

# Paradox in Artistic Unity\*

by

*Florencia R. Baban*

The poet suffers the world of diversity, but endowed with a creative imagination that can transform the outward form of things into an artistic unity, he finds a way of escape.<sup>1</sup> That complex world which torments and angers him may no longer be a perpetual battleground of warring elements nor an imprisonment of "things" for his way of escape is a way of reconciliation of diversities through a love-hate collision and reconciliation with that very world. Recognizing the duality of a relationship imposed by the necessity of his having to live in it and having to gather from it the materials for his

own particular escape-world, he accepts the paradox of diversity in unity. From out of the chaotic inconsistencies around him, he rearranges "tyrannies" into order and form which transformation he calls art.

What is art? Plato first viewed it as "imitation." Plato's imitation meant the mere copying of nature.<sup>2</sup> And, he said, because copies are not truths, therefore art was not moral. Aristotle, however, whose theory of art still prevails today interpreted "imitation" as arrangement, order, modification, completion, abstraction or, in other words, into a world of sense and form.

---

\*From a Master's thesis done at Silliman University, Dumaguete City. Dr. Florencia Baban has recently completed her doctoral work at Central Philippine University, Jaro, Iloilo City.

<sup>1</sup>Spender Stephen, *The Making of a Poem* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1962), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>Laurence Perrine, (trans.), *Plato From the Ion and the Republic* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962), p. 2.

Things as they appear in nature he said, do not really speak of their truest essences. Art is a **simulacrum** of nature — an imagery — not a pure copy of nature, for nature in the raw is meaningless. The poet sees truths beyond that savage surface. In short, the truth that poetic art seeks is not scientific truth, for the truth of science is the truth of surfaces — things, objects, but the truth of art is the truth beyond surfaces.

Art builds on natural objects, but those objects become mere cues: they only suggest the poetic reality behind them. In art, the image of nature must be true to objective reality, but even more so must it be true to the furthestmost implications beyond it. A stone, for example, thrown into water forms ever-widening circles around it. Even as those rings come from the fact of the stone in the water, so in art, likewise, the occasion or the objective reality of the artistic creation is the stone but all the ever-widening rings of connotations, inferences,

higher levels of meanings springing from it must be consistent and true not only to objective reality of the occasion, but also must it be so to the universal experience of man.

What is unity in art? First, we must go briefly into the creative process. The poet is gifted with poetic intuition which enables him to see beyond the reality of nature. The **objects** in the world into which the poet's **self** enters and which in turn tend to invade his **self** create a conflict and a complex of attitudes which the poet must resolve.<sup>4</sup> That poetic intuition enables the poet to assume a **connaturalness** with all things.<sup>5</sup> He can communicate with them, perceive their own individual histories, and in his innocence and integrity, feel in his soul their very truest essence. He is omniscient — **he knows**, although he may not logically explain how or why.

The subconscious where all such communications occur becomes a matrix where all impressions in the conscious or unconscious life of the

---

<sup>3</sup>S. H. Butcher, "Aristotle," **The Great Critics**. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks, editors (Third edition, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1951), p. 28.

<sup>4</sup>Jacques Maritain, **Creative Intuition In Art And Poetry** (The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts. New York: Meridian Books, 1953), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup>H. H. Price, "Paranormal Cognition and Symbolism," **Metaphor And Symbol**. L. C. Knights and Basil Cottle, editors (Proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium of the Colston Research Society held in the University of Bristol, 1960. London: Butterworth Scientific Publications, 1960), p. 78.

poet are stored. They are all in a floating, indefinable flux. These impressions live in a nebular alert sleep until such a time as they may present themselves for use in a poetic creation. A sudden flash of insight at a moment of inspiration makes the poet see the true relationship of things in and around him.

The poetic intuition which in itself is a creative energy thus awakes into active processes.<sup>6</sup> Touched by an emotion which digs deep into the poet's soul calling forth all his being to actualize a feeling into a concrete whole and intelligible experience the poet unleashes that creative energy but in a dream-like manner. That emotion becomes intentional, awakening the poet's total personality to participate in the intellectualization of that emotion. The "illuminating intellect" of the poet guides the creative energy to order the materials in the unconscious. It judges, approves, evaluates, discards, modifies and orders them.<sup>7</sup> Step by step, the creation of intellectualized emotion unfolds by the balancing and contrasting of materials such as a word or detail into a comprehensible

unity. The "ruins" of experience are fused dramatically into balances and strains; opposites grip in a "war-embrace" or a "breastplate to breastplate" posture. The system of balances is not a negation of any object's force but rather a reconciliation of opposing forces into an explosive unity. Neither is it a system of mechanical pairing of opposites or an incoherent clustering of images. There is no mathematical formula, no pattern to follow, nor a mentally preconceived design. There is but that simultaneous action of intuition and creative energy unleashed guided by the internal melody of the poet.

The materials in the unconscious determine the final structure and form they will take. Because of the very infinite diversity of the materials in the poet's unconscious, the stresses and resolutions, qualifications and contrasts tilt the form now to one side, then to the other; overlap here and there; leap and bound from one spatial position to another in a meandering, formless, disorganized order; yet such as when finished presents a complete, consistent, and honest wholeness.<sup>8</sup> Taking but the "ruins" of ex-

---

<sup>6</sup>Max Schoen, *Human Nature* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publisher, 1930), p. 316.

<sup>7</sup>Jacques Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>8</sup>John Clark Pratt, *The Meaning of Modern Poetry* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1962), p. 1.

perience fused into tensive sharp details to suggest the imprecise whole, the creative energy unleashes itself breathlessly until the experience has completed itself in words and has become intelligible and concrete. If that creative energy and the poet's experiences be rich, his passion full, his memory precise and keen — the poetic structure will stand for an artistic unity. This unity is a heightened experience whose tension — intensions and extensions — reverberates and resonates from the particularity of the poetic occasion into universality.

Still, the overall pervading attitude and passion of the poet determines the meaning of the poem.<sup>9</sup> Attitude which defines the scope within which the experience may act determines the tone of the poem. What is the poet's attitude toward himself, the world, his subject matter? That attitude is determined by his total personality: his beliefs, values, experiences, judgments, reflections, intelligence, knowledge, desires, dreams, visions, all that he is — even his physique; in fact, all that makes him the individual that he is. His total attitude imperceptively tones his work.

The poem is the poet's biography: his individual insightful harmony completed in his own poetic language. The tone projects from the very atmosphere of his words, rhythm, meter, images, symbols, metaphors and poetic sense. That tone is heightened by the poet's passion — a passion which is the natural outcome of his own personality in relation to the diversity and chaos of the world around him. The emotional tone, therefore, is the core of the poem. It is the meaning. Without the tone, the poem is merely a private chronicled experience of an individual.

By the very nature of the creative process, of the materials with which it structures and textures poetic experience, of the poet's personality revealed in the tone — the finished poem is a structure that becomes indestructible, irreducible, and unparaphraseable.<sup>10</sup> Every item, every image, rhythm, number or harmonic expansion; every delicate nuance or turn of music or thought or feeling becomes integral in the poem. Each inheres and coheres in the most inevitable manner in the poem. It becomes inviolate. This is to say that the poem itself is its

---

<sup>9</sup>I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1955), p. 107.

<sup>10</sup>Cleath Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1947), p. 192.

own communication.<sup>11</sup> To abstract a statement and to say that that abstraction is the poem itself is to say something external to that poem. One portion of the poem does not **mean** the poem. To say that the statement at the end of the poem is the meaning is at times dangerous and senseless. Without the context from which it has earned itself, any part is nothing. Not one item nor portion of the poem stands for the whole, nor does the poem mean the separate parts. Neither is the total sum of the parts of the poem is the poem itself. In the structure of the experience, each item has earned an inherent indestructible part in the order of the experience. To move one is to destroy the equilibrium of the poem.

Unity in the art of poetry, therefore, is solid as globed fruit.<sup>12</sup> Without those separate ordered parts there is no fruit, but the fruit is beyond particularities for the **fruitiness** of the fruit is in the essences of form, shape, color, and all emotional tones ascribed to it.

Artistic unity is illusive because it cannot be pinned down to logical verification. There is some kind of logical illogicity or possible improbability which may point toward the pattern and truth of the poetic experience. Such logicity is not of the mind nor of objective reality, but of the soul. The meaning of a poem is felt before it is understood. That feeling even after the poem is understood still holds its own by its relevance to the poem and by the consequently enriched discoveries of the facets of that poem.

What is "paradox" and how does it function in the artistic unity of the poem?

Paradox is the fusion of two separate elements in juxtaposition.<sup>13</sup> The paradoxical word, image, statement or situation seems always self-contradictory or absurd, yet explicable as expressing a truth.

By all the methods, nature, and materials of the poetic process, paradox is spontaneous to the poet. It is his inevitable language.<sup>15</sup> Paradox is the inevitable language in art since to name things directly is to

<sup>11</sup> Maritain, *op. cit.*, pp. 250-260.

<sup>12</sup> Brooks, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-79.

<sup>13</sup> Clarence L. Barnhart, (Editor), *The American College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 878.

<sup>14</sup> J. Isaac, (Translating Mallerme), *The Background of Modern Poetry* (New York: E. V. Bulton and Company, Inc.), p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

lose half the charm of art. Since the poetic intuition cannot name things in abstraction, it can only render concrete images or symbols which may be incredible, bizarre, shocking, or violent. The use of sharp details in synecdoche, for example, makes for that "slight dislocation of language" which earns the poet his name as "maker." It may be said here that the poet's constant renewal of language is one of the basic reasons for his presence in any age.

The power of paradox lies in its understatement through condensation and compression.<sup>16</sup> Understatement leads to ambiguity, and obscurity. By the mere suggestion of paradoxical details in rhythm, image, symbol, or the whole situation of the poem, so much free-association and interpretation, so much admixture of feelings, meanings, and attitudes are evoked by the poet from the reader. The juxtaposition of contrasting items: the material with the immaterial, the ugly with the beautiful, the past with the present, death with life, triumph with defeat, *ad infinitum*, in a telling condensation of language and form makes for the explosive power of poetry.

Such condensation calls for the reader to become an active partici-

pant by his over-exploration and unravelling of the poem's riddles. When details suggest several meanings all at once, or where several meanings are resolved into one detail, or when the details are bare as in Chinese poetry where the reader has to supply all his own interpretations, or when they suggest the confusion of the poet, or a division in his mind as regards opposition or confirmation — all these are the rich charms of art that beguile the reader.

The juxtapositions of opposites in poetry may also lead to ironical turns shocking the reader with a blow on his beliefs, established traditions, or ethics, but which irresistibly and honestly in the end he accepts as truths.

Paradox in condensation makes poetry hard, witty, rich, and extensive. It makes for that heightening of experience free from the slithering of sentimentality and discursiveness.

Randall Farrel, modern poet and critic, describes the methods of modern poetry as: very interesting language, a great emphasis on connotation, texture; extreme intensity, forced emotion, violence, great emphasis on sensation, perceptual nuances; emphasis on details on the part rather than the whole; ex-

---

<sup>16</sup>Brooks, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-21.

perimental, or novel qualities of some sort, a tendency to external formlessness and internal disorganization. He adds that there is a great deal of emphasis on the unconscious, dream structure, the thoroughly subjective; that the poet's attitudes are usually unscientific, anti-common sense, anti-public he is essentially-removed. . . .<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to past traditions of poetry the twentieth century poet is one passionate, loving, courage-

ous, tough, hard, despairing, devoted student of man under the light of eternity, but as that light falls through the prism of the present.<sup>18</sup> His poetry is a poetry of reconciliation in paradox whose universality not only convinces the mind but also moves the soul for in the ultimate, that poetry inevitably, is about the reader himself. This universality is the absolute judgment of all art.

## HOW THE WORD?

A poet is both creator and critic. When a poetic experience reaches completion in words on the page, the poet now views with a logical mind what was created illogically. If the art work withstands the ruthless eye of responsible criticism, then the poem is said to be "successful."

"How the Word," one of the poems included in the thesis collection has been declared "successful." Discussion will focus on the author's use of paradox and all its concomitant principles of con-

densation, compression, irony and wonder, ambiguity, ambivalence and obscurity and synecdoche.

### HOW THE WORD?

*What  
If the feet of my spirit were  
Free  
From the manacles of flesh and bone  
Shall not I  
Through oceans of my dead days  
Ride the wind  
Above the jagged teeth of gloom  
Light all the flamebeams of heaven's  
Night — sing  
Dance*

<sup>17</sup> Randal Jarrell quoted in "Understanding Villa," *Philippines Free Press*, Vol. 61, No. (Saturday, October 12, 1968), p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Jerome Judson, "Poetry and Why," *Writer's Digest*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (February, 1969), p. 16.

*Fling all my fetters upon  
The graveyard of our  
Griefs — !*

*But then, how can I  
Word the rose-dews  
Of ten-thousand songs  
Upon my breast —  
Your hands - - - ?*

This poem settled on the page with ease one evening when the author was in a dream-like lonely moment in her room. The emotion of loneliness took a turn towards a passion for nearness of a loved one then absent.

The poem speaks of the paradox of man and of the human condition. Man as corporeal body and spirit mysteriously united in one. The union is inevitable and indissoluble in man to divide these elements is to lose the very essence of man. To negate either force is to destroy him. The poem ends with a question to start in the realization of the paradoxical unity which is man.

The tension of the poem starts with the word "How" in the title. "How" is an intellectual question — a question into processes and methods. Then is followed by "the Word." Word is a symbol — a concrete object that speaks of an idea. The tension then is posed by the

title which unites an intellectual concept and a material symbol.

The first word "What" in the poem carries further the idea of "the word" and contrasts more clearly with the "How." "What" implies a concrete object.

The word "If" is a positive of possibility. The poem by implication realizes a condition of unity, at the moment irksome and inconvenient. Here is a paradoxical image "feet of my spirit," again, feet is physical and spirit, non-material.

The first four lines make the tension more precise. The author wishes to be "free from the manacles of flesh." The passion of the author for the spirit to depart from the body, to be "free" to "ride the wind" and savor the delights of freedom comes to the height of what she dreams about — union with the beloved.

She imagines her physical body as "fetters," and for the first time she brings in the beloved one in the word "our". She presumes a reverberated longing, too, from the loved one. The last three lines of the first stanza again presents a paradoxical image — "graveyard of our griefs."

The last stanza is both a question and an answer. The author comes to the naked moment of union with



the loved one. But how? She — ab-  
 bodiless spirit, and he — a corporeal  
 body? How to “word” the ten-  
 thousand songs upon her “breast”?  
 Meaning, how to communicate the  
 joys of the spirit without the body?

Upon my breast —  
 your hands — ?

The last two lines explode with  
 realization, wonder, and a telling  
 image. “Breast” again is spiritual  
 and “hands” — material. How then  
 is union possible?

The dashes imply more than  
 words can tell — and perhaps in the  
 silence of the dashes are reverbe-

rated the total human situation —  
 the paradox of body and spirit,  
 of materiality and incorporeality,  
 of the lofty and the low. Man’s  
 functioning depends not on the ne-  
 gation of either force but in the  
 perfect harmony of both forces in  
 him. The poem resonates therefore  
 a reconciliation which the author  
 accepts. From the pen of one lone-  
 ly poet, says a critic, naked truth  
 springs which truth resolved her  
 own problem, and perhaps the uni-  
 versality of that insightful truth  
 may help the reader to resolve his.