

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## Epifanio San Juan, Jr. as Poet

L.M. Grow

*Philippine Studies* vol. 40, no. 4 (1992): 522–530

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

## Epifanio San Juan, Jr. as Poet

L.M. Grow



It is certainly safe to say that Epifanio San Juan's reputation rests on his literary criticism. Although controversial (Casper 1974, 109 and 1968, 70 and Demetillo 1974) it has earned him a place in the forefront of contemporary critics of Philippine literature. San Juan's poetry is less well known, though anthologists have placed him in very select company. His "Fragment" appears in *A Doveglion Book of Philippine Poetry in English*, assembled by the exacting Jose Garcia Villa. Four of San Juan's poems were included in the special Summer 1964 issue of the *Beloit Poetry Journal* which, according to the editors, "is a culling of the best works from a vast assortment of materials gathered for us by the Publications Program of the Asia Society" (p. 3). Casper selected two San Juan poems for *New Writing from the Philippines*, quite a distinction since only eleven poets are represented. Valeros and Valeros-Gruenberg (1987, 199) note that San Juan's poetry had had modest, but certainly not inconsequential success in literary contests: "His 'Kundiman XL' was awarded honorable mention in the 1964 *Talaang Ginto* Contest, poetry division, and his 'Isang Pangkaraniwang Dalaw' and 'Ekliipse ng Buwan at Araw sa Nayon ng Montalban' both rated honorable mention in the same contest the next year."

### San Juan as Poet

Critical assessments of San Juan's poetry are few and far between, however, and the scattered criticism that has been done is far from a chorus of admiration. Nandakumar (1959, 340) asserts that "San Juan's *Antichrist* is a provoking commentary," but "provoking" is ambiguous. Is the poetry irritating or thought-producing? Hufana (1963-64, 48) is laudatory, but his approbation is only focused on one poem. "Canticles to the Beloved's Rising." "The *tour de force* in diction here is appreciable. It recalls especially in the combinative pe-

nultimate and last lines, that of Hart Crane in *The Bridge* . . . " It is precisely diction that Casper in "Haggle" sees as a weakness:

In place of *Godkissing Carrion's* occasionally obsolescent language there is in *The Exorcism* a sophisticated coloration-by-saturation which defines rather than disguises the obsession with vulgarity underneath a non-literary crudeness this time. Usually graffiti are terse; many are inventive; the typical poem in *The Exorcism* is neither, though it reads like a pathetic, nervous, acrylic splash (not a scrawl) on a washroom wall. (Casper 1969, 60)

Casper is disappointed not only with "the slapdash violence of form" and "the unrestrained excesses of color and imagery," but also "the poet's lack of development," the sort of growth Demetillo (1962, 335) was obviously anticipating: "Ernest Manalo and Epifanio San Juan are finding their voices, as our other young poets. San Juan has gusto, but the language, lacking restraint, does not hew close to the experience as yet."

Granted that *Godkissing Carrion*, if we take literally its subtitle *Selected Poems 1954-1964*, covers the years from 15 (not 16 since San Juan was born on 29 December 1938—Valeros and Valeros-Gruenberg 1987, 198) to 24, it is initially very suprising, that a steep curve of development is not visible. One inclusion in the volume (hereafter referred to as GC), "Her Face," is dated 1952 (GC 44). Nor is GC the only case in point. "Ballad of the Honeysuckle Rose," published after GC, sounds like undergraduate tomfoolery. Even a poem much more seriously rendered, such as "Commitment," has a cuteness about it that is almost ingenuous:

Mayakovsky's suicide  
Possessed us like that tailing "'s"  
Of his namé above.

Scholars have explained  
This phenomenon:  
Its grammar,  
Its aesthetics.

But Mayakovsky is our kin:  
We also reek  
Of incense  
And formalin.

Casper and Demetillo are correct. San Juan's promise has remained unfulfilled, I think for the same reason that Villa has produced wonderful opening lines but has been unable to sustain that level of achievement throughout most of his poems (see my "Calibration" for details)—San Juan has never found his metier. Casper (1969, 60) attempts to contextualize GC: "it could reasonably be interpreted as an allegorical commentary on Philippine politics, in the tradition of Goya's graphics." But this is as specific as the amorphous nature of GC permits Casper to be. Casper's "Introduction" to the volume is cautious, even wary, in this regard, as qualifiers such as "appears" and "presumably" indicate. "Much of the poetry of Epifanio San Juan appears designed for the walls of a charnel house. . . . His are dark, gothic angels barely sensed in the high gloom, making ambiguous motions in the shadow-play of vigil-light on stone wings. The presumably human figures move in a medieval dance of death . . . (v)." Lacaba (1970, 39) is even less able to pinpoint what San Juan's work is all about, classifying San Juan as a "Phoenix" poet. However, Lacaba never really answers his own question: "What is Phoenix poetry?" except to note its salient characteristics: "And with 'phoenix' come marching in similar-sounding, similarly 'burning' words: 'matrix,' 'genetrix,' 'onyx.'" After citing San Juan's "The Dream of the Rose Window Or, The Three Temptations" (1970, 39-40), Lacaba adds that the Phoenix poets conceive of "poetry's proper music" as "bardic chanting" (1970, 40). The only way out of this genre uncertainty may be to apply Casper's comment about San Juan's poetic *personae* to San Juan as poet: "even San Juan's 'songs' are plaints or quests for identity" ('Introduction' v).

### The Lyric Voice

At times, San Juan seems to be groping for a lyric voice—the titles "Epithalamion," "Song," "A Bawdy Tune," "Pastoral," and "Envoi" suggest that direction, and at times he comes close to finding it:

#### Dialogue of the Mind with Itself

Sweat flowers her windy face;  
Her body on the rocks is blown away  
On dark hoofbeats. Her brows  
Are the surf, as she sways

On a broken sea-shell blown  
Under the wheels that wind and spin — (GC 8)

**Lux Et Lumbra**

Still boughs float  
on the water. . . .

Sunlight creeps and curves  
round your arms —  
a leaf hangs in the air.

Lip move not.

Your arms lift and poise  
in the air —  
a leaf hangs where  
still boughs float:

What dark fingers fell?

Lights kiss the water  
and caress the air,  
plunge in deep shadows  
moving far away. . . .

Sunlight creeps round your arms  
and curve in prayer. (GC 48)

But lyric interludes are rare in San Juan. He easily drifts into dullness by simply writing uninspired prose in the form of verse:

I wake and watch the danger in the dance  
And dive of light—what disaster  
Awaits my lady's casket?  
There's only the judgment of the abyss;  
What other deep forfeitures? (GC 2)

His worst moments come when he puts a poem together the way a mason might lay stones, carefully but mechanically contriving the structure:

Exorcise the ire of Eros  
And desire what mystery  
Can reveal the abyss  
That undermines the self (GC 4)

Alliteration has been forced, at the expense of both sense and melody. At times the sacrifice, especially of sense, is only momentary, as in "Pigs that feed on kin will scale the fathoms of philosophy"

(GC 6). This mixed metaphor puts us in the position of accelerating in reverse gear. Carried further, this contrivance approaches the ludicrous:

Up in the eagle's catapulted nest  
When night staggers like a burnt-out fuse

We gather the worn-out edges of our flesh; (GC 30)

"Catapulted nest"? "Night staggers like a burnt-out fuse"? "The worn-out edges of our flesh"? When San Juan turns up the intensity, he produces sound without music, as the jackhammer touch exhibited here well illustrates:

Come, my ghostly lady, drive down and ravish  
This heart convulsed with orgiastic fire

Kindled from operation of wanton shades -  
Obscured from light I make a discipline  
Of quantum identities, as oil-gear'd tides  
Relentless, slam my lady on the vortex-spin. (GC 41)

### The Comic Voice

By 1967, when *The Exorcism and other poems* hereafter referred to as *EP*) was published, San Juan had developed a new note, though I think quite by accident. The discordant, hyperbolic imagery was so pronounced as to create the incongruity between matter and manner necessary for comedy. At some points the humor is more latent than blatant; e.g.,

The wind chimes' torrents unleash  
Undulating taut nerves, tautening  
Exhausted bodies rung beyond  
The strict protractions of love:

Our souls embedded, bedded, dead  
Awake at tintinnabulations —  
What runs, winds, across the ceiling?  
Only the rhythms of your desire (*EP* 13)

The oxymoronic status of "unleashed/undulating taut" gets us started. We continue with "tintinnabulations" (rather at odds with "torrents"), the associations of which, carried over from Poe's "The Bells," are out of keeping with "taut nerves." We conclude with the anticlimatic line. "Only the rhythm of your desire" as an answer to the question "What runs, winds across the ceiling?" The reader might well assume, before coming to the last line, that "cockroach" will be the answer.

But in a fair number of other spots, the boffo is full-blown. "To Bell, Who has Abandoned the Streets for a Steady Job as Mistress of a Multimillionaire" is interlarded with lines like "I knew your ambiguous oval face somewhere in the halo of Bikini Atoll" (EP 1). Not only does this sound like the winning quip in a put-down contest, it is replete as well with double entendre. One meaning might be "You're so ugly that your face looks like the landscape after the atomic bomb was dropped on it." Another possibility depends on a zeugmatic sense of "Bikini Atoll." On one level the reference is to the Marshall Islands, but on another level to a woman's two-piece bathing suit. On this level, "oval," "halo," and "Atoll" coalesce. All refer to something round and flat. Is this a derogatory description of a shapeless, flat-chested figure? The possibility is enhanced by the obvious female symbolism of an atoll's configuration. As a glance at a dictionary will confirm, an atoll is "a coral island consisting of a reef surrounding a lagoon" (EP 56). Hyperbole is next: "But our tongues—paralyzed knives—froze in acetylene kiss" (EP 2). Beyond the phallic overplay of "knives" is the one-upmanship of the Cavalier poet's "my mistress's lips are freezing fire." The next line informs us that "At night we watched trajectories of jet-propelled fireflies." (Are they *that* fast?) A bit later the narrator reflects on their relationship: "Love? Nay, only hemorrhoids of pathos." This sounds suspiciously like spoof, as does the penultimate line "But my winged sperms will hover forever in your wax boudoir."

Although this is hard to top, the entertainment supplied by EP is hardly exhausted. In "The Loves and Deaths of Vladimir Mayakovsky," San Juan manages to turn serious social commentary into something befitting a comic book: "While B-52 pterodactyls zoom in from Vietnam horizons—/Zoom—Zoom . . ." (EP 18). Did he absolutely have to add "Zoom—Zoom" to the *Star Wars* effect of "B-52 pterodactyls"? The next poem, "Icarus Grounded But Nature Abhors the Womb's Vacuum," treats us to "He never knew this athlete of idylls, troubadour Vladimir, prophet by TKO/whose ghost

will parachute from the stratosphere, his heart impaled on a phallus" (EP 20). "Athlete of idylls"? A ghost parachuting, "heart impaled on a phallus"? Is this the ultimate in the tug-of-war between love and lust? Closer to the poem's end is "Your eyes, Vladimir, are embalmed gas jets/tied to the radiator of your solar plexus" (EP 22). This congeries of dissonance, featuring "embalmed gas jet" eyes and "the radiator of your solar plexus," might rival the "winged sperm" in the "wax boudoir" line for sheer uproariousness. And there are other rib-ticklers. "Speech Against Destroyers" provides "The headless horseman, reins unleashed at crossroads. /Runs aground. Forgive that spouse!" (EP 24). How can a horseman (presumably terrestrial) run aground? Surely the mode of transportation susceptible to this sort of calamity has to be aquatic. Does "reins unleashed" indicate ship's engines stopped or full speed ahead? What is our spouse to be forgiven for? Perhaps he lacks "winged sperm" at the moment. After all, the poem does have the dedication "o lente lente currite noctis equi" and the narrator shouts that "Phantasmagoria rapes your innocence!" (EP 24).

Following hard on the heels of "Speech" is "The Assignation." The opening "luminous image of the Dance of Shiva" (EP 24) deteriorates by poem's near end into "I see the glare of your electric smile" (EP 25), and along the way we discover that "there are no hives for lovers" (EP 24). "Hives"? Is this the "hemorrhoids of pathos" which to "To Bella" exposed? Or is a beehive meant? In the latter case we have either a buried phallic/vaginal image combination (the bee inserts himself, including his stinger, into the hole in the nest) or an explanation for the lady's "body scarred with kisses" a few lines later.

These comic productions may well be unintentional, and they are usually not sustained. But that San Juan can fabricate a tonally consistent bit of wit is amply evidenced by "Gather Ye Rose Thorns Again?" The title's "Gather Ye Rosebuds" variant sets the stage, in this case a nightspot where a man tries to besiege the fortress of the lady's virginity. At first the narrator tries the "classy" approach by urging the lady to "listen to the zither's mimicry" (EP 3). Here alliteration is functional, not forced, and of course it is the perfect vehicle to convey the idea of mimicry. He tries to ply her with alcohol and exhortation: "But for you? Nothing? Why deny yourself and the music?" Soon, however, he becomes impatient: "This nightclub's not open all night, nor all morning." Frustrated, he turns to another ploy:



Ah, no more psaltery, harpsichord,  
 Nor virile organ for you; but a plain scratchy jukebox —  
 Or perhaps your taste goes for the ukelele with one string? —  
 For the long hot nights of summer solitude  
 Dreaming of idylls in the eastern garden, only to wake  
 In the damp rainy nights of your virginity. (EP 3-4)

But the fortress survives the siege: "(Yak! not *carpe diem* again now it's closing time!) (EP 4).

### Conclusion

Although many readers will find San Juan's poetry repulsive because crude—even gross—it is his humor, if anything, which is its saving grace. If Cruz's (1952, 10) judgment that "The kind of humor which makes use of ludicrous situations and amusing characters has not been cultivated by the writers but has been confined almost exclusively to the oral literature" remains true, then San Juan's contribution to Philippine poetry is clear. If San Juan's humor fits the "pornographic" category of Mallari (1952, 55), then San Juan's poetry may be considered a disvalue. Nonetheless, San Juan's forte is somewhere in the territory that Quemada (1954, 54) long ago staked out: "The poetry in which Filipinos can excel is that which walks the middle road between the aspects of intellectualized Occidental poetry and such aspects of Oriental poetry as quaint lyricism, and the richly suggestive economy of Japanese verse." Perhaps "Love is a Four-Letter Word" (EP 16). Perhaps "your sex, a pneumatic drill, /Recoils with a prophylactic" (EP 29). But "These ruins still conceive a stillborn breathless bliss" (EP 4).

### References

- Casper, Leonard. 1968. Review of *The art of Oscar Wilde*, by Epifanio San Juan, Jr. In *Solidarity* 3(8): 70-71.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1964. Introduction. In *Godkissing Carrion: Selected poems 1954-1964*, by Epifanio San Juan, Jr. Cambridge, MA: Concord.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1969. A haggle of Filipino poets: 1966-1968. *Solidarity* 4(3): 53-64.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1987. The critic of Philippine literature as provocateur. In *Firewalkers: Literary celebrations 1964-1984*, ed. Leonard Casper, 107-19. Quezon City: New Day.

- Cruz, Emilio Aguilar. 1952. Filipino humor. *Philippines Quarterly* 2 (June): 9-12.
- Demetillo, Ricaredo. 1962. *The authentic voice of poetry*. Diliman: University of the Philippines Office of Research Coordination.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1974. Kill the father(s) to go to bed with Mao or Epifanio San Juan, Jr. as critic. *Solidarity* 8(7): 67-76.
- Grow, L.M. 1987. Jose Garcia Villa: The poetry of calibration. *World literature written in English* 27: 326-44.
- Hufana, Alejandrino G. 1963-1964. Impressions on Filipino verses and verse-making in English. *University College Journal* 5: 35-61.
- Lacaba, Emmanuel. 1970. Image and music in Philippine poetry. *Solidarity* 5 (3): 38-41.
- Mallari, I.V. 1952. Background of Filipino literature. *Journal of East Asiatic Studies* 1 (January): 53-58.
- Nandakumar, Prema. 1959. The Philippine literary scene. *Indian P.E.N.* 25: 337-41.
- Quemada, David. 1954. Major influences on seven leading Philippine poets in English. *The Siliman Journal* 1(1): 43-55.
- San Juan, Epifanio, Jr. 1965. Ballad of the Honeysuckle Rose. *Lines* (March): 11-12.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1960. The dream of the rose window, or the three temptations. *Harvard Advocate* 144 (December): 14.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1964. Dialogue in the Dark. *Beloit Poetry Journal* 14(4): 25-26.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1964. *Godkissing Carrion*. Cambridge, Ma: Concord.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1964. Portrait of a lady. *Beloit Poetry Journal* 14(4): 24.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1964. The stature of the native man. *Beloit Poetry Journal* 14(4): 26.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1964. Testament of lovers on an antique manuscript. *Beloit Poetry Journal* 14(4): 24-25.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1965. Commitment. *Radix* 1 (Summer): 12.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1965. Fragment. In *A Doveglion book of Philippine poetry in English: 1910-1962*, ed. Jose Garcia Villa, 48. Manila: Florentino.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1966. A fable for innocents. In *New writing from the Philippines: A Critique and anthology*, by Leonard Casper, 299-304. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1966. Voyages. In *New writing from the Philippines: A critique and anthology*, by Leonard Casper, 268. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1967. The Exorcism and other poems. Manila: Paritikan.
- Valeros, Florentino B. and Estrellita Valeros-Gruenberg. 1987. *Filipino writers in English (A biographical and bibliographical directory)*. Quezon City: New Day.
- Webster's seventh new collegiate dictionary*. 1963. Springfield, MA: Merriam.