

AN EGO STRONG ENOUGH TO LIVE:  
TRANSLATING & IMAGINING CESAR VALLEJO<sup>1</sup>

*Clayton Eshleman*

*(from Archaic Design, Black Widow Press, 2007)*

By the time I completed a third draft of César Vallejo's "Human Poems," in Kyoto, Japan, in 1963, I felt that I was hardly any further ahead with the project than I had been at the beginning. By insisting on trying to get everything right, I kept running up against dead end after dead end. This word was not in any dictionary. This phrase made no sense. Not only did I not understand a lot of what I was working with, but I began to fantasize that Vallejo did not want his words turned into English, and in some bizarre way was resisting my efforts. I realized, however, that being lost in a labyrinth that I had created for myself *was* significant. I decided that if I could figure out a way to conceive this struggle in a poem of my own, I would have at least something to show for all my work.

I imagined that I was in a life-death struggle with Vallejo, or, in Blakean terms, with the Specter of Vallejo. I was trying to wrest his language away from him as if it were his food while he cannily thwarted my thievery. So I worked on a poem ultimately called "The Book of Yorunomado." The crucial section of the poem, as far as the struggle with Vallejo was concerned, is this:

I entered Yorunomado and sat  
down, translating,

---

<sup>1</sup> This talk was written out for and given at Michael Heim's translation seminar at UCLA in February 2007. "The Book of Yorunomado" and "The Excavation of Artaud" were published in *The Name Encanyoned River: Selected Poems 1960-1985* (Black Sparrow Press, 1986); "The Book of Niemonjima" appeared in *Coils* (Black Sparrow Press, 1973); "One if by Land, None if by Void" is from *An Alchemist with One Eye on Fire* (Black Widow Press, 2006).

*Nightwindow.*

The coffee breathed  
a tiny  
pit—

As a black jeweled butterfly alights  
in late summer on a hardening coil of dung,  
so I lit on his spine

pages lifting in the breeze      in from the patio

We locked. I sank my teeth into  
his throat, clenched, his fangs  
tore into my balls, locked  
in spasms of deadening pain we turned, I  
crazed for his breath, to translate  
my cry into his gold, howling, he  
ripped for food

Locked, a month passed, and as he increased lean  
I slackened, drained, and tripling my energy  
drew blood, not what I was after, muscles  
contracting, expanded he was clenched  
in my structure, a dead matter  
eating into my cords, and saw deep  
in his interior a pit, in spring  
I went for it, made myself into a knife  
and reached down, drawing  
out from the earth cold.  
A hideous chill passed—

another month, cunningly  
he turned himself into a stone

I dulled on, grinding my own teeth, woke up,  
another month, a season. I was wandering  
a pebbled compound, the stone in my hand.

I saw I had birthed the dead end, but Japan  
was no help—until I also saw  
in the feudal rite of *seppuku* a way.

On the pebbles I lowered stone-like.  
Whereupon the Specter of Vallejo raised  
before me: cowed in black robes, stern on the *roka*,

he assumed a formal kneel. With his fan  
he drew a bull's-eye on my gut;  
he gave no quarter; I cut.

Eyes of father tubes of mother swam  
my system's acids. As one slices raw tuna  
with shooting contortions not

moving a foot I unlocked Yorunomado,  
undid his wrists and ankles chained to altars of  
the multichambered sun.  
Vallejo kept his word:

he was none other that year than himself

Hello all I have ever felt...

for that was the point upon which the knife  
twisted loose an ego  
strong enough to live.

*Seppuku* is the more sophisticated term for what is otherwise known as *harakiri*, or disembowelment. In 1962, I saw, several times, a terrific Samurai film called *Seppuku* that made a profound impression on me.

Slicing into my own metaphoric guts, an eerie ecstasy ran through me. I was envisioning the destruction of my given life for a creative one, in which Yorunomado, a figure of imagination, replaced my mother and father.

Years later, studying shamanism, I discovered that the novice in his initiation often experiences dismemberment in which his insides are torn out, or boiled. Spirits or ancestral shamans then replace the organs with rock crystals, indicating that the new initiate has an indestructible body enabling him to go on celestial or infernal quests.

Elsewhere I have written: "In early 1964, the fruit of my struggle with Vallejo was not a successful linguistic translation but an imaginative advance in which a third figure had emerged from my intercourse with the text. Yorunomado then became another guide in the ten-year process of developing a "creative life," recorded in my book-length poem, *Coils* (1973)."

\*

The temptation in Kyoto at this time was to tinker with Vallejo's lines in English in such a way that they made sense to me, to, in effect, interpret them rather than to translate

them. Probably because of the wall I was up against, I had a lot of fantasies, not only about what a particular line or image might mean, but fantasies that seemed detached from the translation itself. And since Vallejo was one of my key sources for what being a poet meant, I knew that if I was not careful I would skew the translation in directions that would represent my own, at the time, unclear aspirations in poetry. As I pointed out in “A Translation Memoir,” the Afterword to my translation of *The Complete Poetry of César Vallejo*, I have worked hard, over the years, to keep this from happening.

Since I worked on Vallejo at the time I was seeking to lose and to find myself in poetry, his influence on my writing has been considerable. However, there seems to be a crucial difference between being influenced by a master in one’s own language and by one in a language that one is translating. If I am being influenced by Hart Crane, say, you would think of Crane when you read my poetry, and by doing so, one could say that Crane’s presence had marginalized my own. If Vallejo is to make himself felt in my poetry, one way that he could do so would be through what I, as his translator, have turned him into. In this sense, my translations of him act as a kind of half-way house between the original Spanish and my own poetry. If you think of Vallejo when you read one of my poems, you are most probably not thinking of him in Spanish, but of what I have turned him into in English. So to some extent, I have created a text to possibly be influenced by. While I would not go so far as to say that this is the equivalent of being influenced by myself, the translation is so full of “Eshleman decisions” that Vallejo, as direct presence, has been distanced.

Other forms of influence involve psychological strategies. Near the end of “Song of Myself,” Walt Whitman writes:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then.... I contradict myself;

I am large.... I contain multitudes.

Vallejo's form of contradiction, certainly in *Poemas humanos*, often involves a subconscious thought entering a line under formation and re-routing it. I became aware of this strategy while in Kyoto, and it taught me that engaging lines of poetry are often those that construct a new image, or, yoke two disparities into a seamless proposal. For example, look at what happens in this stanza from Vallejo's "There are days, there comes to me an exuberant, political hunger...":

Ah to desire, this one, mine, this one, the world's,  
interhuman and parochial, mature!  
It comes perfectly timed,  
from the foundation, from the public groin,  
and, coming from afar, makes me hunger to kiss  
the singer's muffler,  
whoever suffers, to kiss him on his frying pan,  
the deaf man, fearlessly, on his cranial murmur;  
whoever gives me what I forgot in my breast,  
on his Dante, on his Chaplin, on his shoulders.

Everything the speaker seeks to kiss disrupts literal logic, but does not become nonsense. To kiss whoever suffers on his frying pan, suggesting that the sufferer is hungry, implies that the kiss would be a kind of food. To kiss a deaf man on his cranial murmur is even more dense, but intelligible: is the deaf man unaware that his skull, in effect, "speaks?" And by kissing him on his "cranial murmur," does not a mystical



to Vallejo. Los stood & watched,  
& Yorunomado saw how those who weep in  
their work cannot weep, how those who  
never weep are the weak, the fake  
sufferers. To be a man. That suffering  
is truer to man than joy. These were  
the lines in the heavy pocked face of Vallejo,  
trinities of intersections &  
heavy lines, a village of nose & lids;  
Vallejo never left home, it was home  
he always begged for even in the taking on  
of the suffering body of man. I stood for  
7 years & looked at him there, observing  
the Quechuan rags & shreds of priest cloak,  
the immense weight in his mind,  
& lifting his rags I saw his female gate,  
bloodied & rotten, hopelessly stitched  
with crow feathers, azure, threaded with  
raw meat, odors of potatoes & the Andes,  
& how the priest roaches had gotten into  
the gate, yet the edges of his gate were  
sewn with noble purple velvet & I pondered  
my own course, what was in store for me  
given the way I was living, how the female  
gate in a man must open, yet the horrible  
suffering if it opens & something else does  
not open! But there was no cure or cause  
for who Vallejo was, perhaps it was the enormity  
of what he took on, the weight of his people  
to utter, & I shuddered to think of Indiana,  
of what it would be to cast Indiana off.

Yorunomado sobbed when he saw the extent  
of contradiction in Vallejo's body, how  
could he have lived even one day, he thought;  
this was the agony in the lines, the fullness  
& the dark beauty of Vallejo's face horizontal  
to sky, long black hair flowing back  
into the sand, & Los likewise moved bent  
& rested his hammer for one day in tribute  
to the fierce & flaming profile contoured  
to the horizon...

How long had he been left there? Yornomado  
stood & with Los helped the casket off  
into the sea of another language.

Los is Blake's figure of the poet, or the spiritual revolutionary who reveals basic truths. Having freed Yorunomado from my solar plexus (or, to put it another way, having transformed my working place into a figure of instruction) , he could occupy dramatic space with Los, in the same spirit that I had engaged Los via Blake.

One point I would like to get across here is how translating Vallejo encouraged me to give priority to imagination over memory and to trust in creative presence. Not only was he instructive regarding contradiction (and "the logic of metaphor") but his work also enabled me to begin to confront ambivalence. The fact that one is drawn to the world as one is repulsed by it is an aspect of the larger forces of affirmation and negation which I came to see as core values in the making of an art. I think it was Rilke who wrote that "to praise is all," sensing such as the key mission of the poet. I think he is close to being right: affirmation is wonderful, but it is only real when it is constantly tested against

negation. Over the years, I have tried to always hold my affirmation to the fire, as it were, believing that only that which survives the fire counts.

\*

In the mid 1980s, and again last year, I wrote two poems that are hard to describe. Both are based on my translations of two Vallejo poems, and are, in a way, translations of translations, though that is not quite right. Both follow to a considerable extent the formal procedures of the translations in such a way that I would think that a person familiar with either the original or the translation would hear them as ghosts inhabiting my own poems. I am also reminded of the palimpsest, or a text that has been written over earlier texts, so that both show through the third or most recent text.

Here is the first of the Vallejo translations, “The Book of Nature,” from *Human Poems*:

Professor of sobbing—I said to a tree—  
staff of quicksilver, rumorous  
linden, at the bank of the Marne, a good student  
is reading in your deck of cards, in your dead foliage,  
between the evident water and the false sun,  
his three of hearts, his queen of diamonds.

Rector of the chapters of heaven,  
of the burning fly, of the manual calm there is in asses;  
rector of deep ignorance, a bad student  
is reading in your deck of cards, in your dead foliage,  
the hunger for reason that maddens him  
and the thirst for dementia that drives him mad.

Technician of shouts, conscious tree, strong,  
fluvial, double, solar, double, fanatic,  
connoisseur of cardinal roses, totally  
embedded, until drawing blood, in stingers, a student  
is reading in your deck of cards, in your dead foliage,  
his precocious, telluric, volcanic, king of spades.

Oh professor, from having been so ignorant!  
oh rector, from trembling so much in the air!  
oh technician, from so much bending over!  
Oh linden, oh murmurous staff by the Marne!

Before presenting my “translation” of this translation, since it concerns the fate of the French poet and metaphysician of the theater, Antonin Artaud, I should say a few things about Artaud that are relevant to my poem. Artaud was incarcerated in insane asylums from 1937 to 1946, where he underwent 51 electro-shock sessions. In the last two years of his life—he died in 1948 outside of Paris—he created some of the strangest writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, texts that at once are profoundly disturbed *and* uniquely coherent. Many facets of his life—his vision quests to northern Mexico and southwestern Ireland, use of a magic dagger and cane, loss of identity, possession by doubles, glossolalia, the projection of magical daughters from his own body, and his imaginative resurrection in Rodez asylum—have more to do with shamanism than with the lives of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ‘men of letters.

Here is my “translation” of my translation of Vallejo’s “The Book of Nature”:

#### THE EXCAVATION OF ARTAUD

Shaman of obsession—I said at his tomb—  
excavated in electricity, opened between  
anus and sex. In the Australian outback of the soul,  
3 dead men are fingering your anesthetized root support  
shining like a chain of sputtering lights, for the key to creation,  
between the bone they've drawn out and your bone they so desire.

Priest of lethal phallic rites, of sparkings  
in foetid material, of remaining in antithesis  
with no hope of synthesis, priest of a genuine *melée*—  
3 dead men are fingering your Muladhara Chakra, your amphimixis,  
as if, under the Christian gunk that clogged your focus,  
they could plug into your triangle and its twisting tongue of flame.

Pariah in silence, coprophilially  
squatting in the corner of your cell for years,  
sealed open, who only came when called by your mother's name—  
repressing their way in, to the point of anal cancer,  
3 dead men, licking your electroshock-induced Bardo, have found  
your atomic glue, the Kundalini compost they must eat to speak.

O shaman, from having been so masterfully plundered!

O priest, from having been fixed in antithesis!

O pariah, from having been so desired by the dead!

Structurally-speaking, Vallejo's poem is an apostrophe, in which a tree is addressed metaphorically in the first three lines of each of the first three stanzas. In the last three lines of these stanzas, a student attempts to tell his fortune via "the book of nature" present as a deck of cards in the pedagogical tree. In the final stanza, the pedagogical tree is again apostrophized and in a quick series of contradictions defined.

I have no idea if this is a Spanish verse form, or whether it has ever been used by anyone other than Vallejo. I thought it would be a cogent structure to use in apostrophizing Artaud who claimed he had been attacked between anus and sex (the location of the Tantric Muladhara Chakra) by God. I borrow an Australian aboriginal lethal phallic rite from the research of Géza Roheim in an attempt to dramatize Artaud's plight.

The second of my "translations" of my translations is a poem that concludes a longer work in prose, "One If By Sea, None If By Land," and it is spoken by a spider, or my vision of the poet as a spider, based on my reading of the labyrinth.

I see the labyrinth as a three-fold image: the model for the Cretan labyrinth in which Theseus engages and destroys the Minotaur at the center is the orb-weaving spider web across which a male must make his way to mate at the center with the female builder of the web, and then exit before he is eaten. Writing a poem involves, in my sense of it, the poet symbolically entering this labyrinthian constellation where his activity is transformed into a spider writer (*Argiope*, the "golden orb-weaver," is also known as the "writing spider") devouring his/her material. That is to say that the bitter combat at the center (arachnoid mating, Theseus-Minotaur conflict) is, in the poem's terms, the poem's realization of itself where it simultaneously feeds on itself *and* gives its heart to itself. Another way to put this would be to say that the poet's task is to translate literal war into mental war (one of Blake's definitions of poetry).

The Vallejo translation I chose to "translate," or re-envision, begins "Chances are, I'm another; walking, at dawn..." Such a phrase evokes, of course, Rimbaud's "Je est un autre," I is another. In my piece, Vallejo's "other" becomes a "Minotaur surrogate."

Here is my translation of “A lo major, soy otro.”:

Chances are, I’m another; walking, at dawn, another who proceeds  
around a long disk, an elastic disk:  
a mortal, figurative, audacious diaphragm.  
Chances are, I remember while waiting, I annotate marble  
where scarlet index, and where bronze cot,  
an absent, spurious, enraged fox.  
Chances are, a man after all,  
my shoulders anointed with indigo misericordia,  
chances are, I say to myself, beyond there is nothing.

The sea gives me the disk, referring it,  
with a certain dry margin, to my throat;  
nothing, truly, more acidic, sweeter, more Kantian!  
But somebody else’s sweat, but a serum  
or tempest of meekness,  
decaying or rising—that, never!

Lying down, slender, I exhume myself,  
smashing my way into the tumefied mixture,  
without legs, without adult clay, nor weapons,  
a needle stuck in the great atom...  
No! Never! Never yesterday! Never later!

Hence this satanic tuber,  
this moral plesiosaurian molar  
and these posthumous suspicions,  
this index, this bed, these tickets.

And here is my version:

Chances are I'm a Minotaur surrogate,  
weaving, at night, an arachnoid adept who jigs about a cordate void,  
an anomalous void, orbicular labyrinth.  
Chances are, I behead upon being impregnated,  
nourishing the just conceived with my brain marrow lunch.  
Chances are, I spin-say to myself:  
mental war takes place on husk-strewn thread.

The air advertises reality, connecting it,  
via respiration, with non-being—  
nothing, truly, more noumenal, more depth-resplendent!  
But a religious grid, or gradient, an oasis  
beyond this work tomb,  
verdant, eternal—that, never!

Abdomen-tentacled, I snag  
etymological drift, injecting it with literal  
breakdown, so as  
to turn it, as a threadbale Thesean,  
into drink.

Thus this spider mind,  
this forever warp woof-crossed by never,  
this spectral Tenochtitlan,  
this Jurassic chandelier.

The initial Jacob/angel combat with Vallejo that produced, instead of a realized translation, an imaginary third figure enabled me to understand that the translation process was dual: it involved an imaginal reality as well as a linguistic one. From my

point of view, these two realities are not in conflict—in fact, I would argue that acknowledging the imaginal realm, and working with it, has enabled me to support a keen observation made by Eliot Weinberger: “A translation is based on the dissolution of the self. A bad translation is the insistent voice of the translator.”

In “The Book of Yorunomado,” I cast Vallejo as an actor in my drama of self-transformation. In “The Excavation of Artaud,” I generated a vision of Artaud’s terrible and grotesquely stunning condition and drew upon one of Vallejo’s poetic forms to articulate it. And in “Chances are I’m a Minotaur surrogate,” I turned my translation into another poem of my own, making use of my totemic figure, the spider. To some extent, I would argue, I have incorporated Vallejo’s poetry in translation as an element in my own poetry, and thus reversed his influence. Metaphorically speaking, who I served is here serving me.