

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

The Parlement of Giraffes: Poems for Children-Eight to Eighty by Jose Garcia Villa

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Philippine Studies vol. 47, no. 4 (1999): 564–566

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Book Reviews



The Parlement of Giraffes: Poems for Children—Eight to Eighty. By Jose Garcia Villa. Tagalog Translation by Larry Francia. Edited by John Cowen. Pasig: Anvil Publishing, 1999.

It is perhaps a testament to a writer's genius that his or her works can be read and reread to suit different audiences. The plays of Shakespeare, for instance, yield new insights every time they are adapted for cinema, restaged as a different theatrical genre, translated into another language, modernized, bowdlerized, or even bastardized. In each production, a different "Shakespeare" emerges, sanctioned by and circulated in (to borrow from Stanley Fish) a host of "interpretative communities," whether postcolonial, neo-colonial, feminist, Marxist, nationalist, Christian, or plain liberal humanist.

In *The Parlement of Giraffes: Poems for Children—Eight to Eighty*, a new aspect of the late National Artist Jose Garcia Villa emerges. Edited by John Cowen, the book re-presents some 30 of Villa's poems as works for children. Those of us who are familiar with the image of Villa as the arrogant and eccentric iconoclast of Philippine poetry might initially be surprised by this book, but a moment's reflection on the poems in the collection will reveal the *enfant* behind the *terrible* that is Villa. The following poem, for instance, is at once simple, philosophical, and whimsical:

When, Nothing, is, so, well, said,
Or, so, well, done,

It, betrays, itself, and, becomes,
Something:

As, apples, by, Cezanne, or, just,
Lines, by, Mondrian.

(Of course, it would take an especially precocious child to recognize the allusions—and there are many more in the book.) Pervasive in the book is

the element of play. Villa plays with sounds (e.g., "musical as a sea-gull" from "First, a poem must be magical"), punctuation (e.g., "Sonnet in Polka Dots"), words ("from, pears, / pearls" from "From, peaches, are polar, bears, made"), images (e.g., "I have observed pink monks eating blue raisins"), ideas (e.g., "Observe me, I do not speak"), textuality (e.g., "The Emperor's New Sonnet" and "The Bashful One"), form (the adaptations like "The Vanishment" and "Seafood"), and his own literary output (e.g., "The, bright, Centipede" and "Centipede Sonnet").

Although a number of poems in the collection are either visionary utterances of the God-person relationship or imaginative and imagistic inscriptions of Villa's poetics—the stuff of graduate theses and the final exam—readers are asked to look at them through children's eyes and ears, to purge away any critical or academic presupposition (if that is possible at all), and to be sensitive to the sound and the *sense* (in the broadest meaning of the term) of words and letters—which is perhaps what poetry is all about.

At the same time, however, the richness of Villa's poems (and of Francia's translations) supplies the inveterate literary critic with objects of explication and analysis. One might, for example, explore the connections between Villa's infantile utterances and his formalism (which in the extreme seems to mean the abandonment of meaning altogether, in the adult sense of the word). Other critics might also want to show how Francia's translation of the poems sometimes elides the complexities of Villa's imagery and symbols (and from there build a case for the cultural and political particularity of language and the indeterminacy of meaning). For example, "essential," a key concept in Villa's poetics—and apparently, his ethics—is rendered simply as "kailangan," or necessary in the line, "Essential but secret like a rose" ("Kailangan, nguni't lihim katulad ng rosas").

But perhaps these lookouts (for loopholes?) are games for children aged 80—who, like the emperor and his adult subjects in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, might overlook, by looking too hard, what should be obvious—and "essential," even to a child of eight.

As for Francia's translations, these deserve another article altogether. They stand by themselves as poetic gems in Filipino. Reading them in isolation, one realizes the truth in the dictum that "translation is also invention." While they sometimes fail to reproduce Villa's puns (e.g., "slender as a bell" becomes "balingkinitan tulad ng isang batingaw"), they certainly capture the exuberance, playfulness, and inventiveness—the essence beneath the epithet—of Villa's poems. "If I wrote in Tagalog," Villa is quoted as saying after having read Francia's work in *55 Poems*, "my poems would have appeared just as Larry has written them!"

Francia's parleys with the English texts are interesting illustrations of the tightrope act of translating. He renders the key word *parlement* which Villa explains "is the French word for *speaking*," as *kapulungan*. In one stroke, he conveys the double meaning of the word, as conversation (*pulong*) and as

assembly (*lupon*). Where he cannot be exact, Francia weaves his own verbal magic specific to his medium. Thus in the example cited above, he substitutes alliteration for pun. When all else fails, Francia exploits his presumed readership's knowledge of both English and Filipino, as in the following lines from the previously unpublished "Farfelu":

it can be a bee too or
2
or it can be just you or
U.

(Villa)

maari rin itong maging isang bubuyog o
two
o basta maging you o
U.

(Francia)

If nothing else, these translations are a source of endless fascination for the bilingual reader, creative writer, and scholar and theorist.

An added, and perhaps the most attractive, feature of the book is Villa's line drawings, generously interspersed between pages of poetry. These illustrations, which Cowen compares to Joan Miro's, are a perfect complement to the poems—art mirroring art—and reveal yet another aspect of Villa's many-sided personality.

Villa once remarked, "Children, unlike Old Poets, see language in their innocence and bloom." *The Parlement of Giraffes* is an invitation to see language anew and to remember Villa, not as another dead and unread poet, but as a child "laughing, arm in arm [with God] / strolling upside down."

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The Cry of Balintawak: A Contrived Controversy. A Textual Analysis With Appended Documents. By Soledad Borromeo-Buehler. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1998. xv + 221 pages.

In 1968, a monument to commemorate the start of the Philippine revolution against Spain a little over a century earlier disappeared from its place in Caloocan City. It reappeared in the University of the Philippines in Diliman,