular quotations. Such a technique works well when the author can safely assume that his readers are familiar

> with this material from infancy; it proves however extremely troublesome for the translator who has to deal with an audience whose spontaneous responses are based on a completey different set of childhood and cultural associations (1987: 177)

For the first time, too, I realized that translation could be a way for me, the translator, of re-viewing my own culture—a "re-vision" as it were.

The Albany experience therefore encouraged me to adhere to my translation "framework", even when I was asked to translate for publication some of the poems I had written in Filipino at the Hawthornden Castle International Retreat for Writers. And since the poems were written at the end of winter in Scotland, they contained details that were not Filipino, such as "snow" and "fireplace" (which became "yelo" and "pasigaan" in the poems).

And as I looked at these poems again for a report I did as a student in a translation class at the University of the Philippines in the summer of 1995, I saw more interesting aspects of translating from Filipino into English.

I realized that the English translations of my poems in *Luna Caledonia* (1992) fail to capture many of the meanings my Filipino words connote. "Yelo," for instance, in "Yelo sa Abril" (*Luna Caledonia*, 13-14) is not as precise a translation as "niyebe" for snow, but it is the word I used as a child to describe, say, a scene from a Hollywood Christmas movie: "umuulan ng yelo." "Yelo" is also a crucial ingredient in "halo-halo." Translating "yelo" to "ice" in English would not be appropriate, but having "snow," in the English translation of the poem, makes the poem lose the flavor of "halo-halo."

There is, moreover, no way to retain the very active, and almost magical, use of "Kinakamayan, inuuluhan, binebeluhan./ Kinokoronahan, pinupunasan, niluluhaan,/ Pinagdadalamhati…" in describing how the persona dresses up the image of the Mater Dolorosa in "Biyernes Santo" (*Luna Caledonia,* 9-10). I had to settle for the accurate and efficient, but rather bland, "Give it hands, a head, a veil,/ A crown, a heart, some tears,/ Making it grieve…" In "Sana" (*Luna Caledonia,* 12), the deliberately ambiguous "Makakatalik lamang/ Sa pag-iisang walang hanggan" becomes, in

its translation "I Wish", merely "But can only be with/ Forever in solitude," rendering the end of the poem much less dramatic.

Drama is lost, too, in a number of other poems because of the demands of English sentence construction. While "Ganito Lamang Naman" (*Luna Caledonia,* 15) ends with the word "hangin" ("At abong aangkinin ng hangin"), suggesting both "loss to" and "union with" the elements, the translation "As Simple As This" has to end with "Which the wind/ Will eventually claim" because "Which will be eventually claimed by the wind" is both awkward and misleading. "Tahanan" (*Luna Caledonia,* 18-19) deliberately ends with "Muling makauwi," stressing the verb "uwi" and omitting the word "tahanan." In English, this has to be "Come home once more;" "Once more come home" would sound awkward and would just be repeating the title, "Home."

All this proves to me how right Walter Benjamin is when he writes:

> Even when all the surface content has been extracted and transmitted, the primary concern of the genuine translator remains elusive. Unlike the words of the original, it is not translatable, because the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation. (1955: 75)

As Michael Coroza (as translated by Marne Kilates) says of his translation of Maria Luisa F. Torres's "Pagkatapos ng Rali" ("After a Rally"):

> I had to "reversify" (muling-tula) the poem in Filipino. Yes, "reversify." This is a method of translating a poem that is not a simple translation. This is the appropriation of the original so the translation appears original in itself. The result, not translation but a new poem in the target language based on the poem written in the source language. (2011: 10)

That U.P. translation class in 1995 not only reminded me of the limitations of translation but also opened my eyes to one of its more exciting aspects—an aspect to which I had not paid enough attention before.

I read Benjamin's question,

> But do we not generally regard as the essential substance of a literary work what it contains in addition to information—as even a poor translator will admit—the unfathomable, the mysterious, the "poetic," something a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet? (70)

and I began to think of myself, not just as a translator of my own poems, but also as a poet who translates them. Since I had learned in Albany that translating my own poems allowed me to re-view or re-read them, and, as Benjamin puts it thus: "Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife," (71) I realized that translation actually allowed me, even pushed me, to revise my poems—not just to add or delete words or lines, not merely to "take more liberties that another translator would" (Gaddis Rose, 1981: 3-4), but also to really rework my poems as a result of my "re-vision." As Benjamin says, while the intention of the "translator is derivative, ultimate and ideational" (76-77), "the intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, graphic." (76)

I was thus freed from my very conservative, very constricting, view of translation. This served me well, and emboldened me to translate the very personal, rather contemplative, poems that I had written in the past years.

For more than ten years now, I have been making an annual eight-day silent retreat. And each time that I do, I write what begin as small contemplations and end up as short poems. I have shown many of these poems to some people, and published some (in magazines and journals, and as my status on Facebook). I have received favorable comments on them, and not a few have asked me to translate them to English.

I, of course, would like my poems to be accessible to as many people as possible. And since English is the only other language I really know, I

decided to embark on a rather ambitious project. I translated many of my recent poems. Why me, one may ask. Why did I have to translate them myself? I could have asked other poets, other translators.

Since these poems came from my contemplations, I felt that it would be best for me to translate them myself. Doing so would afford me the chance to look at these poems more closely, to contemplate the fruits of my contemplation, as it were. And as I translated these poems, I also revised them. The process affirmed what I had learned about translation earlier. I came up with "new" poems. And this is also why I had thought it best to translate these poems myself.

True, I cannot say that these new poems in English completely capture my contemplations in Filipino, and probably a poet and editor who knows English much better than I do would make them more pleasing, more meaningful, to their readers. But I think that translating my poems myself is a step I must always take.

In empowering myself as a poet as I translate my own works from the original Filipino, I let my translations liberate my own works and allow them to aspire for totally new meanings in another language—a language not necessarily just American or British English. Filipino-English? Maybe. It may, however, even be a language that still awaits a name.

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