

Do Androids Dream of Electric Thesauruses?

Kong Ritthdee

Thai Film Archive

ABSTRACT—In this piece, adapted from a lecture at the Siam Society on 10 October 2019, the translator of Veeraporn Nitiprapha's *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth* reflects on the task of translating a very distinctive prose stylist.

The act of translation is exactly that: an act. A pretence, an imitation, a catch me if you can performance of linguistic sleight of hand and cultural approximation. A sort of theatre, a pantomime, a replica. A dance that the audience won't be able to pick apart, every little move unseen if the rhythm is fast or fluent enough, or if the choreography is effortless enough to make you forget, momentarily, that what you are watching is a second life of something else.

Neither a scholar nor a theorist, I approached the task of translating Veeraporn Nitiprapha's *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth* as an actor. Or a sensualist, or maybe a dreamer. Since I am not a native English speaker, the process of translating the novel involves a lot of *feeling* the Thai text and acting it out in an alien language. A performative quality of my translation was made possible, God help me, through a combination of mimicry, acquired spontaneity and deliberate camouflage of my non-native status.

The title of this brief article is ostensibly appropriated from Philip K. Dick's science fiction novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*—a gritty dystopian imagining of a future world where robot hunters track down and terminate androids, who believe that they have acquired human consciousness. They are artificial intelligence programmed to pretend to be human long enough that they really have become, or think they have become, human beings. The analogy came to me not long after I had finished the translation of Veeraporn's book: am I a Thai android programmed to function in English, an android who starts to believe that he could dream in English and thus achieve an English-based consciousness? Are all translators—Thai to English or English to Thai, or any combination thereof—androids, who strive to dream in the language that they are not supposed to?

This metaphysical enigma is beyond my untrained mind to unpack (not to mention that we can stretch this exercise further into how a non-colonised person could ever dream in a coloniser's language, an unpatriotic blasphemy!). To me, this “dreaming” or “acting” is an intellectual arch that spreads its formidable shadow across the entire project of rendering into English *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth*, a bestseller written with stylish aplomb. But in the end, in the day-to-day, sentence-by-sentence,

micro decision-by-micro decision physical and mental labour, the act of translating the book was to deal with the fundamental differences in linguistic construction between Thai and English, with which all translators of these two tongues must have been familiar: the no-punctuation nature of the Thai language, the pliability of the Thai that requires structural scaffolding in English, the endeavour to find the right equivalence of words, the puns, the wordplay, the tone, the colour, and the smell made palpable in words through cultural association.

So it's not enough to dream in English; I had to dream it in the same rhythm as the author is dreaming in Thai: Veeraporn's style is rich, lush, and breathless, as she strings words together and stretches the near lawlessness of her language to its poetic extreme where clauses, sub-clauses, narration and sometimes even dialogue sprout up next to each other:

It must have been the year Mother died, or sometime later, not long after Chareeya decided to pursue the career of a great explorer and patrol the orchards – which by then belonged to the neighbours – to collect samples of rocks, minerals, archaeological relics, fossilised monsters and unclassifiable insects of the Nakhon Chai Si River, putting them in an empty jam jar slung around her neck with a plastic magnifying glass borrowed from Grandma Jerd next door, her expeditions beginning at dawn when the garden was still wet with dew... It must have been around that time that Chareeya found the spider in the pomelo tree.

Veeraporn is a prose stylist, who is always happy to use one (or two or three) extra words to achieve an emotional crescendo or sensual elegance (here, detractors quickly snatch at the style-over-substance argument, but wasn't that crude distinction debunked a long time ago?). As a proud and fashionable literary stylist, Veeraporn does not use "difficult" vocabulary in the traditional or archaic sense. Instead, she plays with the elastic nature of our language by disassembling and reassembling familiar words, deconstructing and reconstructing them, toying with syllable, alliteration, homonym, internal rhyme, and other semantic devices:

ราวกับหยิบจับเส้นไหมบอบบางเอาไว้ได้แค่ปลายนิ้ว พลิกพลิ้วปลิวสะบัดอยู่กลางสายลมระรื่น แต่ไม่คาดฝัน กลับเลื่อนรื้นปลิดคว้างร้างหายไปตลอดกาล ท่วงทำนองงดงามค่อยๆทอดจบลงอ่อนหวาน... เสียงบัน

In Thai, the sentence has a series of compound verbs – พลิก+พลิ้ว+ปลิว+สะบัด and เลื่อน+รื้น+ปลิด+คว้าง+ร้าง+หายไป – with each one or two-syllable word carrying a meaning in itself and yet, when strung together, the new set heightens the melodramatic despair of the passage. In English, it is grammatically impossible to have six verbs in a row, or if possible, it would look clumsy, amateurish and unwieldy; but the impact of those compound verbs in Thai, when used masterfully, is the opposite. This leads to an inevitable frustration faced by all translators when they know they have to compromise.

... flutters in the wind and slips away without a warning to be blown away.

It was my intention from the start that I would try to stick closely to the structure of the Thai source instead of doing a “summary” of a paragraph. This meant I had to translate the book, if not word by word then phrase by phrase, clause by clause and sentence by sentence, like when you translate a poem. It is not always possible, and compromise is what all translators have to live with every day and night, like a haunting ghost that refuses to be reincarnated. “Fidelity” in translation is a complex concept that encompasses not just pedantry of literal meaning, but a matrix of other qualities that constitute the text as an entity, such as emotional colour, cadence, gesture, lyrical flow, poetic truth, the author’s intention to entertain or confuse or sadden, and so when a translator is forced to sacrifice one of those things for another, as I am sure we must on a daily basis as long as we still have a job, I think of Abraham and Isaac because whatever it is we end up sacrificing, it is all for the great of one God: the text.

As a text, what exactly is *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth*? Critics and scholars have dissected it, and naysayers have picked it apart, so I will leave it to them whether the triangulated tragic romance between Chalika, Chareeya and Pran is a straight-faced literary upgrade of prime-time soaps or a wry, winking parable of our melodramatic society. Translation is a form of close-reading. It is a recurring dream that translators wake up to every morning, and the ability to read and re-read that dream—in Thai or English or any other human tongue—is what eventually makes it come alive as an act that, hopefully, can attain a consciousness and become a breathing thing in itself.