

Ricardo de Ungria and Philippine Poetics

Isabela Banzon¹
University of the Philippines Diliman

Abstract

Sometimes it takes a national trauma to jolt a poet out of his necessary occupation with form, and Ricardo de Ungria is no exception. De Ungria's life as a poet spans some 20 odd years, starting with the publication of his poetry book *R+A+D+I+O*. In the early 1980s, like most Filipinos, he found the socio-political situation in the Philippines increasingly difficult to ignore. After 1986, with the end of the Marcos dictatorship, he went to the US to work on an MFA in creative writing. In this paper, I would like to show how the Philippine situation and a transnational experience revised and redirected his view of poetry and its writing. While in the US, he was, in his words, at "a crossroads" between "place and placelessness," a position he put to poetic advantage even after his return to the Philippines.

Abstract in Malay

Kadangkala seseorang pemuisi memerlukan satu trauma nasional untuk mengejutkannya dari kedudukan bentuk penulisan yang selesa. Ricardo de Ungria tidak terkecuali. Kehidupan Ricardo de Ungria sebagai seorang pemuisi berlangsung selama 20 tahun bermula dengan penerbitan buku puisinya yang berjudul *R+A+D+I+O*. Seperti kebanyakan rakyat Filipino di awal 1980an, beliau sukar meminggirkan keadaan semasa sosio-politik di Filipina. Selepas 1986 dan berakhirnya pemerintahan dictator Marcos, Ungria melanjutkan pengajian MFAnyanya di Amerika Syarikat di bidang Penulisan Kreatif. Di dalam makalah ini, saya ingin tonjolkan bagaimana keadaan di Filipina dan pengalaman transnasional mengolah dan mengalih hala tuju puisi Ungria dan mempengaruhi penulisannya. Semasa berada di Amerika Syarikat, Ungria (di dalam ayatnya sendiri) berkata dia berada "di persimpangan jalan" di antara "penerimaan" dan "ketidakpenerimaan", satu situasi puitis yang diterapkan di dalam penulisannya sekembalinya ke Filipina.

Keywords

Ricardo de Ungria, Philippine poetry, Philippine poetics, writing in English, place and placelessness, transnational experience

¹ Isabela Banzon teaches at the University of the Philippines Diliman. She researches creative writing and Philippine literature in English in context of other Philippine languages and Southeast Asian writing in English. In 2010 she was visiting professor in Wisconsin, USA. Her recent publications include *Lola Coqueta*, a book of poems.

Keywords in Malay

Ricardo de Ungria, puisi Filipina, puitika Filipina, Penulisan Inggeris, Penerimaan dan ketidakpenerimaan, Pengalaman transnasional

Sometimes it takes a national trauma to jolt a poet out of his necessary occupation with form, and Ricardo de Ungria is no exception. In the early 1980s, he found the political situation in the Philippines increasingly difficult to ignore, and after 1986 with the end of the Marcos dictatorship, he went to the United States to work on an MFA in creative writing. De Ungria's life as a poet spans some 20 years, starting with the publication of his book of poems *R+A+D+I+O*. In this paper, I would like to demonstrate how his awakening to Philippine social and political realities and travel to the United States in the form of a study grant provided him with material, focus and direction in writing his poems and in shaping his poetics. Away from his home country, his experience of place and displacement enabled a confrontation with the "Filipino" self and paradoxically located his writing in the context of Philippine history and culture. The poems that result from the experience are significant contributions to Philippine literature in English and lead to a more profound understanding of the shape of Philippine poetics.

History, Language and Literature

"Philippine history is like Oriental music," says Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, journalist and former head of the National Historical Commission in the Philippines. It "repeats itself over long periods of time. Invasions, colonisations, foreign influences, native responses and assimilations succeed each other over and over again" (qtd. in Bautista 106). She may well be describing the country's literature, its story: as much the written work as it is the writer's. A consequence of the country's colonial experience with Spain and then the United States is that not a few writers are competently bilingual or multilingual today. For example, Marra Pl. Lanot has poems in English, Pilipino and Spanish; and Jose Dalisay whose novel *Soledad's Sister* (2008) was short-listed in the Man Asia Literary Prize; writes fiction and a newspaper column in English and is a playwright and scriptwriter in Pilipino. The fact of the bilingual/ multilingual writer and that literature is written in many languages indicate how a full understanding of the size, range and complexity of Philippine literature in its entirety can prove to be a challenge. Literature written in English and in Pilipino, the Tagalog-based national language, continue to dominate the literary scene, but there is an increased interest in literature written in Spanish and in at least the major native languages.

Over time, Philippine literature in English has had to deal with accusations of "colonial mentality" mainly because it is written in a colonial

language. The dilemma of which language to write in had been a subject of much debate because traditional nationalists had taken – and still take – English to be “a foreign language inadequate as a medium of expressing local sentiments... therefore it cannot serve as the language of the masses” (Tope 77). Recent poetry publications such as the slim *Truth and Consequence: An Anthology of Poems for the Removal of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo* (2005) are significant in that poems are written in Pilipino with translations in English and vice versa while published by traditional nationalists or Left-leaning groups, in this case, the Congress of Teachers for Nationalism and Democracy (CONTEND) and Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT). This suggests a more moderate stance on the relation between language and politics or a practical response to worldwide decolonisation and the dominance of English on the international scene. Of course similar anthologies have been previously published. For example, a 1989 anthology by underground poets edited by the unknown Mainstream: People’s Art, Literature and Education Resource Center is *STR, Mga Tula ng Digmang Bayan sa Pilipinas*, subtitled *Poetry of People’s War in the Philippines* which contains poems mostly in Pilipino/ Tagalog but also in English. A qualitative difference is that the former is a legitimised call for President Arroyo’s impeachment while the latter is addressed to “the masses and the guerrillas (to) merge/ ... (in) struggle” against the Marcos dictatorship or remnants of it, as stated in Lucia Makabayan’s poem “Sagada” (*STR* 112). Both cases suggest an ambivalent position on the language issue especially that English remains the language of the educated elite who by implication are the intended readers of both volumes.

A pivotal point in Philippine literary history is the Commonwealth literary contest held in 1940 with the support of the Philippine president Manuel L. Quezon and implemented by the Philippine Writers League. This event may be described in today’s terms as a literary festival participated in by Filipino writers in Spanish, Tagalog and English and included lively discussions on the issues of a national language and a national literature. This is where the long-standing debate on literature’s reason for being became more heated. The contest was held not only to showcase the best literary production then, but also to measure the “progress” of a literature written in the new language, English (Arguilla et al 75). In short, it was the first major assessment of a soon-to-be national literature. There was not to be another. In December 1941, Japanese armed forces occupied Manila and thus began Philippine involvement as an American colony in World War II.

The Awakening

It is a well-trodden path for the Filipino writer in English to seek further literary exposure and validation overseas. The popular destination was and still is America, probably because the Filipino writer’s standard for good writing was at

onset suggested by prescribed readings – mainly American texts and English translations of “world literature” – in the school curriculum of public schools set up by the American colonial government. In addition, further education in the United States continues to be accessible with the resumption of cultural and educational exchanges after the war but under new programmes such as the Fulbright exchange programme. Some writers who relocated to the United States permanently are Carlos Bulosan and Jose Garcia Villa, and more recently the likes of Gina Apostol, Eric Gamalinda, Fatima Lim Wilson and Luisa Igloria. A poet who took a similar path but returned to the country is Ricardo de Ungria (b. 1952).

In an autobiographical essay “An English Apart,” de Ungria remarks that when he was new at writing poems, “I was *expressing* myself and didn’t care a whit for no other gringo but myself” (Carbo 52). He wrote lines only he could understand and was interested in experimentation, evident in poems such as the interactive “L.I.P. Crevices” where the reader is encouraged to fill in the blanks and generate meaning out of fragments that make up the poem. Like his preference for rock music and jazz, he thought of poetry as improvisation, never to be revised. He would later say that when he discovered “the rigors and pleasures of revision,” he let go of his long-held belief in “the sanctity of first-flush writing” and in “language at work in calibrating its own roughness towards finishedness and completion” (Carbo 55).

In the poem “SIC/SEC” (*In Memoriam* 22-24), de Ungria describes the 1983 assassination of political opponent and former senator Benigno Aquino as “the figure on the (Manila) airport tarmac/ at the beak of a Sunday noon/ ... clad in white/ (as a flag or a shroud or soon/ a bloodstained cerement).” In “Hard Blues” (*In Memoriam* 27-28), he relates how the assassination “woke (him) up.” When he “stared at the face behind the glass” of the casket bearing Aquino’s body, he found himself “stand(ing) (t)here with everyone else/ And elsewhere too.” His awakening to Philippine social and political realities is an experience that is shared by many poets writing in English and a turning point in their personal lives and as poets. For de Ungria and others like him, “everyday (became) a vigil” henceforth, and because “there (were) no more chairs,” he had to take a stand. The consequence of taking a stand became clear to him after he and his friends, the poets Gemino Abad, Cirilo Bautista, Alfredo Navarro Salanga and Alfred Yuson, lost their post as consultants to the state-run President’s Center for Special Studies for putting out a poetry pamphlet *In Memoriam: A Poetic Tribute by Five Filipino Poets* to make known their sentiments about Aquino’s death. The assassination virtually ended his preoccupation with “designer” poems and “difficult” poems, as his early collections *R+A+D+I+O* (1986) and *Voideville. Selected Poems: 1974-1979* (1991) have been described. From there on he became aware of the reader, wanting to

write poems for a reading public composed of “professionals, workers and housewives” (Carbo 53).

In America

In 1987, a year after the EDSA or People Power revolution that finally ousted Marcos from power, de Ungria went to the United States on a Fulbright scholarship grant. His aim was to formalise his study of poetry through an MFA in creative writing. At Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, he was able to read on “metrics and prosodies, myths, arts, philosophies,” and for the first time, wherever he went, there was only English (Carbo 55-56). Cold and alone in a foreign country, de Ungria was faced with the “alien” yet familiar situation that Filipinos overseas find themselves in: to be both at home and away from home in English, or according to him, to be at a “crossroads” between “place and placelessness” (Carbo 58). His poetry collection *Decimal Places* (1991) is a direct result of this displacement.

Whether by sheer coincidence or true intention, de Ungria’s place of study is significant. In 1904, the St. Louis Exposition in Missouri, the first world’s fair, had put on live show “savages” from the new American colony, the Philippine Islands. This presentation or mis-representation of life in the colony provided concrete proof and reason for continuing American “benevolent” rule over the islands. In “Room for Time Passing” (*Decimal Places* 108-11) de Ungria rearticulates the historical moment. At the fair, just as the Philippine archipelago is “condensed” in the image of “Intramuros and Laguna de Bay/ dotted with Moro and Bontoc villages,” so is the Filipino gazed upon as “monkeys along the Great White Way.” The colonial subject’s ignorance is presented in the form of the Igorot, the essentialised Filipino who thinks of an elephant as a “great pig with two tails.” In class, the teacher Miss Zamora admonishes the student who cannot get the English grammar right: “Four chairs minus three chairs are one chair. No: Is one chair.” In identification, de Ungria remarks: “Sometimes I feel the show never really closed.” And indeed it hasn’t – for him and to those whose sentiments are aligned with his. In “Civil Liberties” (*Decimal Places* 61), the Filipino as a colonial subject is contemporised as the Filipino “third-class citizen” in the United States. Taking a defensive pose, de Ungria participates in an act of double discrimination, returning via “Express Service” the dirty look he imagines an African-American postman gives him.

In “Festina Lente” (*Decimal Places* 99-100), he decides to make haste slowly, re-viewing his way with English and his understanding of it. At home in English (specifically, Philippine English) while in the Philippines, he finds that in the colonial heartland, he is at best only a mimic. To fit into American society, particular phrases “must be learned to suit occasions” as with “accents slidden like trombones and idioms.” Rollicking from one culture to the other, his speech as with his poems become “lines almost clearly drawn/ between the

subtleties in speech/ and the veiled hostilities, between/ the poison and the helping hands,/ between the native cultures and the scruples/ and follies fair to foreign lands.” In “An English Apart,” he relates how English had exposed him to western culture but in process also led him to neglect his native culture, an indication of American success at colonising the Filipino mind. Among other things, the English language had taught him “to think poorly of (his) native language and exclude (it) from the discourse of (his) deepest needs and joys and aspirations.” It taught him to “strive for excellence” that he could not achieve, it showed him “a rich heritage of writing” of which he could never be a part, and it “opened up... a fascinating world (that he was) forever condemned to be a stranger” (Carbo 49). English, his first language and the language of his poetry, had turned into a stranger, and thus “home is what begins to be said/ almost in every conversation,/ but remains lost in translation.”

In “The Staten Island Ferry Ride” (*Decimal Places* 112-113), a lost de Ungria eventually takes a commuter ferry to New York City where he imagines that he is being welcomed like America’s first immigrants. In Manhattan, he experiences a sense of home in the city’s frenzy and cosmopolitanism: “all getting-under-way/ all glitz and glory, all grits and beans...” Although he is “not sure this is what (he) needs” or “what (he) sought out,” he notes that Manhattan is America in “miniature” but it is not the America of Philippine colonial history that he recalls or that which St. Louis reminds him of, but the America of his happy childhood. He sees images of the Lone Ranger, Moby Dick and Peter of children’s-book fame. Another poem set in Manhattan is “Angel Radio” (*Decimal Places* 115-117), and for de Ungria – and for immigrants and American poets like Hart Crane – the Brooklyn Bridge remains a cultural icon, a symbol of crossings, past and present. At the bridge, de Ungria is done with winter and is literally out enjoying the sun. When he looks down, it is not the Hudson he sees but the Pasig River in Manila, and in imagination these rivers flow with other rivers of the world like the Volga and the Yangtze. Here the present moment converges with personal and cultural history in confluence with Azcarraga and Tutuban in Manila to the countryside of Vigan, Gumaca and Naga, train routes of his childhood and connections with his father who had worked the railways. Ellis Island beyond Manhattan reminds him of Filipino migrants like Bulosan and Villa, and by the poem’s end, he likens himself to an immigrant and not “a prisoner” of America or the colonial past as he had thought himself to be. At the bridge, he also comes to realise that education, America’s colonial tool, is a liberating force which affords him choices that he was apparently previously unaware of.

In “Room for Time Passing” (*Decimal Places* 108-11), de Ungria states that there will be “No more playing with broken pieces not my own,/ ... Let an ethnic moon have its way with time.” His sense of the “ethnic” is not to take an anti-colonial stance nor to dream of a golden past that never was (Mojares 300-

301). For him, a return to the ethnic is about a recovery of Philippine culture but in a globalised context, starting with family and native traditions. The poem “Media Noche in St. Louis” (*Decimal Places* 30-31) describes a family reunion traditionally held on Christmas Eve. Even though the location is St. Louis, de Ungria sees the gathering as “a home for home back home,” in the mix of guests coming from the north to south of the Philippines, in the “crisp” native language “freed of their dutiful English” and even in the “perfect accent” of Filipino Americans. He smells family and family extensions in the “crushed ginger and oreganos,/ the vinegar and garlic stewing in the air.” Tradition is Mother cooking, “the spice in the women’s conversations,” laughter, the sampaguita flower, the rooster crowing. Tradition is also about personal and shared loss, in a funeral, another occasion for reunions with family, community and friends which for de Ungria is about his son and only child taking his own life. His poetry collection *Waking Ice* (2000) tells of a father’s grief and attempts to make sense of the suddenness and finality of death. The ethnic also includes literary traditions, but not only in Pilipino and English, as indicated in love poems like “Killing the Buddha at Her Feet” and “Kawazu Tobinoku” the title of which refers to Basho’s famous haiku.

The poem “Bienvenido” (*Decimal Places* 91-92) is dedicated to the fiction writer Bienvenido Santos who comes from the Bicol region like de Ungria. Santos will be like a literary “father” and guide to “where all stories go/ as if it were a place/ (he) can point to in a map.” Once, they had “talked of hunger and dark roads,/ of letters unreceived,/ of snow and apple trees and new words learned/ to name old griefs/ and new difficulties” – all old topics and present concerns. Now he will re-possess the word “Bienvenido” which in Spanish means (a) “welcome.” Like Santos, he can welcome because he “can touch everything again” – the “old furniture and houses,/ insects and lace and rivers of childhood,” the love of women, and art. They have made “certain his return.” His recovery of the originary is not without pain: “I had to fight for the grace/ and the distance I sought,/ until tale by tale I recovered the island/ where the whole emotion began.”

De Ungria’s other decision is to “move on./ “Perhaps just for the turns in the road/ that might still surprise with a glimpse/ of ricefields and haystacks at dusk, and/ beyond the voices of children running home....” The turns in the road led to writing residencies in Scotland (1991) and Italy (1993) and the consequent publication of two poetry collections *Nudes* (1994) and *Body English* (1996). *Nudes* vacillates between his writing past and present: some poems exhibit familiar playfulness with language and many still deal with love; a few are flecked with references to Philippine culture. In “Formal Destinies” (*Nudes* 71), he reviews his stance on English: “*Just between us* just won’t work between us./ When what’s done has been done and said in language/ fit to fake us, we ought to know enough/ is enough. The cat is out of the bag./ We’ve risen with

fleas and eaten the dogs.” The poem “Soap Opera” (*Nudes* 72-73), a seemingly tired story of love gone awry, is an early foray into popular culture.

Body English, arranged in alphabetical order, are poems set in Scotland like “Laugharne,” “Sunday Morning at the Edinburgh Zoo” and “Midnight: Walking Back to Hawthornden.” There are also poems like “Sinakulo” (*Body English* 109-110), a satire on the Passion of Christ performed during Lent in the Philippines that insinuates extreme economic hardship and moral corruption – “Pilate pokes a finger/ at his balls. ‘Behind the stage tonight, boy.’/ His mother, dead by suicide in Taiwan,/ dreamed his fortune waiting tables in Guam,” as well as hopelessness and despair – “On the rim of the grail a cockroach/ contemplates the stale lips of God./ Two flies suck a straw of light./ ... / Shadows scour the walls, peel of, then skip/ on cigarettes stubs on the earthen floor/ strewn like so many stars squashed out.”

The Return

A poem that signals de Ungria’s return to Paco, Manila where he has been a resident “all his life” is “Jam. Taxi” (*Body English* 51-53). It is a taxi driver’s conversation with a passenger, evidently de Ungria himself, but in the form of a monologue spoken in broken Philippine English. It is more significantly a running commentary on the state of the nation, about what “happens everywhere” in the capital city – from “begging in Quiapo/ before the first mass is through” to Commonwealth Avenue in Quezon City, “the Forbes Park of rubouts conducted by those in “the same (police) uniform,” in which only the “small fries fry” or get caught and never “the top brass,” and on to Paco itself where “They dump/ bodies of the salvaged next block.” There are more references to incompetence or failure of the powerful institutions of the church and the state: as thugs “chase/ each other in the streets with knives” or “pay with icepicks and bullets,” the driver “wonder(s) what the churches and temples around/ are for. And the cops are just two blocks down.” The not unusual Filipino way of dealing with cruel reality is to escape from it or to live in fantasy, and for the driver, it is in the form of its “movie version” because “There’s justice there, yessir, at least,/ and truth works out fine.”

In 1998, two years after the publication of *Body English*, de Ungria had to face the actuality of his son Nikos’s suicide. In his next and most personal collection *Waking Ice*, he tells of his son’s drug addiction, rehab sessions, the moment of news of his death; but it is also about regretted tensions between father and son, about fatherly love that had not been articulated when his son still lived. In “The Boast” (*Waking Ice* 30-31), he says, “A hug should have set things right/ and washed it down,/ but I opted to savor/ death down to its last bit/ between my teeth.” The poem “Tres Amigos” (*Waking Ice* 63-64) is as much a description of the infamous funeral parlour Tres Amigos (Three Friends) and by extension Manila where it is located, as it is metonymic of de

Ungria's grief. Standing outside the funeral parlour, he imagines it to have a table and "man-size sink" "for cutting the dead open and taking the insides out." It smells of "decay" like "dead rats" and there are flies like those in "unwashed vats in the fish market section nearby." He thinks of the corpses as "hemmed in by starless/ presences" covered "in heavy plastic cerement/ that has also covered the many dead." In the parlor, in the city and in his heart, "everything is stayed still,/ and nothing is happening anywhere." Here, "dead or alive, one is... alone forever."

In "In the Lull" (*Waking Ice* 97-98) de Ungria is in Mintal, a barangay halfway between Davao and Calinan, when he is visited "in the lull between rains" by "something white, immaculately white/ on the doorscreen." He believes this moth or "winged life pulling free" is his son, as folk belief might explain it, but in reality it is "Only coldish air on my skin,/ a shiver for the wanting,/ a breath of random sky/ trapped inside me,/ and wouldn't let go." As he ought to know from experience, one cannot escape the past nor should one dwell too much on it; instead, one simply learns from it – in time, in life, in poetry – in order to be free.

While de Ungria still keeps residence in Manila where he stays when taking on work as head of the Committee on Literary Arts of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), as professor he has left the University of the Philippines Manila campus for that in Davao, Mindanao in southern Philippines. Davao is "an entirely different world that he is just beginning to wake up to." It is a world lived and understood in the language of Cebuano mixed with Davaoëño and Tagalog, a language which, de Ungria says, "has received the most ridicule and abuse from the English-enabled Tagalogs in Manila" (Carbo 62). This brings back to attention the much elided fact that Philippine culture including literature is not just about consequences of history nor only about the Tagalog culture, particularly the Manileño variety which perhaps – although unintentionally – has been passing itself off as "Philippine."

De Ungria sees Davao as both a wilderness and the pastoral, "a place that has not yet lost its faith in words" (Carbo 62). It is where he is learning to speak and write its language, and as his most recent collection *Pidgin Levitations* (2004) suggests, where he is thinking about what next to do with English – whether "to hold (it) up or break down or ship off back to New York or to England where it all began" (Carbo 62). Meanwhile in perhaps the only published critical review of his work, his poems are described as "sure-footed in their movement across the lines of free verse, and their negotiation between the grammar of sense and the syntax of the musical phrase. He is adept at sustaining a balance between apparent simplicity of means and complex, often fairly intellectualized ends." At his best, his poems possess "the savour of metaphysical wit and sensuous intellection" (Patke and Holden 169-70).

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