

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 42, no. 4 (1994): 452–474

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

## Themes in the Poetry of Bienvenido Santos

Victoria Rico



Every work of literature has both a fictional and thematic aspect but the primary interest of poetry is *dianoia*, "theme," the idea or poetic thought (distinct from other kinds of thought). Literature with this conceptual interest is thematic. In such literature, the poet may write as an individual, producing lyrics, satire, and other forms. The dominant moods often include loneliness (whether bitter or serene). When the poet communicates as an individual, his forms are "episodic" or discontinuous (Frye 1957, 52-55).

The distinctness of poetry lies in its unique nature as a physical object and as an experiential process created in the reader. As a physical object, the poem is a concentration, a compact structure of language more formal, more patterned and complicated than prose. It operates by indirection and fused meanings. From the poem, multiple explosions of the sense, emotions and understanding result.

There is, in poetry, only an involved meaning, made up of many simultaneous events and intricate relationships; the physical beat and melody of the lines, sensations imaged in the mind, emotion and understanding through a particular ordering of events. We cannot isolate the "meaning of a poem from the poem, and neither the ideas nor the emotions involved are separate from the total experience (Miller and Slote 1969, 2-29).

Most of the poetic themes of Bienvenido Santos fall under lyric and satire. A lyric poem is a direct statement of a poet's feelings. Its prevailing characteristic is its melody, its singing quality accomplished by the skillful use of the sounds and rhythms of language. Santos's lyrics voice the themes of passion, grief and protest. Satire also expresses Santos's criticism of the distortion of characters and events, through verbal sarcasm and irony.

## The Wounded Stag

*The Wounded Stag* (1956) is the first published volume of poetry by Bienvenido Santos. It is a collection of fifty-four poems in free verse, which use separate or combined forms of the lyric, reflection and satire. Santos writes as the individualist poet rather than as a "spokesman on society," even if in at least a third of these poems there is thematic emphasis on social or moral issues. The primary interest of the poet as individualist is the "separateness of his personality and the distinctness of his vision." In *The Wounded Stag*, the artist and the returning exile form part of the *ethos*, and assume fictional identities who carry the burden of truth. These identities reflect close ties with the poet's varied experiences: his childhood in Sulucan, the years of exile in America, and the postwar return to a devastated country. These periods provide sensory details, or a dramatic framework, and assume further meaning in most poems as metaphorical or representative conditions. These periods also form logical divisions for a review of *The Wounded Stag* since certain themes or *dianoia* unite the poems in each of these sections.

## The Sulucan Poems

The poems of Sulucan communicate poverty and the loss of innocence. The volume begins and ends with poems of these difficult Sulucan years. In "Statement," poverty comes as the "decaying Truth" that the Promethean artist-poet delivers to the world. The personae in the *mythos* of this poem are the slum dwellers themselves who are bitterly proud of "the royalty of rags, our velvet." The lone speaker in the final poem "Maecenas" is the artist asking a room to master his craft in. One of his demands is for solace, a Santos ethic: "I insist on warmth, Maecenas." Once this is met, then, as "the greatest Servitor of them all," he can wait on those who would take of his remembrances:

Then I could write of the little known varieties  
Of goodness and gall, of courage in times without  
One hill left undefiled and nobody minds  
An old flag on new ground. (p. 71)

The allusion is to Calvary, and yet the modern equivalent of courage is the reverse, the "gall" side of reality. The poet's humility is

seen in his view of his career as an "old flag on new ground." Still the ease and rhythm of the whole statement betray a well-deserved confidence in the artist. The final stanza, however, reveals in tenderness another aspect of the artist, now metaphorically the child showing filial devotion. Here he asks that his mother come to receive the love "the child could not show while she lived." References to parenthood in Santos's poems are clearly autobiographical. In the poem "Sulucan" a father is apostrophized: "Your temple is a cardboard box, old man/Your curtains, sails/Ripped in the hurricanes/Of a thousand nights." Childhood and youth are a nightmare of poverty, but the greater loss seems to be the heart's defilement, the bondage to the flesh: "I have trampled on my childhood/ Brought upon my cherished flowers/Blight and death and lonely visions/Hating wombs, investing passions."

There is clear movement from mere autobiographical notation to objective reflection on the loss of innocence: ". . . the bugles from the plain/Sound the age's cry of pain." These have their historical referents in the country's devastation from the Second World War, yet Santos achieves a universalizing truth in his evaluation of an intensely personal yet commonly understood subject.

Santos maintains a clear view of the blight of man, seen more clearly in contrast to the relative innocence and ease of boyhood. A vertical movement from this apprehension of human need is Santos's Catholicism, a faith he has kept through the years. Among the Sulucan poems, "Processional" is most maturely crafted, though simple and ardent in its persona's devotion to Mary. The setting is a procession along "familiar lanes of boyhood." There is lightness and freedom, couched in the associations of song, color and the movements of nature: "See us now travel with music/Past the green arches and the swaying fronds" (p. 10). Yet it is not all pietism. The address to Mary calls her thoughts to ". . . those/who did not walk with you/Too meek for walking in a gilded crowd/Because their lot is far from green" (p. 10). These devotees are too poor for lavish sacrifices but they keep the faith: "They knelt at your feet/Smiling too like you/In their terrible need." A note of unreality is struck here. These people are distanced from the object of their faith who has her own necessities: ". . . needing flowers/and smiling in your need." Santos's clear intent is to project the sincere faith of the poorest, yet the discovery of unsatisfied "terrible need" is a questioning strain that diversifies simple intent to a religious question.

### Poems of Exile

Poems on Santos's exile in the U.S. are not predominant, although a number of references to an alien land and experiences are made in several poems. Most of these are sharply suggestive of the exile's loneliness. "Time and Place" is Oriental in its elliptical imagery and allusion. The whole poem is composed of three haikus, visually striking in their spare pattern on the page, complementing emotional suggestions of loss. The haiku scenes comprise three aspects of leaving: the time and place for leaving and the waiting. The time for leaving:

A novitiate past adoring  
Unflexing a numb arm that has pillowed  
Her head all night. (p. 6)

In a single, quiet moment, the figure dramatizes an irrevocable state, the way a novice has renounced vows of marriage for the nunnery. There is a note of finality, as though this were her last night before her vows as a nun are made. This, too, involves a leave-taking and renunciation. But is there unnaturalness to the symbol and the referent? Just as a woman's renunciation of love is alienating, all leave-taking goes against the grain of relationships:

Footprints in the snow  
In a deserted terminal  
Long ago and far away. (p. 6)

The metaphorical picture evokes the atmosphere of the Ben sections of *You Lovely People*, the Ben who frequents train terminals, though he has no place to go during those lonely Christmas vacations from school. Nothing could be sharper and more keenly painful to an exile than the image of a deserted terminal. Ben stops going to these when all the people have gone. The allusion is autobiographical, yet in itself the imaging is clearly focused on the harsh loneliness of every place for leaving. Now comes the waiting, consequent of all departure:

A printed name on a piece of rotting wood  
At every whistle-stop  
Wrapped up in the night and lost  
In the creeping fog. (p. 6)

This figure conjures the image of people waiting for loved ones in a crowd, who put names on a piece of cardboard or wood for easy

identification. But here the loved one never comes. Or it could simply refer to the names of places roughly put on already decaying pieces of wood. Whichever is the reference of the image, forsaken-ness is evoked by the aspect of the rotting sign, night and fog, endless waiting and moving on. Santos is always successful with poetic indirection, and the vivid metaphors in "Time and Place" suggest sensations fused with the meaning of loss.

Return from exile is a disorienting experience, especially in Santos's case where he was coming home to a war-torn country, and a sense of ruin greater than social or economic loss sets in. Rootlessness and disillusionment in self and society result. "Return from Exile" is a sharply imaginative poem on the phenomenon of loss for a returning Filipino exile. The extended metaphor, voiced by the persona, is that of losing the "glint of star" on the only "minded coin" he owned. This represents the exile's easy passport to social acceptance and material success. With this, sad memories may be dispensed, a new start made possible without the burden of the past or the responsibility of knowing:

Show me a way of telling time  
That beats the patient thought  
Glad ways to easy forgetting  
Exactitude unsought. (p. 51)

But this returnee knows the wisdom of suffering a past, knowing there are no "glad ways" out of the responsibility of truth-bearing. "That which is not is not" and America, the "realm of tarnished gold" can not offer him ready made happiness. The reference to Polynices' fate suggests betrayal, being cheated of one's right. The exile comes home sadly deprived of the integration that *the* promised land is known to give. Yet instead of continuing disillusionment, there is a steady thread of calm from recognizing Polynices's lot and bravely seeing it as becoming one's own. Santos succeeds with this poem because of carefully worked out elements of metaphor, thought and suggestion.

### The War Poems

More than a third of the poems in *The Wounded Stag* dwell on the sufferings of a war-ravaged Philippines. It is ironical that in the persona's protest against war, Santos writes some of his most vivid and

lyrical lines. The imagery of violence and suffering are clearest: "a sad/Processional of hungry men and women . . . flesh and bones/ In the basic frame and shape that pain/Puts on when the years are lean." The use of alliteration, like "bones . . . basic," assonance: "frame . . . shape. . . pain"; and consonance: "pain . . . when . . . lean" support the quiet pulse of protest. Combined with rhythm and melody are the multiple associations of fear and want shaping the poems' imagery. These elements fuse with the subject of war and suffering, and the emotion is directed towards protest. There is no consolation for the parents of heroes, when the latter are missed: ". . . wide stones/Marked hero, fallen in the night" (p. 26).

War is projected as a moral issue. War "is not what He said, this strangeness." All unreason runs counter to the persona's faith as dramatized in "Brotherhood." The mythos involves a soldier dying in the battlefield. He addresses Christ and, at first, finds a mystic solace in identification with his suffering. But the psychological movement of the poem goes from this openness to a sense of longing for comfort, to doubt and despair. This downward process accompanies the persona's dying. At the point where "all voices had been stilled/ Within, without, oh, everywhere" the soldier's angst is grimly settled. The total experience of the poem involves this combined effect of irony, image, sound and rhythm, as in these lyrical lines:

O to feel the wonder and the hope  
Of your presence here as dying I lie  
On the spattered grass, hiding my wounds  
And memory of wrath across the sky. (p. 32)

"Sermons to the Free" is an apostrophe to the Flag and to youth in wartime. Part of the ethos are the ravaged elderly who recall the people's efforts at nation-building, and the youth's difficult tasks at hand. The imagery concretizes this action and the present suffering.

Over the years shall pass  
No clinging remembrance of this morning  
Except perhaps the loudness  
Of the music and the way the thin  
Rain clung to Sister's tattered dress. (p. 19)

The hysteria and the desolation are conveyed in graphic pictures which combine with the total experience of war imaged in the mind.

### Poems of Goodness and Gall

Santos works with other themes as he explores "little known varieties of goodness and gall" in the rest of the poems that are not strictly part of the biographical frames indicated. Among the most brilliant variations are the four poems: "Genesis to Atom," "The Gods We Worship Live Next Door," "Apostate," and "Dreams." These are fully realized poems, fusing strong metaphorical language, sound and motion of speech rhythms, sense and emotion. Like the other poems cited, these reflect Santos's response to certain social problems, the force and presence of humanizing truth in his poetry, and his equal attention to the passions of the flesh as these run counter to man's spirituality.

"Genesis to Atom" has sixteen brief lines, but is powerful in its compactness of symbol and allusion, and the strong contrast, and movement from the state of tarnished innocence to continuing loss in modern man. It is a striking view of the human predicament, employing the Biblical symbol of the "first garden" to point to the beginnings of human depravity. The first garden was marked by "Beauty of slithering rapture." The diabolical presence is suggested in the onomatopoeic phrase. Though the place was "without denial," the "charm of snake" present in the latter period of "Atom" has been laid on man. "The cry of Faustus is lost/In the grim lands; the Years/Have not tarried." Faustus despairs in his possession of all things and the loss of his soul. Time itself is a burden personified. For succeeding generations there have only been "grim lands." Atom, the "last garden" is a wasteland; the images set forth impressions of fruitlessness, dissolution, and evil. Again this is a war image, an apt comment on the twentieth century sophistication of war games. The poem becomes forceful with the parallel of the metaphorical states of man and the suggestive relationships of idea and image.

"The Gods We Worship Live Next Door" is chosen for most anthologies featuring poetry by Santos. It has fictional and thematic linkages with Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Richard Cory," and in Santos's satire, is a prefiguring of Cris Magno and associates of *The Praying Man*. Like "Richard Cory," the characters in Santos's poem are the common people evaluating their awesome regard of the rich and powerful about them. "Richard Cory" is dramatic in its revelation of his secret angst, while "The Gods We Worship Live Next Door" is heavily ironic characterization, identifying triviality and



commonness of heart and gesture, and the slavery to passion these members of the upper class tastelessly flaunt:

The Gods we worship live next door they're brown  
 And how easily they catch cold sneezing  
 Too late into their sleeves and brandishing  
 Their arms in air. Fear grips us when they frown  
 As they walk past our grim deformities  
 Dragging with them their secret scent of love  
 Bought by the ounce from gilded shops above  
 The rotunda east of the bright cities. (p. 47)

The first three lines begin the "demythologizing" process with tongue-in-cheek resolution. But there is no Richard Cory charm in these social deities. Repugnance greets the masses' "grim deformities," yet these are gods beholden to their own warped values and spirits, "dragging with them" the palpable cheapness of empty relationships. More "events" in these demigods' lives are revealed. They are mortal, ". . . and caskets golden/Are borne in the hard pavements at even/Down roads named after them." The trappings of wealth and honor accompany these useless men. The masses triumph to see mortality of power: "Oh we outlive them all," but there is a fatal catch with the last statement of the satire: "But there are junior gods fast growing tall." A sinister note comes with this line, the ironic twist to the personae's built-up confidence in *exposé*.

There is clarity in Santos's development of the metaphor of gods as applied to social class. The images of wealth and want, of coldness and meaninglessness perfectly cohere with the necessary truths from the persona's whole vision. Santos shows unquestioning sureness of purpose in the poem, avoiding abstraction or unsettling word play, mere "cuteness."

### Poems of Passion

"Apostate" is a sample of the poetry of passion, love or unlove, that Santos writes. Frequently recited by him in interviews is "I have been loved with tenderness and claws" from "Opening Night." Santos's diction in this type of poem is metaphorical and emotionally taut. There is much disillusionment in the attempts at loving: "And what of love, powder compounded/Of elements like lightness of down/And dull odor of self" ("Madonna," p. 4). Again the latter

reminds us of Eliot's *Prufrock* in mythos and imaging. "Apostate," a lover's meditation, uses religious ritual as a metaphor of love-making, a modern poet's experimentation with the poetry of sensuality. The poem presents desire and its fulfillment, but shows passion as an ubiquitous presence, and finally a mockery of faith: "Always the background to prayer is red wine/And cool lazy arms entwining with hardness." Red wine, in this context, is suggestive of sacrifice to fleshly desire, linked to the transformation of all things, in the lover's mind, into aspects of love: "Also the silence of tiptoes and water dripping/A cloud against the early sun shaped/Like kisses." The woman who chose her "image in rags" (is it a choice of religion as against loving?) now "lies weeping." Her lover stays "bold and eager with the fire/Of forgotten altar flame yet burning." Finally, they choose passion as religion, in place of the asceticism of ritual:

Which the smoothness of silk or bells chiming  
Shall the heart follow beating with desire?  
Dirt hangs from the ceiling, a beadless  
Rosary orphaned of fingers that now  
At this precise meeting of the suffusing glow  
Are sunk deep into the hollow flesh. (p. 67)

Sound, image and rhythm support the equal presence of richness of feeling and the tension of the lovers' choice. The situation is de-romanticized with the sharp detail on dirt in the third and fourth lines, suggestive of defilement.

Santos writes of passion with impunity. This is consistent through the years of frank treatment of sex. The graphic presentation of human nature in the flesh is balanced, however, with the necessary love and wholeness that is the only context to sexual integration. This particular poem does not suggest such largeness of implication found in other works of Santos, but presents a case of passion fulfilled in a choice against religion.

The imaginative situation in "Dreams" involves the poet's function of finding lost dreams, and his keeping an office for "claimants" to visit and fill up forms for the reclamation of dreams. The poet's office is to discover "routes and dimensions" of dreams, some of which are quiet and fanciful, like that which "sees a comet/Poised for flight and watching, stays." Some refuse the possibility of frustration and "burst at the seam" or float "paper boats/On a jungle stream." This image is a foreshadowing of Santos's "Paperboat Poems" that concretize the exile's loss of certain dreams, like paperboats on

history's jungle stream. Reality of all kinds does violence to the best hopes, yet the poet's treatment of faith remains, maintained through long and patient guardianship of truth and longing:

... truly  
 No dream is ever lost  
 So, claimants, fill these forms right now  
 With a clear, steady hand  
 For my eyes have grown weak with chasing  
 Dreams all over the land. (p. 12)

Bienvenido Santos as poet finds both a lyrical and reflective style that accommodates his vision, both an appeal for hope and a lament for dying men and society. In discovering aspects of these themes, Santos selects correlatives for his meaning and uses these for the statement or development of idea. Yet there is always a musicality, a singing even in the ruins:

O Master, wherefore am I hurt? . . .  
 Save the thunder for a summer dawn  
 Be selfless with music, fill with a little  
 Kindness this legend wilting on dry grass.

Lines such as these attest to Santos's sense of rhythm and sensitivity to sound, color and texture of language, transforming abstractions, here of helplessness and loss, into visual and technical equivalents of his muted protest.

### Symbol and Allusion

Santos shifts from lyricism to symbol and allusion in many other poems. Allusions to mythological, literary and sociohistorical referents are made in several poems. The most predominant reference is to Christianity in the motifs of despair and confusion in War. The betrayal of Christ on the Cross is the continuing treason in men's hearts towards other men ("Epilogue to Betrayal"). Piety is seen as futile in the midst of war: "We are done with vows and condoles . . ./ Only that we hate darkness. . . / All along the base of walls around our favorite chapel lie carrion leavings." ("Poem for the Dry Season"). "The Late Sinners" suggests the defiance of Lucifer and modern man's ultimate rebellion, his sin of "knowing but not knowing enough" and asking freedom *from* the Creator, the path of self-will: ". . allow us to die alone;/ Having come too late, we shall not miss

much/Or know the fire dividing splendor from ruin." Manifest in Santos is a simple faith in God and an understanding of the work of Christ on the Cross. This is employed as a metaphor for the parallel sufferings of modern man. To those, however, who assert their willfulness, the most graphic form of which is senseless war, there can only be continuing moral violence. These are the "late sinners": "forced to forage/What remains in the trough left desolate by quicker ancestors."

Santos also makes ample use of mythological allusion. Prometheus in "Statement" is the artist who must suffer for the exposure of "decaying Truth," aspects of poverty, delusion, the travesties of loving, for naming things, some terrible, "with precision." Tantalus in "In Fair Exchange" projects the futility of knowledge without passion, the "life of knowing." Only when experience of love is given does the punishment of Tantalus cease. The "Homeric seep" the persona promises to speak of in the aftermath of loving bespeaks of the release of all energies of living, a liberation of spirit embracing virtue and fulfillment, Homer's concerns. Other references to Homer are from the *Iliad*, the metaphorical replacement of Priam by the persona's father in "Father and Son." Priam's grief over Hector's death and the defilement of his body by Achilles are suggested: "Old Priam weeping, knelt/Inside a young man's tent." This concretizes his own father's sorrow somehow: "But father's wound is deep/Deeper his discontent." For Priam there is release in Achilles' return of Hector's body, and reconciliation ensues. There is no such unburdening in the persona's case:

My father's son will keep on  
Wandering through the years  
But will never see a king smile  
Or an old man break in tears. (p. 54)

An interesting juxtaposition occurs in "Brief Beauty is Brave," where the Filipino poet, attending a Harvard course on *The Iliad* can only think of his "own burning city far from the plains of Troy." A classmate, a pretty Radcliffe girl, assumes, in the poet's converging imagination, the form of Helen, "Forlorn within the gates." Time and destruction assail countries but cannot harm the artist's wisdom, shaping harmony.

There are poems in *The Wounded Stag* which are weakened by imagery that does not show relevance to its context. "Madonna," "Inscriptions," and "This Then is the Friendliness of Morning," among a few others, contain obscure phrases, imagery or metaphors which are not sustained by the poems' total experience and

meaning. By way of example, "This Then is the Friendliness of Morning" seems to be a lyric on peace after war, as suggested by the lines: "Lovely morning, how many touched the dust/And what old trembling hands survived the night." Sensory details in the first stanza point to serenity, but its concluding statement warns against thinking of "such blessings with no bitterness." This seems clear enough and yet the second stanza poses unresolved questions:

The night before  
 Was lace against the winds and tomorrow  
 Lay nowhere among the breaking shadows  
 Without magic and wordless without hope  
 Like all the winter memories of snow  
 Which in a haunting minute are distilled  
 Petrifying the ages in a dream.

Close reading conveys a general idea of disaster and loss of hope, but the emotional intensity is also lost with the mixture of images, from lace to shadows and snow. The referent to "Petrifying . . . dream" is unclear. Besides this, the phrase itself has no meaning in the poetic context, like the final lines of the poem: "While garden promises died one by one/Uttering the ancient prophecy of dawn." What are "garden promises" in relation to the rest of the poem, and the preceding lines? What is the "ancient prophecy of dawn?" The lack of a unifying image or metaphor in this poem results in diffuseness.

Other failures like this are exceptions, however, to the general coherence of meaning and poetic technique in Santos's poetry. Re-reading the volume highlights the very best of his poetry which becomes a pleasurable experience of the artist's vision of "hope without bitterness." The framework of *The Wounded Stag* is this search for wholeness in a broken world, also expressed elsewhere by Santos, as in the figure of the Magi in *You Lovely People*. The gift bearers are seekers of grace, yet are unable to find this in "the wasteland of the heart." The poet finds refuge in art, whereby even suffering can be understood, the way "a wounded stag lies down to die under poplars flecked with morning."

### **Distances: In Time**

This is the second volume of poetry by Bienvenido Santos, coming twenty-seven years after *The Wounded Stag* (1956). The later collection establishes through poetic experience the themes that Santos

fully develops in his fiction: alienation and passion. *Distances: In Time* (1983) is a rediscovery of those themes yet presents a clear contrast from *The Wounded Stag* in poetic stance and technique. In *The Wounded Stag* these subjects form a distinct chronology with specific periods in the poet's experience. These time frames are absent from *Distances* yet its personae are just as familiar. *Distances* features for its ethos aging poets, perpetual exiles and lovers, mostly in the grip of failure. Their particular conflicts may be linked to those of *The Wounded Stag's* expatriates, lovers or artists. However, Santos is the modernist in *Distances*, conveying a contemporary poet's view of age-old conflicts. In this volume the mood is prevalently ironic, sharply cognizant of the ludicrous aspects of modern society, this "era of loud men" and its members' desperate remedies. This ironic view clearly influences poetic technique in *Distances*. Lyricism is replaced by often bitter protest, i.e. a resistance to all aberration. Casper describes the poems as the "embrace/rejection—of a passing yet accumulating lifetime" (Casper 1983, 10). The statement is very qualified by the poems themselves. Inherent in the embrace is the operative comic view, the laughter in tears as a preparation for harmony. Emotionalism is absent from *Distances*. Instead, a surer grasp of reality results in effective metaphorical statement. Intensity is drawn by the ordered fusion of image, diction, idea and pattern in the poem of *Distances: In Time*.

The volume is composed of thirty-three poems in three sections: Intimidations, Intimates and Intermediaries. The first section, Intimidations, explores the fear of failure, disillusionment and guilt among lovers, an aging poet, expatriates, sons and fathers. Intimates concentrates on lovers' conflicts. Casper says of this section: "The dancers long to touch but rarely manage." Intermediaries presents possibilities of fulfillment through insight. The alternatives to despair, as is the argument in *Distances*, is awareness of both the inward "frequencies" and of social reality, the larger context of personal journeys. Yet, for Santos, the poet as individualist, social and historical tragedies, though identified, are not the artist's permanent concern:

Leave tyrants be. Speak of those who never die  
 Who never come to violent ends, who spend their last days  
 Talking to flowers, preserving butterflies and birds  
 As though these will never die and their wings will yet brush  
 The air and fill with music the coming of twilight.  
 Think of your own twilight and make no distinction

Between the dawn and the afterglow,  
 What lies between is history  
 Or do you prefer the nights?

In eras and lives, there is continuing hope. In Santos's exilic metaphor of fulfillment, the paperboat of expatriates' longing for meaning and wholeness is denied them. Nevertheless, there are always paperboats "the shape of dreams/Which never went under." For Santos, the greater choice is for clarity of heart and spirit, a celebration of "ourselves," to commitment among lovers even in the midst of their separate griefs:

naked we are most faithful to the vows we shared  
 this is the closest we can come face to face with loss (p. 66)

In *Distances: In Time* Santos further asserts that there are no distinctions among experience, "between/What is no longer here and what still is." Certainly the nature and effects of aspects of human experience are absolute even in the understanding of the poet, and the concretized investigations of such in poetry. Santos seems to say, however, that in time, all experience is present and felt, and distinctions rendered immaterial. Casper echoes this point: ". . . in time, all distances are diminished, dismembered, and all differences converge, and are canceled" (Casper 1983, 11). This is the humanist-relativist position expressed in *Distances*, outlining distinctions of all manner of human suffering, yet concluding with non-definition:

But I prefer distinctions, so that whatever overlaps  
 Obscures the truth, the darkness of a crime  
 Or the brilliance of an honest deed.

True enough, there is no chronology to loss and fulfillment in time, yet, even in *Distances*, distinctions about the nature of experiences themselves are clear and unmistakable. Loss is loss, so is the durability of dreams. The cancellation of distinctions certainly is not achieved in Santos's works, even with imaginative flight.

### Intimidations

Unities in common experience are achieved, however. The book's divisions structure these shared distinctions. Intimidations brings

together casual, breezy or even sophisticated voices. But such ease is only on the surface. Most of the characters in the dramatic action of *Intimidations'* poems are badly bruised by failure, or stunted by fear and insecurity. One poem in the section "Three Easy Lessons in Self-Destruct" could very well enact the remedies offered by other persona in *Intimidations*. This is the classic loser's posture, that of flirtation with suicide. The process is imaginatively enacted through metaphorical states, that of diving and flying a plane. The first action involves a "failed liaison with grace" in which the lover tries "again and again/and again nothing." The frustration resolves itself in a final gesture:

so watch me now attempt  
a double jack knife  
who have never dived before.

The use of "jack knife" is a sinister pun in the total context of self-destruction. The persona is another Prufrock in his fear of action or decision, and his contemplation of suicide becomes a means towards defining, or asserting self.

A similar conflict is dramatized in "The Way of the Clown: Three Stations from 'The Sad Notebooks.'" The poem adopts the ritualist stations of the Cross to record a lover's frustration. The lover-clown contends with guilt, fear and attenuate despair. He is sensitive to suffering, himself identifying its components and their working: "guilt a cobweb on the eyes/not too easy to wipe away/A lifetime commitment/in a cellar without music." Wedded to such guilt is anger at the partner's infidelity, marked by her "wordiness. . . soft promises ripped/on a high wind but nothing/new to this wayfarer."

The death of the relationship is symbolized by infection, the partners' hurts a "virus/touching us both." The clown's last station is a crucifixion, the final stage of his journey of despair:

he spits at his face in parody  
of the old story that is much like his  
first he calls on all his ancestors  
to add to the humiliation of his body  
fed to ants and bees  
and the strangest of loves (p. 21)

There is violent and surreal imagery in the agony of the lover-clown. He "rejects himself in a cage/full of twice-told bestiary" where ani-



mals tear off his clothes and a cacophony of laughter and bells sound out "the coward clown/has just died/his thousandth death." There is no redemption, something he has never sought:

the beauty of it all; his eyes  
turned toward calvary see nothing  
he has finally won the darkness  
he seeks in exchange for familiar trinkets (p. 22)

In *Intimidations* this poem employs the most disturbing, raucous metaphorical action. The total effect is one of discord, blending only with resolute anger and despair. "Sad notebooks" as a symbol is a tempered cover term for stories like the lover-clown's. His protest against failure is most strident, bitter in its lashing out, a proud self-abasement. Other poems in *Intimidations* rightfully derive from the "Sad Notebooks," yet come with more tonal restraint.

"Minipo'ms" assume the brevity and precision of "Time and Place" in *The Wounded Stag* yet possess an arresting quality in unconventional parallelisms:

my poems are dying of old age  
get out in the sun, I urge them  
but they sit silent shaking their heads  
staring at their shoelaces  
loose in their eyes (p. 23)

The analogy of poetry is youthfully frank and uninhibited, a playful treatment of tradition and innovation. The third poem also captures in a modernist conceit a mood of loneliness, possibly of an exile:

a piece  
of autumn's  
chill fell into  
my coffee  
and I cried  
waiter  
take this  
away  
and give me  
spring. (p. 23)

"Cried" in the fifth line sounds a double meaning, a response to hurt and a call to remedy. Crisis is subtly conveyed in this whimsical scene,

but for similar ethos in the section, the clear end to hope is frustration. "Correspondence," and "Leis" enact the exile's predicaments. "Correspondence" presents the expatriate's unemployment woes:

I regret to inform you. . .  
 basic words in a manual  
 most secretaries know by rote  
 every job seeker, too, whose glands  
 begin to ooze with xerox ink.

He says shit without reading  
 Beyond regret, goes back to bed . . .  
 perhaps tomorrow's mail. . .  
 he prays or what comes closest  
 to prayer. He reaches for the stereo  
 instead of the woman on the bed,  
 ugliest at this hour like the taste in his groins. (p. 25)

The situation is mild drama in a scene fully suggestive of gripping need and helplessness. It is not just economic deprivation the exile suffers, but emptiness in relationships. As seen in the short stories and *The Wounded Stag* poems from exile, usually the greatest burden of these expatriates is the presence of very real memories of home. These impinge on even the good things in a strange country. Finally these memories are estranging. This is depicted in "Leis" where the persona as exile is shown "defining his wonder/chanting to dissuade tears/this is home this is nearest to home." While the sensuality of experience in Hawaii is recalled, so too are "barbed wires still sharp in his memory." The detail of leis left "to die in his rented room" is an echo of that sharply lingering detail in *You Lovely People* about the Filipino who died a pauper in his room filled with flowers "blackened on the stalk." This recurrence, effectively united to its poetic contexts, shows the memorability and enduring force of illuminating details in the poet's vision. Other parallels are drawn, as the self-declared prophet-performer of a father in "Race with Seagulls"—the same figure in *Villa Magdalena*, Fred's father. So, too, with the symbol of the tarnished coin in "The Paperboat Poems" and "Dreams" in *The Wounded Stag*.

The last poem in *Intimidations* presents the thematic, essential stance of the poems' persona. "Party's Over" metaphorizes the one who doesn't belong, the "copout" as "stranger to a dubious feast." It also satirizes social hypocrisies and delusions, "all those gentle folks making believe/their ancestors had been invited." Once in the past

there was some meeting, some correspondence of will and action. Now there is only cowardice, or semblance of courage "borrowed/ with goblets of madeira." Such pretense eventually fails and, ironically, the actor (clown, lover and masker) decides on his "proper role" (a Hamlet-Prufrock defense of sorts), to bow himself out of his lover's "history."

### Intimates

Intimates properly follows such a performance, sharing its disenchantment, but this time the focus is on the "complete loss of song" in failed relationships. Often the disenchantment is couched in playfulness, or some naughtily sensual terms:

I wanted you to taste my poem  
but your sunglasses  
kept getting in the way (p. 35)

This game with words and feelings adopts not only to the guarded ease of recollection, but to bitter grief: "So here's your valentine/a moonfish easily fed/with crumbs/and unleavened ashes." The final line sums up all that the lover thinks of the liaison: he is there to atone for "all/my sins of emission." With failure there is attendant memory, the chief antagonist. The conflict begins with questioning in "Dry Run":

How does one break a memory,  
burn the fingers that held it too long?  
Dam the sewers, violate  
The center of the storm? (p. 36)

This urgency speaks of the anguish of failed relationships. Constantly the images are violent, disturbing, sensual and strident, as in "Items," the lovers' death in a car accident. In "Pillar of Salt" the Biblical Paul is alluded to as promiscuous. "Peter need not know/Whom Paul undid last night." The final poem in Intimates is an extended metaphor of the prevalent tension of these dissonant ties. "Untuned Violin" uses the violin in its decrepit state as an objectification of a love relationship gone to waste. The owner tries to tune it:

Now, that's just fine.  
Alas, it's worse.

I try again and fail.  
Furious, I break  
it on her head. (p. 39)

The picture is ludicrous, mildly hysterical:

All it needed was a touch of fury.  
Besides, she'll live.  
If she doesn't, what need have I of songs  
these strings now give? (p. 39)

The casual stance is a mask for the undercurrent of desperation. Yet such posturing interprets the grief process very imaginatively. Its extended metaphor is a modernist conceit, ingenious and startling. It is indeed "violence/pure as grief." The violence drives out all sentimentalizing and replaces it with absurdist equivalents of cowardice and loss.

### **Intermediaries**

Intermediaries presents the alternatives for the "distance between shamelessness and hoping," for the time between lack and maturity. Personal and social conflicts are still reckoned with, yet these come with the balancing strengths of insight and celebration, of grieving without bitterness, and courage drawn from humility. In "All Good Men," even death and the business of dying yield "daisies in off color" from grave diggers working. In "Celebration," games are played, imagination stirred, grief is a winning pawn:

Running out of words  
We bet on who cries first  
and nobody wins, having no onions  
to do the job for us  
but I know I could have won  
without trying. (p. 44)

Still, grief is not insisted upon for "usually . . . we call off/playing games and celebrate ourselves." Indirection blends with statement of referents here, to sadness and release. For the best of the poems more use is made of symbol, except for the poems of exile and the long poem of reminiscence "Lament for April."

Santos returns to the now favored ironic banter, to rediscover the nature of change and the passage of time and loss. "Biography" is a characterization of a childhood friend who adored Lindbergh and the likes of "the clean shaven men." This friend grows up "fat and bored/selling office supplies" and hardly makes a go of it. The ultimate folly of the idealistic fellow is surrealistic:

and he marries a cold cold woman  
with hair  
in the wrong places (p. 46)

The next portrait is given in "Tennis Doubles" a play on words and idiosyncrasy. On the courts there is a guy named "plus one" by the players, for his habit of repeating every word he utters:

We could have named him "double talk,"  
but he is such a simple man,  
incapable of double meaning (p. 47)

The man is a slave to enthusiasm, a classic case of *joie de vivre* to those who could only think of mundane things like health. The concluding lines brilliantly enact duplication:

Once on a damp court, running after  
a ball obviously out of reach,  
he slipped, rolled once,  
no more than once,  
squirmed in pain, holding an ankle  
and saying nothing, twice. (p. 48)

This is linguistic play mainly, an intermediary to recorded pain. It is nothing like the interpretation of the horror of Hiroshima in "The Maidens," rendered with the restrained sensitivity of a young *hibakusha*:

I left Hiroshima  
saying goodbye through wounds that once  
were lips that had known salt and honey,  
waving with the stump of an arm  
at the ruins below the fairy clouds.

The maidens talked but little on the way  
some knew how to hide their tears  
Others had yet to learn. (p. 49)

The detail on the arm and the "fairy clouds" rocks the painful calm of the preceding lines; horror is approached obliquely or with ironic indignation:

You lose an arm, that could be hidden  
in a wooden sleeve that wears no heart betrayed,  
or a leg, yet a wooden graft could walk the earth  
with less pride, indeed, but as erect,  
and in your heart, carry a secret wound. . .  
but a blasted face! (p. 50)

Santos pursues concern with inhumanity as a totalitarian lifestyle: "One puts a stop to thought with a bullet/Or with one of the many ways of torture that numbs/Even when it does not kill." ("Lament for April") Materialism is satirized: ". . . he does not know he's a slave/Because he drives a car/And his wife, who wears a diamond ring/plays the stock market." ("Sound Frequencies") There is awareness of summary justice from the ranks: "We allow digressions that tell the way tyrants are tortured by the peasants they have not succeeded/In killing with privation and injustice." ("Lament for April")

### Social Commentary

Yet, social commentary is just a "digression" in Santos's poetry. For those who see historical consciousness as the sole perspective for the interpretation of experience, this admission comes as a self-indictment by Santos. He is clearly nonpolitical, although his works, including his short fiction, show a sensitive awareness of social crises and political dislocations. His art, that of the poet as individual, is not prescriptive or conceptual. Emphasis in all cases is on the inward processes, seen as just as significant as their social context. Santos confines himself to the poetic interpretation of "the story of the heart," to "translate into words/the madness, the joy, the agony" of living in societies, "in the familiar country and the strange."

Santos himself could very well be the persona of a quintessential poem in *Distances*, "To Her Who Thinks Me Young" included in *Intimidations*. The quality of the poet's imagination and the creative process itself are taken as the subjects of a poet laden with years and "young eyes." The poem also provides a framework for the appreciation of this second volume of poetry by Santos.

The comparisons come in two forms: first is the idea of poetry and language as that of the poets at play with "words that have no

season," perpetual fruits for their "sensitive fingers" selection. The poet's resources are always "vibrant and useful." To them "Words are either ripe or green but always/ready for their lips that have know dryness." Santos's real personal caring for his subjects, is concrete testimony to his involvement with the processes of grief and fulfillment translated in his works. This genuineness as a writer results, along with creative genius, in works that ring true, with living "characters" and, in his poetry, with incisive responses to experience.

The second comparison relates poetic resources to the poet's possession of a "master's safe" and "hard pentameter boxes" for the storage of truth and meanings, "wrapped in the tinfoil/of muddled metaphors." It is clever, brilliant allegorizing, pointing to the "dull nights" of the creative process of the poet, and the assurance and excitement of prospective truth available "in cash and redeemable bonds."

## Conclusion

Imagination runs in uncharted liens. Such is suggested in the metaphor for poets, "amateur burglars and headstrong," deciding on "an original combination . . . who cares for the old numbers." Inventiveness, new insight will not accommodate stagnation; this, in Santos's case, is in the area of technique and approach, since his subjects remain constant through the years. His two volumes of poetry are a case in point. The themes are closely aligned. Distance in time are cancelled and the concern with alienation, with dreams, is ever present. Yet *Distances: In Time* acquires a clarity even in its tracking of conflict and defeat. There is contemporaneity, more pungence, immediacy and surprise in arresting symbols and metaphor, and the pulse of speech rhythm. From a store of "muddled metaphors" Santos has unraveled fit patterns and combinations for his themes.

"Their weakness is for music but not for song." Santos as poet attempts distinctions and desires them, and stays sadly content with disharmony as reality, and warmth and longing the only solace for poets, "theirs the vanity of men who had known/Women with young eyes." The phrase works both ways: the women who have youthfully regarded him, and the poet, now only thought young, still able to passionately desire beauty. This is Santos terrain. In the rest of the works one notes the nostalgia of Filipinos for the loveliness of their women. In other contexts, desire becomes passion with attendant suffering:

So all night they toil  
 Succeeding only in sounding the alarm  
 Yet some time close by, the safe would open  
 In a blaze of new minted coin from realms  
 They have not seen in their brightest dreams.  
 Till then, they drive off under the ice-blown elms  
 As if Spring were here and the birds had returned  
 To the stunted firs on the river bank.

A gifted poet's other alternative, that of humility, is manifest here. In a sense, though, as in *The Wounded Stag*, so much of the unverified abstractions in Santos' poetry are disturbing. Yet in the convergence of meanings in time, discovery is "close by" and finally truth beyond the poet's "brightest dreams" emerges. This truth relates to human inward conditions. In every work of Santos such truth has been both "ripe and green," possessing both the hard-core strain of human experience and the heart-warming measures of care and courage from the memorable few. This is the poet's precious burden, the infinite possibilities of truth opening to him. Bienvenido Santos has remained vulnerable to these possibilities, including pain. The symbol of the minted coin, for one, has its past in a poem "Dreams" in *The Wounded Stag*. In that poem there seems no recovery of the lost minted coin in a "realm of tarnished gold." In a recurring figure but a new context, this symbol of personal worth and fulfillment assumes aesthetic worth, becoming the poet's discovery and responsibility. Still, the process to recovery is hard to come by, for its special nature is a creative gift. Meanwhile, the poet must contend with a cold world. There can be no illusions, just as there can be no digressions where stories of the heart call for attention. In his poetry, Bienvenido Santos is also deeply aware of this.

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