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César Vallejo's Ars Poética of Nonsense: A Deleuzean Reading of Trilce

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“Hermetism” is a poor word to designate that meaning is caught up in the movement of the poem, in its arrangement, and not in its supposed referent. . .

Alain Badiou, Handbook of Inaesthetics

“Ce n’est point avec des idées, mon cher Degas, que l’on fait des vers, c’est avec des mots.”

Mallarmé to Degas

The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.

Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation

Trilce is perhaps one of the most difficult literary works in the Spanish language. Often referred to as hermetic, the book remains as elusive today as when it was first published in 1922. It has been pointed out--as if to underscore the difficulty of the book--that it came out the same year as James Joyce’s Ulysses. And since its publication scores of critics have attempted to explain the book away either in biographical or allegorical terms. Some writers

like Espejo (1965) have interpreted the poetry of Trilce as belonging to this or that particular period of Vallejo's life, while others like McDuffie (1971) have attempted to explain the most semantically problematic poems through allegorical readings. For instance, Tr. I (below) has been analyzed as a poem belonging to either Vallejo's five month imprisonment in Trujillo--about defecation and the indignities of prison life [1],--or as a poem about the negative critical reception to the book itself. In all actuality, however, the biographical and allegorical readings of Trilce usually feed into each other. In light of this, I will treat these interpretations jointly, and alternatively propose that Tr. I is, in effect, Vallejo's own ars poetica of nonsense, representative of a book that stands alone in the history of Spanish language literature as an overturning of the ontology of semantics and grammaticality.

Tr. I

Quién hace tánta bulla, y ni deja
testar las islas que van quedando.

Un poco más de consideración
en cuanto será tarde, temprano,
y se aquilatará mejor
el guano, la simple calabrina tesórea
que brinda sin querer,
en el insular corazón,
salobre alcatraz, a cada hialóidea
grupada.

Un poco más de consideración,
y el mantillo líquido, seis de la tarde
DE LOS MAS SOBERBIOS BEMOLES.

Y la península párase
por la espalda, abozaleada, impertérrita
en la línea mortal del equilibrio.

César Vallejo, Trilce. Edited by Julio Ortega.
Madrid: Cátedra, 1991. P. 43.

To illustrate this I refer here to Vallejo's own writings concerning language, grammar, and literature (e.g., El arte y la revolución [1929]); and to better explain what it is that I mean by nonsense I make use of the work of philosophers Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, as well as critics Elizabeth Sewell and Michael Holquist. And finally, to cite the most insightful, richest interpretations of Trilce in this direction, we have the work of Julio Ortega, Bernard McGuirk, and Enrique Ballón Aguirre, who, fortunately for us in Hispanic letters, have done much to clear the field of Vallejo studies of all its allegorical clutter.

Biographical Reductionism and Allegorical Readings [2]

Anyone who suffers from insomnia is probably familiar with late night television commercials advertising phone sex, ways of making quick money, and “artwork” of “suffering artists.” This last example clearly appeals to the Romantic notion of the suffering, misunderstood artist—a myth that continues to generate large crowds at museum exhibits of van Gogh all over the world. The factoid that van Gogh cut his ear in a moment of “passion” is probably responsible for at least a quarter of the ticket sales in museums worldwide. In effect, as Kafka well knew, the suffering artist “sells” and not just tickets. Misunderstood by everyone, except, of course, by the critic who knows everything about his/her life (like a museum guide), his/her work can be explained through his/her biography.

In light of this practice, Espejo (1965) was one among the first writers and critics to construct the image of Vallejo as a misunderstood writer (110). The very title of his book,

César Vallejo: itinerario del hombre already betrays the focus of Espejo's approach. He was the first to have proposed an interpretation of Tr. I based on what he knew of its author's life. Of Tr. I, Espejo writes:

Poema I, con el cual se inicia el poemario de 'Trilce', relata un acto natural de nuestra vida cotidiana o sea la evacuación del intestino... Cuatro veces al día, en la mañana y en el atardecer, los detenidos en la celda donde estaba recluso Vallejo, eran sacados y llevados a las letrinas. Los guardias que debían cumplir con esta misión, urgían a los detenidos, con lenguaje grosero, que procedieran con rapidez. Las expresiones y hasta el mismo lenguaje que emplea Vallejo guarda relación con la función evacuadora que realiza (1965 123).

And French critic, André Coyné, for example, takes it on faith that Tr. I is a poem about defecation and the agonistic forces of life and death (Coyné 185), while Gordon Wing (1969) criticizes Coyné, not so much for his interpretation of Tr.I as a poem of defecation but, more specifically, for failing to provide a "detailed exegesis" of the poem. If the poem is about defecation, it is so, claims Wing, in a tragic-comic, Rabelaisian fashion (271). In contrast, Eduardo Neale-Silva (1970) holds that Coyné's interpretation "involves an artificial shift from a philosophical concept to the specificity of a biological function" that deprives the poem of its philosophical dignity ("Introductory Poem" 6). For Neale-Silva the poem is Vallejo's response to the critical reception of his work, and his feeling of solitude or "orfandad" before of the world's silence and rejection. To verse 2, "testar las islas que van quedando" Neale-Silva hypothesizes that "Vallejo must have felt like a solitary island surrounded by a sea of incomprehension" (Ibid. 9). Thus Neale-Silva's Vallejo is a Christ-like figure, whose ignorant critics we must forgive, as Tr. I is a coded poem awaiting the good enlightened critic to decipher its true meaning (Ibid. 16). The tragic interpretation above is in

turn echoed by D.L. Shaw (1979/1980) in his article, “Trilce I Revisited” wherein he writes: “the poems are regarded as ‘islas’ and the heart of each is a ‘corazón insular’. The offering is made by the poet-pelican who is salty (salt stings but heals wounds) in a series of painful efforts like breaking wind (lines 7-10)” (170). And then with some minor exceptions, Keith McDuffie (1971) offers some of the most outlandish interpretations of the poem:

1. La bulla no deja que las islas den su testimonio del pasado feliz. Sin embargo, las islas van quedando... (113).

2. El alcatraz, que siendo ave es símbolo de la esperanza, en el léxico vallejiano (y nos recuerda el simbólico pelicano de Musset), se transforma en un símbolo de la propia creación emocional del poeta... (113).

3. El neologismo tesórea nace de la necesidad expresiva del momento poético. Pero este tesoro se produce involuntariamente, sin querer, producto del dolor del poeta (113, my emphasis).

Finally, he proposes that “calabrina, arcaísmo que significa cadáver o esqueleto, puede referirse a los recuerdos como ya pasados, y por eso, los restos de una vida que pudiera haber sido otra” (114). However, to be fair to McDuffie, his interpretation is not that much different than those by others. At the heart of such readings of Vallejo is an unquestioned assumption that Vallejo’s innovation was primarily semantic, and that the job of the critic, like that of detectives looking for forensic evidence, is to uncover the hidden meaning of the poems. But why not consider instead, as Próspero Saíz (1991) has suggested, that even the much debated title [3] was Vallejo’s way of untying “the signifier from the signified,” so that the former could “float freely in the space of the poem...”? (7). Perhaps Severo Sarduy’s

cautionary remark that sometimes “la obra está en la obra,” (OC-II/Barroco 1240) can serve us here.

Vallejo’s Critique of Grammaticality and Semantics

A special problem of the biographical method is its implicit faith in depth, which is why psychology is one of its primary allies. Non-cognizant of the possibility that surfaces might just have a depth of their own, it goes diving deep in the waters of signification to find that precious pearl that was floating in plain sight from the very beginning. This school of criticism will often make claims such as: “X wrote such and such because of his feelings of abandonment...” or “X wrote this because of his childhood, marriage, divorce, etc.” And who can deny that events in our lives do not shape what we write—for after all, if they shape behavior and feelings, why not writing, painting, or any other creative activity? The point is not to deny the impact of events on a writer’s life; but to underscore the importance of the text as text. In Último round (2004), Julio Cortázar gives voice to his frustration with critics who seek meaning outside the text, and worse yet, have their students follow them in their ridiculous peregrinations:

¿Por qué los analistas literarios tenderán a imaginar en un texto cualquier cosa salvo la imaginación? El joven platense que consultó todos los diccionarios de la Biblioteca Nacional buscando la palabra mancupia. Roger Caillois que dedujo que los motecas, en La noche boca arriba, se llamaban así porque el protagonista del cuento andaba en moto. El chico de un colegio nacional de Buenos Aires que me escribió desde el hanverso de la hortografía para decirme que su prof los había mandado a explorar la calle Santa Fe para ver si encontraban la calle donde ocurre Final del juego (Cortázar 21).

So much traveling for so very little, when turning a few pages we may have arrived at our own San Marino of signs: after all, collective independence requires that we disconnect from despotic signifying systems. Linguistically, it means disconnecting from grammaticality and semantics. And to that end in “Regla gramatical” (1932) Vallejo wrote:

La gramática como norma colectiva en poesía carece de razón de ser. Cada poeta forja su gramática personal e intransferible, su sintaxis, su ortografía, su analogía, su prosodia, su semántica. Le basta no salir de los fueros básicos del idioma. El poeta puede hasta cambiar, en cierto modo, la estructura literal y fonética de una misma palabra, según los casos. Y en esto en vez de restringir el alcance socialista y universal de la poesía, como pudiera creerse, lo dilata al infinito. Sabido es cuanto más personal (repito, no digo individual) es la sensibilidad del artista, su obra es más universal y colectiva (El arte y la revolución 64).

Vallejo obviously saw grammaticality as a marker of normative linguistic competence that had little or no place in poetry. He equated the poet’s freedom to create his own language with the people’s liberty to forge a new world and create their own mythic order. In fact, for Vallejo, the poet’s new creations, linguistic inventions and innovations, could serve the socialist cause. And rather than seeing the poet as an isolated, alienated member of society, with no social role to play, in the personality (but not in the individuality) of the poet he saw a catalyst for change. What Vallejo understood much better than others is that the success of politics depended much more on speech acts than on abstract discourses. One has only to think of all the political regimes since the French Revolution to recognize this as a fact. Popular declarations, and not analytical readings of texts like Das Kapital, have changed the world. Leslie Bary (1992), for one, sees Vallejo’s poetics as constitutive of a politico-linguistic agon between “liberating” parole and “oppressive” langue (1152). When Vallejo writes

“Vusco” and “volvvver” in Tr. IX instead of the correct forms: “Busco” and “volver”, he is not being merely “experimental.” What he is in fact doing is making these words vibrate [4] *and* stutter [5] in an entirely new way, outside the commanding sign system of signification and phonetics, and opening up new spaces for innovation and linguistic liberation. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have arrived at a similar position regarding the controlling role of grammaticality. In A Thousand Plateaus they write:

A rule of grammar is a power marker before it is a syntactical marker... Language is not life; it gives life orders. Life does not speak, it listens and waits. Every order-word... carries a little death sentence—a Judgment, as Kaka put it (76).

It is in this sense that Deleuze and Guattari speak of the “despotic” role of the signifier. Clearly for Deleuze, Guattari, and Vallejo, language is much more than a tool of communication. At its best and highest “function” it is expressive. And hence for Vallejo the only kind of poetry that can be translated is poetry made exclusively of ideas:

Se puede traducir solamente los versos hechos de ideas. Son traducibles solamente los poetas que trabajan con ideas, en vez de trabajar con palabras, y que ponen en un poema la letra o texto de la vida, en vez de buscar el tono o el ritmo cardíaco de la vida. Gris me decía que en este error están también muchos pintores modernos, que trabajan con objetos, en lugar de trabajar con colores. Se olvida que la fuerza de un poema o de una tela, arranca de la manera con que en ella se disponen y organizan artísticamente los materiales más simples y elementales de la obra. Y el material más simple y elemental del poema es, en último examen, la palabra, como lo es el color en la pintura. El poema debe, pues, ser concebido y trabajado como simples palabras sueltas, allegadas y ordenadas artísticamente, según los movimientos emotivos del poeta (El arte y la revolución 70).

The passage cited above illustrates for us the kind of poetics that Vallejo favored. It is no coincidence that Vallejo cites Juan Gris, a painter, to make his point. If the painter paints with colors and not with objects, implies Vallejo, the poet writes with words and not with ideas. Art is artifice: material through and through. One must understand Vallejo's "socialism" as being part and parcel of his materialist conception of the world, of which language is one of its constituent elements. Language must be returned to the people, so that people may do with it whatever they wish. It is in light of this that the new man (Vallejo's proletarian) will create new words, and forms of expression: free of the shackles of Spanish linguistic colonialism. Hence Eshelman is correct when he says that Vallejo's revolutionary poetry should be seen as a socio-linguistic rebellion directed "against Castilian Spanish, a colonial imposition on an indigenous people" (238-9) [6]. If as Deleuze and Guattari claim that "forming grammatically correct sentences is for the normal individual the prerequisite for any submission to social law" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 101), the refusal to do so, must be seen as a rebellious, conscious act to escape inscription and territorialization by the State. "Salí del español," declares Vallejo in *Contra el secreto profesional* (55), as though he had escaped from the prison house of the Spanish language. And though French, he says, is the language which he knows best after Spanish, French, too, failed to serve his purposes. Alas, he asks: "¿No será que las palabras que debían servirme en este caso, estaban dispersas en todos los idiomas de la tierra y no sólo en uno de ellos?" (56). For the language he was seeking was that of poetic expressiveness, the language of sense (as in sensation and intuition) and nonsense.

A Poetics of Nonsense

Sense ultimately emerges out of the ground nonsense, like “las palabras sueltas” of Vallejo, to which the poet gives shape. In this regard, Austin (1970), points out that meaning results from the way words are ordered in a sentence, and not from words in isolation. “It may be justly urged that, properly speaking, what alone has meaning is a sentence,” says Austin. “All the dictionary can do when we ‘look up the meaning of a word’ is to suggest aids to the understanding of sentences in which it occurs” (56). Now when we appeal to logic and say “this doesn’t make sense” what we are actually saying is: (1) that it is not possible for X to “make” sense if Y is its antecedent, and (2) that X cannot be anything other X. In the first case, it would be like saying if $q > p$, or stating something like: “X found the lost ring before he lost it”. Clearly, if X found the “lost ring” before he “lost it” then X did not lose it at all, and the writer of the sentence is using language incorrectly. In the second case, to say that X is other than what it is would be saying something in the order of “A mouse is a cow,” [7] and obviously this is a nonsensical thing to say [8]. We may alternatively say, “A mouse is like a cow” if we are using language in some creative or analogical way. However, if grammar allows for nonsense, logic does not [9]. And yet it is not the case that nonsense words don’t make any sense and therefore their name; for in fact, they do. It is simply that they are expressive as opposed to grammatical—they make the semantic field vibrate (not mean) in a different way. In fact, nonsense creates its own semantic field. As Holquist (1969) points out, “nonsense does not mean gibberish; it is not chaos, but the opposite of chaos. It is a closed system of language in which the meaning of any single unit is dependent on its relationship to the system of the other constituents” (150). And later: “The difference between nonsense and gibberish is that nonsense is a system which can be learned as languages are learned... Gibberish on the other hand is unsystematic” (151). Words such as tesórea and trilce, and phrases like “SOBERBIO BEMOLES” may be said to belong to a

particular sign system that differentiates itself from other sign systems. “If Nonsense is an art,” as Sewell (1978) proposes, “then it must have its own laws of construction” (6); and by extension, its own internal logic [10]. Thus, what Holquist says of Lewis Carroll’s The Hunting of the Snark—that “the poem is in a small way, its own language” (151)—can equally be said of Tr. I. What poetry of the kind exhibited in Trilce requires of us is that we abandon the comfortable perspectives of the old systems, and approach the new work with open minds, or else “all texts become allegories” (154).

When Vallejo declared to his friend and critic, Antenor Orrego, that he had at last achieved freedom, he was not referring to some kind of existential liberation, as it is usually interpreted, but instead to freedom from the chains of normative, representational poetics. To that end, he wrote: “Me doy en la forma más libre que puedo y ésta es mi mayor cosecha artística” (cited in Espejo 198). And further on he tells Orrego that his greatest challenge was to create new rhythmic forms without falling into the trap of linguistic chaos, or libertinaje, as he puts it. It is at this point that a poet like Carroll or Vallejo will resort to either the portmanteau word [11] or the neologism. And though we are well aware of the difference between the two, both the neologism and the portmanteau word proffer the poet the possibility of creating new signs and new meanings. “It is... pleasing that there resounds today the news that sense is never a principle or an origin, but that it is produced” says Deleuze in The Logic of Sense. “It is not something to discover, to restore, and to reemploy; it is something to produce by a new machinery” (72). This indeed is the way Vallejo viewed language, and why “la marca distintiva” of Trilce is none other than the neologism (Pérez Firmat 77). Giovanni Meo Zilio (1967) does Vallejo a great service when he distinguishes between the poet’s neologisms and other esoteric words, such as foreign and archaic words,

technical terms, jargon, solecisms, etc (15). He defines a Vallejo neologism as any sign that does not appear in any of the mayor dictionaries of the language, or which bears a non-normative sense. Where Meo Zilio goes wrong is in assigning a psychological drive to the poet's use of neologisms, and removing such a practice from the realm of pure aesthetic considerations. After all the only explanation of a portmanteau word or a neologism (e.g. trilce) "must be entirely arbitrary, or at least extremely far-fetched so as to be beyond the reader's reach," writes Lecercle in Philosophy of Nonsense (64). The very purpose of inventing new signs is to push the limits of language to the point where we begin to see, to experience, and to interpret the world in whole new ways. The sense of estrangement from signification that portmanteau words or neologisms provoke is the result of what Lecercle denominates "semantic blanks." But these "semantic blanks," as it were, "compel us to look at the text in a new way, to read it anew. They are meant to be playfully explored, or exploited, by our linguistic imagination, which is boundless" (Philosophy of Nonsense 23-4). Any reading practice that refuses to allow for this new space of freedom presented to us by a writer like Vallejo constitutes a synchronic betrayal of the poet's artistic project. Tr. I gives us the opportunity to put together entire series [12] of "meanings" out of the chaos of language, very much like the narrator of Gombrowicz's Cosmos who establishes original, arbitrary serial relations between two mouths and a town map, and a piece of wood, a sparrow, a cat, and a man hanging from a tree by the side of the road. What Lecercle, consequently, says of Carroll's "Jabberwocky" can be applied to Tr. I: "The poem...is a balancing act between an orderly and a disorderly reading" (Philosophy of Nonsense 24). Herein resides the true possibility for a readerly interaction with the text, where the reader, too, can be a creator; and in Vallejo's political aesthetics, where the reader (read worker), not

a mere consumer, can also be a producer and owner of the work. To this point Pérez Firmat writes:

...dado que la relación entre un producto y su consumidor es antagónica, al entrar en un texto el lector confronta dos alternativas: manipular [13] o ser manipulado (como se ha señalado en distintas ocasiones, la escritura y la esclavitud aparecen al mismo tiempo). En el caso de Trilce, uno puede rendirse ante la legendaria ilegibilidad del poemario, o puede tartar de crear un ‘supuesto orden mítico’ (78, my emphasis).

Vallejo’s poetics of nonsense represents an overturning of ontology and essentialism in literature where meaning is externally imposed and the reader is stripped of any claims to the creative process [14].

Questioning Semantics: Old and New Vallejo Criticism

Hermeneutics is possible because we take it on faith that signs mean something beyond their meaning—that is to say, that signification is transcendental. If the amorous joy of the troubadours was primarily linguistic, we moderns have interpreted their poetry as primarily transcendental. We have also read Dante’s La vita nuova as a book of poems directed to a young woman named Beatrice, and have wasted countless ink attempting to prove her existence or non-existence, in an exercise exemplary of what Julio Ortega has aptly named in connection with Vallejo criticism, “hermenéutica doméstica” (“Intro”, Trilce 11).

Hermeneutics, which began with the interpretation of biblical texts, has unfortunately never given up its initial mission: to imbue the sign with meaning beyond the earthly. But words only mean what we say they mean. And “when everything behaves as if a sign has a meaning,

that sign does have a meaning” (Tractatus 9). Signification, quite literally, is in our grasp: the end result of a certain “language game” we have all agreed to, and not in some Platonic beyond of pure Ideas.

In total disregard of the poem qua poem, critics have ventured far from Tr. I’s synchronic function to provide us with facile diachronic interpretations, which at best are embarrassing. For example, critics of Vallejo’s work have gone out of their way to prove or disprove whether the Otilia of poem A was the same Otilia of poem B, as though the poems’ extra-linguistic referents were the only thing of significance: “como si la poesía de Vallejo no fuese un lenguaje sobre el drama de nombrar y desnombrar, de escribir y describir”

(Ortega, “Intro”, Trilce 11). There are moments in Trilce, as it happens in Tr. I, where the poetry nears a degree zero of signification because Vallejo has erased all possible referents, and thereby eliminated the possibility of a “representational” approach [15]. That is why Julio Ortega is correct when he says that Vallejo incorporates erasure into his writing, and that one cannot read a book like Trilce without such a consideration. Ortega writes:

[L]a tachadura vallejana sigue la dirección contraria de la revisión lírica: no busca el óptimo expresivo, la esencialidad de una palabra exacta que diga del modo más cabal y único lo que quiere decir el poema, sino por el contrario, las instancias de mayor plenitud en el habla y la mayor libertad de la designación (Ortega, “Intro”, Trilce 14).

It is here that freedom resides for Vallejo: the explorer who erases all the footprints on the snow so that those who come after him will make their own discoveries. Yet nonetheless we have the surprising insistence of critics like Neale-Silva who claim that they have actually seen the footprints: know where they originated, and even where they are headed. “El lector

atento está obligado a ‘construir’ el poema a medida que va leyendo, a fin de darle un sentido” writes Neale-Silva in César Vallejo en su fase trilce (29). Neale-Silva, then, offers a justification of what Ballón Aguirre calls “lecturas del positivismo académico” (ix) when he remarks:

Trataremos de justificar nuestra interpretación de Tr. I, analizando tanto la forma como el contenido a la luz de lo que se sabe sobre el vehículo poético vallejano y las circunstancias que pudieron, en una forma u otra, determinar su sentido. De vez en cuando tendremos que recurrir a suposiciones e inferencias, pero teniendo presente el significado central del poema (Ibid. 29, my emphasis).

Firstly, not once, but twice Neale-Silva asserts that Tr. I does not constitute a poetics; secondly, he defines poetry as meaning and image; and thirdly, he defines the work of the reader to be one of deciphering a central theme, even if that interpretation is primarily the product of conjecture, inferences, and presuppositions. Sense, says Neale-Silva, can be made of Vallejo’s poetry, if one considers “las circunstancias” that led Vallejo to write a particular poem. In other words, the “truth” of the poem is exterior to it. And Neale-Silva has reserved for himself the epistemologically privileged position of the critic who carries the standard of semantics. Bernard McGuirk (1997) frames the question of hermeneutics as such:

Obedience to mimesis is never just a question of correspondence; rather it is an affirmation of ideology, a theory of being. But does that ideology have to be Romantic? And why is it that, in the case of those interpretations of Trilce I that I have examined, the most patently unfamiliar self-assertive unfamiliarizable text is each time naturalized into a paraphrase, a recognizable form of literary historical discourse?” (43)

Find something incomprehensible within normative discourse? Very well, then, take that which seems to escape a traditional signifying chain and force a meaning unto it; territorialize it in such a way that you can once again go about your business undisturbed by the threat of nonsense. The question of semantics, as McGuirk notes, is a question of power, of hegemony. “To decipher is to control, since the sacerdotal revelation, the transubstantiation, of even this base matter into really a theo-centric discourse, re-establishes the critical voice as the voice of authority...” (McGuirk 45). But, of course, all great literature resists such control; and if this does not always seem to be case that is because oftentimes years of academic sedimentation have obfuscated our ability to see the text as anything other than a story about an event or events when the text itself is the event.

Conclusion

“I could never be sure to what extent I was myself the creator of the permutations and combinations taking place all around me,” declares the narrator of Witold Gombrowicz’s Cosmos: “When one considers the fantastic quantity of sounds and shapes that impinge upon one at each and every moment of one’s life, what is easier than to combine two and two into a pattern where none exists?” (55). In a way that this is precisely what any interpretation seeks to accomplish: organize the chaos of the world in a particular way. And obviously no one is claiming that there is something wrong in establishing patterns, in attributing serial relations to things in literature and in the world; what is misguided, however, is in believing that these relations can somehow prove the Truth of representation by the mere kicking of a rock. Consequently, Vallejo’s paring down of language and erasure of references, was an attempt, as he said in El arte y revolución to capture what was most

universal and collective in humanity; in other words, that which could not be represented. For referential humanism or realism, as Ortega y Gasset noted with some trepidation, was a strategy like any other, with no greater access to the Real than any of the other aesthetic styles. And while art could not speak for individuals it could think in-humanity. The dehumanization of art was simply this—a rejection of middle class individualist values. “Lo único que la burguesía no soporta” declared Severo Sarduy in Escrito sobre un cuerpo, “lo que la ‘saca de quicio’ es la idea de que el pensamiento pueda pensar sobre el pensamiento, de que el lenguaje pueda hablar del lenguaje, de que un autor no escriba sobre algo, sino escriba algo (como proponía Joyce)” (OC-II 1129) [16].

Thus, in opposition to the humanist notion of the Author as an individual who creates out of divine inspiration in moments of great passions, in order to communicate some idea or concrete experience, Tr. I is the opening poem of the book not because Vallejo in a moment or poetic rapture wanted to let his readers know how much he had suffered in prison; but more accurately because, contrary to Neale-Silva and others [17], the poem represents Vallejo’s poetics—the very poetics that will impact on all the other poems in the book.

Trilce is singular in its reach. Nothing like it had ever been written and nothing like it has been written since. It was a book written by someone who, like the Marquis de Sade, sought artistic liberation above everything else. An early descendant of the death of God, like his contemporary Vicente Huidobro, Vallejo called for a new poetry, and a dismissal of the old masters. He wrote:

De la generación que nos precede no tenemos, pues, nada que esperar. Ella es un fracaso para nosotros y para todos los tiempos. Si nuestra generación logra abrirse un camino, su obra aplastará a la anterior. Entonces la historia de la literatura española saltará sobre los últimos treinta años, como sobre un abismo. Rubén Darío elevará su voz desde la orilla opuesta, y de esta otra, la juventud sabrá lo que ha de responder. Declaramos vacantes todos los rangos directores de España y de América. La juventud sin maestros, está sola ante un presente ruinoso y ante un futuro incierto. Nuestra ornada será, por eso, difícil y heroica en sumo grado (Vallejo cited in Ballón Aguirre xii, my emphasis).

In the end, the heroism of Trilce resides in its forging of a new, non-originary language, free from ontology. If there is no intertextuality in Trilce it is because its aim is immanent and not transcendental. It does not parody other poets or works of literature but language itself. It is a text with a forward movement, inviting its readers to join its exploratory and creative journey forward. To look back to the old masters is to run the risk of being turned into the kind of stone from which monuments, and not poetry, is made. Only a poetics of nonsense: of the multiple, of the open, can allow for new creations, as it eludes the grip of territorialization.

Notes

[1] From Espejo onward, Tr. I along with II, XVIII, XX, XLI, L, LVIII and LXI, have been known as the “prison poems.” And though a critic like Jean Franco (1976) dismisses the biographical, reductionistic interpretations of these poems she, however, relegates them to Vallejo’s psychological states, or as she puts it, to his “explorations of the imprisoned and divided self” (102).

[2] In anticipation of the objection that in citing literary criticism that, in some cases, goes back more thirty years, I am merely setting up a straw man argument, I respond in advance, that such figures as Espejo, Coyné, McDuffie, and Neale-Silva are here precisely because they continue to represent much of the canonical interpretations of Vallejo’s work, and particularly as they relate to Trilce I.

[3] Espejo claimed to have been there when Vallejo came up with the title, and explains the title thus: “[Vallejo]...varias veces repitió tres, tres, tres, con esa insistencia que tenía en repetir palabras y deformarlas, tresssss, trissss, trieesss, tril, trilssss. Se le trabó la lengua y en el ceceo salió trilsssce...¿trilce? Se quedó unos instantes en suspenso para luego exclamar. Bueno...el libro se llamará Trilce. Esta es la versión autentica” (109). And translator, Clayton Eshelman (1992), speculates that perhaps the title of the book came from a verse in an early version of Tr. XXXII, which reads “¡Tres trillones y trece calorías!” “It is possible that at some stage of revising/completing the book, Vallejo spotted the potentially new word in this line, and pulling the tril from the left side of trillones and ce from the right side of trece, coined ‘trilce,’” says Eshelman (241).

[4] “Since language is arid, make it vibrate with a new intensity,” write Deleuze and Guattari in Kafka (1986). “Oppose a purely intensive usage of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying usages of it. Arrive at a perfect and unformed expression, a material intense expression”(19).

[5] “...[A] great writer is always like a foreigner in the language in which he expresses himself, even if this is his native tongue. At the limit, he draws his strength from a mute and unknown minority that belongs only to him. He is a foreigner in his own language: he does not mix another language with his own language, he carves out a non preexistent foreign language within his own language. He makes the language itself scream, stutter, stammer, or murmur” (Deleuze 1997 109-110).

[6] It is in this sense that we can speak of Vallejo’s work as being in line with what Deleuze and Guattari called “minor literature.” For them “minor” did not refer to numbers, but to a position vis-à-vis a hierarchical power relation with respect to language. According to the French philosophers, a “minor literature” is not necessarily the product of a minor language, but instead one which “a minority [e.g., a Peruvian cholo] constructs within a major language [e.g. Castilian Spanish]” (Kafka 1986 16).

[7] “In nonsense, syntax plays with semantics,” writes Lecercle in Philosophy of Nonsense. “It compensates and exposes semantic incoherence” (59).

[8] In connection to this, Wittgenstein writes: “to assert that *two* objects are identical is nonsense, whereas to assert that *one* thing is identical to itself says nothing” (Tractatus 27).

[9] “A thought contains the possibility of the facts that it thinks,” writes Wittgenstein. But “thought cannot be of anything that is illogical, else we would have to think illogically. As the old saying goes: God can create anything so long as it does not contradict the laws of logic. The truth is that we could not even say what an illogical world might look like” (Tractatus 5).

[10] In keeping with the systematicity of nonsense literature, Susan Stewart (1978) considers nonsense as a decontextualized metaphor where an expression such as ‘He thought that the sun rose and set on her’ is interpreted literally. Metaphor is “‘rescued’ from nonsense by contextualization...[They] make ‘common sense’ so long as they are taken as metaphors and contextualized as such,” writes Stewart (34).

[11] The Oxford English Dictionary defines a portmanteau as a valise or carrying case, and Lewis Carroll coined the term portmanteau word thus: “Humpty-Dumpty’s theory, of two meanings packed into word like a portmanteau, seems to me the right explanation for all. For instance, take two words ‘fuming’ and ‘furious’. Make up your mind that you will say both words, but leave it unsettled which you will say first. Now open your mouth and speak. If your thoughts incline ever so little towards ‘fuming’, you will say ‘fuming-furious’; if they turn, by even a hair’s breadth, towards ‘furious’, you will say ‘furious-fuming’; but if you have that rarest of gifts, a perfectly balanced mind, you will say ‘frumious” (Preface/The Hunting of the Snark 42).

[12] “A series,” writes Wittgenstein (1998), “is ordered by an internal relation equivalent to that of generating one term from another” (Tractatus 34).

[13] The mani- or hands of manipulation is in this case aptly analogous to the metaphor of a “literary work.” A worker/obrero makes use of his hands to create his work/obra. In short, the materiality of “la escritura” is implied here.

[14] Ballón Aguirre (1985) underscores the fact that Vallejo was aware of the political economy of the sign, and as such, valorized “el valor de uso de los signos” (lx) over and above linguistic exchange value. “Vallejo postulará una estética del trabajo, el valor operatorio del ejercicio de escribir...es decir, la eficacia propia de los signos en la producción del sentido que, en resumidas cuentas, es la fabricación del texto, fabricación sublimada por su aspecto negociable. De esta manera se borra en la transacción literaria el trabajo concreto de escribir o fuerza de escritura, al mismo tiempo que se oculta o disimula en la transacción comercial de los textos, la explotación del trabajo que ha supuesto. La denuncia de Vallejo ataca la mixtificación lingüística y política que, incapaz de concebir la ideologización de los signos de la lengua, pone entre paréntesis las relaciones de producción de esos mismos signos” (Ibid. lx). The poetics of nonsense, on the other hand resists such exchange value of signs. This is why the bourgeoisie always dislikes poetry such as Vallejo’s. If Peruvian readers and critics turned their backs on Trilce, it is not merely because they failed to understand it. In fact, they understood it all too well and rejected it tout court. Accustomed to the comfortable linguistic and commodity fetishism of modernismo, they were not ready to give up Darío’s ivory swans, and the preciousness of “good” sense.

[15] Examples of Vallejo’s practice of erasure can be observed when one compares the finalized versions of such poems as Tr. III (51-55), XV (95-99), and XLI (285-289), with their originals. In Tr. XV, for instance, the name of Otilia ironically disappears in the published version. See Ortega’s Cátedra edition.

[16] What Sarduy says of Cervantes’ (Don Quijote) and Velázquez’s (Las Meninas) self-referentiality (that “la obra está en la obra”) he also claims of Larry Bell’s minimalist “cube” sculptures: “En él, y a partir de un lugar privilegiado para ello, es decir, un cuerpo, la escultura, se destruye la noción del arte como una referencia a algo que no es su propio físico: es precisamente el soporte, el andamiaje, lo que constituye la obra” (OC-II/Escrito sobre un cuerpo 1186). And early in the twentieth century art historian, Henri Focillon declared that forms have a life of their own, and as such, could be considered as events in themselves (1948 63). Vallejo points us in a similar direction when he invites us to read a poem like Tr. III: “about a child’s feeling of abandonment,” both as a story and as a material

work of art made not simply with ideas but more importantly with words, without which there would be a story (an oral tale) but no poem.

[17] The author is a proprietor (e.g. of copyright), but ironically and inversely, he/she is also the property of the “worshipping” critic, who makes his/her “work” circulate as an object of consumption according to personally beneficent rules of exchange value. Hence, the humanist pity for “the hunger artist!” of which Kafka was rightly suspicious. Fortunately, in that respect, Trilce resists exchange, and escapes the status of “intellectual property.”

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