

philippine studies

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

Orion's Belt: Writing is How One Sees Things

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.

Philippine Studies vol. 46, no. 2 (1998): 249–254

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Orion's Belt: **Writing is How One Sees Things**

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.



Orion's Belt and Other Writings. By Gemino H. Abad. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1996. 160 pages.

Some commentators may classify Gemino H. Abad's latest book as a collection of short stories, but it is essentially a volume of literary criticism which uses personal biographical narratives as a means to communicate literary criticism. Holman, Thrall and Hibbard (*A Handbook to Literature*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972) classify literary criticism "according to the purpose it is intended to serve" and declare that one of the principal purposes critics have is "to justify one's own work or to explain it and its underlying principles to an . . . audience." The cover blurb to Abad's volume describes *Orion's Belt and Other Writings* as

an unusual first collection of fiction. It not only puts together Abad's five stories, but carries an introductory piece called "The Stick" which presents a disturbing [sic] theory of language, fiction and the creative process, and ends with two essays on the author's own workshop with himself on two of the stories.

In "The Stick," the Introduction to *Orion's Belt*, Abad has some very challenging literary comments. His comments on words are very intriguing:

I am fastidious with words, as you can see, even finicky like a high-strung unmarried virgin. . . . I am unhappy with utilitarian words despite their convenience, their "role" or "function." They seem to me like the unhaunted remains of what had once been beautiful and vibrant concepts. . . . I know too well that our words lead crooked lives, and that it takes great effort to see one's way clearly through them. . . . You are by now sufficiently forewarned. You need read no further, for I am wordy. I am only words (3-5).

Abad also stresses the concept of literature as metaphor.

When last night I held the stick, this story was "born" . . . The story that was born also discloses, among its words' shadows, that other story of its secret fermentation. . . . My stick is associated almost physically with that strange instant when the story itself was born. . . . But in no case, unlike in many 'modern' stories, is my stick 'symbolic.' Since I honestly do not understand such a relationship, it cannot possibly disturb my story nor invest it with more meanings (3-5).

After his account of the meaning of the stick, Abad tells the story of the stick—how he found it, how thieves paid the family a visit, and how Inky, their dog, was lost and found. They are *kuwentos* (narratives) only, but *kuwentos* with a literary meaning. Abad concludes the chapter on "The Stick" with a comment on "the story proper"—"Inky's loss has an uncertain status in 'my story proper.' Like the stick I found, it lies in the story's own past, among its contending words" (19).

Indeed, it is a "disturbing" thought, as the cover blurb says! What is the "story proper" and what are the meanings of the words? What is the story really all about? Some of the traditional literary critics would say that the story means what the reader thinks it means, or does it mean what the author wants it to mean? Those are basic literary questions which emerge in Abad's poetic *kuwentos*. In his poetic narratives he raises many critical literary questions.

The Stories

The second section of Abad's collection includes five writings entitled "Stories." Some literary critics might question Abad's genre definition and concept of "Story" as a heading of this section for his volume of writings. The five stories are based on Abad's own life, but they all include "disturbing" comments on language, fiction, and the creative process of literary composition.

The first of the stories, "Tarang," is a story of Abad's youth and his comments on N.V.M. Gonzalez's story entitled "Children of the Ash-Covered Loam." Abad writes:

But of course I am no longer Tarang. I'm almost half a century close to my story's end. Still I can't bear to tell myself what became of the young boy who one dark night felt he was already a man. He's lost. So let my dream of him haunt someone else's story (32).

Abad says that the second story, "The Houseboy," came from his boyhood, and most of its details were from memory.

I still recall the night of our family's arrival in Manila in 1949 and how my brother and I were amazed by the city's neon lights. Our

houseboy, Rufino, stupefied by the dazzle and glitter around us, kept exclaiming: "Ooy! Oy! Oy!" (148).

I think Abad's critically fictional (?) writing is more poetic than can usually be found in a narrative.

Finally I invented the story! So what is the story? What did I invent? I think it isn't in the details, or the items of memory, where the story lies. Important as they are (the story's flesh and bones, if you will), the story's soul lies deeper, hidden in their relationship. So I think I invented their meaningfulness. That's where the story comes to life. There was no story until its pieces—the scattered fragments of memory and experience—fell into place. That is to say, they were no longer pieces but parts. They filled, or rather made for themselves, a clearing, a space of meaningfulness—a singular space where they connect with one another and achieve their meaning together. Their meaningfulness is a certain inter-relationship that, having been found, can no longer be altered In the writing of the story, I worried sometimes about the story's meaning, or lack of it, if it were simply a story (149).

Thus, for Abad, meaning has different meanings depending on the author and the reader.

Abad's third "story," "Orion's Belt," is a narrative of a meeting with friends and the bishop in Romblon, but it is also deeply rich in literary comments on language, English and Filipino in the Philippines and in the high-school curriculum. Abad writes:

"Language is my obsession, Luz. It is a house of spirit, too, of a different sort. Sometimes one wonders about the remedies."

"I know you are a poet," Luz said. "You said, when one writes, one tries to recover the way of thinking that lives in one's own language" (37).

Abad's story of "Dead Souls" uses Nikolai Gogol's famous story as a framework for Alan's romantic courtship and relationship with Enya.

Sweet girl. That was how he loved to call her. He laughed softly as he imagined her in a translucent nightgown. In Chicago [where Alan studied and Abad, too!] she was his imagination's bride; would she as his wife be as lovely? (61).

The chapter also discusses Alan's teaching assignments and includes comments on his attitudes towards literary criticism. Dr. Jules Quicho, the English Chair, asked him:

"So, what's the critical fashion now, Dr. Alan Maliopayon?" "I noticed," Alan says to Jules, "You have given me the course on Critical Theory." "In all that theoretical salad out there, Al, which seems . . . , uh, shall we say, more useful?"

Alan answers:

"It [literary criticism] isn't anymore my favorite dish, Jules . . . all that jargon, the syntactic molasses, the premium on cleverness, in those poststructuralist thickets, all the way to Baudrillard. Now we read more theory than literature which seems quite wrongheaded. . . . Is that our way with our majors?" "I think," Jules answers, "there's a lot of indigestion and the usual consequences. But a few seem to take to it" (63-64).

The discussion between the two of them—chairman of the Literature department and Alan, newly returned from the US with his doctoral degree—gives Abad the opportunity to make many literary comments and criticisms. Alan says, for example,

As a people, we Filipinos are not used to thinking, upon our own ground—if we can find that Normally we quote only foreign scholars and hardly know our own poets. It's our education system We just have to get on somehow, with whatever language we know to use well, assuming any language can be shaped to our image—what we have already become. Then maybe we can become our own critics and interpret us to ourselves, and our dark soliloquies can connect somehow and build a tower on our Babel (67-68).

Abad's fifth "story" is the chapter entitled "Introibo." It is the rather beautiful narrative of Abad's experience as a Jesuit. The description of the Jesuit life at Novaliches and the profession of vows on the second Easter there after the 30-day retreat is very touching. Interestingly enough, there is practically no literary criticism in the chapter about the young Jesuit. But Abad does end the chapter with an interesting thought that is also a summary of the biographical chapters of his collection.

It's funny how poets seem to be my guardian spirits. So maybe, he told himself, that's all that I am made of—words and a mad passion for them so that sometimes they may appear like spirits to me. But perhaps also, he pursued, I'm daunted by their void, an aching emptiness I sense in their hue and cry when I grope for meaning and find they are inadequate and so, perhaps, I only seek the comfort of silence where I seem to be half in love with death. Ah, yes, he nodded to himself, I shun the agony of writing, for I must still grope, and when I finish and seem to have found the meaning I sought, in just its most

radiant form, I find it as yet surrounded by darkness. . . . It is a priesthood I seek but not any order! (126-27).

Is Abad's vocation in *Orion's Belt and Other Writings* the priesthood of poetry, of fiction, or of literary criticism?

Creative Writing

Abad's collection of writings concludes with two essays on creative writing—on how "Orion's Belt" came to be written and how "The Houseboy" came to be. Abad says:

I wrote Carlos Angeles about it last 8 February (1995) I've been trying stories!—yes trying, it's rough weather. Very slow and very painful, but I think there I might work out my obsession. There may be a few things (mainly about myself, the old psyche) I couldn't say with poems; just maybe (132).

Abad's account is a very interesting narration of how his stories came into being, as well as some provocative comments on creative writing and ingenuity. One must admit, though, that Abad's account of his fictional writing is more poetic than narrative. He says:

The story ("Orion's Belt") too may always have been lying there hidden in my thoughts and feelings, in my psyche—chiefly, I suppose, as my obsession with language, which had always found expression in my poems; this (the writing of poetry) was why, perhaps, for a long time the story couldn't become an overriding necessity with me. But not only that obsession pressed toward another definition of itself. The story was there, too, in ferment as a swarm of things, or forms of thoughts—chiefly, I think, my own readings, which of course stretch far back in time, like a scatter of constellations without figure or name. . . . As a newcomer in short story writing I was acutely aware of my struggle with writing what should be a "short story"; as a poet, of course, I know in my bones the anguish of writing. Writing "Orion's Belt" I became aware of three problems—in regard to action, character, and the handling of language in the story (133).

Abad's second reflection on creative writing is his account of how "The Houseboy" came to be written.

I felt that perhaps now, if I write the story's story (of the houseboy) I might come upon certain "mysteries" in the writing of the story. . . . After "Orion's Belt" I did not think I would write a story again, so

agonizing was its writing. But I did and wrote "Dead Souls" and now "The Houseboy" (147-48).

Conclusion

The widely differing classification systems for criticism are not mutually exclusive. Abad's "writings" in *Orion's Belt and Other Writings* indicate that he has employed a great variety of strategies in getting at the work of art and communicating what he finds there. This book is a fine example of critical poetic writing. Abad's fiction, especially that of the romantic "Dead Souls" and the spiritual "Introibo," are very exciting and poetic. His literary criticisms are profoundly reflective of his own approach to literature and to the cultural influences on literary criticism in the Philippines. This is a useful book for fictionists, poets, critics, and teachers. Abad does communicate well. He says of his own writing: "I cannot write anything that isn't true. Yet anything when written is already fiction—for it is how one sees things." This volume is, indeed, a wonderful portrait of how Abad sees things. It is well worth reading as "an unusual first collection of fiction and disturbing theories of language, fiction and the creative process."