

philippine studies

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

Maria Luisa F. Torres
SipatSalin: TransFigurations

Review Author: Vincenz Serrano

Philippine Studies vol. 60 no. 1 (2012): 147–149

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>

In February 1945, as the battle for the liberation of Manila raged, the Tongs and other civilian internees were released from Bilibid and flown to Leyte, whence they boarded a ship bound for San Francisco, from where they then took a train to New York City. Curtis, who remembers lovable things more than the opposite, narrates how during a stop the train conductor told him to toss a rolled newspaper after the conductor said “bow-wow.” Curtis did as instructed and a puppy, coming from nowhere, quickly ran after the newspaper and caught it in his mouth. According to the conductor, he had been doing this for four years. The puppy was consistently there, waiting for the train to arrive.

I recommend the book to all who already know the history of the Second World War in the Philippines because Tong’s narration is from the perspective of an American child internee, a perspective he complemented with various other written and oral accounts. The way he reconstructed his memories will deepen and broaden perspectives, which are solely focused on Filipinos. I recommend it to scholars interested in the analysis of war memories and the war’s impact on the relationship between Japan and the United States. It is common knowledge that the two former enemy states became close allies after the war. This is usually explained from the point of view of states that act for their own national interests. However, close and lasting friendship between the US and Japan is found not only at the macro level but also at the personal level, such as that between Curtis Tong and Tomibe. Perhaps there is more to state relations beyond national interests.

I enjoyed the book. It will be wise, however, for the reader to mark the pages they wish to go back to later, because there is no index that will help them do so quickly.

Lydia N. Yu Jose
Department of Political Science
Ateneo de Manila University
<lyjose@ateneo.edu>

MARIA LUISA F. TORRES

SipatSalin: TransFigurations

Marikina City: Talindaw Publishing; Yogyakarta: Research and Community Service Institution, Sanata Dharma University, 2011. 185 pages.

SipatSalin: TransFigurations is a collection of thirty-five poems in English and Filipino by Maria Luisa F. Torres, Professor of English at the Ateneo de Manila University. These poems, produced starting from the 1970s and well into the 1990s, have been translated into a number of languages, among them, Iloko, Chabacano, Bikol, Kapampangan, Indonesian, Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Spanish, and German; this makes *SipatSalin*’s linguistic variety one of the more recent outstanding examples of both poetry *and* translation. In her preface, Torres remarks on the milieu which occasioned her work: the poems were forged during the martial law (1972–1981) years of “activist thought and thoughtful activism” (3) for her and her peers, a milieu that “taught [them] that faith and suspicion, like compassion and sufferance, were two faces of one and the same metaphor” (3).

Although *SipatSalin*—published a year after the author’s award-winning book of criticism, *Banaag at Sikat: Metakritisismo at Antolohiya*, appeared in 2010—puts equal emphasis on both her poems as well as their translations into multiple languages, this review will comment on the original poems (be they in English or in Filipino) and not on the translations. I claim that the poems—with their attention to aspects of the physical world and to interior feeling—are, in German critic Theodor Adorno’s felicitous phrase, “subjective expression[s] of a social antagonism” (“On Lyric Poetry and Society,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, 45; Columbia University Press, 1991). These expressions, moreover, propose to extend the resources of the lyric: in dealing with personal and historical materials, Torres’s handling of the lyric form troubles fixed and unitary temporal and spatial categories.

One key feature of *SipatSalin* is the lyric voice of the personae—the attentiveness to detail depicted in the interior scenes of poems such as “Letters to Mama” where things like dry leaves, a candleholder, an ashtray, and scrapbooks are assigned places in the apartment. This focus extends to aspects of the landscape, where the persona in “Sagada” describes the road leading to Bontoc as a “higanteng sawa” (110) or where the surroundings of Scotland—complete with trees, shrubs, and rivers—are typified as both “so sacred

and so sensual” (134): “a scenery of seduction” (134). This lyricism, moreover, accommodates a wide range of feeling: the sarcasm in “To the Poet of The Year,” where the persona asks the lauded poet if his/her feats were “death-defying” and if he/she “totter[ed] and traipse[d] on the tightrope of language” (46); the resolute stance in “After a Rally,” where “fighting” is considered as “the art of the survivor” (15), the persona making distinctions between “deadened but not dead,” of “dying without dying” (15); the sense of searching hopefulness, articulated by the persona in “Paalam,” in discerning “between the notes / in the voice of the guitar / for the time that was to come” (94).

This lyrical disposition and the emotional range are, to be sure, inseparable from social critique: these are not poems of mere interiority; rather, the poems are for Adorno “subjective expression[s] of a social antagonism” (Adorno, 45). For him, “the lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with that society” (Adorno, 43). Moreover, the work of interpretation involves “discover[ing] how the entirety of a society [is] conceived as an internally contradictory unity, [and] is manifested in the work of art, in what way the work of art remains subject to society and in what way it transcends it” (Adorno, 39). In other words, in contrast to ways of thinking about the lyric as an expression of interiority (which, certainly, is still a valuable approach to lyric poems), I would offer the proposition, following Adorno, that the poems in *SipatSalin* distinguish themselves from other examples in the lyric genre insofar as they offer subjective and personal expressions of social antagonisms: for all their emphasis on lyricism, the poems nonetheless demonstrate social paradoxes and contradictions. Just to cite one example, among many: in “Sa Lipunan ng Mga Lamok,” the focus on houses and the interior, which I hinted at earlier, becomes repurposed for social commentary: “Ligtas ang tahananang / Sa langit nakatindig. / Sinisipsip lamang / Ang dugo ng tahananang / Sa estero nakasandig” (119). In these lines, the persona makes distinctions between kinds of houses—the mansion whose foundations are, it seems, in heaven, vis-à-vis informal housing near the estero. It is precisely this ability of the poems to yoke and articulate disparities (coupled with the implied violence of sucking blood) that enables them to inhabit a position of contradiction: to be both grounded in, and opposed to, the very society depicted in the work.

Hence by extension, if for the modernist poet Ezra Pound the epic is a poem containing history, *SipatSalin* proposes to offer a nuance and contrast to Pound’s argument: the lyric is a poem containing history. Not only that, the sense of history demonstrated by Torres’s poems proposes to trouble linear and

cohesive temporal and spatial categories. “Mexico in My Mind,” for example, where the opening stanza already hints at a description of a mural at Tia Maria’s that is “multi-layered” and “split-level” (69), depicts a seemingly confused map of “neither North nor Central America,” where “the northern lines follow the Rio Grande,” and “southward [one sees] Honduras and Guatemala” (70). Parallelisms (by way of a catalogue of geographical references) are drawn: although thousands of miles apart, the powerless members of society “are banished from their own land / In Yucatan, Qaxaca, Quintana Roo, Campeche / and Puebla, like those in Tondo, Sapang Palay, / Dasmarinas (Cavite) or the tribal lands of the Sierra Madre” (70–71). This blurring of historical and spatial categories—in Torres’s formulation: “the boundaries / befuddle the landmarks of history” (70)—not only demonstrates a sense of the global scope of inequity, it also offers a sense of similarity and solidarity: in Mexico as much as in the Philippines, there is a need, as described in “Paalam,” to “creat[e] an equitable, / Loving society” where “each car[ries] on [his/her] shoulders the weight / Of love, whatever it is called, / Even in a society that is unequal” (94). In the main, in *SipatSalin*, the reader may find sensitive, observant, and intelligent personae coming to terms—by way of working with, as well as extending, the aesthetic resources made available to the lyric—with the social, political, and historical forces (the numerous storms) they find themselves in.

The British art critic John Berger’s commentary on how the labor of poetry consists of “bring[ing] together what life has separated or violence has torn apart” (“The Hour of Poetry,” in *Selected Essays*, edited by Geoff Dyer, 450; Bloomsbury, 2001) resonates with *SipatSalin*. For Berger, “poetry can repair no loss, but it defies the space which separates. And it does this by its continual labour of reassembling what has been scattered” (Berger, 450). Seen in this light, the reassembly of seemingly large categories of history and geography in poems such as “Mexico in My Mind,” or the desire to have in “Letters to Mama,” even just a “little space” (65) to accommodate things accumulated over time appear as two gestures of the same action, gestures informed by the inseparable qualities of “faith and suspicion” and “compassion and sufferance” (3): a singular defiance, through poetry, of the spaces that separate and of forces and storms that scatter and dissipate.

Vincenz Serrano

Department of English, Ateneo de Manila University
<vserrano@ateneo.edu>