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*The Winged Minotaur:  
(Notes On) Experimentation in the  
Poetry of Cirilo F. Bautista*



(Author's note: *This essay is the second of a three-part probe into the poetry of Cirilo F. Bautista that was written and then abandoned in the nineties when duties in academic administration got the better of me. It was meant to complement a longish piece on The Cave and Other Poems that formed part of my unfinished master's thesis on the poet back in the seventies. The probe (a very seventies term) dealt with three aspects in the poetry of Bautista and were discussed as follows: "the difficult Bautista," "the experimental Bautista," and "the unknown Bautista."*)

In 1973, Bautista published "A Theory of Poetry" in the philosophy quarterly of De La Salle University where he spent most of his years teaching and writing. The

short piece gives us a clue to his frame of mind in the years after the publication of *The Cave* and during the writing of two more poetry books, namely *The Archipelago* (1970) and *Charts* (1973)—although I do not discount the possibility that he was already entertaining those ideas that were finally formulated in that essay even while he was writing *The Cave*.

In his theory, he claimed that

Poetry is a science. Like all sciences, it contains within its concept a system of principles which the structure of its being, its inner force, is explicable and defensible. As a science, and like all sciences, it must presume, even without being called for proofs, a body of knowledge by which the explication and the defence can be possible. It is exact, and mathematically precise. As it moves towards the highest function of idea—enlightenment—so it has to be founded on idea, and on nothing else. And since the highest function of man is related to the intellect, it is the intellect alone to which the poem should be addressed.

And he gave its formula thus: “Poetry is formulated thus: P=I E, where P stands for poetry, I for idea, and E for enlightenment. There is no alternative for I not even Emotion.” For Bautista, emotion “makes of poetry a thanatoid.” Its role “should be merely peripheral; in good poetry it should be totally removed.” The poet must strip the word of its emotive skin: “Slowly, the emotional element must be weaned from the intellectual element until only the latter stands between the reader and the poem; and taking the formal aspect of the art in conjunction with its goal of enlightenment, a meaningful dialogue will ensue between poem and reader.” As examples, he cited concrete poetry and his own poem “A Man Falls to His Death.”

This polemic would have provoked the controversy or, at least, the discussion it was after had it been published in a more public forum, e.g., a newspaper or magazine, or had anybody really cared at all. This is not the place to scrutinize it, but I would only point out its debt to New Criticism in its attempt to put poetry on an equal footing with science and in its consequent pitch for cognition and logic in the creative act. For Bautista, it would seem that difficulty is an ideology of a kind, its ideals of cerebral calibration of the poem and intellectual enlightenment of the reader set against the prevailing, and traditional, notions of poetic composition and poetic effect. Such an “experimental” phase in the career of a poet seems to be entered into only after he has achieved a certain level of confidence and competence through at least two collections or publications. Audacity in both theme and technique seems to be a natural consequence of a perceived command of a literary form after having “proven” something in, say, a first book.

Bautista's notion of concrete poetry as "the first real step towards divorcing idea from emotion" is borne out by Mary Ellen Solt who writes in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*: "The concrete poem, they contend, by liberating words from meaningless, worn-out grammatical connections, cleans up language; and by means of its orderly method, it places a control upon the flow of emotions, thus creating a distance from the poem that allows the poet as man actively perceiving and articulating his experience to examine and consider the quality of his human materials." Still, the appropriation of concrete poetry within Bautista's "scientific" and post-emotion poetics needs to be qualified. For though, as seen in his handful of "concrete poems," words are reduced to their atomic components and space is correctly used as a structural agent, his adherence to traditional narrative techniques—made necessary by the function of the poem as source of "intellectual enlightenment"—goes against concrete poetry's dismissal of the logical-discursive in favor of direct, analogical treatment of linguistic entities as visual components. In other words, Bautista is too logical a poet to be concrete.

Concrete poetry has actually a distinguished lineage from the pattern poems of Simias of Rhodes and Theocritus in the 3rd century B.C. through those of Porphyrius (ca. 400 A.D.) and Venantius Fortunatus (ca. 530 A.D.) to George Herbert (b. 1593), to the concrete poems of Emmett Williams, Eugen Gomringer, and others of the modern era. Its word designs invariably reveal reticulations, or play-activity, in the visual field as well as in the interfaces of word and image such that the pleasure its verbivocovisual universe provides is of a different, more enhanced and intersensual, kind from that based solely on texts. In the Philippines, the archetypes would be Jose Garcia Villa's "The Emperor's New Sonnet," "The Bashful One," and "Parenthetical Sonnet"—each of which depicts a blank page—but not his comma poems whose appeal, initially visual, is ultimately to the understanding and to the ear. Bautista's "The Sea Gull" is a pattern poem in the order of George Herbert's "Easter Wings," which is shaped like wings, and Robert Herrick's "The Pillar of Fame," which is shaped like an altar. All three are traditional poems with innovative line cuttings that image the subject of the poem. Visual concrete poetry (for there are also the phonetic and kinetic concrete poetries) is a descendant of the pattern poems and love knots of the preceding ages, but is more properly visual than logical and discursive. The visual poem, according to Pierre Garnier, "should not be 'read.' It should be allowed to 'make an impression,' first through the general shape of the poem and then through each word perceived out of the whole at random."

Thus, the poem "A Man Falls to his Death," which Bautista appends to his theory as a step in weaning the emotional away from the intellectual in poetry, is really a traditional one with a diagram and a numbering system for its lines as rhetorical supports. These pseudo-scientific devices, which give the poem a "concrete" look, are supposed to enhance the "scientific" objectivity, precision, and coldness of the speaker as he describes the fatal fall of a construction worker from

the tenth floor of the building he was working at in terms of simple computations that prove the theorem “Blood is nothing. Space is all. Is.” The speaker is able to carry off this artificial and inhuman pose well enough, although he does so at the price of being deconstructed by a more human account of the death juxtaposed with his statements but put in parenthesis like antithetical afterthoughts from a more knowing, sympathetic, and disembodied voice. It is from this voice that we learn the pertinent “facts” of the incident and realize the futility of, and the irony in, the “scientific” efforts of the more dominant voice. The question is: where is that other voice coming from?

I would like to think that in such a bipolar frame in the poem can be found the maneuver and the spirit of concrete poetry—but that would be an easy way out. Probably without being aware of it, Bautista has laid bare in this poem the deep oxymoron of the relationship between the intellect and passion that was working in and through him and which he had resolved in favor of the intellect and its pretensions simply because he might not have known how to deal with passion and its intractability and unpredictability. The mind is more calculable and chartable, even if it leads to blank walls; the heart is the more knowing and charitable, and the easier to defer and parenthesize. It would seem that many of the poems Bautista had written virtually read like “A Man Falls to his Death” but without the parentheses—mostly mental calisthenics or poses propped on the shoulders of unmentioned private and dramatic moments easy to depersonalize and gain distance from with the help of metaphors. He may be passionate in his intellections, but as this poem shows we get more from the “emotional element” in terms of facts and poetic effects that determine, in the final analysis, the readers’ responses to the entire poem. That such “emotional element,” however repressed this may be, surfaced in this text at that time could be read as a sign, and this is very speculative of me, that deep in Bautista’s poetic psyche he had admitted to himself its importance and role in his poetry but kept it marginalized, so to speak, because his poetic program of writing the second and third parts of his epic demanded so. For now, however, we can see that the poem he offers as proof of his idea of an emotion-free poetry actually disproves his theory since the emotional element in it—and not its pseudo-scientific theorem and procedure—provides the poetic ground for, and elicits, the proper response on the part of the reader. The “science” proves nothing finally, and the parenthesized emotional element deconstructs the poem in the same way as the poem deconstructs the theory it was supposed to exemplify. Such contradictions and paradoxes are normal parts of the lives of poets and should be placed in the proper perspective, difficult as it already is to understand the speech of those who speak with a double tongue.

A second poem written in the spirit of concrete poetry is “A Manner of Looking.” There are no images here, and the “concreteness” is located in the tension generated by the juxtaposition of two texts: on the left side, the poem of Bautista, and on the

right side a passage from William James. The excerpt from James' *Principles of Psychology* deals with the illusion of movement one experiences when sitting in a train that has stopped in a station and another train that had also stopped starts to pull out. The poem, steeped in the diction of philosophy, seems to prove the theorem asserted at the beginning: "Tension between mind and reality/Is a form of structure: Nothing, conceived/With integrity, is solid ..." In the middle, however, it playfully gives a variation of the theorem thus, "Tension between mind and mind is/Reality only Nothing upholds/If the heart forgets" and also at the end, "Tension,/Because imagined, evolves into rock/And the lovers, moving their parted ways,/Fail to graph the moment's scar or hold it back." The poem may ultimately be about the end of an affair, but in its brief cataloguing of disparate images, from Cortes to Bernini to chameleons and flutes and a bus ride and a scene in a motel room, it seems to enact its own statement on writing: "Language,/Because cold, performs nothing but to string/The premises, the promises, dim lights,/Partridges, bites, shoes, nuances that sting;/All will not last." But the pathos in the leavetaking between lovers who appear to have been involved in a one-night stand becomes overwhelmed by the statemental circumlocutions of the speaker (who is generalized and disembodied) eager to find rules for love and its consequences: "what function what degree/Is the heart slumbered by? ... whate'er inference/The heart holds is merely accidental:/For love is a formula." The tension—no less intellectual—in the manner of looking at the two passages, therefore, lies in that while the James passage ostensibly talks about sitting still and falsely feeling in motion, it is actually the one that moves narratively and is more affecting than the poem that appears to talk about moving on after a short-lived romance but is really stuck pacing, as it were, the littered floor of the dainty mind.

Bautista uses the same technique of juxtaposed texts in "The Measure" part of the second section of *The Archipelago* (l. 1203-1243) where it is more successful because the texts are more light and rhythmic and complement each other: one extols the power of the mind to sustain "the nothing" that is "more real than any/gulf or reef or shore/which are only there/perpetual because/the mind wills them so" while the other sings a paean to poetic measure without which realities "will die unfulfilled/because unspoken/in the measure." "The Measure" is a part of the soliloquy of Jose Rizal, the poet par excellence whom Bautista calls the "artisan" and the "Eye of Consciousness."

The third poem that uses the methods of concrete poetry is "John Cage's Tenth Symphony from the Book of the Dead." All three "concrete" poems are found at the end of *Charts*—where, perhaps, their novelty could do less harm, or where they could point new directions for a poetry that was fast hardening into a mannerist one. And if I may digress here a moment: it is probably a measure of the dead seriousness of our poets in English, who seem grimly determined to succeed in that language, to have missed the ludic and "revolutionary," i.e., postcolonial,

possibilities in concrete poetry—in much the same spirit and manner as the Bagay poets appropriated English into the Tagalog language. The literary scene, especially among the writers in English, would have been more lively, liberating, and tolerant of other poetic styles, and less catholic and conservative in taste and outlook, had those writers and their teachers engaged for their models not only the exemplars of the American literary canon propagated by the New Criticism but also those at its fringes, e.g., black writing, Beat poetry, language poetry, etc., where the pleasure principle is more evident and the idea of poetry and poetic space expansive, flexible, and adventurous. Perhaps our literary forbears lacked the sense of humor, acumen, and foresight to see the true nature of their relation to their adopted language and naturally went for the norm of American literary culture for immediate validation and acceptance. They are not at fault, of course, but what I am pointing out here is the absence of a true romantic figure, opposed to Villa who succumbed to the charms of his stepmother tongue, who would have stayed in the country and opened avenues of writing in English little recognized in publications, writing classrooms and workshops, and local and national competitions.

In any case, Bautista's poem "John Cage's Tenth Symphony from the Book of the Dead" uses concrete poetry devices in six of its nine sections. Basically these devices are the pattern poem, the diagram, and the atomization of words. Thus, the first section is made up of just the word "catacomb" repeated four times and arranged such that the letters could be read in a U-shaped direction or in reverse and at the same time look like a catacomb, or at least an outline of one; and the sixth section is shaped like a cross on a stand, or a stylized bird with spread wings also on a stand, with blank space at the center. The arms of the cross, or the wings of the bird, consist of a text of nine lines, with basically two words per line, on the left side and its mirror image on the right side. On opposite sides of the "head" are the two lines of "si/lence"; at the base is two lines made up of the word "silence" repeated ten times, the first line ending with the "s" of the next "silence" and the second line ending with "si." The main text that goes from "head" to "foot" reads: "He will not/Sit upright/He will not/Know who/Came only/What will/Come"; and a secondary text goes from the "head" to the left "wing" or "arm": "He will not/Sit upright/He will not/Talk about/Though none/Will reject/His plumes/His mimes/Mummery his/Harmony of/Ziggurat &/javelins." Section VII consists of just the word "SILENCE"; section VIII of "si"; and section IX of "lence."

On the other hand, section III makes use of a diagram that is supposed to explain "The nothing that counts, the concrete nothing/[that] is the C that is not there, traversing/heaven's leg (A) and water's pure arm (B)/into nothingness."

The poem is a tribute to the American composer's idea that there is no such thing as silence, exemplified in his work "4'33,'" where in three movements marked by the pianist's turning the piano lid up and down the audience heard literally nothing—or at least the nothing that Cage wanted them to listen to—and nothing of

the normal and expected combination of notes that yield “music” as it is commonly defined. Cage is an iconoclast and innovator in the field of modern music, working on aleatory and chance compositions and on “indeterminacy” in both his music and later in his writings. Bautista attempts to depict such silence and indeterminacy in his poem by a montage of images and allusions that range from Cotton Mather to Philippine politics, interrupted by an uncited quotation from Gregory Bateson on information and codification. But his pentametric lines and the willed force of their momentum prove to be a little too cumbersome to carry out whatever intentions he may have had to court chance, and he succeeds only in section V where he gives up logic altogether and begins to play with the language, sustaining the ludic spirit until the poem’s end:

Illustrate the silence through the sound  
of  
nothing dies in the particulars of speech

the flummery of chimera sixty decibels deep  
and  
the powder of autocrats in their nose

the taped scream of the tapeworm gilded  
why  
it will break the funerary mask on the brick

taxes and carrots and beets and sex  
and  
revenue and lumber and cataract and beckoning

the wavelengths that will not quicken his toes  
the  
elegies that will not harmonize his blood

the ziggurat that will not bow to his beckoning  
the  
soldiers that will not black his boots

perambulations periwinkles gnomon termagants  
books  
javelins libraries letters of marque and shipping

the prerogatives of kings the sons of kings  
the  
nothing speaks in the particulars of death

The “joke” in this section being the aleatoric rearrangement of or improvisation on the second section—the silencing of the latter’s speech, or the rendering into speech of the latter’s silences. But the poem’s masterly ludic stroke, of course, rests on the fact that Cage never wrote a symphony, much less a tenth symphony, on the *Book of the Dead*. The poem is an inspired improvisation on a nonexistent work, which is an interesting “concrete” idea not bereft of the required wit.

But Bautista’s experimentation does not end with his handful of “concrete” poems. In fact, he already started it a book ago in *The Archipelago*.

When put in place among the other books in the Trilogy of Saint Lazarus, *The Archipelago* will appear an erratic, if not a flawed, door into the entire epic. To my mind, the book deals with how three men came to terms with their unexpected fortunes as shapers of the consciousness of this country, the arcs of their individual fates forming a circle of pain and loneliness, as well as of dreams and hopes, that turns ever onward the wheels of the nation’s destiny. It is an exquisite discourse on the dialectics of dream and reality and of the role of chance and the ineluctable in the lives of adventurous men. Much of the difficulty and obtuseness in the work, however, could have been avoided if it did not aspire to be a modernist epic.

Understandably, at that time, Bautista was still trying to feel his way into the metrical and narrative requirements of the epic form, and his attempts and experimentation show in this work. Here, there is no singular and strong narrator’s voice characteristic of most traditional epics. That voice is here made multiple and even shared and segued into by personages whose identities consequently become blurred, indeterminate, and only guessed at. The narrative that served well in the first part, where the figures of Magellan and Legazpi were introduced, was broken off radically in the next three parts in favor of a disjointed collage of dense lyrical meditations, ostensible excerpts from journals, and dialogues among disembodied voices that are all supposed to highlight selected episodes in the country’s history. The narrative thread was picked up again only in the last section of the fourth part as a kind of recapitulating and framing device. Structurally speaking, Rizal, the third major figure in the book, is given an entire part all to himself (the reader arrives at this conclusion since the narrator does not help him here) in “Out of the Mouth” and nearly half of the third part “Now the City,” but is not mentioned in the conclusion that featured only Legazpi and Magellan. And his meditative forays into the modern period—there is even a narratological lapse where Mondrian, an artist whose work could not have been accessible to any of the narrators, was mentioned for no necessary reason at all—somehow lend a discordant and jarring note to the Old Worldish charm of Magellan’s and Legazpi’s ruminations in flowing hexameters. Such contrapuntal juxtaposition of differing mindsets and styles could instance the modernist aesthetic that Bautista seems to be working from, as well as his cubist (in terms of collage) aspirations and strategy. But it leaves the work—brilliantly conceived though it may be—uneven, overwrought, and inaccessible, and the reader



increasingly puzzled, bewildered, and cold. It is a minor tragedy for the trilogy that it has remained unread—or if read, little understood—by the very people whose ideas of race and history should have been helped had the song and verses made for them been less perplexing and recondite. As it is, the epic remains the supreme exemplar of high modernism in our poetry.

Still, to my mind, it was inspired of Bautista to have broken off the narrative in favor of a collage of lyrical and dramatic pieces. The only problems with such breakage lie in its timing and contents: we are already 1010 lines lulled by hexameters and ensconced in the narrative when it snaps without warning and is replaced by an abstruseness, complexity, and metric and lineal adventurousness. This sudden fragmentation in the opus appeared to me as Bautista's way of problematizing the epic form (having already written 1010 lines in it), testing its powers and limitations in order to modernize it, make it bend to his will, and offer new excitement, if not to the reader, then to his own hexameter-driven self. To a certain degree he succeeds—as long as the lyrical impulse is restrained in favor of the narrative, and new ways of looking at particular historical events are opened up. This is evident in the “Extracts from Three Journals” section of the third part “Now the City” where we are given Juan de Salcedo's resentment against Legazpi about his assigned post, Guido de Labezares's gentle premonition of Legazpi's death, and Limahon's coarseness and rapacity dovetailed with Pedro de Chaves's magnificent account of the Spaniards' failed attempts to capture the Chinese pirate. But when the lyric takes over, enigmas abound and even the poetic is poeticized—resulting in density, difficulty, and diffusion (if not deferment) of the narrative line. This happens in the entire second part titled “Out of the Mouth”; in the dialogue and “The Journey” sections of “Now the City”; and in the first two-thirds of the last part “Full Circle.” By “poeticizing the poetic,” I refer to the moment when the link between the literal item or event and its trope is so clear and strong that the temptation to exaggerate, divagate, and obfuscate is yielded to simply because there is no mistaking the “real import” of the trope. Here, for instance, is a passage from “The Journey” where three voices attempt to interrogate Rizal, the “Man”:

*Third Voice*

Who stamped the birthright on  
Your palm?

*Man*

I long ago  
Knew a river's eye is  
Much bigger than its flow.

*First Voice*

And you are a prophet?

*Man*

Your voice is very like  
A templar urn that has  
Lost faith in the eunuchs,  
Yet sitting there fired-up  
For lack of gods to burn.  
No. I have never been  
A digger of old wounds.

*Second Voice*

Your name, please?

*Man*

          There are worms  
In my blood.

*Third Voice*

          Origin?

*Man*

The vile sweat of monks.

*Third Voice*

          No,  
*Country* of origin.

*Man*

What are tamaras for?

*Second Voice*

Occupation?

*Man*

          My feet  
Have heard my people's cry  
All over Europe; I  
Arrived with the blackbirds.

*Second Voice*

Occupation?

Rizal gets away with this kind of equivocation, which is an enjoyable spectacle in itself, because while the reader knows who the "Man" is and eventually sorts out

what he is up to, the three voices do not and are therefore made to appear ridiculous. The strategy is not without its political undertones, for the voices soon assume those of Spanish interrogators and the source of the mocking contempt in Rizal's tone of voice becomes clear and defensible. Later, however, Rizal's answers become more obtuse. To the question, "Who are your accomplices?" he replies: "Before/ One engulfs the light, he/Is just a thin shadow,/A flow within a flow,/Till flame gives him an arc/To crawl into life with." And when asked, "You used what instrument?" he answers: "My tongue is wound around/The corpse of darkness, there/Is no need to break me/with hyperboles." One could very well say that this is poetry itself, whose very meaning escapes us. Which is the very point I am addressing here. The obscurity in the longish passage quoted above could be defended in a context of political strategy—as long as the reader is behind the "Man"; once the "Man" turns his back on the reader, as in the two latter passages, the obscurity becomes isolated and unproductive.

"Out of the Mouth," where the narrative line gets broken, is a collage of voluptuously baffling lyric pieces that deal with various places from Germany to Japan—the cosmopolitanism and modernity of which should convince the reader that it is Rizal's consciousness being laid bare here. And indeed it is. Bautista makes this the most experimental part in the book, taking advantage of the fact that Rizal himself was a master poet. Thus, metrically, he suspends the hexameters he has been employing since the start of the poem and goes syllabics in particular poems—from four to five through seven and nine and ten counts per line, running a gamut from dimeters to pentameters. He goes into free verse and exploits the spaces between words as rhetorical tools, plays with stanza indentions, and breaks the line into a spacier staircase pattern. His study on the poetry of e.e. cummings did him well in this regard. Such variety, intimidating on the page but enriching as a whole, provides a sharp counterpoint to, if not rebuke of, the already established unrhymed hexameters in the poem's first part. It is meant to introduce Rizal as the third major figure after Magellan and Legazpi—the fated life-arcs of the Spanish conqueror and settler seducing that of Rizal's in order to complete the circle of destiny of the country and make it move.

The modernity of Rizal's consciousness, however, and the experimental forms into which it was cast are probably barriers that the average reader would find difficult to surmount, which would thereby alienate him. "Out of the Mouth" is a continuous stream of consciousness broken only in some places by elliptical marks and in others by quotations about the country's natural resources from unnamed sources. I have conveniently divided, for my own sake, this poem's second part into fifteen subsections—its flotsam and jetsam, as it were, beginning with the line "Phalacrocorax carbo"—assembled on the principle that they image Rizal's premonitions about his destiny and his struggles to come to terms with it. In other words, the poems are parables of a kind, translatable into terms defined by the

consciousness that holds them and spreads them on the table like cards of fortune. Thus, the phalacrocorax poem that heads off this lyric suite could be taken to represent Rizal's identification of his victimage with the cormorant: the bird cannot swallow its catch "because of a metal ring below/the bulge" and is therefore "condemned to hunger by hunger/by its natural voracity." The price for its service is "a ring round its neck" and indifference—it is "less fondled than the pika" and the men around it drink and "talk of economics/& whores & the night is gone." The poem on "The Measure" exhibits, as has been mentioned above, Rizal's dependence on the powers of the mind and imagination to make reality viable and tractable—veritable crutches for his helplessness in the hands of chance and destiny. The poem on the crows "circling the acres and acres of bareness" deals with the incomprehensible recurrences of deaths and pain and loneliness that also figure in the subsequent poems. The circle is an image repeated in these poems and meant to symbolize the cycles of history and the call of destiny. In the poem that begins "It is the same/ten twenty men/strung up by/their fingers," he reaches a conclusion—"the pattern wins"—and a hesitant consent to his fate: "It/is the same these/battering rams/of life/twenty/thirty men placed/in big deserts/or bloodless from / a tree or clean/in a clinic/the voice of war/the price of birth/broken & all/I cry am final." We next find him taking his place alongside Magellan and Legaspi—"Evening's minions once evening's duennas now/And I am their brother the only extant/Limb of the physical body"—and in "A perfection of form" he begins to understand "the context/Of a greater structure/that is bodiless/Like the sea" and finally gathers the courage to face the harshness of reality heroically, masterfully put in terms of fruition in poetic expression:

The principle

Begins a little  
                                   under the skin           growing  
 Out tenses and tenses  
                                   by sound by syllable  
 Unnamed unhelped but  
                                   with number in its  
 Terrific muscle  
                                   Till it spouts out bone  
 To stand and skin to make  
                                   it pure           unafraid  
 In the real word    real  
                                   as phantasies are  
 Exploding in its  
                                   crystal hand the only  
 Fire of the only world

He counterpoints this power of the heroic imagination with the fulfilling wordless silence of reality, personified by a Japanese waitress in the next poem “There is not much between a temple and/an hotel,” and with the redeeming value of memory in “An island only.”

In “The Black Woods,” his resolve wavers because of his aesthetic sensibility (“O why must the logic of evil/deny the human form How can swans & sun/in the flexible silence/kill naked desire”), but he counters it with an almost Buddhist concept of nothingness:

What  
sun            What swans            Look there is  
nothing            The fabric of day  
you think  
you saw you wove only out  
of the fractions of broken years            This is not  
your house            the lizard is not your brother  
there are no candles here  
the ceremonies you saw  
you saw only as a child  
you saw only a child  
and that  
because he chose to speak  
in a world of nothing and therefore was nothing  
not trees not woods not wounds not bondage not truth  
not all the world is not  
the nothing nothing more  
real than nothing more  
saying really nothing more  
than what  
we cannot know of more  
Because you hoped to suffer because you suffered  
*You are blind*            I embrace a tree            It is not there

“Ladrone Islands” warns him of avoiding BreakHeart Point, another figure for the archipelago, where ironically a man died shouting “agua agua” in the midst of all that water. But the next poem finds him plunging into BreakHeart Point for his final reconciliation with his destiny:

I did not build  
this city  
but I am its wings  
cramped now

into this  
     solitude wordless  
                     after the plunge  
                                     I will spread  
 salt & thunder  
                     in this land  
                             set fathers  
                                     against sons  
 soil against sea  
                     all burning  
                             & neither sword  
                                     nor epitaph  
 will cut them  
                     apart or cause  
                             the breaking  
                                     of their anger

In the last poem in “Out of the Mouth,” Rizal reconsiders the archipelago, which had existed “only as a point/of reference & never/returned to for solace or/ company,” and finds the strength to return home and meet his fate:

                    You hate to be caught  
 in it loving it & all  
 But on a hot day your room  
 closed & your eyes empty it  
 may suddenly explode big  
 covering the latitudes  
 of the map & you wonder  
 if you have been assaulted  
 by a plague or blinded by  
 grace the sound so final you  
 are dumb utterly destroyed  
 But on a hot day thinking  
 how guilt begets is begot  
 you may suddenly explode  
 gone to dance on its black shores.

This parabolic strategy is again used in the poems in “The Journey” section of Part Three where, for instance, Rizal uses some paintings in a London Art Gallery as props for his meditations on mind and reality to perhaps overcome his fear of death.

The other device Bautista uses in the poem is the dialogue, which was the main expository tool in “Now the City.” On two separate occasions, three voices interrogate Legaspi and Rizal about their fates and their roles in history. These voices use a language that is very lyrical, sometimes cloyingly so, and while they shed new light on the above two figures, they remain ambiguous since their identities shift from mere expositors to persecutors, from rhapsodizers to tormentors.

This excursion into the experimental at the very heart of the book would annoy most readers, and make the book uneven and open to charges of inconsistency and obscurity. For after all, Bautista had proven in the book’s beginning and ending sections that he can handle the narrative line and the rigors, flexibility, and momentum demanded by sustained narration. So why did he have to resort to diffraction and to the difficult lyricism that marked his first book? I can only speculate here that the book’s fragmentation could be seen two ways: one, as a portrait of the psychological implosion brought about by the realization of the scope and enormity of the task and the pressures that came with it, including the need to finish the book at all costs and move forward in the trilogy; and the other, as a kind of technical solution Bautista arrived at in the very middle of its writing—that is to say, as the stylistic equivalence of the fragmented state of the archipelago that is its subject (a fact announced by the book’s cover)—in order to cover new grounds inaccessible to Demetillo’s *Barter in Panay* (a book that Bautista had definitely to reckon with, and probably admired to the extent of criticizing it for a syntactical error in one of its lines). Both propositions are risky and contradictory—the first makes much of artistic passivity and elevates it to an aesthetic principle, and the second values will and audacity but undercuts these on grounds of convenience—but they must still be said for whatever light they may throw on the subject.

I suspect that the book was started here in the Philippines and finished during, or after, a fellowship at the Iowa International Writers Workshop from 1968 to 1969. The spiral notebook where the opening lines of *The Archipelago* can be found also contains some poems with American settings that went into the next book, *Charts*. Perhaps his studies abroad infused new theories of writing and poetic construction into his own practice and reaffirmed the audacity and modernism he exhibited in *The Cave*. In any case, *The Archipelago* is full of such interesting and varied poetic maneuvers that one can only conclude that Bautista was flexing his muscles for the arduous task of bringing his epic trilogy to completion.

Such experimentation only revealed the cubist quality in Bautista’s imagination and poetics—that of being unrelentingly in a state of effervescence and nervous angular motion, always tracking down new planes and angles of its subject to reveal a dimension heretofore unseen or, if seen, unrecognized. This has often resulted in surrealist effects duly noted by at least two critics. But according to my taste, Bautista is much too cerebral and wilful a writer to really let himself go and be a true surrealist. Whatever surrealism is there in his works only rides on the tail of his

essentially cubist way of looking at, thinking of, and giving voice and image to aspects of reality. The “Out of the Mouth” part in *The Archipelago* could be read as a magnified scale of the way Bautista constructs a single lyric: working basically from a philosophical cast of mind, he gathers metaphors and synecdoches of the poetic idea in order to look at it from the sides, front, and back, diffusing such idea but keeping it worked out and on a roll with sensuous textures until it reaches a decisive and ineluctable closure. The line takes on the quality of an adventure, laden with a treasure of a word or combination of images that force a turn of thought or dim the lighting of an image. The effect is one of richness that is attractive and sometimes posed, cloying to the point of surfeit and engendering a sense of heaviness and wonder that maybe nothing is being said at all but that it is being accomplished with a certain mysteriousness and muscular beauty.

Bautista’s disposition to the cubist and collagic, however, reaches a kind of questionable high in *Charts* where passages from *The Archipelago* reappear as individual poems or parts of poems and where two poems will later resurface in *Telex Moon*. This recycling happens in eleven of forty-eight poems and involves the following:

1. “Craws”: the entire poem is found in *The Archipelago*, part 2, lines 1313-1325;
2. “The City and the Flood”: the first part of the poem can be found in *Telex Moon*, part 1, section II, lines 101-200; and the first ten stanzas and the eleventh until half of the thirteenth stanzas of the third part are also in *Telex Moon*, part 1, sections 4, lines 301-400, and 5, lines 401-426;
3. “It is the Mountain that Shapes the Sky”: the entire poem is in *The Archipelago*, part 4, lines 3430-3446;
4. “Two Airs for Trumpets and Kettledrums”: the first four lines of the first Air and the first four lines and the tenth to twelfth lines of the second Air are embedded in *The Archipelago*, part 4, lines 3625-3631; lines 26-28 of the first Air are variations of lines 956-958 of *The Archipelago*, part 1;
5. “Early Winter: The Old Mariner”: the first twenty-seven lines are in *The Archipelago*, part 2, lines 1328-1354;
6. “Tokyo International Airport”: the first line is in *The Archipelago*, part 1, lines 746-747;
7. “Loneliness in Another City”: the whole poem is in *The Archipelago*, part 2, lines 1361-1402;
8. “Takanawa Prince Hotel” the whole poem is in *The Archipelago*, part 2, lines 1607-1626;
9. “The Horses in Cheyenne, Wyoming”: the entire poem is in *The Archipelago*, part 2, lines 1946-1980, where “North Platte” was originally “Cebu” and “Laramie” “Mactan”;



10. “Motorcycle Racing in Louisville, Kentucky”: the whole poem is in *The Archipelago*, part 3, lines 2067-2076 distributed among the Three Voices; and
11. “John Cage’s Tenth Symphony from The Book of the Dead”: lines 3-22 of part IV are found in *Telex Moon*, part 1, lines 278-297.

It is puzzling why a poet like Bautista, prolific as he is, would reissue old poems as new ones, snipping these off from their part in an epic’s narrative and giving them new lease on poetic life with fresh titles. The only reasons I can think of to explain this are: one, that the master Bautista was playing with his readers (in his essays he always challenged them to be more attentive and critical) and critics (at that time very few) to such an extent that he did things to his poems with impunity and knew that he would not be taken to task for those; and two, that pressed to finish the first part of his trilogy, he reworked the poems written in America (these would later appear in *Charts*) into *The Archipelago*, using them mostly in the fragmented meditations of Rizal in the second part as evidences of the hero’s travels and cosmopolitanism. Little wonder then that the second part is deeply fragmented and comes across initially as obscure, incoherent, and discontinuous—the more probable truth is that it is really made up of independent poems strung together and meant to be read as refractions of Rizal’s restless mind and his struggles with his fate. Some of these poems gain a new context and specificity when given their titles, like “The Horses in Cheyenne, Wyoming” and “Motorcycle Racing in Louisville, Kentucky”—although the latter is too much of a fragment to be independent and makes more sense in the epic where its images of the arc and the circle become aspects of a motif for the idea of individual and national destinies.

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TO BE SURE, *The Archipelago* has lines reworked from *The Cave*, like the following examples: “She is pacific, venerable,/Schooled in the martyrdom by fire” from “Study for Poetry” becomes “she/Was pacific, dangling round her neck a chain of mountains;/Venerable, schooled in the martyrdom by fire” in the epic (lines 614-616); “For that which completes space must destroy space,/As in Mondrian” of “Study for Minotaur” becomes “For that/Which fills space must kill space as Mondrian with his mass” (lines 1018-1019); and “That one colour a single voice compels” from the first part of “The Cave” is given a variation as “that one voice a single colour/Compels” (lines 240-241). But even as late as his 1992 collection, *Boneyard Breaking: New Collected Poems*, this cut-and-paste technique continues to be evident: “Vigil for Helen of Troy” has been wedged into lines 31-37 of “1989: State of the Nation Address” and “Amongst the Ruins of Ostia Antica” has been

splintered and embedded into the longer “Thoughts on an Assassination, Ten Years Hence; or A Country Full of Magicians” where, for local color, “Manila” took the place of “Ostia Antica.”

In the writing life, it happens sometimes that some lines one wrote early in one’s career may press later, for one reason or another, to reappear in the same formulation or in its variation, an eventuality that is usually resisted by the writer, since it is taken as a sign of the drying up of the wellsprings of creativity—though in this case the repetition comes soon enough that one could probably attribute this either to a forgetfulness on Bautista’s part or to an obsession with his own phrasings.

For me, all this is a sign, not only of Bautista’s dispassion and coldness to his work, but also of his “scientific” and cubist attitude towards his own writings. It would seem that for him his texts, which are temporary achievements of individual moments, have nonetheless achieved a state of abstraction and plasticity that makes them interchangeable, combinatory, and open to cuttings, reconstructions, and transpositions that gain new angles on the subject or new meanings from the unexpected interchanges and juxtapositions. Ultimately, however, this view problematizes the integrity of the single lyric and unmasks the artifice in the production of manipulable meanings. Language itself, as instrument of representation, is transformed into a game, and the writing of poetry is made to break into the plastic arts and the ludic.

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