

# philippine studies

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

---

## Third World Opera, by Dumdum

Review Author: Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.

*Philippine Studies* vol. 37, no. 1 (1989) 116–118

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](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

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

lications like Galende's (*Angels in Stone*, 1987) on Augustinian architecture, the archaeological diggings at the Bastion de San Diego, the slim but impressive guidebook *Tayabas* written by the people of Tayabas on their church, and a host of other better documented studies on colonial architecture, a number of which have appeared in journals like *Philippine Studies* and the *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society*. Not to mention the erudite monographs of Armengol, Merino, and Diaz-Trechuelo. However, the section on Philippine architecture 1898-1940 (pp. 175-79) remains valuable, as this period of Philippine architecture has been badly researched.

The first essay on ethnic houses (pp. 1-95) is a competent summary of the research on vernacular architecture, using sources as old as Worcester's remarks on Bilaan houses (1904). Although the essay depends on previous researches, its typological survey of vernacular architecture serves as an introduction to the vast corpus of literature which the reader is advised to study to en flesh the tale that the author paints with deft but bold strokes.

A summing-up observation. These essays can best serve as an introduction to the topics they cover. Like encyclopedia articles, they are popular, speak in generalities, and are convenient reference points. But the more assiduous students will want data, charts, plans, etc. For them this collection of essays will be propaedeutic, and the Selected Bibliography (pp. 195-222) will serve as a most helpful guide.

Rene B. Javellana, S.J.  
Department of Theology  
Ateneo de Manila University

THIRD WORLD OPERA. By Simeon Dumdum, Jr. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987.

Simeon Dumdum is a lawyer from Cebu who writes in both English and Cebuano and has received numerous prizes for his poetry. He writes a regular column for the Cebu *Freeman* and at present is involved in several translation projects. Critic Alfredo Navarro Salanga described the style of Dumdum's first book of poetry (*The Gift of Sleep*) as "... elemental ... clear, clean, almost proselike—what may well be the saving grace of, not only poetry, but all other genres in which Filipinos now write in English, for it is the style most open to translation into any of the Philippine languages."

In the Introduction to the present collection, Edith Tiempo writes, "The group of poems ... is pervaded by one large sweep of sensibility which may be designated as variations on the theme of wonder." They retain, she says, "the primal sense of wonder that canny old children hold as a kindly talisman." Tiempo offers several examples of this "canny old wonder": "Because birds will show only / the side / that you're not looking at" ("Why Birds Fly"). Or "... The cows shake off the rain / That vanished before it came" ("Masbate") and "... the wind whips the dog / with rain, forcing him to

slouch towards / the fire, where of course the cat is" ("Canticle For The Best Barber in the World"). There are dozens of other examples of this childish wonder:

when she cuts my hair . . . I take note  
of the morning, of the chirping of scissors,  
of St. Francis feeding the sparrows  
("Canticle For The Best Barber in the World")

and

#### Islands

Glowing in the water like a lizard's underside,  
Sailboats, of course, small and powdery as moths,  
And beaches, the white thread held above the sea  
To feel the way,  
How else are maps possible?  
("Airport")

The three best lines in the collection are from "At the STC Grounds, Cebu City": "The measure of their quarrel / Is the silence / Between them."

The difficulty with poetic simplicity, childlike or not, is that it slips so easily into banality. Dumdum does not always avoid the trap. For example: "All dreams are bubbles escaping / When we sleep with our mouths open" ("Axioms"). In "For Emer," Dumdum uses the trite phrase for Irish weather: "(Your weather is like / Our politics.)" In "Afternoon in Cataingan," he writes: "(The street so empty, so safe, just the place / For an accident.)" And in "Communion" about throwing up in order to feed a hungry dog. One sometimes wonders where the poetry is.

The banality extends even to whole poems at times. It is hard to see how "Third World Opera" can be described as poetry. Verse, perhaps, but the childish wonder has become a trifling thought trapped in its own vulgarity. The same might be said of "The Day the Dictator Came" and "At President Aquino's Departure in a Helicopter After Proclaiming Her Senatorial Candidacies at the Abellana National School Grounds in Cebu City" where "So strong was the gale caused by the helicopter / That as it lifted / The typewriters in the room / Began typing." The title of the latter poem cannot be serious. It seems to tell us clearly that the journalist (satirical at that) is at work here rather than the poet.

There are, however, a half dozen very fine poems in the collection of Dumdum. I like particularly "Rice Birds" and "Barrio Road" where the childlike simplicity is maintained, the banality is avoided, and genuine poetry emerges. "At the STC Grounds, Cebu City" with its fine closing lines quoted above is equally good. Two of the best poems in the collection are about Filipinos abroad. "To a Friend Abroad, in Autumn" captures absence and alienation in twelve very moving lines. It begins eloquently: "And I thought I had done with leaves. / It came pressed, hand-like, extra-territorial. / Is it maple? Did

it mark a passage / In your anthology?" "America" is also a powerful evocation of want and not want, of home and abroad:

I listened to him speak  
of West Virginia  
(he was born in Leyte  
but was living  
in West Virginia).

....

And on that warm evening  
I told myself,  
That's where I want to be,  
in West Virginia, or New York,  
or San Francisco.

....

but the moon was rising  
and it was bigger than in  
America.

The best description of Dumdum's poetry is, perhaps, what he says of it himself in "Footprints." Tiempo calls this poem Dumdum's *Ars Poetica*, and reprints it in full, as I will here to end this review of Dumdum's *Third World Opera*:

These are impressions  
Of long flaring toes,  
The bones of a starlike thing  
That might have skipped  
When the rain died, or thinned  
Into mist, and it was quiet,  
Steps that end abruptly,  
An unfinished statement  
As hard for me to read  
As to recall what was said unheeded  
Minutes ago. Worse,  
The steps begin abruptly,  
Ruling out hole or nest or  
Stall being anywhere near.  
Who says angels have feet  
Like men's? And revelation  
Is completely logical.

The poem says it all—Dumdum's childlike innocence, his occasional banality, but always the sense of wonder, which is, after all, the beginning of all real poetry.

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.  
Department of English  
Ateneo de Manila University