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Marlon Hacla, Melismas

Christian Jil R. Benitez

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Marlon Hacla, *Melismas*. Translated by Kristine Muslim Ong. Middletown, DE: OOMPH! Press, 2020. xiv + 127pp. ISBN 978-173-21-5305-9.

Reviewed by Christian Jil R. Benitez

Ateneo de Manila University, the Philippines

Something machinic has already been at work in Marlon Hacla's poetry, even prior to his creation of Estela Vidal, the first artificial intelligence (AI) machine that writes poems in Filipino. Such can be gleaned in the opening poem of his first book *May Mga Dumaang Anghel sa Parang* (*There are Angels Passing Through the Field*) (2010): titled "Imbokasyon" ("Invocation"), the poem is a succession of anaphoric phrases, with each evoking the name ("sa ngalan") of a mundane thing, such as a stone, the eye of a blind child, a pig slaughtered for an incoming feast, a queer father, and untouched hands. In this sense, the doxological is profaned, if only to evoke the sacred again, in an alterity that is eventuated by Hacla's deft writing: not the divine as the metaphysical and unreachable, but instead what is most earthly, as in intimated by even the smallest of things. Nothing else then seems to matter but matters themselves. As Hacla writes in "Maliliit na Bagay" ("Small Things"), from his second book *Glossolalia* (2013):

Nais ko lamang makipag-usap tungkol sa maliliit na bagay (tungkol sa mga susi, bala ng baril, medyas ng sanggol, tungkol sa mga sisiw na pinalalaki upang patayin paglaon) at gumising sa isang magandang umaga pagkatapos. (Hacla, *Melismas* 10)

I just want to talk about the little things (about keys, bullets, baby socks, about chicks raised to be butchered in time) and wake to a beautiful morning afterwards. (translation mine)¹

In Hacla's catalogue, no curatorial principle can be easily recognized. As such, a poem can ideally go on, as long as the poet generates another image to append. Thus, the possibility of a poem extending itself indefinitely is only prohibited by material constraints, among them Hacla's own humanness: in some other circumstance, had a poem been provided perhaps with the luxury of resources, uninterrupted by Philippine reality itself, it could have turned out to be sizable enough to be the equivalent of someone's entire literary corpus.

How then does one make sense of Hacla's poetry? In his introduction to Hacla's first book, Michael M. Coroza describes Hacla's poems as having a certain kind of quietude, one that is ironically "not quietude, [but also] a revolution held or suppressed" ("hindi pananahimik, [kundi] isa [ring] impit o supíl na paghihimagsik").² While such a description might merely appear as an introductory extension of the book's central idiom—namely, "an angel passing by," which in Filipino means to suddenly fall silent, especially midconversation—the attention it calls to the aural is instructive toward understanding Hacla's poetry by and large. For indeed, without apparent logical threads, Hacla's work is valuable to contemporary poetry, both in the Philippines and the globe, in its most urgent proposition of what a poem might mean: in a time when we have become machinic, automated due to our everyday alienations, a poem is a visceral thing we can intimately encounter, urging us to feel anew. To read Hacla, then, is not to merely use our eyes, but to activate as well the rest of our corporeal selves.

Asserting the potency of Hacla's poetry in the vernacular matters, so as to make apparent the stakes to be considered—and thus, the losses to be possibly had—in any attempt of translation. Of course, while many aspire to bring Filipino poets, especially those who primarily write in the vernacular, to the larger global market via translating them to English, the risks of such gestures must also be reckoned with, if only to ensure that such efforts toward a "wider readership" (as if this is assured) are at least most attentive of the material, and not merely exporting them as goods. (The Philippines, after all, has already had too many of the latter, in the form of Overseas Filipino Workers, whose suffered violence is often pacified by simply calling them the country's "modern-day heroes.")

In Kristine Ong Muslim's translation of Hacla's *Melismas* (2020), the sensuous potency of the vernacular is ultimately diminished, in favour perhaps of a lyricism that can only appeal to the global market. In her introduction to the book, Muslim claims that her translation process "took the cue largely from the imperative of the title" (xiv), that is, from melisma or a musical phrase composed of various notes that are sung as a single syllable. As such, Muslim says that she "work[ed] on the variations of that [melismatic] monosyllable's textures and modulation patterns" (xiv). However, for an overarching musical metaphor, the translation itself sounds out of tune. Consider, for instance, the first fragment of the book, especially marked here on accented syllables:

Katawan na itong pinuno ng mga bangungot
pinugaran ng mga dumagat, namumukol
 ng mga solidong kabughawan, kung maihihingi
 lang sana kita ng bagong hubog, kung kikislap
 ka lang sana na parang salita. (2)

This body, stuffed with nightmares
 a nesting ground for hawks, swollen
 with intractable blues, if only I could solicit
 a new shape for you, if only you would scintillate
 like a word. (3)

While Hacla’s verse does not strictly follow a measure, accents fall in an approximate pattern, rendering a palpable rhythm that seduces one to further reading. Such is the quality of the Filipino language itself, long described as melodic, with words exhibiting onomatopoeic quality, intimating meaning through the very sound. In this sense, language is not a mere medium for Hacla’s ideation, but integral to the process of conception: while the species of the “katawan” (“body”) is not—cannot be—ascertained, the verse itself somehow allows for an intuition of what is becoming before us, enabling a creature to aurally arrive, despite its seeming visual improbability.

It is this critical working of the Filipino language in the original that is ultimately missed in Muslim’s English translation: the propensity in Hacla’s poetry for assonances and alliterations is muted deliberately (for we must assume after all that such a translation, published internationally no less, is crafted with utmost intention). In the following fragment, one cannot perceive a desire at least to attempt carrying over to the English Hacla’s visceral Filipino intimation of the simultaneous thorniness and tenderness of a rose, via the repetitive *t*-sounds surrounding the *l*-sounds:

Sa gitna ng tatlong matutulis na pulis,
 isang rosas na lantay na kapulahan,
 nagniningning ang tulis ng mga tinik.(4)

Flanked in the middle of three sharp cops
 a rose of the purest red,
 the gleaming points of sharp thorns. (5)

Granted that Muslim’s translation is able to relay the image portrayed from the original, it is crucial to underscore that much of the potency in Hacla’s poetry—if not poetry in general—lies in its

ability to merge and even interchange our senses—that the visual, for instance, becomes aural as well. While it is indeed impossible to completely capture an original’s material effect, it is imperative for a translation to devise a means to somehow parallel this in its own different terms. For if not, what is merely being carried over is the idea found “within” a poem, implicitly rendering the poem *itself* then, in its very materiality, to be dispensable as a signifier, inessential except as a vessel for a concept.³

In such instances, only transliteration takes place, which necessitates nevertheless an utmost attention to the material by way of reading.

Mesa karton de-lata letsugas gaheto sopas na may liturhiya
may kutsilyo may sintomas na unti-unti ka nang lumiliit
munting motor munting kalendaryo munting simbolong tunog. (20)

Table carton canned lettuce tool soup with liturgy
there is a knife there is a sign of your slow slide into smallness
small engine small calendar small metaphor of sound. (21)

In the case of this fragment, however, a novice misreading glaringly (at least for an average bilingual Filipino) took place: the first line is a nonchalant catalogue of things, among them a canned good (“de-lata”) *and* a lettuce (“letsugas”), clearly distinct from each other and not entangled as a singular “canned lettuce,” given the lack of the connecting suffix *-ng* to *de-lata*. While such mistranslation can simply be an oversight, what is curious is how this detail is even quoted in Amado Anthony G. Mendoza III’s introduction without any perceptible hesitation or interest (ix), given that “canned lettuce” does not—or perhaps, at most, barely (but where? when?)—exist in the Philippines. After all, the lettuce, especially from the northern Cordillera region, is prized for its freshness; if canned, one can theorize that the vegetable has to be at least pickled—although, again, where and when such a thinkable dish is mass produced in the country as to be “canned” remains a mystery, if not imaginary.

Muslim and her collaborators in this translation of Hacla have been in the forefront of the current efforts to open Philippine literature in the vernacular to the world by way of translation to English: Mendoza and Tilde Acuña, who provide introduction and intermission illustrations respectively,⁴ are both part of the editorial team behind the recently published *Ulirát: Best Contemporary Stories in Translation from the Philippines* (2021), which prides itself on being a “groundbreaking” anthology. They are also set to team-edit a similar anthology, this time of

poetry. However, it bears repeating that while such attempts are admirable at the very least, their desire to be faithful to the ingenuity of the Filipino authors they carry over to English must also be considered. It is this care to the material that ultimately recognizes an instance of translation as either a humane, empathetic gesture or a machinic, production-oriented-but-not-necessarily-productive one.⁵

Hacla's work has now been featured in known literary journals in the West such as *Poetry*, *Words Without Borders*, and *Prairie Schooner*. It is fortunate that the world can now read his poetry in English; it is also a pity that the world could not be bothered to learn Filipino to read his poetry in its vernacular lushness.

Notes

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¹ Compare with Muslim's translation: "I only want to talk about small things (about a bunch of keys, bullets, infants' socks, about chicks allowed to grow into chickens for the slaughter) and then to wake up to a good morning" (Hacla, "Miniatures").

² Compare with Mendoza's (2020) description of Hacla's poetry: "A feast for the senses; an assault against frail sensibilities. Concealed nuclear howls *muffled* with treacherous sweet nothings" (v; emphasis added).

³ Consider, for instance, Muslim's (2021) introduction in a special issue of *Loch Raven Review*, featuring 49 Filipino poets in translation, in which she merely glosses over what the poems say (as if this is also not already contentious) rather than how they say it, and how this is carried over in the translations.

⁴ It must be added that the relevance of Acuña's illustration to the translation of *Melismas* still remains questionable, given the original poem's recognizable vision to let the fragments bleed into another, without any discernible clustering together as chapters—which Acuña's illustration inevitably produces. In fact, in Hacla's (2016) original poem, the only considerable "illustrations" are the discontinuous horizontal lines at the bottom of the page, broken and placed like notes of

melismatic phrases, making it apparent that the entire chapbook is a singular poem. Of this formal intervention that Acuña's illustration creates, neither Muslim's (2020) nor Mendoza's (2020) introduction attempts to explicate.

⁵ Consider, for instance, the following lines from the published call for contributions for the said upcoming anthology of Filipino poetry in translation, to be edited by Muslim and her same collaborators: "[B]ecause there are only a few of us and our time and resources are limited, there is no way we can enter into or sustain any correspondence with writers whose works we cannot use. Thanks so much in advance for your interest" (*Ulirát*).

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