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## "Hufana in Excelsis": Dredging for Poetic Nuggets

L. M. Grow

Alfredo O. Cuenca, Jr. has managed, by dint of two titles for the same book review—"Hufana in Excelsis" and "Alex in Wonderland"—to encompass the differing critical reactions to the literary works of Alejandrino G. Hufana.<sup>1</sup> Amongst Hufana's admirers are Francisco Arcellana; The Committee on the Humanities, University of the East; Florentino Dauz; and Guillermo C. De Vega.<sup>2</sup> But more numerous and generally more vehement are his detractors, including Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.; Teofilo Del Castillo Y. Tuazon and Buenventura S. Medina, Jr.; Ricaredo Demetillo; Esperanza V. Manuel and Resil B. Mojares; Sister Marie-Laurentina; and possibly Leo Cullum.<sup>3</sup>

Of the *aficionados*, however, De Vega can probably be put aside as not being in position to render objective judgement, since his remarks are part of the front matter of one of Hufana's books. In two other cases, the claims for the stature of Hufana's verse are so hyperbolic that they become suspect as a result. Arcellana makes the incredible statement that "with the De Vega epic, it [*Poro Point*] must take its place as the most important work of verse in the Philippines today"(11). By 1977, when Arcellana published *Poetry and Politics (Part I)*, in which this statement appeared, Philippine literature in English had produced, just to name a few outstanding collections, *The wounded Stag*, by Bienvenido N. Santos; *After This Exile*, by Manuel A. Viray; *Prose and Poems*, by Nick Joaquin; and *Selected Poems and New*, by Jose Garcia Villa. These are works of the first rank in Philippine literature; it is unimaginable that any well-schooled reader, much less literary critic, would rate *Poro Point* above them. The claim that it does simply will not survive examination, even if we limit ourselves to Philippine epic poetry, granted fair consideration of Ricaredo Demetillo's *Barter in*

*Panay* (which also appeared long before 1977). Likewise Dauz' position, though initially moderated, is also unsupportable:

Professor Hufana's contribution to poetry in this country is most valuable; perhaps more than that of any other Filipino poet, except Villa. (1974, 233).

He is in more ways than one a far greater poet, a greater dreamer, and a more masterful craftsman than that equally gifted writer, Nick Joaquin. (235)

The most charitable interpretation here is that "greater" is intended to take account of scope and bulk. Joaquin has produced no epics, whereas Hufana has written four: *Imelda: A Tonal Epic*; *Poro Point*; *Sickle Season*; and *Sieg Heil*. Joaquin has only two modest-sized collections of relatively short works, of which one (*Prose and Poems*) has only a small poetry section, and the other (*Collected Poems*) reprints some selections from *Prose and Poems*. On the other hand, Hufana has published, besides his epics, three other collections: *Obligations/Cheers of Conscience*, *13 Kalisud*, and *The Wife of Lot and Other New Poems*. Obviously, however, a quantity criterion, even if this is what Dauz had in mind, is untenable. Were it to prevail, as the bromide goes, Robert Southey and Robert Service would have to be preferred to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The only unassailable and unqualified endorsement comes from the Committee on the Humanities, and it only is applied to two lines in *Poro Point* (1961, 251). Demetillo finds excellence in a few places in a few poems (1962, 284–85), but overall the valuation is resoundingly negative. His assessment is seconded by a formidable array of critics.

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J., is especially forthright: "Hufana, it seems to me, is just grinding out propaganda. And I don't see any discipline with him, any structure" (quoted in Bresnahan 1992, 94). But Fr. Galdon's candor is not unique:

In substance powerful but in language graceless and difficult. (Del Castillo y Tuazon and Medina 1966, 403).

*The Sickle Season* lacks architectonic unity, both in the whole plan and in the creation of individual units. Like a sprawling edifice built by some bizarre builder, the verses ramble here, there. Or to change the figure, one beholds some brilliant nuggets, it is true, but only after dredging tons of material.<sup>4</sup> (Demetillo 1962, 279).

[about a passage from "Baltazar at Quiapo"] Will anyone be so good as to explain what is the meaning of that? (280)

The lines show that Hufana has not mastered syntax and, therefore, is struggling nightmarishly to communicate meaning. Also, he goes on and on and on. (281)

[about "Melchor in San Fernando"] That, like the mystery of God, is beyond mortal understanding. (281)

The second Hufana Book, *Poro Point Anthology*, carries the Hufana faults of prolixity to their most staggering proportions. (286)

Nor had Demetillo's judgement changed five years later: to many, the verse of Hufana is nightmared by jumbled syntax, the confusion of images and symbols, and also characterized by a metronomic rhythm and melody" (1967, 712). Sister Marie-Laurentina, reviewing *Poro Point*, is as vociferous as Demetillo is:

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) . . . degenerating into abused obscurity (1962, 159).

For there is neither depth nor timeliness in this Filipino PEYTON PLACE (160).

It could have been said as well in prose, if not better . . . (163)

As Demetillo observed, however, there are felicities in Hufana's verse; one simply must dredge his corpus in order to find them. In *Sickle Season*, there is the excellent "Requiem for a Prostitute" (182–83), a coherent and touching lyric. The three "Soldier Sonnets" (59–61) are quite good and "Fragment IX: Guerrilla" (61–62) worth a read. These poems succeed because Hufana has minimized his attempts to force alliteration and syntax; inverted syntax is common but not artificial, and the tones are quiet, not strident, natural rather than obtrusive.

But beyond cavil Hufana's *pièce de résistance* is "Hymn on the Eclipse, 1955." Its Prufrockian quality, especially in the First Movement, makes it less a hymn or even a liturgy than an incantation. It is not so much an expression of worshipful praise as it is an exploration of time and its interfaces with other aspects of existence, such as motion, place, and human experience. As such, it does not have a chronological, linear progression, in spite of its four numbered movements. It unspools like an Emerson essay, spiraling away and then returning to the central hieroglyph of time, which it incessantly attempts to define formally. But each effort is incomplete, consisting of term, equation expression, and genus—but no differentia. Then it elides to another context to undertake the concrete applications of the extended definition, before reverting to another elliptic formal definition. To wit:

Time is a trinity:  
Infant, father, ghost —  
The found, the possessed, the lost,  
The ooze last night, the matter of today  
And tomorrow the decay. (11. 63–67)

Briefly, we are told what time does not do:

But time shall not delay  
Either work or play  
Its effect or cause  
Shall neither prime nor pause  
A daily dominion,  
Union and reunion,  
Flesh and bone  
Noise and tone  
Confusion, harmony. (11. 68–76)

Appropriately, the assertion that time is a trinity is thrice iterated, in lines 78–79.

From here, we revert to motion, both aqueous (“Shore-shorn shell”—1. 80) and terrestrial (“The high-heel and the walking-stick”—1. 87).<sup>5</sup> “In swaddling and in shroud” (1. 101) anchors the motions of time to human experience; immediately we have another mention of motion, this time in the context of human religious experience via biblical allusion: “Time travels on a plane—/Time for loss and time for gain” (11. 107–08). The *Ecclesiastes* echo is repeated in line 124. “Loss” and “Gain” then are anthropomorphized as “two persons” (1. 109).

The third  
Descends—an incandescent bird  
Gathering flocks of different feather  
And schools of different scale. (11. 109–12)

But it is this bird of time, on the wing, that, by transcending the phenomenal world, facilitates the emergence of “Past, present, and ever” [eternity] from the “ether” [Realm of Ideas], so that there may come “From chaos a context” (11. 113–17). In other words, from the primeval oneness (often characterized in myth as a “watery void”) can come differentiation (“context”), which is the result of “Meeting on the plane” (line 123). Ideal and real, timeless and time-bound, abstract and concrete intersect to create.

But “when do time and no-time meet?/Then, now, ever. You shall neither rise nor sink/In time. Time is only what you think” (11. 126–

28). This passage conflates the formulations of Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant, thus resonating line 128, which otherwise might strike the reader as platitudinous. Yes, all time is the eternal present in the mind of God.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in both a complementary and a contrary sense, it is what you think it is; a la *The Critique of Pure Reason*, it does not exist independently of the human mind.<sup>7</sup>

At the start of the Second Movement, space is the focus. The bird of time has to "Struggle to beat the air/To try your wingspread" (ll. 135–36). But the locus is space—"There. Here. And everywhere" (line 132). Cf., "Then. Now. And ever" in line 129. The mission is to defeat "the placeless wind" (line 137), "to leave the same/Artifact of existence" (line 146), to be able to reach "Mount and descent" (line 132), to traverse "Desert. Fertile crescent" (line 133). Dessication and fruitfulness must meet on a plane, just as time and "no time" did. And the indication that this is so in the confluence of images of life and death:

Rub birth always, dub death always. (l. 153)

.....

Prepared by the skeleton that rings

The knell at the entrances of the jaws

Of life, at the terrible birthplaces

Of the electric chair and the guillotine. (ll. 165–68)

Here "a stillborn joins the cherubim" (line 170); the "hectare" is "tomb-filled" (line 173). The life cycle is represented directly in "the bride, the mother, the widow in a woman" (line 174) and less directly in "Seek sepulchre past the nest of the nectar" (line 175). In the latter, "past" may well have both temporal and spatial import.

The "bird of time" has succeeded in transcending the boundaries of space and time; "death is gone" (line 176); "death is done" (line 184); "Gone from the cycle of the candlerack" (line 177). The transcendence is overtly in the expression "moon-pulled moment" (line 179), asserting a spatial object's influence on a unit of time, and subtly in the synaesthesia that now appears, melding one physical sense with another: "the odor of the sun" (line 182); "cool colors of a cave" (line 183). As we approach the interlude in which the First Voice is heard, we have the reassurance that life and death are coterminous, not alternating states of being:

Whose birds sing his elegy

Death is his sign of maturity

There where the dead do not trespass on the playground

Of the living. Here where the alive  
Claim the bedtime of the dead. (11. 187–91)

The First Voice alludes to the expulsion from Eden (lines 200–203), but the Second Voice affirms that, nonetheless,

The world is a place for man,  
The world is a floral arrangement:  
Heaven, man, and earth—in one.  
Oasis, desert, fertile crescent. (11. 250–53)

The interrogatory in lines 258–61 is really a challenge, not an unanswered question:

Who shall divide the world white and black,  
Hot and cold, fire and ice,  
Latitudes of the horse or of the bat,  
Longitudes of the albatross or of the lark?

Such bifurcations have the viability of “The same foreshadowing in a soapsud” (line 262). The Chorus restates the notion that place is not absolute, with the biblical allusion perhaps functioning as a response to the expulsion from Eden allusion:

There. Here. And elsewhere. You neither spin nor weave  
In place. Place is only what you leave  
Behind. Arrive at. And last link with. (11. 269–71)

At the outset of the Third Movement, “Hymn on the Eclipse, 1955” shifts its focus to a series of opposites, “Many a scattered thing that one should adjust,” as line 276 puts it. At line 326, the First Voice returns to inform us that “The eclipse will happen/In the living space of the brain/At the narrow standard plan” (11. 328–30). Again, the division into physical and mental phenomena is suspended or at least eclipsed. The ensuing seventeen lines, attributed to the Chorus, drift to the subject of human relationships changing from hostile to helpful. The Second Voice then returns for sixteen lines before the Chorus reiterates its rejection of bifurcation, both with the new line “The dead come, the living come to the future” (1. 370) and the poem’s refrain: “Dead. Alive. And offspring” (11. 372 and 374), with “Person is only what you witness” sandwiched between. The Fourth Movement introduces a somewhat Whitmanesque series of fertility images:

The first contact  
At sea where man’s impulses wait  
But not understand nude nature’s gait

Till where the light may crack  
 Its bright loins on the rods  
 Of the right eye, the cones of the left (ll. 383–88)  
 Porpoises shoreward mate (l. 391)

But the Chorus again intercedes to meld the heretofore discrete entities:

Porpoise and person contract  
An objet of surprise,  
To reconcile what they attract  
Of hell or paradise. (11. 398-401)

Thereafter, the Movement resumes with more startling, voracious sexual imagery:

The dark disc spreads its dye  
On the bright like a sucking mouth  
Of a carnivorous flower—its cinctures  
Mourning in the sky  
The virginity of youth  
Whom she this time captures  
To stir her maidenhood.  
But not without draconic fears  
Of the illicit daughter  
Making of her parent a lover  
When after sweet spasms of the act. (11. 402–12)

Then we come again to transcendence of time: "But what is time when she has him/For the longest short moment/Of delirious interim?" (11. 416–18). The Chorus follows with the confirmatory "What is time, when lovers lack/Jurisdictions with the clock?" (lines 420–21), a note sounded by the Second Voice twice: "Man cannot be confined/Nor will ever be resigned/To manger, bed, and grove" (11. 463–65) and

The perished persons—the lover,  
The son, and the husband—  
Rearise to feel  
The ring of the firebrand (11. 469–72)

Appropriately, the poem ends on this note of the permanence of humanity:

... perhaps  
The only child-bearing in whose laps  
Man's longevity unrun



Will suffer rebirths to prove  
The permanence of love;  
The long religion of the sun. (11. 486-91)

The merging of time and space is also suggested in the identification of the Voices by both proximity and chronological sequence:

(Voice afar  
or First Voice):  
(Voice Foreground or  
Second Voice)

Perhaps it would not be too fanciful to think of the Chorus as a blending of the two voices, signifying again the protean nature of space and time. Nor, possibly, would it be too far afield to see the heavily alliterated lines, with sporadic end rhymes, as other devices to effect the mergers and re-mergers after separations of space and time.<sup>8</sup>

In any event, much as we may need to dredge Hufana's corpus to locate poetic nuggets, we eventually can find them. Although, ironically, "Hymn on the Eclipse, 1955" is anything except melodic or mellifluous, it is a carefully crafted work. Much as we may feel as though we have put in a full day at the sluice, we will be well-compensated for extracting Hufana's nuggets from his poetic ore.

## Notes

1. The former is the title in *The Manila Review*; the latter is the title in *Pamana*. Hopefully Cuenca intended no allusion to "In Excelsis Deo," which would of course carry hyperbole to the level of the irreverent.

2. It may be telling that Casper, in three separate discussions (not four because *Wounded* is only one paragraph short of being identical to *New*), only describes Hufana's work but does not evaluate it ("Cultural," *New*, "Haggle"). San Juan follows suit.

3. It is not quite clear what "These poems belong to what Mr. Ivor Brown calls 'barbed wire verse which it is difficult to penetrate'" implies. Cullum's next assessment is equally doubtful: "To say that Professor Casper in his graceful preface [to Hufana's *13 Kalisud*] adds any light to Hufana would be the sheerest flattery" (1956, 88). The same point about difficulty of access is made by Bienvenido Lumbera (1984, 77), referring jointly to Nollado and Hufana: "Like Hufana's poem, the novel finds only a limited audience among the people it celebrates . . ." This wording softens the phrasing in Lumbera and Lumbera two years earlier: "For it is ironic that while Hufana might have written a new epic of the Ilokos only a handful of Iloko intellectuals and men of letters could read, much less understand it" (1981, 246). Daguió (145) seems to see the problem of comprehensibility as a fault, as he discusses

. . . Hufana's sometimes overuse of alliteration and synecdoche and associated evocation. What nevertheless is an obstacle to Hufana's methods, and in the end

understanding of his meanings, is his uncontrolled use of "free association," or what we would call the "let-go" manner. This leaving to the mind a free rein of associations can result in the piling up of ideas but in words that tend to overwhelm thought and emotion. [in *Poro Point*] the reader gets unfortunately groggy at the end of the reading if he does not resort to skimming.

Perhaps no more convincing confirmation of Daguió's point exists than the virtually incoherent Casuga article. Here difficulty has evolved into bafflement.

4. Although Hufana intended to be encompassing, Demetillo's criticism is not thereby blunted: "I can be very eclectic . . . *Seig Heil* . . . will be in a variety of forms in keeping with the modal vagaries of our place and times, shuffling from book to life and chance from chance and life to book" (Hufana, "Hufana" 535-36).

5. Early on, we encountered "a shell washed off anchorage" (line 6) and

a traffic counter set on a bridge  
Measuring, weighing earth and engine  
On the soles of feet, in the trial of wheels  
Moving to their beat, moving to their orbit. (11. 9-12)

6. Cf., Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughter-House Five*, in which Billy Pilgrim is transported from past (World War II) to present (the 1950s) to future and finds out from the Tralfamadorians who have kidnapped him how the universe will end.

7. Admittedly, there is no conclusive textual warrant for treating "Time is only what you think" as elliptical. It could be argued that the line means "Time is whatever you're thinking about," in which case the sense of the sentence would be something akin to Berkeley's *esse est percipi*.

8. Certainly few would doubt the success that varying line lengths, stanza sizes, rhyme patterns (including slant rhyme and eye rhyme) brought Amy Lowell's "patterns," and it does not appear that Hufana's work uses from significantly more to convey or at least reinforce meaning.

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