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A Poetic Vision of Love and Loss

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I consider myself very fortunate to have had occasion to deepen my appreciation of the work of the Indonesian poet Amir Hamzah (1911-1946) through the medium of this beautiful and enigmatic poem – a poem that, in its multi-layered complexity, lends itself to a variety of interpretations. In what follows I reflect on the very personal response to “Barangkali” that has informed my translation.

Soon after embarking on the project I began to feel that the key to an integrated interpretation of the poem could lie in its final two lines – lines that, in their tone of sombre introspection, stand in dramatic contrast to the rest of the poem. This feeling was strongly influenced by what I knew of Amir Hamzah’s biography, and my reading of those final two lines led me inevitably to the pivotal crisis in his life: his decision, at the age of 26, to abandon a pioneering literary career in Jakarta – and his beloved Javanese sweetheart Ilik Sundari – and dutifully return, at the behest of his aristocratic Malay family, to an arranged marriage and an administrative role in the court circles of a Sumatran sultanate.

“Barangkali” was first published in 1937, at the time of Amir’s fateful decision to return to Sumatra. Could it be that in those final lines he is thinking of himself – or at least his life of poetry and love in Java – as an ocean wave [gelombang] that, after flinging itself [membanting diri] exultantly through the surf, now lies washed up on the shore [pantai] of eternal regret?

The penultimate line offered no resistance to a straightforward, word-for-word translation: “Perhaps, dying [mati] along the shores of the heart”. “Shores”, however, seemed unsatisfactory for considerations of both prosody and euphony and, after long deliberation on possible alternatives, “margins” floated up into consciousness. This not only satisfied the demands of the formal constraints, but brought together the geographical, anatomical, psychological and emotional associations so beautifully evoked by Amir’s “pantai hati” [margins of the heart]. Then, viewing those final two lines in the context of the whole poem, I began to see the first four stanzas as an extended invocation in which the poet is praying for a visionary – and perhaps final – experience of the “plunging ecstasy” he feels he is about to lose forever, just as a drowning man is said to “recall” [kenang] or “relive” his past experience.

Having decided to adopt this narrative outline as the structural skeleton of my translation, I was faced with the challenge of attempting to translate the richly textured and living substance of “Barangkali” from the linguistic/literary/cultural context of Indonesian-language poetry into that of English-language poetry – with the emphasis on *poetry*.

Starting, then, with the first word of the poem, the question immediately arose: Who (or what) is the mysterious entity being addressed through the personal pronoun “engkau” [you]? Used familiarly in addressing social equals or inferiors, but also in addressing God (who is above all social distinctions), “engkau” here seemed to refer to a heaven-sent spirit of love both personal (lying dormant within the poet’s heart) and universal (extending throughout the created world).

Here, too, may be echoes of the poetic trope, familiar to Amir as both scholar and translator of oriental mystical verse, in which earthly romantic love can serve as a type or symbol of union with the divine. And to me, the curious image of the arch of an

eyebrow [alis] providing a haven for the heavenly spirit in its microcosmic manifestation suggested nothing more than a telling sparkle in the eyes of the poet's sweetheart.

As I proceeded, Amir's acute sensitivity to the poetic potential of the then-nascent Indonesian language [bahasa Indonesia] became increasingly apparent. Reflecting, then, on certain linguistic correspondences between Indonesian and English – particularly in their hybrid heritage and phonemic structure – I began to wonder if these correspondences could be exploited as linguistic “bridges” in the translation process.

The first stanza offered opportunities for experimenting with these inter-language correspondences. The second line has two distinct halves: the first half, “akasa swarga” [firmament of heaven], comprises two Sanskrit-based words, while the second half, “nipis-tipis”, is a reduplicative combination – for emphasis – of two Malay words meaning “thin”. The connection with the language of the gods and the long, open vowel sounds of “akasa swarga” combine to evoke images of an infinite celestial realm, while the homely Malay flavour and short, close vowel sounds of “nipis-tipis” bring us abruptly back to human dimensions. I tried to replicate this effect by juxtaposing the Greek-based “ethereal”, with its elevated, literary associations and extended vowel and diphthong sounds, and the more colloquial-sounding, shorter-vowelled “breath of heaven”, firmly rooted in Anglo-Saxon. And in the fourth line, I chose the words “linger below” in response to the effect created by the repeated [l] sounds of Amir's “terlindungi alis” [sheltered by an eyebrow].

The first two lines of the second stanza evoked the picture of a worshipper approaching the shrine of a deity. In isolation, the first line – literally “I carry you on (or above) my head” – can be read simply as one variant of a stock expression of obeisance, addressed to a ruler by one of his subjects or servants, and frequently found in the Malay prose romances and histories so well known to Amir. In the context of this poem, however, the poet could also be drawing on the figurative content of the expression, with its connotations of ceremonial worship and “offerings borne aloft”. His paean of public worship becomes an intimate, protective lullaby in the stanza's last two lines as his perspective on the object of his invocation moves from its universal to its personal aspect.

This enigmatic entity is apostrophized as “Gunung” [Mountain] in the first line of the third stanza. I pondered for days over words that might capture the symbolic significance of “Gunung” before finally settling on “exalted Presence” to suggest a mysterious spiritual being whose domain extends from the lowly human realm to the heights of heaven. Then, although the imperative “Bangkit” could be perfectly well translated as “Arise”, I chose an alternative meaning of the verb – “to inspire” – to express the poet's desire to be transported to those mystic heights.

The spiritual “Presence” now begins to assume an angelic feminine form as the poet enters on his supplication – delivered in picturesque detail throughout the rest of the third stanza and all of the fourth – for her to orchestrate that visionary, ecstatic experience.

From the beginning of the fifth stanza the poet's address changes direction, as signalled by the informal tone of “Mari menari” [Let's dance]. Consequently, I read the first two lines of the stanza as being directed towards the spirit of Ilik, his “beloved maiden” [dara asmara], begging her to join him in the celestial celebration and expressing his longing to hear – perhaps for the last time – her “most beautiful voice”

[swara swarna]. Then, in the final couplet, comes his dramatic descent from the heights of poetic rapture to the desolate “margins of the heart”.

The image of dying waves in “Barangkali” echoes a piece of poetic prose that Amir published in 1932 when he was beginning to establish himself in Jakarta as a new voice in Indonesian literature. In that piece, titled “Pujangga Baru” [The New Poet] (Jassin 56-57), he speaks of “waves dying along the shore” [ombak mati kepantai] when referring to the waning potency of Malay literary traditions – “sastra dewi” [goddess writings] – within a modern Indonesian literature turning increasingly towards Western models. But “wanderers from the land opposite” [kelana dari tanah seberang] eventually arrive in Java; they strike “the gong of memory” [gung kenangan] by brushing the dust off the old writings, rousing the “goddesses” [dewi] in their literary temples, and firing the hearts of the young with the deeds of the heroes of old. Those “wanderers from the land opposite” are Amir himself and other young Sumatran writers of the “*Pujangga Baru* generation”, such as Sanusi Pane, who sought to revitalize traditional literary themes, forms, and images.

Five years after the publication of Amir’s “Pujangga Baru” the symbolic literary significance of those dying waves is retained in “Barangkali”, now immeasurably enriched by their poignant reference to the poet’s own life and literary career. On his return to Sumatra Amir virtually abandoned poetry. Thus, while “Barangkali” may be read as a personal – and regretful – farewell to poetry, we can marvel that, from the bitter depths of that regret, he was able to conjure one of his most beautiful poems.

Bibliography

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Barangkali
By
Amir Hamzah

Engkau yang lena dalam hatiku
Akasa swarga nipis-tipis
Yang besar terangkum dunia
Kecil terlindungi alis

Kujunjung di atas hulu
Kupuji di pucuk lidah
Kupangku di lengan lagu
Kudaduhkan di selendang dendang

Bangkit Gunung
Buka mata-mutiaramu
Sentuh kecapi firdusi
Dengan jarimu menirus halus

Biar siuman dewi-nyanyi
Gambuh asmara lurus lampai
Lemah ramping melidah api
Halus harum mengasap keramat

Mari menari dara asmara
Biar terdengar swara swarna
Barangkali mati di pantai hati
Gelombang kenang membanting diri.

Perhaps . . .
By
Amir Hamzah
Translated by James Scanlan

You, who sleep in the depths of my
heart –
Ethereal – a breath of heaven –
Can enfold the world in your wide
embrace
Yet linger below the arch of an eyebrow.

I honour you with offerings borne aloft,
Your praises ever rising from my
tongue.
I hold you in my lullaby's embrace,
My song a shawl of woven harmony.

Inspire me, exalted Presence.
Unveil the pearly lustre of your eyes.
Waken the strings of the heavenly lute
At the touch of your delicate fingers.

Summon the goddess of song
– and the dancers –
The dancers of love
so straight and slender,
Lithe and graceful as tongues of flame
That perfume a shrine with incense.

Come to the dance, beloved maiden.
Let me hear that most beautiful voice.
Perhaps,
dying along the margins of the heart,
Spent waves relive their plunging
ecstasy.