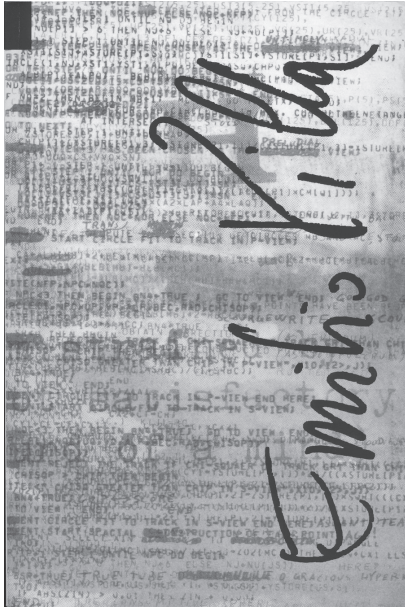


THE SELECTED POETRY OF EMILIO VILLA

Emilio Villa

Translated by Dominic Siracusa
Contra Mundum Press (\$33.50)



it's a grain, merely
a grain of wheat stolen from endless
bushels of chaff across the energetic

universe: and if you search for it you'll search
through a prodigal eternity: you'll find it when
the warm noise of empty time subsides.

(from "17 Variations on Themes Proposed for a Pure
Phonetic Ideology" [1955])

Hermetically dynamic, anciently postmodern, materially evanescent, marginally liminal, futuristically prehistoric, reclusively performative, vulgarly esoteric, erotically ascetic—and intensely, explosively, delightfully heteroglossic—this translation of the selected poetry of Emilio Villa relentlessly rewrites everything we think we know about twentieth-century poetics. To approach an understanding of Villa's life work requires reimagining what translation is and how language means. His work, in turn, underscores the impossibility of completion, of a collected whole:

poetry is memory of what is not
& what must not be; that is

the culminating, liminal Self
the Self as an incomplete cosmos
never to be completed

The manifesto "Poetry is" stands as one of the more traditional, recognizable poetic forms in the selection. Perhaps this explains why Villa composed it around 1989 on nine unnumbered folios, then left it in a box at a neighbor's house without considering its potential "mass" reproduction.

Villa lived from 1914 until 2003. He was one of the truly great visionaries of the twentieth century, a poet whose depth, breadth, and originality can only be matched by a few contemporaries the world knows a little more about: Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, Aimé Césaire, Edoardo Sanguineti.

The Selected Poetry includes a thorough, yet inevitably inexhaustive, forty-page bibliography of Villa's work, much of which shares the murky and tenuous provenance of "Poetry is." Scattered throughout Europe and the New World, or destroyed by the poet himself, Villa's collected work will arguably always remain undiscovered. Think Sappho, think Greek tragedy. Think Pompeii.

Villa worked avidly and regularly in a dozen languages to construct his poetic universe. He translated Homer's *Odyssey* and the Hebrew Bible into Italian. For him, every creative impulse invokes a mythic return to the Ur-moment of Creation. The bringing of a whalebone from the ocean shore into a cave serves as one of these archetypal moments. Consequently, every one of Villa's forays into the labyrinths of language endeavors to set off a poetic big bang. Ex nihilo, he ritualistically recreates and deconstructs singularity, haecceity, quiddity. From the beginning of "Linguistics" (*Yeah but After*, 1950), he declaims:

There's no more origins. Nor. Nor does one know if.
If there were origins and not even.

.....
who do you say originates origins in the touch in the accent
in the mortal dream of the necessary?

No, there's no more origins. No.
But

the provoked transit of ancient ideas—and impulses.

.....
place without stories.
Place where everyone.
And where the conscious.
And where the where.

Beginning with this concerted negation of origins, "Linguistics" culminates in the birthing of a cosmic and heteromorphic etymon "in the thirst / and in the thirst suited to fossil rocks lit / by Idumean phosphorescence, idol of Amorgos!"

In 1968, Villa composed a stunning poem that incorporates multiple layers of text and erasure. Mostly written in a fragmenting and computer scientific English, this palimpsest is entitled "Options. 17 Es-

chatological Madrigals Captured by a Sweetromatic Cybernetogamic Vampire, by Villadrome.” Think Sun Ra. Here is a brief fragment of one layer of the sixteen-page poem:

in a some musical War
of psychoplegogametes (chance)

at a some Disfinite Number (chance)
at a some Apomorphic Lymph (chance)
of the someversal Somebody Something

N.B. Underlying typed layer, handwritten words and erasures, sonically charged particles of speech that litter the text, directional arrows, and mathematical-linguistic equations not included. As with most of Villa’s oeuvre, so with the art of translation. One can reproduce the reproductions of his poems, but not adequately translate (fig.) the experiential nature of reading Emilio Villa.

As a result, Dominic Siracusa generally opts to translate (lit.) only Villa’s modern Italian into English, leaving Italian dialects, ancient languages (Greek, Latin, Sumerian, Akkadian), and other European tongues (English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, etc.) in their original. Attention, *chers lecteurs!* Villa wrote *beaucoup beaucoup* in French; there are pages and pages of untranslated Césairean profusion in his *Selected Poetry*.

It should be noted that Siracusa’s introduction to the life and work of this mercurial and sibylline master is excellent. And his deft, albeit necessarily “partial,” translations induce a curious effect, as if his translated Italian compels the English speaker to note the translated part of the heteroglossic, “original” whole.

For one installation in 1981, Villa self-translated a series of ten poems, “the walls of th; éb; és;” from Italian into ancient Greek, then cut up the

originals and put them in sealed plastic bags next to the translations:

and truly like a blind man I gave you
that certain and large part of me
as much as others need
so that others become the others
as much as the very Other.

Think Tiresias, think Cassandra. Also recall Giuseppe Ungaretti, who wrote “Lontano” in February 1917: “So far far away / like a blind man / they took me by the hand.” *The Selected Poetry* includes three articulations of the ten poems – ancient Greek, Italian, and English.

Five preferred titles for the selected poetry of Emilio Villa, other than or in addition to *The Selected Poetry of Emilio Villa: Absolute Hapax, Cuspids of Shrapnel, De-cap-it-ate the Words, Syllabic Labyrinths, and Vox hieroglyphica, vox labyrinthica*.

At the “end” of the tome, “Alphabetum coeleste” begins with a couple classic Villa textual-diagrammatic sketches (see his *Reformed Geometry*) which intimate the cosmological dimensions of the ensuing “poem,” which consists of a series of fourteen black and white photos. The broad expanse of a whiteboard in an empty room soon gives way to several lines of French, superimposed on what could either be geological close-ups or lunar surfaces: “this is the dead serpent,” “this is the burned sun,” “this is the subjugated moon.” Then one pays witness to an epic garbling and dissolving of text. Letters break down as they become embedded in these gray and grainy deserts. Capillaries of etymons, micro-organisms of meaninglessness. They intimate once having been part of language, once having meaning, but now enact a devastating and triumphant return to linguistic oblivion.

But you, dear readers, you can still return from oblivion.

— Kevin Carollo

