

The Scientist

Translated from Carlos Piocos III's "Ang Siyentista"

Reya Mari Veloso

University of the Philippines Los Baños
rsveloso@up.edu.ph

It requires only two people
To facilitate the collapse of the entire world.

And here, in your room,
we, the two of us,
geniuses of arcane wisdom,
will dictate the fate of our vast universe.

Tonight, I will prove to you the power
of science of our bodies merging, here,
in the finite space of our bed.

This is the force of gravity,
A pair of hands fumbling on a shoulder.
Come: the force commands,
first, lie down in accordance
to the placement of the planets and stars
before we commence the revolution
in the expanse of your bed. Astrology
or the mapping of movements,
of axes, of alignments
parallel to the lure of the brightest suns
inside your eyes: the center of my galaxy.

My fingers will measure the miles
that separate your lips,

the geography of a misbehaving body
unmatched against my embrace.
Here in the pores of your skin,
the cracks across the land,
the kinesis of continents as it quakes,
and the tremors of our trembling chests.
Here lies the ocean's abyss,
the ridges of the mountains,
the darkness of desolate places,
the peace in your sleep.
I will survey the calamities of nature,
the deluge, the victims
of your feigned slumber.

Explain to me the first
and most crucial law of physics:
Whatever force is exerted
on an object shall be confronted
with an opposing force: as if the science of war,
as if dialectics without end.

And I will demonstrate to you
the magic of alchemy
with potion concocted in my lips:
please, just one kiss.
Because my saliva is gasoline
inside your mouth,
and will implode in your heart
the explosive I have long buried there.
The bomb that shatters the cosmos
was smuggled inside your chest.

We will discover the secret sorcery
of ancient and clandestine chemistry:
look, I will forge a gram of gold,
an immaculate new-world,
at the tip of your tongue.

Ang Siyentista

Ni Carlos M. Piocos III

Kinakailangan lamang ng dalawang tao
upang tuluyang mapaguho ang buong mundo.

At dito, sa loob ng iyong kuwarto,
tayo, tayong dalawa,
mga paham ng matatandang kaalaman,
ang magtatakda sa tadhana ng malawak nating uniberso.

Ngayong gabi, patutunayan ko sa iyo ang kapangyarihan
ng agham ng pagsasanib ng katawan, dito,
dito sa kuwadradong espasyo ng ating higaan.

Ito ang puwersa ng grabedad,
dalawang nag-aatubiling kamay sa balikat.
Halika: ang dikta ng puwersa,
humiga ka muna nang tama
ayon sa posisyon ng mga planeta't tala,
bago natin simulan ang rebolusyon
sa kalawakan ng iyong kama. Astrolohiya,
o pagmamapa ng tamang galaw,
ng tamang ikot, ng tamang indayog
sang-ayon sa halina ng makikinang na araw
sa loob ng iyong mata: ang sentro ng galaksiya.

Susukatin ng aking daliri ang milya-
milyang agwat ng iyong labi,
ang heyograpiya ng katawang malikot
at walang tinag sa aking yakap.
Dito ang guwang ng balat,
ang pagwawatak-watak ng kalupaan,
ang mga maliligalig na kontinente kapag lumilindol
at nanginginig ang nagpupuyos na dibdib.
Dito ang lalim ng karagatan,
dito ang taas ng mga bundok,
dito ang dilim ng liblib na mga pook,
kapag lumalalim ang paghinga sa pagtulog.

Pag-aaralan ko ang mga kalamidad ng kalikasan,
ang mga sakuna, ang mga sinalanta
ng iyong pagtutulug-tulugan.

Ipaunawa mo sa akin ngayon ang kauna-unahan
at pinakamahalagang batas ng pisika:
Ang anumang puwersang ilalapat
sa kahit anumang bagay ay may katumbas
na puwersang manlalaban: parang siyensiya ng digmaan,
parang diyalektikang walang hanggan.

At ipapaunawa ko sa iyo
ang hiwaga ng mga kimika
sa hinalong gayuma ng aking bibig:
pakiusap, kahit isang halik.
Sapagkat ang aking laway ay gasolina
sa loob ng iyong bunganga,
at sasabog sa iyong puso
ang matagal nang naibaon na granada.
Ang bombang sisira sa buong daigdig
ay naisilid lamang sa loob ng iyong dibdib.

Tutuklasin natin ang sikretong mahika
ng matanda't lihim na siyensiya ng alkimiya:
tingnan mo, tutubog ako ng isang butil ng ginto,
ng isang busilak na bagong-mundo,
sa dulo ng iyong dila.

Translator's Note

Carlos Piocos III's "Ang Siyentista" remains one of my favorite poems. Over years of reading and re-reading, I felt an impulse to translate it into a language I have been more accustomed to reading and writing. Indeed, my own fault as a writer and a scholar is that I lack a foundation in reading and writing in the vernacular—a result of a middle-class upbringing where I was raised to only read books, as well as consume TV shows and other media, in English. Admittedly, these influences in my upbringing have calcified into my preferences even as I entered the academe as a teacher.

The result of this lack, ironically, is the fixation and desire to read and translate Filipino poems into English.

My first published translation work entitled “Our Birdsong is Near” is a translation into English of Dennis Andrew Aguinaldo’s “Hindi na nalalayo ang huni” from his tome *Bukod sa maliliit na hayop*. The approach in this translated work was more playful and personal—less conscious of the technicalities and more focused on completing the piece and sending it out for publication.

At the height of the pandemic, I sat in an esteemed colleague’s translation class. It was there that I came across scholars whose discipline zeroes in on the methodologies in translation. In Ricoeur’s *On Translation*, he writes, “Language is one yet languages are many. In this very distinction lies the primordial need for translation. What all languages share in common is a capacity to mediate between a human speaker and a world of meanings (actual and possible) spoken about. But if this function constitutes the unifying property of language, the fact there exist a plurality of languages, both living and dead, means that we are faced with a double duty of translation, internal and external.”

While the task of translation started as a personal attempt to rewrite a poem according to how I understand it in a language I am more familiar with, it eventually grew into the challenge of “How do I make others understand it in another language?” A personal hobby done to pass the time and test my skill in rewriting and poetry morphed into a task of *mediation*: it is no longer just a matter of *what it means to me*, but now includes the question of *what it can possibly mean for others*.

The act of translation democratizes the material, particularly the meaning-making process. As a poem is translated into multiple languages, it becomes an invitation for a multicultural understanding of the piece. Ricoeur discusses that, “the meaning of Being is always mediated through an endless process of interpretations – cultural, religious, political, historical, and scientific.” The translator then becomes a bridge which readers can use to access a version of the piece that will allow them to interpret it in their vernacular; meaning-making then becomes accessible and attainable. Further, Ricoeur retains that the basic definition of hermeneutics is the “art of deciphering *indirect* meaning.” Here, the task of translator becomes threefold: to help readers 1) access, 2) understand, and 3) interpret both implicit and explicit meanings of the text.

To say that translating “Ang Siyentista” is difficult is a serious understatement. Words like *paham* and *guwang* are excluded from my knowledge of Tagalog words; I needed the help of friends who read and wrote in the vernacular to help me figure out the meaning of such unfamiliar words. *Paham* is synonymous to *pantas* which denotatively means a scholar and an intelligent one at that. In the line, “*mga paham ng matatandang kaalaman*,” there exists a notion of not just intelligence, but also the idea of expertise and authority, which I tried to encapsulate in writing, “geniuses of arcane wisdom.” Meanwhile, *guwang* means hollow or relating to holes: “*Dito ang guwang ng balat*.” The inclusion of the word *balat* or skin signifies physicality and desire which I justified in my translation: “Here in the pores of your skin.” As a novice translator, the realization that the task is more than *transposing* words into another language but also ensuring that the context is also carried out in the translated language becomes a recurring epiphany.

Context is just one element in translation, but in poetry, it is an element that encompasses unity, metaphor, and rhythm. Translating a poem means it must contain the same elements present in the original language as its translated language. More than a poem’s organic unity and metaphor, rhythm, or sound, at least for me, remains one of the most challenging elements in a poem to translate. In the line, “*Halika: ang dikta ng puwersa*,” the *k*-, *d*-, and *p*- sounds remain prominent, and the utterances themselves are somehow forceful in nature. I translated it into, “Come: the force commands,” which also contains *kuh*- sounds subdued by a mixture of *f*- and *s*-utterances. While the translation into English does not contain the same forcefulness in Tagalog, it is compensated by the use of the words *come* (an imperative), *force* (implies coercion), and *command* (another imperative); therefore, occupying the same contextual meaning as in *halika*, *dikta*, at *puwersa*. In this process of translating not just words but also sound, I am reminded of Paul Ricoeur’s “...double duty of translation, internal and external.” As in form and content, the translated work should not only contain the external structure of the original but along with it the internal nuances in its utterances.

One of the most difficult lines to translate into English in “Ang Siyentista” is “*dalawang nag-aatubiling kamay sa balikat*.” The line suggests hesitation, but at the same time, urgency. *Ang pag-aatubili ay kaakibat ng pagdedesisyon*—the apprehension comes from delaying a decision, but in the end, you must arrive at a choice. “A pair of hands fumbling on a shoulder,” implies loaded indecision—to fumble with something means that the hands are clumsily moving about, but the *cause* of the fumbling might also mean that an urgent decision needs to be made. While

“hesitation” is a more direct translation of *pag-aatubili*, not only will it render an awkward translation (“A pair of hands hesitating on a shoulder”), but it will leave out the sense of urgency not to mention the haptic element that very much occupies the line. Again, Paul Ricoeur’s “plurality of languages” comes to mind in affirming my decision to be slightly unfaithful to the direct translation, rather, to search for a word that not only contains the denotative meaning of the original but the possibility of carrying its nuances to the translated work.

I come back to the matter of cadence and rhythm in translating the following lines:

the kinesis of continents as it quakes,
ang mga maliligalig na kontinente kapag lumilindol

and the tremors of our trembling chests.
at nanginginig ang nagpupuyos na dibdib.

The original work carries *l*- sounds in the first line that rolls off the tongue as it describes restlessness in bodies of land, something that tickles when you utter them out loud. In the second line, restlessness is used to describe the movement of a corporeal body; the *ng*-, *p*-, *d*-, and *b*- sounds complement the image of movement and friction between bodies when read aloud. In my translation of the first line, I relied on the combination of *k*-, soft *t*-, and *s* sounds to mimic something that easily rolls off the tongue when read aloud while in the second line, I employed the use of consonant clusters such as *tr*- and *ch*- in implying friction and movement among bodies. The task of carrying the nuances in the internal rhythm of the translated work comprised most of the challenges I encountered during this process of translation.

As I reflect on this entire project, I am grounded by what Paul Ricoeur says on the relevance and function of translation: “Language is one yet languages are many. In this very distinction lies the primordial need for translation.” Perhaps it is in the task of translation that I interrogate my own ineptness for the vernacular, and quite possibly, it is also through this process that I am finding means to rectify such self-identified incompetence. In translating Filipino poems into English, I become a learner of my own vernacular—a worthy area of scholarship, especially at a time of sociocultural unrest where even our own language is a political target of its own government.

Works Cited

Piocos, Carlos III. "Ang Siyentista." 5 April 2011. *Buraburador*. February 2023. <<http://buraburador.blogspot.com/2011/04/ang-siyentista.html>>.

Ricoeur, Paul. *On Translation*. Trans. Eileen Brennan. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Reya Mari S. Veloso is a teacher of writing, literature, and art criticism at the Department of Humanities in the University of the Philippines Los Baños. Her recent work can be found in ASEAN Journal of Community Engagement and Alchemy: Journal of Translation.