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Review Article

Abad, Aristotle and a Philippine Poetic

JOSEPH A. GALDON

IN ANOTHER LIGHT: POEMS AND ESSAYS. Gemino H. Abad. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1976. xiv, 266 pages.

This volume is really two books in one. It includes a collection of thirty-three poems and eleven critical essays. Abad tries valiantly to justify the marriage of the poems and the essays in his Preface, but doesn't really succeed. As a matter of fact, he introduces each part with a separate essay, and says that "the poems are one realm, the essays, another" (p. x). He admits that perhaps it was only a "hospitable publisher" who accepted the two-part manuscript and hopes that a certain external unity might be achieved because the "poems and essays are equally negotiable by one and the same reader" (p. x). They are equally negotiable, but neither part can be negotiated with ease. That is both Abad's virtue and his vice.

POEMS

In Another Light: Poems won second prize in the Cultural Center of the Philippines Verse Writing contest in 1973. In the present volume new poems have been added to the original collection. Abad's first volume of poetry was highly praised by the critics (see "The Emphasis is Fugitive," *Philippine Studies* 22 [1974]: 204-8) but was not too widely read by the public. For Abad writes difficult, if superb, poetry, and it is not meant for the ordinary reader. The same can be said of the thirty-three poems in the present collection. They are of a part with his first collection and are equally difficult, even if highly rewarding to the professional who can work his way through them.

Abad's "vocation as poet" (the phrase is trite, but the classical poets and critics used it) is rather neatly expressed in the third stanza of "The Human Jug," and this stanza can well serve as the theme of all of Abad's poetry:

The poet must ask questions
 Though his leman scoff
 At things and jugs, and point
 To the infinity on hand:
 The thing has an indwelling
 Beneath the exactitude of its clime,
 And there persisting,
 Delicately shaped,
 He must name it with the word most apt
 At the depth at which he sees
 This jug —
 Not demijohn nor grail —
 Since it happens it is part
 Of a poem's rare career
 To imitate the nightingale's note
 Presiding over the precise plight
 Of lovers beneath the golden bough.

In the present confusion of intention and, therefore, of execution among Philippine critics and writers, Abad leaves no doubt as to where he stands. He is a universalist.

If anything, I am even more impressed with this second collection than I was with the first, for Abad seems to have discovered in these later poems an ease and smoothness of language that adds immeasurably to their understanding. The early poems were often involuted, as though Abad were straining too consciously for effect, but these later poems flow more easily and spontaneously. Secondly, in this collection Abad has largely abandoned the classical, western allusions and replaced them with more local and simpler allusions. This is a decided improvement and goes far toward removing the pitfalls for the unwary in pursuit of Abad's poetic meaning. The classical allusions established a geneology for the young poet but often sounded like intellectual name dropping. On both counts — language and allusion — simplicity has improved the poetry.

A good example of this new found simplicity is in "White Butterflies," which captures a devastating experience in a net of language which emphasizes with its simplicity the weight of the experience.

It was enough
 Since it healed her day on a
 sudden
 To have seen a tree besieged
 By white butterflies.
 Her neighbors seemed asleep,
 She could almost believe it was
 a plot

To diminish her against their
 silence
 Since she would be left with a
 revelation
 Even she had not consciously
 desired.
 So again it was to be forever
 unshared
 Like so many things that wake
 in the mind
 And find no one else there
 But a sleepy ghost whose smile
 drifts
 Across their wordless ruin.

Abad has captured a similar moment of poetic revelation in the second stanza of "The Years."

How does one stop the mind
 When it does not itself know until late
 That it has taken a deep measure of the past
 And hurt itself incurably,
 Only seeking more privately to rue
 More private deaths than consciously borne —
 Friend, show me if you know the route
 To another summer not dishonored
 By those ruins the mind stumbles on
 When, weary of refuge or comfort,
 It only dreams of a tranquil relation
 To the past.

Throughout the poems there are phrases that intrigue with their simple evocation of a profound experience, like the "choice of an angle of vision / That in the end mattered above all" (p. 34) and "Though your hands might have worn / All its doors, you can't simply walk / Into someone's life" (p. 22). Without sacrificing the intellectual weight of his poetry, Abad has now found it in his heart as well as in his head.

Further indications of the simplification of Abad's poetry are evident in his poems on children. Of "Baby, Cradle and All," Arcellana says in his introductory letter: "I don't remember ever having read a poem published here or abroad in recent times that has moved me as much" (p. vii). I agree with Arcellana — it is one of the best poems in the collection, overwhelming in its disarming opening lines:

There was no help or quick or
 potent enough. It was, clearly
 the end.

and masterful in its almost theological statement of human acceptance of a child's death:

It was, clearly, the end
 it was that he had to meet again,
 turning from the gate,
 climbing the stairs,
 inventing the words of comfort
 where it had no shape,
 except that his wife, who had not
 seen the stars, nor heard the fall
 of their light, might also invent
 the speechless word of their assent.

"Children's Party" is also good, but "Capra Hircus" is the best fusion of the vision of childhood with the inevitable vision of burdened man:

Children will chase a goat
 Far afield
 To force a crooked ride
 Upon his back
 Through pliant hours
 Of their unfettered whim.

.
 Was it so long ago
 That adorned with our chaplets
 And cheered lustily on,
 For the loneliness of his
 enterprise,
 He was led to the desert's
 edge,
 And his tracks,
 As our seers observed,
 Skirted oases
 In favor of the burden
 Upon his back?

The technique in "Capra Hircus" — that of "imitation of human action or experience" plus meaning — is reminiscent of Hopkin's "Spring and Fall," which Abad comments on in several places in his essays. The technique is basically what Abad calls "the reflective lyric." He defines the reflective lyric as "serious lyric poetry in the dramatic mode, imitating a mental action or experience of a single character in a single closed situation The principal part of the reflective lyric is the activity of thought or reflection, whatever else is its more specific nature or character as someone's action" (p. 201).

This juxtaposition of the goat as child's pet and man's scapegoat raises the poem of childhood to a level of seriousness that contrasts sharply with the

almost "cute" image of the opening lines. It brings to the poem a theological dimension, and confirms a point I have made elsewhere (*Philippine Studies* 22 [1974]: 206) that Abad is, in his best moments, a profoundly moving religious poet.

In this regard, there are four poems in the present collection which are worthy of note. The first of course, is "Capra Hircus" with its background of *Exodus* and salvation history. The other three religious poems are all concerned with faith, and form a little triptych. They are "Baby, Cradle and All," which we have discussed above, "The Difficulty of Belief," and "He Meant What He Said." This last of the three poems is among Abad's best:

He said what he meant
 Building his synagogue in the foxes' lair
 And the field of blood,
 But what he meant beckoned away
 Beyond itself.

.
 Is he so estranged from us
 Who had not had the courage
 To understand?

.
 He meant what he said
 But we would not enter
 Into the kingdom of his word
 Since we had sheep to tend
 For our livelihood
 Or women who offered forgiveness
 Without much loss.

After a successful first book, be it fiction or poetry, the critic waits anxiously to see whether an author will retain the level of his first inspiration or busy himself in mining low grade ore. Abad's second volume is not only as good as the first but in several important aspects it is better, and points the way to even better things to come. Without making a judgment at this point on the essays which form the second half of *In Another Light*, I might only suggest that when the present edition is exhausted, the University of the Philippines Press reprint the poems in their own volume. They and Abad both deserve it.

ESSAYS

In Another Light: Essays is the result of a research project with the UP Social Science and Humanities Research Committee and includes revisions of articles that appeared in *The Philippine Collegian*, *The Diliman Review*, and *Asian Studies*, as well as previously unpublished monographs. Their purpose was to establish a critical framework for the analysis of lyric poems. The

essays are "essays in formal criticism or the criticism of form or structure" (p. 84). They are Aristotelian and derivative from the Chicago School of Critics, particularly R. S. Crane and Elder Olson. Arcellana comments:

The essays constitute a poetic — our first, and until Jose Garcia Villa publishes his own, our only. It is our first: what could be more natural than that it should be drawn from the first poetics ever, the original? It is our only — but how wonderful to realize that it is applicable not only to our poetry in English but also to all poetry that Filipinos have ever composed, to all poetry in whatever language! (p. vii)

In opposition to the school of Historical and Social Criticism, now so dominant in Philippine literature, Abad is unabashedly formalistic and universal. His essays in theory and practical criticism are exemplified with discussions of Frost, Hopkins, the English Ballad, Baudelaire, Pound, Issa, Eberhart, and Angeles, among many others. For being Aristotelian, "western," and universalist, Abad will be (has been?), I am sure, written off by many a contemporary Philippine writer and critic. But he has done what no other Philippine critic has yet done — established a workable framework for Philippine criticism. It will have to stand as the only framework in Philippine literature until the social and historical critics provide their own.

Abad provides a road map for the unfamiliar traveler in criticism in his first essay, which summarizes the principle modes of contemporary criticism, and outlines the place of each of his essays in the structure of formal criticism. He enumerates the five modes of criticism as criticism of elements and devices, criticism of form or structure, criticism of circumstances, and criticism of values. In the second essay, "The Poem Itself: A Concept of Form," he discusses a concept of form or structure, and summarizes the formalistic approach to poetry (poetics). In the remaining essays he then applies the principles to various lyric poems. Abad's analysis is solid; his insights are clear. His only defect is that, like his own poetry, his criticism is hard going for the average reader. But, like the poetry, to struggle with Abad is well worth the effort.

Apart from his excellent summary of the Modes of Criticism, and his application of Formal Criticism to various concrete poems in a particularly perceptive exercise in practical criticism, Abad has made three important points which, to me at least, are significant for the future of literary criticism in the Philippines.

Firstly, he has established the relation of the critic to the poet or writer. "Whenever one is a critic, one seeks to *rationalize* whatever of the thing called a poem *can* be rationalized" (p. 1, emphasis mine). Abad goes on to explain this point:

It is important, I think, to distinguish between the discipline of criticism and the discipline of composition, between the art of explication and the art of poetry (making the object or thing called a poem.) The difference,

to put it simply, is that one is addressed to the reason, the other to the imagination. (p. 1)

Secondly, Abad's thoughtful exposition of his poetic has given respectability to Aristotelian Formal Criticism in Philippine letters, at a time when it is seriously under attack, perhaps for nationalistic rather than literary reasons. Abad's summary of the Chicago School of Criticism, *née* Aristotelian, is based on the Aristotelian concept of the four causes (pp. 82–83). His summary of the poetic process derived from Aristotle, Horace, Longinus, Pope et al. is as good as I have seen. He has renamed the traditional elements for contemporary use as The Poem-of-It, the Inspiration of the Poet, the Transfiguration of Experience and Metaphor. His summary of image, metaphor, and symbol on pages 177–94 is a neat little summary for a generation that has forgotten what poetry is all about. (My prejudice *is* showing!) Abad has given us the handbook. It is now up to the other critics to use it, or to write their own.

Finally, Abad has reminded us that both the poet and the critic must be free. The poet must be free to be social or universalist. The critic must let the poet be free, and not force him into predetermining or (heaven forbid!) prejudiced categories. It is worth quoting Abad at length on this point:

We speak often enough of the *freedom* of the artist, but quickly forget, in our enthusiasm or commitment to a particular disclosure of poetry, that there are other disclosures. It is good to bear in mind that our commitment to any idea of the poet as rebel from all causes or as social reformer or as philosopher or as any other thing involves an expression of *our* freedom that we cannot deny to other commitments to other ideas of the poets. Indeed, no artist is free or can grow in depth or stature without that appreciation and respect for other orientations of mind, other realms of sensibility, other politics, other mysticisms (p. 3).

Leonard Casper has made the same point in a particularly perceptive essay on the Critic as Provocateur (*Philippine Studies* 24 [1976]: 248).

A final note which is also a plea. Abad has established his credentials as a critic – both in theory and in practice – with these eleven essays. His analysis of two poems of Carlos Angeles is solid and flows from his Poetic. But these two poems are the *only* two Philippine poems that are really criticized or analyzed. The bulk of his criticism is exemplified with western or Asian poems. Let us hope that Abad will now go on to apply his "Philippine Poetic" to Philippine literature, particularly to the sad state of contemporary poetry. The task will be difficult, I know, for if Abad also wishes to continue as poet as well as critic, he runs the risk of offending his fellow poets by his criticism, and inviting their barbs at his own poetry in return. We will offer hecatombs to Apollo that Abad be brave enough to make the attempt – for the sake of both poetry and criticism in the Philippines.