Ferrying Across Memories: My Personal Memories and the Fashioned Memories of Ferdinand Pisigan Jarin's *Six Saturdays of Beyblade and Other Essays*

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ABSTRACT

This review criticizes and celebrates the translation process done by emerging Filipino author John Leihmar C. Toledo in translating Ferdinand Pisigan Jarin's collection of personal essays of coming-of-age in *Six Saturdays of Beyblade and Other Essays* (Penguin Southeast Asia, 2023). This also ferries between the reviewer's personal experience of becoming in the margins of the city and connecting it to the fashioned narrative in the translation. The translated book is not far from the original Filipino. Albeit written in a seamless universal English influenced by Singaporean editors, it is a very Filipino collection of essays, capturing the essence of the environment, the relationships, the language, hardships and

triumphs of a Filipino growing up in the province, moving to Manila, and after a loved one's passing, hopefully moving on. The spinning Beyblade described in English becomes a poignant symbol of the afterlife of the source text, as language and as story of the "art of grief."

Keywords: literary translation, creative nonfiction, personal essay

Translation has always been tricky. You feel like a writer on a mission, wanting to ensure that your next audience would appreciate the text as you have enjoyed it in its first language. The weight of the words of the translated text rests on matters of equivalence, naturalness, and effect. One of the most challenging processes in literary translation is discovering an equivalent meaning, idiom, or figure of speech in the target language even if the context is a bit different and sometimes, disorienting. It is an act of "encoding the meaning and form in the target language by means of the decoded meaning and form of the source language" (Owji, 2013, 2.1.1.).

If the author is alive, it would be a little easy as you can refer to them back and forth. Not minding the fact that the author might be suspicious of your understanding. In the case the author is dead, you might think in fact, that it is easier but book critics who have read it in the first language will probably be more critical of the text. As the author cannot defend it, the literary translator assumes the reader reads again the text for the first time in another language. Those encountering the text for the first time in their second language will give their own meaning to the text, by finding their own voice within, and suddenly the text seems to have a life of its own. As Walter Benjamin (1923) asserts in his essay, "The Task of the Translator", the translation is an *afterlife* of the text. It may open new doors to meaning or new understanding of the text in a new life, "a transformation and a renewal of something living" (p. 256), or a sort of archetypal reincarnation. The literary translator becomes both a reader and a creator, breathing life to the text. It resonates in National Artist for Literature Gemino H. Abad's concept of writing as an act of translation. He says to translate is "to carry the world over the language, to ferry across the words of the language, the wonder of nature, the miracle of living" (Jarin, 2023, p. 29).

As in the act of ferrying across, the act of literary translation creates connection between two islands, two spaces, two different kinds of earths, that are textured in language and culture. It is most evident in the *Six Saturdays of Beyblade and Other Essays (Penguin*

Southeast Asia, 2023) by Ferdinand P. Jarin, translated by John Leihmar C. Toledo. I have read the original title essay in its source language, "Anim na Sabado ng Beyblade" in Filipino, albeit hurriedly, and took notice of the Filipino casual or conversational register that was used in telling the story. The personal essays span a period from the 90s to the 2000s depicting the bildungsroman or coming-of-age of the protagonist, the author himself depicted as the narrating persona, from his humbled origins in Zamboanga, his provincial life, his family nostalgia, his struggles as a child of a single mother, to his becoming a man and a father. This new version of the book in English attempts to achieve the voice of the different personas and the mood of each piece from the source text. It is a collection of essays in English by a narrating persona, still Jarin, but not in the language of Toledo, attempting to voice different figures as Jarin have depicted in his bildungsroman: a friend, a father, a husband, a brother and grandson growing up in both the city of Makati and the province of Zambales.

The most enjoyable part of the book for me is reading about the unsung towns in Zambales like Quinabuangan and how one forgotten town, erased by urbanization today, manifest in one's memory. Since I have no such memories, I revel in getting to know Jarin's grandparents and their daily rituals in the essay "D'Pol Pisigan Band", and the small-town band characters and the places and events they play in. In one part, the translation would gladly narrate, "We'd join our cousins and uncles to go fishing, or we'd do some crabbing by the river using our feet" (Jarin, 2023, p. 3). Another shows how "The rice field and the large mango tree became our little plaza" (Jarin, 2023, p. 5), and how "every summer vacation, the marching band would fill the streets with their vibrancy at the fiesta" (Jarin, 2023, p. 13). It is very close to Filipino hometown experiences such as fiestas, the rural life, and rural spaces. Toledo's translation did not disappoint in attempting to achieve naturalness in expression but still preserving the culture of the place. One striking evidence that preserved Jarin's Filipino culture is the translation of "bokadura" which did not have a direct equivalent in English. Toledo's translation to "lipping" shows this intricate process of

blowing a trumpet becomes more connected and authentic to the act of playing a band instrument,

> One after another, we blew the pitch of 'do' on the mouthpiece and aimed for the longest breath hold. At first, it sounded amazing but later on, the sustaining note broke. It was a sign that we were out of breath. Also, we had to check the tightness of our snout and lips blowing on the mouthpiece. This was the key to knowing if we were right or wrong in lipping to get the pitch. (Jarin, 2023, p. 10)

Another instance where Toledo attempted to preserve Jarin's memory of his culture is found in the description of food. Here in the essay "Homecoming", the title being a free translation as well from the original Filipino essay "Quinabuangan", the narrator, a young Jarin, reminisces his childhood home and his friends by sharing a delicious memory of fish delicacies that re-imagines it being told to a global audience:

> We were not well-off like the other families in Quinabuangan. That's why Michael and I had an assigned chore in our grandparent's house. We'd get water, cook rice, pick up pieces of firewood for cooking, and buy food from the market. We'd join our cousins and uncles to go fishing, or we'd do some crabbing by the river using our feet. Uncle Jun and Uncle Genie would sometimes do the *mangingilaw*, which is what they referred to as catching tons of fish and crabs in the evening at Quinabuangan. They would wake us up in the wee hours of the morning to boast of their catch and sometimes we would dress the wounds they got. If there was no catch at all, we'd eat *monamon*—anchovies called dilis in Manila, stewed in mangoes and bagoóng. It is also made as a kilawin,

> served as a dish in drinking sprees. Sometimes we would eat small fishes called *terong*. Some believe them to be yellow tail fusilier fish because of their similar red underside and shape. Like the *monamon*, the *terong* was also stewed in mangoes and bagoóng. (Jarin, 2023, p. 3)

Six Saturdays of Beyblade and Other Essays remains faithful to the skopos of the Filipino source text where Jarin finds answers from his memories so he could understand his present, fashioning father figures to his transformation into a man and father himself. Register shifting in the text did not seem to be that challenging for the translator, as they easily switched from happy to melancholy while retaining the local flavor that can be savored by the reader. As poignant as the storylines of "Homecoming", "D'Pol Pisigan Band", "Baclaran" and "Six Saturdays of Beyblade", you could feel the happy-go-lucky theme and go-with-the-flow banter of the characters with the rest of the stories and yet, be assured that these were all written by the same person. In one scene from the essay "Service Crew", Jarin shares a funny story about his experience as a service crew in a fast-food restaurant and Toledo attempts to keep the joke by making the Filipino term "plastik labo" into "plastic blur" instead of "plastic bag":

> Where else to hustle but to 'steal' food again. Before leaving the kitchen, we wrapped the spare rice in 'plastic blur' which is of course illegal. It would simply be tucked into our boots and under the heel. The rice was hot, so we simply tiptoed as we went to the dining area. (Jarin, 2023, p. 98)

In another anecdote in the essay, Jarin would mention the names of Michael Jordan and Hakeem Olajuwon, famous basketball icons. Toledo keeps these names and extends it as a funny joke in context:

> After pay day, it was also common for somebody to come in with a strong hangover, irritable and

> almost exhausted, finish a gallon of Michael Jordan and Olajuwon and purge the alcohol with chicken butt. Some managers also knew this because some of them, I would say, joined in these trips. A few days later, you would hear many of them borrowing money because their daily budgets had depleted. (Jarin, 2023, p. 99)

Toledo succeeds in using the same tone for these, much like Jarin had.

Growing up in Lakandula and Zaragosa streets of Tondo, Manila, I am more acquainted with the slums of North and South Harbor while living right next door to Divisoria, a sprawling market where products of all kinds start their journey here before going all over the country. But I grew up speaking English in this part of Manila where I was endearingly called 'spokening dollar' in our community or speaking in 'dollars' as in the American currency. My mother was a public-school teacher, and she deemed it best for me to have English as my first language to serve me well in the future.

Reading *Six Saturdays of Beyblade and Other Essays* transported me back to my childhood in our Tondo apartment where I understood everything in another language and yet I knew the people around me were not Americans. They were Filipinos expressing themselves in another language but with all the nuances of the Filipino culture. As everyone around tried to converse with me in my first language, I was trying to understand their first as well.

In the opening essay, "Homecoming", I encountered "That's why Michael and I had an assigned chore in our grandparent's house" (Jarin, 2023, p. 3). Only to discover in the next sentence that there were several chores for them. But in Filipino, this is probably 'kani-kaniyang gawain,' (each has his own set of chores) and therefore does not warrant pluralization of the word chore. It was also amusing to read about "my shoes would always smile to show

its teeth, meaning my little toes inside" (Jarin, 2023, p. 4). In Filipino, when the outer sole has separated from the body of the shoe this is often described as 'nakangiti na sapatos' or smiling shoes, a situation common in developing countries, especially in the rural areas, where one's footwear are not just hand-me-downs, but are worn until the soles are paper-thin and your actual foot sole can feel the ground.

Another essay, the "D' Pol Pisigan Band", featured Jarin's passion for music, as his memory traverses between small-town music played by a local marching band in Zambales and his experiences as a player in a wannabe rock band. The word "bombo" (drum) was in the same context as "trompa" (horn). I used to hear these words from my late grandmother in describing the "musiko" (can mean to be the band or the musician) during town fiestas and pronounced as "mosiko." Jarin wonderfully describes it in this passage, "In the early morning, one by one, members from neighboring towns, taken by rented car. We were the last ones to reach - a privilege of Tatay as the bandleader" (Jarin, 2023, p. 15), is somewhat incomplete in English, but in the original Filipino makes perfect sense. Or the run-on sentence, "In fact, I am still frightened of peeking inside caskets and avoid this by inviting somebody to chat and drink with me" (Jarin, 2023, p. 16), which is a very conversational, storytelling-like way of talking in Filipino. And this is where I started to feel that the translator's intent is to make the reader feel as if they were reading the original author's work. In interpreting the voice of the source culture in the target language, including these nuances makes the text more than interesting, it is a delight to encounter in reading. It also shows the tension the translator had to negotiate and resolve between faithfulness and creativity in the translation. The decisions made by Toledo all point to achieving a faithful representation of Jarin's story while still communicating it naturally in the translated language of a Southeast Asian reader.

This type of translation approximates what Peter Newmark (2006) calls communicative translation. In contrast to semantic translation which attempts to render exact contextual meaning of

the source language, communicative translation attempts to produce an effect on its readers as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original (Zheng, 2018, p. 628). This book is the translator's first and from his background of being a creative non-fiction writer in both Filipino and English, Toledo was able to reproduce emotions, culture and nuances in the translated version.

Sentences such as "The breath had stopped for the trombone" (Jarin, 2023, p. 20); "Children would divide in two groups" (Jarin, 2023, p. 5); "It was here that they would often emotionally request their favorite songs, which Tatay would immediately command us to find the tune of, especially the pieces we hadn't rehearsed" (Jarin, 2023, p. 15); and "I was more of an eavesdropper than them" (Jarin, 2023, p. 18), among others, clearly feature the Filipino way of everyday speaking. In his notes, Toledo wrote, "I was in awe of the roughness of language. How was this guy able to write such coherence amidst the very messy language of the streets? Honestly, it had lots of fragments and run-ons, but people loved it!" (Jarin, 2023, p. 130). It was this rawness that appealed to the audience in the source language, and which appealed to a translator like Toledo as well.

Recalling Venuti's advice to "not skip an introductory essay written by a translator and read it first, as a statement of the interpretation that guides the translation and contributes to what is unique about it" (Venuti, 2004, par. 16.), gave me a better understanding of how Toledo negotiated his translation. He wanted to introduce the global audience to "talented essayists in Filipino and for the readership of the text to transcend boundaries, and if were forced by colonialism to read Western writers, why can't we be read by those outside the country? Especially those that challenge their (West) writing style in the language of the streets" (Jarin, 2023, p. 130).

Some instances where the translation challenges the hegemony of standard English is evidenced in the attempting to speak in Philippine English. In "The Ship," the discourse marker

'eh' or 'e' is nice to read in "E, what? Do you want me to order your mother to pluck the grass on the fields?" (Jarin, 2023, p. 27). "E" (a Filipino discourse marker pronounced as "eh") is a very commonly used filler in everyday Filipino conversation. The familiarity of the way the conversations are constructed makes it a very relatable text for the reader. It also retains much, if not all, of the Filipino culture confined in those words, as he has approximated the voice of Filipino slang and conjunctive adverbs. This is what Lawrence Venuti means when he says, "social and regional dialects, slang and obscenities, archaisms, neologisms, jargons and foreign borrowings tend to be language specific" (Venuti, 2004, par. 10).

Another instance is found in "Service Crew" in the passage, "Who would want to eat in a restaurant, where the service crew smiled like their teeth were chainsaw massacred?" (Jarin, 2023, p. 94). At first glance, one may think it was a literal translation, but the choice to emphasize "chainsaw massacred" is to keep the comic tone from the source text. A foreign reader might do a double take on this one, but a Filipino will get it straight away as this only means terribly crooked or misaligned teeth. Or how about mentioning Uncle Telmo's house as a code for "motel or motorists hotel" that lets clients stay a minimum of three hours for short time, just enough to have a round or two of sexual intercourse? These translational negotiations show that Toledo naturally invites the reader to be part of the Filipino community by sharing these inside jokes within the Pinoy culture. Inclusion of footnotes might be appreciated by international readers as we wouldn't want to gatekeep the cultural nuances described, especially since translators have always performed the crucial role of cultural go-between, even at the risk of transforming what is foreign into something familiar or simply irrelevant (Venuti, 2004).

I, of course, reminisced about my college days when I used to work for a fast-food joint in Alabang, a barangay in Muntinlupa City, and lived with an aunt in Fort Bonifacio. But as I was luckier than the writer, my stint was just a summer job designed to teach me the value of hard work. My aunt was the area manager of the

said food company, hence it was not that difficult to secure a position, but I did have to clean the toilets, during 'closing.' Which is no wonder why my favorite shift was 'opening,' when the store was clean smelling of either deepsol or divoklens, our trusty cleanser and disinfectant. Mornings were when hardly any customers were about, and if any, they were still in a good mood, smiling and could pass on all these good vibes to us workers. My station was where all the rice meals then were assembled plus the spaghetti and 'palabok.' Though unlike the writer, who was eating and drinking food from the store, all I remember was having an 'edis' or employee discount and we'd make sure to use it on paydays when we'd splurge and treat ourselves to food our colleagues specially 'made' for us as paying clients. I do remember accidentally tipping over almost a liter of hot water from a large container into the spaghetti sauce. Looking for help from my male colleague in the kitchen, he immediately aided me by taking the water container and instructing me to quickly mix the water in the sauce. I guess that day yielded at least 10-15 extra servings of spaghetti sauce.

The title piece in the collection, "Six Saturdays of Beyblade", is the most painful and poignant to read, in either language, because I can relate as a parent. I can't help but tear up in some parts that show how sacrifices were made by parents for their children. I could feel the pain and despair within the text. Dialogues with the interjection 'ha' such as "Kapitan, thank you for the donation, ha!" (Jarin, 2023, p. 123); and using bitter gourd or bitter melon to describe a hopeless or losing position in "Thank you, compadres! Drinks on me next time. Just eat bitter gourd for now" (Jarin, 2023, p. 123), clearly show the real situation in Filipino communities in times of crises and how they respond to it.

Similarly, I could hear the very distinct Filipino accent in my neighbors' English in Tondo as they sometimes struck up a casual conversation with me. I could see the neighborhood boys crowding over a game of spiders, slapping their thighs or each other's shoulder as soon as a winner is declared. I could taste the fried 'baga' or lungs I used to eat at a vendor's cart in front of the bakery where we would

get our weekly 'monay' and daily 'pan de sal.' And I could feel the camaraderie that I experienced with neighbors I grew up with in the 'eskinitas' or alleys of Tondo, which I longingly look for in a gated village in Quezon City.

The last three paragraphs in the piece were reminders as well of how Toledo negotiated and stayed sensitive to the language of the Filipino original. To express the unfathomable grief and acceptance that Jarin wrote in the piece, Toledo has to turn to poetry in the last few paragraphs in attempting to write the final piece,

> It was the sixth Saturday when Rebo left the hospital. It was the last Saturday his loved ones saw him.
>
> The Beyblade and their owner are gone now, laid to rest in the coffin. They journey into the afterlife, where there is no sickness, no hunger, and no suffering. Peacefully gyrating and turning. Spinning endlessly in bliss.
>
> Meanwhile, those of us left behind grieving on earth will continue to survive and learn the art of grief. (Jarin, 2023, p. 128)

The core of the stories in *Six Saturdays of Beyblade and Other Essays* are found in these last three paragraphs. This is the story of Jarin focalizing Rebo, his son, who died of leukemia. Rebo's battles are recounted in the last six Saturdays, through the metaphor of the Beyblade. After months of struggling with cancer, Rebo accepted his fate and chose to end chemotherapy. The afterlife mentioned in the ending is like the spinning Beyblade. Toledo consciously compares the Beyblade to the act of translation itself. The "art of grief" is not an exploitation of the grief to be sold in public as a form of commodity. Here, Toledo paints the grief of loss of the narrating persona like the grief of Gilgamesh who in his loss of his companion and beloved goes through the five stages of grief, an epic journey

that ends in acceptance. Those of us left behind continue to live, and tell the story in its new forms, in its afterlives.

Translators are never invisible, so in reading a translated work, it is like reading two authors at the same time (Harman, 2017). And sometimes, even if their intent may not align perfectly (Powell, 2022), at some point there is convergence. Toledo first translated the title essay and successfully published it in the 2021 winter issue of the *Asymptote Journal*. This translation may have happened because of the success of the book in its source language as Yasir Suleiman remarks that "publishing is a commercial enterprise; publishers are looking for books that will sell with their target audience. They need to take into account the horizontal expectation of their own readers in English" (Obeidat, 2014, par. 3). But nevertheless, *Six Saturdays of Beyblade* is one hell of a read.

Maybe it was serendipitous for me to have encountered the translating author in this lifetime and for him to ask a review from me without knowing my childhood in Manila or even my first language as we met in a Filipino writing workshop several years ago. At the end of his Translator's Note, Toledo shares that Jarin kept reminding him "to keep the emotions intact, make the reader feel what is in the original and what it must have been to experience that memory" (Jarin, 2023, p. 131). And he has abided by it.

The translated book remains close to the original—so close that, if I were to estimate, I would say, just inches apart. Toledo has staked his claim by insisting on the very Filipino tone and shades in his English translation. The book is a collection of essays in English, but it is as Filipino as my next-door neighbor in Tondo, capturing the essence of the environment, the relationships, the language, hardships and triumphs of a Filipino growing up in the province, moving to Manila and after a loved one's passing, hopefully moving on.

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