

don Benito, al mismo tiempo un diálogo intergeneracional y una polémica desde el independentismo de uno y el federalismo de otro. O en el hecho de que Bontulan sea por dos veces héroe: en un primer momento, héroe de guerra; en un segundo momento, más revelador si cabe de la voluntad discursiva del autor, héroe de paz en virtud de una oposición no violenta a la propaganda mediática del periódico en que trabaja.

De entre todas las dualidades predomina una: la de la tradición frente a la modernidad. La irrupción del automóvil y del cine como fenómeno de masas frente a las ceremonias religiosas. La provincia frente a la capital. El temor y el desconcierto de Ta-Titay frente al bullicio manileño. Los bailes galantes frente a la rígida moral cristiana. De este modo coloca a su país en el tiempo de un modo inequívoco: Filipinas en la encrucijada. El final abierto no es más que un ejercicio de coherencia con esta idea. Lo que ha venido después es historia y todos la sabemos, una historia anticipada por esta novela, conjeturada en sus páginas. No obstante, quizá todo haya cambiado para que no cambiase nada y Filipinas se encuentre aún, como en *La oveja de Nathán*, en su encrucijada.

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Antonio M. Abad. *La oveja de Nathán: Una novela filipina/Nathan's Sheep: A Philippine Novel*. Translated by Lourdes Castrillo Brillantes, with Lilia Ramos de Leon and Edgardo Tiamson. Consultant for Spanish text, Isaac Donoso Jimenez. Makati City: Georgina Padilla y Zóbel, Filipinas Heritage Library, and Ayala Foundation Inc., 2013. 642 pages.

We are in luck. This year the Premio Zobel Collection recovers the novel of Filipino writer Antonio M. Abad, *La oveja de Nathán*, in a meticulously prepared bilingual Spanish-English edition by Lourdes Castrillo Brillantes and Isaac Donoso.

Written in Spanish by Antonio M. Abad (born in 1894 in Barili, Cebu) and published in instalments in the Manila serial *La Opinión*, it won the Premio Zobel in 1929, which annually was given to the best literary work written in Spanish by a Filipino author.

La oveja de Nathán is the story of Mariano Bontulan, a young Cebuano of humble birth. His guardian is the irreproachable Don Benito Claudio de Hernan Gonzalez, a leader in science and politics in the Philippines, who helps him get to Manila and find a job as a compositor in a press. Bontulan is a highly impressionable boy and is of a passionate and pertinacious disposition. For that reason, he is much affected when he reads the news coming from Europe about the First World War. He sides with the Germans at first and later, ultimately, sides with the Allies. He literally is by their side, since true to himself, he decides to participate in the war, enlisting in the forces that the United States is planning to send to the battlefields in Europe. Thus, because of his accomplishments in battle, the young Bontulan becomes, for the first time in his life, a national hero.

Back in the Philippines, he marries Emilia, and with his mother Ta-Titay, they move to and settle in Manila. He again gets to work as a compositor, this time for *The Manila Daily Chronicle*, owned by the American William Doherty, a spokesman for the more openly imperialistic economic interests of his compatriots. Soon Bontulan experiences the tremendous conflict caused by his having to typeset the inflammatory and offensive editorials of the owner and director of the daily, on the one hand, and his own desires of independence for his country, on the other. And so despite being financially tied down, with the payments on the house and the car due, as well as the coming birth of his child, he decides to resign—an act that will once again make him, this time almost involuntarily, into a national hero and an inspiration to those who desire Philippine independence.

A literary descendant of the foundational work of Philippine literature, Jose Rizal's *Noli me tangere*, the novel not only shares an identical purpose with it, but also draws on Biblical inspiration. If the title of Rizal's novel alludes to the episode in which the resurrected Christ asks Mary Magdalene that she touch him not, that of Abad's points to the famous parable of the sheep (according to which a rich man robs a poor man of his only sheep so that he need not offer his own to a guest), with which the prophet Nathan uses to reproach King David for sending the husband of Bathsheba to certain death so that he might marry her himself later.

However, the parallelisms do not end there. Written in Spanish, both novels pursue the same goal, as we said, except that they are conditioned by different historical moments. Rizal's novel is a sharp criticism of the excesses in the last years of the Spanish colonization, directed especially at the Franciscans and Dominicans, as well as at the upper classes of Filipino society; Abad's is an exact reflection of the situation in an important period of American dominance, when the tensions between the American government's delay in granting the promised independence and the urgent desires for emancipation of the Filipino society were beginning to grow.

Both *Noli me tangere* and *La oveja de Nathán* are works of their time, but their reach transcends the period in which they were conceived. To understand the Philippines today, it is essential for one to have read them—the first is faithful to its romantic identity and the second, to the realistic condition. Both are pieces of living history, memory, a testimony of a time and of those who lived it.

So we meet characters like Mariano Bontulan, who is quixotic to the extent that what he reads, in this case, the accounts of the war, leads him to take paths undreamt of, but in whom reason prevails over emotion—a characterization in keeping with the realistic intention of the novel. Or characters like Don Benito de Hernan Gonzalez, who strongly reminds us of that other Don Benito of Spanish literature, the realist writer from the Canary Islands, author of *Episodios Nacionales*, a politically engaged man who even came to occupy a seat as a deputy in the Spanish Congress, a position that he, just like Antonio M. Abad's character, abandoned.

The markedly realistic nature of the novel is evident likewise in the remarks made by the third-person narrator on local culture, which we could identify as the views of the author himself. Thus, Manila and Cebu society in the first part of the twentieth century, with its lights and shadows, parades before his eyes and before ours as well. These too come into view—members of high society in the ballrooms, the clergy ever watchful over morals and good customs, natives and mestizos, Spaniards and Americans, the unsung of the village who fade away without making so much as a flash and only sometimes exploding as a collective force (an uncommon occurrence in the course of history), the political celebrations, the religious rituals, the war. Other scenes are no less important: the European battlefields inundated by rain and with blood spilled in the height of the First World War, and other periods, like the eighteenth century, a time of senseless conquests by the ancestors of Don Benito de Hernan Gonzalez of other territories in southeast Asia like Cambodia or Laos, which makes up one of the most surprising narrative turns in the novel as it adopts the style of the chronicles of the Indies (*cronica de ultramar*).

All of that is expressed in a language that is precious, ornamented, probably influenced by Modernism that had much influence in the Philippines as evidenced in authors like Zoilo Hilario and his work *Adelfas de la lira Filipina*. Again, here, Abad surprises us; he boldly and creatively fuses realist strategies with modernist prose. In this connection, the impressive work of translation undertaken by Lourdes Castrillo Brillantes progressively smoothens the overly elaborate style of the Cebuano writer, offering, it may be said, a lighter, even modernized version of the novel. Of course, it is superfluous to add that the wealth of adjectives and the nuances of the Spanish used by Antonio Abad resist a literal translation.

But what is without doubt the most surprising effect of reading *La oveja de Nathán* is the historical prescience of Antonio M. Abad, who guessed and anticipated a great part of the course taken by the history of the Philippines and even of the world in the decades that followed. It is a foreshadowing of what almost two decades later would be, at last, the independence of his country, in the period between the wars. It accurately dissects the politics, commercial and interventionist, mercantile and imperialist, of the United States, many of its conclusions still relevant today. Unlike the usual realist novel, which chronicles the triumphs and setbacks of the bourgeois, this one has its protagonist risk whatever foothold he has on the bourgeois world (its trappings, the house, the car) for the sake of some ideal. As such he is more in consonance with the ways of the antiheroes of the novels that will come after.

As a good realist novel, it establishes moreover a continuous dialectic between opposites: characters, universal concepts, positions, or circumstances occur and are questioned, problematized. This strategy can be seen in the fervent conversations between the young and the innocent Mariano and the old disillusioned Don Benito, which are at the same time an intergenerational dialogue and an argument between the separatism of the one and the federalism of the other. Or in the fact that Bontulan may be twice a hero: first, a hero of the war; second—more illuminating this if one understands the discursive intention of the author—a hero of peace by virtue of his non-violent position against the media propaganda of the newspaper where he works.

Among the dualities one stands out: that of tradition versus modernity. The irruption of the automobile and of the cinema as popular phenomena versus religious ceremonies. The province versus the capital. The fear and the disconcertedness of Ta-Titay in the face of Manila's uproar. The gay dances versus rigid Christian morals. In this way Abad places his country in a distinct period: the Philippines at the crossroads. The open ending is no more than an exercise consistent with this idea. What has come since is history, and we know all of it, a history foreshadowed by this novel, imagined on its pages. That notwithstanding, perhaps all may have changed so that nothing should change, and the Philippines might still find itself, like in *La oveja de Nathán*, at a crossroads.

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