MODERNIST POETIC PRACTICES IN ENGLISH POETRY FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA:
A COMPARISON BETWEEN JOSE GARCIA VILLA AND ARTHUR YAP

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Abstract
The paper develops a comparison between Jose Garcia Villa (1908-97) and Arthur Yap (1943-2006) as the principal Modernists of English poetry from Southeast Asia. Though they wrote from very dissimilar backgrounds, and in very different circumstances, each represents for his time and place a radical assimilation of Western poetic practices into a new form of experimental writing. The comparison delineates the various ways in which their example reveals the scope and limits of what can be achieved through a systematic subversion of traditional modes of poetic writing in Southeast Asia.

Keywords
Philippine poetry, postcolonial poetry, Singapore poetry

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José Garcia Villa (1908-97) and Arthur Yap (1943-2006) are probably the principal Modernists of English poetry from Southeast Asia. Narratives of the anxiety of influence familiarize us with patterns of development in which colonial and postcolonial talents work subserviently in the shadow of Western traditions. Such narratives are given an unusual twist by Villa and Yap. At the outset of their careers, each derived impetus from American models, but then took that momentum in new directions. The radical nature of their achievement helps highlight the principal tension that underpins the literary history of English in Southeast Asia: the scope for innovation in the dialectic between conformity and experiment, which is also the scope for resistance to tradition in the context of societies whose readers look to their writers for the role they might adopt in respect to the cultural development of literary cultures emerging from colonialism. In this paper, I hope to focus
on this tension by providing an overview of their writing through concise answers to five questions:

1. When does a radical new talent present itself within the literary history of new nationhood?
2. How does the stylistic development of these talents stand out from general trends among their contemporaries?
3. What is the nature of the resemblance between the two poets?
4. What are the limits to the similarity between the poets?
5. What is the cultural significance of their poetic practices?

The first question can be answered quickly: the case of Villa and Yap suggests, rather unexpectedly, that it did not take very long after the inception of a new tradition for talents to come along who were willing to challenge its conventions, almost before they had a chance to consolidate themselves. Villa and Yap opened up radical possibilities for which there was no inkling in their models or contemporaries. This feature seems more significant than the fact that Filipino writers took to English no sooner than the Americans introduced them to the language, while it took a much longer time for the colonial language to become the vehicle for literary aspirations in the Malayan peninsula.

The experimental dimension to Villa and Yap is attended by a specific irony. Each evokes in the country of his birth a response that remains mixed: admiration mingled with unease or disapproval. While their innovativeness has received the acknowledgement of eulogy, pastiche, or parody, no subsequent poet from either country has shown either the desire or the capacity for a comparable degree of risk management in respect to language, form, or audiences. This gives their work a fascination different from that evinced by poets with safer styles and more secure reputations.

My second question is premised on the recognition that poets develop their styles through a process of imitative learning, and postcolonial cultures reinforce this pattern by inducing recurrent anxieties about poetic identity. How does the stylistic development of Villa and Yap resemble, and differ from, such patterns?

Villa’s early poems remind us of effects familiar from e.e. cummings and ideas associated with the “Ars Poetica” of Archibald MacLeish (see Villa’s “Proem”: “The meaning of a poem is not a meaning / of words” [Poems by Doveglion 1]) and a host of echoes, including Dickinson, Hopkins, Blake, and Donne. Yet a distinctive voice, full of self-conviction, announces itself very early. This voice is intent on repressing its cultural
location. It believes that poetry transcends such materiality in its aspiration for the aesthetic. In his “Guggenheim Fellowship: Plan for Work,” written in 1942, Villa himself wrote that poetry has “the advantage over prose, in my belief, in being able to deal directly with essences” (The Anchored Angel 132). This belief subsidizes a good deal that is banal or mannered in Villa, but it also enables effects that are striking because they provide the “brilliance” and “consecration” he demanded of poetry (“I demand brilliance and / consecration…” (“Poem 213,” Poems by Doveglion 7). His work succeeds whenever his approach to the familiar appears fresh rather than strained or affected, as with the following example of synaesthesia in the poem “Descriptional”:

I could feel it
like a stab of sun. I could hear it
like a flower, like a curve of rose:
(Poems by Doveglion 6)

Through all the stages of its development, his poems reveal a fiercely resistant individualism, a tendency to idealize the poetic quest for the aesthetic sublime, and a sensibility based on enthusiastic assimilation to a deeply subjective version of the Western tradition. With hindsight, it is tempting to read the early poems as driven by an over-determined urge to reject the prosaic, the quotidian, the uncomprehendingly paternal, and the insistently bourgeois for a realm of the spirit where “Doveglion” felt like an apt rather than an absurd self-nomination.

The work of the 1940s is not self-evidently the work of one reconciled to prolonged existence as a self-exile. But the later poems of the 1950s do evoke a sense of fading inspiration, a muted lion pent up in a metropolitan cave of his own making. More puzzling than Villa’s abandonment of poetry is the reception he got in the forties and early fifties from an audience of Western elders and peers. The hyperboles of Edith Sitwell and Marianne Moore now seem less like the intuitiveness of liberal souls than a mixture of the paternal, the patronizing, and the indulgent, the dated vagaries of a metropolitan taste for the marginal and the exotic. The later evanescence of his American reputation now seems no less ironic than the wary and belated recognition he was granted from the Philippines. While his sharp tongue, vivid style, and haunted tone continued to exercise a canonical influence over a handful of poets during the 1950s, 60s and 70s, others reacted to his work with hostility, suspicion, or indifference.

Regardless, it is possible to recognize that Villa’s poetry had a natural affinity for
the neo-Romantic, a confident ear for rhythms and for what he described as “reverse consonance,” allied to a tonal range with a propensity for the rapt and the rhapsodic. In “A Note on ‘Reverse Consonance’” Villa explains: “The last sounded consonants of the last syllable, or the last principal consonants of a word, are reversed for the corresponding rhyme. Thus a rhyme for near would be run; or rain, green, reign. For light–tell, tall, tale, steal, etc.” (Selected Poems and New 76-7).

His work was the intense outcome of a temperament drawn to the idea of “pure” poetry. It is also evident that his work suffered the consequence inevitable to a temperament unwilling (or uninterested) in making his social and cultural distance from his rarefied conception of literariness an aspect of self-awareness. This willfulness had two consequences.

Villa’s poetic world remained selective in focus and hermetic in effect. It insisted on giving no signs of the poet having lived life in the Philippines, or in New York, or amidst any of the mundane realities which comprise most of life for most people. Villa was quite emphatic about this: “Land is not real country: it is commerce, agriculture, politics: a husk country,” he wrote in “A Composition” (The Anchored Angel 135). It was determined to personalize feeling as idea or image rather than experience, memory, or history. His poems lived a life more convincingly as sounds, arrangements of words and lines, and ideas and symbols rather than emotions, feelings, thoughts, and desires. Language remained de-linked from the world of reference, suspended in the realm of abstraction.

On the more or less positive side, the poetry realized in print a fanciful imagination that was as sensitive as it was fastidious, and a sensibility in love with the idea of poetry, even more than with the idea of love or God or the freedom to pursue them both. The poetry fed on what Villa called the metaphysical dimension to experience: “a single motive underlies all my work … the search for the metaphysical meaning of man’s life in the universe” (The Anchored Angel 132). His notion of the metaphysical essence of life suffers from being kept resolutely empty of contingent detail. Poem after poem ekes out an existence sustained exclusively by the will to play with sounds, syntax, punctuation, and symbols. Once the limited possibilities of such restricted means had been exhausted, there was no option but silence or the “found poems” which he called “adaptations.”

Next, turning to Yap, we note that his poems share a number of features more or less consistently throughout his career. The quirky energy and intelligence of his poetry owes little to song. He had no interest in stanzaic form or a logic of rhythm bound to conventional meter and rhyme. Instead, he practiced a free verse closer to English as a language learned from books, spoken as a second tongue, unmindful of its bookish diction
and formal syntax. He also abjured the use of the capital letter. A practice modeled after e. e. cummings carried the nuance that this poetic voice was not going to present itself as anything but lower case: modest, diffident, self-effacing.

The poems show little or no interest in tackling conventional motifs such as love, or the poet’s emotional private life: in that sense they are anti-Confessional and non-lyrical (although occasional poems do articulate moments of lyric perception and an awareness of nature). His main strength is the dramatic mode applied to the short poem. His work divides into meditative or dramatic poems. The first kind vocalizes the poet thinking aloud in print; the second presents assorted Singaporeans, drawn from all strata of the social, economic, and demographic registers, whose accurately mimicked speech habits reveal more than the fictional characters might realize about the poet’s oblique intentions.

The meditative poems generally use a style that ranges from the prosaic to the pedantic. At its extreme, it is either inadvertently or deliberately self-parodic. It is modeled on langue rather than parole. Its vocabulary and syntax are drawn from books; its rhythms are remote from ordinary speech or song. It becomes distinctive largely through quirkiness of tone, and the laconic habit of playing with words, phrases, and ideas. The poet rarely articulates his views in person, except through the involved implications of irony and satire.

What makes Yap striking is the manifest oddity of every poem at the level of tone and syntax. What makes the practice compelling to its admirers is how the obliquity of approach is rarely gratuitous. It appears that the rejection or avoidance of conventional expectations concerning poetry happens as an incidental consequence of the poet trying to be true to an inward sense of fidelity to what we might call the “truth-value” of a specific insight into the human predicament. The poems demonstrate a sense of integrity in relation to human experience, a reflective and a skeptical cast of mind. The opening of a single poem (“stained glass”) will have to suffice here as example.

stained glass
was awesome silence,
was such quiet it indicated paraphrases everywhere.
the branches outside were your fingers
held in benediction.
the space 108

People can be put off Yap’s writing because it appears self-preoccupied, oblique,
compressed. It is witty if you have a taste for the laconic; it feels dry or sterile if you do not relish word-play and are discouraged when you find no obvious purchase for emotions and feelings as the peg on which to hang poetry.

A broad consideration of the two poetic topographies brings us to my third question: in what sense do the poets resemble each other? There is a short answer to this question: they are both Modernist, although in different ways. This answer can bear with a little elaboration.

“Modernism” is a complex and controversial notion. In somewhat synoptic fashion I use the term to refer to a set of crises and questionings that affected how artists and writers handled four types of cultural relation: between art and its medium; art and reality; art and artist; art and its audience.

The Modernist features in Villa and Yap are fairly self-evident. Both poets show an acute degree of self-reflexivity about language, rhythm, and form as elements of the poetic medium; about the relation of the poet or his art to representation or self-expression; and about the ways in which the audience’s expectations of poetry must accommodate the revised view of art implicit in the poet’s practice. Both are severe in the demands they make of their readers. Neither is prone to compromise. Both were drawn to painting as a sister art. Villa may have been secretive about his work in the visual media, but Yap’s paintings were exhibited in several venues in the 1980s, and both provide evidence of being conversant with the discourses of Modern art.

Villa’s early aesthetics was based on scorn for servile imitation and the willingness to abandon conventional syntax and cohesion for experiments with rhythm, line breaks, patterns of sound and syntax, and elliptical development of mood, idea, and argument. The “converse rhyme” of his early poems remains a more subdued and hence more successful innovation. In contrast, his 1949 venture into the commas, whose use he described as “poetic” and “functional” rather than grammatical, leaves the reader with a mixed effect. At its optimal, it does slow down the linear movement to a pace which in “A Note on the Commas, Vol. 2” he said that he hoped could convey a sense of “quiet dignity,” (Selected Poems 81), as in “Poem 109”:

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The,soul,swarms,with,angels,
If,Soul,but,knew,it.
I,heard,an,angel,once,
Declaim,within,the,Orbit:
(Selected Poems 90).
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This effect may have a distant ancestor in Emily Dickinson’s habit of using the em-dash as her principal punctuation mark (or Hopkins’s idea of Sprung Rhythm). But such echoes do not prevent the practice from appearing both intrusive and limited in its effects, symptomatic of the desire to experiment, but inadequate as a technical resource that would reward sustained repetition.³

Next, there is the elliptical compression of syntax, accompanied by the intensification of accented syllables and lexical effects based on alliteration, rhyme, or neologisms. Villa’s “Poem 117” is a concise example:

More, miracled, and,
Gazing, from, new, light-
Nings: from, blázerock, stérnrock,
I: journeyer, yet, I, go
My,

Jacob, warlock, seek.
(Selected Poems 95-6)

In such a poem, the degree to which the reader is expected to struggle to keep up with the poet is considerable. The poem as rhapsodic utterance can also be experienced as poem-puzzle, a race towards the meaning, in which the poet has chosen to enforce a handicap on his readers by telescoping semantic connections, compressing syntax, and making abrupt changes of tone and reference.

In Yap’s case, modernist attitudes control and drive the tone and the syntax: irony is the principal cognitive instrument; humor the chief antidote to boredom, passivity, and despair. An extract from a single poem will have to suffice here for illustrative purposes:

statement

of course your work comes first.
after that, you may go for a walk,
visit friends but, all the same,
it is always correct to ask
before you do anything else.
so if you say: please may I jump 
off the ledge? And go on to add 
this work is really killing, 
you will be told: start jumping. 
(the space 29)

In the usual Yap poem, the focus is always on the human condition in all its 
contingent specificity, the specifically Singaporean in its urban manifestations, always 
monitored by the implicit presence of a sternly paternal State. The individual or the group 
is caught by a candid and discerning camera in a moment of marginal and accidental self-
revelation. The skilful mimicry of habits of speech and thought become the poet’s way of 
absenting himself and his attitudes from the world of his poetry. Yap’s irony cuts two ways: 
never taking an obvious or clear position on an issue pluralizes the possible reactions one 
could give to the predicaments he dramatizes, leaving the reader both free and uncertain 
about the attitude the author would like to elicit from the reader. An ethics is implied but elided in Yap’s world of relativity. A short poem, “there is no future in nostalgia” illustrates 
the ambivalence neatly. In it, the reader is left uncertain if the poet accepts or regrets the 
changes that are an inevitable part of the urban landscape:

there is no future in nostalgia

& certainly no nostalgia in the future of the past. 
now, the cigarette-seller is gone, is perhaps dead. 
no, definitely dead, he would not otherwise have gone. 
he is replaced by a stamp-machine, 
the old cook by a pressure-cooker...
(the space 59)

The compression or elimination of connectives, the telescoping of syntax and 
thought processes, the obsessive interest in jokes, mimicry, parody, and subversion are 
some of the other features that constitute Yap’s postmodernism.

That brings us to the fourth question: what are the limits of similarity between them? 
Here too, the answer is self-evident: Villa and Yap are dissimilar in most respects. Villa was 
always explicit about his metaphysical conceptions and aspirations; Yap would persuade us 
that the notion of metaphysics is too far-fetched to apply either to his social ventriloquism
or to his meditations on landscapes and mindscapes. Nothing could be further from Villa’s exuberant and flamboyant personality than Yap’s aversion to the direct personal expression of feelings. Villa is often abstract or symbolic; Yap is almost always tied to the quotidian in its concrete specificity. Villa elides all of contingent reality from his poetry; Yap opens his poems to so much detail that he leaves many readers wishing there was more of the poet to guide them through his welter of the observed and the audited. One has too much metaphysics; the other appears to be almost all physics.

They resemble each other only in a relational sense. Each in his time takes a risk and introduces a rupture. Each for his time and place rejects certain relatively simple choices, and takes on a more experimental approach to poetry. And that is salutary.

Finally, what then is the general cultural significance of a comparison between their poetic practices and careers? Both Villa and Yap (the former rather more obviously than the latter) turned their backs on a significant aspect of the cultural aspirations of the societies they came from. Consider, first, the relatively minor rebellion constituted by Yap’s life and career. In a Singapore dominated—albeit benignly—by the canonical status and poetic commitments of Edwin Thumboo, it took some courage for Yap to go his own way, choosing to write in a style that constantly risked being dismissed as mannered and eccentric. Perhaps he had no choice, in the sense that he wrote the only kind of poems he could write. Nevertheless, a moral can be derived: poets cannot afford to be burdened with a sense of their belatedness or distance from traditions, whether local or global. Nor can poets afford to worry over how other poets handle language, form, or subject matter; they might do worse than look for their own way of doing things, without being fazed by the risks taken in writing at a distance from all models and everything that is merely modish.

Consider the relatively major form of rebellion symbolized by Villa. Not only was the young Villa severe on Filipino writers of the late 1920s and early 1930s; his entire life, sensibility, and taste were turned exclusively towards a Western metropolitan culture that may have endorsed him for a while, but which he was never really part of. Proud and rebellious isolation were his self-appointed role and destiny. He was always special and knew, better than others, why he was special — that remained the constant implication of his poetry and criticism. This was unabashedly elitist, a form of confirmed snobbery. It deferred too much to a culture he was not part of. Assimilating himself to it still kept his poems in a poetic environment that remained rarefied, lacking the muscle and fiber that makes, for example, the Yeatsian rag-and-bone-shop of the heart propitious ground on which to sustain its neo-romanticism.

A style fed on e. e. cummings was not likely to supply the energy for the strenuous
uphill grappling of a Hopkins or a Donne. In that sense, Villa’s work and life acquire a forlorn and mutedly heroic quality. However, the significance of Villa is greater than the sum of his achievements. If he paid a heavy price for the pursuit of an inward-gazing Muse, his single-minded dedication to an exalted sense of vocation, like Yap’s more fugitive but equally dogged self-conviction, still stand as tokens of a courage that most postcolonial poets lack when they tackle the challenge of how to establish a relation between the voice from the margin and the historical Babel of voices that is the fictive metropolitan centers of the American and the British traditions.
NOTES

1 Villa’s creative period extended from the late 1920s in the Philippines to midway through his long permanent residence in the USA. His first two volumes of poetry were published from Manila, the rest from the USA: Many Voices (1939), Poem by Doveglion (1941), Have Come Am Here (1942), Volume Two (1949), Selected Poems and New (1958), and several subsequent selections. Yap’s poetic career, based entirely in Singapore, extended from only lines (1971), commonplace (1977), down the line (1980), Man Snake Apple (1986) to the space of city trees: selected poems (2000).

2 Modernism is a name given retrospectively to a historical phase in artistic consciousness, and refers to a set of beliefs, preoccupations, and practices whose effects were first discernible in Western Europe and North America. They were at their most intensive during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Later, they spread unevenly and belatedly to artists and writers in all societies that responded to the productions of the Western Modernists with a spirit of sympathy and emulation. Artists become more self-conscious about the limitations of their medium, or about new ways of drawing on the expressive resources from the old medium and its grammar of conventions. The ways in which art is supposed to imitate or represent or refer to reality are found to be problematic or untenable or irrelevant or uninteresting by artists. They question the traditional idea of art as imitation, representation, or didacticism, and turn increasingly to the idea of art as a complex form of self-expression. Artists feel alienated from their audiences, or audiences feel frustrated by what they cannot comprehend as art because the production and reception of art becomes problematized, either because artists refuse to supply what audiences expect, or artists require audiences to revise their notions of art in order to follow what they are doing.

3 The comma poems are perhaps seen at their best when concise, as in some of the epigrammatic “Aphorisms,” Selected Poems and New, 120-8, 134-42.
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