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## History and Form, by San Juan

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

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**History and Form.** E. San Juan Jr. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1996. 240 pages.

E. San Juan summarizes his collection of essays by saying: "Written within the last two decades the essays gathered in this volume represent my attempt to intervene in the cultural and ideological terrain of struggle for national democracy in our country as well as in the Filipino diaspora around the world." He adds that his project was to become an organic intellectual of the Filipino working masses. His topic in *History and Form* is literature and nationalism. He asserts: "I select those weapons, those texts and writers that will help free us from what one writer calls 40 years of servitude."

### **Literature and Liberation**

His first two essays establish a parameter for the oppositional or alternative orientation to which he is committed. His first essay on "Literature and Liberation" says that Philippine culture is so thoroughly westernized that Filipinos have a problem on how to free themselves from colonialism and western domination. For example, he says, can a nation exist without a common language? San Juan says that "our literary tradition is original in being essentially revolutionary. Literature can be a weapon for enslavement or liberation, for continuing subservience to former colonial masters and the internalized colonizer, or for emancipation."

His Chapter Two focuses on Rizal, whose literature was an allegorical rendering of a people's struggle to become a nation. San Juan says: "My essay on Rizal departs somewhat from the orthodox consensus. It intends to delineate and probe the anatomy of the Filipino intellectual, fissured by multiple contradictions, torn by antinomic motivation and dissonant drives, caught in the folds of the uneven and combined development that characterizes any peripheral formation. Rizal belonged to the anti-colonial democratic intelligentsia who, despite their opportunism and quixotic egotism, catalyze the popular revolution now sedimented in memory."

San Juan then lists the literary contributions and social comments of Carlos Bulosan, "an intellectual of the masses" and Jose Garcia Villa, a Filipino-American writer. His essay on Carlos Bulosan focuses on the historicity of Filipino writing. Bulosan assumes that the growth of Philippine literature was a long struggle against tyranny, but it was a sturdy and brave movement toward reality. The awakened consciousness of the workers and farmers was supplemented by the emergence of new and vigorous talents. With Bulosan, Philippine literature was beginning to explore Philippine life, from the much-abused sharecroppers in the large haciendas of Luzon to the proletarians in Manila who were conscious of their exploitation and their role in Philippine society. Much of this Philippine literature perceived the importance of native folklore, and devoted many efforts to universalize educa-

tion and relate culture and political reality to each other. Of Jose Garcia Villa, San Juan says: "Villa's authority was bestowed and ratified by the norms of transnational criticism. He was a Filipino poet who indigenized certain themes and styles of avant-garde modernism."

Furthermore, San Juan's essays on Garcia Villa introduces his essays on Filipino-American writing and Filipino writing in the U.S. He has two essays that analyze the dialectics of Philippine-U.S. literary relations. He analyzes three tangents on the basic attitudes and status that constitute this sociocultural phenomena. They are nomadic (vernacular writing), migrant (alien and visitor writing) and sedentary (Filipino native-resident writing). These three thoughts are summaries and comments of American colonialism in the Philippines.

San Juan also says that American critics have denied or ignored the contributions of Filipino writers in the U.S. But he himself is a Filipino-born writer writing in the U.S. In his essay on "Filipino Writing in the US," San Juan says that "the practice of writing by, of, and for Filipinos in the United States remains nomadic, transitional, hybrid, metamorphic, discordant, beleaguered, embattled, and always ready in abeyance."

### **Sociocultural Philippine Writing**

San Juan has several essays on the various manifestations of sociocultural writing in the Philippines. His essay on "The City in Philippine Writing" summarizes the difference between the western conception of the city and the Philippine and Third World approaches to urban culture. He comments on the work of writers who have ambivalent and polarizing attitudes toward the city. For many of those writers, Manila was a "site of moral dilemma and the vicissitudes of metaphysical doubt." That was because they considered Manila as the "zenith of commercial life." San Juan says that in Rizal's *El Filibusterismo*, Manila was the testing ground of Philippine culture and nationalism.

Another of San Juan's essays relates the narratives of women migrant workers. Many Filipinos continue to feel no alternative to misery in the Philippines, and the only hope is to live abroad. San Juan's essay on "Boondocks and the Belly of the Beast" is a summary of literary writing about the colonial distortion of "Filipino psyche and culture and the flight from colonial and feudal subjugation." High culture is the belly of the beast and plebeian mass culture is the boondocks.

### **Cultural Revolution**

San Juan's final essay is a summary review of "Cultural Revolution in the Third World." He says: "I contend that our writers accept the view that writing is a kind of social practice involving a specific point of view as se-

lected material. Thus writing is a social practice. The historical Marxist perspective can help us elucidate Third World formation, for Marxism incarnated a vision of human liberation realized in history. It also offers a prophetic message of new life for humanity."

San Juan's *History and Form* represents his attempt to intervene in what he called the cultural and ideological terrain of a struggle for national democracy in the Philippines as well as in Filipino diaspora around the world. He says: "As we approach the centennial of the 1896 revolution and the founding of the first Philippine Republic in 1898, we are also entering a new stage of more profound and unprecedented social transformation all over the world that promises not to leave the peripheral regions, the Philippines included, intact and pristine." The book is an excellent collection of essays by the leading authority on Filipino-American literary relations, who is also a leading intellectual on Marxist criticism, anti-colonialism, and the liberation of Philippine culture, both in the Philippines and in the U.S.

*Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.*  
*Interdisciplinary Studies Program*  
*Ateneo de Manila University*

**DevilWings.** Renato E. Madrid. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1996. 262 pages.

*DevilWings* is the first novel of Renato E. Madrid. His short stories collected in *Southern Harvest* won a National Book Award from the Manila Critics Circle. The novel is told from the point of view of the apostolic nuncio, who has been tasked by the Vatican to investigate the massacre of four men inside a remote suburban church in the Visayas. The murdered men include an old priest and a younger one, a former seminarian and a close friend of the two men, and a respected country doctor.

This is a Southern gothic novel, grim and serious, yet absurd and funny at times. It probes the grace and generosity, the intrigues and betrayal, between the opposing ideologies in the Church. The rollercoaster events in the small parish church may well stand for the Church hierarchy itself. The titles of the novels' chapters are an adroit mixture of Church holidays ("The Gift of Kings"), classical music ("A Little Night Music"), and Shakespeare ("A Remembrance of Things to Come," "Perchance to Sleep"). Throw in the recurring metaphors of the papaya and bonsai trees, and you have a heady novel about Philippine church life and lore in the last thirty years. After asking a lot of questions and rattling some old skeletons in the closet, in the end, of course, this is still a Catholic novel that has solid moral concerns.

First published in *The Manila Times*, 24 August 1997.