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Review Article

THE EMPHASIS IS FUGITIVE

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.

FUGITIVE EMPHASIS. Geminio M. Abad. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1973. x, 158 pp.

The Philippine book reviewer is asked to tread on dangerous ground. He dare not be too critical for fear of destroying a struggling writer or publisher, or offending a friend in what is, at the moment unfortunately and perhaps inevitably in Philippine letters, a very narrow circle of educated writer — reader — reviewer. He dare not lash out too boldly with his critical rapier lest he find the rapier at his own throat, for the critic or reviewer in the Philippines, is also reader, and often writer himself. On the other hand, the reviewer can not be too lavish in his praise lest he encourage an incompetence or a mediocrity which will be eventually self destructive, and in the long run, ill serve the cause of Philippine letters.

The task of the poetry reviewer is even more complicated, for Philippine poetry, at least the good poetry, is most often the product of a small coterie of writers who speak only of and to themselves. The poetry reviewer must choose, then, to speak the language of the insider, the jargon of the poets themselves, and be unintelligible to those outside the chosen circle, or he must choose to speak the language of those who are not 'poets' and be scorned by the inner circle of poets for failing to understand and appreciate the 'poetry' that is presently being written.

My prejudice is of course, obvious — poetry must be understood, and not relegated to a dim corner of the temple to be worshipped by the chosen priesthood of poets and critics in a mystic language that defies comprehension by the wider circle of readers. The dividing line between pedestrian and mediocre, which is easily comprehensible by all, and good poetry which challenges the thoughtful reader is a narrow one and difficult to negotiate for the unwary or imperceptive critic. This is, of course, the challenge of poetry, and of the poet and critic as well. That challenge is particularly demanding in Philippine poetry at the present time. But until critics really "criticize" I fear that the vicious circle of

subjective and mediocre poetry will be prolonged only for the autistic gratification of the chosen few.

The candid critic must admit that Philippine poetry in English is pretty much of a wasteland — an occasional oasis, but the rest of the landscape rather bleak and barren. There are innumerable volumes of poetry, most of them privately printed, but few of them rise much above the commonplace or the childish. *Fugitive Emphasis* by Gemino Abad may well be an exception to the rule. Not every poem in the collection is a prizewinner, but there are enough of them above the average to merit a word of praise.

The highest word of praise for this collection is that although not every poem in the volume "works", almost none of them are trite, for Abad is a poet who has struggled with his material. A second word of praise must be given Abad for a rigid sense of intellectual integrity, for none of his poems are sentimental, and with the exception of some of the earlier poems, few of them are superficial.

It is easy enough to trace Abad's poetic genealogy in his allusions. They are Filipino — carabao and herons, geckos and wasps, the fire trees in Diliman and the moon over Camiguin, where the Filipino's landscape:

... lies toward the center

Where the hornbill wakes for his sound

Or the gecko quaffs a mote of light,

Then tolls for long, archaic myths. (p. 25)

His allusions are also classical — Pan and the Minotaur, Ishtar, Orpheus and Dis, Ariel, Selene, Oedipus and the sphinx. There is also Eros and Eris, the Hyades and "the tranquil Aegean" to set side by side with "the moon over Camiguin."

This fusion of Filipino and classical has not always been successful in the poets of the past. Joaquin struggled with it in his early poems, but with not half the skill or sophistication that Abad has brought to the task. Later poets, struggling to formulate the 'authentic Filipino voice' have too often repudiated the classical as being essentially antithetical to or destructive of the genuine Filipino. It is satisfying to see this fusion accomplished in Abad with so much skill, and to note the confidence of the poet in in himself as Filipino, so that he need not be afraid to assert the relevance of the non-Filipino for a fuller definition of the full Filipino. My prejudices are once again obvious.

The third source of Abad's allusions is what we might call the *existential*. It is this strain which characterizes the poet (a contemporary man? the Filipino?) as "The Underground Man", in the title poem of the collection.

He it was, the underground man,

Was lifted by his hair

In the full radiance and panic of that fire

Moved the utmost mind through the body's doom. (p. 36)

I agree with Dadafulza that, at least in the latter half of the collection (the first half of the volume is obviously a collection of finger exercises), Abad is attempting to portray the "Multiple Man" who is in reality multiple facets of the one self. The lineaments of that Multiple Man (Multiple Filipino?) emerge from the titles of the poems in the latter half

of the volume: "The Ancient Mariner" (p. 100), "The Exile" (p. 102), "The Lover in Search of His Soul" (p. 107) and "The Poet In Quest of Himself" (p. 111). The existential is described as search, journey, struggle for self identification:

We had a need
To be opening doors searching them
That we might enter doors
When we choose
We keep opening doors
That we might enter and Be. (pp. 64-65)

I have discussed this theme of the Filipino in Search and Discovery of himself as the Multiple Man elsewhere (*Philippine Fiction*, pp. xi-xvii). This theme provides one of the foundation stones of postwar Philippine fiction in English. Abad has succeeded in the arduous task of translating the theme poetically.

There is a final element in Abad's poetry which deserves more than passing mention. I find him a deeply religious poet, perhaps the only religious poet of any worth in Philippine writing in English. The religious element in his poetry is all the more striking in that he does not write a volume of poetry which is clearly labeled and categorized as religious. The religious themes are part of the total vision, which make them all the more revealing in the context of his work. Religion has not been relegated to the convento, but is part of the total poet who is at the same time Filipino, classical, and existential, whose poetry will build for itself a "labyrinth to make an eternity for the pursuit."

The religious themes are evident — Januarius and Ursula, the Mysteries of the Rosary, a meditating nun, Requiem and Judgment, the Thought of God and the Distance to Grace. Some of the religious poems are the weakest in the volume, for religious poetry is a perilous adventure at best, and Abad has not always escaped the pitfalls of poetic statement over religious statement, or of rounded rather than flat statement. Innumerable poets before him have discovered that the spiritual landscape is such a personal one that it defies meaningful communication. "The Mysteries of the Rosary", for example (pp. 46-49), is precise and competent but lights no emotional fires. On the other hand, I find "The Distance to Grace" a masterpiece and one of the best poems in the volume:

Is it the same dusty road, the same gate,
Under whose speechless trees the years stalk
their shadows?

A ravined time may set a weary distance to grace,
No road may presume to take you back to All
Hallow's eve.

But memory, slow to acknowledge change,
Has access to feeling will cheat time's disunities.

Here is religious feeling *communicated*. The poem undoubtedly owes much to G. M. Hopkins and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, perhaps more than Abad would be willing to admit. Man, confronted with the

distance to God, rages, but then submits to God's will in the finest lines in the poem:

Oh, restore the sweet rages of the submitted will
as when God walked on the lake of silence
And made our boat ridiculous, his laughter as a
net, cast to draw our sun. (p. 59)

Though the allusions and the themes are obvious enough, Abad's style is not easy. It is tortuously metaphysical and allusive, but in every case it repays the efforts of the diligent reader. The poet himself outlines his method on the first page of the collection:

Let the serene idea
Shape with gentle, devouring grace
The hour of which the simple intent

Is brightest, fiercest space
For spleen of feeling, fanfare of mind,

Before the sky falls batlike at dusk
To collect in hollows of a dry wind,

Let the serene idea nurture memory
To make it grow a vine of thought

And sprout into a touchless bud
On the tree of the self's weather.

The only word, pitiful, and unfair as it is to describe these poems, is intellectual. In the midst of contemporary Philippine poetry in English which is so often superficial, or trite, sentimental, undisciplined and meaninglessly subjective, poetry which reaches out the mind of the reader is a rare phenomenon indeed. Abad's poetry presents the:

. . . smallest objects as windows
For extravaganza in the offing.

Abad's emphasis is fugitive; it must be pursued, tracked and finally trapped in the intricacy of his thought. Abad has written his own commentary on the poems and on his poetic:

Here are too many things
.....
That speak different voice in invisible choir
Or are seen all at once in the single eye
Or thrust themselves forth into the open
Where the mind delights to sing
But bravely insists on its ignorance —
Or dance ceaselessly to human touch
.....
Or onslaught of thought
Or this gentle and loving siege of imagination!

And yet intellectual is the wrong word to describe this poetry, for it is more than that. Perhaps the better word is metaphysical, as it is used of Donne, or Hopkins. Both of them were complicated men, in search of identity for themselves and their age. The comparison with Abad is not

unfair, I think. He too is complicated, struggling in a complicated age. The beauty of his poetry is that underneath the complications there is a devastating simplicity, whose intellectual weight overwhelms at the same time that it entices.

Abad's poetry has been published by the University of the Philippines Press. The volume includes a bit of "Poor Pitiful Prose" to praise the poems by Francisco Arcellana which serves no purpose other than to decorate the volume with the name of a "distinguished" writer. But Abad needs no commendation by association; his pages stand on their own. "A Reader's Response" by Concepcion Dadafulza at the end of the volume, is more helpful. Her "Response" is more rhapsodic than critical, but it does provide some helpful guidelines for understanding the poems. The volume is unfortunately marred by numerous misprints which have been corrected on the photographic plates by hand. Abad's poems deserve better treatment than this from a University Press.

My final prejudice has been obvious throughout this review: I like the poetry. I am challenged and intrigued by it. I think that Abad, if he continues to write like this, will be a name to reckon with in Philippine poetry in English.