The Story and the Line: On Three Philippine Poetry Collections

Carlomar Arcangel Daoana[1]
Philippines

Francisco Guevara, *The Reddest Herring*. Manila, Philippines: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2015. 77 pp. ISBN 978-971-506-744-7.

Ned Parfan, *The Murmur Asylum*. Manila, Philippines: University of the Philippines Press, 2014. 67 pp. ISBN 978-971-542-737-1.

Charlie Samuya Veric, *Histories*. Manila, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015. 115 pp. ISBN 978-971-550-715-8.

Philippine poetry in English, in the second decade of the new millennium, has entered a period of risk, furious experimentation and discomfort from received knowledge as can be gleaned in the works which are the subject of this review: Francisco Guevara's *The Reddest Herring* (2015), Ned Parfan's *The Murmur Asylum* (2014) and Charlie Samuya Veric's *Histories* (2015).

This trifecta of works – all of which are the authors' first books – exhibits deliberate intent in interrogating and transgressing conventional features of poetic expression, particularly in two aspects: lineation and dramatic situation (and by extension, the lyric voice and the credibility of its utterance). Their poems test the limit of the page, assume terrifically diverse – and divergent – registers to enact a kind of radical thinking through verse and displace the agency from the speaking voice (the persona) to the poet himself, who is revealed through palpable strategies and decisions, as the master orchestrator. These changes, along with a multitude of similarly inclined initiatives, are

[1] Carlomar Arcangel Daoana is a regular columnist in the Arts and Culture section of *The Philippine Star*. In 2014, he won the Purita Kalaw Ledesma Prize for Art Criticism of the Ateneo Art Awards. Recently, he was declared winner of the Metrobank Foundation-Alice Guillermo Award for Art Criticism in the Metrobank Art and Design Excellence (MADE). As a poet, he is the author of four poetry collections, the most recent being *Loose Tongue* (2014), published by the UST Publishing House. In 2012, he won the Grand Prize in the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature in the English Poetry category for his collection, *The Elegant Ghost*.

profound in that they signify possibilities in contrast with and away from the Formalist tradition.

"That I have never been to a writing workshop, never joined the Palanca, never had a literary *barkada,* never held an MFA show what a fluke I am," says Veric in one of the segments of his poem, "Let the Missing Poetics Be" (*Histories* 20). While the statement is remarkable for its sheer candour and the breathlessness of its claim, what is more telling is the plainness of its exposition: it resembles prose. Shorn of irony, ambiguity and indirection – the Formalist expectations – it asks no reading between the lines, only a trust from the reader that what is being told is true. It may be seen as operating within the confessional mode except that what is being confessed does not appeal to emotion, has no attempt to make the reader as a confidante.

"I am not saying I am exceptional," he clarifies three paragraphs later. "I am saying that one need not attend a workshop, need not win an award to be validated, need not join a clique to be noticed, need not get an MFA to be published" (*Histories* 20). This time, a reading between the lines may be judicious: the negatory statement actually confirms exceptionality in that, he may have bypassed the modes of validation mentioned earlier but, look at him dear reader, he was still able to produce that you are now holding in your hands. That he withheld the fact he is an academician, which is big currency and good-enough reason to seek and merit publication (publish or perish, indeed), is part of the conceit and understandable in the seeming absence of an invented speaker: the poet, it is assumed, has every right to shape – and believe – his self-mythology. It would be sheepish to chastise him for not employing a metaphor or a dramatic situation, for not being less direct, as the intended effect is to bolster the reader's confidence in the vein of self-help: that, just like Veric who does not have the expected credentials, he can be a poet, too.

Such self-reflexive statements in the works of local poets are rare. The bold – and bald – claims by Veric rally against artifice and organic unity, especially when considered against his preparatory field notes n "Let the Missing Poetics Be" in which the poet narrates in earnest the unearthing of a "16th century Ottoman village on Hungarian soil" (*Histories* 3). When the diaristic mode kicks in, signified by the single line "I am not your usual poet" (*Histories* 14) taking all the energy of the white space of a single page, the reader is caught unprepared as the poem sharply turns into the poet's explanation of his vocation (within extraordinary conditions, no less) and his poetics. "Seen this way, poetry represents one of the last frontiers of freedom and autonomy in our time," he writes, "but its increasing professionalization poses that single most damaging threat to itself as a creative act" (*Histories* 26).

Every generation, it must be said, seeks to break away from tradition, carve out new streams and enact in theory and practice what it detects as the contemporary – its own – register. Hence, it has become *de rigueur* – a cliché, in

fact – that an emerging generation would signify its discomforts with and quarrel against what it perceives to be the old and the established, that is, until the succeeding one emerges and feels compelled to topple earlier efforts as well. This is how the pool of poetry is replenished.

With my generation, the monster to slay is Formalism, that export from the United States (particularly, the University of Iowa) which, up to this day, remains to be the persistent and dominant theory and discourse in the writing and the reading of a poem. Its completeness, interior resonances and self-containment are mirrored visually (how it is seen on the page) and orally (how it is recited) by lineation, the arrangement of the poem into discrete units of thought. It is the architecture of poetry. "Put more practically, line-break is all you've got, and if you don't *master* line-break – the border between poetry and prose – then you don't know there is a border. And there is a border. (A prose poem is prose done by a poet)," says the British poet Glyn Maxwell in his book, *On Poetry* (2).

No matter how arbitrary it may seem, lineation enforces a regulatory element: the poem will be only read the way its lines dictate, not otherwise. In prose, there is an illusion of continuity, that one line flows naturally to the next (with punctuation marks as arbiters of stops and pauses) until one reaches the end of the book. No such luck with poetry, as the line directs the eye path, unpacks (or suspends) image and idea in a given length and insists its pause (or half-pause) – an invisible punctuation. Unlike prose, it engages with and reacts against the negative space of the page. Lineation is the immediate identifier that a poem *is* a poem, not prose and, by its definition, the first one that is interrogated, if not wilfully exploded, by all manners of experimentation.

This attempt is to be found in the title poem of *Histories*, whose lines, ranging from two to five and separated by spaces like orphan stanzas, float on the page like fragments from a papyrus. They glory in their abruptness and incompletion, like "(n)eon signs" (*Histories* 100), "(h)uman happiness" (*Histories* 101, "faces in airports" (*Histories* 102).

When expanded at length and made as intrinsic to the design, "exploded" lineation achieves thrilling effects, such as in the case of "Scatter," the longest poem in Parfan's *The Murmur Asylum*. The poem actively works with the page as though it were a performative stage with its variety of indentations and italics, oscillations of line lengths and number of stanzas, surprising centre-justified and right-justified cascades. Thought processes, contemplations, narrations, brief moments of illumination: it shuttles the reader from the present to the past, from the interior of mind to the surface of the visible world, from the privacy of a room to the expansiveness of a cosmos – then back again. It is the bulwark of dark: black-outs, shadows, unlit rooms, ink, eyelashes, "another Earth, in this same orbit/ always hiding right behind the sun" (*The Murmur Asylum* 16). Pondering its many guises and forms, the poem plumbs the dark's

concealments and disclosures, enactments of terror and wonder and evocations of desire and crime. Its capaciousness, as it were, can only be effected by lines that teeter and trail off, that dare the right-hand margin, and not the regimented arrangement of stanzas that simply announces the nature of the enterprise, not its possibility.

We put our trust in Parfan's typographical pyrotechnics because we detect, amid the different registers, a singular voice and consciousness, a persona: the primary demand of the lyric poem. This voice, usually couched in a certain event or situation, is moved to speak because of it, allowing the reader to occupy the same subject position, as though he were the one speaking. In order to make this transference successful, the lyric demands a wire of a story.

In Guevara's *The Reddest Herring,* the narrative breaks down as the Biblical Adam and the fictional Alice (of Wonderland, presumably) sally forth in the space of what the poet Dan Beachy-Quick calls in his blurb as the "post-Edenic page" that resists the cohabitation of the reader, frustrating transference and insisting the autonomy of authorial articulation. How to enter and make sense of, say, these lines from "Habeas Corpus":

> And so the missing/ Adam thwarted
> "his scab flaking," your diurnal
>
> redressed & televised: we were just/
> "we were following orders marred
>
> by meadows Adam fragged for your
> witnessed; you're redrawn & disarming
>
> in the shade…. (4)

What is evident, however, is the attempt of the author, in poem after poem, to displace attention from the supposed content (the meaning of the work) to the linguistic form in its brave capacities, through its manifold elisions and ellipses, to reveal the mind at work in its ever-figuring out of sense – most especially that of sound – impressions so that these may assume as a kind of new and quickened experience on the page. We recognise this experiment as restorative of faith on poetry's jolting and transcendent speech, what with the cheapening of words in this age of social media, selling and spin. In eluding the invention of a persona – with its attendant narrative cargo and conventional demands – the poet makes apparent the vitalising agency that constantly engages with the materials of poetry, "(the) dialect to think yes in" (*The Reddest Herring* 9).

Works Cited

Maxwell, Glyn. *On Poetry*. London: Oberon Books, 2012.