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A Festive Lightness of Being

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Review Article

A Festive Lightness of Being

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STATE OF PLAY: LETTER-ESSAYS AND PARABLES. By Gemino H. Abad. Manila: Kalikasan Press, 1990. 136 pages.

Even Gemino Abad fears that the essay is now a lost art as our world "may have somewhat lost its balance, tilting toward Digos and Tiananmem Square" (p. 11). Abad refuses "to careen toward the Atomic Flower" and assures himself, and us, that his essays are, in the classical tradition of Bacon and Montaigne, "attempts . . . at equipoise" (p. 11) in a Filipino context. "Whatever the theme (of the essays)," Abad says, "I follow one special direction. I seek a native clearing where no words break" (p. 12). That clearing, as Abad has described it, is characteristic of the Filipino—"A Festive Lightness of Being."

THE ESSAYS

Although one critic has defined the essay as everything left over when literature has been divided into poetry, criticism, drama and fiction, the more traditional definition of the essay has been "an analytic or interpretative literary composition, usually dealing with its subject from a limited or personal point of view." One essential characteristic of the essay, derived from its etymology, is its experimental or tentative nature. Unhampered by the structures, stylistic and thematic, of the other forms of literature, the essay (and the essayist) can test the limits of thought or imagination in an exploratory journey towards new concepts, new realities, new ways of expressing old and threadbare ideas.

Abad is a poet and critic of considerable note (*Fugitive Emphasis*, 1973; *In Another Light*, 1976; *A Formal Approach to Lyric Poetry*, 1978; *The Space Between*, 1985; *Index to Filipino Poetry and Verse in English, 1905-1950* and *Man of Earth* with Edna Z. Manlapaz, 1988 and 1989). But Abad is an essayist of no little

talent as well. He modestly says that "If the essay is a special gem of Logos, mine as I write is only its meretricious stone. I smile a little abashed, each time I finish with one, to see it mock the perfect imaginary pearl. But mine are essays still . . ." (p. 11). One reads an essayist primarily for what he has to say. Abad has much to say and he says it well.

It is a fortunate (?) accident of our time that essays are no longer delivered in bound volumes to be catalogued on library shelves. The bulk of contemporary essay writing is journalistic—it appears in newspapers and journals. Many of them are trivial, too shallow and topical to touch the chords of humanity in the reader, but the better journalistic essays are masterpieces of the genre. Thus journalism remains the last bastion of the essay in contemporary literature.

Fifteen of the seventeen essays in *State of Play* first appeared in *The Manila Chronicle on Sunday* and *The Manila Chronicle: Focus* from 12 March 1989 to 8 July 1990. (Two of the essays, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "A Festive Lightness of Being" have not been previously published.) Six of the parables appeared in journalistic form in 1988 and 1989. ("The Parable of the Box of Voices" had not been published earlier.) The essay thrives in Philippine journalism (while facts and information suffer) where readers go to the newspapers not for news, but for the latest "essays" of their favorite columnists.

Most of Abad's essays and parables in this collection originally appeared in a column called "Exchange" in the *Chronicle* as letters exchanged among NVM Gonzalez, Sylvia M. Ventura, Luning Bonifacio Ira and Abad on "themes in Philippine life and culture outside the hurly-burly of each day's politics" (p. 11). Abad's "Letter-Essays" are provocative discussions, in the final analysis, of the definition of the Filipino.

THE THEMES

There are three major themes or characteristics of the definition which occur and recur in Abad's essays like musical themes. They are "The Sense of Nationhood," "Philippine Language and Literature," and what I would call the "Genesis and Vocation of the Writer."

Abad's essays are political in a deeper, humanistic sense. In "The Sense of Nationhood" he defends Philippine culture against James Fallows' accusation that it is a "damaged culture." "No, we're not masochists," Abad writes, "but in our history . . . we have been crossed and double crossed by even our leaders and our purported friends. Yet we are not diminished by tribulation; we endure and transcend it" (p. 42). In "Filipinas, Spirit Country," Abad says: "Because the Filipino is 'Man of Earth,' as Amador Daguio says, a man of feeling more than of thought, he is more 'psychic' than others and has strange visions and apparitions" (p. 54). In "EDSA Is Our Soul Image," Abad returns to the theme that occurs in several other of the essays and parables: "We are the people. In our seeming powerlessness lies our greatest power Let us not trivialize our crisis with humor and ribaldry, toward which our festive lightness of being often inclines" (p. 74). For Abad, EDSA has

become a new Filipino myth: "We must always remember our own story and celebrate it in our deeds" (p. 75).

A second major theme in the essays is "Philippine language and Literature." Abad has some very sensible things to say about English in the Philippines in "Our Lingua Franca" and "Basketball, Politics, and the Contest of Languages." "Sige na," he says, "let us call our lingua franca Filipino, but without intention to deceive; and let linguists tell us its varieties and parts, without contentiousness. Away with pretense and jingoism; for example, the absurd claim that Filipino today isn't chiefly Tagalog, or that those who speak in English should first apologize!" Would that others were as sensible!

Abad has two fine essays on Philippine literature. "More Than What You Are, America" is a journey "down Fil-American memory lane *per versum* (by verse)" (p. 45) and "The Eve of Writing" is a very perceptive study, though quite brief, of the early feminist writers in Philippine poetry in English—Angela Manalang Gloria and Trinidad Tarrosa Subido. "We Could Not Make the Ruby Into the Stone of a Ring" is an analysis of whether "the Filipino soul can be expressed by those foreign languages which we have adopted—Spanish or English" (p. 88). Abad says "it isn't a very bright question," but addresses himself to it by a discussion of Amador Daguio's "Man of Earth." The final essay on Philippine literature in the collection is a tribute to Franz Arcellana.

Abad's third theme is what might be called "The Origin and Genesis of the Writer." It is a personal opinion, which could be disputed, of course, but it is here in this third theme that Abad's best writing as an essayist occurs. The essays are a delightful chronicle of the emergence of Abad, the poet and writer. The first two essays, addressed to NVM Gonzalez tell us why Abad writes, and recount his early years as a writer. "The Spirit of Earth" continues the story of the growth of the writer from the town of Dumanjug to Chicago and finally to Taytay and the University of the Philippines. Abad's credo as a writer is summarized in "One's Secret Lifework," "The Childhood of the World" and "Writers Create Our Humanity." "I've always thought the perfect symbol for civilization is a man reading a book. He is then most in touch with himself and the world, and thus loosing his egregious ego, regains awhile his deepest humanity. For the words there that he reads are points of contact with heaven and earth. The texts of hell too could flame out between the words."

One must make a special note of the seven "Parables" in the collection where Abad resurrects the parable form and on occasion brings it close to the land of allegory. "A Parable of Taiwan," "Parable of the Gun-Runner," "The Return of the Tyrant Murkos" and "Parable of the King's Remains" are political satire and topical. "Parable of the Googol Balloons," "Parable of the Box of Voices" and "Parable of the Andromedan" are criticisms of the failure to communicate. "All the stars in your sky speak at night, but no one listens" (p. 133).

Critics have always noted the personal note in the essay. The author intrudes in the essay in a way which is not possible in fiction, criticism and

drama. The *persona* in the essay is a much more approachable and engaging personality. One cannot deny that one of the most appealing characteristics of the two dozen essays in *State of Play* is the presence of Gemino Abad himself. There is a "joy of comradeship" between the author and the reader. (See Abad's celebration of that joy in the essay of the same title, pp. 35 ff.) In the essays we share a good deal of Abad's life—growing up in Dumanjug, his father, the University of Chicago, first love, a family and children in Taytay. *L'auteur—c'est moi!* He reaches across the pages to involve us in his own human consciousness.

CONCLUSION

A reader will always have a favorite essay in a collection like this. My own is "First Love." It does not fit the categories I have outlined above. It is not political. It does not discuss Philippine language or literature. It does not speak about the person or the craft of the writer. It is uniquely its own. It is magnificently human—for all those who turn fifty and think of their first love and "imagine all its throbbing splendor and bitter anguish" (p. 77). There is one passage that deserves citation at length:

Now, for a little while, the passion foresworn is rampant upon my ground. Her sweet name made strange from long silence, her hair that once made evening fall gently about me, her voice that shaped my morning, her hands, her young mouth, the dark cold tide of her going that set me adrift, the unbearable oppression of living still . . . All the accumulated wonder and pain had only lain dormant, but on a sudden, inexplicably the passion declares itself through my being's fissure and sweeps away reason and perfected denial. Upon that weird Richter scale, one is unstrung and loses all efficiency of action. (p. 79)

My other favorite passage is in "A Festive Lightness of Being":

We can't endure too much abstraction, and for this reason, our sense of justice is often obscured by tender feelings of pity. We live in the present; our past has little memory, and we feel little responsibility for the future. Are we lawless?—no, but we hardly read our laws, and so politicians hoodwink their bailiwicks, and pettifoggers have holiday in court. We seek and thrive on personal relationships which are immediate and concrete; the law is somehow remote, merely fiction without blood. . . . We have enough laws but little compliance. (p. 33)

The two passages represent the scope of Abad's style and thought as an essayist.

The literary essay may be explicative, cathartic, hortatory or entertainment (I prefer the word *divertive*, from the French *divertir* and *divertissement*). Abad has all of that here in this magnificent little collection of essays. But most of all, and best of all, his essays add up to a picture of what it truly means to be Filipino—troubled by the race's own furies, part of a "damaged culture," perhaps, but bathed in a festive lightness of being.