Translation and Philippine Poetry in English[1]

J. Neil C. Garcia

AS AN INTRODUCTION to my paper's topic, allow me to invoke a personal memory of the late National Artist for Literature, NVM Gonzalez.

Sometime in 1997, at a literary conference one afternoon in a modestly appointed hotel in Cebu City, Gonzalez 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.[2]

Gonzalez 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 Gonzalez'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

1 Read at the main library building Silliman University, Dumaguete City on May 12, 2017.

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

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" Gonzalez 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 of any of this by Gonzalez. 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 Gonzalez 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 Gonzalez (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 Gonzalez had to say. Finally, this British writer, while unwittingly (and unfortunately) 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 Gonzalez'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. As such it is already verbally complex, ironic, and self-reflexive—qualities that have otherwise been exclusively ascribed, in the West, to the various avant-garde and experimental kinds of literary practices.

By contrast, even the most typical and "realistic" 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 literature written in it simply resonates the postcolonial opacity— what critics have called, the "metonymic gap"[3]—between referent and sign.

We must remember that 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.[4]

To elaborate: Dickens's and Eliot's novels about nineteenth-century London were deemed realistic, because among other things their characters actually sounded

3 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 synechdochic 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.

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.

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 homogeneous 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.

In this paper I will be reflecting on the question of our poetry in English, whose main aesthetic divisions are, on one side, the representational and on the other the post-representational. Under the banner of the former may be found the allegorists and the confessionalists, while classified under the latter are the conceptualists, proceduralists, and other members of the contemporary avant-garde.

It isn't surprising that, thus far, Filipino poets writing in English have mostly eschewed the scrupulously self-referential, antimimetic, or post-representational 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 (for instance, you cannot even begin to read a Filipino poem in English without becoming aware of the material privilege—the social alienation—that is the local ground of its possibility).

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 writing has simply not proven strong enough for many of our poets.

Just now, I'm thinking that the fact that many of our writers and 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.

In my teaching practice, I promote postcolonial readings of our literature in English, precisely by engaging with the question of translation.

Because our literature in English is a translational literature, we can say that it negotiates the plurality of cultural and linguistic registers and ideas of the Philippine reality, and encodes them in/as English. This task isn't as straightforward as it would otherwise be, if only our poets were not given to writing "universal-sounding poems," and instead wrote plainly ethnically, with sensitivity to the issue of linguistic and cultural particularity. And yet, the postcolonial perspective precisely urges us to see that the universal as an aspiration, as a register, and as an idea, is one such cultural "meaning" that has been translated by and in our writers' works.

My task, then, when I teach Philippine literature is to *postcolonially interpret* its seemingly universal themes, images, and textual gestures, by translating them back into the specific conditions and situations that framed and engendered them. Since postcolonial criticism assumes formalist appreciation and transcends it, it will be possible to accomplish this specifying form of textual analysis by inquiring into the germane biographical facts of the text's maker, as well as the interpretive variables that exist in the culture within which the text's postcolonial critique is supposed to take place.

Before anything else, here's a short review—a recap—of how poems may be formally discussed.

In my literature classroom, we begin by reading the poem out loud (because as lyric, a poem is a sonic experience, first and foremost). We then try to answer the question of what the poem is about. This question pertains to the story, imagery, and sound that together constitute the poem's form. As we know, answering this question will require our students to describe in their own words the poem's dramatic and objective situation on one hand, and also its sonic or even visual presentation on the page (are the lineations in free verse, is there any rhyme or syllabic scheme, is the poem's form closed or open, etc?). Only after we feel this question has been adequately and properly answered or responded to by our students can we begin to help them "interpret" the poem—which is to say, can we allow them to hazard answers to the question regarding its content (which—it should now be clear—is nothing if not the realization of form).

"What is the poem saying?"

This is a question that may be answered in any number of ways, all of which being valid as long as they can be accounted for—textually as well as contextually.

It is in the latter, "contextual" sense that the translational and postcolonial approach I will presently be demonstrating may be best understood.

Which is to say: we need to realize that evidence of the *translatedness* of Filipino anglophone poems doesn't always have to be inscribed visibly in the text, but necessarily attends the writing and reading contexts that frame it. Because a translational reading is not a Romantic interpretation, we don't have to dump the onus of establishing relevancy on the author's shoulders alone.

Because this is no longer New Criticism, inquiring into the biography of the author, into the "community" to which she belongs, as well into the political and historical forces that condition and/or challenge the translational reading, is an entirely permissible activity. Nonetheless, the reading of literature remains an intensely hermeneutic undertaking, especially given the "thickness" of its figurative and rhetorical indirection. The unpacking of our anglophone texts continues to be hypothetical (and generative), thus, and is not remotely like a positivist search for and a "de-coding" of one-to-one correspondences between literary signifiers and extra-textual referents.

For today's presentation, I will offer readings of four well-loved "representational" poems—touchstone texts, almost, in our country's anglophone tradition. These mimetic texts are seemingly devoid of postcolonial ethnic "particularity," and for this reason they appear or sound —to the general and uncritical reader—unproblematically "universal." I will further the argument that a Filipino text written in the register of the universal, though seemingly "at home" in the English language,

lends itself to a reading that reveals how complicated and uneasy this interpretive arrangement—its intentions, affects, and rhetorical effects—truly is. This is because the universal, in the hands of the Filipino anglophone subject, is nothing if not a translated universal, and for this reason it cannot be remotely coincident—or even performatively comparable—with the universal of Anglo-Americans or indeed other anglophones.

Postcolonial authors writing in the language of colonization no longer need to behave as just guests or "others" in the house of English, deforming, fragmenting, or sabotaging its traditions. This stance of deliberate and voluntary Otherness is, after all, more colonially suspect, for it continues to obsess about the West to the degree that it stubbornly preserves it as a linguistic and/or aesthetic point of reference. Rather than turn into an "alterity machine," the anglophone author can instead choose to write with unflappable confidence, with virtual mastery, with no apology, with such fabulous verbal temerity in what started out as the language of colonization that she can dare to speak as a Self, who traffics in common rather than proper nouns, and who articulates universals in it. I will argue that it's entirely possible to imagine a different kind of postcolonial difference—a less blatant and more intensely hermeneutical one, that will be harder to fetishize, tokenize and contain, because the problematic and generative "gap" it posits is not even just metonymic or formal, but rather plainly cultural and historical.

We need to remember that English has needed to be translated in the native setting to become effective. Since no translation is ever exact or seamless, we can conclude that translations are "imitative composites" of the "source" and "target" texts. This is simply another way of saying that all cultural translations, all cultural imitations, are hybrid (and what is an anglophone literature if not a literature in translation?). Thus, if the signifiers and signifieds of English, imperfectly translated, are practically caught and "immobilized" between the impossibility of their avowed imperatives and the overwhelming mysteriousness, the alterity, of the context within which they seek to make sense, then it only stands to reason that texts subsequently written by the colonized in them are probably not really written in them at all. Thus, the idea of the universal, as imitated by our poets in English, isn't quite the same thing that it is as other anglophone writers have imagined it.

Allow me now to illustrate this "translational" approach, with some short critical readings.

I HAVE BEGRUDGED THE YEARS[5]

by Angela Manalang-Gloria

Perhaps the years will get me after all,
Though I have sought to cheat them of their due
By documenting in Beauty's name my soul
And locking out of sight my revenue
Of golden rapture and of sterling tears,
Let others give to Caesar Caesar's own:
I have begrudged the dictatorial years
The right usurious to tax me to the bone.
Therefore behold me now, a Timon bent
On hoarding each coin of love that should be spent
On you and you, and hushing all display
Of passionate splendour lest I betray
My wealth, lest the sharp years in tithes retrieve
Even the heart not worn on my sleeve.

OLD MAID WALKING ON A CITY STREET[6]

by Angela Manalang-Gloria
She had a way of walking through concupiscence
And past the graces her fingers never twirled:
Because her mind refused the heavy burden,
Her broad feet shoveled up the world.

Angela Manalang-Gloria was one of the first Filipino anglophones to clearly achieve a measure of mastery over the new medium and its attendant literary forms. Her attempts at traditional verse, and her working with closed forms like the Petrarchan sonnet, were invariably failures in the formal sense, for they only rarely succeeded in sustaining the requisite accentual syllablic meter (the iambic pentameter, for example). The most likely explanation for this is the fact that of all the elements of a language, it's accent or stress that's possibly the least "portable" of all.

5 Gemino H. Abad and Edna Zapanta Manlapaz, eds., *Man of Earth: An Anthology of Filipino Poetry and Verse from English, 1905 to the Mid-50s*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1989), 67.

6 Abad and Manlapaz, 69.

Without the ability of pronouncing English words properly—which is to say, following the "correct," *OED*-sanctioned accent—our poets, like other anglophone poets, were logically unable to deploy the various accentual meters with the required and strictly culture-bound regularity. This perhaps explains why much of anglophone poetry, in the Philippines and elsewhere, is in free verse: unfettered from the patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables that all Anglo-American closed forms require, free verse is the system of versification that suits its postcolonial difference best, since it's the form that lends itself most easily to irregular patterns of accentual variation.

But Gloria's poems were glorious indeed, in all other ways. Her sonnet, "I Have Begrudged the Years," and its companion piece, the one-stanza "Old Maid Walking on a City Street," both beautifully demonstrate the deployment of the "universal" as a trope of postcolonial appropriation: one that is so confident, consummate, and homely that it barely registers its own nature as a postcolonial trope, precisely.

To be specific, in the sonnet, Gloria is practically untrammeled in her allusions, dragging in figures from Graeco-Roman history and even the Shakespearean dramatic corpus without compunction or apology, and yet it's her utter verbal and formal mastery—the grandeur of this poem's exquisite achievement—that bids us to be mindful of the kind of postcolonial labor she exerted to reach this level of skill. On the other hand, the story of this poem's dramatic monologue is perfectly localizable, despite its being potentially transculturally valid: the speaker, arguably a woman, is an artist who "document[s] in Beauty's name [her] soul," suffering the pangs of regret as she looks back on her affectionless life. This persona is arguably a representation of the poet's own autobiographical self.

This poem's preference for solitude and for erotic non-disclosure is strangely qualified by the theatrical convention that it invokes—literally, a performative convention, signalized by the words "each coin of love that should be spent / on you and you," calling to mind a typical Filipino oratory being enacted by an earnest pupil inside the colonial classroom, extending her arms left and right toward the audience, as she recites the English lines that have been painstakingly consigned to bookish memory. The sonnet's sestet is also an interesting example of Gloria's own appropriation or "qualification" of the borrowed form, for what it essays is not the expected unified statement of the Petrarchan convention, but rather an unexpected logical turn, a complex movement away from the initial idea of acceptance, "Therefore, behold me now, a Timon bent / On hoarding each coin

of love ..." This turn comes in the form of an afterthought, that all the efforts at self-control and asceticism may easily, after all, be undone, and the "wealth ... / the heart not worn upon [the] sleeve" may suddenly be revealed and made plain to all the people concerned.

A counterpoint to this sonnet is the one-stanza poem, "Old Maid Walking on a City Street," whose quatrain structure is perceptibly cloven between its two independent clauses, so juxtaposed as to be mutually illuminative. The first clause provides a curt explanation for the persona's unmarried state: it's apparently a matter of choice, the decision long ago arrived at, to heed but finally to transcend (to "walk through") the call of desire and its vanities ("the graces her fingers never twirled"). The second is an equally brief but evocative description of what she presently enjoys, in lieu of "the heavy burden" that she long ago chose to give up: the freedom of being able to walk as her own person on one hand, and of being able to experience life as depth, which is to say full of secret joys and pleasures that require uncovering, "Her broad feet shovel[ing] up the world." One of the charms of this small poem is precisely in the tenderness that attends that otherwise unflattering and familiar image, of a big-footed spinster, stomping frightfully on any city sidewalk; this time, however, those same big feet have become her foremost asset—which is to say, the source of her metaphorical beauty.

And so, no matter how perfectly British-sounding and "universal" Gloria's pitch-perfect lyric poems may be, the fact of the matter is that it was not a British or American but a Filipino poet who wrote them. And while ascertaining the representational links between this poem's seemingly Western imagery and allusions and the poet's specific experience or situation in the Philippines may prove more difficult than it would be had their texts been, for example, more locally nuanced, ethnographically detailed, and syncretic—what finally matters is that for the postcolonial critic who truly wishes to dis-identify from the defeatist polarities of colonial thought, those links, no matter how tenuous, can only be there, and they must simply be found. After all, as is the point of most postcolonial interventions into the by-turns aesthetic and political process of representation: in the end, postcolonial readings do not seek to determine whether a representation is original or merely imitative. Rather, the important questions of postcolonial inquiry are ultimately, and commonsensically, consequential: Who is doing the representing, how, and to what ends?

The late National Artist, Francisco Arcellana, is better known for his works in minimalist and lyrical fiction, which are also normally taken as universal allegories. And yet, when linked back to their referential grounding in their Philippine and

local circumstances, they yield moments of particular significance, as they only should.[7]

PRAYER[8]
by Francisco Arcellana

Close all open things, Lord.
Open all closed things.
All those who have long received, let them give.
All those who have long given, let them receive.
All those too long apart, let them come together.
All those too long together, sunder them.
Let the wise be fools for once, Lord,
And let the fools speak their minds.
Affirm the long-denied, Lord.
Fulfill the unfulfilled.

This famous poem is strange, because it is composed of a series of "perverse" importunings to the Lord of his own Filipino Catholic upbringing—perverse because these are requests to overturn the worldly order of his own anguished experiential ground—his own country's historical situation—characterized precisely by the social hierarchies that colonial violence put in place, and that neocolonialism has continued to perpetuate, and that he now implores the good Lord to rectify, precisely by turning them on their cruel heads. Any contemporary Filipino uttering the words of this prayer should be able to call to mind the countless political scandals, cases of unending graft and corruption, economic plunder, and impunity perpetrated by the "wise" and the "privileged" lording it over the immiserated wastelands of Philippine social life—evils from which the poet-pleader is asking divine reprieve. Its final entreaty, "Fulfill the unfulfilled," may sound like a personal plaint, but taken in the context of the poem's overall social relevance, it may well pertain to the elusive dream of Filipino national

7 It makes easy sense to read for social commentary in Arcellana's corpus, inasmuch as he taught all his adult life in the University of the Philippines, famous not only for its academic excellence, but also for its social and political activism. See the short biographical note at the back of *The Francisco Arcellana Sampler* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Creative Writing Center, 1990).

8 Taken from Gemino H. Abad, ed., *The Likhaan Anthology of Philippine Literature in English, from 1900 to the Present* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2002), 54.

sovereignty and freedom from want—a dream that the neo/colonial yoke frustrates at every turn, and that would seem impossible to ever come true for the downtrodden Filipino masses.

Next, there's the work of the extraordinary poet, Edith L. Tiempo, who once acknowledged (in one of her last interviews, I believe) her most popular poem would appear to be "Bonsai":

BONSAI[9]
by Edith L. Tiempo

All that I love
I fold over once
And once again
And keep in a box
Or a slit in a hollow post
Or in my shoe.
All that I love?
Why, yes, but for the moment—
And for all time, both.
Something that folds and keep easy,
Son's note or Dad's one gaudy tie,
A roto picture of a queen,
A blue Indian shawl, even
A money bill.
It's utter sublimation,
A feat, this heart's control
Moment to moment
To scale all love down
To a cupped hand's size
Till seashells are broken pieces
From God's own bright teeth,
And life and love are real
Things you can run and
Breathless hand over
To the merest child.

9 Abad, *The Likhaan Anthology,* 57.

Tiempo's poem is an exquisite little text whose typical interpretation involves deriving the general "insight" regarding the idea of affective distillation or "sublimation" (an idea that inheres in the image of the Japanese art of tree-miniaturization, called bonsai), all understood in universal and historically groundless terms. This clearly runs against the poem's own specific and biographically verifiable "representational content": its listing of loved mundane objects—souvenirs and mementos of a particularly enacted life circumscribed by very specific circumstances: wife to a husband, mother to a daughter and a son, rural-residing citizen of an archipelagic country where, at any one place, one is never that far away from a pristine beach and its everyday pillage of weed, bits of sea glass, coral, shells, and other such ephemera of daily tidal leavings. Perhaps especially culturally resonant is the "roto picture of a queen," that immediately calls to mind the well-known fascination of many Filipinos with beauty pageants, as well as the rural Philippine detail of the "slit in a hollow post," into which, perhaps, the folded "money bill" mentioned a few lines down is routinely slipped by provincial and money-saving children, in obedience to their parents' admonition to be unwasteful.

The author's domicile in laid back and provincial Dumaguete along the southeast coast of Negros island also comes to mind, as does her childhood in faraway Nueva Vizcaya in the northern Philippine island of Luzon, from where her mother, an ethnic Gaddang, hailed.[10]

On the verbal level, this poem also seems to register a specific transliteration of the Filipino verb for "run," which underpins the use of the English word that is strangely deployed here in its transitive form. This word is of course made inevitable given the image that it evokes, with which the poem ends, but it does present an audible shift in diction, inasmuch as the colloquial denotation of the word "run" to mean *smuggle*, does not appear to be appropriate to the tone of the poem as a whole (the typical usage given in dictionaries in this regard is "gun-running," thereby clarifying that the context for this action is usually illicit if not plainly criminal). This shift is made explainable and "acceptable" when we remember that in Filipino, both the transitive and intransitive forms of the most common word for run (*takbo* in Tagalog-Filipino, *dagan* in Cebuano) are entirely available and self-evident in the form *itakbo/idagan*. We cannot help but wonder if knowledge of this Filipino word's lexical ambivalence in fact informed this idiosyncratic translational decision, on Tiempo's part.

10 These germane biographical facts come from Gemino H. Abad, ed., *A Native Clearing: Filipino Poetry and Verse from English since the 50's to the Present: Edith L. Tiempo to Cirilo F. Bautista* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1993), 648-50.

Moreover, an interesting entry-point for the postcolonial recuperation or particularization of this poem is presented by the possibility that a nebulous but nevertheless generative intertext to it may well be "A Heritage of Smallness,"[11] a well-known cultural *mis-reading* excoriating the Filipino people's supposed small-mindedness and lack of enduring and monumental ambition, popularized in Nick Joaquin's famous essay with the same title. Resorting to the East Asian metaphor may have not been necessary, hence—it is arguably the wrong metaphor, after all, since the Japanese discipline of "repetitive folding" alluded to in the opening lines is not actually bonsai but rather origami. In any case, the same retail, "preserving," and frugal sensibility that this poem embraces and in its own graceful but evocative brevity actually embodies is, as Joaquin keenly and correctly noted (albeit incorrectly explained) very much a part of the Philippines' cultural landscape.

It's important to note that while Tiempo's text, being a lyric poem, doesn't quite analyze at length the genealogy of this cultural trait, at least it doesn't *mis-analyze* it like Joaquin's famous essay does. If we may recall, Joaquin misattributes this inherited trait it to some species of Filipino pre-givenness, completely overlooking the possibility that it may in fact be a malingering state of neocolonial servitude and systematic historical pauperization that has "conditioned" the Filipino small-time subject to prefer the miniscule over the maximal gesture in almost every other case.

In truth, Tiempo's "Bonsai" actually goes Joaquin's text the one better, by refusing to equate this "cultural modesty" with insubstantiality. Rather, resonating the very form it has lyrically assumed, this text sees in this diminution a *mindful expansiveness*, a kind of imaginative thriftiness and interpretive capaciousness. Which is to say: in the rhetoric of nationalist agency, Tiempo's poem describes a universality-embracing, resourceful, and synecdochic move that imitates the kind of "self-metonymizing"[12] performance that Filipino subject needs to enact, if only to begin to arrogate unto herself the agency that the postcolonial space of subversive reading (and writing) affords all who are willing to carry this imaginative procedure out.

Speaking of Joaquin, allow me now to bring up one of his poems.

11 Nick Joaquin, "A Heritage of Smallness," in *La Naval de Manila and Other Essays* (Manila: Alberto S. Florentino, 1964), 33-47.

12 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Trajectory of the Subaltern in my Work," lecture, University of California Santa Barbara, University of California TV, Series: "Voices" [9/2004] [Humanities] [Show ID: 8840].

SIX P.M.[13]
by Nick Joaquin

Trouvere at night, grammarian in the morning,
ruefully architecting syllables—
but in the afternoon my ivory tower falls.
I take a place in the bus among people returning
to love (domesticated) and the smell of onions burning
and women reaping the washlines as the Angelus tolls.

But I—where am I bound?

My garden, my four walls
and you project strange shores upon my yearning:
Atlantis? The Caribbeans? Or Cathay?
Conductor, do I get off at Sinai?
Apocalypse awaits me: urgent my sorrow
towards the undiscovered world that I
from warm responding flesh for a while shall borrow:
conquistador tonight, clockpuncher tomorrow.

Indeed, while Nick Joaquin is better known for his prodigious prose—his voluminous and outstanding works in fiction and nonfiction, to be more specific—he did, early in his career as a writer, pen quite a few successful poems, most of which were allegorical and representationally ambiguous. In the curious poem "Six P.M.," however, we are presented a rather specific portrait of a Manila journalist/editor—a professional identity to which Joaquin experientially had a lifelong claim—leading a "double-life," the threshold or gateway between which is this fateful and reverential hour at dusk, during which the persona transitions from being a "grammarian" to being a bardic lover or "trouvere."

This French word is, of course, a mere euphemism, for what the poem in fact attests to is the ubiquitous reality of the indulgence in casual—possibly contractual—sex, which the speaker, a representative of Manila's innumerable daytime "clockpunchers," enjoys.

Careful reading reveals that, on one hand, the poem's text is addressed by the speaker as an apostrophe to the "you," who is most likely a male bus conductor

13 Abad, *The Likhaan Anthology*, 56.

"projecting strange shores" upon "[his] yearning"; and on the other, that he frequents known sexual districts in the "sin city" that is post-War Manila (this was Joaquin's own memorable epithet for the capital, actually). This was a kind of behavior that was chronicled in feature articles by Joaquin himself, and it is referenced in this poem by metonymically displaced but entirely resonant place-names for the various venues where he borrows from the evening's "warm responding flesh" an "undiscovered world." Certainly, this kind of frank admission of what must be, among Catholics, a morally ambivalent and "dissonant" life was made all the easier by the fact that Joaquin, an undomesticated bachelor (and practicing journalist) to his dying day, couched it in English, whose intellectual and emotional history afforded the aesthetic distance that—especially at this time—permitted such candidness.

The representational project in anglophone writings, creative and critical, requires cross-cultural dialogue—a practice of "double translation" that involves both the referential movement across cultures, and the transcultural movement across realities. As I have attempted to only briefly rehearse here, the postcolonial reclaiming of mimetic anglophone literary texts by Filipinos requires tracing the trajectories of this double or hybrid movement, with the view of proposing various modes of "postcolonial resistance"—as made possible by the metonymic gap between *mimesis* and *poeisis,* that cleaves all translational acts—particularly as they involve the reading of seemingly simple and "universal" representations.

The idea of "cultural translation" bids us to recognize that English in the Philippines is, from the very beginning, a contact or hybrid form of english, and thus, a kind of "creole." We must insist that this is the case even in the most subtly localized—which is to say, the most "universal-sounding"—of circumstances.

Grounded in our immemorial orality, and permeated by a layering of cultural differences, our liter to register my position that any anti-establishment interrogation of the practice of New Criticism by our anglophone writer-teachers is incomplete to the extent that it doesn't account for the ways this practice is just as translational as the texts to which it attends, as Filipino anglophones have deployed it.

Because New Criticism as a literary approach is not theoretically self-reflexive—inasmuch as its positivist origin as a scientistic, "intrinsic," and supposedly autonomous method of reading texts has prevented it from inquiring into the linguistic ground of its suppositions—it indeed may be said to proceed out of a realist

assumption that deems language to be a transparent and unproblematic rather than a mediating and "interested" access to the world.

Before taking to task the New Critical establishment—as it may be said to hypothetically persist in the pedagogical "creative writing" structures that have proliferated in our country across the last half-century—the more responsible position will be, I believe, to examine the ways in which the very use and "usage" of this critical assemblage have been transformed, mostly non-volitionally, by the Filipino writers, critics, and teachers who have both taught and *written through* it.

A cursory survey of our national literature's most famous radical and revolutionary writers—from Gelacio Guillermo to E. San Juan, from Edel Garcellano to Caroline Hau—should offer a clear and compelling enough suggestion that the formalist pedagogy has not been as apolitical, socially pacifist, reactionary, and plainly indifferent as it's been supposed to be, going strictly by an examination of the declared protocols and official policies of these educational structures.

That many of these radical thinkers and artists have persisted to write in English is something that should also give us additional pause: other than the reclaiming of Philippine anglophone practice as at once translational and resistant (which is what I've argued here), we need to recognize the fact that the theoretical as well as strategic affordances that this medium of analysis has contributed to Filipino intellectual history have been immense, and therefore cannot just be summarily dismissed with a wave of the naively nationalist hand.

After all, there probably isn't any "miseducation," as far as discourse (and its productivity) is concerned: modalities of power and their subversion are propagated and proliferated at the exact same moment that knowledges are inaugurated and enforced. As we know, the reflectionist model—and its linear understanding of ideology as "false consciousness"—has long been superseded by a more complex analysis of just how power constitutively performs itself, precisely in the forms through which it is both promoted and undermined.

This is even more the case, we can only surmise, in the case of post/colonial hybridity, which reminds us that, from the very beginning, colonialist authority is never fully present or absolute; that as experienced by the colonized, it is always already different from its claims to a "natural" originality, truthfulness, and superiority; that there is, in the colonial setting, a radical ambivalence that lies at the heart of imperial power, which in its desire to be acknowledged as powerful has needed to be translated into the local languages and is therefore, precisely in its *translatedness,* irremediably bastardized, hybridized, transformed—needless to say, subverted *from within*.

This pertinence of the productive—as opposed to merely repressive—theory of power[14] is all-too-obvious when the power in question is colonialism, for the discourse this power licenses and through which it acts is never more unstable and open to appropriation than when it isn't even self-evident to begin with—when it needs to be translated and turn "hybrid" first, just to be recognizable. Hybridity is colonial power's tenuous life, and its spectacular undoing. That it animates at the same time it coerces is never clearer than in the person of the postcolonial subject herself. Add the fact of a predominantly oral society, in which translation and its hybrid effects need to be negotiated not just interlingually—across ethnic speech varieties—but, actually, primarily across the oral-textual divide, from one cognitive mode to another, and you have even vaster spaces in which the univocality of power is possibly waylaid, transvaluated, undone.

Any thorough and responsible institutional critique should inquire into the translation that arises out of the encounter between a power that wishes to be understood and the alterity of the publics to which it addresses itself. As postcolonial criticism has taught us, we may refer to this translation as a moment of hybridity, and as such it may be said to derive its character from the non-convergence between source and target, intention and affect.

All neo/colonial impositions—including the linguistic and aesthetic ones—end up becoming resignified by and in the receiving culture, split between their claims and their performances, recontextualized and syncretized right from their very moment of contact.

Hence, like the global power for which it is a metonym, English in an anglophone context is necessarily fractured and transformed in its relationality with its subjects, over whom it exercises both a coercive and an empowering mystique. For the simple reason that it illustrates the imperfect workings of a dominant discourse or language that transforms and is transformed in the very fact of its incumbency, our hybrid postcolonial literature ironically particularizes—for our contemporary situation—the notion of an internally incoherent, appropriable, and ambivalent power.

Finally, we must be happy enough every time a critique—the most satisfying and full-bodied form of intelligent engagement—is being earnestly advanced in

14 Appropriately enough, Foucault never more clearly illustrates his idea that "where there is power, there is resistance" than when he discusses the pathologized category of homosexuality: soon after its normalization in psychiatric and sexological discourse, there emerged homosexual subjects who identified with and embraced this selfsame label, and spoke defiantly from the position it inaugurated. See "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 62-63.

our culture, precisely because it is only through the production of discourse that the persistent condition of a residual but powerful orality and precarious literacy against which all Filipinos who write—creatively or critically, the difference is, to us, ultimately if painfully moot—must inveigh can be challenged, despite the variety of our convictions.

While our anglophone literature in all its interlingual complexity and representational hybridity is most certainly our own, and may not be vulgarly written off on the basis of a simplistic notion of power and resistance—the suggestion to promote and cultivate the interest and growth of not just this but rather of as many languages and compositional traditions in our archipelago as possible is, of course, entirely urgent, welcome, and necessary.

I warmly encourage the caretakers of this and all the other creative writing, critical, and (broadly speaking) "literacy" workshops and programs in our country to pick up the well-meaning suggestion, and forge ahead in just this courageous direction.