

Death and Resurrection in César Vallejo's Late Poetry¹

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Death pervades the poetry of César Vallejo. From the overpowering "blows in life" dealt by *The Black Messengers* in his first volume of poetry, through *Human Poems*, his third collection, the Peruvian poet perceived life and death as an inseparable pair.² For the Vallejo of this period, the individual does not live so much as merely survive, for death — our invincible enemy — renders life meaningless. In Vallejo's final work, *Spain, Take This Cup Away From Me*,³ the great obsession with death not only persists, but also is more present than ever. Nevertheless, in this beautiful collection of poems inspired by the Spanish Civil War, a distinctly new vision of death appears.

The purpose of this study is to examine the change which occurs in the last phase of Vallejo's work — in *Human Poems* and *Spain, Take This Cup Away From Me* — by examining a key poem from each volume, specifically, "Piedra negra sobre una piedra blanca" ("Black Stone Lying on a White Stone"), from *Human Poems*, and "Masa" ("Mass"), from *Spain*. By analyzing these two texts representative of the different phases of Vallejo's poetic and philosophical vision,⁴ we will see not only the change which the poet undergoes, but more importantly, *why* he experiences it.

"Piedra negra sobre una piedra blanca," a sonnet⁵ which deals with human suffering and death, opens with the bold declaration, "Me moriré" (I will die). Paradoxically, it is the poet's memory — a specific recollection of the future event — which allows him to foresee his imminent death. He has clearly given this a great deal of thought, and

as the stanza continues, the poet provides us with all the specific details of the event:

Me moriré en París con aguacero,
un día del cual tengo ya el recuerdo.
Me moriré en París —y no me corro—
tal vez un jueves, como es hoy, de otoño. (vv. 1-4)

*I will die in Paris, on a rainy day,
on some day I can already remember.
I will die in Paris —and I don't step aside—
perhaps on a Thursday, as today is Thursday, in
autumn.⁶*

We see here where it will occur (in Paris), the possible day and season (a Thursday in autumn) and even the weather conditions (during a rainstorm). But perhaps more importantly, we note the poet's attitude regarding this premonition: his words "y no me corro" ("and I don't step aside"), indicate that he awaits his death, fearlessly, as an inevitable event from which he knows there is no escape.

In the next stanza the author appears more confident, more sure of himself: whereas before he was only predicting (as evidenced by the phrase, "*perhaps on a Thursday*"), he now affirms with precision and certainty, "*Jueves será*" ("*It will be a Thursday*"). Moreover, this time it is his *present* situation which makes him sure of his future:

Jueves será porque hoy, jueves, que proso
estos versos, los húmeros me he puesto
a la mala y, jamás como hoy, me he vuelto,
con todo mi camino, a verme solo. (vv. 5-8)

*It will be a Thursday, because today, Thursday, setting down
these lines, I have put my upper arm bones on
wrong, and never so much as today have I found myself
with all the road ahead of me, alone.*

He knows now that it will be Thursday because *today* is Thursday, because today he is in pain, and most importantly, because today, upon reviewing his life, he finds himself alone. Not only is this a terrible day for him, it is the worst he has ever lived (v. 7: "jamás como hoy"); it is,

in fact, the maximum expression of his loneliness. He thus concludes that he must have already died: this sad, solitary Thursday must be death itself.

The lines which follow confirm this. Like the opening, the third stanza begins with a strong declaration; only this time the premonition is fulfilled: "César Vallejo ha muerto" ("César Vallejo is dead"). In these lines which eerily resemble an epitaph, we note an abrupt change in the poetic voice, from first to third person. Stylistically, this serves as a distancing device and highlights a new, objective perception of identity. But this change is also necessary semantically: because the original voice — that "I" which earlier wrote these lines (vv. 5-6) — has now expired, it obviously can no longer continue, and another must enter to finish the poem. This voice, then, explains the cause of death:

César Vallejo ha muerto, le pegaban
 todos sin que él les haga nada;
 le daban duro con un palo y duro

también con una sogá; . . . (vv. 9-12)

*César Vallejo is dead. Everyone beat him,
 although he never does anything to them;
 they beat him hard with a stick and hard also*

with a rope. . . .

We learn here that César Vallejo died from being beaten so long and so hard by those painful Thursdays, those blows which life continually deals us. The verbal tenses employed here (and throughout) are very significant. For example, note the use of the imperfect in line 9: because the poet does not perceive these beatings as something with a definite beginning and end, he chooses the imperfect ("pegaban") to highlight the habitual, continuous nature of the action. The following line, however, returns us to the present — "sin que él les *haga* nada" (v. 10) — showing that the blows are not locked in the past, but rather continue into his present, and will, inevitably, also invade his future.⁷ The line also illustrates another important point: life's injustice. For Vallejo, these blows persist regardless of one's actions. The poet here perceives himself as an innocent, blameless being to whom pain and suffering come without cause or reason.⁸ As seen here and in the

allusions to the stick and rope, the poet becomes a Christ figure, destined to endure a cruel, unjust crucifixion.

The poem concludes with an enumeration of those elements which have evoked pain and death throughout the text:

..... son testigos
 los días jueves y los huesos húmeros,
 la soledad, la lluvia, los caminos . . . (vv. 12-14)

..... *These are the witnesses;
 the Thursdays, and the bones of my arms,
 the solitude, and the rain, and the roads . . .*

These images from the last two lines symbolize the daily blows — those little deaths the poet experiences — and prove to him (because they are “witnesses”)⁹ that living is nothing more than a slow, gradual death. As in *The Black Messengers*, the individual is a tragic being, a mere accumulation of pains and sorrows which he continually relives and suffers each time he remembers them.¹⁰ The ellipsis that ends the poem gives us the impression that the pain continues — never ceasing, never diminishing — even when we arrive at that final blow which is death. For the Vallejo of this period, death concludes, but does not resolve, human suffering.¹¹

“Masa,” from *Spain, Take This Cup Away From Me*, provides a strong contrast to “Piedra negra.” This poem embodies hope and rebirth. It is a fairly simple text, at least in vocabulary and form. Written in free verse, with frequent dialogue incorporated throughout, the poem flows more like a narrative. From here we might infer that the message supersedes the form: instead of simply meditating or lamenting (as in “Piedra”), this Vallejo seems to want to communicate something directly to his readers.

Vallejo lived the last years of his life acutely aware of the great political struggles of the time. When he returned to Paris from Spain in 1932, he witnessed a world in crisis, plagued by poverty, unemployment, and the triumph of Fascism in Germany. Five years later, while attending the Second International Congress of Writers in Defense of Culture held in Spain just one year after the outbreak of the Civil War, he sensed the historical significance of the Spanish struggle, and returned home ready to dedicate himself fully to the Republican cause (Franco 223). Like many writers in the 20s and 30s, Vallejo

resolved his spiritual crisis and found new hope through Marxism, which he had discovered in Paris and seen in action in Russia. For the poet, communism offered something no other doctrine could: the possibility for concrete change through revolution in *this* lifetime. It is debatable as to exactly how devoted Vallejo was to the Communist cause, but most critics would affirm that he remained divided at best.¹² What is certain, however, is that his Christian upbringing greatly influenced his newfound ideology, and at times he seems to be more inspired by the Bible than by Marxist doctrine. The grandson of two Catholic priests, Vallejo was raised in a home saturated in religious devotion, and he would never escape the weight of his Catholic roots (Eshelman xxi). The very foundation of his Marxist philosophy is the Christian ideal of fraternal love, and he uses religious terminology to sing the praises of the new earthly paradise achieved through revolution (Higgins 306-7).¹³

Spain, Take This Cup Away From Me combines the messianic spirit of the Old Testament with the New Testament message that humanity can be saved from death. The fifteen poems include a hymn, a response, a prayer, a litany, and a prophecy (Franco 233). Vallejo believed the Spanish people to be in a "state of grace," and his work, like the Acts of the Apostles, chronicles a series of miracles, of victories over the laws of nature and destiny.

"Masa" is modeled after the biblical resurrection of Lazarus,¹⁴ and reads like a prophetic dream:

Al fin de la batalla,
y muerto el combatiente, vino hacia él un hombre
y le dijo: "¡No mueras, te amo tanto!"
Pero el cadáver ¡ay! siguió muriendo.

Se le acercaron dos y repitiéronle:
"¡No nos dejes! ¡Valor! ¡Vuelve a la vida!"
Pero el cadáver ¡ay! siguió muriendo.

Acudieron a él veinte, cien, mil, quinientos mil,
clamando: "¡Tanto amor, y no poder nada contra la muerte!"
Pero el cadáver ¡ay! siguió muriendo.

Le rodearon millones de individuos,
con un ruego común: "¡Quédate hermano!"
Pero el cadáver ¡ay! siguió muriendo.

Entonces, todos los hombres de la tierra
le rodearon; les vio el cadáver triste, emocionado;
incorporóse lentamente,
abrazó al primer hombre; echóse a andar . . .

*At the end of the battle,
and the combatant dead, a man came toward him
and said: "Don't die; I love you so much!"
But the corpse, alas! kept on dying.*

*Two approached him and repeated:
"Don't leave us! Be brave! Return to life!"
But the corpse, alas! kept on dying.*

*Twenty, a hundred, a thousand, five hundred thousand, came
up to him,
crying out: "So much love and no power against death!"
But the corpse, alas! kept on dying.*

*Millions of persons surrounded him,
with a common plea: "Do not leave us, brother!"
But the corpse, alas! kept on dying.*

*Then, all the inhabitants of the earth
surrounded him; the corpse looked at them sadly, moved;
he sat up slowly,
embraced the first man; started to walk . . .*

The poem tells the story of an anonymous man who tries to save a combatant who, paradoxically, is already dead yet able to "keep on dying." Unfortunately, one man alone cannot end the suffering; but likewise, even "millions of persons" remain impotent in the face of death, as seen in the emotional refrain which concludes all but the last stanza, "Pero el cadáver, ¡ay! siguió muriendo." Only the Mass — as solidarity, love and absolute fusion in one single being — is able to conquer death. Thus, only when "all the inhabitants of the earth" (v. 14) surround the corpse, without words, in total community and synthesis, does he miraculously sit up and come to life. Note, however, that before he begins to walk through history, he embraces that first

man, the one who by his love began that struggle for life and vanquished death through the union of all humanity.¹⁵ The poem thus illustrates the tremendous strength of humanity if it joins together as one.¹⁶ "Masa" is a strong political statement that calls individuals to action, to unity, to revolution through love.

Having briefly examined the two poems separately, let us now compare "Piedra" and "Masa" in order to understand Vallejo's dramatic change regarding his vision of human suffering and mortality. Both poems are paradoxical regarding death. In each we have a corpse — literally in one, and symbolically in the other: "Piedra negra" describes a living man, a poet who "today writes these lines," who expires in front of our eyes, while "Masa" shows the exact opposite, a corpse which paradoxically comes to life. For the latter, who is revived with the help of his fellow brothers and sisters, death is a modifiable experience; for the former, however, death is an inevitable, fatal conclusion. This man remembers his difficult past, realizes that it parallels his terrible present, and painfully concludes that the future lacks hope as well. Stylistically, the mixture of verbal tenses throughout the poem exemplifies this concept. By moving from the future to the present to the past and back again to the present, Vallejo illustrates that death is a constant experience, pervading one's entire existence. For the Vallejo of this poem and that vision, we start dying the moment we are born. Thus, critic Américo Ferrari states that "Vallejo, al igual que Quevedo, siente a veces la muerte no como un fenómeno, o un acontecimiento, que se produce *en el tiempo*, sino como un proceso de desintegración que no *está en el tiempo*, pero *es el tiempo*: el tiempo anula el presente al par que hace de la vida un eterno presente" (*Universo* 89).

We must now ask ourselves why the poems present such contrasting visions. Why does one illustrate the progression from life to death while the other presents the exact opposite phenomenon? To begin to answer this question, let us examine the circumstances in which the texts' protagonists find themselves. Essentially we note another important contrast: this time, between loneliness and community, solitude and solidarity (common themes in Vallejo's poetic production). In "Piedra" it is loneliness — combined with sadness, frustration, anguish and the overwhelming pain that accompanies them — which propels the poet toward death; in "Masa," on the other hand, a sense of unity and togetherness miraculously leads to life. The poems thus illustrate that while solitude destroys life, the community — the mass — is capable of conquering even death itself.

The contrast is also evident in the poems' titles as well as in the poetic voice(s) employed in the texts. "Piedra negra sobre una piedra blanca" alludes to a tombstone, the universal symbol of death.¹⁷ Moreover, it is a single white stone, and the poem is a monologue; only one voice speaks throughout.¹⁸ Hence, the relationship, solitude/death. By contrast, "Masa" is a dialogue, many voices speaking together. The title "Masa" — a group so big it cannot even be counted — alludes to these multiple voices. But on another level, "Masa" also refers to the dough used to make bread, and in *Spain*, the Christian symbols which had lost meaning in *Human Poems* now recover referential value: bread once more refers to the bread of life (albeit one produced by the material world) (Franco 233). From here, the analogy, togetherness/life.

"Piedra" is a poem of desperation and constant struggle, symbolized in the verb "pegar" (to beat). "Masa," on the other hand, begins "at the end of the battle," when the violence is over. It is thus a poem of hope, fraternity, and love, symbolized in the verb "abrazar" (to embrace). It is important to remember here that although Vallejo wanted an armed, violent revolution, he saw this revolution as only the first phase.¹⁹ In his essay *Rusia ante el segundo plan quinquenal*, he affirms that "the primary essence of revolution is love" and that when the revolution passes, "love will manifest itself in the ultimate embrace of all men" (99, my trans.).

Having examined the paradoxical presence of death (and pain) in these two poems as well as the circumstances causing its presence or absence, we now move on to analyze the poet's attitude. As before, the poems offer a contrast; this time, that of passivity versus action. In "Piedra," the text's protagonist *surrenders* himself to die, doing absolutely nothing to change his situation. The phrases "y no me corro" (v. 3) and "sin que él les haga nada" (v. 10) highlight this passive attitude. For the Vallejo of *Human Poems*, death is an invincible enemy against which all means of defense are ineffective.²⁰ The poor man of "Piedra" knows that fighting back is useless, and he therefore resigns himself to his fatal destiny.

In contrast to the pessimism and frustration which predominated in Vallejo's first three works, *Spain, Take This Cup Away From Me* offers hope — a desire to transcend the misery of the human condition and achieve a sense of fullness and unity. "Masa" clearly embodies this new attitude. Here, the men in the text are soldiers who refuse to accept human suffering or death; on the contrary, they actively fight to defeat

them, and are ultimately victorious. Their non-passive attitude is exemplified by the numerous commands that fill the poem, as well as by their confidence, perseverance, and willingness to act on behalf of others.

This contrast (resignation versus action) is also related to the different ways pain is perceived within the texts. For the solitary poet of "Piedra," for example, pain is strictly personal. He therefore does not seek solutions, but rather merely complains and laments, remaining dejected and depressed. On the contrary, in "Masa" pain is not individual, but universal. The protagonist here is fully aware that his situation is linked to that of all people, and this solidarity produces a sense of hope. For the Vallejo of this period, the salvation of the individual can be achieved only through the salvation of all humanity, and this is possible only when all people join together in a common cause. When this occurs, the force of human solidarity — of the mass — will vanquish pain and death.

Consequently, the individuals in "Masa," united and conscious of their place within contemporary history, take action, fighting for the causes which will lead to a rebirth of the world, symbolized in the poem by the rebirth or resurrection of the combatant. Note that these individuals in the text are never specifically identified — it is *the* combatant, *a* man — because they represent universal persons. Nevertheless, they are *soldiers*, people who fight, people of action. By contrast, the poetic voice of "Piedra," is identified concretely; we know his first and last name, and even his profession. Unlike "Masa"'s men and women of action, however, this is a man of letters, of mere words. From here arises another important contrast between the poems: theory versus praxis. The poet of *Spain* now realizes that neither theories nor doctrines will create a new society. On the contrary, humans must abandon their passive attitude and turn to action; this, not ideas, is their only recourse against suffering and death.

The last stanza of each poem provides a final example of how Vallejo's vision of death and human suffering has changed dramatically with *Spain*. "Piedra" concludes with an enumeration of nouns: "los días jueves y los huesos húmeros, la soledad, la lluvia, los caminos." This stylistic device, however, also underscores the message, for it highlights the poem's static — even stagnant — quality. In "Masa," on the other hand, verbs fill the last stanza ("rodearon", "vio", "incorporóse", "abrazó", "echóse a andar"), signaling a dynamic quality, an active progression toward something. Coincidentally, both poems end with ellipses, suggesting that there is something more,

something unfinished. This same literary device, however, communicates very different things in each text. For example, because the list of nouns which precedes the ellipsis in "Piedra" all symbolize pain and death, it suggests that afterwards only more pain and misery await. Moreover, the final word of the poem is "caminos" (roads). Earlier, in the second stanza, recall that it is precisely the *road* which makes the poet aware of his solitary state, and his own mortality. These roads, then, must lead inevitably to despair, loneliness, and death. For the poet of "Piedra negra sobre una piedra blanca" there is no way out: he is forever trapped within the vicious circle of his own misery, destined to die a little more with every breath he takes.

On the contrary, a list of action verbs precedes the ellipsis in "Masa." Significantly, the last verb is "andar" (to walk). This walk, however, leads not to death but rather to life, and symbolizes the march toward hope, toward a more noble and just future. The combatant of "Masa" who "started to walk..." is sad, but moved (v. 15) — sad, for he sees suffering all around him, but moved because he knows that there is a solution to his pain through human solidarity. This is no longer the absurd, passive suffering of *Human Poems*, but rather a suffering which is active, armed and victorious (Paoli 364).

In Vallejo's work, seemingly contradictory influences blend together to create a highly personal ideology. Thus, while he embraced Marxism, he never completely abandoned his Christian vision, and its values, ideals, and symbols color his political ideology. Like Isaiah, Vallejo prophesies a "new Jerusalem," only this Utopian society will be realized on Earth. Similarly, he speaks of the redemption of the entire human race, though not by a Savior descended from Heaven, but by humanity itself, united as one (Higgins 307). The passion recorded in "Masa" — and throughout *Spain, Take This Cup Away From Me* — is that of an entire people. In their decisive struggle, Vallejo saw in the oppressed Spanish masses a Christ figure, willing to transcend individual egoism and sacrifice themselves for a higher and nobler purpose.

As the resurrected combatant is reborn in the spirit of the mass, so also does the poet leave his individual consciousness for a cosmic one. And, like that anonymous soldier, Vallejo must move forward for he, too, has an important task ahead.²¹ He boldly proclaims the liberation of the oppressed, but is also quick to clarify that the true revolution occurs in the hearts of all people. Viewing the Spanish war as part of a greater, universal war against evil and injustice, he sees beyond the revolution

the total redemption of humanity, and dreams of a new, universal society in which all peoples will live together in perfect harmony. Armed with only his verses and his great love for others, he thus begins his walk through history striving to create a world of peace, liberty, and love — a world where only death will die.

NOTES

¹ Portions of this paper — in Spanish — were published by *Hispania* as part of the conference proceedings “Simposio Internacional ‘Vallejo y España’” (1989).

² *Los heraldos negros (The Black Messengers)* was published in 1918. The texts of *Poemas humanos (Human Poems)* were written between 1923 and 1937 and published posthumously in 1939.

³ Published posthumously in 1939, the fifteen poems of *España, aparta de mí este cáliz* were written in 1937 and 1938.

⁴ I realize it is perhaps debatable to speak of the philosophical differences between *Human Poems* and *Spain, Take This Cup Away From Me* by using “Piedra” and “Masa” as the key examples from these works. First, there remains much confusion with regard to the exact dates on which Vallejo wrote many of the texts from *Human Poems*, which were arranged and compiled by others and published after his early death (see Salomon). Moreover, as early as 1929, in *Contra el secreto profesional*, there appeared a synthesis — in prose — of the poem “Masa”: “Si a la hora de la muerte de un hombre, se reuniese la piedad de todos los hombres para no dejarle morir, ese hombre no moriría” (69). Nevertheless, it is also necessary to note that Vallejo included the poem “Masa” as an integral part of *Spain*, and even dated it November 10, 1937. The fact that it is quite possible that Vallejo altered these dates a posteriori, is irrelevant. What is important is that by dating this poem (and others from that same period), César Vallejo has wanted to say clearly to both his contemporary and future readers that his texts are directly related to that time, to those sad years of the Spanish Civil War (Salomon 298). Moreover, although many of the poems from *Human Poems* and *Spain* perhaps coincide

chronologically, they are two different *projects* in Vallejo's mind. The fifteen poems of *Spain, Take This Cup Away From Me* constitute a separate, defined work with its own identity, and Vallejo decided to include "Masa" within this volume. In other words, the *chronological* coincidence between *Human Poems* and *Spain* does not necessarily imply a *philosophical* coincidence between the two works.

⁵ Vallejo uses hendecasyllables, but with an unconventional assonant rhyme structure: AABB/BAAB/CCD/EDE.

⁶ All English translations are from *Twentieth-Century Latin American Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, edited by Stephen Tapscott. "Black Stone on a White Stone" is translated by Robert Bly and John Knoepfle; "Masa" is translated by Clayton Eshleman.

⁷ Moreover, the blows he receives are *hard*. This word ("duro") must be quite important because it is intensified by two poetic devices — its repetition within a single line (v. 11); and its bold enjambment (which occurs between stanzas) — both of which grant the word greater emotional emphasis.

⁸ The poem "Los nueve monstruos" ("The Nine Monsters"), from *Human Poems*, clearly exemplifies these concepts.

⁹ Mario Montalbetti (in personal communication) also notes that it is the humerus bone which we instinctively raise to avoid the threat of a blow, to protect us from pain. Thus, these bones are "witnesses" both figuratively *and* literally, physically exhibiting the marks and scars of all the blows that we suffer throughout life.

¹⁰ Throughout *The Black Messengers*, Vallejo deals with the metaphysical themes of pain, the presence of death in life, and the tragic human fate of being born only to die.

¹¹ James Higgins (107-9) points out that Vallejo believes that the dead continue suffering after death, and he cites the poem "Piensan los viejos asnos" as an example.

¹² For example, Vallejo's widow Georgette suggests that he was less than enthusiastic about the Communist Party's support of popular front governments (cited in Franco 224). Eshleman notes that it is difficult to determine whether Vallejo came to the conclusion that Marxism was a solution to the social and economic problems which enslaved humanity. "Chances are," he continues, "he remained divided, for while his political activities in the years that followed would lead us to believe that at least until 1933 he was an actively committed Communist, the poetry he had been writing since 1923 and would continue to write until his death in 1938, identifies with and embraces suffering humanity, but never argues any doctrine or solution" (xxiv). Ferrari also notes that Vallejo had serious doubts about Marxism, stating that the poet "tuvo una dificultad lógica de integrar su sentimiento pesemista y angustiado del tiempo a la tranquila seguridad de la dialéctica marxista... La misma fuerza centrífuga — y precisamente la inquietud — que lo saca fuera del sistema de creencias de la Iglesia católica, lo desorbita igualmente de la ideología marxista" (397).

¹³ Regarding the Christian influence in Vallejo's communism, see Higgins and Paoli.

¹⁴ Cf. John 11: 43-44.

¹⁵ Perhaps this first man — so full of love — represents Vallejo himself, who, armed with only his verses, fought so hard for the community in order to achieve humanity's ideal.

¹⁶ Roberto Paoli (368) points out that for Vallejo, because death is the most terrible and inescapable of all human pain, the resurrection from death is the most radical symbol of the victory over pain.

¹⁷ The title also refers to the ancient custom of indicating happy events with a white stone, and unhappy ones with a black stone.

¹⁸ Although there is a change of voice from first to third person, the poem continues as a monologue; in reality one voice only replaces the other, and never enters into dialogue with it (since they are really one and the same).

¹⁹ See *Rusia en 1931, Reflexiones al pie del Kremlin* for more information regarding his philosophy with respect to revolution.

²⁰ Therefore, Higgins (87-91) states that for Vallejo, all human activity and all life in general seem useless and meaningless in the face of death. Before *Spain*, the individual's desires for a full and meaningful life remained frustrated by the realities of existence. This frustration produces a complete disillusionment toward life, and makes Vallejo see the world as absurd.

²¹ When Vallejo was given the floor at the Second International Congress, he cited the words of Christ: "Jesus said, 'My kingdom is not of this world.' I believe that the moment has come when the consciousness of the revolutionary writer might be expressed by a new formula ... 'My kingdom is of this world but also of the next'." For Vallejo, writers are particularly responsible for they control a powerful weapon, the Word, with which they must now move the world (qt. in Franco 229).

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