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## **The Opposing Thumb, by Casper**

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

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## Book Reviews and Notes



**The Opposing Thumb: Decoding the Literature of the Marcos Regime.**  
By Leonard Casper. Quezon City: Giraffe Books, 1995. 67 pages.

Leonard Casper's collection of critical essays on literature during and after the Marcos regime was published in 1995, but it has particular relevance as the Philippines moves into a new generation of leadership and literature. Casper's volume is subtitled "Decoding [literal and critical interpretations] the Literature of the Marcos Regime."

Casper states that the literature of the Marcos period was a literature of "open concealment" and "chameleon literature." In his review of this collection, Isagani Cruz wrote that "Casper argues (quite correctly in my view) that writers during and after the Marcos dictatorship either gave up their creative ideals or attacked Marcos in their personal literary fashion. Casper does not hesitate to name the people he thinks were bad guys that sold their creative souls to the devil. While Casper praises other writers as good guys, he is not blind to their aesthetic weakness. His solid grounding in aesthetics, together with his correct awareness of the political background of art, makes this book balanced, helpful and significant."

Casper focuses on the Philippine writers he thinks are major writers of what he calls "open concealment" and "chameleon literature." Because of his English language background—he is an American critic although he taught literature for several years in the Philippines—Casper concentrates on Philippine writers in English. But he makes up for his lack of proficiency in the native languages by situating the protest literature in English of the Marcos regime within the vernacular tradition.

### **Open Concealment and Chameleon Literature**

Casper underlines open concealment and chameleon literature as a literary strategy under Marcos. Literature's custom of revelation by literary concealment means hiding one's true resentment toward and resistance against

abusive socioeconomic and political conditions. It reemphasizes the long tradition of polemicism in literature. One critic has suggested that "Good literature, of course, is always subversive, not in that it advances ideologies or is politicized, for that is not its function, but in that it observes and tells the truth of what it sees. Were it to propose specific solutions or endorse political creeds, it would lose this independence and its credibility." That is the essence of literary open concealment.

Moreover, Casper affirms that the purpose of his study is to interpret and criticize the kind of protest literature that is linked to historical precedents. Under the Marcos regime, some writers learned to reply, as their ancestors before them had, in open concealment. Their literature is designed to deceptively obscure even the worst object of one's contempt in a political or social structure. Casper also describes the openly concealed literature as chameleon literature. Chameleons are lizards that change color depending on the situation in which they exist. The interpretation of the metaphor of the chameleon is that of a fickle person or writer who conceals his sociopolitical view in literary fiction and metaphor. Chameleon literature, in a sense is non-confrontational. It is literature that is intended to be constructed as a veiled complaint against social and political excess.

### The Roster of Resistance Writers

Casper then enumerates the roster of resistance writers in open concealment and chameleon literature. Under Marcos, literature was needed to replace writing that was not longer free, and to reveal by concealment what the censored reporters and columnists dared not say under Marcos. Casper's dedication in his book says that it was written "For all the phosphorescent birds (intelligent and free writers!) who were half unseen and whose silent song burst the bamboo cage of *bayan ko*."

Casper's roster of resistance writers includes many contemporary Philippine writers. Bienvenido N. Santos's novels are good examples of Casper's theory of resistance literature. *The Volcano* outlines the disorder and dismay among foreigners in Albay as a reflection of a similar situation under Marcos. *Villa Magdalena* describes the low and the humble who rise too far and too fast, until reality humbles them once again. In *The Praying Man*, Cris Magat rises from poverty because of his connection with the politicians—the minister of health, the mayor of Manila and even the President of the Philippines. By extension these novels are barbed commentaries on social and political situations under Marcos.

The novels of F. Sionil Jose, on the other hand, were dedicated to the reduction and the ultimate destruction of oligarchic feudalism. The positive element in Jose's novels is that he meant them to be both protest novels and hope-of-reconciliation novels. In many of his writings, Nick Joaquin also implied reflected that a dictator as well as his lapdogs are sources of evil.

Casper's wife, Linda Ty Casper, wrote several historical novels that reflected her concern about poverty in the Philippines. She writes of the variety of people who populate a country and constitute it as a nation. Her protest literature understands very well that political literature is really an account of human experience that is suffered by individuals rather than that of the nation.

Alfredo Navarro Salanga writes about the 1898 Philippine revolution in *The Birthing of Hannibal Valdez*, while Wilfrido D. Nollado's novel *But for the Lovers*, is "a compelling narrative of the horrors and humiliations experienced by the people of Manila while awaiting liberation after the Allied landing in Leyte in World War II." By way of solution to the Marcos problems, Edilberto Tiempo's novel *To Be Free* emphasizes the difference between service and servitude, and the imperative of fidelity to the people as a whole, and the deterioration of the people's values by many politicians.

If the aftermath of the Marcos regime, Jessica Hagedorn's novel, *The Dogeaters*, projects the turbulence of the Marcos years. The Philippines was shown as an underdeveloped society that invites and relies on ambition. But when it is limited to the violent, the manipulative, and the greedy, the society is doomed to self-destruction. In his writings, Alfred Yuson also maintains that the lesson learned from the Marcos years is the need for vigilance, resistance, and whatever forces would subvert self-determination and social solidarity. In her first novel, *State of War*, Ninotchka Rosca considered dangerous the Marcos syndrome of authoritarianism. In his reflections on the Marcos dictatorship, Cirilo Bautista contrasts the Spaniards with Rizal, who was a man who sought only equality and the end of sociopolitical injustice and who was essentially a man of peace. These were all openly concealed reflections on the Marcos regime. Eric Gamalinda's novel, *The Empire of Memory*, showed that those growing up during Marcos's 20 years would have had so little democratic experience that they might be submissive to tyranny, because they would not recognize it as such under Marcos.

## Conclusion

The writers in Casper's roster of resistance, in a sense, refused to collaborate with Marcos. In their writings they expressed their loyalty to an open and free society, rather than to a government that was linked to elitist oppression. Casper's book is a good collection for literature students, as well as for the writers themselves who wrote either for or against Marcos. Casper has a broad view of literature as a human phenomenon that is at once literary, political, and social. His collection of essays outlines "the opposing thumb" of many contemporary writers, a thumb we all need in these times of ferment and change.

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