

***Poems of Rolando S. Tinio, Jose F. Lacaba & Rio Alma*, translated from the Tagalog and introduced by Robert Nery (Vagabond Press, 2013)**

The question regarding the worth of poetry in translation is age-old. ‘It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation,’ said Salman Rushdie, ‘but I cling obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained.’<sup>1</sup>

My journey into poetry in translation began with Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gitanjali* or *Song Offerings*, a collection of poems translated into English from their original Bengali.

Published in 1912, *Song Offerings* was a quiet sensation in its time, in that it placed Tagore in the pantheon of world poets, largely responsible as it was for his being the first outside of Europe to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. *Offerings* also had a personal significance, in that it led me not only into the poetries of other lands, but also to that question of such poetry, in original versus translated form. Rushdie’s statement, after all, though positive regarding translated poetry, by its juxtaposed ‘always’ and ‘also’ does acknowledge such a dichotomy. With due respect to Rushdie, however, I believe that there is a bit more to it than that: a translated poem, although seemingly in the lap of the gods, is nevertheless firmly a case of the god being the translator.

With *Song Offerings*, any such dichotomous question, however, became no question at all: Tagore himself did the translating from Bengali to English, on the basis of English being as much a home language for him as Bengali was. The translation of *Poems of Rolando S. Tinio, Jose F. Lacaba & Rio Alma* on the other hand, has been done by a second party: Robert Nery.

Though living in Sydney, Nery was born and raised in the Philippines, and, as is demonstrated by his introduction to this book, he is fluent in both official languages of that country, the languages he has worked with here: Tagalog (Filipino) and English.

Working from one home language to the other then, and being an acknowledged poet in his own right, Nery’s outcome should be seamless. Nuance and idiom of thought as well as speech, along with a host of other attributes, would come naturally to him, again in both languages.

Ronaldo S. Tinio, the first of the three poets of *Poems of ...* was born in 1937 and died in 1997. He received a Masters Degree in Creative Writing in 1958 from America’s University of Iowa as a graduate of its internationally renowned Writers Workshop. Though a recognised poet now, as Nery says, Tinio in his lifetime was better known for his work as an educator, essayist and critic, translator and thespian.

Tinio’s poems in this collection have a world-weariness, a sense of inexorability, of life being only about people and things wearing out.

A collage of such is ‘Song for the Dead’:

The Old Fellow is dead, the cobbler with a shop  
Who was Aunty’s partner in her business  
Of comic books and weekend magazines.

<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991) 16.

My sib said:  
The heart was massaged  
Without benefit. (24)

‘Downstairs’ continues in that vein:

In a corner, piled on top of each other, chests  
Full of clothes too good for wiping with:  
Fine shirts, yellowed, most of them,  
Their sleeves heavy with knotted silk ... (30)

There is some resistance, though still the inevitability, in ‘Storm in the Ateneo’:

Here I go, plunging into the storm.  
Let the umbrella turn inside out.  
Soak the office shoes in the rain if necessary.  
Shrink the not-unshrinkable trousers.  
  
I won’t shrink.  
Not me, even if I’m blown like a clothesline  
And soar like a scream – (34)

That Tinio identified with the anti-Romantic Bagay group of Tagalog poets who eschewed explanation or analysis to concentrate on description, reaffirms the fatalist mood of his poems in this collection.

The second poet of the collection, Jose F. Lacaba, was born in 1945 and wrote journalism in English in the 1960s. In 1979 he also attended the University of Iowa International Writing Program, when he was already a well-known Tagalog poet. Lacaba has also been a magazine editor, and a prolific screenwriter involved in a number of important Philippine films.

Whether in English or Tagalog, Lacaba’s language is universal. In his ‘Letter from father to son’:

We talk about many things,  
and we have nothing to talk about.

We talk about a lot of things,  
trivial things,  
yet never talk about  
what’s close to the bone.

You are flesh of my flesh  
blood of my blood  
but don’t show me  
what’s deep in your heart.

You have nothing to whisper  
and I have none to ask. (64)

The humanly familiar continues in ‘The old’:

The children leave one by one  
till only the old remain.

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*Transnational Literature* Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017.  
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One by one the children leave –  
O time after all is fleeting. (54)

Lacaba can also evidence a lyricism recognisable to Western classical tradition, as in ‘Maria Makiling’:

Throughout the land the news has spread  
struck dumb she hugs her knees.  
Our nymph to the wilderness has fled.  
She loves a faithless boy. (61)

The little that I have seen of Lacaba’s poetry elsewhere, has mostly concentrated on the mordant, even the humorous. I found his poems in this collection important, in that they indicate there is more to his work. These are poems that are reflective, lyrical, and appeal to human universality.

The third poet is Rio Alma, the pen name of Virgilio S. Almario. Alma was born in 1944 of a peasant background but was successful in attaining a university education in the Philippine capital Manila. As well as being a recognised poet, Alma has followed the same polymath path as Tinio and Lacaba, having been an artist, critic, editor, educator, translator and director and chair of a number of Philippine cultural bodies.

Nery describes Alma’s prolific output as impossible to fully represent in this book. However, Alma’s rural upbringing, closer to the natural world, can be seen here in a number of his poems, which is in contrast to those of Manila-raised Tinio and Lacaba.

In the longer poem ‘On Anxiety’ extremes of Filipino weather become metaphors for those of emotion:

Moreover, anxiety is the rainy season of the heart without a rainbow  
And the monsoon’s lash and the lightning’s slash is all you get.  
Morning eludes you,  
The lamp’s flame is a fallen prayer, whose voice ebbs, flickers; (84)

Such parallels continue in ‘My Mother’s Monsoon’:

Reclaiming the paddy field she advanced  
In her mildewed sleeves and faded gaiters,  
The cone hat her shield against many monsoons past,  
In fulfilment of that vow on my father’s death. (91)

In another long poem, ‘The Returning Herons’, images of farm and field are juxtaposed with those of domestic life:

In the foreground of the heron and the buffalo’s  
Intimate conversation, we see a fat rice stack,  
A ladle that worries over a boiling clay pot;  
A handsome maiden singing by the kitchen window;  
A schoolboy’s wrestle with pencil and paper. (95)

Nery also describes Alma as Neruda-like in his ambition, and as ‘many-stranded.’ The rice paddy, the palm grove and the monsoon, the wet and dry seasons of tropical South-East Asia, can be seen as one of those strands.

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There is an energy in the work of the three poets here that appears to have been brought through by the translator, rather than introduced by him. The soul of a poem, after all, is both its emotional and intellectual energy. To paraphrase yet another polymath, Walter Benjamin: ‘the task of the translator is to release in his language, the language of another; to liberate the language of a work, in his re-creation of that work.’<sup>2</sup> Nery, as the acknowledged poet he is and in working from one of his home languages to another, would have succeeded in such ways with his three poets.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator* (1968 English translation H. Zohn), in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 80.

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