

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

The Writer's Dilemma

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Philippine Studies vol. 10, no. 4 (1962): 679—683

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

The Writer's Dilemma

*Ang hindi magmahál sa sariling wikà
Ay higit sa hayop at malansáng isda.*

In the myth of the Fisher King, a Knight Perilous wanders through an ailing kingdom with the sacerdotal task of asking a question, so that the mere process of inquiry might prove curative for the wound of the dying king and, consequently, of the famine-stricken kingdom. In most versions of the myth, the Fisher King languishes forever, because the Knight's interrogation, obviously intended as a gesture of human compassion, becomes a gesture merely for its own sake, a rhetorical question.

The question "What is the language that the Filipino writer, whatever be the language he is writing in now, should write in?"—a question which, by this time, is a myth in its own right—was raised for the *n*th time in a recent forum by a motley group which might be roughly categorized into at least three factions: (a) Filipino publishers; (b) Filipino teachers of English, the language as well as the literature; and (c) Filipino writers in English and/or Pilipino. Conducting the forum were two Americans, Father James B. Donelan, S.J., and Dr. Leonard Casper, whose keen interest in the fate of Filipino literature cannot be underestimated, and whose character as outsiders equip them with unquestionable objectivity in the appraisal of such landscapes. Fr. Donelan said that his preoccupation with the matter arose from the suspicion that the language of his students in English literature had been undergoing steady erosion and corrosion. Moreover, considering the enthusiasm of Filipino leaders for the implementation of Pilipino as *the* language of Filipinos, it seemed that such enthusiasm might be reflected, with substantial advantages to all parties concerned, in the significant writing of the present time. Hence, he summoned one and all to inquire how it was with them.

English teachers were called to these proceedings primarily to hear witness to the alleged deterioration of students English. However, no one showed any particular interest in the question. They may have simply assumed that English, not yet a vacuum-packed and vacuum-sealed commodity, lent itself to deterioration everywhere in the English-speaking world, "deterioration" and "mutation" being completely synonymous when applied to the history of language, the choice of word depending merely on whether one was a purist or a structuralist.

The participation of publishers in what was otherwise a purely academic discussion was motivated, I suppose, by the moderators' curiosity as to the sales appeal of Filipino writing. The question was

put to them in no uncertain terms: Which has been selling more, English or Pilipino periodicals, magazines, books? I do not recall that the question was satisfactorily answered, despite attempts at statistical reportage from various quarters. More conspicuous was the consensus among the publishers that the Filipino bookbuyer continued to value the imported article far more than the local; Nabokov and Loring were preferred, always preferred, to anything written here. This may be due to the persistence of the colonial mentality. On the other hand, it is not entirely impossible that the happy few who actually *buy* books suffer from nothing more serious than good taste.

Possibly, the first really significant question that afternoon of the forum was raised by Dr. Casper who, admitting to no knowledge whatsoever of the Pilipino language—wondering, as a matter of fact, if it had remained unchanged since the days of Rajah Soliman—questioned the Filipinos: Pilipino is vaunted to be one of the world's most beautiful languages; is its beauty owing to a quality of indefiniteness and the resultant richness of ambiguity, or owing to a quality of stiletto-like precision? Mr. N. V. M. Gonzalez rose supremely to the occasion by assuring Dr. Casper that Pilipino was the very embodiment of precision. And that was that.

The inevitable question followed: If such is the case, why do *you* not write in your beautifully precise Pilipino? Mr. Gonzalez' reply was as categorical as the first: My Filipino readers read English, not Pilipino. And that, once again, was that.

From the ensuing discussions, a kind of consensus emerged: that Filipino writers have two languages at their disposal. This is not the same as saying that Filipinos are bilingual. Actually, most Filipino writers are unilingual, since they always think in Pilipino whatever be the verbal accoutrements with which they chose to disguise their Filipinism. One need not quibble about this point. One can continue to entertain the illusion that we have the option to elect the use of our borrowed tongue, with the consequent risk of falsifying our Filipino soul. On the other hand, we may shirk the responsibility of choosing by subscribing to Mr. Francisco Arcellana's thesis that the choice has been made for us: *huli na ang lahat*.

Allow me to pass on to a consideration of the language question in itself, apart from the necessarily circuitous proceedings of a writers' forum. The lament and jubilation alternately attending our bilingualism have long been a commonplace among us. It should be clear, in the first place, that Filipino English is a variety of English quite as much as the English of the Americas, the British Isles, the Antilles, the Carolines. Hence, only those with the most naive concept of linguistics will demand that English syntax, idioms and even accents be purified of all disfigurements. To begin with, by what

language standards shall we determine disfigurements? If we look to the American dictionary and the American grammar as our arbiter, this is only because our educated class today happens to be America-oriented. I mean that American English as such is, clearly, not our standard of perfection; it is the language of a cultured minority who happen to have had Thomasites for teachers, and who could very well have had German or French teachers if history had not taken the course it did.

But, prescinding for a moment from this dizzying round of considerations, one is forced to ask a more basic question, an even more rhetorical one perhaps than that of the Knight Perilous. Is it a fact that the Filipino writer has two languages at his disposal? Is it possible at all to write *now* in Pilipino, or, to be more precise, Tagalog?

The apparent impertinence of the question may be mitigated if the writing problem is examined more closely and soberly. It should be noted that the company of Filipino writers assembled for the Writers' Forum at the Ateneo included no poets. The group consisted primarily of newspapermen, propagandists, dramatists and fiction writers, writers in English, that is. There were a few among them who are writers in Tagalog, there is no doubt, but I am already begging my own question. If I decry the absence of poets in that convention, it is because, with Pound and Eliot, I look upon poets as pre-eminently the custodians of language. Prose writers are, after all, carriers of ideas; they carry on against all odds, able to make monuments out of scrap. There is no doubt that the Filipino prose writer in English can turn to Tagalog without losing face or value; Tagalog is good for at least 18,000 words. But will the poet find what he seeks?

Compare:

Sabihin ko kayáng naparaán akó isáng dapit-hapon sa maki-
kitid na lansangan

At namalas ko ang usok na pumápaibabaw sa bungangá ng pipa
Ng mga mamang malumbáy, nakákamisadentro, nangákaduk-
wang sa mga dúrungawán?...

Akó'y dapat na magíng magagaspáng na sipit
Na humáhagibis sa ilalim ng tubig na tahimik.

* * *

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?...

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

—T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.

Compare also:

Waláng hatíd ang kanyáng mukhâ
Kundi kalumbayang dì matulusan,—dì na kanyáng sarili yaón,
Na noó'y tila napangarap lamang ng plasang iyón,
Itinakdáng pagkádausdós at pag-ikot;
Tulad ng dahon, o talulot, o malasutláng kusot
Na tangáy ng anod sa muntíng talón, na pagkaligid minsá'y
Daglíng mahuhulog—
Walang malay sa kanyáng lipós na alingóg.

* * *

Nothing upon her face
But some impersonal loneliness,—not then a girl,
But as it were a reverie of the place,
A called-for falling glide and whirl;
As when a leaf, petal, or thin chip
Is drawn to the falls of a pool and, circling a moment above it,
Rides on over the lip—
Perfectly beautiful, perfectly ignorant of it.

—Richard Wilbur, *Piazza di Spagna, Early Morning*.

A final comparison might be suggested, precisely because what has been translated is itself a piece of translation.

Alaala kitá, Andromake! Sa batis
—Mapanglâw na salamíng doó'y ipinapalos
ang iyóng maringál na pagdadalamhati,
Ang nakatimbuwáng na ilog na iyóng niluhaan—
Ay daglíng namulaklák ang mga gunitâ
Nang akó'y maparaán sa Karosél na bagong gawâ.
Walâ na ang dating París (lalong mabilís magbago
Ang isáng lunsód kaysá sa può ng mga tao);
Sa aking isipa'y namamasdán ko pa ang mga tanghalan;
Ang buntón ng mga ladrilyo't kapitál na magagaspáng
Mga damó, mga batóng pináglumutan;
Pagpapatong ng baldosa't kung anó-anóng kaguluhan.

Andromache, I think of you! The stream,
The poor, sad mirror where in bygone days
Shone all the majesty of your widowed grief,
The lying Simois flooded by your tears,
Made all my fertile memory blossom forth
As I passed by the new-built Carrousel.
Old Paris is no more (a town, alas,
Changes more quickly than man's heart may change);
Yet in my mind I still can see the booths;
The heaps of brick and rough-hewn capitals;
The grass; the stones all over-green with moss;
The debris, and the square-set heaps of tiles.

— Charles Baudelaire, *The Swan*.

The point I am trying to make may be an extremely tenuous one, but I do feel that the elasticity of a language is best put to a test when confronted with the problems of translation. The translations suggested above are obviously not definitive. My primary concern in them was for authenticity of tone at the expense of everything else. The lack of tonal range seems to me to be the most confining feature of the Tagalog language for purposes of the subtle arts; it permits of no understatement, makes elegance of colloquialism totally impossible and almost completely forbids the kind of verbal ambiguity which is the wellspring of poetic wit and irony. Tagalog is precise, as Mr. Gonzalez has claimed, only in so far as it is the language of direct communication; in it, a spade is called a spade by force of circumstance. But if to be precise is to capture a curve of thought or feeling, as Eliot suggests poetry must always do, then Tagalog is perhaps inept.

I realize that the last statement lends itself to enormous confutation. I realize too that when I raised the question about the eligibility of Tagalog for literature, I have in mind a specific kind of literary art which verges on the *précieuse* and may, therefore, be regarded as no art at all by those who champion the cause of the temple gong and the *musikong bumbong*. Finally, I realize that I might have been worrying only about myself when I question the valence of my native tongue. At any rate, it must be remembered that, like the Knight's question in the myth of the Fisher King, my question was announced as a rhetorical one.

ROLANDO S. TINIO