

Poetry Between Life and Death: the Late Work of César Vallejo¹

William Rowe, Birkbeck College.

What I have to say comes partly out of Décio Pignatari's triple translation or *trilation* of Mallarmé's 'L'Après-midi d'un faune', which is an example of the more general translation practice of the Brazilian Concretistas, which they called *transcreation*.

What I want to say is also related to a desire that translation awakens and which makes 'the original' seem like a fullness that is impossible to fulfill, or that one can only *partly* be carrying across.

But my point of departure is writing in relation to the possibility of a collectivity, not *any* collectivity but a political collectivity: a community? a multitude? a class? that would be constituted against the capitalist order.

César Vallejo's poem 'Payroll of Bones', written in the mid 1920s, embodies the question, i.e., opens up the question of the political subject. This poem interpellates the subject seven times and each time the interpellation fails. But before quoting it, I want to mention that the first poems I translated were Peruvian 'social poetry' of the late 1960s, poems that were directly political in ways that seemed impossible in English. There are some poems of this type in the book *Our Word: Guerrilla Poems from Latin America*, translated by Ed Dorn and Gordon Brotherston. The political directness of these poems came from a particular scenario of speaking, where speaking could be located inside a narrative of national liberation. *Palabra de guerrillero* is a poem by Javier Heraud, killed in a guerrilla uprising in Peru in 1963:

Porque mi Patria es hermosa
como una espada en el aire
y más grande ahora y aún
y más hermosa todavía,
yo hablo y la defiendo
con mi vida.

¹ This essay was originally written for Partly Writing 4, organized by Caroline Bergvall and Carol Watts, and held in Bury Art Gallery on 4-5th June 2005.

that the poem was written in the early to mid 1920s, at a time of high confidence (among French and Peruvian intellectuals) in revolutionary propaganda – was Vallejo also showing the impossibility of the political subject? i.e. there's no-one there. The micropassage of time-space makes that fullness impossible. Was this deconstruction *avant la lettre*? i.e., the primacy of *différance*?

Ernesto Laclau speaks 'of the social organized as a rhetorical space', out of which 'social identities' are constituted, through a type of "parodic performance" (the phrase is Judith Butler's).³ What a performance of Vallejo's 'Payroll of Bones' brings out, is how interpellation runs up against the non-identity of the subject, how rhetoric smashes against time-movement. So that it's not that nothing is there, but that there's something that rhetoric crashes into. *Il crache*, it spits.

If the address to the other runs up against *différance*, how to reconstitute the political subject after that? Naming is the major part of the language action that fails in the Vallejo poem. The title in Spanish is 'Nómina de huesos', which as well as payroll of bones, can be heard as list or nomination of bones. There's an echo, also, of the Book of Ezekiel: 'Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. . . . Then you will know that I am the Lord.'"⁴ Here the interpellated becomes living substance and knows the name of the voice that is calling it. Speaking becomes an act of sovereignty. Indeed there's a triple embedding of saying inside saying inside saying, typical of the dialogicality of oral narration: except that here in the written text multiple voicing is reversed into the singleness of sovereignty. Again, Vallejo's poem seems to register the impossibility of that action.

How could translation touch *lo inominable*, the unnameable? Surely, if the poem speaks of an impossible subject (i.e., which would be the subject of a payroll and of a naming or summoning), then to attempt to translate it would be to place oneself at a double remove from this possibility of a political subject (who is also a social subject and, as object of a payroll, an economic one)?

³ Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 78. See p. 79: 'the fullness of society is an impossible object'.

⁴ Ezekiel 37, 4-7

But why ask the question about translation at this point? Surely it would make more sense to do that when the translator has worked out the sense of the poem? But no, because translation repeats the question that the poem asks, it inhabits the same question. It would work out of the gap that the poem opens up, the gap between rhetoric and life substance. It would make that gap productive. But it would do so insofar as that gap is already productive, transitive: which is to say that to read the poem in its negativity, to read it as showing the impossibility of a subject that could be commanded, is to move towards a rift in which the subject as that movement which is excessive to language might arise.

There is a later poem by Vallejo, perhaps the last he wrote, with the title 'Sermon on Death' (1938). The way of reading-performing it that most translations propose is shaped by the idea of the grotesque autobiographical self as subject. The first part of the poem consists of a long series of questions, among them the following (in my translation):

Is it simply for that that we die so much?
Is it just to die,
that we have to die every single moment?
And the paragraph I write?
And the deist bracket I hoist?
And the squadron in which my helmet failed?
And the key that goes to all the doors?
And the forensic dieresis, the fist,
my potato and my flesh and my contradiction under the sheet?

The questions address themselves to a subject which is the subject of death, and to language (the non-phonetic signs used in printing)⁵, and to food and the (parodically) sexual body. The questions open up a gap between the things named and the subject of the act – although death would seem to be a non-act and its subject a passivity, a suffering. In this sense 'Sermon on Death' echoes Vallejo's poems of the mid 1920s (such as 'Payroll of Bones'), which ask who is the subject of interpellation, who is the subject of pain, who is the subject of the act. But 'Sermon on Death' takes the question(ing) further: it embraces the gap itself between rhetoric and subject, between its own questioning and the subject of it.

Translators, as I say, have hung their versions on Vallejo as interesting autobiographical subject (as does much Vallejo criticism its reading). Take Clayton Eshleman's one, which is probably the best: (these lines follow on immediately from 'my contradiction under the sheet'):

⁵ Apart from the dieresis, which is in between phonetic and non-phonetic

Out of my mind, out of my wolve, out of
my lamb, sensible, out of my absolute equinity!
Writing desk, yes, my whole life; pulpit,
likewise, my whole death!
Sermon on barbarism: these papers;
proparoxytonic retreat, this skin.

And here is my version:

Mad of me, wolve of me, lamb
of me, sensible, absolute horse of me!
Writing desk, yes, all my life; pulpit,
too, all my death!
Sermon on barbarism: these papers;
dactyllic retreat: this skin.

To take it line by line: 'Out of my mind, out of my wolve, out of / my lamb' and/or 'Mad of me, wolve of me, lamb / of me'. The first evokes a subject unhinged by the foregoing, and thus a tone along the lines of 'the contemplation of death has driven me to this madness, these grotesque figurations of myself', so that the subject is reactive rather than active, the self that speaks locating itself as some sort of full subject or biographical entity. The gap between rhetoric and subject gets suppressed. The second version has wolf and lamb as interpellations, nominations. 'Wolve' and not wolf so as to keep the phonetic mis-spelling of the Spanish ('lovo'), i.e., the materiality (perhaps maternity) of the voice. So that this part of the poem is not a reaction but an act, an act that embraces the very terms of interpellation and conditions of writing in a gesture which affirms there *is* nothing else. In this action the impossible substance is embraced. Writing ceases to be subordinate to any other production of meaning and becomes instead a total wager, *una apuesta total*, going for broke.

The poem at this point sets up a series of oppositions: wolf/lamb, rational (as 'sensible') /irrational (as 'horse'), life/death, sermon/barbarism, poetry/skin, and these continue through to the end of the poem (e.g., 'I will defend my prey in two moments, / with my voice and with my larynx, / and with the physical smell in my praying / and the instinct of immobility in my walking'). Its larger action is to embrace both, rather than submitting to the either/or. What is affirmed is both physical and spiritual, biological and semiotic, i.e., in excess of subjectivity as constituted under conditions of capitalist modernity.

This impossible life-substance -or that which in the poem opens up the question of the subject - is precisely what translations have tended to

eliminate. Part of what is suppressed is a sense of the poem as a decision existing within a field of chance: a loss of the sense of a relationship between writing and indeterminacy. This was suggested to me by the translation practice of Décio Pignatari, a member of the Brazilian Concretist group (founded in the 1950s), in his triduction or triple translation of Mallarmé. What Pignatari does is to translate each line of Mallarmé's 'L'après-midi d'un faune' three times in succession. Take the first three lines (or nine, in Pignatari's version). I give the French first, then the Portuguese:

Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer.
Si clair,
 Leur incarnat léger, qu'il voltige dans l'air
 Assoupi de sommeils touffus. Aimai-je un rêve?

Quero perpetuar essas ninfas.
Tao claro
 Essas ninfas eu quero eternizar.
Tao leve
 Vou perpematar essas ninfas.
É tao claro
É o rodopio de carnes, que ele gira no ar
É a sua carnacao, que ela gira no ar
 Seu ligeiro encarnado a voltear no ar
Entorpecido de pesados sonos.
Sonho?
 Sonolento de sonhos e arbustos.
Foi sonho?
 Espesso de mormaco e sonos.
Sonhei ou . . . ?⁶

In an essay on the process of this translation, Pignatari speaks of adopting a trick or artifice by which he avoided rhymes but sought instead 'hologrammatic rhymes', consisting in 'large-scale assonances and resonance'. This would correspond with Mallarmé's procedure, which is to produce the 'holophrase', i.e. 'the line which, out of various words, remakes a total word, new, strange to the language and with an incantatory effect', something which applies not just to single lines but to blocks of lines. It is not a poem – he adds – that moves from indeterminacy to determinacy: i.e. it is not a stochastic poem if we take stochastic as meaning the approximation through a known code (or procedure) to an unknown message, like when focusing a

⁶ Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, Décio Pignatari, *Galaxia concreta* (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1999), p. 153.

slide. At first sight, as a reader, you distinguish nothing and if you go on to analyse it the mass gets lost in the detail and you have to start unraveling it all over again.⁷ Hence Pignatari calls it an anti-stochastic poem. The translation would insert itself within the poem's drift between determinacy and indeterminacy.

The drift or *dérive* in the Mallarmé poem is semantic-phonetic. But with Vallejo's 'Payroll of Bones' what cannot be determined is the subject of interpellation. That brings me up against a question: what, in rhetoric, would be the equivalent of semantic-phonetic drift? What would rhetorical indeterminacy consist of? Gertrude Stein's insistence that there is no such thing as repetition seems at first sight to offer a way of opening up the question: 'there can be no repetition because the essence of [. . .] expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis.' People, she says, always 'vary their insistence' and adds: 'That is what makes life'.⁸ But actually, Vallejo's 'Payroll' seems to be an opposite case: what varies is the subject, not the insistence.

There is another poem of his from the same period, where, once again, the concern is with the subject, in this case the subject of the act. It begins with an insistence on absence: "Nobody lives in the house any more," you say; "everybody's gone. The living room, the bedroom, the garden, are all deserted. No-one is left, because they've all departed." But the poem goes on to assert a strange and haunting presence:

And I say to you: When someone goes away,
someone stays. The point through which a
human being has passed is no longer alone.
The only place that is alone, with human
solitude, is the one no-one has passed
through. [. . .]

They have all left the house, in reality,
but in truth they have all stayed. And it is not
the memory of them that remains, but they
themselves. And it is not that they have
stayed in the house, but that they are still
around the house. The functions and the acts

⁷ This is a paraphrase of Pignatari's quotation from Francis Jammes (Décio Pignatari, 'Nota a la traducción del *Fauno*', *Galaxia concreta*, p. 270).

⁸ Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (London: Virago, 1985 [1937]), p. 167.

go away from the house by train or plane or
on horseback, on foot or crawling. What is
still in the house is the organ, the agent in
gerund and in circle. The footsteps have gone,
the kisses, the forgiving, the crimes. What is
still in the house is the foot, the lips, the eyes,
the heart. The negations and affirmations,
good and evil, have dispersed. What is still in
the house, is the subject of the act.

Here what is adrift – i.e. what remains in the house in spite of the usual ideas of space and the usual grammars of action – is not the sound-mass (the surplus of Mallarmé's poem) but, once again, something to do with the subject. A residue remains, which cannot be accounted for. There are two approaches here which may be of interest. First, to the idea of the act, and second, to an economy of the subject and of writing.

There is something intractable about Vallejo's 'subject of the act.' It is not the subject of things done in the ordinary sense (traveling, kissing). Nor is it a spectral presence in the sense either of trauma or of will. Yet it remains. Here Zizek's discussion of 'the Lacanian Real' is relevant. Instead of taking the Real as really existing society or really existing subject which cannot be symbolized – Zizek speaks of 'some pre-existing external substantial Entity beyond the grasp of symbolization' (120) – the question would be 'the Real as the *inherent point of failure* of symbolization.' So in Vallejo's poem we are not dealing with something that, in some over-simple sense, exceeds language.⁹ Zizek goes on to speak of

the act as a gesture which, by definition, touches the dimension of some impossible Real. This notion of the act must be conceived of against the background of the distinction between the mere endeavour to 'solve a variety of partial problems' within a given field and the more radical gesture of subverting the very structuring principle of this field. An act does not simply occur *within* the given horizon of what

⁹ A Romantic idea which he satirizes in the poem 'Intensidad y altura', where fecundity is shown to be not the property of the self wishing to express itself ('I want to write, but foam comes out of me') but of language ('there's no spoken cipher that is not a sum, / no written pyramid, without a bud. // [. . .] There's no spoken cough, that doesn't become fog, / no god or son of god, without development').

appears to be 'possible' – it redefines the very contours of what is possible¹⁰

It seems to be that it is the subject of the act, in this sense, that remains in the house. Or, to say it differently, that it is time as dimension of the creative, rather than time as operation of exchange, that makes it possible for what remains in the house to remain – which is certainly not the citizen, the person, or the member of a society.

Pignatari says of his triple translation that it constitutes an 'antieconomy', and that it could be thought of as 'a deformed projection of the object [or the *boject*, the mad throw] inside that subtle rift or cut between the precise and the imprecise: a moment in a stochastic series of a translation of 'L'après-midi d'un faune'.¹¹ That particular conception of the project would not fit Vallejo's 'No-one lives in the house any more', because although there is a 'rift between the precise and the imprecise', it does not occur in the region of semantic/phonetic drift but in that of the subject who is not 'the footsteps [. . .], the kisses, the forgiving, the crimes' but 'the foot, the lips, the eyes, the heart.' Except that Vallejo writes 'what is' instead of the personalising 'who is': i.e., what is still in the house, between an affirmation and a question. The poem moves repeatedly from saying nobody to saying somebody, and yet it is impossible to draw the line between them precisely because the terms of the one are not the terms of the other. The distinction, and lack of distinction, recur. This is where I think a triple translation of this Vallejo poem would be productive:

'Nobody lives in this house any more,' you tell me; 'everybody's gone.
'No-one lives in the house any more,' you say; 'everyone's gone.
'There is no-one living in this house any more,' you say to me; 'they
have [all gone away.

The living room, the bedroom, the patio are all deserted.
The living room, the bedroom, the garden, are all empty.
The front room, the bedroom, the garden, are uninhabited.

Nobody's left, because everyone's departed.'
No-one's left, because they've all gone away.'
No-one is left, since they have all gone.'

And I say to you: When somebody goes, somebody stays.

¹⁰ Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, pp. 120, 121. See Vallejo's poem from the same period 'I Am going to Speak of Hope', where the subject of suffering is not the subject of any statement, discourse, or nomination, yet is inside language.

¹¹ *Galxia concreta*, pp. 270-271.

And I say to you: When someone leaves, someone's left.
And I say to you: When someone goes away, someone remains.

The point through which a man has passed is no longer alone.
The point through which a human being has passed, is not alone any
[longer.
The point which a man has passed through is not alone any more.

*The place that no man has passed through, is the only one that is alone, with
[human solitude.*
Only a place that no person has passed through can be alone with
human [solitude.
The only place that is alone, with human solitude, is the one no-one has
[passed through.

Here Stein's variations of emphasis, i.e., of tone,¹² which is a relation to the outside, can be felt. Yet they do not add to or link up in any way with that emergence of something other than the habitual subject. The 'subject of the act' would remain as an excess with respect to the economy of ordinary actions and the economy of ordinary space – and but also in a relation of excess to ordinary speech. In other words, the variations of emphasis that register the aliveness of the subject of speaking do not align with 'the subject of the act'. The variations of emphasis, which produce a (dialogical) sense of several voices inside one, contrast with 'the subject of the act', which does not belong to the order of the voice.

The 'subject of the act' does not speak, but bespeaks a different economy – an economy where there's no transcending principle of equivalence (called meaning). Does that make the poem a gift without equivalence? Where does that leave the receiver? Is not Bataille's idea of sovereignty relevant, as 'the power to rise indifferent to death, above the laws which ensure the maintenance of life'?¹³

A third reading of the poem's substance is possible. The poem speaks of 'the inescapable resemblance between a house and a grave' and adds: 'except that the house lives off the life of man, while the grave lives off the death of man. That is why the first stands upright, while the second lies down.' This

¹² Vallejo wrote 'What matters most in a poem is the tone with which something is said and, secondarily, what is said'. This appears in his key essay 'Electrones de la obra de arte', an inquiry into the semiotic substance of poetry. (César Vallejo, *El arte y la revolución* (Lima, Mosca Azul, 1973), p. 69.

¹³ Quoted by Steve McCaffery, *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986* (New York: Roof, 2000), p. 213.

appears to extend the economy of life into death, removing the distinction between alive and dead as states of being, as in Andean belief where the dead person, in the shape of their *ánima* or soul, stays on in certain places, such as the house or the graveyard. Except that the poem does not constitute a system of stable symbolic investments but on the contrary interrogates the relationship between space and meaning. In order to attribute life to specific places, it must first separate the one from the other, and by implication separate life from the symbolic, in order to discover that life, indeed, passes through it. But this is life made free from a sacrificial relationship to existing systems of meaning, just as Chapter One of *Capital* separates time or life energy from its sacrificial and fetishistic subsumption into capital.¹⁴

In another mid-1920s Vallejo poem, 'Existe un mutilado', the person is completely de-subjectified and yet completely alive:

As the face is immobile and dead, all the psychic life, all the animal expression of this man takes refuge, in order to translate itself to the outside, in the hairy cranium, in the thorax, and in the extremities. The impulses of his deep being, as they come out, retreat from the face and from breathing, smell, sight, ear, word, the human splendour of his being, function and express themselves through the chest, through the shoulders, through the hair, through the ribs, through the arms and the legs and the feet.

The man's life is not gathered in the organs, is not organised by the pleasure principle.¹⁵ A principle of untranslatability already inheres within the poem: 'the psychic life' of the person inheres in the non-symbolic (strictly, in parts of the body which do not relate to the senses as expressive), and thus the poem takes us to a similar impossibility to that of the interpellated who does not appear. This is non-translatability of a different order from that which pertains when paratactical and parasemantic drift produces indeterminacy. The standard translation, by its personification of 'the impulses' which 'back

¹⁴ Compare Barry MacSweeney's work of the late 1970s and early 1980s where he exposes the takeover of language by neoliberal fetishism. See, for example, 'Liz Hard' and 'Jury Vet' (in Barry MacSweeney, *Wolf Tongue: Selected Poems 1965-2000*, Bloodaxe: Highgreen, 2003).

¹⁵ Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* has pleasure as inherent to the child's first relationship with language and more generally to the substitutory function of the symbolic. However, trauma – or the Real – is resistant to the pleasure principle. Normally 'the feelings of pleasure and unpleasure . . . predominate over all external stimuli.' In the case of trauma, 'the mental apparatus' is 'flooded' with excessive amounts of stimulus, which remain 'unbound'. (Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, The Standard Edition of the complete Psychological Works, Vol. xviii (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 29-30).

away from his face . . .',¹⁶ diminishes the unrelieved collision between meaning and physicality – makes the poem translatable precisely where it is not, i.e., where it produces, internally, its non-translatability.¹⁷

Without the operation of the symbolic, there is no principle of equivalence. Translation, as an economy of equivalence, which is, as McCaffery notes, the 'dominant conception' of it, relies upon a 'semantic exchange' upheld by 'the notion of a "third" equilibrated meaning between the source and target texts.'¹⁸ This 'third, transcendental term' makes its appearance in Vallejo's 'The Windows Have Shuddered' – also from the mid 1920s – taking the form of a fly:

Serving the cause of religion, this fly flies successfully, along the whole length of the ward. When the surgeons come to do their round, its buzzings do not, for sure, forgive the chest, but then as they develop they take possession of the air, so as to salute those who are going to die with the genius of change. Some patients hear this fly even during their pain and thus in the trembling nights on them depends the lineage of the gunshot.

This immensely complex piece of writing has the theological fly as vehicle that enters and exits the symbolic as it passes through the unsymbolised body. The result is perhaps more like a film shot in its material opacity which passes in and out of symbolic investment. The hospital, grand scenario of the symbolised, measured, auscultated, symptomatised body is cut across by a hurricane which causes the windows to tremble:

The windows have trembled, elaborating a metaphysics of the universe. Window panes have fallen. A patient throws out his groan: half of it through his tongued and left-over mouth, and the whole through the anus of his back. / / It's the hurricane . . .

Like the fly, the hurricane offers a principle of equivalence:

¹⁶ César Vallejo, *The complete Posthumous Poetry*, translated by Clayton Eshleman (Berkeley: University of California, 1978), p. 12. The Spanish is 'retroceden', which does not imply a personified subject.

¹⁷ Vallejo wrote, in 1929, 'The best poets [. . .] are those who lend themselves least to translation' ('La nueva poesía norteamericana', in *Artículos y crónicas completos* (Lima, Pontificia Universidad Católica, 2002), p. 779). In this essay he insists on the need for poetry to work with the material rhythms of life just as painting works with colours and not with objects.

¹⁸ McCaffery, p. 219.

From what point, I ask, hearing both ends of the oceans, from what point does this hurricane come, so worthy of credit, so honourable in debt, straight to the windows of the hospital? Ah! the immutable directions, that oscillate between the hurricane and this direct pain of coughing and defecating!

Again, the standard translation attenuates the collision between irreconcilable orders of meaning with: 'Ay the immutable directions, that oscillate between the hurricane and this direct embarrassment to cough or defecate!', where coughing and defecating have become mental image, removed from the physical, making the poem more readable, more translatable.

The final sentence of the poem, with one slight variation, repeats three times:

It is not pleasant to die, lord, if one leaves nothing in life and if in death nothing is possible, except upon what is left in life!

It is not pleasant to die, lord, if one leaves nothing in life and if in death nothing is possible, except upon what is left in life!

It is not pleasant to die, lord, if one leaves nothing in life and if in death nothing is possible, except upon what could have been left in life!

The meaning of these sentences has little to do with autobiographical pathos. The micro-variations of emphasis smash against the recurrent 'nothing' – the word itself in turn a signifier of substance (leaves nothing in life) and of negation (nothing is possible) – not a symbolised substance but a negative substance that passes through language. The triple repetition gives the time in which symbolic investment occurs. In this sense it is like the freeze frame that occurs at the end of Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* and becomes invested with multiple futures. Except that Vallejo's ending produces in a certain way the opposite, a non-signifying substance, in which, nevertheless, life inheres.