A Gerontologist's Idea of the World, Time, and the Cure for the Present: T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Wilfredo Pascua Sanchez, Wallace Stevens, Jose Garcia Villa, and Their Poems From or About Old Age

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Old age does not always engender a positive poetic response. In specific works by five poets—T.S. Eliot's "Gerontion," Robert Frost's "Directive," Wallace Stevens' "The Man With the Blue Guitar," Wilfredo Pascua Sanchez's "Adarna," and Jose Garcia Villa's "The Anchored Angel"—we get disparate views of the aging condition. We get a sense that old age is the ripe time for reflection on the meaning of the march of time. The poets in this study render their very specific judgment of the meaning of time, ranging from the wistful to the raging to the quietly accepting. This paper observes that the younger poets (at the time of the writing of the works in question) are relentless in their view of old age as a time of decay and decrepitude; the older poets (at the time of the writing of the works in question) are gentler, more optimistic about growing old; the passage of time for these poets has a moral dimension, with the past almost always perfect, and the present and the future awash in chaos and corruption; and that for these poets, there are ways of mitigating or making sense of this chaos in life, and the older personas in the poems consider these two as the best methods: *spirituality* and *art*.

KEYWORDS: old age and poetry, gerontology, spirituality and old age, art and old age, the passage of time in literature, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Wilfredo Pascua Sanchez, Wallace Stevens, Jose Garcia Villa

Consider an old man. Consider "time" or "history" for that old man. Consider his place in that flow. The past, the present, and the future must weigh differently for him. When he writes poetry, how does he sing of time and impending mortality? Will it be of the morbid, nostalgic sort? Or gentler and full of gratitude for having lived a life? Will poetry about time and old age by a younger man be any different?

Liver spots, wrinkles, aching joints, gray hair, and mortal knowledge have always inspired the writing of poetry. A tradition of it can actually be argued for—poetic ruminations, after all, seem like an apt recourse for going over the drooping details of the weathering body, the nostalgia for vanished youth, the keen preoccupation of what lies on the other side of the mortal divide. The tone for the subject matter varies, however, from the sense of regret and a yearning for a youthful second chance in William Butler Yeats' "When You Are Old"—

> When you are old and gray and full of sleep,
> And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
> And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
> Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

to the morose understanding of bodily pains and the biological breaking down in Matthew Arnold's "Growing Old"—

> It is to spend long days
> And not once feel that we were ever young.
> It is to add, immured
> In the hot prison of the present, month
> To month with weary pain.

to the acceptance of the coming end as natural and inevitable, such as in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Nature"—

> So Nature deals with us, and takes away
> Our playthings one by one, and by the hand
> Leads us to rest so gently, that we go
> Scarce knowing if we wish to go or stay,
> Being too full of sleep to understand
> How far the unknown transcends the what we know.

to an acknowledgment of it as a time for playful rebellion against the tyranny of convention, such as found in Jenny Joseph's "Warning"—

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick the flowers in other people's gardens . . .

to the rare expression of jubilance regarding old age's coming in Lu Yu's "Written in a Carefree Mood"—

Old man pushing seventy,
In truth he acts like a little boy,
Whooping with delight when he spies some mountain fruits,
Laughing with joy, tagging after village mummers;
With the others having fun stacking tiles to make a pagoda,
Standing alone staring at his image in the jardinière pool.
Tucked under his arm, a battered book to read,
Just like the time he first set out to school.

I say "rare" because old age does not always exactly engender a positive poetic response. For instance, in the article "Images of Old Age in Poetry" published in *The Gerontologist* in 1971, the researchers Mary Sohgen and Robert J. Smith have written of a study of the texts of 127 poems listed under "old age" in *Granger's Index of Poetry*. They indicated strongly negative attitudes about physical, emotional, social losses, and they noted in their conclusion that the reading of poetry, a sensitizing experience, "serves to reinforce negative stereotypes persistent in the media of mass culture."

That may be. In specific works by five poets studied in this paper (T.S. Eliot's "Gerontion," Robert Frost's "Directive," Wallace Stevens' "The Man With the Blue Guitar," Wilfredo Pascua Sanchez's "Adarna," and Jose Garcia Villa's "The Anchored Angel"), we get disparate views of the aging condition, or of the unfolding of life as told from somebody in the throes of this very condition. Always in the ruminations by the aforementioned poets, we get a sense that old age is the ripe time for reflection on the meaning of the march of history, of time. The poets in this study render their very specific judgment of the meaning of time, ranging from the wistful to the raging to the quietly accepting—viewpoints that are *almost always* centered on the fact of a betraying body which is now showing signs of decay. It pays

to note, however, that these viewpoints can be critiqued by taking into consideration the ages of the poets writing these specific works during their specific time of creation.

What I have gleaned from the five works are the following general observations:

1. The younger poets (at the time of the writing of the works in question) are relentless in their view of old age as a time of decay and decrepitude;
2. On the other hand, the older poets (at the time of the writing of the works in question) are gentler, more optimistic about growing old;
3. The passage of time for these poets has a moral dimension, with the past almost always perfect, and the present and the future awash in chaos and corruption;
4. According to these poets, there are ways of mitigating or making sense of this chaos in life, and the older personas in the poems consider these two as the best methods: **spirituality** and **art**.

In this paper, I shall try to explicate the meanings of the poems considered for study, and at the same time consider how they exactly reflect the four observations I have made above.

In T.S. Eliot's "Gerontion," old age becomes a metaphor for the inevitable corruption of history, his image of an old man ruing an empty life in a world that has gone astray, indicative perhaps of Eliot's own view of what ageing entrails. This is typical, of course, of the high modernists—of which Eliot was an iconic figure.

Eliot wrote "Gerontion" in 1920 when he was only 32 years old, and there lies something to think about: a young man has penned a powerful, if damning, poem about old age set in a time of great decay. What to make of it? (In later poems, especially the suite that makes up *Four Quartets*, published in 1943 when he was 55 years old, he is increasingly hopeful for man's redemption—which may be attributed to his later embrace of Christianity.)

It is best to think of the poem first as being situated in a period of history—the earliest years of the 20th century—that had seen so much ferment and change. The old institutions and the old beliefs and the old conventions were dying or were being leveled to considerable death. Think of the fundamental changes that burst into the first thirty years of that century—the reordering of distance via Charles Lindbergh and Henry Ford, the plunge into the unconscious via

Sigmund Freud, the discovery of radioactivity via Marie Curie, the burst into the atomic age via Albert Einstein, the startling magic of moving pictures via Eadweard Muybridge, the revolution into (often bloody) class warfare via Karl Marx, the abstractions in art via Pablo Picasso, and the nimble linguistic games in literature via James Joyce. The Great War of 1914-1915 (otherwise known as the First World War) until then proved unequalled in its widespread devastation—a loss of so much humanity and a plunging into technology-assisted barbarity that seemed to prove true a nihilistic reading of Friedrich Nietzsche's statement that "God is dead." Imagine Eliot sitting down one day to begin the first draft of this poem, all these things weighing heavily into his consciousness.

And so we begin this dramatic monologue by a gerontion—an old man (the word comes from the Greek, which specifically refers to a disrespectful term for old men)—who acknowledges, from the start, his wasting away at present, cognizant of an approaching end (the epigraph, perhaps a deliberate misquotation from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, recalls solace being given to a man awaiting execution). He is being humored out of cantankerousness by a youth who reads to him (I find that contrast in age telling), and finally, he wishes for some kind of replenishment:

> Here I am, an old man in a dry month
> Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.

The first stanza moves on to consider the lot his life has taken. At its basic level, the lines speak of his life as somebody who has not done anything worthwhile, which would have been enough to amount to a lived life:

> I was neither at the hot gates
> Nor fought in the warm rain
> Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
> Bitten by flies, fought.

Here is an empty man contemplating an empty end in an empty time. And yet, farther on in our reading of the poem, when its take on history becomes clearer, we go back to these lines and get a jolt from a new insight upon rereading: the old man's consideration spans centuries—the "hot gates" he speaks of may be that of the Greek battle at Thermopylae, a crucial event in Western civilization that speaks of holding fast against the encroachment of Persian "barbarians"; and

being "knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass" pertains to the Edwardian adventures in world exploration. This is a man who weighs all of history—and later on, we discover that he has found it wanting. It is of course, easy enough to be scornful of such bleak assessment of history. Who is this old man to tell us what is so? Does he even have a handle on keen, clear truth? And yet we get this somewhere in the poem: "I would meet you upon this honestly." This is an honest man talking, and his confession comes not from "any concitation of the backward devils." What he has to say bears reading and pondering over.

From that brief, albeit contemplative, biographical sketch in the first stanza, the gerontion sees what surrounds him, perhaps as a projection of his own decrepitude, the harsh physical reality of living in "a decayed house," which resembles a hodgepodge of dreary places (an "estaminet," for example, is a shabby café), and that is bordered by the jagged, dirty edges of "rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds…."

And then, before going into a startling monologue that contains the exquisite details of his damning worldview, we get a swift break—a stanza onto its own, indented to create a contemplative emphasis:

> I an old man,
> A dull head among windy spaces.

which indicates a promise of expanse, a vastness that moves, and yet: that dot of "a dull head," an unmovable thing in this undulating space—old age as stubborn inertness.

And from that, the poem jumps into five stanzas that distill history as a degenerating actuality, perhaps from the loss of grounding spirituality. That spirituality—in Eliot's poem, clearly Christian—is foregrounded by the biblical-sounding pronouncements in the third stanza (allusions to the "word," the mention of "Christ the tiger," the significance of "juvescence of the year," which is Eliot's playful reinvention of "juvenescence"), as well as in the symbolisms contained in the fourth (the flowering dogwood is considered by many Christians as a religious symbol because of its showy cross-like shape and often because it blossoms during the springtime Easter season, and the judas tree, in myth, is the tree from which Judas allegedly hanged himself).

But what is important about the third stanza is this insight ("Signs are taken for wonders…") into the eventual hollowness or muteness of the marvels we believe in, "[t]he word within a word,

unable to speak a word,/Swaddled with darkness…" (The "marvel" being Christ the child, of course—helpless, wordless, useless.) This is particularly striking, given a youthful beginner's belief in a ferocious spirituality (the image presented here is that of a "tiger"), which ends—by depraved May—digested ("to be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk"—quite like the empty ritual of communion) by shadowy figures represented by the boarders of the same house the old man lives in (Mr. Silvero, Hakagawa, Madame de Tornquist, Fraulein von Kulp—names suggestive of the sinister).

In the fifth stanza, the old man paints history as "cunning," "contrived," a deceiver "with whispering ambitions," something that guides "by vanities." History is likened to a woman who deals in futility, someone who gives "when our attention is distracted," and when she does give, the very act itself "famishes the craving." The old man conceives of history as having become nonsensical:

> …. Unnatural vices
> Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
> Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.

It is important to note, in my estimation, that the old man refers to history as a woman. It is not too difficult then to make a leap to understanding the sixth stanza's sudden segue to a rumination of love lost:

> I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
> To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
> I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
> Since what is kept must be adulterated?
> I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch:
> How should I use it for your closer contact?

Here is an impotent man remembering lost passions. The imagery in this jarring memory is sexual, tactile, something involves all of the senses, but all of it irrevocably lost. The old man rues that all of these have been removed from him, having lost all that beauty "in terror," which is "terror in inquisition." Is this beauty, the thing that has to be "adulterated" in order to be kept, the corrupted history he has come to condemn? And where does this corruption of history come from? We learn: from a loss of a grounding faith, from the disappearance of the spiritual—so much so that the Christ "springs in the new year," not as a compassionate figure, but a devouring one, a tiger. All of

history is heading to an end, and the end is not redemption.

But in the last stanza, we sense that the old man's final acknowledgment of tragedy comes from the fact that history rams on, unheeding of warnings of its own corruption (the "wilderness of mirrors"). But he understands the unfortunate momentum—

> … What will the spider do,
> Suspend its operations, will the weevil
> Delay? …

In the end, this is where he finds himself: "a sleepy corner" in a draughty house, looked over by a careless housekeeper (a woman who "keeps the kitchen, makes tea, / Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter"), in company of transients. And finally, in the end, after the long monologue strong in its condemnation, bedevils us with a disclaimer, that all these are just "[t]houghts of a dry brain in a dry season."

Old age, it seems for the young Eliot, is a time of frantic contemplation of man's place in time and history—but since time and history are corrupted, there can be no place, only a loss of anchor, not just for one man, but for all of humanity. It is a dreary consideration of old age. And becomes even drearier because it presents man as a passive observer of things around him (which is history), and becomes *even drearier* that he resents it for what it means—or does not mean—to him. That his prescription (for it is a prescription) for this bankruptcy is a return to a state of spirituality strikes me as even more passive, even a betrayal to Modernist principles, a strange longing for a kind of Deux ex machina for angst that does not come.

In many ways, Robert Frost's "Directive" is the *gentler* cousin of Eliot's "Gerontion," albeit it is as equally damning as that poem with regards its consideration of unfolding history. But at least Eliot is direct in his assessment for why history falters: it is because of the loss of spirituality.

In Frost's poem, we can ask the same thing: what is the reason for the present's state of "confusion"? Is it spirituality? That Frost ends his poem with the metaphor of the Grail—that cup said to be used by Christ during the Last Supper, and according to legend, the very same cup that collected his blood during his crucifixion—may skew this poem towards the very same concern as Eliot's.

Frost wrote "Directive" in the twilight of his years, and made it a part of his 1947 collection *Steeple Bush*, when he was already 73 years

old and during a time of great personal loss. (His wife had just died of a heart attack and his only surviving son had just committed suicide). It is understandable then that in a close reading of "Directive," we finally note that Frost's project is ultimately to make a kind of fetish of the past—or at least the memory of the past—as something inherently better than the present. But unlike the Eliot poem, this is an old man's poem *by an old man* who is all-too-aware that what he is writing is actually an illusion (the past without details), but still clings anyway to that past.

What it has to say is simple: the poet is giving directions to a house, an old one, which is metaphorical of all that has vanished. The monologist travels a familiar road back to an old house where he once lived, and as he journeys past familiar but now forgotten landscapes and byways, he becomes aware that this journey back to the past is more ideal than the present he is living in.

It helps to consider where the starting point is for the imagined reader who is to take this journey, for whom the poet is giving directions. Both the first and last lines of the poem give us a hint of that starting point. From the last line, it is a place (or time) of "confusion," which is reflected by the exhortation that bursts from the first line—"Back out of all this now too much for us"—which signals retreat from everything that confuses. But to where?

> Back in a time made simple by the loss
> Of detail, burned, dissolved, broken off
> Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather…

This is the past—a weathered one, which the poet tries to bring up from the similarly weathered hazes of memory. This past is a house, but it is something that is caught in the tail-end of changes (note the changes denoted by the negative qualities):

> There is a house that is no more a house
> Upon a farm that is no more a farm
> And in a town that is no more a town.

This flux of "being" aside, the poet notes that it is difficult to journey to this house, and the only way to get there perhaps is to become lost (although becoming lost here is hinted at as being ideal, since it is something that your guide—the poet—has, at his heart, as his primary mission). The road, the poet says, "should have been a quarry" that the town (symbolic of the present) has long since given

up—"[g]reat monolithic knees the former town / Long since gave up pretense of keeping covered."

The next two stanzas cover much of the journey the reader undertakes to get to this house—each geographical detail painting an immense clash of past and present—the "wear of iron wagon wheels" beside the ledges versus the "the chisel work of an enormous glacier"; the "wood's excitement over you" being nothing compared to the greater march of what came before ("They think too much of having shaded out / A few old pecker-fretted apple trees"). In this journey through the landscape, on towards that house, the poet reminds us of things that have come this way before, treading this same road (his past self, for example, who is more assured, more positive and gregarious):

> Make yourself up a cheering song of how
> Someone's road home from work this once was,
> Who may be just ahead of you on foot
> Or creaking with a buggy load of grain.

This glimpse of what came before is reassuring, like a welcoming ghost leading you to what was once certain and energetic and purposeful and bountiful, in contrast to what the road is now: forgotten, overran with neglect. Frost seems to be saying, "The present is traitor to the promise of what came before. The past is always glorious because it is yet untainted by this treachery." This is magnified by the emphatic lines that seem to leap out from the rest of this poem:

> The height of the adventure is the height
> Of country where two village cultures faded
> Into each other. Both of them are lost.

Here the adventures of history and the changes that come with it that lead to the bankrupt present become a process of erasure, of negation.

Only in the acknowledgment of being lost in this landscape, however, does one finally come, paradoxically, to the destination, and the poet exhorts the traveler to make the ultimate gesture of exiting from all that he had come from, to "pull in your ladder road behind you" and also to "put a sign up CLOSED." It smacks of hermetic romance. Only in shuttering away the present, to be lost in the very house of the past, can one finally make oneself "at home," even if the place itself is dotted only with relics ("a house

that is no more a house") and ruinations—a small field "no bigger than a harness gall," a "children's house of make-believe," some "shattered dishes underneath a pine," the "belilaced cellar hole," and so on and so forth… The poet proclaims these as evidences of a "house in earnest," which contains both our destiny and our source of replenishment. And in the middle of this house, lying in secret, is the aforementioned metaphor of the Grail, which is memory, and not the state of spirituality (borrowing from Eliot) that I have hinted at earlier. Here we are merely told that if we persevere, we can partake of glorious remembering—and only then can we be whole again.

Frost insists that the Grail, which occupies the metaphorical center of his poem's ending, is the wholehearted partaking of the past, illusory it may be, which is antidote to the confusions of the present. In Wilfredo Pascua Sanchez's "Adarna," however, to drink from the Grail (which, this time, takes the form of the magical bird from Philippine mythology and the life-giving blood wrung from its broken neck) is to partake of the (eventual horror) of immortality—an endlessness of future time.

Sanchez wrote "Adarna" as part of a collection that won Second Place in the 1975 Palanca Awards for Poetry in English (when he was only 31). Here you can see a young man contemplating of death, old age, and decrepitude, and contrasts these with a young man's bedeviled grappling with responsibility, temptation, and encounters in an unwanted quest that are etched in pain; it dwells as well on the tantalizing fantasy of escape from all that, only to give the realization that the escape is its own unpredicted horror.

It is also, upon close reading, a meditation on art. Art as the grail, the bird of magic.

The poem is a recounting of the popular mythological journey of three brothers, all of them princes. There is, of course, a focus on one prince (in the myth he is named Don Juan; in this poem, he is named O, or Prince Omega[1])—and O's painful and cathartic monologues in the narrative is the emotional crutch the poem leans on.

We are, of course, already informed (even before reading the poem, at least if you know Philippine Spanish colonial mythology) of the particulars of this story. The king is sick, and his three sons are then sent on a perilous quest to find the cure: the magical Adarna bird—the "cinnabar" (mercury), "Adamantine" (hard as diamond) bird—whose songs can cure anyone of grave illness. Of the two older brothers, the poem does not say much, although mythology fills in the blanks and informs us of their failures in the quest, and

their ultimate acts of treachery over their successful and kind-hearted younger brother. Their treachery is not the poem's point: this one is centered on the inner demons of the youngest, most favored prince—and uncovers a twist that details his own act of treachery. The bird, we are finally told, is the poem's Holy Grail—and its powers do not just rest on healing; they have repercussions as well on time (or at least the consideration of time and its passing).

The poem's first part details what is known of the magical bird—that it is a "Bird of Death" (capable of turning the unsuspecting into stone, once entranced and made to fall asleep by its singing), as well as a "Bird of Life" (capable of giving immortality, if *seized* by the throat and made to sing). ("Seizing" is a recurring objective correlative in the poem.) What is apparent in close analysis is the emphasis on the double-nature of the bird's "singing"—that it can lead to either life or death, that it is death when received passively, that it is life when it is seized. The first part also contains a coda near the end that gives us an idea of what the Bird is finally symbolic of—life itself, and the exhortation we get (the "carpe diem" of the poem's fifth part) about seizing it. Also this: what is most important about it is the "singing."

What of "singing"? What is it a metaphor of? Poetry? Art? Perhaps, generally, the hard and labored pursuit of the artistic, with the knowledge of the weight of tradition? (This reminds me of Harold Bloom's contention of the "anxiety of tradition," which is the very engine of literary production and its evolution.) The beginning of the second part alludes to this—

> Thus laboring day and night
> Lonely sons struggling to go one better
> Than their fathers, risking adventurous wounds…

The search for the Adarna—the antidote to decrepitude and mortality—can be said to be the search for immortality in the artistic. But there is a price to pay:

> And all this time, the journey
> Exhausted and took him nearer to himself
> Like all concentric journeys
> Into the middle of things
> No sooner than out of its horrid depths
> A plethora of monsters called into question
> Laughingly imploring
> Is it this that he was sent out on a mission for…

The price of song/poetry (the price of possessing the magical bird) is self-knowledge—and, it would also seem, *an acknowledgment of one's inner demons*. To undertake that journey is to do an exhausting confrontation from the depths of the self, which attempts to question the journeying hero of his strongest resolve regarding the quest. The stanza here also presents to us this idea that to go on a journey like this is to start moving towards the destination, towards an end—and there is a reason why the hero of Sanchez's version of the tale is named Prince Omega, or O: from the Greek, he is the embodiment of "the end." Even his place in poetry, he comes to symbolize the ultimate end, perilous and hard his journey may be to get to where he is ("…hold up your wheel and ride rough-shod / Past calloused alphabets that the godheads exhaled / That he and no one else /Subscribed in cracked syllables…"). It is a journey he must take regardless of anything, it is something that rightfully measures him ("That's his fitting cross to track the diamond / Flawless, surpassing the pale marquise / And bluest vowel of opposing cults…"), if only to continue the legacy of his father or of what came before ("… his father's fate / Rescinded like a crushing O / As driven he was, no holding back / And nothing can hold him back / Except that old man skulking in awed silence").

The third party contains a rumination over the possibility of Prince O not leaving to take the journey. This alternative does not seem particularly joyful. Life without this journey becomes an existence fraught in shadows and uncertainty ("… only time's / Chiaroscuros will show: labyrinthine caves"), where meaning is lost and confusion and small terrors reign, unless the journey is started ("Masks and symbols in a calamitous heap / O-rings, rockets, uranium farms / The hierarch's clock ticking tangled ultimatums / A few exhilarating climaxes ensconced / In empty-handedness, a sweet cipher / Of closed fingertips melting down / The bulk of his portals in pendulous brick…"), or even where "sybaritic moulds" (e.g., a richness of luxurious pleasure) may be had, but it becomes a "guardianed cage / [a]nd life's every moment's granite girdle / [t]iptoeing under lock and key," so much so that "dying would be as good as living."

And so, having "squealched in a stale vacuum of expectancies" to the journey our hero goes to find the "unhumbled bird." The journey commences, our hero suffers the ravages ("the vowel shrunken / Into an eyeball, a dot, an interregnum"), the days and places pass ("Marking time, counting days / Severed depths, cleft horseshow losing thread / Inconsonant with time…")—but the very act of journeying, of finding the song, sets him free.

Always, however, the specter of failure. Of life, of the quest, as a failure. In the fourth part of the poem, Prince Omega gives us his first direct address from this perilous journey to song/self ("Lost in a dazzling forest of mirrors"—which recalls, perhaps aptly, Eliot's "wilderness of mirrors" in "Gerontion"). For him, this journey is something from "the deepest of despair," and completing the quest seems futile, "a pendulum afraid to come into full circle." What accounts for this? He remembers tradition, of what came before, all of it dying (his father's "gaunt face / Etched in despair / An old man with a long beard skulking / In the shadow of stones"). And yet,

> If he couldn't avail of the magical cure
> It is unlikely he would live
> Lands tranquilized, lost in darkness
> In the wrangle of the dysfunctional

And always, like a threat that consumes our hero, the wrenching figure or vision of the father wasting away—decrepitude, old age, a waning tradition, muteness, a specter without poetry or song.

In the beginning of the poem's fifth part, the Omega Prince succeeds in capturing the magic bird, and still the fraught journey does not end there; dangers remain, and even the prize, already in his hand, promises betrayal:

> And yet not daring to close his eyes
> Afraid the frail-psyched bird trembling in hand
> Feigning death, would betray him

One imagines the prince (the "prince of despair and lonely migrations") dead-tired and flailing in his solitary journey, the path going back home endlessly teeming with danger and perhaps disease and the constant smell of death ("grop[ing] his way / Into his paralyzed land"). There are temptations, and in this stanza, it takes the form of a woman in a dream "exhort[ing] him to carpe diem," which leads us back to the seizing theme made prominent in the first part of the poem. He holds the bird in his hand to give his father life; but also he holds the bird in his hands to give him renewed strength, too.

The irony of the poem lies in the fact that the magical bird promises life when it is seized, and death when it is not. Prince Omega seizes—

> That magical bird he caught

And grasping it by its throat
Broke its singing blood.
It poured into his own throat
Like a sieve…

—but this act of seizing also becomes his biggest act of betrayal, not just because he disregards the original quest (he betrays the father), but because also in so doing, he betrays himself by giving himself a terrible gift he could not anticipate. We know that he returns home empty-handed, in "a hushed voice," "chastened," to a land which has now become (from a mere "dazzling forest") a "congested island of mirrors," a metaphorical shorthand of a person guilty of betrayal, and for which he explicates. Prince Omega says he has killed the magical bird—both the Bird of Life and Bird of Death—to attain immortality at a grave moment of need, but finds out in the end that this immortality is a ranker reality, because death in his final estimation *is better*.

He had "shuddered" upon drinking the bird's blood because—

How so close to death it left me with no choice
Seeing the face of the beautiful woman
I'll marry, but whose beauty I will long outlive
Seeing day to day the anguish
Bequeathed to my orphaned land
Lengthen like a shadow, shadowing me
And the dead desperate for attention, taunting
Pinpointing me in the direction of death
Where, no matter what,
The shut door is closed to me forever

To be mortal (a "simplicity" … "[a]mong satisfying lands / Purged, inured to toxins of despair"), is the principal wish of Sanchez's hero, almost the antithesis of Eliot's wasted man, or the delusions of Frost's fetishist.

But we go back to that hidden theme of the magical bird as metaphorical for song, for poetry, for Art. Something that augurs death if unseized, and life if seized. Something that makes us confront our "plethora of monsters" from the "horrid depths" of our "concentric journeys into the middle of things." Something that revitalizes, but also something that is dangerous—it tempts with its promise of immortality, of release—Art as the best method for living forever. And yet also the very horrors of that achievement. Still, in the final analysis, Sanchez proves unsatisfying in threading the loose threads of these associations—which cannot be said of Wallace

Stevens' project.

Like Sanchez, Wallace Stevens pinpoints to Art as the glue—the Grail—to confronting the future and the present, but unlike Sanchez, he has a different sensibility and take of it. Whereas Sanchez suggests that the life-giving immortality Art can bring can be tinged in regret and darkness, Stevens says otherwise—that only through Art can a life be at its truest. We must also take note that Stevens was an old man when he came to his truest form as a poet—but his poetry signals a more positive take on life (and history) than the young Eliot or the older Frost. In fact, the literary critic Harold Bloom considers The Man with the Blue Guitar [the book as opposed to the title poem included in that collection] as the poet's "triumph over ... literary anxieties," and that "the poet … [have] weathered his long crisis, and at 58 was ready to begin again."

In the "Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens posits that poetry is the antidote to the world that comes to us bathed in chaos. For him, in the imagination, "reality" can best be reconstructed and perceived. Meaning comes from this, and from nothing else:

> The man bent over his guitar,
> A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.
>
> They said, "You have a blue guitar,
> You do not play things as they are."
>
> The man replied, "Things as they are
> Are changed upon the blue guitar."
>
> And they said then, "But play, you must,
> A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
>
> A tune upon the blue guitar
> Of things exactly as they are."

Here in this poem is an old man with a guitar being provoked by an audience to sing of the world as it is—but he refutes them by saying that the guitar will sing of the world the way it wants to sing of it. This is Steven's answer to having order in the chaos of the world.

The poem is long, written in thirty-three parts, and we can best understand this as a dialogue between three perceived personas: the man with the guitar, the audience that listens to him, and the poet that massages (and comments on) their contributions to the conversation. But everything is simply about one thing: Stevens, in this poem,

was concerned with the imagination and what he considers to be its transformative power over us. (For this, he is in fact often called "a philosopher of the aesthetic.") What this means is that, at least for Stevens, reality is what is actively produced because of what we imagine. That while we go on with our lives, we are always in the process of actively perceiving the world, making sense of what is otherwise chaos. For Stevens, this is our biggest undertaking, our purpose: to be passionately engaged in making meaning (through Art) and to make world become coherent.

In this project, he continues the Modernist's allergy to religion as the maker of meaning. (He is different from Eliot in this regard.) For him, religion no longer suffices, and in fact, in his idea of "supreme fiction," Stevens tries to replace the idea of God—which he says is known to be fiction but is willfully believed by people anyway. For him, poetry is now the supreme fiction—that is, it is the "supreme fusion of the creative imagination and objective reality."

In "Sunday Morning," for example, he replaces Christianity with nature. But probably the key to understanding the poetics of Stevens is "The Idea of Order in Key West," where he writes about strolling the beach with a friend and finding a woman singing to the ocean. The persona in that poem notes that what the girl is doing is creating order out of the chaos by fashioning a song about it. Song and poetry, according to Stevens, is order—an idea that is clearer than the muddle of Sanchez's "Adarna."

"The Man with the Blue Guitar" is an attempt to further his philosophy—that the poet's purpose is to interpret the outside world of thought and feeling through the imagination. For Stevens, the blue guitar is a metaphor for the power of imagination, which, in turn, was "the power of the mind over the possibility of things" and "the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal."

Again, what is the poem about? It is about a singer, and the poem is his way of articulating his world, a chaotic one that somehow becomes meaningful once its story is strummed out of the blue guitar. Here, the singer voices his "personal woes in a world of harsh reality: a lost love, the cruelty of police officers, oppression at the hands of white folk, [and] hard time." The objective reality is discordant. But when he sings about it, the discordance vanishes and meaning is made. (One way we could see this happening are in the parts of the poem where Stevens seems to be describing objective reality. In these parts, his lyricism ceases. But when he is in the subjective mode of the imagination, his lines sing with concordance. Consider:

Do not speak to us of the greatness of poetry,
Of the torches wisping in the underground,

Of the structure of vaults upon a point of light.
There are no shadows in our sun,

Day is desire and night is sleep.
There are no shadows anywhere.

The earth, for us, is flat and bare.
There are no shadows. Poetry

Exceeding music must take the place
Of empty heaven and its hymns,

Ourselves in poetry must take their place,
Even in the chattering of your guitar.

This is the audience clamoring for "things as they are" strummed out by the man with the blue guitar. The effect is discordant. Compare to the lyricism we find in the guitarist's speech, as he beholds a world, not as it is, but something transformed by the blue guitar:

The vivid, florid, turgid sky,
The drenching thunder rolling by,

The morning deluged still by night,
The clouds tumultuously bright

And the feeling heavy in cold chords
Struggling toward impassioned choirs,

Crying among the clouds, enraged
By gold antagonists in air—

I know my lazy, leaden twang
Is like the reason in a storm;

And yet it brings the storm to bear.
I twang it out and leave it there.

What sets apart Stevens for me from the other poems is his positivity about the change in life. "The Man With the Blue Guitar" is in essence a repudiation of the dismal attitude of "Gerontion," or the escapist fantasy of "Directive." For Stevens, the two specific provocations in life—pain and evil—are actually part of life, and are

necessary aspects of it, and in fact, seconding Nietzshe, he believes that evil is both inspirational and profitable to imagination. (In his last poetry collection, he finally also reflected on the mundane as capable of sublime.)

In some ways, like a roundabout vision of Wallace Stevens', the works of Jose Garcia Villa can be considered the embodiment of poetry as the lens by which the world can be reconstructed and reordered. (Although one can make the argument that the world through Villa's poetry is not only reconstructed and reordered, but regurgitated and made beautiful madness through the prism of poetry.)

This can be seen in "The Anchored Angel," in particular. The poem, collected in *Selected Poems and New*, which was published in 1958, first saw print (without commas) in 15 September 1954 as the lead poem in *The Times Literary Supplement* in London, England when Villa was 46 years old—not quite an old man, still relatively young—but this was to be his last book at the height of his reign as the premier poet of the avant garde in Greenwich Village in New York. (His last book was *Appassionista: Poems in Praise of Love*, published in 1979, right after his reputation as a poet in the West had considerably declined—although his literary star continued to shine brightly in the Philippines. He was proclaimed National Artist for Literature only in 1973.)

In "The Anchored Angel" (which Sanchez's "Adarna" echoes in idiosyncracies and sometimes syntax, although Villa himself echoes much of Eliot's "Gerontion"), Villa takes God (as opposed to Steven's replacement of God or religion with poetry as "supreme fiction") and he anchors the Divine to the ordering magic of Art ("verb-verb, noun-noun"):

And,lay,he,down,the,golden,father,
(Genesis',fist,all,gentle,now)
Between,the,Wall,of,China,and,
The,tiger,tree,(his,centuries,his,
Aerials,of,light),…
Anchored,entire,angel!
He,in,his,estate,miracle,and,living,dew,
His,fuses,gold,his,cobalts,love,
And,in,his,eyepits,
O,under,the,liontelling,sun—
The,zeta,truth—the,swift,red,Christ.

By the last line of the poem, Villa finally makes God human—in a sense saying that to understand the divine, one must start by fleshening it, by giving it carnal dimension. In other words, this poem

is essentially the entire act of sex rendered to poetry, rendering sex as akin to poetry, rendering God to order, rendering the chaos to divine order. This is echoed by Luis H. Francia in his Introduction to *Doveglion*, Penguin's volume of Villa's complete works, where he writes: "In 'The Anchored Angel,' in my estimation a great poem, we witness a peerless musicality, muscular language, startling imagery, and a fusion of transcendent and erotic love…" Francia goes on to say, "The poem ends with the stunning and iconoclastic portrait of a complete Messiah." Consider:

—Or,there,ahead,of,love,vault,back,
And,sew,the,sky,where,it,cracked!
And,rared,in,the,Christfor,night,
Lie,down,sweet,by,the,betrayer,tree.
To-fro,angel! Hiving,verb!
First-lover-and-fast-lover,grammatiq:
Where,rise,the,equitable,stars,the,roses,of,the,zodiac,
And,rear,the,eucalypt,towns,of,love:
—Anchored,Entire,Angel:
Through,whose,huge,discalced,arable,love,
Bloodblazes,oh,Christ's,gentle,egg: His,terrific,sperm.

If God is *all* of time and history ("…his,centuries,his,/ Aerials,of,light …"), Villa says there is a way to make sense of all this glorious chaos and mystery ("The,sun,the,hermit's,seizures, / And,all,the,saults,zigzags,and / Sanskrit,of,love"), and comes up with the same solution as Sanchez and Stevens: art, or poetry. But in this case, this is "poetry" ("To-fro,angel! Hiving,verb! / First-lover-and-fast-lover,grammatiq…") that can be embodied by something even more physical: sex.

In the final analysis, this is what is apparent enough in all five poems, all seen by old men on the verge: history, the passage of time, or the present is corrupt or undergoing corruption. Life can lead to decrepitude, literally and metaphorically.

And all poets in this study give an eventual cure for it: For Eliot, it is spirituality, which has been lost. For Frost, it is memory of the past, and he urges a journeying towards it. For Sanchez, it is the seizing of life and of art, but posits that this can contain its own betrayals. For Stevens, it is nature or poetry, which can replace God. And for Villa, it is poetry *and* sex, which is God made flesh. I like the older poets better; the younger ones are all gloom, they miss the point of what life and time and the march of history are really all about: a celebration—a carnal, artistic, or whatever else that Holy Grail becomes, which

makes it worth of this quest called living.

END NOTE

[1] This is reminiscent of Arthur Rimbaud's "mysterious origins" and colors he considers for the vowels in "Voyelles," and for O, he writes that it is blue and that,

> O, suprême Clairon plein des strideurs étranges,
> Silences traversés des [Mondes et des Anges]:
> —O l'Oméga, rayon violet de [Ses] Yeux!

Translated:

> O, sublime Trumpet full of strange piercing sounds,
> silences crossed by [Worlds and by Angels]:
> —O the Omega! the violet ray of [His] Eyes!

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