

10-31-2023

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### Recommended Citation

Chan, Nathan Timothy (2023) “I, began, to, Die, and, I, began, to, Grow”: Incarnational Theopoetics in the Poetry of José Garcia Villa," *Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities Asia*: Vol. 13: No. 2, Article 2. Available at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/paha/vol13/iss2/2>

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*Nathan Timothy Chan*

“I, BEGAN, TO, DIE, AND, I,  
BEGAN, TO, GROW”

Incarnational Theopoetics in the  
Poetry of José Garcia Villa

**ABSTRACT**

Although critics have observed that Villa’s poems use religious language and imagery, this has not been sufficiently explored. The article interprets the first set of seven comma poems that Villa published in 1948 as exemplifying his incarnational theopoetics in both form and content. In these poems, God or Christ is poetically, yet sometimes illogically, enmeshed with the created order. God assumes a body—not only the body of Man, but also the bodies of animals, machineries, and objects. This portrayal of God as embodied allows a deeper understanding of not only what Villa’s conception of God is, but also how his conception of God relates to his poetics.

**KEYWORDS**

José Garcia Villa, theopoetics, comma poems, theology and poetry

Of the many Filipino poets who wrote about divinity and religious matters, perhaps none did so in a more brazenly rebellious way—one might even say sacrilegious way—than the poet José Garcia Villa. “Reared in a religious environment” in the Philippines,<sup>1</sup> Villa talked about religion never piously or meditatively but mostly haughtily. There is little reverence towards the sacred in the arrogance of the poet. Such an affronting attitude is evident in an incident recounted by the fellow poet Eileen Tabios: Villa approached the poet Cirilo Bautista and proclaimed his (Villa’s) poetry’s “emanation from [his] angelic divinity.” One cannot be a poet, he further remarked, if one “is not divine.”<sup>2</sup> And yet this divinity is not assumed from a posture of humility but rather from a stance of supercilious self-regard. Villa could claim for himself divinity—he could have been brought up surrounded by influences from Catholicism—and yet he is someone who, according to his poet-friend Luis Francia, did not adopt the conventional belief even of the afterlife.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Villa’s poetry is seemingly established based on the images and language of religion such that many writers, poets, and critics have taken note of the metaphysical and mystical strands of Villa’s poetry in various places. One finds in his poems unusual depictions of God as a centipede or God bursting forth from a pigeon. In one instance, God is seen wrestling with Man, as in the Biblical story of Israel wrestling with the Angel of God; in another, the poet usurps God as the new creator. Although the comments made on these poems and others are left under-elaborated, they nonetheless point to the prevalence of a certain undefined religiosity in Villa’s poetry.

For instance, the critic Jonathan Chua notes Villa’s poetry as being spoken in a language that is “mystical and religious”—that

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1 Eileen Tabios, “An Angel’s Introduction to a House of Song,” in *The Anchored Angel: Selected Writings by José Garcia Villa*, ed. Eileen Tabios (New York: Kaya Press, 1999), 148.

2 Ibid., 143.

3 Luis Francia, “Villanelles,” in Tabios, *The Anchored Angel*, 175.

Villa's own identification as an "angel" is itself a reflection of his use of Lucifer, the fallen angel in the Christian tradition, as an image of the poet.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, the poet Ricaredo Demetillo notes that Villa's "almost instinctive mysticism" works to "give a cohesive center to [Villa's] utterance" in *Have Come, Am Here*.<sup>5</sup> However, despite claiming that Villa's "mystical furor" waned in his next collection of poems, *Volume Two*,<sup>6</sup> Demetillo never gives a definition of what constitutes mysticism. A more defined, though still shaky and unclear, conceptualization of the mystical in Villa is given by Salvador P. Lopez, Villa's own literary rival, in the introduction to Villa's first poetry collection, *Many Voices*. For Lopez, Villa's poetry imbibes a "deeply felt, if somewhat unrealized, mysticism" in belonging to the long line of a tradition of mystical poetry, which includes the works of Walt Whitman and the biblical Song of Songs.<sup>7</sup> Such a mysticism, rooted in the Bible, is understood through the lens of an erotic union between the lover and the beloved, but even here, Lopez does not elaborate on the intersection between erotic love and the mystical union between the soul and God.

Other more elaborate discussions of Villa's poetry can be found in Cornelio Faigao's 1951 master's thesis. In it, Faigao claims that religion is the "most dominant and most pervasive characteristic" of Villa's writings.<sup>8</sup> Faigao defines religion as "*essentially a personal relation, the relation of subject and creature, men, to his . . . Creator, God.*"<sup>9</sup> His analysis of Villa's poems, then, hinges upon the relationship between

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4 Jonathan Chua, "Colonialist or Critic: Revaluating Villa," in Tabios, 184.

5 Ricaredo Demetillo, "Jose Garcia Villa vs. Salvador P. Lopez," in *The Authentic Voice of Poetry* (Quezon City: UP Office of Research Coordination, 1962), 296.

6 Ibid.

7 Salvador P. Lopez, introduction to *Many Voices: Selected Poems by Jose Garcia Villa* (Manila: Philippine Book Guild, 1939), 9.

8 Cornelio Faigao, "The Element of Religion in the Poetry of Jose Garcia Villa" (master's thesis, University of San Carlos, 1950), 11.

9 Ibid., 19.

the persona as a person/poet and God. According to Faigao, Villa's God shares in the fellowship of brotherhood with man and is humanized, and the poet is given over to God in his "complete surrender to the consummate splendor . . . of the One."<sup>10</sup>

A different view of the religious element in Villa's poetry is given by E. San Juan Jr., who claims that Villa advocates for a "gnostic conception of life" in his poetry.<sup>11</sup> According to San Juan, Villa's poetry communicates the subordination of the body to the soul: what is concrete and physical are secondary to what is spiritual. This assertion would seem to be supported by Villa himself. In his essay "Best Short Stories 1934," Villa writes how the artist's task is to apprehend the inner essentiality of life through imaginative vision.<sup>12</sup> Good literature, in short, must penetrate the depths of mere phenomena and reach for Essence. There is no room for dwelling on "local color," which the likes of Casiano T. Calalang has exhibited in writing about the realities of Philippine life.<sup>13</sup>

As San Juan Jr. points out, to speak of religion in the works of Villa might then simply mean speaking of the metaphysical: a metaphysical understanding of life that is, at its roots, gnostic. In line with this, in his essay "Status of Criticism in the Philippines," Villa gives a condensed formulation of his poetics in relation to religion, arguing that the spirituality of great art is "not the spirituality of religion" but is "*metaphysical*"—a term which Villa uses to define "the consciousness of *being*" (italics in the original) towards knowing the greatest Reality.<sup>14</sup> This search for Reality that is not bound by the

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10 Ibid., 69–70, 72, 66.

11 E. San Juan, "Jose Garcia Villa—Critique of a Subaltern Poetics," *EurAmerica* 40, no. 1 (2010): 20.

12 Villa, "The Best Philippine Short Stories [of 1934] [First Installment]," in *The Critical Villa: Essays in Literary Criticism by Jose Garcia Villa*, ed. Jonathan Chua (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2002), 106.

13 Chua, ed., *The Critical Villa*, 52, no. 5.

14 Villa, "The Status of Philippine Poetry [First Installment]," in Chua, *The Critical Villa*, 135.

fixity of concrete objects is tied to what Villa claimed was his “single motive” in writing his works—the “finding of man’s selfhood and identity in the mystery of Creation.”<sup>15</sup> One can, then, readily interpret the religion in Villa’s work in philosophical terms. Villa’s poetry, as such, exemplifies the notion in neo-Platonic philosophy of the emanation of forms, where things in the world are less pure or less real than that from which everything derives its being—Being itself.

Even as these readings foreground the presence of religion in the poetry of Villa, they also make the exact formulation of religion in Villa’s poetry more complicated. While religion, or at least religious language, undergirds much of Villa’s works, the phrase “Villa’s religiosity” or even “the religious element in Villa’s poetry” would remain an equivocation in terms were one to posit merely an undefined or loosely defined mysticism or were one to subject Villa to merely being a poet concerned with metaphysical themes. In all save one of the examples pointed out above, the term “religion” is not given a precise definition. Only Faigao does so, and even so, his understanding of religion and the religious elements in Villa’s works seems to be self-contradictory. Christ, for Faigao, becomes merely a symbol in one’s mind, and so what relationship, which is the substance of religion, can be formed therein?

Here one comes across the thorny issue of delimiting the topic of “religion” in the poetry of Villa. Villa held unconventional beliefs that cannot be fixed into the doctrinal and dogmatic specifications of any one religion. In a letter written to Faigao, dated 1950, Villa writes how God is, for him, “the Fire in [him]” that he “create[s] out of [his] energies and faculties”—when he, the poet, dies, this same God “dies with [him].”<sup>16</sup> Such a belief in the creation of God

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15 Jose Garcia Villa, “Guggenheim Fellowship: Plan for Work,” in Tabios, *The Anchored Angel*, 21-22.

16 Quoted in Martin Joseph Ponce, “The Queer Erotics of José Garcia Villa’s Modernism,” in *Beyond the Nation: Diasporic Filipino Literature and Queer Reading* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 79.

in the mind of man subverts the Creator-creation relationship that is a fundamental tenet in Christianity. Thus, even while Villa uses the term “Christ” in his essay and can be said to adopt tropes from Biblical literature, Villa’s heterodoxy makes one question the sincerity with which he employs the symbols of Christianity.

Whether Villa’s heterodoxy was ironic or deliberately blasphemous is beside the point. One can never fully grasp the true intent and attitude of another’s statement, though one can reasonably arrive at a sufficient understanding thereof. Were one to focus on the topic of “religion” itself without adequately defining it, one gets wound up with denominational discussions on doctrinal beliefs, the extent to which the author himself believes (or does not believe) in them, and the influence the poet’s belief or lack thereof has on the poems’ themes. It would seem that such questions are only secondary to what is, in fact, more crucial. As the terms such as “Christ” and “God” remain prevalent in Villa’s poetry, one must reach for the more fundamental aspects of the topic at hand—not the question of religion, but the question of God.

This paper, therefore, takes Faigao’s thesis as its starting point in looking at the question of how the poems of José Garcia Villa talk about God and how they thematize divinity. It argues that Villa’s poetry, particularly the first set of seven comma poems he published in 1948 can be interpreted as exemplifying his incarnational theopoetics in both form and content. In these poems, God or Christ is poetically, yet sometimes illogically, enmeshed with the created order. God assumes a body—not only the body of Man, but also the bodies of animals, machineries, and objects. This portrayal of God as embodied allows not only a deeper understanding of what Villa’s conception of God is, but also how his conception of God relates to his poetics.

### EMBODIED DIVINITY

It is not only Villa’s radical and eccentric portrayals of divinity that might unnerve the conventional understandings of the reader. The

formal gestures his poetry makes, as influenced by the experimentalism of e. e. cummings, would similarly challenge the reader's standard understanding of poetry. The most daring of Villa's experimentation in poetic form came in the form of his comma poems, which were collected in his 1949 book *Volume Two*. In these poems, each word except for the first and last is separated by a comma. Whereas a space would normally occupy that space, a comma is instead inserted.

However much one is scandalized or accosted by this formal experimentation, Villa justified himself in a note that he published together with his poems. In it, he claimed that the commas were "functional and valid" as essential elements of the poems themselves.<sup>17</sup> Villa assures his readers that the commas are not, as later critics such as Demetillo would point out, specious or the "silly antics of a perennial adolescent";<sup>18</sup> instead, such additions have both an auditory and a metrical function, enhancing the "tonal value" of each word and "regulating the poem's verbal density" to allow each line to "become more measured."<sup>19</sup> Whereas Villa remains abstract, the poet Eileen Tabios seems to have put it in terms less technical: the commas, according to her, facilitate "a meditative mode" in reading the poem.<sup>20</sup> Crowding the eye, the commas challenge the reader to pause at each word, to dwell on its meaning, and to savor its sound.

Naturally, such experimentalism would have its consequences, especially in terms of Villa's reception. The comma poems were seen by many to be Villa's way of anxiously including himself in the canon of American modernist poetry.<sup>21</sup> When they were published, Villa had

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17 Jose Garcia Villa, "A Note on the Commas," in *Doveglion: Collected Poems*, ed. John Edwin Cowen (Penguin, 2008), 78. This is reprinted from *Volume Two* (New York: New Directions, 1949), 5–6.

18 Demetillo 295, 300.

19 Villa, "A Note on the Commas," 78.

20 Tabios, 145.

21 Timothy Yu, "'The Hand of a Chinese Master': Jose Garcia Villa and Modernist Orientalism," *MELUS*, 29, no. 1 (2004): 51.

already been living in the United States for close to two decades. He had, by then, formed a friendship with e. e. cummings and had become a notable figure in the literary scene. The comma poems, however, did not appear first in 1949, in *Volume Two*. A year prior, Villa had published seven comma poems in the literary journal *Wake* with the same note justifying his inclusion of the commas. These poems do not all speak of or represent the divine in direct terms; while some do so, their themes seem to be more about the poetic process and its relationship with the divine. But just like some of the later comma poems in *Volume Two*, these poems thematize the artistic process by parsing out, as Faigao has pointed out, the relationship between the human (the poet) and the divine (Christ). They exhibit, in short, a theopoetic imagination.

First coined by Amos Niven Wilder in his book *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, theopoetics refers to the dynamic interplay between literature and divine mysteries present in a work of art and its making. For Niven, a theopoetic work embodies and imagines theological mysteries through literary language, be they mystical or doctrinal in nature.<sup>22</sup> In other words, theopoetics makes possible a creative and imaginative articulation of divine presence.<sup>23</sup> In elaborating on theopoetics's origins as theopoesis in Stanley Romaine Hopper's 1971 speech for the Society for Art and Religion in Contemporary Culture and the American Academy of Religion, L. B. C. Keefe-Perry writes how:

Hopper posits that to the degree that modern theology has *rigidly* attempted to prove something absolutely, the whole project has been a fool's errand. . . . The [theopoetic] way forward will lead us into a new language where theologies are *not rigid, logical*

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22 Amos Niven Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 3, 11-12.

23 L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, "Theopoetics: Process and Perspective," *Christianity and Literature* 58, no. 4 (2009): 580.

assertions, but joyful expressions that plunge us into mystery and a primal being; a theology that is “not theo-logic but theo-poiesis.”<sup>24</sup> (italics mine)

As opposed to a theology of divine presence, Hopper, Wilder, and Keefe-Perry all reinforce apprehending God from an intuitive, rather than logical, stance. Through this intuitive way, one breaks free from the theo-logic categorizations of God as someone reducible to formulae and scholastic disputations so as to enact a poetics of divinity which shows how God is “[packed] . . . into the world” and how He is “incarnate *in the world*” (italics in the original).<sup>25</sup>

To be incarnated is to be made present in the world through a body. It is through such incarnations that the divine can interact with Man. Broadly speaking, if God’s presence is “[packed] . . . into the world,” then He, too, is incarnated in it—his presence is made known not only spiritually, but also through the materiality and corporeality of objects. In the Christian theological tradition, there is a more specific articulation of this thought. The doctrine of the incarnation speaks of the second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, taking on human flesh, so that in the one person of Christ, one finds the two natures of Divinity and Humanity. As the Chalcedonian definition of the doctrine of the incarnation states, the two natures of Christ are to be “inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, [and] inseparably” acknowledged; in such a union there is nevertheless a distinction of natures. Thus, in the Christian tradition, it is possible to speak of the “death of God” or the “heart of God,” insofar as the word “God” here refers to the second Person of the Trinity, Christ.

Therefore, there is more to reading a poem theo-poetically than to simply divine God’s abundant, ebullient Presence through the

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24 Ibid., 581.

25 Joshua B. Tuttle, “Toward a Practical Definition of Theopoetical Poetry,” *Christianity and Literature* 71, no. 4 (2022): 555, 559.

poetic language of metaphor, image, and symbol. If God's Presence is incarnated not only in things but also in Man through Christ, then one finds another perspective to theopoetics. Theopoetics is theo-poiesis—man's "God-making" (or Man creating something which holds the presence of God)—and "[man's] becoming divine" (Man's growth into the image and likeness of God).<sup>26</sup>

In this theopoetic movement of God becoming Man and Man becoming God, the philosopher Richard Kearney states that there is a "play of mutual recreation between human and divine" where "creatures [cocreate] with their Creator."<sup>27</sup> Man and God are both the object of each other's creative acts, albeit in different senses. God gives Man his being and creates him (Man), while Man causes (*poieîn*) God's presence to envelope poetry (through *poiesis*). To poeticize God through poetry (*poiesis*) is to "cause" (*poieîn*) His presence to permeate the poem, the Word to be enfleshed in the words. As poets "[pack]" God "into the world" through the (il)logic of poetry,<sup>28</sup> in this continuing "recreation of creation" can be found a literary epiphany that brings forth a new experience of the divine predicated on incarnation. All theopoetics, therefore, is necessarily incarnational and epiphanic.

### JOSÉ GARCIA VILLA'S THEOPOETICS IN HIS COMMA POEMS

Villa's first set of comma poems, published in *Wake* in 1948, exhibits this incarnational theopoetics in both content and form. In these poems, which are untitled but are numbered by Villa, Villa poeticizes God not through scholastic logic and argumentation, but through

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26 Richard Kearney, "God Making: Theopoetics and Anatheism," in *The Art of Anatheism*, ed. Richard Kearney and Matthew Clemente (Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 31.

27 Ibid., 4.

28 Tuttle, 555.

his poetry.<sup>29</sup> God, then, is manifested as Christ, a centipede, or, in some cases, as some machinery. In some of these comma poems, Villa talks about the creative process itself, with the figure of the poet being the persona. If these two strands of thought are taken together, then one finds how the poet can be seen to be “making” or “causing” God to be present and incarnated in his poetry precisely by talking about that act of God-making or theopoetics.

The first of the seven poems describes, in obscure and esoteric terms, the epiphanic moment of a poet’s encounter with the Divine. Indeed, while nothing in the poem explicitly mentions God or even Christ and nowhere in the poem does Villa suggest that the persona is the poet, the description of the dramatic situation suffices in revealing these details to the reader. In the poem, the persona is granted a spiritual vision of a “bright,Centipede,[beginning],his,stampede” towards him and a “celestial,Engine” coming from a “celestial,province” moving towards him. In this approach of the spiritual embodied in the “bright,Centipede” and the “celestial,Engine,” there is not only urgency bordering on violence (as indicated by the “stampede”) but also the subordination of the persona in relation it, leading to the persona’s ecstatic and exclamatory tone. When, finally, as if hearkening to the crushing of grapes in the winepress or of a stamp branding its design to the page of a paper, the persona’s “radium,brain” is brought by the stampede to “Spiritual,Imagination” in an act of “stamping,in,heat,” Villa’s poem reveals itself to be one about spiritual inspiration. Descriptors for divinity (“bright” / “celestial”) are appended to insects and machinery (“Centipede” / “Engine”) with human limbs and body parts (“eyes” / “feet”) so as to mystically

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29 Jose Garcia Villa, “Seven Poems,” *Wake*, no. 6 (1948): 56-62. The seven poems are (1) “The,bright,Centipede,” (2) “Much,beauty,is,less,than,the,face,of,” (3) “When,I,was,no,bigger,than,a,huge,” (4) “My,whoseness,is,to,me,is,what,I,” (5) “Clean,like,iodoform,between,the,tall,” (6) “More,miracle,and,” and (7) “A,little,giant,all,in,little,pieces.”

render that moment of artistic inspiration in visionary terms. For Villa, the movement to “Spiritual,Imagination” or artistic insight is understood to be painful, even excruciating. One has to be subject to the uncomfortable fornication of spiritual insight pressing down, stampede-like, or stamping, in heat, one’s thought so as to attune one’s vision to a piercing gaze—to see beyond the physical and into Essence and Reality.

While Villa does not explicitly tell us who or what the centipede or the engine are symbols of, one can reason out that it is Christ or the divine. In this poem, Villa renders in poetic and metaphysical terms his own poetic philosophy about artistic creation, which is invariably connected with his thoughts on God. “The path of the poet,” Villa writes after all, “is the path of Christ.”<sup>30</sup> In speaking of God in entomological and mechanical terms as centipede and Engine and in crafting a hodge-podge of images in relation to this (“feet” / “stampede” / “eyes” and so on), Villa uses the (il)logic of poetry to theopoetically incarnate God in his poetry as one of the actors in the process of artistic creation. The poem, then, is a poem not only about the theopoetic incarnation of God in objects, but also about the process of spiritual or creative inspiration in the act of God-making.

Theopoetic making and theopoetic presence are therefore two of the foremost concerns of Villa. This is not a surprise. As mentioned previously, Villa thought that the “path of the poet” is “the path of Christ.” Villa is doing more than simply divinizing the poet in this statement, as he is also humanizing the divine. While it is true that, like Christ, the poet creates and fashions, so too is Christ like the poet who, in much of Villa’s poetry (as shall be further shown later) is the recipient of a kind of death. Both the poet and Christ are capable of death by virtue of being incarnated, and this confluence

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30 Quoted in Lopez, 10.

is the thematic concern in the comma poems.

In the second poem in the collection, for instance, Villa presents the reader with another poetic representation of a theophany, and this time, who is being revealed is more clearly stated. For whereas the “Engine” and the “Centipede” were not given a name in the previous poem, here, the name of Christ is unequivocally invoked as the terrifying divinity whose brilliance is expressed as “pure,Lightning.” Even so, Christ, in being both “Oppositor” and “Foeman,” does not leave the receiver of the vision “unburned” and undazzled: He is not a tame “Fox,” nor is “His,beauty” “too,Sly,too,mEEK.” The magnificence of Christ’s divine light that leaves no one “unbowed” is a brilliance which wounds, frightens, and shocks: an effulgence that can even lead to death. This, on first reading, seems to be all that the poem is about. But the poem remains silent on who it is exactly who is receiving the vision and who the persona urges to “be,perceived” by Christ.

Such confusion can be cleared up when one reorients one’s focus to the images of brilliance and darkness in the poem, all of which are images related to sight. In fact, Villa’s persona goes so far as to mention that the primary way by which the viewer is wounded is precisely by being blinded by light: “After,pure,eyes,have,peeled,Off,skin,” Villa asks, “who,can,gaze,unburned”? It is the word “gaze” which reveals in its manifold connotations who the recipient of the theophany is, for it is indeed none other than the poet as visionary. After all, in Villa’s other works defending his poetry, vision, the ability to see into the depths of Reality, is a crucial aspect that make for a good poet: a poet should be one who is able to pierce through externality and into essence and the Real. When, at the end of the poem, the persona urges the recipient of the vision to “well,perceive” (a syntactical variation of the phrase “perceive well”) and “receive” the vision of Christ, he is, in effect, asking the poet to be blinded by Christ’s brilliance—to be received into Christ’s death by dying with Him.

These ideas are expressed in indirect terms, and yet they gain their clearest articulation in the next two poems Villa includes as among the first comma poems. In the third one in particular, the interplay between light and dark, which was characteristic of Christ in the previous poem, is now transposed to the persona, a poet who, in his visionary experience, says that, in him, there grew an “Eye” which springs “Visions” of “Gold, and, . . . , wars.” All of this occurs not in a moment of divine revelation, but in the process of writing his “Theology, / of, rose, and, / Tiger.” In the creative process of writing, one takes on the incommensurable polarities of Christ (both “dark, and, yet, most, Lit”; both “Gentle” and “Wrath- / Full”; and, of course, both God and Man) and one is able to see Reality more clearly through a visionary experience.

Here, however, the persona seems to subvert the expectations of the reader. Instead of a mutual complementarity between Christ and the poet, the poem ends with the poet usurping the role of God as Creator. Indeed, such lines recall the Luciferian figure of the poet as a fallen angel in Villa’s poetry. And yet a closer reading shows that there is, indeed, an implied complementarity between Christ and the poet, for although the poet brazenly claims that he knows how “the, Lord, was, not, [his], Creator,” it is revealed in the following line that the persona-poet is not talking about Christ, but rather the “Unbegotten.” The choice of words is striking. For Villa, who grew up in a Catholic environment, the Creed would have been familiar to him, and the line “Unbegotten” is a clear negation of any reference of Christ. As the Nicene Creed proclaims, Christ is “Begotten, not made.” Christ, in other words, is the Word who is, as the Gospel of St. John notes, “with God” but also “God” in the beginning of time. In the terminology of the creed, Christ is “consubstantial” with the Father, but His eternal Sonship is a being-from the Father. When the poet claims superiority over the “Creator” the “Unbegotten,” it is more a statement of Villa’s rejection of the Fatherhood of God, than a clear

disavowal of Christ and a contradiction to Villa's poetics. For just as Christ dies in order to be raised up on the third day, so too does the poet who, through the creative process, becomes another Christ who proclaims, as in this poem: "I,began,to,Die,and,I,began,to,Grow."

While the third poem clearly articulates death as one of its thematic concerns through a poetic expression of *poesis* (making), the fourth proceeds to establish the thematic preoccupation of death through a prayer for the persona to be fashioned (to be "knit," "elect[ed]," and "erected" in God's "kighthood" and to rise to the spiritual and radium heights of self-hood, of "I"), only to ask, in one and the same breath, to be unravelled (to "perish" and to be dashed). The contradictory supplications of the poet are in line with the contradictory declarations he makes, as he claims that he is moved not by spirit, soul, or ghost (as if possessed), but by the "Holy,Unghost." Such an ambiguity, however, may be momentarily clarified by the presence of the negative prefix "un-," through which Villa coins neologisms such as "unnight" to refer to day and "unghost" to refer to the "process of un-souling or taking out of one's soul." If the poet-persona belongs to the "Holy,Unghost," a divine being that is corporeal (not-a-ghost) but also unghosts, then the prayer to be knitted and yet unravelled—to be chosen and yet to be perished—is elucidated as a paradox that can be resolved if the contradiction is interpreted as a process: in order to reach the heights of "I" and "self-hood," I must be unghosted, led out of myself in such a way that I, at the peak of who I am, can only perish, and that which I use to make sense of reality, my eyesight, "break[s]." To be most myself, I die. To see most clearly, I must be blinded.

In the two poems just interpreted, the theme of death and undoing emerges together with the topic of the creative process. The poems proceed theo-poetically: they are based foundationally on the incarnation of Christ, which forms the pre-condition for His death as the God-Man. But it is also in being God-Man and Him dying

as the God-Man that the poet can identify himself with Him: it is through the incarnational theopoetic that the analogue between Christ and the poet is established. And just as Christ passes from death into life through his incarnation and Passion, the poet, too, undergoes a similar death, albeit one that is figurative. For the poet, the death of the self is paradoxically that which allows for his birth.

This contradiction between death and life is held and expressed by the next poem in the series. In this poem, the persona sees a vision of “Life” between the “Letters,of,Death,” and the vision is nothing but striking. For the persona sees, couched between “Letters,of,Death” (how fitting for the Word), Christ, the “Hero,” presencing Himself as an “elegant,interweaver.” This Christ-interweaver threads both death and life into one. He is no man of sorrow, for He is more babe-like in appearance: His beauty, the persona notes, is comparable to the purity of a “child’s,eyes,gazing,at,you” and His elegance manifests itself as dancing, “perpetual,in,beauty.” Here, as in the first poem, is a series of seemingly unconnected imagery which are used to presence Christ, the divine. But unlike the first poem, this fifth poem communicates the contradiction of the immortal dying so that life may flower—a contradiction which both Christ and the poet hold. Indeed, the artistry of Christ as “interweaver,” the innocence of Christ in a “child’s,[gaze],” the elegance of Christ as a dancer are all images of the blossoming of life after death, all images of how “Death,buils,her,heroes,Intensely,clean”—of how “a,man,and,Death” are “in,league,that,Life,may,flower.”

From the elegant and the innocent, however, proceed the violent. The sixth poem uses the story of Jacob wrestling with God to further detail the relationship between the poet-persona and Christ. It starts almost in seeming continuation with the previous poems: the poet, having received new light and now “more,miracled,” “gazing,from,new,light- / Nings,” from the peak of “blázerock” and “stérnrock” (both neologisms which harken back to the fourth

poem), now decides to go on a journey to seek “My, Jacob.” The tone is personal and intimately so: the poet-persona does not say “the, Jacob” or “His, Jacob” but “My, Jacob.” Still, the figure he finds is less than gentle. Christ appears, and He is described in bestial terms (with a “Forepaw, sweet”) and mercenary language (Christ is a “Killer,” in whom, however, is the poet’s origin, his “Whence” and his “love”). But Christ must come, and “Thou, must,” the persona says, for the struggle is to determine who among the two—the poet or Christ—is who. It is, in other words, a struggle for the self and identity: a struggle to distinguish one and the other.

And the poem’s verdict? If Christ arises, then is he, however blue and beaten, “glown, to, heaving, light.” If the persona-poet arises, still is Christ “knelled” and summoned: Christ, the persona-poet still “[kneels], to”: Christ who is aided and “succoured” by “Prometheus,” a mythological metonym for the bearer of fire, heat, and light. And what is this light and heat, if not a metonym for spiritual and creative insight? The poet, despite his victory, bows to Christ, superior to Prometheus and equivalent in His Personhood to “Love.” Whereas in other poems, Villa’s persona adopts a Luciferian attitude of rebellion, in this one, subservience usurps sedition, gentleness overturns ferocity, and love redeems struggle.

The last comma poem in the group is, in terms of the linear pacing of the poem, the most steady and the least enjambed. The persona in this poem, like the one in a previous one, is being “unghosted,” led from one kingdom into another by the persona’s “dark, hero,” “deep, hero” who comes from death’s kingdom. The lack of capitalization of the word “hero” makes the reference of the term ambiguous, for in all other instances where the term is used to refer to Christ, it is capitalized. The term, then, may just as well be referring to a poet who, having followed Christ into death, now comes from death’s kingdom as “death’s scholar, victor,” and “flower[s]” to bring the persona similarly to “destruction”—to death.

There is, after all, no easy way to distinguish the figure of the poet (who serves as the persona in many of Villa's poems) and Christ: the way of the poet is the way of Christ, who makes all words shine.

In formal terms, the shining of the words is accomplished by the commas, which Villa himself claims that it allows for a fuller tonal resonance for each word. The commas, as such, are not simply adornment, but are embodiments, in poetic form, of the very bedazzlement that falls on the persona-poet in his encounter with the divine in many of the comma poems. They are, in short, concrete manifestations of the persona's awestruck terror at the divine. When Villa's poems were published in his first collection, *Many Voices*, a section included as one of the poet's ruminations on the definition of poetry suggests the signifying potential of the commas which dot Villa's poems. In this collection, Villa writes that "[poetry] is the path of a word from silence to music, from music to the Silence after music."<sup>31</sup> Despite poetry's capacity to enchant through language, poetry ultimately ends in silence. Poetry, then, is, as Villa claims, both "chorus and silence": simultaneously "the chant and the pause" which redounds to and culminates in that "*word which will never be uttered*" (italics in the original).<sup>32</sup> In light of this, it is likely that the commas have an essential role in Villa's poetry. In the poems read above, the closer one is to Christ, the more dazed, blinded, and speechless one becomes. The commas, as such, are there to concretize the theophanic moment: the moment of speechlessness and blindness.

Contrary to some of the readings of the religious element in Villa, Christ in Villa's poetry is not a gnostic figure, nor is he merely a symbol that is detached from the contexts of Christianity or that is only a figment of one's mind. Christ is the Logos who makes all words (*logos*) shine, but He is also the pre-condition that makes all

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31 Villa, "Definitions of Poetry," in *Many Voices*, 203.

32 Ibid., 202-203.

verbs come alive (the “Verb-living, Garnet”). What bearing this has on the creative process—about presencing and causing God in poetry—is embedded in the message of the comma poems themselves. In these poems, Christ is not merely a symbol, but the Person upon whose divinity, embodiedness, and death *poeisis* turns. It is Christ, who, as the embodied and incarnated God-Man, is the Poet *par excellence* Who makes efficacious all subsequent poetic makings—the connection, in short, between the ebullience of the poetic word and the effulgence of the theophanic Word. In the theo-poeisis of Villa’s comma poems, one finds not only God’s presence in the poems, but also Villa’s insights on *poeisis* in general. Villa’s theopoetics suggests that the logic and movement of poetry, both formally and thematically, must be directed towards Christ, in whom poetry and divinity were consummated and in whom this consummation was done through his death. For Villa, it is Christ in whom coincides both the paradigmatic Poet and the singular and most perfect poetic articulation: the apotheosis of the word in the Word.

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