

A Preliminary Exploration of Pizarro's Notion of Poetic Indecorum in Jose Garcia Villa's Selected Poems

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Abstract

This paper presents a preliminary exploration of Charito J. Pizarro's notion of poetic indecorum by applying it to three of Jose Garcia Villa's poems. Specifically, it uses two criteria that she set within the concept, which are (1) vocabulary mobility, and (2) the switching from syntactic logic to metaphorical logic. Although Villa's poems have been exhaustively studied, there is practically no application of the notion of poetic indecorum to date. As such, this paper presents a novel way of appraising Villa's select poems in the context of the two criteria provided. The paper's findings reveal that the three selected poems exhibit both vocabulary mobility and switching from syntactic logic to metaphorical logic. In addition, these two criteria functioned as part of the author's stylistic choice and expansion of meaning. Given these findings, I propose a preliminary definition of what poetic indecorum is in the context of Jose Garcia Villa's poems. Nevertheless, I also argue that it would be worthy to look at other poems, particularly local ones, and subject them to analysis using the same framework. This would, in turn, provide a more thorough discussion on what constitutes and limits the concept of poetic indecorum.

Keywords: poetic indecorum, vocabulary mobility, syntactic logic, Villa

There are many ways by which a poem can be appraised for its literary merit. One can look at how it reflects the author's reality. Others would opt to take a closer look at the dominant emotions expressed in the poem. Still others would consider how the readers might interpret the piece.

However, beyond the content that the poem tries to convey to its readers through these ways (reflection of reality, dominant emotions evoked, and readers' interpretation), it is also equally important to focus on the poem's style, particularly if the poet, himself, like Villa, has a very distinctive one. Zooming in on the style will reveal not only the poet's creativity but also the poem's value. Having this in mind, the notion of poetic indecorum, which has not been explored previously, is a helpful complement or method to flesh out and concretize this 'literary merit' as perceived through the poem's style.

Thus, this paper is a result of my re-reading of the notion of poetic indecorum, which was first proposed by Pizarro (2016) in her book titled, *The Symbolic Foundation of Human History: From Stonehenge to the Eye*. She posited that poetic indecorum in the context of poetry, and by extension any literary genre, is a pre-requisite for readers as they immerse themselves in the experience espoused by the text. Thus, she went on to say that the notion of poetic indecorum involves two criteria: (1) vocabulary mobility, and (2) switching of syntactic logic to metaphorical logic. These two criteria are used as an analytical framework in this paper. Moreover, I have purposely chosen three of Jose Garcia Villa's poems for analysis as I believe they exemplify these two criteria, thereby defining what constitutes, and possibly limits, poetic indecorum.

Prior to Pizarro (2016), there has not been any literature concerning the concept of poetic indecorum. What is available, though, is the notion of poetic decorum, which has been used since the beginning of classical criticism. According to Britannica (1998), decorum is the *appropriateness* of the rendering of an action, character, scene, or speech. Additionally, Markos (2019) mentioned that Horace defined decorum as what is fitting or proper. In the same vein, it can also refer to the appropriateness of style to the subject. The word decorum can also denotatively refer to how one behaves in social etiquettes or functions. It is also worth mentioning that Pizarro (2016) points to the fact that decorum and its opposite—indecorum—refer to the notion of style appropriated in a particular literary work, as in this case poetry. Therefore, by way of analysis, poetic indecorum is present when a work or a text deviate from the usual perceived style of that text/genre. Such is the case in Jose Garcia Villa's poems. He was

known as someone who masterfully and extensively used commas, other punctuation, and capitalization unconventionally within the mainstream concept of poetry. Such an assertion is sustained by Leow (2024), who commented about his writings by saying that “the delicacy with force of such writing reminds one of the colors of black ink from a hogs’ hair brush in the hand of a Chinese master” (para. 4).

Given his stature as a poet, several studies focus on Jose Garcia Villa and his poems. For example, in 2007, Dorsett dealt with Villa’s poetry and their extensive interpretations. Later, Buena (2019) investigated the semantic deviations of some of Villa’s poetry, asserting that these deviations pointed to his excellent metaphorical sense; conversely, Sapong (2020) looked into the semantic-based description of some of Villa’s poems. Finally, Leow (2024) made a commentary mentioning that Villa was ahead of his time because of his unconventional poetic ways. Common to all these studies is the fact that Villa, considered to be one of the finest contemporary poets, has tested, figuratively, the notion of poetry. Through his poems and his use of language, it appears that he had been successful in his attempt to marry language (linguistics) and literature. However, one obvious gap in these studies is that Villa’s poems, and his supposed unconventional ways in poetry, have not been subjected to analysis with respect to poetic indecorum. This is borne out of the fact that the notion has only just been recently explored by Pizarro (2016). Therefore, it is interesting and significant to use the two criteria set by Pizarro and place these against the selected poems of Villa. That way not only will the poems be subjected to further exploration but also, most importantly, the deviations (the use of commas, capitalization, etc.) that are present in them. Specifically, it is hypothesized that insights on how vocabulary mobility and switches from syntactic logic to metaphorical logic are used and observed in these poems can further illuminate Villa’s mastery of language and his craft as a poet in general.

To be outright clear, the present paper does not attempt to disprove previous research on Villa’s poems and the linguistic and stylistic deviations present in them. Instead, it endeavors to explore how deviations are subsumed into or reflective of the notion of poetic indecorum, thereby

extending the work of Pizarro (2016) by attempting to provide a definition of this relatively novel concept/framework.

Theoretical Background

Extending the work of Pizarro is important in the discourse of poetic indecorum as such work closely relates to stylistic and formalistic approaches in analyzing poetry. On one hand, a stylistic approach to poetry, as defined by Sapong (2020), is the marriage of linguistics and literature, whereby linguistic elements such as deviations are used as tools to analyze the merit of the work. Manquosh and Al-Wadhaf (2021) produced a comprehensive discussion on what they called literary stylistics. Sustaining the previous assertion, they said that this approach involves three important elements: personality and/or individuality, linguistic choices, and style of deviation. These elements are significant for my analysis because these are what constitutes an indecorum in poetry, where, because of these linguistic choices and deviations, the visual form of the text is distinctly changed from what is commonly attributed to be a poem.

On the other hand, a discussion on poetic indecorum also coincides with a formalistic approach, where the text is considered to be the heart of literature. This simply means that the central tenet of analysis is borne out solely from the text itself. This is affirmed by the study of Gormez and Beyoglu (2021), where they articulated that formalism is text-centered, and that the focus of analysis is the text's literary elements which are intrinsic (i.e., inherent to the text) rather than extrinsic. Moreover, the notion of poetic indecorum is also relevant to the concept of literary or text deviation. Such deviations occur on different levels as pointed out by Monsoor and Salman (2020). These levels are lexical, semantic, syntactic, phonological, morphological, graphological, historical, dialectal, and registerial. Any deviation from these levels is considered to be subsumed in the context of poetic indecorum.

All these three, stylistic and formalistic approaches as well as literary or text deviation, are considered and are very much significant to the on-going discussion on poetic indecorum. Overall, in this paper, I define poetic indecorum as the perceived appropriating of style. These. Although, one may find similarities among them (stylistic and formalistic approaches,

literary and text deviation, and poetic indecorum), as already pointed out in the previous paragraphs, it is important to underscore the fact that the focus of this paper is the explication of the two criteria set by Pizarro. In other words, the present paper's novelty lies not on their perceived similarity as interrelated concepts *via-a-vis* Villa's poems, but how the criteria specifically set by Pizarro—vocabulary mobility and switching from syntactic logic to metaphorical logic—contribute to the discussion on how a poem, like Villa's, is ought to be analyzed and understood. Using this concept of poetic indecorum, again although similar with stylistic, formalistic approaches, and literary deviations, provides a novel method or way of appraising a literary text. As a result, this paper aims to come to terms with how these criteria are applied/presented in the poems of Villa, how they function, and finally how they contribute to the possible definition of the concept of poetic indecorum. Accordingly, it aims to answer the following questions:

1. How is the notion of poetic indecorum, following the two criteria set by Pizarro (2016), exemplified in Jose Garcia Villa's selected poems?
2. What functions do vocabulary mobility and switching from syntactic logic to metaphorical logic perform in the context of the poems?
3. How can the notion of poetic indecorum be defined as a concept considering the findings?

Method

The analysis follows a qualitative approach based on textual evidence. Specifically, it moves through four phases: Phase 1 involves drawing out relevant textual evidence from the three poems that exhibit the criteria of poetic indecorum as first laid out by Pizarro (2016). Phase II subjects these textual evidence to an in-depth analysis that zeroes in on how they flesh out poetic indecorum in terms of (1) vocabulary mobility and (2) switching from syntactic to metaphorical logic. Phase III extends this analysis by looking into the criteria's—vocabulary mobility and switching from syntactic to metaphorical logic--function in the poems. Finally, Phase IV synthesizes the analysis to (re)define what constitutes the notion of poetic indecorum.

Research Data

The data comes from the three pre-selected poems of Jose Garcia Villa. These poems are as follows: *When one becomes One*, *When I Was No Bigger Than Huge*, and *Poem # 136*. The choice of using Jose Garcia Villa's three poems warrant the showcase of Villa's writing prowess, having been known to use extensively capitalization, commas, and other punctuation marks in an unconventional way in his writing for the genre. Such extensive use of unconventionality is significant to the discourse on poetic indecorum, and by extension the choice of selecting Villa's poems, considering that, as mentioned previously, poetic indecorum is considered to be the appropriating of style according to the genre.

Discussion

This section is divided into three parts. The first part is a detailed explication of the criteria set by Pizarro (2016) with respect to poetic indecorum. These criteria are vocabulary mobility and the switching from syntactical logic to metaphorical logic. Said explication is complemented with textual provisions from the poems. The second part investigates how these criteria function with respect to the greater context of the poems. In the third part, the discussion provides an exploratory definition of what constitutes poetic indecorum in so far as these poems are concerned.

Criteria of Poetic Indecorum

Pizarro (2016) has asserted that poetic indecorum is observed when two criteria, vocabulary mobility and switching from syntactical logic to metaphorical logic, are present. Therefore, alongside the provision of the textual evidence from the text, it is important to define what these two criteria are, at least within the context of the three poems selected for this study.

The term itself suggest that inherent to this concept and the greater concept of poetic indecorum is flexibility. This mobility or flexibility is evident in the poems of Villa, particularly Poem # 1: *When one becomes One*, wherein Villa writes, "The, labor, of, un-oneing". The word *unoneing*, as used by Villa here, is a neologism such that it is not present in the

conventional English vocabulary. Within the context of the poem, it appears that the choice of using the prefix “un-” is used not only to indicate negation but also more importantly to provide a stark contrast to the word, that is One. This is sustained by the fact that the poem asserts that in order to become one (with God), one must be ready to un-one, that is to lose one’s self.

This line exhibits particularly vocabulary mobility because not only does it provide a stunning paradox (that the labor of unonening is actually a pursuit of being one with the Divine) to prove a point, but it also teaches the readers that such choice (of a supposedly non-existing word) is stylistically warranted as it allows them to contextualize its meaning within the poem.

Both the presence of the neologism and the criterion on vocabulary mobility are related to the concept of literary deviation. In fact, it is safe to say that one key feature showcasing vocabulary mobility is when the poet departs from not only the syntax but also the conventional vocabulary in a language as shown in this case. Herianah et. al (2024) elucidates on this departure as the desire of the author to not only be unconventional in his work, but also to showcase that this departure is a test of his/her creativity. As in this case, such creativity is shown in the intention of Villa to provide contrast by using the prefix “un-“, as already elucidated.

In poem # 2, the same is observed in the following line: “When, I, was, no, bigger, than, a, huge,”. The choice of placing the words “bigger” and “huge” in the same poetic line merits attention. It involves vocabulary mobility in such a way that readers are invited to look at not only the distinct meanings of the words, but the way they are related. In other words, it points to the fact that these two share nuanced meanings. While it is the role of the reader to unpack these nuanced meanings, it allows the author to showcase his masterful use of flexibility in vocabulary.

Considering these insights obtained from both poems, vocabulary mobility, as first pointed out by Pizarro (2016), therefore, is an extension of meaning(s) found in the word(s) used by the poet. In this case, the use of “un-oneing” in Poem # 1 and the words “bigger” and “huge” in Poem # 2 invite the readers for a greater and richer analysis by using these stylistic choices, perhaps, to point out contrast. On the side of the poet, this mobility

allows him to contextualize the meaning of these words as they are situated in the poem (even to the extent outside of their usual denotative meanings).

Switching from syntactic logic to metaphorical logic

Pizarro (2016), in her book, asserted that there is constant switching from one logic to another in poetry. She further added that, in fact, there are many logics now. However, she did not define what syntactical and metaphorical logics are—more so, the supposed switching that happens between these two logics. It can be deduced, by mere observation of the terms, that syntactical logic refers to two things: (1) the use of elements such as punctuation marks and capitalization, as rightly observed in Villa's poems; and (2) the internal order followed in the poem. The switching, then, happens when these two things take on a metaphorical role, as discussed below regarding the following lines, which are taken from Villa's Poem 136:

“The, hands, on, the, piano, are, armless.
No, one, is, at, the, piano.
The, hands, begin, and, end, there.”

As can be seen in the quoted lines, the use of commas is observable. Such use appears to be within the confines of syntactical logic on the basis that commas do not usually appear in poetic writing. They only appear, by default, in sentences which is the concern of syntax, the root of the notion of syntactic logic. However, there is switching that happens when readers look at the metaphorical value (meta here refers to the idea of being over and above) of using the commas—as a way to revolutionize the view of poetry, for aesthetic purpose, to indicate stops in between units so that the readers immerse themselves within each of the words. Additionally, the internal order is present in the lines such that the usual subject-verb agreement seems to be followed. As in this context, it points to the fact that, poetry, in its literariness, follows the order of syntax, or at least a specific internal order. Such internal order takes on a metaphorical role (again, emphasis on meta as over and beyond is pointed out) such that it facilitates the production of imagery painted in these lines. Thus, switching from one logic to another is rightly observed.

“Before, one, becomes, One,” (Poem 1)

“The,

Creator,

Was, I—and,

I, began, to, Die, and, I, began, to, Grow.” (Poem 2)

Capitalization is a distinct feature of writing systems that is used to indicate the beginning of sentences or proper nouns within sentences. However, this feature is carried over in literature, particularly in poetry by Villa, again, for a metaphorical purpose—to emphasize certain words so that they have a role in the poem(s). As in the quoted lines, the capitalized “One” refers to God, a notion, quite literally, higher than man. The words “Die” and “Grow”, on the other hand, are capitalized to emphasize stark contrast.

Finally, switching is also observed in Villa’s consistent and, thus, intentional deviation from the usual rule of grammar in the case of the use of the article/determiner, “a/an”, as shown in the two lines:

“To, become, a, One!” (Poem 1)

“When, I, was, no, bigger, than, a, huge,” (Poem 2)

Using the syntactic logic lens, it can be implied that the use of the article/determiner “a/an” is unnecessary, as it seems to merely create a syntactic flaw (as nouns and adjectives like “one” and “huge” are not preceded by an article/determiner in English syntax). However, its use serves a metaphorical purpose within the context of metaphorical logic similar to capitalization. In other words, it is used to complement, by way of emphasis, the significance of the capitalized word “One” in Poem # 1 and the non-capitalized “huge” in Poem # 2. Such significance can be further unpacked as readers investigate, in their analysis, what these words should mean within the greater context of the poems.

Both vocabulary mobility and the switching of syntactical logic to metaphorical logic affirms what Gibbons in 2017 poetically said: poetry whose material is language. Language is central to understanding a literary text, most particularly a poem. Both criteria give a concretization of this centrality of language. They answer primordial questions on how exactly language is facilitative of the readers’ understanding of a text. On Villa’s side, he has made sure to showcase this materiality of language in his poems.

The same materiality of language is present in both vocabulary mobility and the switching of syntactical logic to metaphorical logic. In other words, Pizarro (2016) has laid the foundation for readers of poetry to have an available toolkit of interpretation—the two criteria she set for poetic indecorum—which help us further understand that language is material for and to poetry.

Functions Involved in Vocabulary Mobility and Switching from Syntactical Logic to Metaphorical Logic

Having laid out the notions of vocabulary mobility and the switching from syntactical logic to metaphorical logic within the greater context of poetic indecorum, it is important to extend the discussion on the functions that these two criteria perform, starting with stylistic choice.

Stylistic choice

A poet has the authority to explore stylistic choices. In the this context of this paper, Villa showcased his masterful use of commas and other punctuation marks, capitalization, and internal/syntactic order to further enrich his poems. Consequently, analysis and interpretation does not only revolve around content, but also involve the form. As such, Villa has, and the present study by way of extension, highlight how the interpretation of form and content has an intertwining role.

This intertwining role of both form and content is affirmed by Chua in 2021, when he quoted Villa himself and zeroed in on his use of commas, saying that they are “an integral and essential part of the medium: regulating the poem’s verbal density and time movement” (Chua, 2021, p. 233). He further went on to say that this was Villa’s way of experimentation. To reiterate, such use of commas in his poetry, and other stylistic choices for that matter (capitalization, em dashes, creation of metaphor), does not only showcase Villa’s automaticity and mobility in using language features in literature, but also shows how he has reinvented the notion of poetry as a literary genre, thereby influencing how its form and content are to be interpreted. This is poetic indecorum at its finest.

Finally, Villa's stylistic choice also presents his poetic license. As defined by Britannica (2007), "it is the author's departure from usual syntax to meet the poem's, or any literary piece for that matter, metrical and tonal requirements" (para. 1). He has done this by using resources not only as a matter of style (in other words not only for the sole sake of metrical and tonal requirements) but, rather equally, as a matter of allowing us readers to re-interpret his poems—which is the concern of poetic indecorum. In other words, while poetic license is on the side of the author, poetic indecorum is on the side of the reader, as it is a viable method of interpretation in the context of such departures.

Expansion of meaning

The scone function afforded by vocabulary mobility and the switching from syntactical logic to metaphorical logic is the extent to which meaning can be negotiated and expanded in terms of the context (in poetry). Words, as they are, bear experiential meanings—what others call literal or denotative meaning; however, these words, as applied in poetry, bear other expanded meanings, such as how words are capitalized for emphasis and how they are used relative to the other words within the same line. As such, these words now have a specific tool box whereby their possible meanings are available for use, again, dependent on context as specified by the author or as deduced by the readers. This function supports the assertion of Lindsay et al. (2019) when they said that poetic language is the fullest possible language. They went on to say that "poets pack the absolute maximum of meaning (in every sense of the word) into every part of the poem" (para. 2). In other words, the poet uses linguistic and literary resources that he has at his disposal for various reasons. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the consequence of the poet using these resources is expansion of meaning. It is not even a question of whether this meaning is denotative, connotative, or figurative. It is that meanings, when used extensively by the poet, are expanded according to how the poet intends these to be.

Given the above discussion on the criteria first set forth by Pizarro (2016) on poetic indecorum, how might this term be (re)defined? Building on my analysis above, I propose that it could be defined as the appropriating of style in a text pursuant to the intention and purpose of the author. Note

that the word used is *appropriating* (and not appropriateness), which permits the author to explore, to bend, and to test the limit of a particular genre (both in context and, more so, in style and form) to suit the intention purported by the work, say a poem. On the side of the readers, this calls for a re-calibration of how literary texts should be interpreted (not solely within the confines of their content and the supposed ‘appropriate’ style for the genre but also, more importantly, the form within which the author creates for a particular purpose.

Again, it is worth reiterating that the concept of poetic indecorum indicates a strong association with literary deviations and poetic license. As such, literary deviations at any level in a poem are assumed to be a hallmark of poetic indecorum. In addition, poetic license speaks of the author’s stylistic choice—which, again, is one of the functions of poetic indecorum as presented in this paper. All these point to a now undisputable fact: that when poetry is the subject (whether in creating one or in appraising it), it is not the appropriateness of style that matters, but how it (style) is appropriated by the author, the one who breathes life into the literary piece.

Conclusion

This paper extended the proposed notion of Pizarro (2016) on poetic indecorum. My argument proposed, based on the two criteria set for this concept, that the three poems written by Jose Garcia Villa observe vocabulary mobility and switching from syntactic logic to metaphorical logic. In addition, based on the analysis of the three poems, there are, at least, two functions that are being performed by these two criteria in the context of these poems: (1) stylistic choice, and (2) expansion of meaning. Finally, given all these, a preliminary definition of poetic indecorum is proposed—that is the appropriating of style in a text/work pursuant to the intention and purpose of the author. Such appropriating bears flexibility.

Although this paper has only focused on Villa and three of his poems, it has provided an insight on how poetic indecorum, along with its criteria, can be defined. Poetic indecorum provides a novel way of looking at not only the content of the poem but also, rather equally, its style. As revealed in this paper, both content and style reveal so much of the author’s

intention and stylistic ability and these two—intention and stylistic ability—can be fleshed out using the lenses provided by poetic indecorum. In other words, using poetic indecorum as a method of interpretation provides a nuanced (and a novel way of) understanding a particular literary piece. The aim of this paper, though, is just to lay the groundwork on the concept of poetic indecorum as a method of interpretation in the context of Villa's poems. The definition of poetic indecorum as well as the functions of the criteria may be further explicated by other literary researchers using other literary genres.

As this is a preliminary work on poetic indecorum, I see four clear recommendations for further studies. First, Jose Garcia Villa has a poem titled, *The Emperor's New Sonnet*, which is a blank-page poem that attempts to further revolutionize the notion of poetry as a literary genre. It is, therefore, worth investigating this work, contrary to the ones considered in this paper, as it clearly deviates from the two criteria for poetic indecorum—there is no perceived vocabulary mobility and there is no switching of syntactic to metaphorical logic. This is important because it allows for a more thorough discussion on the extent and limit of poetic indecorum. Second, there are other poems, such that of Adonis Dorado, a local yet prominent poet, that could be analyzed using the two criteria as framework. This will enrich the concept of poetic indecorum even further. Third, it would also be noteworthy to investigate how poetic indecorum is present in other genres of literature, such as a short story or a novel. Finally, regarding the teaching of literature, poetry, or the art of interpretation, it is important to look at how this concept of poetic indecorum can enrich literary texts when it is used as a frame of reference.

Overall, this paper served as a preliminary exploration of Pizarro's notion of poetic indecorum. As already mentioned, she has not provided a definition of this concept as well as the criteria she included for it. However, using the select poems of Villa, this paper has attempted to unpack what she meant with the concept as well as the functions of each of the criterion. What has been revealed to us, by virtue of analysis, is that is a novel method of interpretation focusing not on the appropriateness of style which is very prescriptive but the appropriating of the style which gives both the poet and the readers flexibility in creating and appraising the literary piece.

The study also underscored the pivotal role of the poet (his stylistic choice as well as his ability to expand meanings) who breathes life into the poem. Finally, moving forward, insights obtained from this paper will hopefully bolster our understanding of poetic indecorum (what constitutes and limits it) as it is applied in other literary genres.

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