The Defence of Lawino [Wer pa Lawino]

BY OKOT P’BITEK, TRANS. TABAN LO LIYONG
Foreword by S. Radithlao, preface by Taban lo Liyong, and glossary.
Distributed by African Books Collective Ltd.

Let’s start with an intriguing bit of literary archeology. Or maybe it’s just idle gossip. Back in 1974, in the preface to his book The Horn of My Love, Okot p’Bitek admonished his fellow writer and countryman Taban lo Liyong:

When, recently, my friend Taban lo Liyong wept bitter tears over what he called the literary desert in East Africa, he was suffering from acute literary deafness, a disease which afflicts those who have been brainwashed to believe that literature exists only in books. Taban and his fast dwindling clan are victims of the class-ridden, dictionary meaning of the term literature, which restricts literary activity and enjoyment to the so-called literate peoples, and turns a deaf ear to the songs and stories of the vast majority of our people in the countryside. (ix)

With an almost gratuitous slap, p’Bitek concludes the opening paragraph of his preface: “In this book I have presented the poetry of Taban’s own people, the Acoli of northern Uganda” (ix).

Maybe this all has little or nothing to do with the work at hand, but with the publication of this, lo Liyong’s translation of p’Bitek’s Wer pa Lawino (which p’Bitek himself translated and had published in English as Song of Lawino), lo Liyong could be said to be returning the favor. But in whose favor it works is open to question.

It would be wrong to think of this as another version of p’Bitek’s seminal Song. This is very much lo Liyong’s Lawino. For it is not just the title that has changed—which is significant in itself—but what we read is so very different from p’Bitek’s “original” English translation. Lo Liyong himself presents this as a corrective, a truer version of p’Bitek’s Acoli original: “Song of Lawino is a watered down, lighter, elaborated, extended version of Wer pa Lawino” (ix). Lo Liyong writes that he is most interested in maintaining the “philosophical tone” and “gravity” of p’Bitek’s Acoli original: “When faced with the dilemma of elucidating a point prosaically or recasting the point poetically, I have opted for rendering meaning rather than soaring poetically” (xvi). Is ever so stark a choice laid before a poet?
This preference for explanation over song seems to reflect more an ideological positioning than a reasoned reflection on the limits of craft or even faithfulness to the original text (a text that lo Liyong is at great pains to laud in his introduction). Consider the matter of the title itself and lo Liyong’s recasting of the work as a “defence” in place of “song.” Lo Liyong’s loose translation of the full title of p’Bitek’s Acoli original—Te Okono Obur Bong Luputu: Wer pa Lawino—is distressingly bloodless: “Lawino’s thesis: The Culture of Your People You Don’t Abandon” (x). And in many respects, lo Liyong’s Defence reads precisely as such: a defense of an academic thesis presented for committee review (compounded by Lo Liyong’s decision to label each “chapter” as a “submission”). Yet a check of the few Acoli dictionaries available has wer defined as “song.”

This is not to say that there are not parts and passages of lo Liyong’s translation that “soar poetically,” and where lo Liyong’s presentation outstrips p’Bitek’s own English rendering. There are such passages, such choices made. lo Liyong’s Lawino touches on something more evocative than p’Bitek’s own in the following passage:

I listen to this party talk and it does not satisfy me.
To begin with the party uniforms are variegated in colour and cut:
Some are dressed in long robes like witch-doctors of God
But they’re rough and wild with one another. (Defence 85)

Here is p’Bitek’s own English version:

I do not understand
The new political parties.
They dress differently,
They dress in robes
Like Christian diviner-priests
But Ocul treats his brother
As if they are not relatives (Song 104)

It almost seems that with lo Liyong’s last two lines, he has allowed himself the freedom to fully, and completely—in the broadest sense of the word—translate p’Bitek’s work. Yet the passage also points to one of the real, obvious, poetic flaws in lo Liyong’s translation (though one he as much acknowledges when he admitted opts for the prosaic over the poetic): Lawino’s language. Granted, lo Liyong does not see Lawino as an uneducated bumpkin—it is very much against this that lo Liyong (and p’Bitek, for that matter) defends her—but there is something a little bit off in the use of “variegated.”

This disconnect crops up time and again, though I do wonder how much of this is conditioned by my own familiarity with and affection for p’Bitek’s Lawino, a Lawino much more explicitly presented as a “simple” woman, though no less intelligent for it by any means; and how much is conditioned by the lack of poetry in the feel of the following lines: “They sound cacophonous to my ears” (63); “Inverse inferiority complex forces him to grab foreign ways” (21); “If these would not induce eructation, then push your finger down your throat” (101); the “wish you had never hatched this freak” (41), though perhaps none is more stark than hearing the “girls’ voices as they ululate the aria” (49). That last example sings, it is true, but it stands so starkly at odds with what has gone before: it reads
as an almost incidental and unreflective clasping of “foreign ways,” of a damned
syncretism.

The more troublesome (and poetic) failure of the work is the clunky literal-
ness over which so many of lo Liyong’s lines stumble. Take p’Bitek’s “original”
rendering of Lawino’s impression of Clementine, her husband’s new wife:

And when she walks
You hear her bones rattling,
Her waist resembles that of the hornet.
The beautiful one is dead dry
Like a stump,
She is meatless
Like a shell
On a dry river bed. (40)

Here is lo Liyong’s Lawino:

My husband-sharer walks like a person whose life-force is detained
Like a ghost, she walks without audible steps!
There is no enthusiasm in anything Tina does;
All said, she is incapable of feast-cooking for a crowd.
She looks sickly, but it is actually hunger!
She doesn’t eat, claiming food makes her fat!
She claims the doctor’s order is for her not to eat
She’s now twiggy, her bones rattle as she walks. (7)

That stanza, so compressed in p’Bitek’s version, continues for five more lines in lo
Liyong’s Defence. Yet, p’Bitek’s rendering says as much as as forcefully, and more
even, than lo Liyong’s drawn-out exclamations. There is in lo Liyong’s lines an
earnestness and desire to explicate that characterizes the entire work, and that,
poetically, does not compare well to the understated yet cutting irony of p’Bitek’s
meatless beautiful one.

One feels The Defence of Lawino much more often as translation (“husband-
sharer”) than as poetry. It is up to others to determine the veracity of lo Liyong’s
translation—how closely in word and spirit his work hews to p’Bitek’s Acoli
original. And as dependent as lo Liyong insists he is on the original, repeatedly
asserting that he did not revisit p’Bitek’s English translation once he was into his
work on Defence, one wishes that he and the publishers had seen fit to include the
Acoli original in this version. But as poetry unto itself, and compared to p’Bitek’s
own English-language original, this latest iteration at best labors.

WORKS CITED


Heinemann, 1984.

—MARK L. LILLELEHT
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON