

# “The Hand of a Chinese Master”: José Garcia Villa and Modernist Orientalism

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On November 9, 1948, a reception was held at the Gotham Book Mart in New York City in honor of Edith and Osbert Sitwell. The distinguished literary guests included W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and Tennessee Williams. A photograph of the evening shows Auden, perched on a ladder, towering above the scene; Moore sits directly below him, with Bishop to her left. To their right is a less familiar figure, no less at ease than the rest, but perhaps most striking for being the only non-white person in the group: José Garcia Villa (1908-1997), a forty-year-old Filipino poet whose 1942 collection *Have Come, Am Here* had earned him wide acclaim and admission to the highest American literary circles.

That Villa's name should be largely unknown today would likely be quite surprising to the literary luminaries who surrounded him at that reception. Villa's prominent friends and champions—Moore, Edith Sitwell, E. E. Cummings, Mark Van Doren—considered Villa a significant writer, and his work was widely anthologized in collections of modern American poetry of the 1940s and 1950s. Although he had only published two volumes in the United States, his reputation was substantial enough for a *Selected Poems* to be issued in 1958. Yet by the 1960s Villa was already sliding into obscurity. His poems stopped appearing in

major American poetry anthologies, and his books went out of print and remained so. Perhaps his baroque religious imagery came to seem dated and his formal innovations—“reversed consonance” and “comma poems”—derivative of poets like Cummings. In any case, Villa fell quickly from the canon of modern American poetry and now seems a mere footnote to its history.

In examining Villa’s rapid rise and fall, I argue that his American reputation emerged in a kind of contact zone between Filipino and US literary formations. Villa has been regarded since the 1930s as the Philippines’ greatest modern English-language poet, the writer who, as E. San Juan, Jr. puts it in *The Philippine Temptation*, “almost singlehandedly founded modern writing in English in the Philippines” (171). Through much of the later twentieth century he wielded enormous authority in the Philippines as critic, anthologist, and arbiter of literary reputations, and his status as a great “National Artist” was even officially ratified by the Marcos regime in the early 1970s. But American modernism could only adapt to the phenomenon of a Filipino modernist writer by placing him squarely within the Anglo American literary tradition, while filtering his racial difference through an orientalism already present within modernist ideology. The presence of that orientalism also meant that there was a particular space available for Villa to occupy. In this sense, race became a curious kind of asset in his US canonization. But it also, as his fall from favor suggests, placed a limit on the kinds of formal gestures that would be accepted in his work. Modernist orientalism allowed readers to aestheticize Villa’s race in a way that did not disrupt the ostensibly universalizing standards of modernism; those readers that did thematize Villa’s nationality tended to reject his work, revealing the deep connection of aesthetic criteria to national boundaries.

Although Villa was hailed as a major new American poet when *Have Come, Am Here* was published by Viking in 1942, his career had already spanned over a decade in the US and the Philippines. Villa was born in Manila in 1908, the son of a doctor. His first collection of poems, swaggeringly titled *Man Songs* and published in the *Philippines Herald*, got him expelled from the University of the Philippines for its erotic content, but it also won him a literary prize whose funds allowed him to travel to the United States (Joaquin 160). He studied at the University of New Mexico and

published a well-received short story collection, *Footnote to Youth*, in 1933.

While he remained obscure in the US, Villa's reputation in the Philippines soared through the 1930s. In 1939, a nearly 200-page collection of Villa's poetry, *Many Voices*, appeared in the Philippines. In an introduction, critic Salvador P. Lopez calls Villa "the one Filipino writer today who it would be futile to deride and impossible to ignore," and recognized him as *the* pioneer of modern Filipino writing, dubbing him "the patron-saint of a cult of rebellious moderns" (7). At the same time, Lopez critiques Villa for his lack of "social significance," suggesting that "[t]here is something effete and bloodless in the lines of Villa, something that smells of the study and the parlor" (14-15). Villa's authority as a critic was equally potent, even well into the 1960s and 1970s. Jonathan Chua, who provides an excellent overview of shifting evaluations of Villa in the Philippines, cites numerous examples of the "tyranny of Villa" in Filipino writing, including the much-coveted stars (one to three) that Villa awarded to writers in his annual selections of Filipino writing.<sup>1</sup>

But all this remained quite invisible to American readers of *Have Come, Am Here*, in no small part because Villa himself worked to sever his links to his previous work, publishing almost nothing in the decade between *Footnote to Youth* and *Have Come*. *Footnote*, though praised by American critics for its formal accomplishments, was largely read as a set of tales of Villa's "native land," circumscribing his ability to be accepted as an American modernist writer.<sup>2</sup> Villa's decision, after *Footnote*, to turn almost exclusively to writing poetry might, then, be read as an attempt to transcend such limits by shedding explicitly "Filipino" content from his work. By emphasizing formal poetic innovation, Villa sought to gain access to the US modernist canon, a task that must have seemed incompatible with his status as a respected Filipino writer or as a prose chronicler of Filipino life.

Villa's gambit seems in part to have succeeded since for most readers of *Have Come*, Villa's crossing of boundaries—from prose to poetry, from the Philippines to the US—left no trace. Reviews of *Have Come* register no awareness either of *Footnote to Youth* or of Villa's many publications in the Philippines. For the most part he is greeted unproblematically as a new "American" voice. In the

*New York Times*, the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, and the *Saturday Review*, Villa's book was praised by such prominent writers and critics as Marianne Moore, Alfred Kreymborg, Louis Untermeyer, and Babette Deutsch. Villa appears with other "new voices" in group reviews in the *New Yorker* and the *Yale Review*; indeed, the *New Yorker* review pairs Villa with Muriel Rukeyser in opposing their highly "literary" style to that of British poets.

Yet even these generally positive reviews are vexed in their attempts to find aesthetic criteria that can remain untainted by race or nationality. Indeed, reading US critics reading Villa exposes for us the way the supposedly international phenomenon of modernism is circumscribed by national and racial boundaries. Louis Untermeyer's review in the *Yale Review* gives us, in a nutshell, the criteria of evaluation that allowed Villa to be incorporated. Most crucial is the question of tradition and influence:

[*Have Come*] is surprising not only in spite of its derivations but even because of them. The influences are obviously, almost ostentatiously, there: the lean epigrammatic incisiveness of Emily Dickinson, the kaleidoscopic montages [. . .] of E. E. Cummings, the breathless images of Gerard Manley Hopkins. But the fusion is Villa's own.

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Most critics give a similar list of influences; others would include Blake, Stevens, Stein, even Spenser and Dante. But at the very least the reviewer's first priority is to place Villa squarely in the Anglo American poetic canon, satisfying Eliotic demands by positioning his individual talent with regard to a tradition. And Untermeyer's observation that the tradition is "ostentatiously" present suggests the degree to which Villa is consciously citing this tradition in order to authorize his status as a modernist. Some of Villa's "divine poems" sound like Dickinsonian exercises: "Death, corollary to Life / But only by Chronology. / Death, the supreme Theorem— / Life, the Corollary" (138). Others borrow strongly from the syntactic contortions of E. E. Cummings: "am so very am and / speak so very speak / and look my every hand / is for each all lovers' sake" (28). Still others display a Hopkins-like reveling in alliteration and religious imagery: "O jewelled, pacing, night-displacing / Fire. O night's nimble-dancing, No- / Saying lyre" (40).

It is striking to note how many of the reviewers insist that Villa *must* be well-schooled in the canon; in the *New York Times*, Peter Monro Jack calls Villa a “poet-scholar” with “evident training in logic and philosophy” who “must have read the seventeenth-century religious poets, perhaps also Blake” (12). The triad of Dickinson-Hopkins-Cummings places Villa even more particularly: as a religious poet of “metaphysical” conceits, but also as an innovator and mannerist, experimenting with form and sound. Untermeyer further identifies two key traits of Villa’s poetry: its indirectness, which “suggests instead of stating,” and its “strange way of combining opposites” (367). The first trait follows the Poundian dictum of presenting rather than describing, while the second gestures toward the rising New Critical paradigm and its privileging of “tension” in the poem.

So the critical project of incorporating Villa inscribes his poetry within universalizing aesthetic criteria and locates it in an Anglo American tradition, retrospectively constructing Villa himself as an Anglo American subject (“he *must* have read. . .”). Most of the reviews follow these lines. The most celebrated is perhaps Marianne Moore’s in the *Nation*, which follows Untermeyer in hearing the influence of Hopkins and Cummings in Villa’s work. Moore preemptively defends Villa against charges of obscurity, a charge often leveled against Moore’s own work, by recasting his difficulty as modernist impersonality and indirectness: “Mr. Villa is with great effect, at times, ‘deliberately aiming just beside the mark’” (394). She singles out for praise Villa’s technique of “reversed consonance,” a subtle rhyme scheme in which, as Villa writes in a note, “The last sounded consonants of the last syllable, or the last principal consonants of a word, are reversed for the corresponding rhyme” (*Anchored Angel* 31).<sup>3</sup> Moore argues further that Villa displays a unity of form and content, finding that “reversed consonance has been extended to content” through the poems’ rhetorical reversals and understatements. But perhaps the most striking moment comes in the review’s second paragraph, when Moore compares Villa’s work to painting:

The delicacy with force of such writing reminds one of the colors of black ink from a hogs’-hair brush in the hand of a Chinese master. “The antique ant” is a drawing; the watermelon, yellow strawberry,

giraffe, and leopard poems are, in effect, paintings; nor could reticence be more eloquent. (394)

Moore's description obviously brings Villa under the imagist rubric by emphasizing his work's visual elements. But her remarkable comparison of Villa to a "Chinese master" alludes to the myth of China that underlies modernism itself, from Pound's "ideogrammic" method to Moore's own preoccupation with *chinoiserie*. Moore's litany of Villa's virtues neatly matches her complex of ideas about China—"precision and detail, fastidiousness, brevity, concentration, wit, and wisdom," as Cynthia Stamy catalogs them (5)—which become her own aesthetic values, and to some extent those of modernism more generally.

There can be little doubt that Anglo American modernists' encounters with Asia, from Moore to T. S. Eliot to Ezra Pound, were seminal and productive. Zhaoming Qian's *Orientalism and Modernism*, among other studies, documents the depth of Chinese influences on Pound and Williams, arguing that "It would be gross insensibility not to perceive the Oriental contribution to [modernism's] growth" (5). Cynthia Stamy's *Marianne Moore and China* finds in Moore's extensive study of Chinese painting, porcelains, and verse forms a "subversive orientalism" that generates viable alternatives to Western traditions and contemporary American writing. For modernist poets, China served, as Robert Kern puts it, as "a model for a purified poetic practice in English" (ix): a focus on "the thing itself," on presentation rather than description, best embodied in the imagist writing of Pound.

But many of these critics also acknowledge that Asian influences on modernist writing may have had less to do with the reality of Chinese culture than with preoccupations, projections, and appropriations internal to the West. Hugh Kenner, while placing great weight on Chinese influences in *The Pound Era*, calls his chapter on *Cathay* "The Invention of China"; Pound's translations, Kenner argues, are less an authentic rendering of the Chinese than the "deliberate decisions of a man who was inventing a new kind of English poem and picking up hints where he could find them" (218-19). Kern suggests that the modernist vision of Chinese as "a script which overcomes the mediation of alphabetical writing" is part of a larger Emersonian quest for an Adamic language, for

“greater access to the being of the world [. . .] motivated by a concept of linguistic possibility that is entirely Western” (9).

Villa may very well have been quite aware of the role modernist orientalism played in his reception in the United States. Anecdotal accounts of Villa by other writers and critics—particularly Mark Van Doren’s report of being called on by Villa, who pressed his work upon Van Doren with an “impassive” combination of “gentleness and firmness”—have a performative element that suggests a Villa self-consciously playing to orientalist expectations.<sup>4</sup> But the presence of Villa, an actual Asian subject, as a modernist writer is quite a different kind of subversive orientalism; he threatens to overturn the orientalist hierarchy at the heart of modernism, in which classic Asian art and literature provide passive inspiration to a vibrant Western modernism.

One way of containing this threat is to follow Untermeyer’s lead and simply make Villa into an American poet coming from an Anglo American tradition. But the strain in this effort is evident in the insistence that Villa *must* be vastly read in the canon—the implication being that this acculturation trumps his race and nationality. For a writer as engaged with the Far East as Moore, the question is even harder to put to rest. Ultimately Moore solves the problem by bringing Villa’s race in only metonymically, converting the Filipino poet into the “Chinese master,” a move that identifies him with modernism’s “Chinese” inspirations, with subtext rather than with text. She curiously puts his actual national origin in quotation marks—“A new poet, ‘a young native of the Philippines,’ this author” (394)—as if this information were irrelevant or of questionable veracity. Villa as Anglo American modernist and as “Chinese master” is simultaneously peer and object, sublimated into criticism, but ultimately—as apparent in other readers—still threatening. E. San Juan, Jr.’s claim in *The Philippine Temptation* that Villa’s positive reception shows that he “posed no threat to the orthodox standard of literary excellence” (183), that he was completely assimilated into the modernist canon, is thus not entirely correct. Rather, Villa, and the fact of Villa’s nationality, were incompletely incorporated via modernist orientalism, an ideological framework through which historical realities continually threatened to erupt. Converting the actual historical terrain of the Philippines, and the history of US colonial-

ism there, into the textualized terrain of China is the most striking example of these ideological dynamics.

Moore's review shows the delicate ideological work necessary to incorporate Villa, a Filipino subject, into the Anglo American modernist canon. A number of the reviews of *Have Come* do dwell upon Villa's nationality, and by and large these reviewers have a more difficult time making an argument for Villa's poetic value. Babette Deutsch, reviewing for the *New Republic*, echoes many of the familiar points: comparing Villa to Dickinson, Hopkins, the metaphysicals; noting his difficulty, intensity, paradoxes, and ambiguities; labeling him (in classic modernist style) a "myth-maker" (512). But Deutsch allows Villa's national origin to surface directly in a way that Moore does not, linking his nationality directly to the peculiarities of his poetry: "The fact that he is a native of the Philippines who comes to the English language as a stranger may have helped him to his unusual syntax" (512). San Juan regards Deutsch's pronouncement as a racist assumption that Villa's distinctive syntax is a "defect of being a Filipino native not born to the language" (182). And it is true that this claim seems directly linked to what Deutsch sees as Villa's main flaw, his formal mannerisms: "Occasionally his pleasure in technical problems betrays him" (512). But in fact what the injection of Villa's national origin does is disrupt the universality of the aesthetic evaluation taking place in the rest of the review. Coming in the final paragraph, the observation casts doubt on the ground of Deutsch's objection: Villa's mannerism may be a poetic failing, or it may be an effect of his foreignness. In either case, the injection of racial and linguistic difference destabilizes the criteria of judgment.

Those reviews that foreground Villa's nationality tend to be more negative, further suggesting that nationality disrupts the modernist criteria of judgment. Nationality also is coupled with religion, as a number of reviews blame the weaknesses of Villa's poems on Filipino Catholicism. Louise Bogan's *New Yorker* review labels Villa's weaknesses as those of a "Spanish mystic," effectively taking Villa out of the Anglo American tradition; the fact of Villa's foreign nationality and religion raises the specter of another tradition, one that is clearly not compatible with the high modernist tradition Villa's champions want to place him in. The



most virulently anti-Catholic moments come in Elliot Paul's *New York Herald Tribune* review; although the review is quite laudatory overall, Paul makes no bones about blaming Villa's shortcomings on Catholicism:

[He] can scarcely write eight lines without talking about God as if He were his "Brother Sylvest." Once in a while his Catholic background gets him into a kind of unthinking brutality. [. . .] To those of us not accustomed to seeing those terribly unaesthetic Sacred Hearts on the walls of rooming houses and even knocking shops, the idea of a pigeon walking toward one and bursting into God, wounds and all, is more than mildly repulsive. (28)

This clearly has nothing to do with Villa's personal religious beliefs; rather, Villa is identified with a racialized Catholicism labeled as foreign and "Spanish." (Paul, at various points in the review, facetiously refers to Villa as "Pep Garcia" and as "Don José.") Paul is the most explicit of any reader in suggesting the possibility that Villa is *not* part of an American tradition, but comes to modernism as an outsider: "The poet is a Filipino who, instead of having been brought up on Longfellow, Whittier, Alice and Phoebe Cary, Lowell [. . .] Emerson and the rest, has been influenced by our modern poets" (28).

For Deutsch, Bogan, and Paul, Villa's nationality and religion have a certain explanatory power. But ultimately they must be suppressed if Villa's work is to be evaluated positively in the American context. Deutsch finally insists that Villa's identity as a "born poet" trumps his problematic Filipino identity, while Bogan, having labeled Villa as "Spanish," is unable to find anything redeeming in his poetry. For Paul, having so crudely characterized Villa's race and religion, the only way to recuperate the value of Villa's poetry is by remarking that he is a "worker against Fascism when he is not writing poetry" (28)—an apparent reference to Villa's work for the Commonwealth of the Philippines in Washington during World War II. Paul's review shows most openly how the evaluation of Villa's poetry is inseparable from the evaluation of Villa's body and its race, nationality, and politics.

The one counterpoint to these trends is a review by Alfred Kreymborg in the *Saturday Review* that does show an awareness of Filipino history. Kreymborg notes that Villa is a "youthful Filip-

pino [*sic*] who comes to us through our own language” and calls Villa a “Spaniard” in his religious sensibilities, then goes on to praise Villa in familiar terms: comparisons to Dickinson, Hopkins, Cummings, discussion of his “boldness of imagery and revolutionary style” (18). But then Kreymborg does what no other US reviewer does: he links Villa not simply to other American poets but to other Filipino and Filipino American poets, juxtaposing Villa’s *Have Come* with *Chorus for America*, an anthology of Filipino poetry edited by Carlos Bulosan and published in the same year. Here, for what is likely the first time in American criticism, we have a pairing of Villa and Bulosan, two pioneers of Filipino American literature; what the pairing shows us is how different Villa’s angle of entry into US literature is from Bulosan’s. Kreymborg praises Bulosan’s volume for its political and social engagement as part of “a great literary tradition started in Spanish times to destroy tyranny” (18). This is a harbinger of how Bulosan would be incorporated into American literature, as part of a tradition of literature of social protest, which would also become the ground for his status as a founding father of Asian American literature. Villa is actually included in Bulosan’s anthology, but Kreymborg makes a sharp distinction between Villa and the other poets: “With one exception (Villa), these are poets whose ideas are relevant to the revolutionary tradition which is the very foundation of Philippine history [. . .] [But] for the best illustration of the battle between God and Man, or between Man and mankind, we have to return to José Garcia Villa” (18). Bulosan belongs to the realm of politics, while Villa belongs to the realm of metaphysics—and aesthetics. It is this dichotomy that has long delayed Villa’s acceptance as an Asian American writer.<sup>5</sup> But it is also this dichotomy that allowed Villa, and not Bulosan, to be incorporated into the modernist canon. Villa had to be removed from history to be adopted into modernism, a move that Villa himself endorsed.

Given the ideological contradictions on which the glowing reception of *Have Come* rested, it seems rather inevitable that Villa’s reputation would be highly unstable. When Villa’s archly titled *Volume Two* was published by the avant-garde press New Directions in 1949, the reception was decidedly cooler. The most striking new element in this volume was, of course, the infamous “comma poems,” in which commas appear between every word:

The , bright , Centipede ,  
 Begins , his , stampede!  
 O , celestial , Engine , from ,  
 What , celestial , province! (13)

As with the “reversed consonance” of *Have Come*, Villa appends a note explaining the use of commas. But just as this new innovation is more radical and obtrusive than the earlier one, Villa makes his note much more obtrusive, placing it at the front of the volume rather than at the back. He seems thus to be further pressing the case for himself as experimentalist modern, while betraying some anxiety that his devices will be seen as mere mannerism:

The reader of the following poems may be perplexed and puzzled at my use of the comma; it is a new, special, and *poetic* use to which I have put it. The commas appear in the poems *functionally*, and thus not for eccentricity [. . .] [T]he commas 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. (5)

Villa, in short, puts forward an argument for his own artistry, comparing his work to Seurat’s pointillism.

Emphasizing the experimental aspects of his work seems to have been a gamble that Villa lost. While *Have Come* was formally and syntactically eccentric enough to earn Villa his modernist stripes, reversed consonance was a subtle (and invisible) formal technique that was congruous with orientalist expectations about Villa. This subtle mode of slant rhyme embodied, for Marianne Moore, the “delicacy with force” that made Villa a “Chinese master.” But the more radical, foregrounded device of the commas is harder to assimilate to this image, resembling perhaps too much the devices of a poet like Cummings. For Villa, foregrounding this technical device may have been a way to expand his reputation as a modernist innovator. But what seems to have happened is that readers, unable to reconcile this device with the covert orientalism through which they read Villa, lambasted his attempt to behave like any other American modernist.

A few reviewers did see *Volume Two* as a continuation of the achievements of *Have Come*. Richard Eberhart, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, finds in *Volume Two* “a pure, startling and resounding body of poetry” that is “the most intensely personal religious poetry of recent years” (57). Babette Deutsch, who gave *Have Come* such a strong review, writes in the *Yale Review* that *Volume Two* is “sometimes magnificent” and “exquisitely acute” (363-64). But she raises doubts about Villa’s experimentation, particularly in the comma poem, which she pronounces “not successful,” as it “calls attention to the typography at the expense of the poem, and tends to make one read in gasps” (363-64). Deutsch begins to raise an argument that will become increasingly prevalent among readers of Villa’s work: that form and content have become detached, with the former inadequate to the demands of the latter. Villa’s poetry, Deutsch argues, has failed to follow the dictum laid out in *Have Come*: “that a poem ‘must be able to hide / What it seeks, like a bride’” (364). This feminizing of Villa’s work, rather in contrast to the aggressive masculinist sexuality of much of his poetry, suggests the feminizing orientalism behind Deutsch’s earlier reading of *Have Come* and suggests that ostentatious experimentation, while perhaps “modernist,” is not consonant with what readers expect from Villa’s poetry.

The most negative reviews make their racism much clearer, and reveal that the apparent incorporation of Villa as an “American” poet is incomplete. William Meredith’s review in *Poetry* calls *Volume Two* “extravagantly bad,” relying on a limited repertoire of poetic “tricks”; he implies that Villa has a poor command of English since “the cavalier way Mr. Villa uses the language” indicates “an insensitivity to the conventional meanings and uses of words” (291). The most nakedly bigoted attack actually comes from the poet Randall Jarrell in *Partisan Review*; Jarrell sarcastically proposes a kind of “fairy tale” about Villa’s rise:

Once upon a time, in Manila or Guadalajara, as he sat outside a convent wall and listened to the nuns preparing a confection called *Angels’ Milk*, a little boy decided to go to New York City and become a great poet. There he wrote a book called, charmingly, *Have Come, Am Here*; after he had read the reviews of it he telegraphed to his parents, *Vici*, and said to himself, in his warm, gentle, Southern way: “What critics these mortals be!” (192)

Jarrell portrays Villa's work as a kind of con perpetrated on unsuspecting American readers by a foreigner whose ominous goal is to conquer. Although he begins by identifying Villa as Filipino, he soon generalizes this into a "Spanish" and "Catholic" identity; the effect is to erase the fact that Villa is an American colonial subject and to turn him into a Spanish one. Jarrell's vicious review shows that labeling Villa as a "Spanish mystic" is always to racialize him, and that his foreignness makes it impossible for him ever to be fully incorporated into an American modernist canon.

These trends, for the most part, continue into the reception of Villa's *Selected Poems and New*, published in 1958. An entire decade had elapsed since *Volume Two*, and Villa began to fall victim to changing literary tastes as much as to racism. While the volume still received positive reviews from a number of major journals, many of these clearly still rested upon the achievements of *Have Come*. Even positive evaluations of Villa are now distinctly tinged with anxiety about his Americanness. Horace Gregory, writing in the *New York Times*, characterizes the distinctiveness of Villa's work as "foreignness," meaning both its novelty and its non-American origin: "The most enduring tradition of American poetry is its arrival from unpredicted sources of language and imagination [. . .] [T]he strange and the foreign still hold their attraction [. . .] [A]ll these [Villa's poems] are expressed in a slightly foreign accent that has gained authority" (6). But most reviewers simply agree that while Villa is a talented poet, his mannerisms have grown self-indulgent.

A number of Villa's reviewers were themselves rising young poets—Thom Gunn, John Hollander (who would be named Yale Younger Poet that year), John Cicardi—and for them Villa represents a modernist style of pretentious experimentation that is passing from the scene. Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, which would be published the following year, would set the tone for the new "confessional" mode in poetry, and Gunn anticipates this when, in the group review in which Villa is included, he criticizes Muriel Rukeyser's "fashionable disjointedness" (300) and praises David Wagoner's honesty and clarity. Earlier in the review Gunn remarks on E. E. Cummings's "wearisome tricks" (299), and it is clear that Villa's star is falling along with Cummings's: "Mr. Villa is a

professional experimenter who makes Cummings look like a prince of discretion. The experiments are pretty naïf, and it is surprising that anyone should take them seriously” (300). John Cicardi sounds Villa’s death knell even more clearly, grouping him among the “traditional poets” as opposed to the avant-garde represented by Henry Miller and Kenneth Patchen. Villa has gone in a generation from modernist cutting-edge to conservative old-guard.

Why could Villa not adapt to the new taste for “honesty” and clarity? Perhaps because “honesty” is precisely what Villa was fleeing in his move across national and generic boundaries. For Villa, the poetry (or, rather, prose) of honesty would always be tainted by “localism,” by race and nationality.<sup>6</sup> His gambit for entering the modernist canon was precisely to purge his poetry of such forms of “honesty.” But his reception was always framed by nationality, and he was never again able to find the precise orientalist angle through which his first book entered the US canon. A new demand for honesty placed Villa at an impasse that could only lead to his obsolescence; *Selected Poems* was Villa’s last major US publication, save a little-read selection of love lyrics, *Appassionata*, issued in 1979.

Curiously enough, the one new experiment that critics did approve of in *Selected Poems* was Villa’s “adaptations,” verse settings of prose materials from letters, essays, and journalism. While Villa draws from a variety of sources, almost none of the literary sources from which he draws are American or even British; instead, they are emphatically continental European, with Rilke the most heavily represented figure. We can read this as Villa’s attempt to appropriate the European canon and make it his own; we can also see in it an attempt to expand his own range of influences (and hence his reputation) beyond the Anglo American, and perhaps also a tacit acknowledgment that the American literary canon has ultimately proved impermeable to him. But this may also signal Villa’s heightened awareness of various levels of linguistic and ideological mediation; many of the sources are translated from German or French into English, and subsequently translated by Villa into poetry. And it is through this awareness of mediated discourses that Villa finally finds a means of speaking back to the critical discourses that have formed his reputation. For

a number of the adaptations are appropriations and deformations of the orientalist discourse on China through which Villa's own work was filtered.

One of the most striking examples is "Dame Edith Sitwell Reading," which adapts an account of the reading style of one of Villa's most loyal patrons. Sitwell helped Villa find publishers, included his work in anthologies, and contributed a preface to Villa's *Selected Poems*. In private, however, she suggested that she was mostly captivated by Villa's exoticism, imagining him as a "magic iguana" and condescending to his "Filipino" emotionalism.<sup>7</sup> "Dame Edith Sitwell Reading" suggests that Villa may well have been aware of the orientalist lens through which Sitwell read him, and the adaptation gives him a striking way to turn the tables.

Villa divides his account into five-line stanzas, framed by a one-line opening and closing; his main device is a heavy enjambment that emphasizes nouns and adjectives, giving a jerky pace that mimics Sitwell's dramatic movements:

She comes on slowly, almost  
Reluctantly—it is not the  
Majesty of movement, rather  
The majesty of person that  
Commands. Big, tall, rawboned. . . (*Selected Poems* 169)

The account dwells on Sitwell's bizarre appearance ("With the face of a sensitive / Horse") and her "exotic" clothing: a "robe. . . red / Cut through with gold. . . She carries a / Massive, brocaded knitting / Bag and inevitably a white / Flower" (169). What is most interesting is Villa's emphasis on Sitwell's performance, her person, rather than her work—"Her entrance is a masterpiece"—and his sense of how she can don and discard her costume at will:

When she reaches the  
Lectern—abruptly she changes  
  
Personality: puts aside  
Exoticism as a quick-change  
Artist discards a hat or  
Mustache! and becomes tweedily  
English. (169-70)

The punch line, though, comes when Sitwell begins to read:

Tweeds suddenly vanish into  
The red-and-gold robe and Dame  
Edith begins to read. . . A two-  
Way metamorphosis between

Chinese empress and Margaret Rutherford. (170)

In a stunning reversal of Sitwell's orientalizing of Villa, Sitwell is herself orientalized in this conclusion, characterized as a "Chinese empress" much as Villa was labeled a "Chinese master." I think we can read in this a subtle critique of Sitwell's method of reading Villa; this is, after all, a portrait of "Dame Edith Sitwell Reading." But I think Villa is also giving us a model of his own self-presentation. The movement back and forth between Chinese empress and eccentric English actress, between brocade and tweed, is exactly the kind of movement Villa is trying to achieve himself. Villa's modernist aspirations are acknowledged here to be the donning of Anglo American literary tweeds, quite clearly attached to a particular cultural character; at the same time, Villa acknowledges that he will always be seen as the orientalized "Chinese master" by the same audience for whom he dons his tweeds. That these identities are also seen as ideological constructs is perhaps indicated by the several levels of mediation: Sitwell performs in her dual costumes for an essayist who writes a prose account which Villa turns into a poem.

Although we might optimistically want to say that Villa's poetry emerges in the shuttling between the two poles he describes, it might be more realistic to say that Villa is simply exposing the contradiction he inhabits. The form of the adaptation allows Villa to speak without claiming responsibility for content; perhaps what he suggests is that throughout his poetry, he can only speak through a highly constrained set of discourses, discourses not of his own making.



## Notes

1. I examine Villa's reputation in the Philippines, and the impact of his American career on that reputation, in greater detail in a forthcoming companion piece to this essay ("Asian/American Modernisms").
2. I discuss American reviews of *Footnote* in greater detail in "Asian/American Modernisms."
3. For example, Villa writes that in his system, "a rhyme for *near* would be *run*; or *rain, green, rain*. For *light—tell, tall, tale, steal*" (*Anchored Angel* 31).
4. In his *Autobiography*, Van Doren writes, in language reminiscent of Moore, that Villa "called on me one morning to introduce himself. He had a completely impassive face, and he moved with a quietness that captivated me. He had brought some of his poems for me to read. When I said that I preferred to read manuscripts at my leisure, to myself, without their authors' eyes upon me, he said in the softest of voices: 'You can read these now. This one'—the top one—'is very fine'. [. . .] The man was a unique combination of gentleness and firmness [. . .] there could be, however, a subtle play of humor or of pain about the eyes; and this amounted in the end to eloquence; for it expressed, delicately, a thousand reservations" (252-53).
5. Villa earns a brief and ultimately dismissive mention in the groundbreaking 1974 anthology *Aiiiiieee!*; the book's "Introduction to Filipino American Literature," devoted almost entirely to Bulosan, describes Villa's work as "personal and idiosyncratic [. . .] with little relation to the epic of Filipino immigration" (54). His name does not appear in such seminal surveys as Kim's *Asian American Literature*. The current *MLA Bibliography* lists no articles on Villa before 1986, and of the dozen or so articles listed since 1986, the only essays that explicitly discuss Villa in the context of Asian American writing are two pieces by E. San Juan, Jr., both from the mid-1990s.
6. In his introduction to Villa's *Many Voices*, Lopez suggests that one sign of Villa's maturity is that his work is free of the "taint of localism" (7). As I have noted above, it is precisely that "localism" that Villa sought to shed in his move from the prose of *Footnote to Youth*—viewed by American critics as charming and true tales of his native land—to the artifice of poetry. This strategy served him well in the New Critical era of the 1940s and 1950s, but when the personal returned as a value in poetry in the confessional 1960s, Villa stuck with aestheticism, hastening his own fall from favor.
7. Glendinning writes, "The fact that [Villa] was a Filipino caught Edith's imagination; she enjoyed the fantasy that he was some kind of magic iguana" (246). When her publisher questioned her decision to include Villa's work in an anthology, Sitwell replied in a letter that while she found his formal techniques "bosh," she felt personally obligated to include them: "But he is a Filipino, and Osbert says his heart will be broken if we don't put in those explanations" (169). I discuss Sitwell's response to Villa at greater length in "Asian/American Modernisms."

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