

# philippine studies

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 50, no. 4 (2002): 567–570

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

# Jose Garcia Villa as a Literary Critic: Comments on a Compilation of His Works

*Miguel A. Bernad, S.J.*

**The Critical Villa: Essays on Literary Criticism** by Jose Garcia Villa. Compiled and edited by Jonathan Chua. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2002. xiv, 349 pages.

Only twice have I personally met Jose Garcia Villa, and the first time was unpleasant. In 1961 my little book on Philippine Literature in English—*Bamboo and the Greenwood Tree*—was published by Bookmark and we had a booklaunching which was well attended. Probably because the Foreword had been written by the Australian Ambassador, Mr. Alfred Stirling, members of the diplomatic corps were there as well as several of the embassy personnel and their ladies. Also many from the press, besides of course my own friends and former students. Mr. Alejandro Roces came and he brought along Jose Garcia Villa who was making one of his rare visits to Manila. All the guests were in formal attire but Villa came in a loud colored Hawaiian shirt. (He had previously explained that he dressed like his namesake, Joseph, favorite son of the Hebrew Patriarch Jacob who had given him a multi-colored coat.) Besides his loud shirt, Villa was also loudly adorned. He wore a ring on every finger of both hands, the rings all identical and bearing the initial V.

Apart from his loud attire, Villa's conduct was outrageous. He managed to insult several of the guests, including a very tasteless comment on marriage made to a newly married couple at whose wedding I had officiated.

My second meeting with Villa was several years later when he again came to Manila, this time as a guest of the newly constructed Cultural Center. He had by then been appointed National Artist. Though not as outrageous as on the former occasion, his conduct made it clear that Mr. Villa was a self-centered self-important person who wanted to call attention to himself.

Quite apart from these two personal encounters, there were other indications from what others had told me that made me suspect that Jose Garcia Villa was not a very wholesome person.

Neither were his writings (those designated by the critics as "creative") particularly impressive. His reading of Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio* opened his eyes to the possibilities of the short story. His stories were competently written but not memorable. As for his poetry, though highly praised by such writers as Edith Sitwell, their oddities seemed to be a way of giving them adventitious value not arising from their essence. One gimmick was the comma after every word. Another was the unusual form of rhyme.

But if neither the man's character nor his "creative" works were particularly impressive, his impact as a literary critic was enormous. And it is this side of Villa's work that is well served by a new book published by the Ateneo de Manila University Press entitled *The Critical Villa*. It is a compilation of his critical works, compiled and edited by Jonathan Chua who teaches literature and literary criticism at the Ateneo de Manila.

### The "Best Stories"

For nearly a decade and a half—from 1927 to 1940—Villa selected and commented upon "the best Filipino short stories of the year." This yearly critique was highly regarded. It gave Villa the status of an unofficial dictator of Philippine letters, a king of *magister artis scribendi* not unlike the *magister elegantiae* of Rome.

This yearly selection was not dictated by arbitrary whim. He had definite standards learned from English and American writers. He spelt them out in an essay (included in this collection) on "fifteen literary highlights" among which were "high seriousness," "serenity," and "nobility."

This yearly critique had a twofold effect. On the one hand it gave a stimulus to writers. It encouraged potential writers to try their hand at the short story, and it encouraged the periodicals to publish stories. Villa mentions seven periodicals that were publishing stories, although he considered only three of them as any good.

This yearly critique served also to establish a canon of "good" Filipino short stories, and set up a standard of taste and technique.

That is the chief contribution of Villa (and not a small one) to the development of Philippine literature in English. It would perhaps be a misuse of the term to call him great; but certainly he must be considered an important figure in Philippine letters.

### Other Critical Essays

Besides the yearly critique, there are other critical essays in this collection. Villa's dogmatic and self-important manner is exemplified in an essay entitled "Writing Short Stories in the Philippines" (1931) which begins with a statement that was of course quite true: "The Filipino short story in English has become the most important and the most developed field in our literature." But his dogmatic manner and his devastating condemnation of periodicals

and individual writers by name could not have won him many friends. For instance, "Of the seven leading magazines and periodicals in the country, there are only three magazines whose editors have a true knowledge of the short story"—he mentions the periodicals and then continue, "Consequently only these three have a true literary significance. The rest are edited by ignorant literary editors."

Even more belligerent and unflattering is his condemnation of certain persons by name: "There are those who, unqualified to make judgment on the short story because of unacquaintance with the art, nevertheless now and then make derogatory declaration on our short story. Among them are Carlos P. Romulo, Jorge Bocobo, Vicente M. Hilario, and—very lately—one Jose V. Clariño."

Tact and charity were not among Villa's virtues.

### Letters

An appendix to the book reprints some of Garcia's letters. From the viewpoint of those interested in Villa as a person, the first letter is of historical interest. It was his letter to the Dean of the University of the Philippines (15 June 1929) defending himself in an effort to prevent his expulsion from the U.P. The charge of obscenity had been made against some of his poems and the matter had reached the courts where he pleaded guilty to the charge. To the Dean he explained that the guilty plea was merely a way of preventing further undesirable publicity for himself and the newspaper that had published the poems. He himself, he said, did not think he was guilty, and he proceeded to explain why.

Apart from its historical value, that letter is itself a piece of literary criticism, trying to establish artistic norms.

One letter dismisses Rafael Zulueta da Costa as "non existent" as a writer. Zulueta da Costa's "Like the Molave" had been awarded the grand prize for poetry in the government's literary competition for 1940. Villa says, "Alfred Austin was poet laureate of England until his death in 1913, but nobody ever hears of him today. The reason for this of course is the fact that he was no poet at all and therefore his work is dead. R. Zulueta da Costa is our Alfred Austin. No matter how often he may reprint his 'Like the Molave' he does not exist as a writer. Desire and ambition have nothing to do with capacity."

### Annotated Bibliography

An important contribution of the Ateneo compilation is Mr. Chua's annotated bibliography. Villa's own works are listed under five headings: (1) Books by Villa; (2) Works edited by Villa; (3) Articles and published correspondence; (4) Creative works; (5) Unpublished works. In addition to these works by Villa, the 15 pages of "secondary sources" attest to Mr. Chua's erudition.

**Introductory Essay**

Finally, a noteworthy feature of this book is the introductory essay by Mr. Chua which a good literary critic, Mr. Gémino Abad, calls "superb."

I am somewhat amused to find two brief references to myself in that essay, neither of which is complimentary. In one of his early essays, Villa had condemned a writer named Cornelio Faigao as a critic with "poor taste" and accused him of ignorance of the norms for good literary art. Mr. Chua says Miguel Bernad "is perhaps Faigao's counterpart" today.

Moreover, because in a book I had suggested that the Filipino writer should have cultural continuity with Shakespeare and with the culture of Greece and Rome, I have been dumped in Mr. Chua's essay among those with "colonialist" mentality.

Those who have been condemning me for being "anti-American," "anti-Spanish" and "anti-foreign" would find that interesting.