

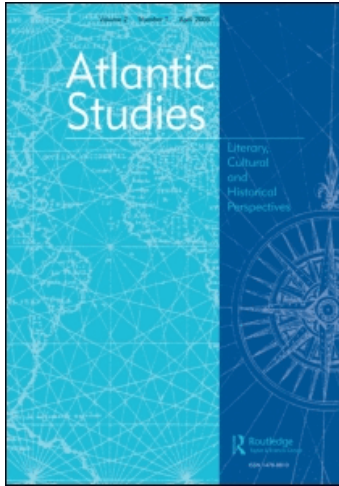
This article was downloaded by: [O'Donnell, Irene][informa internal users]

On: 13 October 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 755239602]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Atlantic Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: <http://www-intra.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713703567>

Vallejo's Songskeleton: Review Essay

Matt Sandler^a

^a Louisiana State University, USA

Online publication date: 30 November 2009

To cite this Article Sandler, Matt(2009) 'Vallejo's Songskeleton: Review Essay', Atlantic Studies, 6: 3, 393 – 399

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/14788810903264902

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14788810903264902>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www-intra.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Vallejo's Songskeleton: Review Essay

The Complete Poetry, by César Vallejo, ed. and trans. Clayton Eshleman, Berkeley, U. of California P., 2007, 732 pp., \$55.00, ISBN 978-0-5202-4552-5.

This volume is the culmination of Clayton Eshleman's life's work as translator of the modernist poetry of César Vallejo. Vallejo receives lavish treatment here, and the book is a sign of his election to what Pascale Casanova has recently called the "world republic of letters." However, it is also a collection that puts Casanova's concept of a discernable literary universe to harrowing inquiry. Vallejo lived the latter half of his life in European exile from rural northern Peru. In Casanova's attempt to prove Paris as a kind of "Greenwich Meridian of literature," she quotes Vallejo saying, "I set out for Europe and I learned to know Peru" (87, 32). However, the fact that Vallejo was harassed by European governments for his dissident activities does not figure into her careful delineation of the French nationalist and mostly European internationalist literary institutions that comprise her conception of world literature. Moreover, his poetry plays on deep structural characteristics of the Spanish language that frustrate translation. His often profoundly inward-turned writing reveals an unremitting pessimism and a proclivity to suffering that forecloses on any celebratory account of his achievement in bringing voice to his people. Finally, the bodily orientations of this writing, its relentlessly close examination of physical and psychological symptoms, make claiming it for any imaginary geographic construction exceedingly difficult. For all these reasons, Vallejo's status as a figure of "world" literature is extraordinarily complex, a situation this collection happily and copiously lays bare.

Eshleman recounts many difficulties in a lovely "Translation Memoir" that he appends as an afterword. Getting permissions from Vallejo's sometimes intractable widow, finding equivalents for Vallejo's frequent neologisms, and living with the psychological burden of Vallejo's extravagant sadness all prove arduous undertakings. He describes, for instance, a recurring dream about finding Vallejo's dead body between his wife and himself in bed. A heroically indulgent but assiduous man has taken up the task of the translator here, embodying the writing more than staging some sort of transaction between languages. Some of the works which appear here have already been published to substantial acclaim: Eshleman's translation (with José Rubia Barcia) of Vallejo's *Complete Posthumous Poetry* won the National Book Award for translation in 1979. That volume's contents are divided into a long work called *Poemas humanos* [*The Human Poems*] (1939), and a short one about the Spanish Civil War entitled *España, aparta de mí este cáliz* [*Spain, Take This Chalice from Me*] (1940). Presented before these, his celebrated rendering of *Trilce* (1992 [1922]) is republished here as well. This volume opens with its newest material, Vallejo's first book, *Los heraldos negros* (1918), which Eshleman notes presented more conventional problems for the translator of poetry – end-rhymed sonnets, for

instance. More than 80 pages of notes and supplementary materials explain the vicissitudes of the translation. Eshleman had to consult, for instance, a Spanish zoologist for help with some of the more obscure bird species Vallejo mentions. This edition generously retains the original Spanish on facing pages, a luxury for which this poetry's linguistic complexity makes a strong implicit argument.

Vallejo's "songskeleton" (221) has influenced more than one generation of experimental poetry in the United States, going back to the period encompassed by the "New American Poetry" (1945–1960). Zen Cowboy poet Ed Dorn, the monastic Catholic priest Thomas Merton, Bollingen prize-winner Donald Justice, and Robert Bly, founder of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement, are among the diverse American writers of the second half of the twentieth-century who have also translated Vallejo. Christopher Buckley has edited a slim volume of poems by contemporary Americans dedicated to or based on the work of the great Latin American poet entitled *Homage to Vallejo* which only begins to survey the scope of his devoted American readership. His work is much more popular among American poets, it seems, than American scholars and critics of poetry. This collection's appearance at a time when American literary study is expanding to encompass the "Atlantic" and the "Americas" virtually guarantees that scholars will take some interest in Vallejo's importance to North American poets. Looking backwards, they might also find themselves interested in Vallejo's own formative reading of Poe or Whitman. Like in American Renaissance symbolism, much has been made of Vallejo's interest for psychoanalytic readers, because he often puts familial and romantic scenes at the heart of more transhistorical and metaphysical questions.

Vallejo's legacy labors under the burden of myth, much like many poets in the post-Romantic tradition. The problems here are partly of his own making, and partly the work of his often enthusiastic critics. The process began in *Los heraldos negros*, written as a young man in Northern Peru, in which he takes the posture of poet-prophet, recording "the deep falls of the Christs of the soul" – the spiritual/emotional turbulence of supposedly quiet provincial life (25). These preoccupations will move from religious to scientific. In "The Invention of Vallejo," a chapter of her excellent book *César Vallejo: The Dialectics of Poetry and Silence*, Jean Franco¹ gives the map of misreadings, from those of the sentimentalists and Communist Party members who have claimed him. She recounts, for instance, that Louis Aragon's eulogy at the poet's Paris funeral praises his synthesis of language of empire (Spanish) with the cultural materials of the colonized (Incan). Aragon leaves aside Vallejo's disintegrating loneliness, and his intense bodily self-awareness that cuts against any facile reconciliation – relational, political, or linguistic.

In the first of his "Autochthonous Tercet," a group of poems describing a harvest festival, Vallejo writes: "In indigenous veins gleams/a yaraví of blood filtered/through pupils into nostalgias of sun" (85). The image of blood presumably hidden in veins runs against the various visual cues, "gleams," "pupil," "sun." Complicating matters further, Eshleman informs us in a note that the *yaraví* are songs incorporating Spanish and indigenous melodic structures. He mentions that the word is a Hispanicization of the Incan *harawi*. In these lines, visual, aural, biological, and cultural registers collide, rather than synthesizing some easy hybrid. A yaraví would more properly ring or echo through ears than gleam through pupils. One could recall any number of romantic racialist fantasies in which song is heard through the beating of the blood (Vallejo's Harlem Renaissance contemporaries, for

instance, wrote a few). Here, however, such clichés are taken at visual and historical distance, “through pupils into nostalgias of sun.” The poem is found in a section of *Heraldos Negros* called “Nostalgias Imperiales,” a phrase Renato Rosaldo has since raised to the level of a concept in post-colonial theories of the idealization of the native. Vallejo belongs in the tradition of democratically-inclusive thinking about New World *mestizaje* that goes back to José Martí and José Vasconcelos. However, while these thinkers offered holistic prophecy for the Latin American race, Vallejo subjects the category of the “human” and its productions to microscopically analytical representation.

In *Trilce* (1922), which Vallejo wrote substantially while imprisoned for his part in a political bombing in Trujillo, such religious, racial, and national concerns have moved much further from their standard associations. What many consider his masterpiece was originally meant to be titled “Cráneos de bronce [Bronze Skulls]” under the pseudonym César Perú, in which case its ethnic and nationalist coordinates would have been more clear. The neologism “trilce” might be a combination of the Spanish words for sad [*triste*] and sweet [*dulce*], which is a typical modulation in his verse. Or it might be a combination of the words quintillion [*trillon*] and thirteen [*trece*], in which case threeness or trinity is amputated, “*tril-*” referring to the number of zeros and “*-ce*” corresponding to the English suffix -teen. In his most manifesto-like moments, Vallejo shouts, “*Ceded al nuevo impar/potente de orfandad!* [Make way for the new odd number/ potent with orphanhood!]” (238–9).

More often, though, *Trilce* embodies a strange atomic genealogy in language. In *Trilce XXX*, for instance, we read:

*Quemadura del segundo
en toda la tierna carnicilla del deseo
picadura del ají vagoroso
a las dos de la tarde immoral.*

Burn of the second
throughout the tender fleshbud of desire sting of vagurant chili
at two in the afternoon (226–7).

For all his politics, intellection, and introversion, Vallejo was capable of an erotic poetry subject to the most unregenerate abandonment. It proceeds as if by measuring the caloric energy (“sting,” “burn”) lost and gained in mini-moments (“second,” “at two in the afternoon”) of love and debasement. The neologism “*vagoroso*,” which Eshleman glosses as a combination of *vago* [vague] and *vagoroso* [vagrant], also happens to be the spelling of Portuguese word meaning “slow,” and calls the word *vigoroso* [vigorous] fairly quickly to my mind. This matrix of possibilities for the modification of a “chili” takes the traditional mood-setting of love poetry and renders it algebraically multiple. Franco points out that Vallejo shares with American blues musicians the tendency to cloth sexual references in food metaphors, itself a fairly complex, though less individual displacement of bodily necessities. This quantum poetics, what it does to individual experience, makes Vallejo an interesting counterpoint to apparently cutting-edge thinking about globalization. How can a lyric speaker of such variable sentiment bear the weight of a national character and, even more complexly, a “universal” subject?

Another aspect of Vallejo's life that will interest readers of *Atlantic Studies* is his travels in the Soviet Union. Among his epigrammatic notes on the subject of "Art and Revolution," he writes of what he calls "mania de grandeza, enfermedad burguesa [Mania of Grandiose, Bourgeois Illness]";

*Algunos escritores creen infundir altura y grandeza a sus obras, habando en ellas del cielo, de os astros y sus rotaciones, de las fuerzas interatómicas, de los electrons, del soplo y equilibrio cosmico, aunque en tales obras no alienta, en verdad, el menor sentimiento de esos materiales estéticos. En la base de esas obras están solo los nombres de las cosas, pero no el sentimiento o noción emotive y creadora de las cosas.*²

[Some writers fake summit and magnitude in their works, speaking in them of the sky, or the stars and their rotations, of interatomic forces, of electrons, of cosmic blast and equilibrium, even if such works don't inspire, in truth, the least sentiment of these aesthetic materials. At the root of these works is only the names of things, but not the feeling or creative and emotive notion of things.]

Vallejo believed that bourgeois writing had interfered with the basic phenomenological apprehension of the material world. These lines echo Gertrude Stein's desire to depict the essence of everyday objects without using their names in *Tender Buttons* (1914). Both Vallejo and Stein's projects may have been influenced by Russian and Eastern European literary thinkers. It is unclear how familiar Vallejo was with the ideas of Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky, who theorized the specificity of literary language and its intensification of rote existence, or Russian futurists like Alexander Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov, whose *zaum* poetics aspired to a nonsense shot through with etymological import. Kruchenykh's collection *The Lacquered Leotards* (1919) shares Vallejo's nuclear attention to language and the body:

*At 6 in the morning the calorimeter reads a barrel
The valve roachers of conscience sting
more painfully Than awls*

Only the first buzz of the blood is scary.
Later we relish it
like a viscous wine
and the hand
of rakes won't tremble against the craggYcheek! In
distraction, like young potatoes,
Crumble and launch into separation
On *their* bottom (Kruchenykh 85).

Here, as in Vallejo, the traditional language of sentiment (blood, conscience) is renovated by science and machinery (calorimeter, viscosity). In each case, some form of bittersweet romance is retained (rather than stamped out, as in the Italian fascist variant of futurism). Likewise, here we also see a willingness to play with orthographic effects ("craggYcheek") and to alternate between spare natural images and lushly orchestrated confusion ("in distraction, like young potatoes"). Finally, both Vallejo and Kruchenykh share a belief that such rarified literary tricksterism has some basic stake in the ends of social revolution. This premise – anachronistic as it may be now – acted in generative contradiction with the ostensibly "global" impulses of both Romanticism and modernism.

Vallejo invested himself bodily in his work, but saw the cost, or inevitable failure of this sustained gesture. “*Yo me buscolen mi propio designio que debió ser obralmía, en vano* [I seek myself/in my own design which was to be a work/of mine, in vain]” (281). He has been notorious for his doubles, his impoverishing self-reproduction, as in “*La rueda del hambriento*” or “*The Hungry Man’s Rack*” from *Human Poems*:

From between my own teeth I come out smoking,

shouting, pushing,

pulling down my pants...

My stomach empties, my jejunum empties,

misery pulls me out by my teeth ... (403)

As an emergence in language, these lines bridge revelation and sympathectomy. The shrieks and wheezes of this experience are, in a sort of paradox, silently textual and physical. This is no “barbaric yawp,” to borrow Whitman’s famous phrase. While his double energetically uses his body and clothes as footholds in its escape, Vallejo records his ecstasy in a quiet notation of evacuated part-objects.

Sadness is the dominant emotional tone of Vallejo’s universe. Doubling is the metaphysics of his melancholia. Out of his detachment, we find abjection motivating happiness, humor, thought, love, and sex. It brings about externalization, apprehensible in physical language as a incomplete relief from the bodily condition. Creative misery, in the absence of god, tears man out of his abasement. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley³ puts the necessity of building one’s own cosmology this way: “Each to itself must be the oracle” (II.iv.123). Vallejo, in seeking to bring to life the “creative and emotive notion of things,” wanted to sing a myth for each particle of existence. Writing after Darwin and Haeckel in particular, Vallejo gave his stomach a different perspective on its historical being than his teeth. This is a poetry where looking tears the eyelids, tasting cuts the tongue, listening boils the blood in the ears and so on...

There are a number of aesthetic and theoretical accountings of this sort of microscopic bodily self-experience across the twentieth century. Gilles Deleuze,⁴ for instance, said of the molten portraits of British painter Francis Bacon that his “scream” is the “operation through which the entire body escapes through the mouth” (16). Charles Olson,⁵ the American poet, in writing the local epic of Gloucester, Massachusetts, *The Maximus Poems*, found himself much concerned with “proprioception” – the neuralregister of physical self-awareness that assists in balance and movement. In an essay on the subject, Olson wrote of “the body itself as, by movement of its own tissues, giving the data of, depth ... the ‘soul’ then is equally ‘physical’” (2). In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon⁶ turned to the concept of “heautoscopy,” which in Freud meant “self-examination,” arguing that for black subjects, such self-awareness is necessarily bedeviled by hallucination, and terrifying visions motivated by the internalization of white racial-biological anxieties (162). He takes up the heautoscopy’s other associations as an intensely particularizing awareness of one’s organs (the skin, the genitals), and the experience of doubling, or the *doppelgänger*. All of these figures – Bacon, Olson, Fanon – are known for their renovation of psychological interiors. That a queer cosmopolitan British painter, a left-liberal avant gardist American poet, and a Martinican psychiatrist and

postcolonial radical can all be drawn into quick parallel with the Peruvian poet's estrangement testifies to the pointed and paradoxical globality of his work. Elsewhere in *Human Poems*, Vallejo records an image that bridges his intensely inward awareness and his worldliness: "*Se estremeció la incógnita en mi amígdala* [The unknown shuddered in my tonsil]" (459).

Vallejo knew better than anyone when he was caught in "the tangles of the tangles." However, he arrived at more than a few formulas of bracing simplicity. Sometimes, the vast emptinesses he confronted more than adequately sustain the microscopic physical portions to which he laid claim: "*Absurdo, este exceso solo ante ti selsuda de dorado placer* (Absurdity, only facing you does this excess sweat golden pleasure)" (315–6). Eshleman is careful to break the English word excess between the first and second line, just as Vallejo divides the verb "*suda*" (sweat) from its reflexive pronoun "*se*." One might wonder what is at stake in shifting the morphological disruption from verb to object, reuniting the sweat with its subject and dividing the -cess from the ex-. Does it sabotage his carefully turned vision? This sort of moment recommends this volume as a model for the translation of difficult modern poetry, since where it cannot be accurate, it can at least match the spirit of searching which characterizes the verse. Rather than seeming an act of self-aggrandizing bravado (and there are a few moments here that verge on it), Eshleman's choices warn us of the pitfalls of tourism within the "world republic of letters." Vallejo's catalog of closely examined sufferings, sentiments, and loves, always redolent with physicality lays many traps for readers looking for some kind of typically "Latin American" verse. We are given the opportunity by an experienced guide to be thoughtful travelers in a foreign literature which is not so just because of its national origin, but also because of its fundamental estrangements from body and language.

Matt Sandler

Louisiana State University, USA

E-mail: msandler@lsu.edu

Notes

1. Franco, *César Vallejo*.
2. Vallejo, *El arte y la revolución*, 50.
3. Shelley, *Poetry and Prose*.
4. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*.
5. Olson, "Proprioception."
6. Fanon, *Black Skin*.

References

- Deleuze, Gilles. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. New York: Continuum, 2003.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
- Franco, Jean. *César Vallejo: The Dialectics of Poetry and Silence*. Cambridge: Oxford, 1976.
- Kruchenykh, Alexei. *Suicide Circus: Selected Poems*. Trans. Jack Hirschman, Alexander Kohav and Venyamin Tseylin. Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2001.

- Olson, Charles. "Proprioception" [1965]. In *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander, 179–99. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers. New York: W.W. Norton, 1977.
- Vallejo, César. *El arte y la revolucion* [1928–1934]. Lima: Mosca Azul, 1973.