

Deciphering Love: Two Close Readings of Philippine Lyrical Poetry *from English*

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Abstract

*"Deciphering Love" is part of an ongoing book project tentatively titled **Elucidations: Close Readings in Philippine Poetry from English** by author Galan. The said book will be a series of analyses of the works of 24 leading Filipino wordsmiths (12 male and 12 female) who write in English. The aim of the project is to make more accessible to the general public the verses of the selected authors. The chosen poems cover a variety of themes and subjects: love, family relationships, war and other atrocities, etc. Cesar Ruiz Aquino's "Word Without End" and Edith L. Tiempo's "Bonsai" are two of the love poems that the author has opted to interpret, not only because of their meaning and meaningfulness, but also because of their linguistic density and suppleness.*

Keywords: poet persona, image, euphony, sublimation, metaphor

Word Without End

East, the horizons and all the learning
Lost. Sick for Siquijor or Avalon
O I could for the sheer sight of her throw
Verses away! Let the Virgins carry

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Virgule widdershins upon the fairy
 Earth, the same that on the world's first morning
 Left her traces, her face an eidolon
 Of whiteness for the chilled blood to know

Or for one word and one word only go
 Void as days all misspent for the starry
 Echo of a night come without warning
 Like a thousand thieves stealing on and on

Love, tongue-tied, is my Tetragrammaton
 Opening no door, giving leave to no
 Vendaval that, priceless, she might tarry
 Even as the sands and there's no turning

- Cesar Ruiz Aquino

* * *

A cursory reading of Cesar Ruiz Aquino's "Word Without End" seems to suggest that the poem is difficult to decipher, if not utterly cryptic. It appears on the surface level that the entire poetic enterprise relies on euphony and wordplay alone, a welter of melodious and mysterious words without any internal logic or overall design. But this is not completely true, for the poem has a regular structure of four quatrains written in blank verse with ten syllables per line. Furthermore, a much closer and deeper reading of the text reveals that there is a hidden narrative beneath the surfeit of images and metaphors.

The poem begins with a sense of direction, or more precisely a position in the compass: East, where the sun emerges and the point of origin in most cultures, as well as a mixed sensation of dislocation and a loss of knowledge ("the horizons and all the learning/ Lost"). It is immediately followed by a yearning for enchanted places: Siquijor, the mystical island in the Visayas famous for its sorcerers and soothsayers, and Avalon, the mythical burial place of King Arthur where legend claims he will rise again to heal and unite all of Great Britain.

The cause of the persona's bewilderment is identified in the third line of the first stanza: a virtual goddess whose mere presence ("O I

could for the sheer sight of her throw/ Verses away!") can induce him to compose poems which he will scatter at her feet or toss to the wind, as if his masterpieces are not worthy of her consideration. The last line that runs on to the second quatrain expresses the poet-persona's archetypal angst ("the same that on the world's first morning/ Left her traces"): an old man's ("chilled blood") desire for a much younger woman with the fairest of complexions ("her face an eidolon/ Of whiteness"). *Eidolon* refers both to an idealized image [It has the same etymology as the word *idol*] and an ephemeral vision, further enhancing her divine but protean nature, like the elusive nymph *Daphne* when she was being pursued by *Apollo*, the god of poetry and patron of the arts in classical Greek mythology.

The enigmatic and esoteric atmosphere of the objective situation is further enhanced by the deployment throughout the poem of unique words that are seldom used in ordinary speech. Aside from *eidolon*, readers might encounter for the first time such obscure terms as *virgule*, *widdershins*, *vendaival* and *Tetragrammaton*, among others. But what exactly are "*Virgule widdershins*"? According to the lexicon, a *virgule* is a small diagonal line (/) that connotes the availability of two possible choices (either/or), like yes or no, now or never, etc. On the other hand, *widdershins*, which is German in extraction, is to move in a counterclockwise or opposite direction to the apparent course of the sun, hence a motion from West to East. Within the context of the poem, this unusual combination can probably allude to a magical rite or a pagan ritual, since the act is to be executed by Virgins "upon the fairy/ Earth". In the Wiccan tradition, after ritual magic has been performed, a witch closes the magic circle by drawing in the excess energy with an *athame* or ceremonial dagger in a *widdershins* fashion before sending the absorbed energy back to the ground.

The penultimate stanza reinforces the persona's desperation for his spring-winter obsession, which has taken its toll on him, the way it has robbed him of precious time "Like a thousand thieves stealing on and on". But a single and singular word from her suffices to cancel out ("go/ Void") his endless waiting "for the starry/ Echo of a night come without warning", that fateful evening when the alignment of the heavenly bodies becomes auspicious for the fulfillment of his heart's desire.

The last quatrain is both a summation of the poet-persona's emotional condition and its cyclical nature. The adored and adorable lady, the object/subject of his deepest affection does not utter even a

solitary word ("Love, tongue tied") towards him. The arcane term that follows, Tetragrammaton, has multiple meanings: in the Hebrew language, it is the unutterable and ineffable name of God (Yahweh or Jehovah) represented by four consonants (YHWH or JHVH), or etymologically speaking, it can be any four-letter word, which in the erudite persona's consciousness he conflates with love as embodied by the beloved woman, hinging perhaps on the adage that "God is love!"

Because she does not say something, brought about in part by the persona's failure in making the first move for fear most likely of outright rejection, no portal of communication becomes available to them ("Opening no door") and no powerful natural force is released ("giving leave to no/ Vendaval") to prevent her inevitable leave-taking. Vendaval is the gusty southwesterly wind off the strait of Gibraltar often occurring during winter time (another allusion to his twilight years), which is within the framework of the persona's mind the necessary energy to delay her departure ("that priceless she might tarry"). In the last line of the poem, he recognizes that this is the point of no return, that there will be no second chances ("Even as the sands and there's no turning"), that metaphorically and literally the sands of time are running out.

Tetragrammaton is the all important clue to Aquino's poetic puzzle, for it is the "word without end" of the poem's title, which is none other than love, for as the cliché goes "love makes the world go round." To further enhance the circular characteristic of the persona's impossible desire, the poet employs a revolving acrostic, in which the initial letter of each line of all the four stanzas when read downwards are actually word variations of the same four letters, the persona's own version of the Tetragrammaton: ELOV, VELO, OVEL, LOVE.

An important side note: The number four figures prominently in the poem's framework. In numerology and in the Kabbalah, four represents the physical world: There are four basic elements (Earth, Air, Water and Fire), four points in the compass (East, West, North and South), and four seasons in the temperate regions (Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter), et al. Aside from the fact that the keyword, LOVE is a Tetragrammaton, a four-letter word, the poem itself is composed of four stanzas with four lines each, a standard quatrain, which means that all in all there are sixteen lines, or four multiplied by four (4X4). Furthermore, the entire poetic utterance is made up of forty syllables, another significant number divisible by four, which has biblical resonances: Noah and his family lived inside the ark while it rained for forty days and nights during the Great Flood; led by Moses, the Jews

wandered around the desert for forty years during the Exodus; and Christ ascended into heaven forty days after his crucifixion.

It is also worth noting that the last line of the poem does not end with a period, or any punctuation mark for that matter, and that the entire piece can be read as one long and looping, breathless and breathtaking, complex and compound sentence, replete with numerous subordinate clauses, so similar to the inescapable labyrinth of love with its serial corners and serpentine corridors, where an infatuated person can easily lose his sense of direction and where time ceases to exist, turning a privileged moment into an eternity of hopeless longing.

Cesar Ruiz Aquino's "Word Without End", therefore, is a poem about unrequited love and its delicious but devastating effects on the besotted persona. For love is the most mysterious and mystical of experiences, transforming and transporting the Self into another realm in the arms of an Other, whether real or imagined, accessible or otherwise.

Bonsai

All that I love
I fold over once
And once again
And keep in a box
Or a slit in a hollow post
Or in my shoe.

All that I love?
Why, yes, but for the moment —
And for all time, both.
Something that folds and keeps easy,
Son's note or Dad's one gaudy tie,
A roto picture of a young queen,
A blue Indian shawl, even
A money bill.

It's utter sublimation
A feat, this heart's control
Moment to moment

To scale all love down
To a cupped hand's size,

Till seashells are broken pieces
From God's own bright teeth,
And life and love are real
Things you can run and
Breathless hand over
To the merest child.

- Edith L. Tiempo

A first reading of Edith L. Tiempo's signature poem is a tad confounding, for the first lady of Philippine poetry in English deploys the centripetal-centrifugal-centripetal (or inward-outward-inward) motion in expressing her profoundest thoughts and deepest feelings about love. The title itself, "Bonsai," is a bit misleading, since nowhere else in the poem are there any further references to plant life or the ancient Japanese technique of cultivating miniature trees or shrubs through dwarfing by selective pruning. Some might even argue that "Origami" is the better title choice, for at least the persona's act of folding objects is a bit analogous to the Japanese art of paper folding to make complicated shapes. But this reader will prove at the end of this essay that "Bonsai" is the most appropriate title for the poem, something that is not quite obvious to most people after their perfunctory appraisal of this often misread literary masterpiece.

However, despite the false lead, even a cursory perusal of the poem reveals to the sensitive and sensible reader that "Bonsai" is about love, if only because the four-letter word is mentioned in all four stanzas. In the first stanza, the persona declares that she folds everything that she loves and keeps them hidden in secret places: "a box,/ Or a slit in a hollow post,/ Or in my shoe./" What then are the things she considers imperative enough to keep?

At first glance, the catalogue of her beloved objects in the second stanza appears to be disparate, unrelated, almost random, if not completely aleatory. But since a literary sorceress like Tiempo seldom commits mistakes in conjuring appropriate images, then there must a

be reason for singling out these particular items and not others. The more important query therefore is this: What do "Son's note or Dad's one gaudy tie,/ A roto¹ picture of a young queen,/ A blue Indian shawl, even/ A money bill./" share in common? Besides being foldable and thus easy to keep, they must symbolize for the loving female persona important individuals and incidents in her life. For as the semiotician Roland Barthes correctly observes in *A Lover's Discourse*: "Every object touched by the loved being's body becomes part of that body, and the subject eagerly attaches himself to it."²

If we are to assume that the speaking voice of "Bonsai" closely resembles the poet's own, then the first three objects must represent members of her immediate family: son Maldon; husband Edilberto (It is a well-known fact among writing fellows and panelists of the Silliman Writers' Workshop that Edith fondly called the late fictionist and literary critic "Dad," while being addressed by her husband as "Mom," which is a common practice among Filipino couples.); and daughter Rowena (Unknown to many, the current Program Administrator of the Iowa Writers' Workshop is a former winner of the Miss Negros Oriental beauty contest sometime in the 1970s, another indicator of the Filipino flavor of the poem, since the Philippines is a pageant-obsessed Third World country.).

The referents of the last two items are more covert and thereby more difficult to decipher. At best, we can only speculate on the persons and/or events that make the two things significant: blue Indian shawl (Edith's engagement date with Edilberto, her first winter in Iowa, her last autumn in Denver?); money bill (Her initial salary from Silliman University, cash prize from the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature?).

In the long run though the indeterminacy of the allusions does not really matter, for the opaqueness of the symbols leads not to generic obscurity and obfuscation, but to personal mythology and mystery. Perhaps part of the poem's message is that the things a person considers memorable and therefore valuable most other people might think of as debris, detritus or dirt. (Note that the adverb "even" modifying "money bill" is used to indicate something unexpected or unusual, which in the context of the poem seems to suggest that a money bill is not a conventional object to collect and treasure even by the most sentimental of persons.) Suffice it to say that all five objects, which are outwardly ordinary and nondescript, acquire associative significations because they serve for the poetic persona as conduits of recall, like mementoes, souvenirs and keepsakes.

Interestingly, the second stanza commences with what appears to be a rhetorical question ("All that I love?"), which the persona answers with a paradox: "Why, yes, but for the moment —/ And for all time, both." The significance of these seemingly self-contradictory lines will be discussed towards the end of this essay, but for now this reader will focus on the fact that the persona pauses to contemplate on the germane issue of the scope of her love, before she proceeds to enumerate her loved ones' memorabilia that she has decided to vouchsafe. Love for the female persona therefore is a conscious choice, a cognitive act not only an affective one, a motif that recurs in various degrees in most of her other love poems.

In the third stanza, the persona explains the rationale behind her action:

It's utter sublimation
 A feat, this heart's control
 Moment to moment
 To scale all love down
 To a cupped hand's size,

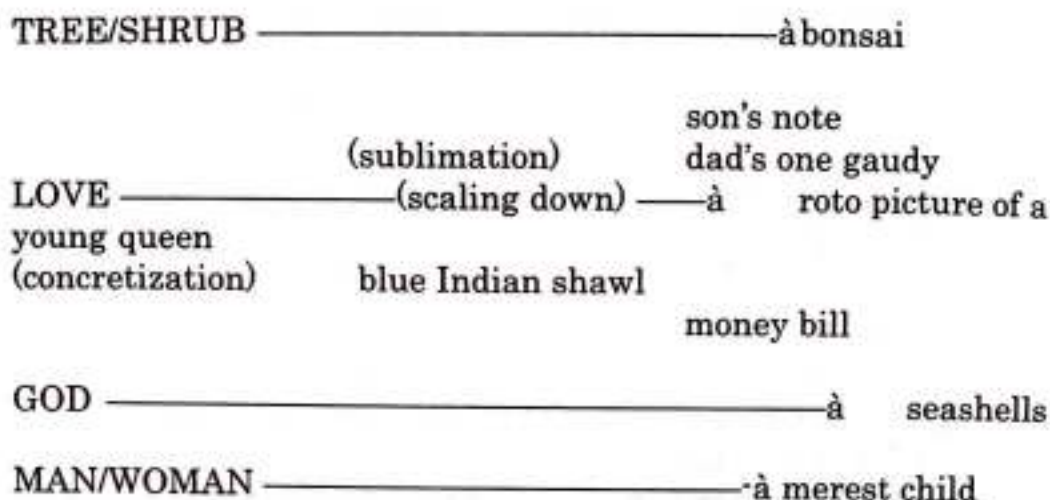
The keyword here is sublimation, which in psychology is the deflection of sexual energy or other atavistic biological impulse from its immediate goal to one of a higher social, moral or aesthetic nature or use. In chemistry, on the other hand, sublimation is the process of transforming a solid substance by heat into a vapor, which on cooling condenses again to solid form without apparent liquefaction. Inherent in both definitions is the act of refinement and purification through fire, since *to sublimate* in a sense is to make something *sublime* out of something sordid. In the latter a literal fire dissolves through a crucible the dross from the precious metal, while in the former it is furnace of the mind that burns away the superfluous from the crucial experiences.

The second most important idea in this stanza is the procedure of scaling love down, which Tiempo asserts is a feat by itself, an exceptional accomplishment of the female persona's sentimental heart which is achieved through utmost discipline and restraint. But aside from mere manageability, why is it necessary to miniaturize love, to whittle it down to the size of "a cupped hand"?

The answer to this pertinent question is given, albeit in a tangential fashion, in the fourth and last stanza: "And life and love are real/ Things you can run and/ Breathless hand over/ To the merest child." Love as "real things" or concrete objects rather than as abstract concepts is easier to pass on, since it has become more tangible and thus more comprehensible to most everyone else, including children and one's beloved offspring. It also underscores the importance of bequeathing the legacy of love to the next generation, since as the cliché goes "children are the future of the world," which makes "the merest child," and not the wisest woman nor the strongest man, the ideal recipient of such a wonderful gift. The image of the cupped hand also emphasizes the idea that in the act of giving the one offering the bequest is also a beggar of sorts, since the beneficiary can always refuse to accept the heirlooms being proffered.

But another important element is introduced in the ultimate stanza, for the persona by some extraordinary leap of the imagination perceives the seashells on the beach as "broken pieces/ From God's own bright teeth," which for a better understanding of "Bonsai" must be elaborated on, so that readers of Philippine poetry *from* English can fully appreciate the tight structural organization of the poem. Gémino H. Abad in his remarkable essay "Mapping Our Poetic Terrain: Filipino Poetry in English from 1905 to the Present"³ connects this image to the paradoxical lines of the second stanza "for the moment —/ And for all time, both." This reader cannot help but agree, since indeed the five objects mentioned by the persona being mementoes of the people she loves are metonyms of memory, shattered but shimmering fragments of chronology, captured important moments immortalized in the heart and mind, if we are to visualize Time itself as a manifestation of God.

Of greater consequence, thought, is that this divine figure completes Tiempo's poetic picture about love and remembrance by adding the spiritual detail, for love like the unmentionable Hebrew name of the Almighty is also a Tetragrammaton, a four-letter word, which has probably engendered the often-quoted adage that "God is Love, and Love is God." Structurally speaking, her most famous poem can thus be diagrammed in this manner:



On the left side of the chart are the huge objects, concepts or people: full-size flora (Tree/Shrub), big abstract words (Love, God) and grownups (Man/Woman). Their miniature analogues, in contrast, are found on the right side of the chart. However, these diminutive parallels, especially the mementoes, retain the spirit of their larger versions, since the process of sublimation reduces things only in terms of size but not in essence. Ultimately, this makes "Bonsai" the perfect title of the poem, for a bonsai has all the necessary parts that make a tree or a shrub what it is: roots, a trunk, branches, leaves and flowers, albeit in smaller portions; in the same manner that love even if sublimated by the heart and the mind still preserves its sum and substance, its lifeblood in the truest sense of the written word and the word made flesh.

Notes

¹ Short for rotogravure: a photomechanical process by which pictures, typeset matter, etc., are printed from an intaglio copper cylinder to the pages of a newspaper, usually the magazine section.

² Roland Barthes, *A Lover*

's Discourse: Fragments

, Hill and Wong, New York, 1978, p. 173.

³ See Gémino H. Abad

's introductory essay in *The Likhaan Anthology of Philippine Literature in English*, University of the Philippines Press, Quezon City, 1998.