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## ARCHIVO VALLEJO

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# Poetry, destruction, reconstruction: Trilce XXXVI, César Vallejo's first *ars politica*?

Poesía, destrucción, reconstrucción:  
Trilce XXXVI, ¿el primer *ars politica*  
de César Vallejo?

Poésie, destruction, reconstruction:  
Trilce XXXVI, le premier *ars politica*  
de César Vallejo ?

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## ABSTRACT

Via a rereading of the poem «XXXVI» by César Vallejo, this article explores the connections between this earlier poem, and Vallejo's later poetry. The most prominent theme in this relation is the presence in each of the poems under discussion, of the process of redistribution.

Indeed, this process is not only mentioned or implicated by the poems on a semiotic and metaphoric level; redistribution is imbricated in the language and axiology of the poems, at the fundamental level of their linguistic and grammatical formation. This article examines how this process, nascent and more metaphysical in «XXXVI», becomes an integral element of the poetic socialism of Vallejo's final poems, those which present, most explicitly and powerfully, his radical vision.

**Key words:** poetry; politics; education; axiology; redistribution.

**Indexing terms:** literary analysis; literary criticism; poetry (Source: Unesco Thesaurus).

## RESUMEN

A través de una relectura del poema «XXXVI» de César Vallejo, este artículo explora las conexiones entre esta obra más temprana y la poesía posterior de Vallejo. El tema más prominente de esta relación es la presencia en todos los poemas de un proceso de redistribución. De hecho, este proceso no solo es mencionado o implicado por los poemas en el nivel de significación y metáfora; la redistribución es imbricada en el lenguaje y en la axiología de los poemas, al nivel fundamental de su formación lingüística y gramática. Este artículo examina cómo este proceso, naciente y más metafísico en «XXXVI», deviene un elemento integral en el socialismo poético de los últimos poemas de Vallejo, que presentan su visión radical más explícita y poderosamente.

**Palabras clave:** poesía; política; educación; axiología, redistribución.

**Términos de indización:** análisis literario; crítica literaria; poesía (Fuente: Tesauro de la Unesco).

## RÉSUMÉ

À travers une relecture du poème «XXXVI» de César Vallejo, cet article explore les liens entre cette première œuvre et la poésie ultérieure de Vallejo. Le thème le plus important de cette relation est la présence

dans tous les poèmes d'un processus de redistribution. En fait, ce processus n'est pas seulement mentionné ou impliqué par les poèmes au niveau de la signification et de la métaphore; la redistribution est imbriquée dans le langage et l'axiologie des poèmes, au niveau fondamental de leur formation linguistique et grammaticale. Cet article examine comment ce processus, naissant et métaphysique dans «XXXVI», devient un élément intégral du socialisme poétique des derniers poèmes de Vallejo, qui présentent sa vision radicale de la manière la plus explicite et la plus puissante.

**Mots-clés:** poésie; politique; éducation; axiologie; redistribution.

**Termes d'indexation:** analyse littéraire; critique littéraire; poésie (Source: Thésaurus de l'Unesco).

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*Declaro, sin escrúpulo, que traigo a la exégesis literaria todas mis pasiones e ideas políticas, aunque, dado que el descrédito y degeneración de este vocablo en el lenguaje corriente, debo agregar que la política en mí es filosofía y religión.*

*Pero esto no quiere decir que considere el fenómeno literario y artístico desde puntos de vista extraestéticos, sino que mi concepción estética se unimisma, en la intimidad de mi conciencia, con mis concepciones morales, políticas y religiosas, y que, sin dejar de ser concepción estrictamente estética, no puede operar independiente o diversamente.*

JOSÉ CARLOS MARIÁTEGUI, *7 ensayos* (1928)

*Los responsables de lo que sucede en el mundo somos los escritores, porque tenemos el arma más formidable, que es el verbo. Arquímedes dijo: «Dadme un punto de apoyo, la palabra justa y el asunto justo, y moveré el mundo»; a nosotros, que poseemos ese punto de apoyo, nuestra pluma, nos toca, pues, mover el mundo con esta arma.*

CÉSAR VALLEJO, «La responsabilidad del escritor» (1937)

In 1928, in one of his *7 Essays on Peruvian Reality*, the Peruvian socialist José Carlos Mariátegui wrote «No es posible democratizar la enseñanza en un país sin democratizar su economía y sin democratizar, por ende, su superestructura política» (pp. 150-151). Whilst I concur with Mariátegui's assertion, I believe we must also understand the value inherent in the inversion of this statement: «Es imposible democratizar la economía de un país, o su superestructura política, sin democratizar la enseñanza». Herein, we must direct our attention not only towards *who* receives a formal education, but towards *what* qualifies as education, or educational. Given that I am researching the work of César Vallejo, this paper examines some of his poems, questioning whether sociopolitically-oriented poetic language and theoretical exegeses could be seen to have influence in any such «democratising» of the societal edifice, as works of art that can *educate*

us. Through their innovation at the level of axiology, and concomitant capacity to counteract destructive (say, capitalistic, fascistic and anthropocentric) worldviews, I argue that committed aesthetic and exegetical productions such as Vallejo's and Mariátegui's can play their part in the transformation of the world through changing the way it is interpreted. To reformulate value systems through art and interpretation, as a mode of pedagogy, entails the exposition of more positive ways of perceiving and understanding the world and all of its inhabitants. For Vallejo himself, as for his compatriot and friend Mariátegui, artistic and exegetical practices can, as part of a revolutionary socialist movement, play their part in the dismantling of unjust, abusive social structures subtended by destructive worldviews. And not only this; such artistic and theoretical productions can, and must, offer hypothetical recompositions of a world reconstructed according to the positive universal values of cooperation, compassion, and equality, from fragments shored against our ruin.

## 1. THE POEM

*Trilce*, «XXXVI»

Pugnamos ensartarnos por un ojo de aguja.  
enfrentados, a las ganadas.  
Amoniácase casi el cuarto ángulo del círculo.  
¡Hembra se continúa el macho, a raíz  
de probables senos, y precisamente  
a raíz de cuanto no florece.

¿Por ahí estás, Venus de Milo?

Tú manqueas apenas, pululando  
entrañada en los brazos plenarios  
de la existencia,  
de esta existencia que todaviiza  
perenne imperfección.  
Venus de Milo, cuyo cercenado, increado  
brazo revuélvese y trata de encodarse

a través de verdeantes guijarros gagos,  
ortivos nautilos, aúnes que gatean  
recién, vísperas inmortales.  
Laceadora de inminencias, laceadora  
del paréntesis.

Rehusad, y vosotros, a posar las plantas  
en la seguridad dupla de la Armonía.  
Rehusad la simetría a buen seguro.  
Intervenid en el conflicto  
de puntas que se diputan  
en la más torionda de las justas  
el salto por el ojo de la aguja!

Tal siento ahora el meñique  
demás en la siniestra. Lo veo y creo  
no debe serme, o por lo menos que está  
en sitio donde no debe.  
Y me inspira rabia y me azarea  
y no hay cómo salir de él, sino haciendo  
la cuenta de que hoy es jueves.

¡Ceded al nuevo impar  
potente de orfandad!

Far from being an insignificant feature in the body of work of which it is a part, as Eduardo Neale-Silva once wrote, the poem «XXXVI», from Vallejo's *Trilce*, is an important, indeed essential text in Vallejo's oeuvre; and not only this - it is also - when compared with the other pieces in *Trilce*, and with his poetic work in general - a strange poem. Strange, not for any linguistic or grammatical peculiarity in the context of its 1922 *poemario* - a modernist masterpiece the cultural value of which has only recently begun to be apprehended by an anglophone academic audience - but for its theme, or rather, its muse. The poem, which addresses the classic, and now widely reproduced, commodified

and banalised sculpture of the Venus de Milo (though it more likely depicts the sea goddess Amphitrite than Aphrodite), has been called Vallejo's *ars poetica* - and with good reason - though I believe the poem is of even greater importance. Exegeses of «XXXVI» have explored a range of registers, highlighting everything from the poem's interrogation of the impossible (Bravo, 2017; Guzmán, 1990), or, in another case, and I think more suitably, the incipient - i.e. the possible, but not yet (Fuente, 1973) - to its engagement with physical and biological difference, duality and proteanism (Higgins, 1970; Reisz, 1997). To other readers, the poem appears discrete (if not unique) in *Trilce* for its withdrawal from the quotidian. Most of the poems in the collection work what were Vallejo's everyday experiences - things he saw, felt, smelled, heard and did personally - through the cerebral refractive lens of his particular poetic vision. Amongst the most memorable of such poems are those Vallejo wrote whilst incarcerated in Trujillo jail - these poems depicting the unravelling of time in isolation, a subjectivity under duress - and the heavily implied eroticism of those poems addressed to the poet's living, human muse, Otilia. «XXXVI», unlike most of the poems in *Trilce*, does not approach the immediacy of everyday experience. Vallejo could not have seen the statue «in the flesh», as we might say - as Juan Espejo Asturrizaga (1965, p. 105) wrote, the poet was living in Lima at the time of writing, and was therefore some 6,000 miles from the sculpture, where it stood (and stands to this day) at the Louvre. The poem, however, does not approach the Venus de Milo solely as such, that is, as an art object. Where Rubén Darío, a major influence on Vallejo, had in his own Venus de Milo poem, «Yo persigo una forma», exploited the statue's dismembered state in outlining an unattainable but ever-striven for aesthetic ideal, Vallejo's poem encounters and addresses the Venus more unconventionally, challenging the Platonic ideal of aesthetic harmony by depicting the sculpture as an adamantly material object rather than an idealised form. Indeed, in another divergence from Darío's poem, where it features in the first quatrain, the marble Venus does not appear until «XXXVI»'s second stanza. One should not, however, infer from this that the opening

sestet of «XXXVI» contains little of note regarding the poem's muse - quite the opposite, in fact.

The opening line of the poem presents us, indeed, with an attempt at achieving the seemingly impossible: «Pugnamos enserarnos por un ojo de aguja, / enfrentados, a las ganadas». The image is inspired by Matthew 19:16-26 (and multiple other similar or nigh-identical passages from The New Testament<sup>1</sup>), from which passage I shall now quote for its relevance to my purposes here:

16 And behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?

17 And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? *there is* none good but one, *that is*, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.

18 He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness,

19 Honour thy father and *thy* mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

20 The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?

21 Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go *and* sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come *and* follow me.

22 But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.

23 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.

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1 Mark 10:25, Luke 18:25.



24 And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

25 When his disciples heard *it*, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?

26 But Jesus beheld *them*, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.<sup>2</sup>

In answer to the young man's question, then, Christ urges not only that he follow the commandments, but that he give up his wealth to those who have more dire need of it. The act of redistribution of material wealth, here, in Christian scripture, is placed on a level of importance equivalent to that of Mosaic Law. The wider sociopolitical, ethical implications of the opening lines of «XXXVI», then, in their implicit reference to this biblical passage, avail the poem of the limitations many exegeses have placed upon it. Indeed - whilst more explicitly presenting itself, in the denunciations directed towards aesthetic harmony that come at the end of the poem, as an aesthetic manifesto in the form of an *ars poetica* - «XXXVI» is bound from the outset to an ethics of redistribution, tacitly emphasising Vallejo's commitment to a secularised version of (New Testament) Christian ethics. Herein, «XXXVI» is also - though far more implicitly - Vallejo's first *ars politica*. What is more, the correspondence of aesthetic overtones and political undertones in this poem marks the nascent stage of what would become an essential feature of Vallejo's oeuvre: a steadfast commitment to the revolutionary potential of art, and artistic practice. We must now clarify how this nexus of aesthetics, ethics, and social transformation, functions in «XXXVI» and beyond.

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2 From the King James Bible. The relevant line from the *Biblia Reina Valera* of 1865/1909 (the one Vallejo was most likely to have known), runs «Y además os digo, que más fácil es pasar un camello por el ojo de una aguja, que el rico entrar en el reino de Dios». <https://www.bibliatodo.com/la-biblia/Reina-valera-1865/mateo-19> and <https://ebible.org/spaRV1909/MAT19.htm>

## 2. DECONSTRUCTION AS RECONSTRUCTION

Why, then, or rather *how*, is redistribution so important in Vallejo's poetry? We must first of all attempt to capture this in a formulaic manner: Vallejo's poetry is the product of an ethical and political poetics, wherein his poetic language witnesses the breaking down of objects into their constituent parts, and the redistribution of individual freedom and value amongst these parts so as to create a field of semantic and, hypothetically at least, societal and political equality.<sup>3</sup> In setting out towards a comprehension of just how integral this is in Vallejo's work, let us return to the poem's odd take on the traditional muse. The Venus de Milo had already, by the early 20th century, long been a symbol both of aesthetic perfection and its unattainability.<sup>4</sup> However, where in a historical sense the implication of such views is that the Venus de Milo in its original form would have typified an aesthetic ideal, and where for Darío the completed form of that sculpture acted as a metaphor for that ideal sought in the present by the individual artist/poet, for Vallejo the statue's most significant reflection of the realm of possibility rests in its very material, physical incompleteness.

Incompletion, in «XXXVI», is first figured explicitly in terms of sexual difference. Lines 4-6 run «Hembra continúa el macho, a raíz / de probables senos, y precisamente / a raíz de cuanto no florece». The male body, here, as Susana Reisz (1997) has surmised, is presented as being in a state of lesser maturity to the female form - the former always potentiating the latter, but not becoming, *not attaining* it (p. 82). The preceding lines 1-3 hint at two ways in which the female form can be achieved by the male: the tacit reference to sexual intercourse in «ensartarnos [...] por un ojo de aguja» in this context refers to procreation, wherein the male body can produce a female form from a part of itself smaller than the human body, recalling

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3 See my recent paper Brakspear (2023).

4 Not always for the right reasons, however. After the Louvre were forced to return the Venus de' Medici to the Italians, French critics were obligated to praise the Milos Venus as an epitome of female beauty (Bonazzoli y Robecchi, 2014, p. 32).

Mercutio's wonderful fertilisation-related insult to Benvolio in *Romeo and Juliet*: «Thy head is as full of quarrels as an egg is full of meat» (Act 3, Scene 1). The second way in which one human body can develop into another body is, of course, through its own destruction, i.e. its death. I do not have the time here to run through how this works, but suffice for the present to say that in Vallejo's poetry the dissolution of the body entails what I have elsewhere called a process of secular transubstantiation - as in the atomistic metaphysics of Epicurus and Lucretius, the dissolution and subsequent dissemination of the body's infinitesimal parts into the world, potentialises their reincorporation in the form of any other thing, animate or inanimate, male, female, or otherwise. This process is, as it happens, referenced by line 3 of the poem: «Amoniácase casi el cuarto ángulo del círculo». This declaration seems to concern the geometrical conception that a circle is a shape with four angles - interior, exterior, inscribed, central - or indeed that which defines the circle as a polygon with infinite sides and thus infinite angles, rather than the orthodox view that a circle, having only one side, therefore has only one angle (360°).<sup>5</sup> The unorthodox conception of a circle as composed of infinite sides and angles seems most pertinent here, for the shape in Vallejo's poem is not stable, nor constant, i.e. *not ideal* - not only because it hasn't a fixed number of sides and angles, but because it «ammonifies» - the circle, here, is not the «perfect circle» of the realm of geometrical ideals, but is instead part of the natural world, acted upon by a natural process. The reference to ammonification in particular is pertinent; this natural process is

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5 Now is not the time to enter in depth into the debate between competing topological theories concerning the geometric qualities of circles, but suffice to say that there are two competing camps: a circle is not a polygon, as it is simply a curved line - it therefore has zero sides and either zero angles or one 360° angle, with no possible reflex angles; *or*, a circle's circumference is made up of  $\pi$  possible lines, and therefore infinite possible angles. Another important specification here is that mentioned above, which states that a circle has four *types* of angle: central, inscribed, interior, exterior. Whether Vallejo intended to reference the «infinite angles» or «four types» theory, is an intriguing question, and, indeed, as I hope to have shown above, a fruitful one...

given the following three definitions by an online dictionary: «1. the act of impregnating with ammonia, as in the manufacture of fertilizer. 2. the state of being so impregnated. 3. the formation of ammonia or its compounds by decomposition of organic matter» (Dictionary.com, s. f.). Here we see not only other types of fertilisation and pregnancy - those which entail the production of fertilizer used to provide nutrients to the crops we grow, thereby sustaining living beings and ensuring their productivity, including the possibility of physical reproduction - but also the production of ammonia *through decomposition*. As already signalled, this abstract process of *de(con)struction* -> *recomposition* is present throughout Vallejo's (2021) oeuvre; indeed, he coined a similar term - «destrutivo-constructivo» - for revolutionary artistic and hermeneutic praxis that accelerates the destruction of the outmoded and oppressive, and replaces them with the radically new (p. 49). Such a process is, pivotally, also present elsewhere in «XXXVI».

Despite the appellation, the Venus de Milo in «XXXVI» is not, or not exactly, that present in the Louvre. Where museums traditionally seek to keep objects in a state of preservation, static and unchanging, Vallejo's Venus - like the ammonifying circle - is not viewed as paragonic. Rather than something ideal and unchanging, «XXXVI» treats the sculpture as a material object, decomposing, collapsing, eroded by the unimpeded effects of nature, the progression of linear time. This eroding sculpture is first addressed with an interrogative - «¿Por ahí estás, Venus de Milo?» - that questions, not *where exactly* it is, but *if* it is there at all. This acknowledgment of the Venus' unstable presence is emphasised further in the second, third and fourth lines of this second stanza: «Tú manqueas apenas, pululando / entrañada en los brazos plenarios / de la existencia»; not only does the statue limp - its dismemberment now made uncomfortably human - it «pullulates». This latter word refers back obliquely to «ammonifies». To pullulate is to «multiply or spread prolifically or rapidly», and the word has etymological roots in the Latin *pullus* - «a young animal» - and *pullulat-* - «sprouted». Such connotations of productivity and procreation, however, are unsettled by the context in which this word is found - the Venus is pullulating not because it is reproducing or creating new objects, but

because its dismembered limbs (and, we could infer, the rest of its body) are eroding, breaking down into a greater number of smaller elements, themselves redistributed out into the world. This sense of destruction as reconstruction is that which is implied by lines 3-6 of the second stanza, describing how the sculpture is «entrañada en los brazos plenarios / de la existencia, / de esta existencia que todaviiza / perenne imperfección». Rather than a slowing down of movement, a coming to a stop, a stasis, Vallejo's innovative rendering of the word «todavía» as «todaviiza» turns the adverb into a verb. That «perenne imperfección», implicitly referencing the three unstable objects already described in the poem - the circle, the sexed human body, and the sculpture - is hereby seen to be an effect of existence itself; existence, herein, *is* eternal imperfection, unstable, in perpetual motion. The verb «todaviiza», moreover, is not only manipulated grammatically but orthographically - the imperfection of the repeated letter «i» presents a linguistic - more particularly a syntagmatic - iteration of the productive breaking down of physical objects. As we shall see, this mirroring of the physical process of *de(con)struction* -> *recomposition* in the grammatical, orthographic, and semantic peculiarities of the language of Vallejo's poems is essential to the sociopolitical, ethical stratum of his poetics.

Crucially, it is not only at the linguistic level of language that we can locate an implicit political impulse in «XXXVI», but at the level of speech, where the ability to give voice to one's existence reflects the individual freedom necessary for positive social change (here we side with Marx, not Smith). Lines 7-9 of the poem's second stanza run «Venus de Milo, cuyo cercenado, increado brazo / revuélvese y trata de encodarse / a través de verdeantes guijarros gagos». Here we must pay attention to the implicit polysemia of «encodar»; Vallejo's construction allows the statue's attempt to recreate its own «cercenado, increado / brazo» from the elbow - in Spanish «codo» - to be a means of reconstructing itself, indeed *re-coding* itself into existence. «Codo», furthermore, can also be translated as the English «cubit», an ancient measure of length approximately equivalent to that of a forearm. Taking the ambiguities of the reflexive verb «encodar» further here, one

thinks of genetic code, or DNA; of the coding of physical objects into a system of signs, i.e. a language; or, indeed, of the act of hermeneutical and artistic practices as innovative individual acts of creation. And it is this latter consideration especially that returns us to the freedom – both individual and collective – to create, by which we are concerned here, and which is obliquely figured by those «verdeantes guijarros gagos». These pebbles, produced as individual elements by the de(con)struction of the Venus statue, are themselves producing moss or grass («verdeantes») - recalling a passage from Vallejo's (2002) notebooks: «Escribí un verso en que hablaba de un adjetivo en la cual crecía hierba. Unos años más tarde, en París, vi en una piedra del cementerio de Montparnasse un adjetivo con hierba. Profecía de la poesía» (p. 64).

As is the case with «XXXVI», this anecdote subliminally equates the productive power of nature with the productive power of (poetic) language. What is more, the fact that, in the poem, the pebbles are «stammering» signifies something else: the power of having a voice, of being able to use language, to write, to create using language. That the pebbles stammer could, of course, be interpreted as referencing their inability to speak, but our analysis has thus far exposed the paramountcy of movement and development over stasis in Vallejo's work. Thus, I believe it far more likely that «stammering» signifies that the pebbles are *coming to language*, learning how to use it, and what can be done with it. In this sense, then, where «ammonifies» refers to the «impregnation» of soil with ammonia to produce fertilising nutrients, the pebbles could be said to becoming *pregnant with words*. One of the natural processes of «existence» that «stills / perennial imperfection», the use of language is itself a form of productive deconstruction entailing the breaking down of signifiers into a system of individual yet interrelated signs. But words alone, as we know all too well, are not enough. Where the system of interconnected elements making up «existence» as a process in a perpetual flux of de(con)structions and recompositions is, in Vallejo's poetry, metaphorised by the unstable system of language which he employs to describe them, each of these are in turn metaphorised - especially in his later poetry - by depictions of the formation of social collectivities, bringing all that the latter

entails on a sociopolitical, ethical level to bear on each element in this set of metaphorical equivalents.

### 3. POETIC PRAXIS

Another moment in Vallejo's poetry where individual freedom and language coalesce is in the poem «III», from the collection *España, aparta de mí este cáliz...* This collection, whose poems address the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, was published by Republican soldiers at the monastery at Montserrat, not long after Vallejo's death, and on the eve of the Fascist victory (Smith, 2012, pp. 152-153). The title is another biblical reference; a paraphrase of Christ's words on the Mount of Olives;<sup>6</sup> the poem itself, moreover, contains a reference to St. Peter (Spanish «San Pedro») in the principal character, «Pedro Rojas». The poem begins

Solía escribir con su dedo grande en el aire:  
«¡Viban los compañeros! Pedro Rojas»,  
de Miranda de Ebro, padre y hombre,  
marido y hombre, ferroviario y hombre,  
padre y más hombre, Pedro y sus dos muertos.

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6 Reina Valera 1865, San Lucas 22: 39-42:

39 *Y saliendo, se fué, según su costumbre, al monte de las Olivas; y sus discípulos también le siguieron.*

40 *Y como llegó a aquel lugar, les dijo: Orád para que no entréis en tentación.*

41 *Y él se apartó de ellos como un tiro de piedra; y puesto de rodillas, oró,*

42 *Diciendo: Padre, si quieres, pasa esta copa de mí, empero no se haga mi voluntad, mas la tuya.*

King James version:

39 *And he came out, and went, as he was wont, to the mount of Olives; and his disciples also followed him.*

40 *And when he was at the place, he said unto them, Pray that ye enter not into temptation.*

41 *And he was withdrawn from them, about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed,*

42 *Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless, let not my will, but thine, be done.*

Here we see a working man, a supporter of the Republic, expressing his support for the Republican cause by writing his message «en el aire».<sup>7</sup> Compellingly, though, according to the *Real Academia Española* at least, he spells the words wrong. The equivalent of such an error in a speech act might, indeed, be to stammer; but the message itself is clear - Pedro, the secular equivalent of St. Peter, the rock of the church, is the rock (Spanish «piedra», though the etymological unity of name and object is much clearer in the Greek «petros», masculine variant of «petra») of the socialist (red, «rojo») cause, using his individual freedom to support verbally and, presumably, physically, the largely working class and agrarian masses in their fight against the fascist, nationalist Catholic rebels helmed by Franco. Given the numerous other confluences of stones and human beings in Vallejo's poetry,<sup>8</sup> I do not believe that this particular, *political* nexus of stone, individual freedom, and language use, is without relevance to that which we have identified in «XXXVI». Indeed, it is the thesis of this paper that «XXXVI»'s abstract metaphysics, understood in the context of its tacit reference to the sociopolitical and ethical act of redistribution, qualifies it as Vallejo's *ars politica*, or at least the blueprint of his more explicitly political work, inasmuch as it is also his *ars poetica*. Vallejo's oeuvre allows us, there where the political and the poetic meet, to apprehend the sociopolitical and ethical potential of poetic language, and of artistic practice in general. Through demonstrating the potential effects of de(con)struction and recomposition *in language*, that is, Vallejo's poetry demonstrates how this could work, and, indeed, why it must work, in society, in the world. A closer look at how the process of *de(con)struction -> recomposition* functions in some other poems, will further emphasise its importance, particularly in terms of axiology and the ethical implications of the redistribution of value.

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7 Julio Vélez notes that the words of the poem's «Pedro Rojas» were based in fact on lines found in the pocket of a dead Republican soldier, killed at the beginning of the civil war. *Poemas en prosa; Poemas humanos; España, aparta de mí este cáliz*, edited by Vélez (Ediciones Cátedra, 1991, p. 261).

8 Most memorably in the famous «Piedra negra sobre una piedra blanca» (1938).



#### 4. POETIC SOCIALISM

«Himno a los voluntarios de la República» and «Batallas», the first two poems from *España, aparta de mí este cáliz...* - a collection whose poems address the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, and which was published by Republican soldiers at the monastery at Montserrat, not long after Vallejo's death, and on the eve of the Fascist victory - present the two most patent examples of the redistribution of value. In the former poem, Vallejo writes of how, concomitant upon the sacrifice of volunteers for the Republican war effort, «vendrá en siete bandejas la abundancia, todo / en el mundo será de oro súbito / y el oro, / fabulosos mendigos de vuestra propia secreción de sangre, / y el oro mismo será entonces de oro!». Similarly, in «Batallas», Vallejo writes of how a republican victory would mean that

el individuo sea un hombre,  
para que los señores sean hombres,  
para que todo el mundo sea un hombre, y para  
que hasta los animales sean hombres,  
el caballo, un hombre,  
el reptil, un hombre,  
el buitre, un hombre honesto,  
la mosca, un hombre, y el olivo, un hombre,  
y hasta el ribazo, un hombre  
y el mismo cielo, todo un hombrecito!

Here we see the semantic equivalent of the fulfilment of Christ's words in Matthew 19:16-25; the appropriation of value from «gold» and «man» - two paradigmatic examples of things habitually deemed of high value in patriarchal feudal/capitalist society - and the redistribution of their value back into the world, especially amongst things not habitually deemed of high value. Indeed, in «Himno a los voluntarios de la República», we find the following line: «distribuyendo españas a los toros, / toros a las palomas...» - an explicit versing of the redistribution of power from entities with greater power to those with less. Once again, acts in language, in Vallejo's poetry, metaphorise a potential and desired

act in society, in the world. The radically democratic redistribution of value, in *España, aparta de mí este cáliz...*, herein augurs «la salvación de la humanidad» to be achieved by a socialist revolution through the fruition of a «sociedad socialista universal» (pp. 15, 18).

A metaphor for the deconstruction of the societal and cultural edifice, the productive destruction of the iconic Venus de Milo sculpture (this being the proof of its materiality as part of the physical world), sees it broken up into smaller, unknown, nameless elements, which begin to take on voice. This implicit redistribution of value and the potentialising of individual freedom - and thus the formation of social collectivities in solidarity - in «XXXVI» follows an oblique reference to the necessity of the redistribution of wealth. This process is mirrored in those poems from *España, aparta de mí este cáliz...*, where we witness the redistribution of a wealth of symbolic and fiscal value that, essentially, allows for a transformation of perspective - through reading these poems, one comes to understand that the world, and all things - both human and non-human - that make it up, are ultimately only as valuable as we make them. And the «we», here, is crucial to our understanding of how such a transformation on the level of perspective, can lead to transformations on a societal, even global scale.

A metaphor for such grand transformations comes in the form of the poem «Masa» (or «Mass» in the sense of a social body), also from *Spain, take this cup from me...*, and reproduced here below, which presents a scene of death and resurrection. A dead Republican soldier is surrounded by a progressively larger mass of human beings, declaring their love for him, and their wish for him not to leave them. But only when «todos los hombres de la tierra» have surrounded him (and here we can return to «Batallas»; where, in that poem, the value of «hombre» is redistributed among all other things, could «todos los hombres» here in «Masa» not also signify «todas cosas»?), are we told that the corpse «les vio el cadáver triste, emocionado; / incorporóse lentamente, / abrazó al primer hombre; echóse a andar...» Perhaps Vallejo's most moving *ars politica*, «Masa» sees the moment where the abstract metaphysical processes and ethical undertones of «XXXVI» come to fruition in the

final manifestation of a revolution for the salvation of humankind - the victory of love over the fascist powers of death through the total distribution of power and responsibility.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Vallejo, in his theoretical treatise on aesthetics and politics, *Art and Revolution*, writes:

El intelectual revolucionario, por la naturaleza transformadora de su pensamiento y por su acción sobre la realidad inmediata, encarna un peligro para todas las formas de vida que le rozan y que él trata de derogar y sustituir por otras nuevas, más justas y perfectas. Se convierte en un peligro para las leyes, costumbres y relaciones sociales reinantes. Resulta así el blanco por excelencia de las persecuciones y represalias del espíritu conservador. (p. 11)

This «intelectual revolucionario», Vallejo argues, must shoulder their role as a part of the socialist vanguard. Going beyond what he sees as the ideological barricade lyrics of Vladimir Mayakovsky (who, in the wake of the Russian poet's suicide, he picks out for extended criticism), Vallejo contends that the revolutionary intellectual (read also, revolutionary artist) must use their work to alter the ways in which their audiences interpret the world. As what could be seen as a reformulation of the eleventh and final of Marx' *Theses on Feuerbach* - something along the lines of «one changes the world through changing the way in which it is interpreted» - Vallejo views this endeavour on the part of the artist as forming a vital part of the revolutionary movement. Vallejo, though, doesn't give us many concrete examples of how this works in the art of his contemporaries, and no mention is made of his own poems... I believe, however, that the theoretical formulations in *El arte y la revolución* echo our statements in the preceding, underlining as they do the sociopolitical and ethical importance of individual freedom (most patently in the figure of the «intelectual revolucionario»),

the re-coding of value-systems, and the concomitant transformation of worldviews. Each of these features of the role of the committed artist and intellectual make them, and also their creative, exegetical and ultimately *educational* work, indispensable elements in the movement towards positive social transformation and collectivising. As with the production of new bodies, objects and voices from the disharmonic de(con)struction of the Venus de Milo; as with Pedro Rojas' rejection of the official orthography and traditional hierarchy of the Spanish state; as with the redistribution of the value condensed in gold and man, such real positive change cannot come to fruition without the rejection and destruction of the old world, and the redistribution of its power and wealth among the seeds of the radically new. An approach to the teaching of literature, poetry and art that takes into account the transformative power held within cultural objects, and within education itself in all its myriad forms, approximates a more sociopolitically and ethically active mode of engagement with artistic, intellectual and pedagogical practice.

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