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Trying to Read Villa

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You must need behave more generously; help everybody;
To as many as need it, provide for their want through your
bounty.

For this is deathless; and, should you ever trip on Chance,
There, this very same thing will attend to you.

Far better 'tis to be loved in life

Than to be rich in death: your possession, the tomb.

Only a crumb truly of Menander's large-hearted and balanced humanity; but a delicious morsel nonetheless. We can feast ourselves more sumptuously when we get Prof. Highet's English rendition of the entire play.

FRANCISCO DEMETRIO

Trying to Read Villa

Cleanth Brooks tells us that a poem may be difficult because of any of three things: (1) the poet does not know how to write, (2) the reader does not know how to read, or (3) the poet does not want to have too many readers. Needless to say, the poem may be difficult because of all three things at once.

In general, I do not think that the difficulty in reading Villa's poetry¹ is very much different from the separate difficulties attending the readers of other poets, though in varying degrees, for each poet is more or less unique. A poetry is always a dialect of the language in which it is written. The reader must learn the grammar of that dialect, a language he knows and does not know. With Villa, one may begin with Poem 15 (*circa* Have Come, Am Here):

First, a poem must be magical,
Then musical as a sea-gull.
It must be a brightness moving
And hold secret a bird's flowering.
It must be slender as a bell,
And it must hold fire as well.
It must have the wisdom of bows
And it must kneel like a rose.
It must be able to hide
What it seeks, like a bride.
And over all I would like to hover
God, smiling from the poem's cover.

¹ SELECTED POEMS AND NEW. Introduction by Dame Edith Sitwell. New York: McDowell & Obolensky, 1958.

First, the logic of the magical is obviously the total lack of it. Magical things follow one another as antecedents and consequences, not as causes and effects. After a child has discovered how rabbits are produced from an empty top hat, magic shall have given way to science. Nothing should satisfy expectation; deceit is essential to the device, surprise to the effect.

Then musical as a sea-gull. "Then" denotes an order in the scale of beings rather than in time, for magic and music co-exist. Music distracts the eye and quickens the sleight of hand. Music builds up expectancy and creates the state in which we are prepared to accept anything. That is one consideration. The other is imagistic: how is the poem musical as a sea-gull? Having read other poetries, our first impulse is to seize the sea-gull by the neck to make it cough out the musical quality which has invited the simile. Is it the bird's undulating swoop that is suggestive of music? Its shape, perhaps? Or is it the sea against which the shape swoops? But why not musical as an eagle, or a swan, or a seahorse? Or is the line ironic, so that the music is heard between the sea sibilant and the sea bird guttural? One can go on exhausting the reservoir of associations, piling up one reading upon another. One may find supreme joy in doing just that, looking for the proverbial needle of meaning in the haystack of the image. And one may sit back pleased with oneself, delighted to watch his own imagination in action, no longer caring for the missing needle and thus missing the point altogether. For Villa is more musical than mystical. He is devoted to the sound of words. Because the images are thus irresponsible, they create an effect of strangeness and daring, of "legerity and fire" as Eberhart puts it. Unfortunately, this fire does not stand the test of fire. Analysis is ever unkind to lyrical poetry. And when we decide to be drastic, we realize that we have been taken for a ride. "Sea-gull" is musical because of its phonemes, not "sea-gull" alone but "sea-gull" juxtaposed with "musical". One is reminded of the pink and blue monks of Poem 38 eating pink and blue raisins:

Indeed I have observed and myself have partaken
Of blue and pink raisins. But my joy was different:
My joy was to see the blue and the pink counter-pointing.

Here is a phonetic version of that contrapuntal joy. The terminal consonants are a *continuo*, so to speak. The long *e* counterpoints the short *i*, the *g* is the voiced version of the unvoiced guttural *c*, and the short *u* counterpoints the *schwa*.

Going back to the poem.

The poem must be a brightness moving
And hold secret a bird's flowering.

Legerity and fire, no less! One thinks immediately of fireworks. Villa "linguistic glories" (Eberhart) scintillate *in vacuo* while other poetries do so to illuminate. They are decorative phenomena that intend only to be phenomenal. A brightness moving need not move toward any known direction. Of course, Villa has misconstrued MacLeish, for what MacLeish really means is that a poem must *be*, first and foremost, and *mean*, last but not least. At any rate, how is a poem a brightness moving? The poem flashes images against the reader's eye the way some fluorescent signs are built: coming on and off at intervals, the static lights delineate an object in motion, an optical illusion. Here, for instance, the flowering bird is really two images flashed alternately: the bird opening up its wings and the flower opening up its petals. This device is nothing new; Edith Sitwell's *Facade* teems with such diffused metaphors.

There is the other reading of the phrase one cannot ignore: a "brightness moving" the reader the way lightning causes a positive emotion. Whether Villa's poetry succeeds in doing just that is a matter of conjecture and individual experience. As a rule, lightning illuminates and, therefore, moves (I think Longinus uses just this image to describe the effect of art); fireworks merely scintillate.

To go on with the poem—

It must be slender as a bell,
And it must hold fire as well.
It must have the wisdom of bows
And it must kneel like a rose.

The first question is why "slender as a bell"? In e. e. cummings' "Impression"

great bells are ringing with the rose
the lewd fat bells

I dare not say that the affinity is conscious. Nonetheless, Villa's typographic rages can only be symptomatic of a deep impression made by cummings on him. One may therefore relate their bells. Slender and ascetic or fat and lewd, they are church bells ringing with the rose of a rose window. Villa's kneeling rose may be architectural as cummings', or floral, and therefore his own. Anyway, the coincidence is suspicious. For indeed, Villa borrows like the proverbial neighbor with a perpetually empty sugar bowl. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what of Villa is Sitwell or Hopkins, but one catches him *in flagranti delicto* in "The Angel" where Dante G. Rossetti's stars are singing again, this time to dub for Mrs. von Erffa's "intellectual instrument" instead of his own blessed damozel.

The poem *must hold fire as well*. "Fire" may refer to any "brightness moving" but by sheer interaction with the bell and the rose

exudes a religious light, in the sense of Novalis' "absolute sensation". The adverbial phrase "as well" is more clever than it pretends to be. The obvious reading of the line is that a poem must *also* hold fire. However, so subtle a versifier, so shrewd a technician as Villa will be the first to insist that rhyme words cannot represent a mere manner of speaking, a padding for the meter, but must involve a detonation over and above its denotation. The adverbial phrase is therefore calculated to reverberate: a poem must be a well of fire, the suppression of the article "a" being commonplace with Villa whose disdain for conventional English syntax is apparent even from the title of the book.

The trick above is punning, pure and simple. The poet loves the pun; Villa loves nothing else. In one of his *Caprices* (Poem 148: "A Virginal"), the whole effect is achieved, if crudely, on just that score: the *v*, the *y*, and the *z* types of virgins, whom he distinguishes like a theologian, "all, all, shall, become, x, virgins". Sometimes the pun is so subtle that the effect is pure lyric; analysis proves the villain once again. I am thinking of the ending of Poem 155 ("Xalome") where

Baptist, John's, head, then, shall, be,
 (Like, a, kiss; like, a, church;
 Like, a, beehive, in, the, sun)
 My, beehive, in, eternity.

and where, phonetics aside, a beehive is related to a kiss because a kiss is also a buzz. In fact, in the couplets under study, the poet, like a circus magician, deliberately distracts his audience with the pedestrian implication of "slender as a bell" which when read or, especially, heard, suggests a slender belle. Hearing later on the image of the bride, the audience is taken for another ride.

"Bows" is the most problematic image in the poem. The meaning depends on the pronunciation. One would like to dismiss the idea of a bow, meaning a genuflection, seeing that there is no other evidence of slant rhymes elsewhere in the lines, "magical" and "sea-gull" and "moving" and "flowering" being no rhymes at all, although one could invent the term "echo rhyme" for them. However, the idea of bowing is certainly related to the genuflection of the rose and to the theme of the couplets: the poem must be "religious". On the other hand, Villa himself pronounces "bows" as a true rhyme for "rose". Only half of the problem is really solved, for the image may still refer to any of three things: the knot of a ribbon, the rainbow, or the weapon which shoots arrows.

The first possibility is the least probable. Bows are ornamental and Villa's "brightness" is fireworks rather than lightning. Bows, in fact, represent the complication of a ribbon. But Villa is not that

naive, does not fetch his images from marketplaces. His is a world of tigers, roses and flames—of "spiritual reality". Is the poem then to have the wisdom of rainbows? Noah's rainbow was, after all, a divine revelation. However, Poem 15 ends with this presumption:

And over all I would like to hover
God, smiling from the poem's cover

where the poet may be taken to be hovering God the way one flies a kite, or be the god himself smiling from the poem's cover with pastel-colored teeth. Both readings may actually be simultaneously valid. For, in effect, only in the poem does God live; only through the validity of poetry is God valid. It is the poem which invests Him with truth and immortality the way God shares—to orthodox thinkers—truth and immortality with men. Thus, a poetic creature, God may appear in any of those magical forms in Villa's top hat: now a brilliance (Poem 90), now a brother (Poem 52), a lover (Poem 50), a saltimbanque (Poem 115) and so on, or any of the animal forms, peacock, lion or fox.

The third possible meaning of "bows" involves esthetic rather than ethical considerations. The poem is a bow conserving its wisdom, its power, in the native tension of its shape. The vision, the wisdom—the "absolute sensation"—is not communicated like an arrow but is made known to be there. In other words, the poem

must be able to hide
What it seeks, like a bride.

In other words, the statements are never earned, which should make Allen Tate uncomfortable. As Eberhart puts it in praise, "he arrives at peaks without showing the strenuous effort of climbing." Or in Marianne Moore's terms, "his somewhat curious conjunctions of subject matter are 'felt', not forced."

Finally, the poem

must be able to hear
The luminance of dove and deer.

Here is another important aspect of Villa's dialect. The "luminant" dove and deer are themselves examples of "brightness moving", bright because they are more or less milky in color, and moving towards private destinations whither we should not care to follow. That he hears this moving brilliance denotes that the poet's ears have been anointed in the Baudelairean temple of "Correspondences" where

Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

The faculty of synesthesia has been appropriated almost entirely by the French Symbolists from whom is inherited all other poets' schemes to smuggle poetry out of the province of verbal arts into the realm

of music. If we take the cue, we come to conclude that the election of the "deer" image is based solely on its alliteration with "dove" and its rhyme with "hear". We should keep this consideration foremost in mind to avoid another wild sea-gull chase.

We have finally finished with Poem 15 and have learned the following do's and don'ts: (1) If you cannot make out the sense of a line, read it aloud and listen. Chances are the poem was written by ear. (2) Pay close attention to rhymes of all kinds. The poet labored over them. (3) Be amused, not disturbed, by synaesthetic and diffused metaphors. (4) Cultivate a true love for puns. (5) Be sensitive to counterpoint, visual or auditory. (6) Enjoy the poems in parts; many times the parts do not organize themselves into a magico-logical whole. (7) When you come upon a vast possibility of meanings, remember only one thing: the more the merrier!

After all is said, in reverence or jest, the question poses itself: what is the poetics?

Sitwell, describing her own poems, has also described Villa's poetry: it is "the poetry of childhood overtaken by a technician" ("Some Notes on My Own Poetry", *Collected Poems*, London, 1957). Poetry, she says in praise of Villa, quoting Mallarmé, is "written, not with ideas, but with words": (Introduction to *Selected Poems and New*). The child, beginning to discover the universe of language, juggles phonemes with its lips, delighted though uncomprehending, and delighting listeners who will not make a serious effort to comprehend. This is the soul of the French Symbolists' *poésie pure*. As the scientist Henri Poincaré attests (I am quoting Sitwell in the notes to her own poetry), "the accident of a rhyme can call forth a system", to which Sitwell adds, "sometimes a planetary system".

Villa has obviously discovered the world through the word. Rhymes of all kinds and metrical tricks of all sorts are what have organized his milky way, have fermented his theology of tiger and rose. The poet is a saltimbanque, and his greatest virtue is that he does not insist that we take him seriously. He is a god without laws, either for himself or for all others; he prefers the freedom of a vacuum wherein the balls may rise and fall because he wills their rise and their fall, not because of the law of gravity.

Some will be tempted to say that it is a pity, all this linguistic dexterity dedicated to non-sense. They will insist that Villa follow Anatole France's juggler's suit. But that is to make our poet unVilla. And after all there are poets and poets. And readers and readers.

ROLANDO S. TINIO