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A Translation of Sapardi Djoko Damono's "Surat": Reflections on Context

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Sapardi Djoko Damono is known for his vivid lyrical poetry and translations of Rumi's poetry into Indonesian. His short story "Surat" (The Letter) (2000) is full of the kind of evocative and metaphysical imagery typical of his poetry. "Surat" is a woman's response to her lover's declaration of devotion in the form of "sepotong langit" (a piece of the sky) enclosed within a letter (Damono 140). My goal as a translator was to go beyond the surface meaning of the text and try to translate Damono's imagery and metaphor so that it not only makes sense but is beautiful to read. I asked myself: What does the imagery evoke? What kind of feelings? What kind of atmosphere? Image and metaphor are key in the translation of poetry and lyrical prose as the communicative purpose of these texts is to go beyond a mere exchange of information and evoke an emotive or spiritual response in the reader through meaning and poetic effects (Jones). Yet a reader's affective response to and interpretation of a text is not solely dependent on the language used. Social context, ontology and ideology also play a role. Thus, it stands to reason that a translation must also consider the personal, social, cultural and ideological contexts in which both the source text and translated text are embedded (Baker; Hanks and Severy; Munday). The language choices I made were informed by these reflections, as well as the context of metaphysical poetry, Damono's previous work, and the broader social context of current events.

In "Surat", Damono employs evocative poetic techniques which pose an interesting challenge to the translator. For example, the letter sent by the woman's lover was written on "kertas (...) yang berwarna merah jambu" (rose-pink paper) (Damono "Surat", 140). The term *merah jambu* refers to the pink colour of guava flesh and in Indonesian it has a lyrical feel as the vowel sound in the second syllable of *merah* is echoed in the first syllable of *jambu*. I couldn't find a term in English that mirrored this poetic vowel harmony, but instead of translating the term literally as "guava-red" I chose to translate *merah jambu* as "rose-pink" as that colour's symbolic association with romantic love induces an emotional response in the reader. Another instance of poetic effect in "Surat" is the use of the word *melahirkan* which can mean both "to give birth" and "to express (e.g. feelings)". Damono trades on this double meaning in the excerpt below:

[S]ering mendengar dari ibu betapa sakitnya ketika melahirkanku. Itulah kubayangkan dirasakan langitnya ketika dimanfaatkannya untuk melahirkan cintanya padauk.

(Damono 141)

I have often heard my mother talk about the pain of childbirth. That is how I imagined the sky felt when he cut away this piece, an embodiment of his love

(My translation)

Rather than translate the second instance of *melahirkan* as "expression", I used "embodiment" as I felt this choice of words reflected the corporeal, metaphysical nature

of the word's double meaning in Indonesian and evokes the violence of the idea of tearing away a piece of sky.

The metaphysical poets used extended metaphors to characterise intense feelings of love and lust as an intersection between the physical, corporeal world, and the spiritual. In one of John Donne's most well-known poems, "The Sun Rising", he writes, "To warm the world, that's done in warming us/ Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;/ This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere" (Donne 92). As the sun rises through the couple's bedroom window, its light and heat cannot eclipse the intensity of their romantic love and connection. The rest of the world pales in comparison to the universe contained within their bedroom. Damono's use of the sky as a metaphor for romantic love in "Surat" is metaphysical. The lover intended the inclusion of a piece of sky in his letter as an embodiment of his love and what could be more infinite and eternal than the sky?

This use of the sky as this overarching metaphor in the narrative is consistent with Damono's usual style. Themes of love and longing are expressed using imagery from nature, emphasising the eternal and inevitable quality of his feeling. Like the couple's love in "The Sun Rising", Damono's love is more epic and intense than anything in the natural world, even time itself. In the poem "Yang Fana Adalah Waktu" he proclaims simply, "Yang fana adalah waktu/ Kita abadi" (Time is fleeting/We are forever) (Damono, *Perahu Kertas*). In "Hatiku Selemba Daun" (My Heart is a Leaf) moments become an eternity, and in "Aku Ingin Mencintamu Dengan Sederhana" (I Want to Love You Simply) the force of love is greater than the forces that burn wood to ash, dissolve clouds into nothingness (Damono, *Perahu Kertas*). In "Surat" the sky is an embodiment of Seno's love, and yet the object of his love does not accept the conceit,

[A]pa begitu perlu menggunting seserpih langit itu, kalau sekedar untuk membujuk - katakanlah, memaksa - seorang gadis seperti aku ini agar yakin bahwa cintanya seperti langit itu. Langitnya pasti menderita.

(Damono 141)

Did he really need to cut out this fragment of sky just to convince - force, even - a girl like me to believe that his love is like the sky? The sky must have suffered.

(My translation)

To her, love is beyond metaphor, something she feels in her soul. Love is more powerful and true than the sky, so she cannot understand why it was necessary to desecrate it.

Although "Surat" was written well before these events, the context of the #MeToo movement also strongly informed my interpretation of the text. As I was working on my translation of "Surat", the allegations of sexual harassment and assault against Harvey Weinstein were emerging, which triggered a discussion about gender equality and rape culture in popular culture more generally. A recurring trope in many popular romantic films, books, short stories is the lovelorn male protagonist who will stop at nothing to win the woman he loves. Think of the Mark, the best man character (played by Andrew Lincoln) in the film *Love Actually* (Curtis, 2003), who arrives on the doorstep of newly-married Juliet (played by Keira Knightly) to declare his love through a series of Subterranean Homesick Blues-esque cue cards. While cast in the

narrative as grand romantic gestures, in light of the #MeToo Movement, these kinds of actions, the idea that the male protagonist can “win” the object of his desire if only he persists, can be reinterpreted as a form of sexual harassment. Damono’s story also turns this trope on its head. Seno’s declaration of love in the form of a piece of sky is reframed as an oppressive act of violence,

[A]pakah langit itu merintih dan mengeluarkan darah ketika diguntingnya?
Apakah langit itu kejang-kejang karena menahan sakit yang tak ada
batasnya? Apakah langit itu mengeras menahan air mata? Aku tidak berani
membayangkan penderitaannya.

(Damono “Surat”, 141)

Did the sky cry out and bleed when he cut it? Did the sky convulse because
it could not stand the pain? Did the sky try to hold back its tears? I cannot
even begin to imagine how it suffered.

(My translation)

Rather than accepting this gesture of “romance”, the female protagonist is haunted by the pain inflicted on the sky. She burns and destroys the letter and the piece of sky. And overwhelmed by suffering she ends her own life, “aku akan terus menunggu kobaran itu sampai diriku menjelma asap” (I will keep watching the flames until I myself turn into smoke) (Damono “Surat”, 143).

Whether as a reader you accept my interpretation of the text or not, the exploration of the intensity and depth of human emotion in “Surat” is extremely powerful, as it is in all of Damono’s work. I hope that my translation has managed to convey some of that complexity.

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Surat
By
Sapardi Djoko Damono

Tolong sampaikan kepada Seno bahwa suratnya sudah kuterima. Lengkap dengan potongan langit yang diselipkan dengan sangat hati-hati di lipatan kertas suratnya yang berwarna merah jambu. Menakjubkan. Langit itu, maksudku. Dan warna surat itu mengingatkanku pada masa remajaku ketika kami suka menghubungkan-hubungkan warna dengan maksud tertentu yang disembunyikan di balik surat itu. Sepotong langit, serpihan mega yang mengambang, sedikit ujung bukit yang kena gunting, dan beberapa ekor burung yang kebetulan melintas dan tidak bisa menghindarkan diri dari guntingnya itu.

Sambil terus melihat lembaran potongan langit itu, aku melongok ke jendela dan kusaksikan – sungguh! – bahwa langit yang di luar sana masih tetap seperti biasa. Utuh. Lengkap dengan awan putihnya, sempurna dengan warna kebiruannya, dan sesekali dilintasi juga oleh beberapa ekor burung – entah apa namanya. Aku hampir tidak bisa membayangkan apa yang terjadi dengan langitnya, setelah sebagian digunting untuk diselipkan dalam surat yang dikirimkannya kepadaku ini. Aku membayangkan rasa sakit yang tak ada batasnya yang telah menimpa langit itu, sementara sebagian pesonanya diambil hanya untuk menyiratkan cintanya padaku. Aku masih perawan, namun sering mendengar dari ibu betapa sakitnya ketika melahirkanku. Itulah yang kubayangkan dirasakan langitnya ketika dimanfaatkannya untuk melahirkan cintanya padaku.

Katakan padanya, apa begitu perlu menggunting seserpih langit itu, kalau sekedar untuk membujuk – katakanlah, memaksa – seorang gadis

The Letter
By
Sapardi Djoko Damono
Translated by
Sophie Revington

Please tell Seno I received his letter. And the piece of sky he placed so carefully between the folds of rose-pink paper. Amazing. The sky, I mean. And the coloured paper reminded me of when we were teenagers, when the colour of our letters held a special secret meaning. A piece of the sky. Fragments of floating clouds. The point of a snipped-off hilltop. And some birds in mid-flight that couldn't escape the scissors.

While I examined this piece of sky, I glanced out of the window and I saw - incredibly - that the sky outside was normal. Whole. Complete with its white clouds, its perfect blueness, and the occasional bird flying past - who knows what kind of birds they were. I could hardly believe what had happened to the sky. A piece of it had been cut out and sent to me in a letter! I imagined the unbearable pain the sky must have felt when some of its magic was taken away, just for Seno to express his love for me. I am still a virgin, but I have often heard my mother talk about the pain of childbirth. That is how I imagined the sky felt when he cut away this piece, an embodiment of his love.

Ask him, did he really need to cut out this fragment of sky just to convince - force, even - a girl like me to believe that his love is like the sky? The

seperti aku ini agar yakin bahwa cintanya seperti langit itu. Langitnya pasti menderita, tidak seperti langit di sini yang utuh dan entah sampai kapan tak habis-habisnya memandang dengan penuh kebahagiaan segala tindakan kita. Tolong tanyakan padanya, apakah langit itu merintih dan mengeluarkan darah ketika diguntingnya? Apakah langit itu kejang-kejang karena menahan sakit yang tak ada batasnya? Apakah langit itu mengeras menahan air mata? Aku tidak berani membayangkan penderitaannya.

Tolong katakan pada Seno bahwa aku sudah menghayati cintanya, tanpa potongan langit itu pun. Sudah. Hanya saja aku harus menghancurkan serpihan langitnya itu agar tidak memburu-buru bayanganku tentangnya. Tapi apakah itu sopan? Apakah itu tidak berarti mengkhianati cintanya padaku? Aku bingung, tapi bagaimanapun aku harus segera membakarnya, bersama suratnya yang berwarna merah jambu itu. Aku tidak tahan lagi membayangkan rasa sakit langit itu.

Malam ini kubawa surat dan gambar itu ke pekarangan sebelah; tak ada seorang pun saksi. Kurobek-robek surat itu. Kunyalakan korek api, tetapi kemudian aku tiba-tiba menjadi ragu-ragu. Kukumpulkan kembali robekan-robekan surat dan gambar itu, kusun seperti teka-teki potongan gambar, lalu kuperhatikan – dan seketika rasa sakitku bergolak, seperti apa yang kubayangkan tentang langitnya itu. Aku harus tabah. Harus. Tak ada pilihan lain. Harus membakar surat itu agar langitnya yang indah itu kembali seperti sedia kala. Maka kunyalakan korek api itu lagi.

Nyala apinya seperti bianglala: merah, oren, biru, hijau, indigo, violet. Tidak melengkung tetapi membumbung ke atas. Tetapi tiba-tiba saja aku merasa telah menjadi pengkhianat. Telah memusnahkan cinta, keindahan, harapan, dan masa depan.

sky must have suffered. Not like the sky here - whole, stretching for eternity, gazing down on all our comings and goings full of happiness. Please ask him, did the sky cry out and bleed when he cut it? Did the sky convulse because it could not stand the pain? Did the sky try to hold back its tears? I cannot even begin to imagine how it suffered.

Please tell Seno that I feel his love for me already, even without this piece of the sky. I feel it in my soul. But the thing is, I have to destroy this fragment of sky or my imagination will get carried away. But is it the right thing to do? Does it mean I am betraying his love for me? I am troubled but I know I must burn it as soon as possible, along with his rose-pink letter. I cannot bear to think about the sky's pain any longer.

So tonight I took the letter and the piece of sky with me into next door's yard; no-one saw me. I tore them up. I lit a match. But then I hesitated. I picked up the torn pieces of letter and sky and laid them out like a jigsaw puzzle. Then I remembered how I imagined the sky had felt, and for a moment my stomach lurched. I must be resolute. I must be. There is no other choice. I must burn the letter so the beautiful sky can be whole again. So I lit another match.

The light of the fire shone like a rainbow: red, orange, yellow, blue, green, indigo, violet. The flames weren't arched like a rainbow, but rose straight up. In that moment I felt like a traitor. I had destroyed love, beauty, hope, the future. I was the worst person in the

Telah menjadi manusia yang seburuk-buruknya di dunia, yang sejahat-jahatnya, yang entah apa. Aku tiba-tiba berharap agar dari asap itu muncul bayangannya, bagaikan burung punik yang dengan perkasa melesat dari kobaran api. Aku satukan jari-jari tanganku, kutengadahkan kepalaku. Kutatap tajam langitku yang dulu itu juga, yang tidak pernah mengkhianati harapanku. Tetapi api itu tetap membumbung, semakin mirip bianglala. Dan aku terus menunggu.

Sampaikan kepada Seno bahwa aku akan terus menunggu kobaran itu sampai diriku menjelma asap, menyatu dengan bianglala itu, membumbung ke langit yang setia, yang tidak pernah meninggalkanku.

world, the most evil, the most... I suddenly hoped that a vision would appear from the smoke, like a phoenix rising majestically from the flames. I clasped my hands together and raised my head. I gazed at my sky, how it used to be, the sky that did not betray my hopes. But the fire continued to blaze, looking more and more rainbow-like. And I just watched.

Tell Seno that I will keep watching the flames until I myself turn into smoke. At one with the rainbow. Rising into the faithful sky. The sky that never left me.