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Two Filipinos Poets

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Review Article

Two Filipino Poets

I

Upon reading PORO POINT,¹ or Alejandrino G. Hufana's *Anthology of Lives*, one recalls Edward Arlington Robinson's gallery of eccentrics. The setting is different and the rhythm more uneven. The mood is that of an ever-widening grin—not compassionate; the image-making words are rather typical of a contemporary of the Angry Young Men. But if Robinson showed a "liking for the ingeniously full statement of small detail, a kind of statement which tends inevitably toward the quality of parlor verse and which may degenerate into mere cleverness", then Hufana may be said to show an excessive liking for the laboredly full statement of small detail (heaped up to the point of clogging the reader's mind), a kind of statement which tends toward the squalor of red-roofed verse, degenerating into abused obscurity.

Yet, since there is probably not a man alive who considers whatever he says "well said", the man who tries to say what he has to say well deserves praise. Besides, the real poem is larger than the experience of any given reader as it contains the possibility of more experiences than any one reader could get from it no matter how many readings he

¹ PORO POINT. An Anthology of Lives (Poems 1955-1960). By Alejandrino G. Hufana. Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1961. 274 pp.

gives it. This should make any critic humble and non-absolute.

Nothing else does what poetry does, and that is why poetry is so valuable—not simply for what it does, but because what it does is so unique. And this is why men are so fiercely critical of poetry. We can tolerate only the best; we reject the commonplace and the untrue. What is unesthetic on account of over-ornamentation or immoral on account of excessive revelling in deformities, we disdain.

Poetry invites attention in a way no other kind of discourse does. Its function is to startle into perception, to persuade that its subject is worth attending to. To fulfill its function it has a number of legitimate devices such as formal metre, the "illusion of reality", tropes, etc. Obscurity, too, is one such device. If it is used to force the reader to give the poem the close attention it requires, its use is justified. However, when it is exaggerated or improperly handled, it may be classified with the unsuccessful metaphor and the dangling participle.

In *PORO POINT* the device of obscurity fails more than once, sometimes because the reader is left guessing about the missing link or clue, sometimes because the "will that churned alone" remains unrewarded. Where there is no depth to be gauged or no discovery to be made, why should the reader stop?

In the 172 poems (including the prologue, the epilogue and the closing song—not the sermons) assembled in three *Tomes*, Hufana gives expression to his reactions and observations concerning his fellowmen: *Tome I—Citizens* (62 poems); *Tome II—Pilgrims* (57); *Tome III—Family* (50 poems). It is to be feared that these expressions of human experience will be dated before the experience proper will have lost its timeliness. For there is neither depth nor timeliness in this Filipino *PEYTON PLACE*, as there is none observable in *THE SINNERS OF ANGELES*, Pampanga.

The sermon introducing *Tome I* has as keynote: "Brethren, You Have Nothing Else to Gain", which is reempha-

sized by such lines as " Poro Point is a product of anything save love" (p. 19) and "Bridegrooms desire, as in singleness, to be selfish" (p. 20). An utterly barren feeling is the result of the reading of some of the poems of this series and an all-pervading disgust at the many "gutter" lines.

... the idiot comes
To her, kwak-kwakking for his mother's milk

Fashioner of Wings, p. 45.

The moon is no relief as with its light
It shows the sickled fields, their odors reaped
That may bring her the sweat of bare-backed boys,
And also the streets bereft of boys who once
Discharged their bladders on pedestrian lanes;

Girl Without Boy, p. 46.

This proves that custom, while it may be good
When folks demand "will-being," Colcol says,
Will—, not *well*-being, is poor show of wealth
Though it contends to fill the blasted nest
And stuff the babies pink and spirit-full;

Heretic Making Dividends, p. 48.

Yes, PORO POINT is satirical poetry and satire, it must be said, is among the less noble forms of poetry, though it may be one of the most useful. It hits powerfully at entrenched evil and built-in stupidity. It may be used either for the purpose of personal revenge or in the public interest (according to John Dryden). Though the first purpose may not seem acceptable to all, it admits of reservations. The second reason needs no justification: "Tis an action of virtue to make an example of vicious men."

If satire is to succeed as a surgical operation, it must emerge out of firm conviction and a great amount of bitterness in its producer. Few are the men who possess those two qualities to the same degree as Swift and Pope. Satirists have to be obsessed by their rage, nearly driven mad by it, and yet capable of coldly bending it to their artistic ends. Poro Point may be as badly in need of a surgical operation as Peyton Place or Angeles, Pampanga; however,

unconvincing satirical writing has the effect of a cackling hen—no one listens, though the egg is laid.

The sermon introducing Tome II gives as keynote: "Alas, Welcome and Do Feel at Home." "We are here so occupied by the cycle of waking, sweating, eating and stupor/ That we forget that there is such a good as greatness..." (p. 108) and other statements to the same end make one conclude that the sermons are indictments of the *life* as lived at Poro Point—generalized; the poems are indictments of the *lives*—individualized.

The characters of Tome III are introduced with the sermon, "To You A Meddler is Born". Here are more poems that satisfy in their description of character, their rhythm and the recapturing of the experience of someone's lifetime. There is Aunt Luz in "Like a Lark at Noontide". The movement is swift and graceful until it is end-stopped with a four-line surprise clincher.

Aunt Luz, as noon slides to the western clouds
Stops singing as she now locates a gift
Which seems of no use yet or ever afterwards—
A cage so woven it is almost delicate.

Aunt II—Like a Lark at Noontide, p. 208.

There is Grandfather Imong who "can swim on a dare all morning long/ And on a bet can dive down to the afternoon ... " who must have been drunk

To topple in the drink, storm-at-sea or not
And, toothless, there, he must have bitten off
Some chunks of sharks before his bitter turn.
As my grandmother's yawn as big the bite
On my grandfather that the empty howl
Of dogs has driven us to witness and redeem

Grandfather I—Fisherman Overboard, p. 214.

And Cousin Zenia, too, has the power and the talent to appeal.

... her words
Cannot quite come up to her face that seems
So many faces all at once— a girl's

A lady's, then a boy's, a gentleman's
So common and so very — she is
A larger feature than that which is clear
Illumination

Fourth Cousin — Master of Ceremonies, p. 223.

In general the poems are about the human person whose self and whose experience are seen by a cynic, who has unlearned to look for goodness or greatness and for whom this world is just the habitat of male and female—and that is that. As in the greater number of modern novels, there doesn't seem to be anything in this world which is holy or unholy to this cynic. The world is neither wasteland nor morass; there is no possibility of encounter either with the Fisher King or with the damned god. All the old lessons have been unlearned and now the mothers are killed by the wings of idiots who played angels in processions and the virgins are no more.

"Poros Point is a product of anything save love."

It could have been said as well in prose, if not better, for prose is mundane whereas poetry is supramundane and one always expects of it that it will proclaim "Eternity as an event", point at something "beyond appearances" and "utter somewhat above mortal mouth".

II

No ultimate judgment can be made of a book or an epic when only one third of it has been published. *BARTER IN PANAY*, Book I, consists of 11 cantos which sing of the establishment of the Bornean Settlements in the Visayas.

Though it may seem surprising that today—six years after Ginsberg's beatnik "Howl" manifesto was published—someone would conceive the plan of writing a folk epic in the style of long ago, it is still more surprising that a 1962 reader—harried as he is by the speeded-up rhythms of 1962 motors, by the noise of 1962 combos and by the threat of

² *BARTER IN PANAY*. An Epic. By Ricaredo Demetillo. Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1961. 132 pp.

1962 radioactive waves—can be carried away by the slow-motion thrill of an epic on the barter of Panay.

The miracle is that he *is* swayed by the rhythm—"lapped by the gentle motion of the waves" (Canto I, stanza 8, line 5, p. 3), "undulated in the breeze" like the bamboos; *is* caught up by restless sulkiness of Chief Sumakwel's sensuous wife, Kapinangan, the fierce good will of "bare-breasted" Marikudo, the wisdom bred from "hard-won" lessons in Brunei of "grave-eyed" Datu Puti, the calm decisiveness of Sumakwel and the brash vehemence of young Gurong-gurong.

An epic is based on what has happened in history or what men think has happened, as in legend and myth. To recreate the experience of the past with freshness and freedom requires great skill; it makes heavy demands on the memory and the imagination of the artist. Ricaredo Demetillo seems to succeed in giving the reader the "illusion of reality" which consists here in giving the illusion of actual experience of a past reality.

Measured by the norms to which all great epic poems correspond, this epic stands approved. It is a poem, extended in length, narrating an action of power and interest, centered about a single hero (Sumakwel). It has as its generic motive: to excite admiration; and as its essential note: the overcoming of great difficulties. It is purely objective; its action is broader in scope and freer than that of any drama; its characters are in the thick of the action and associated with the national memory and the religious traditions of the people for whom it is written. The great heroic adventure is related in detail with as much historical, geographical and spiritual background as possible to give it more significance than any isolated incident could ever have. The profound moral truth it embodies is as true as the adventure itself; namely, the Aetas as well as the Bornean settlers were all for peaceful settlement.. As such, the epic confirms the most striking native traits and links them back to their primitive origins: calm wisdom, love of peace, hatred of bloodshed, sense of honor, and hospitality.

Just as the dactylic hexameter was the inevitable meter for the epic narrative in Greek and Latin, so iambic pentameter has proved to be the most satisfactory rhythm for sustained narrative in English. The iambic pentameter is a very pliable measure: its movement suits the story, the sessions of the councils, and every story-in-the-story.

With that I slashed at him, but with a bound
He closed in, and his left clutched at my wrist.
His own blade traced an arch, but as it came,
I also caught his wrist and wrestled him.
Braggart he was, abuser too and churl,
But he was strong and cunning, too, I found,
For as we strained, he butted with his knee
And half my wind was knocked out from my lungs.

I fell upon my back on wet, soft sand.
He catapulted through the air, his knife
Aimed at my throat, but as he hurtled, I
Rolled to one side. His blade but sheathed in sand.
He drew it forth, and swang it for a plunge
But I, with quicker motion, threw the sand
Right at his eyes, and while he rubbed it, thrust
My knife. The blade cut to his evil heart.

Canto X, stanzas 40 & 41.

Thus Marikudo describes his fight—in the best manner of the heroic tradition—with the evil Kusganan who had lusted after Maniwantiwan, daughter of the tribal chief and future wife to Marikudo.

The poet makes full use of the typical epic "outgrowths": episodes, simplicity of construction, unity of action in a limited period of time, repetition of phrases, compounds and epithets. There are the spume-fenced lands (p.1); the gore-soaked soil (p. 1); the black-skinned Aeta (p. 35); the brief-trailed life (p. 41); the sand-wet shore (p. 74); the pot-black hands (p. 93); the fine-craved frame (p. 93); the leaf-fringed pools (p. 114) and the sweat-soaked side (p. 129).

A poem succeeds when it achieves what it sets out to do. This epic was written "to project the racial urges and desires for freedom, righteousness, and justice for the people." It will depend on the unpublished Books II and III for final determination as to whether this aim has been achieved. Judging from the subject matter—the tragic relationship between Kapinangan and Gurong-gurong and Sumakwel's romance with Alayon, a chastened Kapinangan—this reader fears Books II and III will be more erotic than heroic. However, another land may yet loom from the fog.

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