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## **Cirilo F. Bautista, *Bullets and Roses: The Poetry of Amado V. Hernandez*, a Bilingual Edition**

Review Author: Michael M. Coroza

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reader as thoughtfully written books.” (A. Rawsthorn, *International Herald Tribune*, 19 June 2006, p. 7). The author and her publisher are commended for regaling the reading public with this beautiful publication.

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Cirilo F. Bautista. **Bullets and Roses: The Poetry of Amado V. Hernandez, a Bilingual Edition.** Manila: De La Salle University Press, Inc., 2003. 165 pages.

It is said that so much is lost in translation. No matter how masterful the translator is in the receptor language, the translation always falls short of capturing a poem, especially its musicality. Such is not the case, however, of most of Cirilo Bautista’s rendering into English of some of the poems of Amado V. Hernandez, one of the Philippines’ most prominent Tagalog poets, who in 1973 was proclaimed National Artist in Literature.

Take, for example, the following stanzas from “An Armstretch of Sky,” a translation of “Isang Dipang Langit,” one of Hernandez’s most popular poems:

From the narrow window all I can see  
     Is an armstretch of sky full of tears,  
 a meager cover to a wounded heart,  
     a ghastly emblem of my falls and fears.

Sharp as lightning are the eyes of the guard,  
     nobody dares approach the padlocked door;  
 the prisoner’s cry in the nearby cell  
     sounds like an animal’s desperate roar.

The whole day is like a heavy chain  
     dragged by a pair of bloody feet,

the whole night is a mournful veil  
 on the prisoner's sepulchral retreat. (140)

People familiar with the prosody of traditional Tagalog poetry, which Amado Hernandez followed in almost all of his poetic works, will see that Bautista's translation read aloud is close to the way the original Tagalog sounds. One can readily attribute such an achievement to the fact that Bautista is poet par excellence in both English and Tagalog. The following stanza from "Tranquility" ("Tining") is another example:

the father forgot he was a prisoner,  
 the mother forgot that she was not well,  
 and the young child forgot her tattered clothes;  
 amidst the thorns the rose is beautiful . . .  
 for a few moments the three together  
 felt that not all in the world was bitter. (81)

Though Tagalog is syllabic and English is accentual, Bautista succeeds in making Amado Hernandez "speak" in English while retaining typical Tagalog melody and sentiment. If readers familiar only with modern English poetry find the translations wanting in metaphorical sophistication and subtlety of expression, it is because Bautista is being faithful to the original.

It may be noted that, while Amado Hernandez was familiar with modern world literature, he followed the movement identified by poet-critic Virgilio S. Almario as *Balagtasismo*. Poets who followed this movement, which dominated Tagalog poetry in the first four decades of the twentieth century, were modern in thought but oral/traditional in style. They made use of familiar or stereotypical images, and they were direct, even redundant, in presenting their insights, the better to connect with their listeners or readers majority of whom belonged to the lower classes. And so the concept of organic unity, the objective correlative, was learned and adopted by a later generation of poets in Tagalog.

Where one may critique the book is, first, its selection of poems. Bautista asserts that Hernandez ranks first in the hierarchy of Philippine poets, "a Filipino of the first magnitude" (42). It is surprising, then, that of the forty-six poems of Hernandez that Bautista translated, more than

half are arguably his minor poems, such as “Dalangin ng Manlalaro” (Athlete’s Prayer), which Hernandez dedicated to the Filipino team that participated in the Olympic games in Rome. “Saturday” (61), “Paradox” (67), “Carats” (69), “Black and White” (71), “Short Story” (76), and “Queen” (101) are poems brief and almost prosaic. Length, of course, is never a criterion for a good poetry, but, if the intention is to introduce a Tagalog poet of “first magnitude” to non-Tagalog readers, then more poems the equal in length and depth of “An Armstretch of Sky” (111), “A Vow for Freedom” (147), and “Motherlanguage” (163) should have been included. Bautista should not have limited his choices to the poems that appeared in Hernandez’s collection *Isang Dipang Langit* (1961). An epic poet himself, Bautista could have translated instead a part or the whole of Hernandez’s epic poem, “Bayang Malaya” (Free Country), published in 1969. For this reader, Hernandez’s popular poems, such as “Kung Tuyo na ang Luha Mo Aking Bayan” (If Your Tears Have Dried Up My Mother Land), “Bayani” (Hero), and “Ang Panday” (The Blacksmith), belonging to earlier collection of poems, better manifest the poet’s “socially realistic romanticism,” which Bautista proclaims is the mark of Hernandez’s genius and “the source of his permanence as an artist” (42).

The second weakness is what seems to be the inadequate documentation in Bautista’s forty-two-page introduction, in which he identifies the stages of development of Tagalog poetry as “Period of Religious Songs,” “Period of Change,” and “Period of Popularization.” It may be purely coincidental, but such a periodization is found in Julian Cruz Balmaseda’s lecture entitled “Ang Tatlong Panahon ng Tulang Tagalog: Pag-aaral sa Kasaysayan at Pagkaunlad ng Tulang Tagalog” (The Three Periods of Tagalog Poetry: A Study on the History and Development of Tagalog Poetry). The lecture was delivered on 28 July 1938 at the Villamor Hall of the University of the Philippines as part of a series of lectures on “Tagalog Language and Literature” sponsored by the Surian ng Wikang Pambansa (Institute of National Language). It was later published as a monograph under the same title in August 1938 (reprinted in 1947 and in 1974). It is now considered a canonical study of Tagalog poetry, a required reading for graduate and undergraduate students of Filipino/Tagalog literature. Great minds may think alike, but one could not help

but wish that Bautista had acknowledged Balmaseda as a matter of scholarly deference.

Finally, there are a few debatable renderings. The phrase “bigat ng taon” (46), for example, which expresses the idea of the hardships of aging (*taon* means year), is translated as “burden of strife” (47). The Tagalog idiom “buhay-alamang” (48) is more appropriately “senseless life” rather than “difficult life” (49).

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the translation project is a laudable effort, a great service to Tagalog poetry in general and to the memory of Amado V. Hernandez in particular.

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