Noli Me Tangere, translated by Lacson-Locsin

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Reading *Palabas*, one experiences, however vicariously, the joy and rigor of literary scholarship. Fernandez culls from ancient sources (the Spanish chronicles, letters, Retana, and Barrantes), from fellow scholars, teachers, and friends (Bienvenido Lumbera, Nicanor G. Tiongson) and from her own wealth of theater experiences—as reader, spectator, interviewer—to present a panorama of Philippine theater. One is impressed by the vast terrain mapped by the book, and is encouraged to explore regions yet uncharted—to retrieve and translate texts, to theorize on movements and forms, to produce criticism beyond the cursory review. *Palabas* makes engaging and instructive reading. Beautifully packaged, carefully researched, lucidly written, it is doubtless an invaluable addition to the canon of Philippine literary history. Indeed, it is itself a *palabas*—a showcase to delight and teach both the connoisseur and the curious.

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A new book is always welcome. If it is a new translation of an old one—in our case, a classic, such as Jose Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere*—expectations always naturally run high.

A translation is like a key that opens for us a door to a new experience. It is therefore an exaggeration to say like the old Latins, *Traductor traditor* (the translator is a traitor), for this ignores the labor of a translation. One has to be at home in both languages to express the same ideas in two different idioms, with a different syntax and spirit. And like the choice of clothes or of art, several translations of the same work cannot be compared, for here, we are now dealing with taste. Again as the Latins say, *De gustibus non disputatur* (tastes are not subject to debate).

But when you read a translation, you will necessarily cavil that certain phrases or incidents were not properly rendered. An example here is Chapter LXII, "*El Padre Dámaso se explica*." It is Chapter 63 in the new translation, which is based on the facsimile printed by the National Rizal Centennial Commission and includes the chapter on Elias and Salome omitted in the Berlin edition (Berliner Buchdruckerei-Actien-Gesellschaft).

The chapter opens with these lines:

In vain are piled on a table the expensive wedding gifts. Neither the diamonds, in their blue velvet cases, nor the *piña* embroideries, nor
the bolts of silk, attract the eyes of Maria Clara. The young woman sees, without seeing or reading, the journal which gives an account of the death of Ibarra, drowned in the lake.

This is a key incident which Maria Clara holds on to in order to avoid marrying Linares, and later motivates Simoun in Rizal's second novel (El filibusterismo) to mount a revolution. Its translation is therefore crucial. Would one accept a translation such as this instead?

In vain are piled upon a table the precious wedding gifts: diamonds in their blue velvet cases, embroidered pina, silk cloths—not one of these draw Maria Clara's eyes. Unseeing, unreading, the young lady looks at the daily carrying news of the death of Ibarra drowned in the lake.

In the same chapter we have the dialogue between Fray Damaso, the friar who turns out to be Maria Clara's biological father, and her. The friar confesses he "abused everyone and everything (... abused de todo)," a key phrase which is rather weakly translated as "abused my position."

In other words, one of the colonial problems Rizal wanted to settle was the racial discrimination that relegated the native-born to a lower social rank. Unfortunately, the tendency is to focus on the priest's sexual aberration and miss its deeper meaning. And one indeed can sympathize with a father loving his child, even if the former happens to be a priest. But to exploit and abuse an indio because of his birth was immoral. Moreover, Spanish law also considered the indio as a citizen of Spain equal to the peninsulares. Like Rizal, many Filipinos were better educated, richer, and of nobler sentiments than many of the latter. And yet, as exemplified by Fray Damaso, certain sectors of Philippine society had no qualms abusing their position in order to maintain their racial superiority. Once more, the translation here is very crucial indeed.

I have pointed out examples of how I would modify the present translation. But actually a translation mirrors one's personality. It is, in a sense, a form of creative writing, although one's genius is limited to a book already finished. It is, in another sense, harder work than an original creative work, for which genius is allowed to soar freely.

Despite my personal reservations, many who are not at home with Rizal's Castillian style will congratulate the translator for a work well done. In this translation, Soledad Lacson-Locsin has tried to preserve the rhythms and cadences of the Spanish original, and generally succeeded. Another thing worth applauding is the somber cover and the book design done by the artist Felix Mago Miguel.

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