

## A REACTION TO “MODERNIST POETIC PRACTICES IN ENGLISH POETRY FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA: A COMPARISON BETWEEN JOSE GARCIA VILLA AND ARTHUR YAP”

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### Abstract

This follow-through develops Patke’s characterization of Jose Garcia Villa as a heroic figure by an account of the reception to his poetry in the Philippines since World War II. Villa’s insistence on the primacy of art alienated him from critics in the late sixties and seventies who saw him as a “mental colony.” Later postcolonial criticism, however, allowed for a more favorable interpretation of Villa.

### Keywords

Philippine poetry, postcolonial poetry, Singapore poetry

### About the Author

Jonathan Chua is editor of *The Critical Villa: Essays in Literary Criticism by Jose Garcia Villa* (Ateneo de Manila UP, 2002).

Rajeev Patke’s astute comparison of the poetry of Jose Garcia Villa and Arthur Yap invites further reflection on the two poets. One may, for instance, ask to what extent are the poets subversive? In Villa’s case, while his experimentations clearly broke away from traditional forms of writing, those experiments, too, were “imported” from the colonial master. Was Villa merely reproducing the metropolitan center in another fashion and therefore not so subversive after all, or did he really clear new grounds for overtly subversive expression?

Those questions obviously require extensive study. This is a more modest undertaking. Only a tentative amplification of Patke’s assessment of Villa may be made here, as I am unfamiliar with Singaporean poetry — and it is to Patke’s credit that he has generated among his auditors some interest in Arthur Yap. Patke sees a “forlorn and mutedly heroic quality” in Villa, whose life and poetry were marked by a dogged individualism. An account of the Philippine reception to Villa since the fifties may serve to illuminate this image of Villa.

Although Villa enjoyed a fairly high reputation in the Philippines after the World War II and throughout the fifties, it sank in the decades that followed. What militated

against him was the radicalization of campuses. The volatile sociopolitical situation of the mid-sixties and the seventies led Philippine intellectuals and artists to question and rethink established notions of art and literature. What was the function of art and literature? What was the role of the artist and the writer in a society wracked by political and economic inequities?

In a way, it recalled the debate between “Art for Art’s sake” and “proletarian literature” (the “Villa-Lopez controversy,” as it is called in various sources) of the late 1930s. However, the “Lopez side” had acquired a distinctly anti-imperialist color. The position was not simply that literature should serve as a means of social protest, but also that social injustice was ultimately intertwined with the country’s neocolonial relations with the United States. English itself was the enemy, and literature, if it wasn’t the type that critiqued the Establishment or that spoke to and for the masses, was complicit in the oppressive system.

In this context, Villa’s metaphysical rhapsodies or “pure poetry” were out of place. The title of Domingo Castro de Guzman’s article—“Villa, Is, a, Mental, Colony”—sums up the general disposition of the time. His denunciation of Villa was not unusual:

His contribution to the continued deepening of the oppression and poverty of the greatest number of his own countrymen cannot be overestimated; it is enormous....

Together with Nick Joaquin, it is Villa’s pre-eminent responsibility that two generations of writers (to limit ourselves to writers) were almost entirely irrevocably wasted and lost. Lost to the enemy: lost to *be* enemies.

It was specifically Villa who espoused in this country the image of the American oppressor as a cultural magus and fountainhead, thereby effectively cloaking the fact of his being *the* oppressor. And this manner of apologizing is indeed more effective than that of directly claiming that the American imperialist is *not* an oppressor; for to make such a claim is to raise the counterclaim. (26)<sup>1</sup>

Before the twin threat of the raised fist and the sickle, Dovegion was a dead duck. In the rhetoric of the times, Villa, who had been a rebel, as Patke stresses in his article, was Villa the traitor.

Since the overthrow of the Marcos government in the mid-1980s, however, the climate has been kinder. Other modes of social analyses sit side by side the orthodox Marxism. The influx of postcolonial theory, particularly that strain which stresses the agency of the colonial subject, has given critics a new conceptual vocabulary to take Villa.

San Juan, who in the 1970s castigated, in no uncertain terms, Villa as an instrument of US colonial policy, has written a "Homage to Jose Garcia Villa" in which Villa comes across as a transgressing writer. Villa threatened the metropolitan center as much as he embraced it (San Juan 191-216). Linguist Andrew Gonzalez sees in Villa's poetry a kind of postcolonial writing back. For Gonzalez, Villa "used the resources of a second language to begin innovating with these resources much as a first language speaker does. In the process ... he embodied the Filipino having perfected his art as form and his mastery of the English language" (qtd. in San Juan "Homage" 199-200).

This theoretical turn salvages English, and Villa, as it were, is its secondary beneficiary. What is ironic is that postcolonial theory is decidedly political, precisely that which Villa wanted to avoid in favor of the universal or (one of his favorite words) "essential." As Patke observes, Villa's poetry "insisted on giving no signs of the poet having lived life in the Philippine, or in New York, or amidst any of the mundane realities which comprise most of life for most people." Thus, too, was his insistence on parthenogenesis.

A similar irony resides, as critic Oscar Campomanes has suggested (at the open forum), in the current reception to Villa in the United States. It is multiculturalism which has revived an interest in Villa among the Asian-American, specifically the Filipino-American, literary community. Villa's ethnicity, the very aspect of his subjectivity which he tried to repress, resurrects him. Timothy Yu writes perceptively that the initial attraction of the American literary establishment to Villa was a function of Orientalism: Dovegion was an exotic bird (41-59).

What is interesting in all this is that throughout these rewritings of his literary life, as rebel, colonial puppet, and now postcolonial mimic or the subaltern who spoke, Villa himself never budged from his position: "I can state ... that a single motive underlies all my work, and that this motive defines my intention as a serious creative artist:—the search for the metaphysical meaning of man's life in the universe—the finding of man's selfhood and dignity in the mystery of Creation" (*The Anchored Angel* 132). It was the critics who did.

There may be something here of Norma Desmond insisting that "it's the pictures that got small" (*Sunset Boulevard*). But here, too, lies something heroic about the poet's unflinching devotion to a Romantic concept of art. It is traditionally the artist's task to challenge, and in Villa's case, he challenged history itself.

Any,hero,is,the,author.

Any,age,is,the,infant.

(*Selected Poems* 134)

As things have turned out, perhaps history has had its revenge. But if History is the victor, Villa was a worthy challenger: “And, if, Thesues—then, Minotaur” (*Selected Poems* 149).

“A Leonard Casper deserves an E. San Juan,” Villa was supposed to have remarked. Perhaps that may be taken as his succinct statement about the instability of critical opinion vis-à-vis the object of criticism. There are, and have been, various and even conflicting ways of seeing Villa. Patke’s is one, and it is both persuasive and attractive, if only because it stresses the courage that self-avowed postcolonial writers need have if they are indeed to write back.

## NOTE

- 1 See also E. San Juan, Jr., "U.S. Imperialism and Philippine Literature." *Asia-Philippines Leader* 15 Sep. 1972, 10, 43-4; and Lucila Hosillos, "Escapee to Universality (Portrait of a Filipino Poet as Escapee to the Non-existent Kingdom of Universalism." *Diliman Review* 18 (1970): 320-40 for similar tirades.

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