

## Jose Garcia Villa —Critique of a Subaltern Poetics\*

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### Abstract

The case of Jose Garcia Villa, an exiled Filipino poet who lived in the U.S. from 1930 to 1997, illustrates the predicament of the subaltern, neocolonized artist embedded in what Pierre Bourdieu calls “the literary field” (see *The Rules of Art*). The significance and ultimate value of Villa’s accomplishment, as epitomized in *Doveglion: Collected Poems* (2008), can only be fully appraised by contextualizing the genesis and structuring of his themes, styles, and artistic manifestoes in the fraught historical-political relations between the imperial hegemon, the United States, and the dependent, peripheral socioeconomic formation, the Philippines. Underlying this colonial subsumption is the global relations of nations and peoples within the inter-state system of global capitalism between the 1930 Depression in the US, World War II, and the Cold War period marked by the communist victory in China, the Korean War, the IndoChina War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the Middle East conflicts. Complicating this grid, further

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Invited article, Received June 24, 2009

Proofreaders: Ming-chieh Chen, Hsin-wen Fan, Ying-tzu Chang

\* Thanks to Andy Chih-ming Wang for his valuable help in preparing this article for publication.



historical specifications concerning the function of artistic organizations, the language question, and the arguments between groups advocating the individualist art-for-art's sake ideology and its antitheses (civic morality, religious metaphysics, revolutionary socialism), should be factored in to arrive at a fully determinate, processual, and historical-materialist assessment of the Villa phenomenon as an example of an ethnic, subaltern poetics articulated within the uneven, contradiction-filled transition from modernity to postmodernity.

**Key Words:** Filipino nationalism, neocolonialism,  
transnationalism, historical materialism,  
subaltern



A single motive underlies all my work and defines my intention as a serious artist: the search for the metaphysical meaning of man's life in the Universe—the finding of man's selfhood and identity in the mystery of Creation. (Villa, 1955: 1035)

On these canvases [of Jackson Pollock] the visible is no longer an opening but something which has been abandoned and left behind . . . Within or beyond them there is nothing. Only the visual equivalent of total silence. (Berger, 1991: 115)

## I. Biographical Prologue

Jose Garcia Villa, avant-garde and modernist poet from the Philippines, died in New York on February 7, 1977. Now virtually unknown, he is probably one of the most neglected twentieth-century writers in the English-speaking world. He is being publicized by astute cultural impresarios and hawkers of the New York Establishment, thanks to an eclectic multiculturalist ethos that functions as the “benign” face of predatory neoliberal finance-capital. In spite of this, Villa's achievement may be said to encapsulate the conflicted, dynamic interaction between US imperial hegemony and a “third world” dependency, the former US colony (now a neocolony) in southeast Asia, the Philippines. Hypothetically his work represents an emergent Filipino American culture on the margins of the canonical Eurocentric mainstream, a product of US “tutelage” and the peculiar hybrid—the postcolonial trademark term—conjuncture of Spanish, Asian, and Malayan sociocultural strains, perhaps the missing “third text” of the ventriloquial subaltern. Anyone undertaking a genealogical anatomy of Villa's life and works is bound to raise scandalous questions of national autonomy, colonial subjugation, cross-cultural linkages, and the possibilities of a *Weltliteratur* in the epoch of cyber-globalization. Ultimately Villa may turn out to be,





This historic photograph, taken by e.e. cummings' wife in a party at New York's Gotham Book Mart during the 1940s, features Villa in the middle and other writers. Gore Vidal is on Villa's left, and W. H. Auden on Villa's right, on the ladder. The rest are Tennessee Williams, the two Sitwells (Osbert and Edith), Horace Gregory, Marya Zaturenska, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrel, Delmore Schwartz, Charles Henry Ford, William Rose Benet, Stephen Spender, Richard Eberhart.

as some have generously speculated, the unknown avatar of Goethe's world citizen-artist, a native, autochthonous spirit from the colonial hinterlands—what the Cuban hero Jose Marti called “the belly of the beast”—materializing in the heart of the technocratic metropolis at the end of the “American” century.

On 5 August 1908, Villa was born in Manila, Philippines, the son of Colonel Simeon Villa, the physician to General Emilio Aguinaldo, the president of the first Philippine Republic



overthrown by US invading forces in the Filipino-American War (1899-1913). He studied at the state University of the Philippines where he was suspended for writing erotic poems. In 1929, he won a prize for a short story, "Mir-I-Nisa," published in the *Philippines Free Press*. With the prize money, he left for the US in 1930 and attended classes at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. Soon thereafter he moved to New York City where he resided until his death. In 1933, Villa's collection of short stories, *Footnote to Youth*, was published by Charles Scribner's Sons, with an introduction by the anthologist Edward J. O'Brien. His first collection of poems, *Have Come, Am Here*, appeared in 1942, followed by *Volume Two*, in 1949. The latter book was nominated for the Bollingen Prize. In these two volumes, Villa introduced his poetic innovations: the comma poems, and reversed consonance. Villa explained that the commas after every word in the poem "are an integral and essential part of the medium: regulating the poem's verbal density and time movement, enabling each word to attain a fuller tonal value and the line movement to become more measured." On reversed consonance, presumably "a new method of rhyming," Villa states that "the last sounded consonants of the last syllable, or the last principal consonants of a word, are reversed for the corresponding rime"—thus, "'near' would rime with 'run,' 'rain,' 'green,' or 'reign'" (quoted in Lucero & Lacuesta, n.d.). Three other collections of Villa's poems may be cited here: *Selected Poems and New* (1958); *Poems 55* (1962) published in the Philippines; and *Appasionata: Poems in Praise of Love* (1979)—most of these now included in the Penguin edition, *Doveglion: Collected Poems* (2008).

Through the sponsorship of the American poet Conrad Aiken, Villa was granted a Guggenheim fellowship. Among his other honors are the following: American Academy of Arts and Letters' Poetry Award; the Shelley Memorial Award; Rizal Pro Patria Award; the Philippine Republic's Cultural Heritage Award. On 12 June 1973, during the Marcos dictatorship, Villa was named National Artist in Literature. Aside from his work in the Philippine



diplomatic mission office, Villa conducted classes in creative writing in the New School, New York. Although he lived for 67 years in the US, Villa remained a Filipino citizen. Long an exponent of the “art for art’s sake” school, Villa, the petty-bourgeois sojourner, also cultivated a notorious life-style to outrage the conventional bourgeois *gentilhomme*, a kind of theatrical re-enactment of his revolt against his father and philistine Victorian society of colonial Philippines in the first two decades of the last century. In effect, he struggled to fashion in words and deeds “a beautiful soul” not in Europe or North America but somewhere in between, in the “occult zone of instability” (to quote Fanon) inhabited by diasporic artists, exiles, émigrés, deracinated or *déclassé* intellectuals wandering the arcades of the metropolises’ culture-industry and subterranean art-world. Was it a choice or a fate imposed by historical circumstances?

Both Hegel and Kierkegaard wrote about the “beautiful soul” of the “unhappy consciousness,” an adolescent stage in the development of the human psyche. Hegel foresaw its dialectical supersession in a more concrete historical understanding of life; whereas Kierkegaard, repudiating Hegel, wanted to sacrifice the aesthetic sensibility to a higher ethical mode of existence. Villa rejected the Hegelian alternative, but instead of moving on to the ethical stage, he opted for a permanent aesthetic beatitude. The 2008 publication of Villa’s *Doveglion: Collected Poems* by Penguin Books, edited by his literary executor and introduced by a devotee, clearly shows the itinerary of the poet from the colonial adolescence of rejection of the “Name of the Father” (to use the Lacanian term) and the ethical dilemma to a preference for erotic bliss in semiotic indeterminacy. But this rejection of symbolic differentiation also equals death, the repetition-compulsion of a mannerist style. The “beautiful soul” of infantile repetition self-destructs into a dead-end: the cutting and splicing of commodified prose, an ironic parody of the comma poems and reversed consonance. Thus, the publication of this volume of Doveglion’s corpus may be said to mark not “a growing revival of



interest (2008, xxxv)” in Villa’s work—as Luis Francia claims—but rather the final nail on his coffin. It may, however, arouse antiquarian interest and nostalgia for the posthumous return of the repressed.

Villa died in solitary circumstances, literally unknown. His last volume, *Selected Poems and New*, was published in 1958, in which he preserved (as though he were a museum curator) those poems he wrote in the twenty years (1937-1957) that saw his maturation in New York City. No resurgence of interest greeted that last collection. Its centerpiece was “The Anchored Angel,” selected by feudal-vintage impresarios Osbert and Edith Sitwell for inclusion in a 1954 issue of the London-based *The Times Literary Supplement*. From then on Villa ceased to be a publicly acknowledged creative writer. In fact, even when he was actively publishing, his recognition was quite limited and confined to a narrow circle of friends and patrons. Except for Conrad Aiken’s 1944 anthology of *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, no anthology of significance—not even of minority or ethnic writers—has included Villa’s poems. In effect, Villa remains an unknown writer for most Americans, let alone readers of American or English literature around the world. In the country of his birth, today, only a few aficionados and college-trained professionals are acquainted with Villa’s writings. I have explored Villa’s situation in my previous inquiries (1995, 1996, 1998).

## II. A Peer Among Equals?

Where is the Villa file in the Western archive? Francia celebrates Villa’s arrival to the New York literary scene dominated by white writers with the famous 1948 *Life* magazine photograph. The photo is a palimpsest or tell-tale rebus in itself. Aside from patricians Osbert and Edith Sitwell, whom Villa courted slavishly, we see left-wing or Marxist-inspired poets such as Delmore Schwartz, Horace Gregory, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Marya



Zaturenska, Randall Jarrell, and certainly non-conformist writers like Tennessee Williams, William Rose Benet, Richard Eberhart, Marianne Moore, and Gore Vidal—Vidal would eventually prove to be the most anti-imperialist maverick of them all. There are no African Americans or other person of color except Villa. E.e. cummings, Villa's model and idol, is remarkably missing.

In the photo, one may discern some allegorical innuendo which may be happenstance: Villa is sandwiched between the young Vidal and the mature Auden, whose anti-fascist sympathies explicit in his eloquent attacks against Franco, Hitler and Mussolini were quoted and broadcast around the world. In short, the major American and British writers in the photo were mostly veterans of the global campaign against fascism in Europe and also against Japanese militarist aggression one of whose main victims were millions of Filipinos in the only US colony in Asia, the Philippine Commonwealth. Villa was and remained a Filipino citizen throughout his life, and was the only colonial, subaltern subject in the photo.

The Penguin Classic biographical note on Villa cites Villa's employment as a cultural attaché to the Philippine mission to the UN from 1952 to 1963, at the height of the Cold War, and his position, from 1968 on, as adviser on cultural affairs to the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Indeed, Villa was made a National Artist for Literature in 1973, the year after Marcos imposed martial law and began 14 years of bloody and ruthless rampage. This may be merely a trivial footnote to worshippers of Villa's aura. But it is cynical not to document this connection of the National Artist to the neocolonial state and its oligarchic retainers/clients for the US imperial power.

The Gotham Book reception for the Sitwells, however, already took place in the second year of the Cold War, which Churchill and Truman inaugurated in 1947 with their shrewd incarceration of the Soviet Union in a fabled "Iron Curtain." The Philippines counted itself America's most trusted ally in the "Free World" crusade against world communism. The next year, 1949,





witnessed the victory of Mao Tsetung against Chiang Kai-shek in China, the outbreak of the Korean War, and the ferocious repression of the Huks in the Philippines led by Col. Edward Lansdale of the CIA, adviser to then President Ramon Magsaysay. Lansdale used the Philippines as an experimental laboratory for the systematic “Phoenix” assassination of communists in Vietnam in the sixties and seventies.

None of these historical contexts is mentioned by Francia. Villa’s itinerary of success, traced by Francia from the beginning of the poet’s migration to the US in 1930 up to his death in 1997, follows an evolutionary and teleological scheme. There seems to be no real break or interruption in the route to fame. Villa ends in fact “belonging to the pantheon of Asian American literature,” despite minor violations of Eurocentric norms and even though excluded by the gatekeepers of the Asian American canon. Villa received prestige-granting awards from Establishment sources: Guggenheim, Bollingen, Rockefeller, etc. But such prizes did not result in the class-defined distinction only reserved for EuroAmericans for the greater part of the twentieth century.

Now monumentalized, however, Villa—Francia continues his accolade—was “a creature of his age.” In other words, he conformed to the conventional, standard pattern—Villa’s models were all European, traditional, and respectable. In what way then did he demonstrate his originality, his bold deviation from the norms, so as to earn or deserve admission to the mausoleum of modernism? Aside from his technical innovations, not always appreciated or accepted by the arbiters of the Anglo-American mainstream canon, in what way was Villa a rebel, a dissident writer, who challenged the standards of his day and initiated a new, radically innovative aesthetics and world-view?

### III. Technician of the Sacred

As time has proved, the technical innovations of “reversed



consonance” and “comma poems” were too idiosyncratic and problematic to stimulate much concern among younger writers or academic scholars. Unlike sprung rhythm or Ezra Pound’s imagist movement, they were not associated with a substantial body of work that has social and historical breadth and resonance. Villa’s themes of angelic rebellion, the solitary genius, and artistic exceptionality that have also preoccupied contemporary poets such as Wallace Stevens, Dylan Thomas, Charles Olson, and others, have proved too rarefied or linguistically constricted as to appeal to readers who expect more elaboration in terms of concrete determinations and cultural or social exemplification.

For this occasion, I will not dwell on the rather familiar and tedious recitation of Villa’s debt to the canonical texts of the Western literary tradition, from the Bible to the Metaphysicals, Hopkins, e.e. cummings, etc. This has been thoroughly explored by numerous essays by American critics, including Villa’s sponsors, from Edward O’Brien to Babette Deutsch and Mark Van Doren. In my previous essay on Villa in *The Philippine Temptation* and elsewhere, I surveyed the ambivalent and often duplicitous tenor and implication of the existing commentary on Villa. Many of them are actually ironic or back-handed compliments, either subtly or openly condescending and certainly patronizing in a rather sly and coy manner. No Filipino critic is acknowledged as contributing worthwhile knowledge about Villa.

In any case, Francia quotes Timothy Yu, a Chinese-American scholar at Stanford University, as an authority on the poet. Yu argues that while Villa was heavily Orientalized by his critics and patrons—Sitwell’s insulting portrait of Villa as a “green iguana” is certainly unprecedented—and thus fixated or reified, Villa resisted this placing of his work in the Western canonical hierarchy. In fact, Yu contends that Villa “threatens to overturn the Orientalist hierarchy at the heart of modernism” (2004: 47; see also 2004b). After much specious and speculative argument, Yu suggests that Villa is not really Asian American but a transnational writer, one bridging the Philippines and the US, a transmigrant artist belonging



to several continents, in effect a writer with universal or global appeal, such as that exerted by Salman Rushdie or V.S. Naipaul, by the authors of *Sargasso Sea* and *The English Patient*.

Francia contends that Villa is that kind of universal writer, despite his critics' praise of his command of English as a foreign language to him, because he resembles Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov in his mastery of the "imperial language." This is quite a plea. First of all, like Yu, Francia commits the fundamental mistake of ignoring the colonial and neocolonial status of the Philippines in the international hierarchy of nation-states and national cultures. Conrad's Poland and Nabokov's Russia are not in the same subordinated position as the Philippines, nor are they exactly identical as socioeconomic formations with specific modes of production. Like most of the proponents of transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and kindred neologisms, Yu and Francia do not really understand the historical and political subordination of a US colony to the quite complex and subtle strategies of a US imperial hegemon distinguished for claiming "exceptionalism." If they have some inkling of it, it is superficial and not integral to their evaluation of Villa.

In fact, Yu and Francia have willy-nilly, without being aware of it, endorsed "American exceptionalism," despite their gestures of being against imperialism or colonialism as such. Why? By equating Villa with Conrad or other postcolonial writers now in vogue, they convert the Philippines into an independent entity, if not equal partner, with the colonizer. It is as if Conrad and Nabokov were natives of Puerto Rico, or Guam, or even Hawaii. Transnationalism is the alibi of special pleading for a subaltern poet who made good in the metropolitan center, who proved an exceptional pupil of colonial tutelage and demonstrated agency for postcolonial mimicry.

Francia's exorbitant claim that Villa was fluent in all three languages, Tagalog and Spanish and English, makes his other judgments suspect. Without even alluding to the deeply subjugated position of the Filipino body-soul after centuries of Spanish, US



and Japanese domination, and the ideological utility of English as a weapon of colonial manipulation, Francia ends up mystifying the situation of Villa as a Filipino subject, ascribing to him the identity of a “prophet” and an “unusual man,” thus belonging to no country or culture—in effect, a universal creature for all or none. This rescue of Villa strikes us as a hubristic act of “salvaging,” as the term is used during the dark days of the Marcos “martial law” regime.

Yu is to be credited with analyzing the covert and patent mode in which American and British patrons or handlers really colonized and neocolonized Villa without scruples. Yu aptly focuses on Edith Sitwell’s heavily racialized depiction of Villa as “this presumably minute, dark green creature, the colour of New Zealand jade, spinning these sharp flame-like poems” (Sitwell quoted in Glendinning, 1981: 246) some of which are bad in Sitwell’s view. Yu also notes that apart from the Orientalizing distortion, his patrons reduced or inflated Villa into an alien mystic, a foreign body, an outlandish race. As Sitwell emphasized, “But Villa is a Filipino” (Sitwell, 1970: 169; quoted in Yu, 2004: 45) to excuse the unacceptable nature of his comma poems.

Yu, however, overestimates Villa’s proto-transnational status. He completely ignores the political and cultural changes that have occurred in the Philippines from the time of Marcos’ despotic rule to the present, believing that Chua’s volume marks a nationwide resurgence of interest in Villa.

There is some legitimacy in noting that Villa’s work and its reception is a “trans-Pacific phenomenon.” But that is not a simple geographical placing but a geopolitical one that the equalizing and leveling inference borne by the prefix “trans” occludes and even expunges from our critical intelligence. In short, Yu is ignorant of the profound anti-colonial and anti-imperialist history of the Filipino people from the time it resisted US invasion in 1899 at the outset of the Filipino American War through the peasant uprisings in the first twenty years, to the Sakdal and Huk rebellions in the thirties, forties and fifties, up to the New People’s Army and



Communist resurgence in the sixties up to the present. That is, Yu is blind or insensitive to the long durable history of revolutionary action that has formed the physiognomy and cultural tradition of the Filipino people from the time of Magellan up to the present.

Lacking this historical trajectory of the political-cultural transformation of a whole people, its national-popular habitus and sensibility, it is unwise to calculate Villa's current worth—both his use-value and exchange-value as a producer of cultural artifacts such as books like the Penguin Classics—and future value, if any. It is unwise, that is, to measure Villa as a Filipino poet worthy of the national-popular tradition of asserting national integrity and autonomy.

#### IV. Problems of Valorization

Villa can indeed be used for cosmopolitan exchange, but his use-value remains unknown or hypothetical so far. Now that I have introduced the twin sides of value—use and exchange—I want to quickly delineate the historical contexts necessary to appraise Villa's writings as produced carriers or bearers of value. Such value is necessarily social and implicated in the multilayered social, political and cultural conflicts of his time.

The hypothesis often posited by devotees of Villa, as illustrated by Francia's allegation that "Villa had no fashionable cause to advance or defend except that of poetry itself" (2008: xxxi) is no doubt self-serving and apologetic, to say the least. It is meant to justify Villa's naïve aestheticism. But what it does is to eviscerate whatever surviving element of worth remains in these highly mannered, stylized and deliberately antiquated poetic discourse. It fails to contextualize Villa's calculated and reflexive essentialism and aesthetic purism.

To say that Villa is concerned only with art or poetry is to say nothing much, unless you compartmentalize culture in a Byzantine fashion and artificially exaggerate the division of social labor and



products of that labor into really specialized niches. In that case, poetry is a freakish and weird sport, a disease whose etiology is unknown or an accidental product of labor which nobody really understands and appreciates. What is poetry in itself? Can one define an essence by itself without locating the totality from which it is distinguished? From Plato up to Hegel, metaphysics never postulates an essence without the intermediary surroundings and the whole structure from which it acquires its status/definition as an essence, or a distinctive if distilled element. I want to call attention again to Theodor Adorno's essay, "Lyric Poetry and Society" (1974), and also to Pierre Bourdieu's genealogy of European aestheticism in *The Rules of Art* to demonstrate how "art for art's sake" is a historical symptom of the bourgeois artist's alienation from a commodified, reifying milieu (2002).

I suggest a historical-materialist appraisal by situating Villa's labor as part of social labor occurring at definite periods of history. Of course, it is assumed that such labor is artistic—the shaping of materials into a concrete formally-specific product, its formal characteristics being already given as a distinctive quality of his work. But the hermeneutic process does not end at the level of formal analysis; rather, that serves as a point of departure for further empirical and functional analysis and theorizing. I suggest the following large contexts, what might be described as "conditions of possibility," lived collective situations that can frame Villa's work and allow the further specification of its qualities and possible effects. What Villa's response to these contexts were, remains unknown, and what has been documented need to be further specified by class analysis of Philippine and US society and the cultural and intellectual formations in which the texts and the circumstances of their production and reception are inscribed.



## V. Look Homeward, Angel, Now

The Philippines into which Villa was born may be described as a tributary socioeconomic formation produced by three hundred years of Spanish colonization. The Filipino nation was in the process of being born from the collective endeavors of Filipino propagandists and agitators in the nineteenth century, an offshoot of numerous peasant-worker revolts and indigenous insurrections throughout the islands culminating in the Katipunan revolt of 1896. This process was aborted by the US imperialist intervention in 1898 as part of the Spanish-American War and the defeat of Spanish imperial forces in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Villa's father was a high military officer and adviser to General Emilio Aguinaldo, the president of the first Philippine Republic, who succumbed to US military and political power. Villa welcomed the invaders and in fact assimilated to US metropolitan culture, despite weak oppositional or disrespectful impulses and tendencies.

When Villa was born in 1908, the US military and civil administrators were in the process of stifling the survivors of Aguinaldo's revolutionary army. Macario Sakay, one of Aguinaldo's officers, and his comrades were hanged a few years earlier; but the *insurrectos* would continue up to the second decade, with the Moro resistance proving the most resilient and formidable. Villa grew up in this milieu of cruel terror against seditious, recalcitrant natives. Later on, with strong nationalist protests, Villa saw the accommodationist and conciliatory policies of the Americans winning over Quezon and the oligarchs. Villa left before the Commonwealth was established in 1935.

When Villa was an adolescent, Filipino nationalism smoldered in the organizing efforts of workers in Manila and peasants in Central Luzon, primarily those involved in the Colorum insurrections of Tayug and other towns in the twenties, and later the Sakdalista uprising in the thirties. By the time Villa was a medical and law student in 1929, just a year before his move to the



US in 1930, the Communist Party of the Philippines had already been founded after years of agitation, propaganda and mobilization of union workers and peasants. This occurred even as Manuel Quezon, Sergio Osmena and other members of the Filipino oligarchy, through parliamentary and legal means, continued to demand immediate independence from the colonial power. Villa left at the time of heated debates on how that demand was to be articulated locally and in the metropolitan heartland.

Meanwhile, Filipinos have struck an autonomous path in the US. They have been organizing and agitating in the Hawaii plantations, and later in the West Coast and Alaskan salmon canneries, since their advent in the first decade of this century. Carlos Bulosan narrates their odyssey in his 1948 chronicle *America is in the Heart*. Their efforts culminated in bloody strikes together with Japanese and other ethnic workers in the first two decades of the twentieth century, through the Bolshevik revolution of 1918 and the fascistic Palmer raids before and after World War I. Pedro Calosa was expelled from Hawaii only to lead the Tayug revolt in Pangasinan a few years later.

## VI. Villa Agonistes

The era of the “Great Depression” in the US after the 1929 Wall Street collapse, up through the Communist-led organizing of workers in the thirties and early forties, to the beginning of World War II—this is the main arena in which Villa found himself struggling for recognition as a serious poet. The Depression was symptomatically recorded in the experiences of his deracination and isolation in New Mexico represented in epiphanic episodes in his 1933 short stories collection, *Footnote to Youth*. By 1933 he was residing in New York City where he experienced the nadir of the Depression. None of his works indicates that he registered any visible sustained response to the massive mobilization of American writers and artists in support of Republican Spain, against Franco’s





fascist military supported by Hitler and Mussolini. His compatriots, Salvador Lopez, Manuel Arguilla and others in the Philippine Writers League, were active in that worldwide solidarity campaign, just as Auden, Spender, Orwell, Malraux, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and others were contributing their share to that united front of democratic, anarchist, and socialist partisan resistance of the proletariat. Arguilla and other Filipino intellectuals, Villa's contemporaries, sacrificed their lives to free the Philippines from brutal Japanese oppression.

One can also submit that the Depression years and the mobilization of Filipinos against Japanese invasion and occupation of the Philippines constitute the time period in which we should judge Villa's major works found in *Have Come Am Here* and *Volume Two*. It is interesting to speculate how e.e. cummings, with his exploits in World War I and its aftermath, might have influenced Villa by his erasure from Villa's texts; and how the New York critics and their dissident or leftist inclinations might have aroused in Villa either negative or positive reactions. This is a project for future Villa scholars.

Meanwhile, I would underscore a salient contextual parameter for appraising Villa's intellectual genealogy. It was this period of Villa's apprenticeship in New York City (circa 1933-1940) that, across more than 6,000 miles of the continental-Pacific divide, witnessed the most fertile dissemination and cultivation of radical, socialist, Marxist-inspired ideas in the Philippines. This decade culminated in the founding of the Philippine Writers League on February 26, 1939, and the institution of the Commonwealth Literary Award by President Manuel Quezon on March 25, 1939. Unprecedented in the annals of Filipino cultural life, the debates sparked by these two events (recorded in a slim volume entitled *Literature under the Commonwealth* edited by Manuel E. Arguilla, Esteban Nedruda, and Teodoro A. Agoncillo) need to be juxtaposed with Villa's reflections on art and its place in society and its humanistic horizon.

Villa's absent presence, as it were, functions as the subtext of



those exchanges. It may be inferred from the ideological conflict between the partisans of the “art-for-art’s sake” camp and the socialist or left-wing group of A. B. Rotor, Salvador P. Lopez, Federico Mangahas, Jose Lansang, M. de Gracia Concepcion, and others. While Villa’s aestheticism was indirectly defended by A. E. Litiatco and J. Lardizabal, the majority of participants in the exchange subscribed to a committed and ethically conscientious stand, even though personalities like Carlos P. Romulo, Leopoldo Yabes and R. Zulueta da Costa expressed mediating, reformist or conciliatory views in response to Rotor’s call for a populist, worker-oriented literature (invoking the authority of Plekhanov and Gorki).

Lopez’s essay on “Proletarian Literature: A Definition” laid out the classic and more dialectical perspective than Rotor’s programmatic appeal for partisanship. But Rotor’s citation of Thomas Mann, who was an exile in the US (like Brecht and countless European artists), stressed the need for writers removed from their homelands to join in active struggle against anti-humanist terror. The author of such masterpieces as *The Magic Mountain* and “Death in Venice” stated that “it is not enough today to concern himself with Right, Good and Truth only within the limits of his art. He must seek these qualities in the politico-social sphere as well, and establish a relation between his thought and the political will of his time” (Rotor, 1973: 21).

## VII. Sacrifice without Redemption

The beginning of World War II and the entire period of Japanese occupation of the Philippines saw Villa either employed or in close contact with the exiled government of the Philippines Commonwealth, via writers connected with the government (Carlos Romulo, Bienvenido Santos, and others). Villa’s contemporaries in the Philippines either fought with the American colonizers in Bataan and Corregidor, and later in the



underground resistance to Japanese occupation; while others in exile, such as Carlos Bulosan, described Filipino anguish at the plight of their families back home and Filipino eagerness to join the US army to help liberate the homeland from the misery and oppression of the Japanese aggressors.

How did Villa interpret this agonizing interregnum between US colonial rule and the second Philippine Republic emerging from the ruins and rubble of Manila, the city of his birth and of his ancestors? His rebellion against god and surrogate authorities, against literal and symbolic patriarchs, and his refusal to belong to any physical/real country may be an expression of his fear, dreams and hope of liberation from all family entanglements and sociopolitical constraints. It is not clear whether Villa married Rosemary Lamb during this period, whether he raised his children during these years of the beginning of global *pax Americana* and the Cold War, and what particular ordeals of his personal life configured and contoured his cultural politics. The impact on Villa of the Cold War vicissitudes remains a blank in the critical commentary on his career.

It is also curious to note that Francia and other commentators are silent on Villa's 1955 autobiographical statement found in Stanley Kunitz's edited reference work, *Twentieth Century Authors*. While confirming certain facts about the author's career, no one seems to want to quote Villa's own ventriloquial characterization of his general artistic, philosophical creed embodied in the last paragraph of the entry. While I used this previously in *The Philippine Temptation*, let me quote it again for those not familiar with it:

Recently someone remarked to Villa that he found Villa's poetry 'abstract,' contrary to the general feeling for detail and particularity that characterizes most contemporary poetry. Villa comments: "I realize now that this is true; I had not thought of my work in that light before. The reason for it must be that I am not at all interested in description or outward appearance, nor in the



contemporary scene, but in essence. A single motive underlies all my work and defines my intention as a serious artist: the search for the metaphysical meaning of man's life in the Universe—the finding of man's selfhood and identity in the mystery of Creation. I use the term metaphysical to denote the ethic-philosophic force behind all essential living. The development and unification of the human personality I consider the highest achievement a man can do. (Kunitz, 1955: 1035-1036)

Actually, if one examines carefully Villa's 1940 essay "Literary Criticism in the Philippines" or the 1953-54 essay "The Condition of Philippine Verse," one will easily find abundant recurrent motifs about essence, unity, synthesis, etc. For example, he contrasts the "essence of prose" as substance, inferior or secondary to poetry's essence, which is "magic and magic of utterance" (2002: 291). Antithetical to a dialectical mode (as in Aristotle or St. Thomas Aquinas), Villa's thought exhibits close affinities to an Augustinian dualism (positing binaries such as sacred intellect versus profane body), which manifests a Manichean tendency that leads to a Gnostic conception of life and a Neoplatonic cosmology. If only the soul can transcend or do away with the body without so much "expenditure of the spirit"—that was Villa's devoutly wished consummation.

Another way to elucidate the Villa problematic, the articulation of possibility and necessity in the poet's life, may be performed by way of a symptomatic reading of "Mir-I-Nisa," adjudged the best short story of 1929 by the *Philippines Free Press*. A reading of the story will reveal the pre-Oedipal ground of Villa's aestheticism and its self-indulgent conservatism premised on the artist's superiority. It is said that the prize money of PHP 1,000 from this story enabled Villa to escape his father's tyranny and leave for New Mexico, US. The story exploits Moro/Muslim ethnographic material to dramatize an allegory of judgment. Distant, exotically strange, alien yet somehow familiar, Moro family structure, kinship, courtship ritual and matrimonial arrangements revolve around the political economy of fishing and



pearl-diving, which in turn is centered on male supremacy. On the surface, the patriarch determines love-choices and the distribution of sexual power. In the contest to determine who is the more worthwhile husband for his daughter Mir-I-Nisa, the father Ulka plays the trickster and rigs the game: Achmed falls into the trap of conventional expectations, coming up with the pearl that was never thrown into the sea by the father, while Tasmi confesses failure. Achmed who follows the conventional pattern loses, while Tasmi who yields to masculine pride wins the contest and becomes the father's choice for surrendering/exchanging the reproductive power of his daughter. What actually happened was not revealed to the community of Wawa-Ojot, the scene of mystification and Moro enigmatic behavior, nor was it also disclosed to the father, Tasmi.

Villa the poet sympathetically aligns himself with Jakaria, the son of Mir-I-Nisa and Tasmi, who concludes the story with the revelation that the father, Ulka, did not drop the pearl but only an illusory copy: a small ball of salt. This fooled both suitors as well as the whole community. The mother confesses the secret to her son, reinforcing the umbilical tie between mother and child, and re-enacting the scene of seduction. She enjoins her son not to reveal the secret to the father: "She said it very softly, and her face was radiantly sweet and beautiful. And because I have always loved my mother, I promised her never to let my father know" (Villa, 1950: 381). The father, the Symbolic name-of-the-father (in Lacan's scheme), versus the Imaginary (the mirror-phase tied to the pre-Oedipal mother), is cancelled and negated in favor of the maternal complicity between creator and created. Ironically, the mother's duty is meant to preserve the honor and authority of her father, the patriarch, who judges honesty (obedience to the prevailing hierarchical order) as a preferable virtue compared to masculine prowess/deceit undermining conventional rules. By analogy, the artist (Villa) seeks to preserve that love (fulfillment, jouissance, artistic integrity) by privileging an arcane linguistic game whose pleasure and benefits are confined exclusively to a



select circle of cult-followers and an elite audience with access to education and the cultivation of refined tastes. But the supreme irony is that Villa's revolt against his father, and by extension the dominant norms of conventional art and taste, together with the ostensible privileging of the mother—the mother's body offering pleasure from the polymorphously perverse erotic target of desire objectified into the poetic art-object, the ludic verbal fantasy—results in the affirmation of the patriarchal order: the Philippine neocolonial order, US imperialist hegemony, white male supremacy in the global system.

In a sense, Villa proved himself honest and faithful to his “mother,” a neoromantic, anti-commercial conception of an artisanal kind of art/poetry, in the face of deceit, pretense, fraud, hypocrisy, etc., that pervaded the petty-bourgeois world of Filipino mimics of Bouvard and Pecuchet (in Flaubert's novel). Such honesty, however, only maintained the status quo as usual even though it gave the illusion that a dialectical twist has occurred, with modern art redeeming the fallen world of commodity-fetishism, alienated labor, and colonial subjugation. By extension, Villa's modernity becomes possible by underwriting the aristocratic tributary enclave (in “Mir-I-Nisa,” the pre-Christian, Muslim-ordered village economy) of the metropolitan cultural milieu made possible by the labor of millions of Filipino colonial subjects and other subalterns in the US empire.

There is thus no doubt that Villa remained uncannily faithful to his earliest fundamental insights or convictions about art and poetry. His belief in some essential property of language that is inherently “poetic” resembles the belief of romantic poets in some divine or supernatural inspiration. This is an old notion already proved fallacious by modern linguistics. In the early decades of the last century, the famous linguist Roman Jakobson laid to rest both the romanticist and Russian formalist's search for the poetic essence of language as something separate from its communicative and expressive functions. Nonetheless, the continuity of Villa's error is premised on a *habitus* or entrenched mentality of



aristocratic individualism sprung from a tributary feudal social formation, a belief that some incommensurable *virtu* or thaumaturgic mana inheres in the poet's soul or spirit that the human body and worldly reality cannot fully realize, hence the singular identity of the poet transcends time and space, biographical particulars, sociohistorical specificity. It floats as a monadic presence, angelic in cast but parasitic on the immanent forms that somehow fail to achieve rising to the level of transcendence. This, together with the concrete facts about Villa's location in Philippine society and his US situation, contributes to explaining the roots of Villa's dogmatic stance in his criticism and peculiar views about society and ordinary life. Further research into the influences and crucial turning-points of Villa's life is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

### VIII. Negative Beatification?

Finally, we are left with the marked stagnation of Villa's poetics, its fixation in the ludic verbal experimentation modeled after e.e. cummings, whose own career suffers a traumatic paralysis after the experience of the Soviet nightmare in *Eimi* (1933). The other model, Sitwell, exacerbates the claustrophobic, incestuous narcissism of a Cartesian nominalism underlying Villa's world-view. What is more crucial is the historical conjuncture that defines the parameter of closure. Indeed, the framing sequence of the Cold War from 1947 to Villa's death in 1997 is a fifty-year enclosure that spells the exhaustion of Villa's style and idiom of mystical lyricism and theatrical self-dramatization. Note that in the fifties and sixties, New York witnessed the beginning of the Beat generation (Allen Ginsberg, Frank Ohara, etc.), aside from the profound and radical influence of Charles Olson and diverse new American poetics that replaced Eliot and Pound's New Critical formalism.

One may hazard the guess that the influence and support of



e.e. cummings and other formalist New Critics may have reinforced Villa's insulation/distance from movements such as objectivism, the narrative and historical epic experiments of William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane, the populist drive of the Beatniks, and the more expressionistic work of Robert Lowell, John Ashberry, and their epigones in the sixties and seventies. Villa seemed detached or removed from the actualities of the New York cultural milieu, not to speak of the whole North American continent and Europe. Note that Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, Cesar Vallejo, and others were deep in surrealism and cubism and resourceful cinematic innovations in Europe, Latin America, and Asia.

Villa's 1949 book *Volume Two* and his 1958 *Selected Poems and New* were all produced in the shadow of the Cold War, the Korean War, and the raging civil war between the puppet Republics of Roxas, Quirino, Magsaysay, and Garcia against the Huks and their millions of sympathizers. With the relatively stabilized world of the fifties under Eisenhower, Villa virtually terminates his active career and lapses into the typographical doodles and games of the "Adaptations" and "Xocerisms." It is indeed the distinctive impulse of modernism to "make it new," in Ezra Pound's terms; to break the traditional pattern, disrupt the conventional mold, and strike out on new ground. But Villa's innovations, whether the comma poems, reversed consonance, or adaptations, are superficial attempts to mimic the novelties of Mallarmé, Rilke, e.e. cummings, or Marianne Moore. The Cold War created the vacuum of universalized exchange-value in which Villa's use-value—his dialogue with god and angels—became superfluous or fungible. It became mere paper not acceptable as legal tender because its use-value evaporated.

## IX. Anatomy of a Suicide

Villa's value resembles those fungible, expunged "derivatives" of





October 2008. What I mean by the “evaporation” of use-value is precisely the drive to purity, to the conquest of the sublime, which underlies Villa’s poetic doctrine. That was already epitomized in the Kunitz testament cited earlier. This obsessive metaphysics of transcendence, the diametrical opposite of secular humanism, may also be discerned in the abstract expressionism that swept the United States in the halcyon days of post-World War II prosperity, the beginning of the Cold War. The key figure here is Jackson Pollock. And the most perceptive historical-materialist analysis of Pollock’s art, its logic of metaphysical violence so uncannily replicated by Villa, is that by John Berger. Berger quotes Harold Rosenberg’s insight that Pollock’s modernism begins with “nothingness,” which he copies; the rest he invents. Berger then delineates the sociohistorical context of that “nothingness” in the Cold War politics of McCarthyism, CIA propaganda about the “freedom of the market” (ancestral spirit of neoliberalism), and the will to impose an American vision of democracy born of Hiroshima and executed in Vietnam (earlier, in the Filipino-American War of 1899-1913). Berger perceives in the American ethos that shaped Villa “an inarticulate sense of loss, often expressed with anger and violence.” Berger explains Pollock’s nihilism:

In traditional painting, the act of faith consisted of believing that the visible contained hidden secrets, . . . a presence behind an appearance . . . Jackson Pollock was driven by a despair which was partly his and partly that of the times which nourished him, to refuse this act of faith: to insist, with all his brilliance as a painter, that there was nothing behind, that there was only *that which was done to the canvas on the side facing us*. This simple, terrible reversal, born of an individualism which was frenetic, constituted the suicide. (1991: 115-116)

With some modification, this judgment can be applied to Villa’s art: the drive to avant-garde purity and novelty and the desire to free oneself from all historic determinants, apotheosizing the imagination as the creator/demiurge of one’s world, reflect



Villa's fatal imbrication in the vicissitudes of US monopoly capitalism from the 1930s Depression to the brief rebirth of bourgeois liberal democracy in the war against fascism, and the advent of US *pax Americana* through the Cold War and the imperial aggression in Korea and Vietnam. Villa's fatality may ironically serve to revive him in this transitional period of the US decline as an unchallenged world power.

It is in the era of neoliberal globalization, the unchallenged reign of commodity-fetishism and global finance's "free market" (now undergoing serious meltdown), that Villa finally becomes a "classic" author. One of Villa's Xocerisms may provide a clue to the exhaustion of his linguistic register, poetic lexicon, and mannered style: "To reinvent God is unnecessary; all He needs today is a designer name" (2008: 244). Indeed, Villa may have been reduced by his editor and devotees as a "designer name" useful to build prestige, firm up a reputation or aura, and promote status-conscious careers. It is indeed ironic to find a poet obsessed with uniqueness, singularity, essence, genius, angels, exceptionality, gods, now being swallowed up in the homogenizing universe of cultural commodities and the culture industry. But perhaps this is a fitting and appropriate end: the dissolution of genius, the angelic imagination, in the totality of exchange whose value, while pretending to be absolute, is also absolutely zero. Nihilism may be the authentic vocation of Villa, a nihilism that may abolish art and all poetry, as well as nations, identities, etc. If so, then Villa has finally succeeded and conquered the last bastion of meaning and intelligibility: language that means and signifies nothing. Is our conversation about him also null, nada, devoid of sense or import? If so, then the only logical alternative (to follow Wittgenstein) is silence.



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## 維拉：底層詩學的批判

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### 摘 要

一九三〇至一九九七年在美國生活的菲律賓流亡詩人維拉，他的經驗說明了被新殖民主義宰制的底層藝術家的困境。維拉的成就，具現在《鴿鷹獅》詩集裡，其意義與價值須置放在其作品的主題、風格與藝術宣言的生成中才能充分理解，因為他的藝術風格乃是在美菲歷史與政治的緊張關係中形成的。潛伏於殖民吸納下的是內在於全球資本主義國際體系中，國家與民族的全球關係。研究維拉的創作經驗將使這樣歷史敘述更為複雜，我們也因而需要更歷史化地對待藝術團體的功能、語言的問題，以及各團體之間的論爭，不論是提倡個人主義式，「藝術僅為藝術」服務的意識型態，或是強調公民道德、宗教形上學、革命社會主義等對立的意識型態。這些論爭都置放在具體的歷史過程中理解，如此我們才能對維拉的族裔底層詩學進行確切的、過程的，以及歷史唯物論的評價，並且理解維拉的詩學如何在現代到後現代的矛盾轉型中發展成形。

**關鍵詞：**菲律賓民族主義、新殖民主義、跨國主義、歷史唯物論、底層

