



A CONVERSATION WITH MARK ANTHONY CAYANAN

Mark Anthony Cayanan answers questions over email from Singaporean poet and **Queer Southeast Asia**'s co-editor, **Cyril Wong**, about the former's 2021 poetry collection, [*Unanimal, Counterfeit, Scurrilous*](#), presented by Giramondo Publishing. The poems take over from the life of the queer antihero in a novel by Thomas Mann to intersect with the speaker's multifaceted reflections and meditations on desire and selfhood.

Cyril: To begin, I suggest we start by introducing the work, as well as the work preceding the work. *Unanimal, Counterfeit, Scurrilous* is a beautifully obsessive sequence that borrows the repressed protagonist from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Gustav von Aschenbach, and transforms him into a prism for refractions of queer desire. Mann's antihero's self-destructive obsession with a youthful Tadzio ends in his not-unrelated death by cholera (a tragedy foreshadowed by his name, Aschenbach; 'stream of ashes' in German). Queer lust, self-denial and mortality (summed up already in your opening poem: 'the body hopes to resist the story it inexorably becomes, because the undiscardable body's the joke that needs to be explained, let the needing wait') compound that well-trodden tension in writing between intellectualism and emotion that recalls (more recently) Louise Glück's *Faithful and Virtuous Night* (where one of her personas struggles to enjoy the 'puzzling music' of fuller feelings) and T. S. Eliot's anaesthetised aestheticism. Could you share a bit about 'why Mann' and about other influences that may have informed your book's unique trajectory?



Mark: Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* was only the second queer book I ever read, one I just randomly picked off the bookshelf of my best friends, who were my housemates back in undergrad. It was a discombobulating initial encounter: the language of the translation was extra-ornate, and the novella itself less preoccupied with nudging along the plot than contriving antibiotic tableaux in which the messy inner world of the protagonist is foisted upon the languid milieu of the Lido. It took me a good number of repeated attempts to finish the book—I'm an easily distracted reader, also a slow one—but I eventually fell in love with its over-determinism, in which every gesture is made to mean something, almost every side character an intrusion from myth. I was around eighteen when I first read it, but I recognised the curiosity that's mired in shame, the overhanging feeling of despair, the compulsion of Aschenbach toward deflection by framing his desire within Apollonian notions of orderly beauty: these telltale indications of disorientation were, for me at that time, inseparable from every version of longing.

It's an obsession that's lingered. I'd already intended to work on this poetry project as early as 2013—but I initially had the hare-brained idea to write from the perspective of Tadzio, young and awe-inspiring and unaware of it; I honestly believed I could pull it off. I could not. It was apparently impossible for me to write from the perspective of a figure whose greatest source of power lies precisely in his being indecipherable. I was only able to start working on the poems, this time by channeling the aged and decaying Aschenbach, in late 2018, and the project was supposed to be a mere chapter to a much larger manuscript, which would've featured two other queer figures, Teresa of Ávila and Judiel Vega Nieva (that original plan had to be abandoned because I apparently ended up writing too many poems—I didn't have a social life, so I just kept writing and writing). The research I accomplished and the literatures I gathered around these two figures, I think, are also spectral presences in *Unanimal*; in particular, when I wrote some of the poems, I was still filching swaths of texts from the autobiography of Teresa of Ávila—and I



think the saint's ambivalent attitude toward earthly life, as well as her phantasmagoric version of a life actively whittled into austerity, all that also lent *Unanimal* some definition.

Another response to 'why Mann': I consider *Death in Venice* a work of fantasy, insofar as fantasy may be defined by its relation to impossibility, and the drive of the imagination to annul the prefix. I read Aschenbach's desire for Tadzio as a fantasy of self-replenishment: the boy—confident in his beauty, still without the self-consciousness that one eventually learns in adulthood—embodies something Aschenbach can no longer possess: invulnerability. Also imperviousness. While overlaying my poems with the arc of Mann's novella, I was consistently trying to test how the body's errancies, and the emotional toll of these errancies, could manifest in the formal choices and syntactical decisions I was making throughout the collection.

And as regards other influences milling about in the book: some of the more prominent ones include Edmond Jabès, a very obsessive writer who tends to diffuse his obsessions via polyphony and allegory, and one who aggressively pursues what, to me, are constantly slippery dilemmas. I tend to draw from him often enough, but he's never been more present in my work than in this book, especially in the heavily prosy sections. Additionally, when I was initially conceptualising the project, I planned on using the haibun as its primary form—but the haiku demands a composure that my normally fidgety syntax couldn't quite assimilate, so I had to give that up. But I think some of patterns of thought in Matsuo Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, which I read over and over to prepare for this project, have been transmuted into the book too. Some more influences: I wanted to test the extent of the durability of the sentence, and Carl Phillips was a great guide for this. And I know that my language also tends to be flamboyant, even hammy—at certain points in the book, I felt compelled to check that impulse, so I often turned to Chelsey Minnis for her acerbic wit and Ariana Reines, circa *Coeur de Lion*, for her dry candor.



Cyril: In a poem that further emphasises the painful contradictions and internal tensions that result from trying to define one's longing as a conscious to unconscious strategy of queer self-governance, you write about how '[a]s final in form as a seizure, this longing he wants to sacrifice a name to' is 'like a pig it roots into dirt for fungi'. Risking a charge of sexism in this age of (to use your words in the book) 'a new politeness' – is there a difference between male and female homosexuality in relation to the ways in which we aestheticise, subjugate or name our desires?

Mark: I'm not sure I'm well-equipped enough to respond to your question without lapsing into reductive essentialisms. I believe in masculine and feminine energies, and their manifestations and interplay in art and literary practice—but I also think of them as designations significant primarily for being interpretive footholds. I do have an aversion to the 'big-dick' posturing of the insightful, purposeful ending, at least as it's used as a regulatory imperative, a way for the poet to establish his profound awareness of the world by declaring his lexical mastery over it—and I think it's an aversion that has l'écriture feminine of Hélène Cixous for its critical tradition. But even then, Cixous resists hard-and-fast gender lines, citing the polymorphic prose of Jean Genet (another gay writer I'm obsessed with) as an example of the term. I guess, to answer your question, this paragraph is a pretty long-winded way of saying I don't know.

But certainly, the performative aspect of gender is important to *Unanimal*, as it was in my previous books, which contain a whole lot of quasi-dramatic monologues with personae inhabiting female characters. I write drag poems. But *Unanimal* was the first time I took on a male character, so throughout the process of working on the book, I was keen on using 'he' as a semantic center—and I was surprised (and happily so, since it proved



productive) by the amount of rancor I was able to plug into the poems once I settled into the pronoun. As regards gender, I don't know what that means either (or maybe I'm being facetious).

To slightly slant your question about aestheticising, subjugating, or naming desires toward queerness: one of the things I also considered during the drafting process was how to queer my aesthetic strategies—and the preponderance of similes in the poems is an outcome of that. Of course, I'm drawing from a queer lineage of tropology: I think of, for instance, José Garcia Villa or of Thomas James, who cranked out similes described by Lucie Brock-Broido as 'far-fetched ... sparked with imagination [and] curiously precise.' I'm attracted to how the simile is a trope that essays both proximity and difference. As opposed to, say, the metaphor, which insists on the coalition between tenor and vehicle, the dissolution of what makes each of them distinct, the simile contrives resemblances between discrete entities, all the while slyly exposing the permeable membranes of each. The simile makes a spectacle of its moves, is clear about its status as artifice, lending itself, I think, to a queer sensibility.

Cyril: From the 'sweet medicine death-smell of Venice', the compass of your poetic imagination points everywhere to conjure up impressions of places in evocative ways that also mix in allusions to political events and individual social commentary, darting from Europe to the Philippines: 'alleys that reek of spunk and unaffordable healthcare...a foul-mouthed dictator and his actors recreate an asylum...Erap was the comic relief in the vice-presidential debates...fishing boat rammed by a Chinese vessel'. Such intertextual and cross-cultural ambitiousness is a remarkable risk. Could you elaborate more on the artistic to personal reasons for amalgamating the worlds of your different personas?



Mark: In Mann, Venice feels like an omnipotent force enabling the tectonic shifts in the protagonist's inner world: that Aschenbach is there on vacation disconcerts him, allowing him to slip out of the dignified mien he thought he had already mastered in his old age; his first gondola ride to the Lido becomes a shadowy, allegorical moment that flings him down into his own katabasis; finally, the epidemic provides a logical conclusion to his inner crisis: how else could desire be redeemed in a novella so fixated on the aesthetic than through its permanent curtailment, the absolute gesture of Apollonian cleansing? I recognised the need to transpose Mann's investment in setting into my poems too—but for my work to extricate itself from what could've been a too-parasitic relationship with its urtext, and in order to drive home the fact that I don't exist in the same rarefied conditions as Aschenbach or Tadzio, I knew I had to imbricate whatever I derived from Mann with other specific realities in specific contexts.

Moreover, I was writing *Unanimal* during my stint as a postgrad in Adelaide, at a time when the Philippines was going through political turmoil and social unrest (things have obviously gotten much worse since then)—through my poems I was absorbing materials (mostly current, but some also historical) from and about the Philippines as, perhaps, a way of keeping myself connected and attentive. But I was also actively trying to avoid injecting the poems with the kind of forthright, Wordsworthian egotism that positions the author as a public ethical voice—so the tendency toward intertextuality and allusion in *Unanimal* is a manifestation of my decision to resort to coding. It's a rhetorical strategy I stole—I did a lot of stealing in this book—from Hart Crane, whose poetry is known for its obscurity, a characteristic that over the past three decades has been read by queer theorists as a strategic retreat into epistemological privacy, generating a hermeneutic difficulty that stratifies its audiences based on their access to information as regards, among other aspects, his sexual identity. Thomas Yingling cites Crane as an exemplar of how, among gay writers, 'literature [is] less a matter of self-expression and



more a matter of coding,’ making homosexuality ‘a mode of semiotic expression’ as much as it is a theme. But whereas Crane insinuates homosexual desire into his poetry through surreptitious means, in my work, it’s the rendering of sociopolitical milieu via what might have been patently representational tactics—in effect, explicitly acknowledging my embeddedness as a Filipino subject—that I choose to circumvent. I didn’t know how to proceed with writing about social struggle without the effort being transvalued into cultural capital, so I ended up rejiggering Crane’s coding to accommodate my preoccupation with and ambivalent attitude toward the literary circulation of political engagement. Besides, evasiveness has historically been a queer tactic, and I think it’s great that I can fixate on this ethical dilemma within the arena of poetry: because not a lot of people consume it, it’s the genre that’s least ensnared in imperatives of accessibility, one whose standards of comprehensiveness aren’t fettered to purposeful intelligibility.

Cyril: In one memorable moment, you write: ‘In truth, when life happens, it happens in the fourth person.’ Is the introduction of the generic referent another example of the overanalytical speaker’s tendency to run from painful realities, or a way of universalising the pain of conflict within our queer consciousness; a renewed strategy of speaking of queer desire as *human* desire?

Mark: Thanks for pointing out that passage—I’m stupid enough to be proud of having thought of it. In the same poem, a few sentences down, I wrote, ‘The fourth person permits one to sentimentalise the pain of others without the shamelessness of co-optation’—I don’t believe that statement, but I also plugged it in to invite suspicions of facileness. When I was writing that poem (crucial because it’s the first in the book), I was trying to figure out how to kind of simulate via syntax and image a carnival house of mirrors. So repetition,



illusion, distortion, and also truthfulness (as opposed to truth): I was puzzling them all out (though, of course, the final version of the poem might not have reflected all that, at all). I suppose I was opening the poem, as well as the rest of the collection, to the possibility of being objected to, disagreement and discomfiture being responses I wanted to elicit at certain points. I spoke earlier of my aversion to totalising assertions of wisdom—unfortunately, I also find alluring their rhetorical oppressiveness. So I use (and use often enough) the sweeping statement, but I’m also anxious to telegraph its sketchiness through the semantic contexts in which it’s embedded.

And I suppose turning to the generic pronoun could be taken as an expression of disavowal—and I wouldn’t deny that the kind of willed dissociation effected by sleights of hand via pronoun shifts might function as an escape of sorts, a reprieve from accountability—while at the same time, dispersing precisely what’s being disavowed among potential antecedents. It’s a tough question you’re asking. I’m honestly daunted by it, thank you for having asked it: it acquires the weight of a diagnosis, not just for the overanalytical speaker but also for the self (myself), because I feel like it speaks to an all-too-recognisable queer conundrum: should one resist homonormative definition (to what extent and at what cost)? should one allow oneself to be perceived (and again, to what extent and at what cost)? what does it mean, to share? what is gained? what is given up?

Cyril: It is certainly a conundrum for many queer people; one that frustrates but also provides plenty of subjective and existential insights if we undergo its painful analysis with intelligence and sensitivity (I might even argue that we’re *fortunate* for enduring difficult lives in which we are forced to address it). In the poem where your book title comes from, you write: ‘Whose method of dealing with the boredom of outgrowing libertinism and adopting the courtliness of solitude is self-mockery. His is either a well-oiled universe or a chaos huddled



together, still a mannish character, unanimal, counterfeit, scurrilous.’ There is an unrelenting sense of self-deprecation to almost self-harm in the way self-deceptions are mocked and vilified. To what extent are Aschenbach and any other persona in the poems symbols of queer rage, homosexual self-hatred or the bitterness of the marginalised?

Mark: Yeah, there are a lot of ugly feelings jostling for airtime in the book. I actually think that the book has numerous instances of lightness, even of straight-up humor—but there is a compulsion in the poems to relentlessly thwart those moments or make the self the butt of the joke. And, yes, there’s queer rage directed toward oppressive systems, and there’s self-loathing that’s a result of internalised homophobia, but there’s also the kind of resentment—I’m drawn to everything about the word, really, from what it means to how it sounds—that’s entangled with the signifiers queers have themselves traditionally laid claim to, ones they’re (or we’re) also constricted by: the emphasis on beauty (as phenomenon, as method of apprehension), the preeminence of desire, the resistance to imposed normativity.

I swiped the title of the book off the George Long translation of *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius, which contains a whole lot of reflections on how to be a good man. The original excerpt reads like a catalogue of objectionable personalities: ‘A black character, a womanish character, a stubborn character, bestial, childish, animal, stupid, counterfeit, scurrilous, fraudulent, tyrannical.’ Recycling Marcus Aurelius was to me a way of refuting him, of queering what he says; at the same time, the incompleteness of the revision, to my mind, was a way of acknowledging the cognitive difficulty of escaping social conditioning. Ergo rage and self-hatred and bitterness. At this point, I’m remembering what Jean-Paul Sartre says about Genet’s deep-seated immersion in beauty (in Genet, beauty spawns its own sordid, wondrous cosmology):



[A]estheticism does not derive from an unconditional love of the beautiful: it is born of resentment. Those whom Society has placed in the background, the adolescent, the woman, the homosexual, subtly attempt to reject a world which rejects them and to perpetrate symbolically the murder of mankind.

The hyperbolically misanthropic edge to Sartre's summation notwithstanding (or maybe it's there too), the seductive, treacherous appeal of the aesthetic to the dispossessed—the longing to be so utterly consumed by it—is one that the entirety of *Unanimal* attempts to reckon with.

Cyril: In 'Self-portraits with tyrannical consistency', I cannot help but recall Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (his take on 'monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled'), but rendered here as fragments or imagistic wanderings of a surrealist flâneur: 'Ashen and hollow, the city loses its monuments in exchange for a richer history. No bombs, the man orders his army...white soldiers drinking from a rusty artesian pump...A woman leans against the one wall of her house and falls asleep.' Did you intend for literal ruins to conflate with the ruins of historical entropy as well as the ruins of the hard-bitten homosexual consciousness?

Mark: 'Self-portraits with tyrannical consistency' is one of several entries in the book in which I make evident my composition process of juxtaposing several intertexts and, in effect, milieus, characters, conflicts. And the metonym is a cardinal strategy in the poem, consisting as it does of fragments that gesture toward broader narratives or conjure up interiorities which are incomplete because they've been either repurposed from their originary spaces or sundered by the governing structure of the poem itself. Another thing that factored into the construction of 'Self-portraits': I was writing my poems and organising



them while keeping in mind the narrative and emotive arc of Mann's novella. And the fourth chapter of *Death in Venice* is extremely ambulatory, with Aschenbach at his most flâneuristic (though perhaps his purpose for walking around is too transparent to count as such)—I think it's in that chapter where the Lido is depicted as a place so glorious, so suffused with Tadzio's beauty, so satiated with sensory stimuli to the point that it's unbearable. 'Self-portraits' is my way of approximating that.

In terms of the imagery of ruins in the poem and its relationship with the psychological schisms the homosexual subject experiences—yes, there is a considerable element of that dynamic in the poem, something that its structure (the parts of the poem are captions to non-existent illustrations) also attempts to evoke. But I was also thinking of wholenesses: the various fragments all orbit around queer desire, which the poem admits to quite garishly at some point. And, really, it's important to me that the book foregrounds its queer content, especially since I come from a national literary tradition where, for the longest time, to be considered a queer writer or to have your work classified as queer writing comes off as a minor embarrassment, indicative of your shortsightedness, your inability to traverse more urgent thematic concerns. To which I think, yeah, ok, sure.

Cyril: The mind's capacity for over-analysis undermines that Socratic adage about the morally unexamined life: an over-examined and self-denouncing existence is unbearable too. On one page, the speaker thinks about 'how many of his ex post facto epiphanies are bullshit...They could only love each other within the limits of their hunger, beyond which love is anaemic as memory, the kind that seems noble and inspires slight embarrassment.' A dismissive intellectualism becomes like a claustrophobic room with no exits, the natural outcome of that failure to address an underlying incapacity to forgive. Elsewhere, the 'Platonic ideal' of a person's face that 'everyone wants' is also



‘unignorable as a threat, steadfast as a cockroach’. The nail-biting and overthinking queer psychology seems to find no respite even in the book’s final moment: ‘I’m afraid of living as myself I don’t want to be unafraid’. Is hopelessness the symbolic coda here?

Mark: Let me just say that to hear you say that about the book feels pretty unsettling—which is not to say I disagree with you. In keeping with Mann’s novella, I knew that a death of sorts would need to transpire toward the end of *Unanimal*. In Mann, as in many situations in life, on the threshold of fantasy is dissolution—I thought it necessary to retain that. But consider the final gesture of Aschenbach before he collapses and eventually dies of cholera: ‘as he had done so often, he set out to follow [Tadzio].’ To me, that aborted action suggests a discrepancy between the punitive world—which impinges upon Aschenbach via his cholera-ridden body—and individual will, dogged till the end in its pursuit of desire. And desire (and I’m invoking Lauren Berlant here) is inherently optimistic. The final poem of the book names a specific auditor, its language calibrated toward the demotic and direct: there’s despair in earnest there—but it’s also despair transparently staged before its intended audience. The wonderful thing about lyric poetry is that so much of it seeks a response—from the longed-for beloved, from the unrealisable self, from the dispersed collective which the lyric utterance corrals into provisional formation—even though, with the lyric being normally monologic, this response is not or never forthcoming. The quasi-dynamic in the lyric of entreaty and withheld (nonexistent) answer, rooted in ambition (insofar as all ambition is rooted in yearning) and futility, is something that threads through the entire manuscript, most explicitly in the last poem, in which the voice of the ‘I’ (the pronoun lexically absent throughout most of *Unanimal*) is at its most strident. And the ‘I’ attempting to reach the other is, of course, still not an entirely hopeless scenario.



I didn't want the book to arrive at a resolution—something that forecloses narrative possibility or even extends a rational or philosophical intelligence over what's otherwise an unruly queer experience. So the conclusion for me isn't so much an expression of hopelessness as something akin to Berlant's notion of the 'impasse,' 'a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic,' in which potential doesn't quite yet, might not but also could, translate into action. And I'd like to think that if *Unanimal* is a queer book whose confrontations with queer situations are marked by their queerness, then part of its job is to imagine new-adjacent, queer affects attuned to the speaking subject's constant reconstitutions.