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CÉSAR VALLEJO

THE DIALECTICS OF POETRY AND SILENCE

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CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i>	vii
<i>Abbreviations</i>		xi
1 Poetry as a mode of existence		1
2 The alienated romantic: <i>Los heraldos negros</i>		27
3 The body as text: nature and culture in Vallejo's poetics		57
4 The end of the sovereign illusion: <i>Trilce</i>		79
5 The discourse of the given: <i>Trilce</i>		117
6 Art and revolution		138
7 The dialectics of man and nature		161
8 The destruction of Prometheus: <i>Poemas humanos</i>		192
9 The mirror of the world: <i>España, aparta de mí este cáliz</i>		223
10 The invention of Vallejo		250
Guide to texts and criticism		259
Notes		264
Index		285

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[More information](#)

P R E F A C E

A strange fate, that of Vallejo. A poet for whom the notion of the individual was problematic, he was surrounded after his death by a personality cult so effective that his poems have usually been thought of as ‘spiritual radiographies’.¹ ‘The legend begins’ wrote one of his acquaintances when he died in 1938. Legend already dominated the act of homage held at his graveside in Montrouge Cemetery at which Louis Aragon read a prescient message. ‘He was not only a poet’, said Aragon, ‘but a fighter for socialism’. Yet for Aragon and most of the others present on the occasion, Vallejo was an unknown poet; his *Poemas humanos* and *España, aparta di mí este cáliz* had still to be published. Few of them suspected that his poetry responded to questions they had not begun to ask.

When he began to write, poetry was an act of transgression against the ecumenical faith of his fathers, a demonic religion whose practice took him away from his roots in the Peruvian *sierra*. In this period, before the publication in 1919 of his first collection of poems *Los heraldos negros*, he lived out the myth of the *poète maudit*, discovering in the process not a new Logos but a superstructure raised by false consciousness itself. The vatic role which, for his contemporaries, put the poet above society and absolved him from its norms was not even viable since, for the Peruvian establishment, poetry scarcely existed except as tradition or adornment; it was something intended to enhance civilized life, not to shake its foundations. Vallejo’s destruction of musicality, his focusing on semantic contradictions, his sense of parody, could only bring him into conflict with society.

From *Trilce* (1922) onwards, Vallejo is the ruthless destroyer of hierarchies and values; fragments of ancient belief, the vestiges of Christian faith and of humanist *hubris* accumulate in his

¹ The term comes from Leo Spitzer’s ‘Linguistics and Literary History’, *Linguistics and Literary History* (Princeton, 1948), pp. 1–40.

poems, expressed in synecdoche which no longer refers parts to a whole, in figures which no longer serve as analogies for another reality. Against the clamour of words, Vallejo sets the silent document of the body as a living text in which (after Haeckel), he saw the history of the species inscribed. For him, arms signal the fact that they have refused to become wings, the feet as columns on which *homo erectus* has raised himself over the rest of nature, his eyes are 'fatal pilots', nails are vestigial claws. Each woman's sex is the silent mouth of the species, each mouth a cry for individual survival. These are the scriptures on which each life is a gloss. The liberal thinkers of the nineteenth century had equated progress with evolution, believing that the species in its struggle for life would develop morally as well as physically and they saw the domination of nature as a necessary condition for the sovereignty of the 'I'. Though Marx separated natural evolution from the progress of social man, even he underestimated the price paid for mastery and the sinister side of enlightenment.² Vallejo's originality is to have related language to domination of nature as well as to civil society. It is a perception particularly interesting in Latin America where the alphabet was introduced through conquest and where script was conspicuously the tool of authority. Nevertheless, to generations of writers after Independence, the printed word was a kind of magic, the *grimoire* which would bring about liberation. The haunting ambivalence of writing fascinates contemporary novelists and the best-known of modern Latin American poets, Pablo Neruda, threw much of his energy into restoring the communion and the sense of presence which is the advantage of the spoken over the written word. When Vallejo grew up in Santiago de Chuco, literacy was still a mark of status and for the rest of his life, the sound of the first syllables a child hears and the sight of the first letters on the page are moments charged with significance. If, as Walter Ong, has suggested, script destroys the sense of presence experienced in spoken communication by giving priority to the sense of sight, then Vallejo's poetry is a desperate battle waged on two fronts –

² The concept of enlightenment has been criticised by Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno. Their essay, 'The Concept of Enlightenment' is included in Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, 1972).

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

ix

against the illusion of presence and the spurious authority of script.³

During his long stay in Europe, from 1923 until his death, Vallejo was drawn towards committed art and active left-wing politics. He joined the Communist party and experimented in different genres – especially theatre and the narrative – which, he believed, lent themselves more readily than poetry to the socialist cause. Never as centrally involved as Brecht and many others in polemics of revolutionary art, he was, nevertheless in the Soviet Union during the critical period in which socialist realism was formulated. In the early 1930s, he even wrote materialist poems which were included in his posthumous collection, *Poemas humanos*, though these by no means dislodged his central obsessions. The poetry of the 30s records the attempt to inscribe his ‘being of smoke’ in a text which will outlive the silent, mortal body. The poetic subject loses all connection with a structured world, living as a stranger among reified objects he has produced but which no longer reflect a human image. Written from the vantage-point of Utopia or Apocalypse, the poems focus on the present as if it were a grotesque error. When the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, he fleetingly envisaged the possibility of a new scripture inscribed by the collective sacrifice in the book of humanity.

It is this analogy of the text which the present study traces. My work owes much to the considerable body of Vallejo criticism mentioned in the Guide to texts and criticism. Because of the textual problems, particularly those presented by the posthumously published poems and because of the controversy which has surrounded successive readings of his works, I have included a short guide to different critical approaches which have been applied to his work and a brief explanation of my own method.⁴

³ Walter Ong S.J., *The Presence of the Word* (New York, 1967). As against his defence of oral communication, see Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967).

⁴ The term ‘foregrounding’ which I frequently use is derived from Jan Mukarovsky, ‘Standard Language and Poetic Language’, trans. Paul L. Garvin, *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style* (Washington, D.C., 1964). Mukarovsky refers to the potential relationship between intonation and meaning, syntax, word order, or the relationship of the word as a meaningful

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Preface

Though I have concentrated on those aspects of his work which I have mentioned in this introduction, I have tried to write a book that will also be useful as a general introduction to readers encountering Vallejo's poetry for the first time.

The difficulty of translation cannot entirely account for the eclipse of this poet in the Anglo-Saxon world in which there is always resistance to those Latin American writers who can neither be readily incorporated into the literary system or categorized as exotic. Happily the number of translations is increasing. Those already published are listed at the end of this book and there are besides new translations of some poems. For these, I am grateful to Reginald Gibbons, who gracefully faced the obvious difficulties of making a selection from a manifold of connotations which could not possibly always match the original. A poet who uses puns as frequently as Vallejo inevitably offers a formidable task to the translator and the final versions cannot offer more than a selection among possible readings. I am also grateful to Madame Georgette de Vallejo for giving me permission to quote from her late husband's work both in the original and in translation. I should like to thank, in addition, the many people who have helped me by discussing my work, and in particular Reginald Gibbons who worked on the bibliography as well as the translating; Joseph Sommers who read part of the manuscript; the many helpful people in Peru and especially José Miguel Oviedo who gave me generous help when he was director of the Instituto de Cultura. In addition, I thank the University of Essex for enabling me to visit Peru in the summer of 1971 and the University of Stanford for a grant to complete this manuscript.

JEAN FRANCO

*University of Stanford**March 1976*

unit to the phonetic structure of the text, to the lexical selection found in the text, to other words as units of meaning in the context of the same sentence etc. as interlinking phenomena which in poetry are organized according to principles of subordination and superordination. Foregrounding is the process by which the dominant component which might be intonation, rhyme or the semantic properties of words energizes the poem.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AO. Luis Alberto Sánchez (ed.), *Artículos olvidados de CV* (Lima, 1960).
Aproximaciones. Angel Flores (ed.), *Aproximaciones a CV*, 2 vols. (New York, 1971).
Aula Vallejo, no. 1 (1959); no. 2 corresponds to 2–3–4 (Córdoba, Argentina, 1962); no. 3 to numbers 5–6–7 (1967).
 LA. *CV, Literatura y Arte* (Buenos Aires, 1966).
 NCC. *CV, Novelas y cuentos completos* (Lima, 1970).
 OC. *Obras completas de CV* (Lima, 1973–4). Vol. I: *Contra el secreto profesional*; vol. II: *El arte y la revolución*; vol. III: *Obra poética completa*.
 OPC. *Obra poética completa* (Lima, 1968).
 VP. *Visión del Peru*, no. 4 (July 1969). This was entirely devoted to César Vallejo and is 'Homenaje internacional a CV'. Some overflow material is included in no. 5 (June 1970).

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