

Emilio Villa Reconsidered Multilingual Crossings, Primordial Modernities and Sacred Texts

Review of: Gianluca Rizzo (ed.), *Emilio Villa visto da entrambe le sponde dell'Atlantico*, Genoa, Editrice Zona, 2024, 142 pp., ISBN: 9788864387963, £17.00.

Bashaina Dumerant
Agincourt Press
bzd0084@auburn.edu
<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1492-040X>

Emilio Villa visto da entrambe le sponde dell'Atlantico is the product of the work by *Centro Studi Emilio Villa - Emilio Villa International Research Center*, whose origins date back to the isolating and uncertain times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past few years, despite the challenges of coordinating scholars across ten institutions and six countries, the editors have accomplished the complex task of keeping Villa's work at the forefront of scholarly discourse. Villa, a poet, translator, critic and visual artist, was long known more for his brilliant intellect, vivacious style and curmudgeonly persona than for his pedagogical efforts. This volume corrects that imbalance, bringing together nine essays first presented at the 2022 American Association for Italian Studies (AAIS) conference and subsequently published in the online journal *Rossocorpolingua*.

The collection is organized into three thematic sections. The first examines Villa's presence in Brazil and the United States, as explored in essays by Nayana Montechiari, Andrea Lombardi and Eleonora Bascherini, each addressing a different facet of Villa's multilingual work. In "Poesia è una scimmia che sta in Brasile": La produzione letteraria brasiliana di Emilio Villa', Nayana Montechiari argues that Villa's encounter with Brazil profoundly shaped his poetry, and through his anthropophagic translations and writings, he absorbed Brazilian culture, art and language, reworking them into a unique avant-garde poetics that both honored and betrayed tradition. Drawing on Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto Antropófago* and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's definition of anthropophagy, Montechiari proposes that a Brazilian anthropophagic translation of Villa's work and poetry should be read through this lens: devouring Brazilian culture and transforming it into something new. The essay closes on Villa's awareness that true fidelity to tradition requires betrayal, echoing the

anthropophagic principle of devouring and re-creating rather than passively imitating. This connects Villa's method to Brazilian avant-garde poetics rather than European models.

Andrea Lombardi's essay, 'Sonorizzare le foreste: Emilio Villa e l'avanguardia letteraria brasiliana', likewise asserts that Villa's Brazilian experience was foundational to his poetic development. Lombardi argues in favor of a direct, fruitful contact between the Brazilian concrete poet group Noigandres and Villa, even though we lack documentary evidence to support this encounter at this stage of his career. Villa's influence can be seen in the shared concerns with language, origins and translation. Through a close reading of *Mata-Borrão para Flavio Motta*, Lombardi demonstrates how Villa's hybrid idiolect, combining Portuguese sonorities with his surrealist-expressive voice, creates a 'living language' infused with Brazilian and African cultural imagery. Lombardi highlights significant conceptual affinities, particularly between Villa and Haroldo de Campos, whose searches for linguistic and civilizational "origins" parallel Villa's own.

In 'Emilio Villa e l'arte: Il contributo del poeta d'Affori alle esposizioni didattiche del Museu de Arte de São Paulo - MASP (1947-1952)', Eleonora Bascherini focuses on Villa's often overlooked but essential role in the early development of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP). She details how Villa helped create MASP's groundbreaking didactic section by overseeing materials, designing exhibition panels, coordinating logistics and writing the majority of captions for more than 20,000 images. Bascherini also examines the innovative educational exhibitions conceived by Villa and Pietro Maria Bardi, which blended images, texts and everyday objects to make art history accessible while dismantling hierarchies between "high" and "low" art. She examines three major exhibitions conceived by Villa: on the origins of art, the history of abstract ideas, and prehistoric and "primitive" cultures, arguing that these projects reflect his belief in art as a cyclical process shaped by continuity, rupture and the coexistence of opposites.

Lorenzo Mari complements this section with his essay 'Emilio Villa: Ur-traduttore o anti-traduttore? Questioni di traduzione nel dialogo tra Emilio Villa e il secondo Novecento statunitense', which examines Villa's engagement with American poetry and art, as well as the paradox of his presumed untranslatability. Mari presents an overview of the few existing English translations of Villa's works, including anthologies such as *Italian Poetry 1960-1980*, the 1981 special issue of *Invisible City* and the 2014 volume *The Selected Poetry of Emilio Villa*, showing how Villa's work intersected with American avant-garde poetry. He emphasizes a paradox in Villa: he is both a master translator (*ur-traduttore*) and a poet whose work resists translation (*anti-traduttore*). This tension underlies the concept of Villa's un-translatability, in which his work may be extremely difficult to fully render in another language, yet the process of translation is continually embedded in his poetry and art.

The second section examines Villa's approach to contemporary arts, engaging with his ideas on prehistoric art, ritual and religion, situating these within the conceptual frameworks of modernist experimentation. In 'L'arte dell'uomo primordiale: Il rito sacrificale condotto alla pura azione del simbolico', Marta Serena examines Villa's crucial essay *The Art of Primordial Man*. She argues that this text is vital for understanding Villa's artistic ideology and his conception of the origins (and purposes) of art. For Villa, art is a transformative, sacrificial practice that mediates between humans and the divine, embodying the tension between biological necessity and symbolic representation. The emergence of the symbol marks early humanity's traumatic detachment from its environment, causing a transition from real acts to representations that attempt to bridge the distance that separates self and world.

Serena concludes that Villa's broader poetics hinge on art's power to regenerate reality and define humanity's place within it.

In 'Un readymade primordiale: Emilio Villa e Marcel Duchamp', Carlo Alberto Petruzzi explores Villa's encounter with Marcel Duchamp and the parallels between their artistic philosophies. Petruzzi argues that Villa's fascination with prehistoric gestures, such as Neanderthals transporting a whale vertebra from the shore to a cave, mirrors Duchamp's concept of the readymade, particularly its emphasis on artistic selection and the transformation of ordinary objects into art. Although the two artists likely never met, Petruzzi contends that Duchamp's influence prompted Villa to develop experimental approaches to language.

Luis Rebaza-Soraluz's 'Primordialmente moderno: Emilio Villa, Jorge Eielson, il Perù antico e l'astrazione artistica del dopoguerra' introduces the notion of the *modern primordial* through Villa's exchange with Peruvian artist Jorge Eduardo Eielson, whose work draws on ancient quipus. Rebaza-Soraluz argues that while Eielson approached his art through modernist poetic physics, Villa, shaped by his interest in pre-Columbian, Andean and prehistoric cultures, interpreted it as an expression of primordial gestures, seeing knotting as a form of structural organization. Villa's framing of modern abstraction as rooted in primal human intelligence and creativity shaped Eielson's later work, in which the knot became a central artistic motif.

The third section delves into Villa's complex relationship with religious texts, particularly the Bible. In "'Il mondo è cattivo": Di un tema gnostico nel pensiero di Emilio Villa', Gian Paolo Renello examines Villa's use of Gnostic and mythological lexicons, arguing that these references express poetic strategy rather than personal faith. Renello traces Villa's early seminary education and later studies in ancient Middle Eastern languages, which led to his translations of Mesopotamian texts. He shows that Villa conceives the world as an impossible figure created not by reality but by art, a notion resonant with Gnostic cosmology, where the material world is a flawed copy shaped by the demiurge Jaldabaoth. Yet Renello stresses that Villa's use of Gnostic thought is conceptual, framing a dualistic artistic vision: the flawed world of the demiurge versus the liberated world imagined by the artist. For Villa, true art rejects imitation in favor of creation, offering an escape from the constraints of the given world.

The final essay, Cecilia Bello Minciocchi's 'Un'"abside ideale" elevata "nella nebbia baluginante dei millenni": Dall'arte al cinema: *Come si raccontava la Bibbia* di Emilio Villa', argues that Villa's little-known essay *How the Bible was Told* provides an essential key for understanding John Huston's 1966 film *The Bible*. Minciocchi highlights Villa's lifelong engagement with ancient languages, etymology and the search for primordial origins. She shows how Villa situates Huston's film within a long history of visual reinterpretations of biblical stories, from early Christian catacombs and mosaics to medieval illuminated manuscripts and sculpted portals. Rather than focusing on textual translation, Villa examines how visual forms convey biblical narratives to largely non-literate audiences. Cinema revitalizes these traditions, transforming static imagery into dynamic, emotionally resonant sequences that preserve the Bible's narrative and didactic power while infusing it with new visual vitality.

The book succeeds in illuminating the extraordinary breadth of Villa's intellectual, artistic and cultural projects, demonstrating why his work continues to demand and reward transnational, interdisciplinary scholarship. Across its three sections, the volume shows Villa not as an eccentric figure, but as a thinker whose engagement with languages, images, rituals and origins placed him at the crossroads of global avant-gardes. Whether tracing his transformative encounters with Brazil and the United States, examining his theories of primordial and modern art, or exploring

his reinvention of sacred narratives, the contributors reveal a creator for whom translation was both method and worldview. In doing so, the volume affirms Villa as a truly transatlantic figure whose work continues to generate new questions, new readings and new creative possibilities.