

Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints

Volume 1
Number 3 *Issues 3-4 (September–December
1953)*

Article 2

12-31-1953

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Recommended Citation

Bernad, Miguel A. (1953) "Poetry By Allusion," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*: Vol. 1: No. 3, Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13185/2244-1638.3579>

Available at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/phstudies/vol1/iss3/2>

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philippine studies

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Philippine Studies vol. 1, no. 3 (1953): 223–235

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Poetry by Allusion*

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

I. A DIFFERENCE IN LOGIC

It is a commonplace of literary criticism that poetry tends to express thought indirectly: by suggestion rather than by statement. Both poetry and prose are, of course, bound by the rules of language, for both are parts of the *ars dicendi*, the art of expressing thought through the medium of words. But, though language is their common medium and words their common stock, they differ in their manner of using these. The identical word seems to weigh more heavily in verse than in prose, just as the identical body seems to weigh more heavily in air than in water. Connotations, associations, suggestions are exploited by the poet more than by the prose writer, with the result that a few words of poetry can often say much more than entire paragraphs of prose. "*Sunt lacrymae rerum,*" says Vergil, "*et mentem mortalia tangunt.*" How translate that line adequately? What prose paragraph can exhaust the suggestiveness of those seven immortal words about the tears in things and the feel of mortality upon the immortal soul?

* Manuel A. Viray says in his essay "Certain Influences in Filipino Writing," *Philippine Writing*, T. D. Agcaoili ed. (Manila, 1953): "Today you may find Filipino writers sharply disputing T. S. Eliot's poetic strategies over a plateful of steaming rice, salted eggs and tomatoes." Father Bernad feels that this vogue calls for a study of the poet's technique.—*Editor*.

Prose, in short, tends to give utterance to an idea in explicit terms; poetry, on the other hand, often gives utterance by the paradoxical way of reticence.

The critics call this a difference in "logic." The logic of prose, we might say, is the ordinary logic of the philosopher and the man in the street, of the law court and the lecture room, the logic of Aristotle and Peter the Spaniard. The fundamental law of this logic is that the conclusion must never exceed the premises: *Aeque ac praemissae extendat conclusio voces*. The poet, on the other hand, uses another logic, a logic more like that of the detective and the psychologist—or, if you will, like that of the madman. It is an intuitive logic that translates the merest suggestion into an inference. And in this sort of logic, the conclusions always exceed the premises.

For instance, it is not logical (according to the rules of ordinary logic) to conclude that just because a person looks somewhat like a cow, therefore he *is* a cow. A person may indeed have a peculiarly bovine face, but it would not make sense to feed him hay. And yet, that is just what the poet does in his poetry. The least resemblance is exploited as a basis for affirming identity. The man who looks like a cow is referred to as if he were one, and the lady who resembles a rose is spoken of as if she were a rose.

No court of law would admit as incontrovertible evidence of guilt the fact that a person has a furtive look. There are crooks who look like angels, and there may well be angelic people who look like crooks. The maid who looks so harmless may be a poisoner, while the stableman who looks so tough may be a saint. For, no matter how the vices of the soul may tend to externalize themselves, there is nevertheless no necessary connection between looking like a criminal and being one, between a furtive look and stealing the lady's diamonds.

But in poetry, a furtive look is all sufficient evidence of guilt—by the operation of that logic which is common to sensible poets and irrational maniacs: the logic of association. A furtive look and a furtive soul do belong to-

gether. They are associated. One suggests the other. As a consequence, the poet need not say in express terms, "This fellow is a crook": he may prefer to say, merely:

—And in his eyes, a furtive look.

In this regard, the poet enjoys the same advantage as the painter who can depict a world of perfidy by a stroke of the brush; for instance, by giving Judas a furtive look.

Chesterton, who wrote prose so well, might have said in prose that the Child Jesus, though seemingly so helpless, was in reality the Ruler of the universe. That would have been a clear statement of a great truth. But choosing as he did to express that idea in verse, he used the language peculiar to verse. That is to say, avoiding the bald statement of prose, he used instead the suggestive imagery of poetry:

The Christ-Child stood on Mary's knee,
His hair was like a crown,
And all the flowers looked up at Him,
And all the stars looked down.¹

Strictly speaking, that stanza does not say the same thing as the prose statement given above. *His hair was like a crown* is not the same as *he is king*. But in the poet's logic, the two statements are equivalent. A crown suggests kingship; the flowers looking up and the stars looking down is a graphic way of saying that both stars and flowers are beholden unto Him for their existence; and the Child standing on Mary's knee suggests the role in His kingdom played by the Virgin-Mother.

A trifling example, perhaps; but it illustrates the fundamental difference between poetry and prose.

His hair was like a crown:
Therefore He was a king.

In ordinary logic, a *non sequitur*; in poetry, a clear inference.

Thus, the language of poetry is at once inferior to prose and superior to it. Inferior, because it is less precise: for language can be precise only when one is willing to make precise statements, sharpened by careful qualifications; superior, because a poet's words are far more suggestive and evocative than the prose writer's ever could be, like the striking of a chord of music, rich with many overtones.

This is true of all poetry, ancient or modern, to a greater or lesser extent, whether it be Homer's with his rosy-fingered dawns, or T. S. Eliot's with his evenings

spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table.²

II. TRADITIONAL AND MODERN USAGE

It is this general principle of poetic indirection which seems to justify (if indeed anything could justify) the modern poet's manner of using allusions in his poetry. The first thing a reader notices upon opening Eliot for the first time is that the verse is obscure, the second that it is rhythmical—with a particularly fascinating sort of rhythm. We are not concerned with the rhythm just now, but with the obscurity; and much of this obscurity stems from the liberal use of allusions and quotations. The verse bristles with them. Eliot uses them in verse as Joyce does in prose—if a concatenation of simple apprehensions may rightly be called prose. And if the question may be asked about prose, it may pertinently be asked also about poetry: can a concatenation of allusions and half-quotations be properly called poetry?

Take, for instance, the last lines of *The Waste Land*:

London Bridge is falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie
.....³

“What,” asks Mr. E. M. Forster referring to these lines,

"does the scrap-heap of quotations . . . signify? Is it helpful, here and elsewhere, to know where the quotations come from?"⁴

The use of allusions is neither peculiarly new nor confined to poetry. It is as old as Callimachus and as recent as Wodehouse. What, for instance, is Wodehouse doing in that orgy of mixed metaphors in which he informs us that the not-so-brilliant Miss Madeleine Bassett

had risen, and for perhaps half a minute stood staring at me in a sad sort of way, like the Mona Lisa on one of the mornings when the sorrows of the world had been coming over the plate a bit too fast for her?⁵

But there is a difference between this traditional use of allusions and Eliot's use of them. In traditional usage, the allusions are, as it were, perfectly assimilated into the sentence structure. For this reason, allusions are easily understood in traditional usage once the allusion has been identified. Few schoolboys, for instance, with a baseball bat in one hand, and a book in the other containing a photograph of Da Vinci's Mona Lisa and Pater's rhapsodic praise of it, would miss the import of the sentence from Wodehouse quoted above. The allusions, heterogeneous as they are, are woven into the sentence structure, and hence into the pattern of thought itself. Indeed, the humor lies precisely in this perfect assimilation of foreign elements. Is it not hugely incongruous to picture the Mona Lisa standing at bat and promptly striking out?

But in Eliot, allusions and quotations stand like foreign bodies, unassimilated into the sentence structure, and therefore apparently unassimilated into the thought pattern. It is only by dint of much research and thought that the "scrap-heap of quotations" begins to look like a logical whole, with one thread of thought holding the scraps together.

The fact that the scraps remain scraps, unassimilated into one sentence structure, makes it difficult for the casual reader to understand Eliot's verse even after he has iden-

tified each individual scrap. There is no obscurity in Shakespeare's

. . . he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus

to anyone who knows that the Colossus was a giant statue astride a harbor. Nor is there any ambiguity in Milton's

. . . cynosure of neighbouring eyes

to anyone who knows that the "dog's tail" is a constellation. But in the case of Eliot's "scrap-heap of quotations" quoted above, the ordinary reader remains baffled even after he has been informed that "London Bridge is falling down" are words from a song, that "*Poi s'ascose*, etc." is from Dante's *Purgatorio*, that "*quando fiam uti chelidon*" is from the *Pervigilium Veneris*, and so forth. The question remains: what holds the scrap-heap together? why these scraps and not others? what does the whole thing signify?

Clearly, Eliot is saying in those lines something *other than the words quoted*. Clearly, he is using these allusions in a different way from the traditional manner of using allusions. What is this new way?

III. THE PRACTICE OF THE CRITICS

That question has, of course, been answered in practice by the critics. For instance, Mr. Cleanth Brooks, in a very helpful and much reprinted essay,⁶ has elucidated many an obscure passage in *The Waste Land*. He has done so by a simple technique: by tracing each allusion to its original source and explaining it in the light of its original context. This is a technique which every critic of Eliot has to follow; there is no other way.

To take a concrete example: in "The Burial of the Dead," Eliot suddenly introduces into his verse four lines from a song in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*:

*Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu,
Mein Irisch Kind
Wo weilest du?*

This is followed by a brief passage about love, and the section is concluded by another quotation from another part of *Tristan*:

*Oed' und leer das Meer.*⁷

The puzzled reader finds no rhyme or reason for the mess. What connection have Irish lassies or wide and empty seas with a waste land? The connection becomes plain when the Wagnerian quotations are studied in their original context. In Wagner's opera, Mr. Brooks tells us, the *Frisch weht der Wind* is a song of young, happy, naive love, while the *Oed' und leer das Meer* is a sad report made to a wounded man that the ship bearing his beloved is nowhere in sight. "In the first, love is happy; the boat rushes on with a fair wind behind it. In the second, love is absent; the sea is wide and empty. And the last quotation reminds us that even love cannot exist in the waste land."⁸

Whether or not one is prepared to accept Mr. Brooks' interpretation *in toto* (it is possible, I believe, to detect in the Wagnerian song a more somber note than that of happy, naive love)⁹ the fact remains that any alternative interpretation can be made only by following the same method as that indicated here: namely, by studying the meaning of the Wagnerian quotations in the light of their original context.

In other words, these quotations do not seem to be used by the poet for their own sake, but as *signposts* to something else—the something else being some situation in their original context. This is why they are not assimilated into the sentence structure of the new context. It is true that Mr. Brooks calls attention to the fact that the lines quoted from Wagner "take on a new meaning in the altered context";¹⁰ it is nevertheless equally true that these passages

have a meaning in the new context only in so far as they retain their meaning in the old.

Just in case our meaning is obscure, let us (at the risk of laboring the obvious) explain what we mean by a homely example.

IV. POETRY BY SIGNPOST

Let us suppose that the modern poet wishes to convey the suggestion that love should be constant, unchanging, imperishable, even when the loved one has ceased to love. There are, in general, two avenues open to the poet. The first is the traditional way, namely, to express the idea by appropriate language, appropriate analogies, appropriate imagery. This may sometimes be a difficult thing for the modern poet who labors under the double handicap of trying to express anew an idea already often expressed in the past by better poets than he, and of trying to say something new to an audience already weary of old ideas or already conditioned to stock responses. How, for instance, could a modern poet express the idea of constant love better than Shakespeare has done?

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 Admit impediments. Love is not love
 Which alters when it alteration finds,
 Or bends with the remover to remove:
 O, no! it is an ever fixed mark
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
 It is the star to every wandering bark
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.¹¹

Since, therefore, the traditional approach is difficult to the modern poet, he tries to look for a new approach; and one such approach is the method of allusion. Why should a poet try to *improve* on Shakespeare? Or, for that matter, why *prescind* from Shakespeare, trying to express an idea as if Shakespeare had not already done so satisfactorily? Why not, instead, merely *allude* to Shakespeare? For instance, why not just say:

Why do you doubt me?
It is an ever fixed mark.

At first sight, of course, the two lines do not make sense. They do not seem to be consecutive. They seem not to form a logical whole. But to one who knows Shakespeare's sonnet in which the line "It is an ever fixed mark" occurs, the two lines in our home-made example would make sense. Spelled out, the thought suggested by the two cryptic lines would be something like this: "Why do you doubt my constancy, as if I were ever going to cease to love? My love is true, and therefore constant. It is as constant as the northern star that looks on tempests and is never shaken. It is an ever fixed mark, immutable in itself though all about it be chaos and turmoil."

But this is a home-made example. Let us see the power of this technique of suggestive allusion by examining two examples from *The Waste Land*, both of them from the first section, "The Burial of the Dead."

V. PEARLS IN THE WASTE LAND

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
Had a bad cold, nevertheless
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)¹²

We are not interested in the significance of Madame Sosostris or of her wicked pack of cards but in that last line about the pearls. It is obviously from Ariel's song in Shakespeare's *Tempest*.¹³ What is it doing here? What does the allusion mean? What does Ferdinand, or the King of Naples, or anyone in the *Tempest* have to do with Madame Sosostris or drowned Phoenician sailors? What are pearls doing in the waste land?

The allusion can be understood only by examining the quoted line in the light of its original context. There are

many situations in the *Tempest* to which the line might point. There is for instance the fact that the terrible tempest, which should have caused the loss of lives and of the ship, turns out to be the occasion for reconciliations and happy endings. Nearer home, however, is Ariel's song, the immediate context of the quoted line:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
 Of his bones are coral made:
 Those are pearls that were his eyes:
 Nothing of him that doth fade,
 But doth suffer a sea-change
 Into something rich and strange.
 Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:
 Hark! Now I hear them—ding-dong, bell.

It is a beautiful song, and its theme is obvious enough: things do not really perish, but are changed into something "rich and strange"; bones are turned to coral, eyes are turned to pearls, death is a gateway to life—a life far nobler than the life this side the grave.

Is not this, then, what Eliot is alluding to?

. Here, said she,
 Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
 (Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)

It is a thought suggested by the whole of *The Waste Land*: Life comes through death, salvation comes through drowning, fertility comes from annihilation, and it is better to die and live than to live a living death by never dying at all, for he that shall lose his life shall find it, and he that shall save his life shall lose it.

VI. LONDON IN HADES

This idea is reenforced by the second example we shall examiner, also from "The Burial of the Dead":

Unreal City,
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
 I had not thought death had undone so many,
 Sighs, short and infrequent were exhaled

14

The casual reader will hardly know what to make of this. The poet is obviously talking of London in the foggy morning, and of a multitude of people flowing over London Bridge, perhaps on their way to work (or, since it is early dawn, perhaps on their way home from the night's entertainment). There is nothing odd in that. The odd thing is to speak of these people as if they were dead:

I had not thought death had undone so many.

The situation becomes more curious when this multitude of people is represented as exhaling "sighs short and infrequent." What does it all mean?

The fog lifts somewhat when the reader is informed (by Eliot himself in the notes to *The Waste Land*) that the line "I had not thought death had undone so many" is from Canto III, and the line "Sighs, short and infrequent, etc." is from Canto IV of Dante's *Inferno*. The reader gathers that some sort of analogy is being made between a crowd of people going over London Bridge in the early dawn and something or other in the *Inferno*. What is this something-or-other? Just what is the analogy?

The question is answered by taking the quoted lines as signposts to some situation in their original context. What is the situation in the third canto of the *Inferno*?

That is the section in which Dante represents himself and Vergil as entering the confines of hell, past the gate of despair into a region which might be called hell's vestibule. It is a dark place, and the air is rent with the sound of sighs and much wailing. What is all the wailing about? He is informed that this is the place of banishment for those wicked angels who neither rebelled against God nor declared themselves for Him, but tried to maintain a neutral position between the Good and the Bad, looking out only for their own interest. Not good enough for

heaven, yet not wicked enough for the more spectacular torments of hell proper, they were banished to hell's vestibule.¹⁵ And in this place of banishment, they were joined by the souls of those men who in life were neither good nor very bad, neutral men, negative men, men who were never really alive and so could never really die. And Dante pictures these souls as a great army following a flag which was being carried hither and yon in every direction without rest. And seeing this great army, he marveled at their number:

so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.

This is the situation in Dante's third canto.¹⁶ And it is to this situation that Eliot seems to be alluding. Equivalently he is saying that the people who are rushing over London Bridge are like (or, by identification, *are*) the spirits that are damned to perpetual banishment in hell's vestibule. London is hell's vestibule, an "unreal city" peopled by unreal men and women, negative people who are unfit for heaven and unfit even for hell; hollow men,

stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw.¹⁷

Such is modern man, and such is man at all times in every center of degenerate civilization:

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal.¹⁸

As a sweeping but penetrating judgment of our neopagan civilization, this is very effective; and it is remarkable that it is all accomplished in one or two lines lifted from the *Inferno*:

so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.

This is poetry by allusion. If you will, poetry by signpost. Its power is unquestionable. But granting its power, the reader may perhaps still ask: Is it fair? Is it fair for a poet to send his reader hither and yon, searching in vast libraries for the sources of his recondite allusions, seeking to understand what the poet could have said plainly but prefers merely to suggest by the use of a technique that might be characterized as the height of indirection? This is a question we shall leave unanswered.

¹ "A Christmas Carol," *The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton* (New York, 1947), pp. 320-321.

² "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *Collected Poems 1909-1935* (New York, 1936), p. 11.

³ Lines 426 ff., *Collected Poems*, p. 90. The Italian, Latin and French mean roughly: Then it is hidden in the fire that purifies it When shall I become as a swallow The Prince of Aquitaine at the ruined tower.

⁴ In Leonard Unger's *T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique* (New York and Toronto, 1948), p. 13.

⁵ *The Code of the Woosters* (New York, 1938), p. 213.

⁶ "The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth," in his *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Chapel Hill, 1939), pp. 136-172. This essay appears in several collections, including Unger's, pp. 319-348, and in B. Rajan's *T. S. Eliot: A Study of His Writings by Several Hands* (New York, 1949).

⁷ *The Waste Land*, lines 31-42, *Collected Poems*, p. 70. The citations are from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Act I, scene 1, and Act III, scene 1.

⁸ *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, p. 142.

⁹ The song, from Act I, scenes 1 and 2 of *Tristan*, may be taken as a song about *absent* love:

Westward surges slip
Eastward speeds the ship
The wind so wild blows homeward now;
My Irish child, where waitest thou?
Say, must our sails be weightied,
Filled by thy sighs unbated?
Waft us, wind strong and wild!
Woe, ah woe for my child!
Oh Irish maid, my winsome, marvelous maid.

The Authentic Librettos of the Wagner Operas (New York, 1938), p. 310, where the German text and the musical score are also given.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 141.

¹¹ Sonnet CXVI.

¹² Lines 43-48, *Collected Poems*, pp. 70-71.

¹³ I. ii. 394-401.

¹⁴ Lines 60 ff., *Collected Poems*, p. 71.

¹⁵ Needless to say, Dante is here using poetic invention and is not an authoritative spokesman for Catholic doctrine.

¹⁶ *La Divina Commedia ridotta a miglior lezione* ed. Gio. Batista Niccolini et al. (Firenze, 1837), Vol. I, pp. 14-15.

¹⁷ *The Hollow Men*, I, *Collected Poems*, p. 101.

¹⁸ *The Waste Land*, Lines 374-376, *Collected Poems*, p. 88.