

UC Berkeley

Lucero

Title

Translating César Vallejo, Poetic Creation, and Dreaming Awake: An Interview with Clayton Eshleman

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/30m9x05h>

Journal

Lucero, 18(1)

ISSN

1098-2892

Author

Daly, Tara

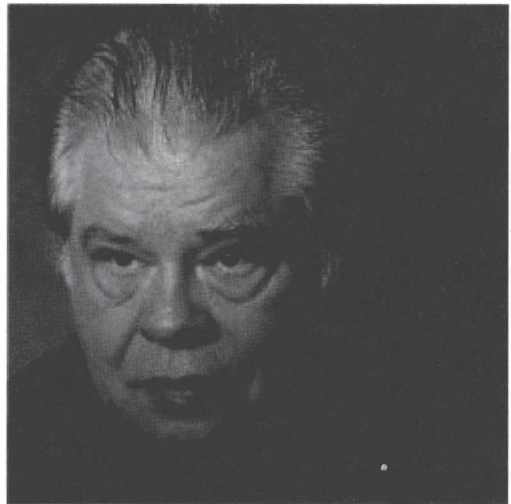
Publication Date

2007

Copyright Information

Copyright 2007 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

TRANSLATING CÉSAR VALLEJO, POETIC CREATION, AND DREAMING AWAKE: AN INTERVIEW WITH CLAYTON ESHLEMAN CONDUCTED BY TARA DALY



Clayton Eshleman, an award-winning translator and accomplished author, has dedicated the past forty-eight years of his life to translating arguably one of the most influential poets of the twentieth century, César Vallejo. A notoriously difficult poet, César Vallejo pushes readers to the very edge of translatability in his original Spanish and reveals the limits of individual agency in any language throughout each of his poetry collections. Filled with challenging neologisms, poignant ellipses, complex metaphors, and stylistic difficulties, Vallejo's groundbreaking and hermetic poems offer myriad challenges to even the most seasoned of translators. However, after decades of work on Vallejo, Eshleman published -- to critical acclaim -- *The Complete Poetry of César Vallejo* with the University of California Press in 2007. The over 700-page volume includes a Foreword by Mario Vargas Llosa, an Introduction by Efraín Kristal, a Chronology of Vallejo's Life and Works by Stephen M. Hart, and an intimate Translation Memoir following the poetry by Eshleman himself. Always one to juggle multiple projects, Eshleman is also Professor Emeritus of English at Eastern Michigan University; a widely-published poet; the founding editor of two magazines, *Caterpillar* and *Sulfur*; and the author of *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld* (Wesleyan University Press, 2003), an intricate book about Paleolithic caves in southwestern France. In addition to previous published translations and co-translations of Vallejo's work, Eshleman is the co-translator with Annette Smith of *Aimé Césaire: The Collected Poetry* (University of California Press, 1983) and the translator of *Watchfiends and Rack Screams* by Antonin Artaud (Exact Change, 1995). He has been honored with the National Book Award as well as the Landon Translation Prize. Inexhaustible in every way, Eshleman continues to travel, lecture, write, and teach while also finding time to answer a question, or ten, for curious graduate students. Below, he talks to me about his experiences translating Vallejo, writing poetry, thinking about art, and being himself:

Daly: *Your first translation of César Vallejo's Poemas humanos, or Human Poems, was published by Grove Press in 1968, which you say then brought about your co-translation with José Rubia Barcia of Spain, Take this Cup from Me (1974, also by Grove Press). In your Translation Memoir of The Complete Poetry, you write a great description of the collaborative nature of your experience of translating Vallejo with Rubia Barcia in Los Angeles in the 1970s. Can you comment on the individual versus the collective aspects of translation?*

Eshleman: During the five years of work leading to the 1968 Grove edition of *Human Poems*, I had some help from strangers, who often responded to my questions with false-leads and misinformation. However, once I was in Lima in 1965, I had the good fortune to meet Maureen Ahern who went over the 6th and 7th drafts of *Human Poems* with me and turned out to be a very good and responsible person to work with. In California, in the 1970s, I teamed up with José Rubia Barcia to retranslate all of the work I had done on Vallejo in the 60s. For about five years we sat, side by side, at the Barcias' kitchen table in their Westwood home, making use of the 1968 Moncloa edition of all of Vallejo's poetry, which included facsimiles of the worksheets for *Human Poems* and *Spain, Take This Cup From Me*. This enabled José and I to work off the manuscripts in the state Vallejo had left them rather than the pirated and inaccurate editions I was faced with in the 1960s.

In all of my Vallejo translations, I have been responsible for the final drafts. Because of textual obscurities, archaisms, arcane words, and coined words, I have, with my informants and co-translator (in the case of Barcia), often been faced with material that no one, to my knowledge, has the last word on. My attempt from the very beginning has been to present in English a non-Colonized Vallejo, to protect the integrity of his Spanish texts.

Daly: *Along the same lines, Vallejo seems to have both an immense sensibility toward the collective, and yet an acute concern with the limits of his individual subjectivity. For instance, in "París, Octubre 1936" (Poemas humanos) he writes: "De todo esto yo soy el único que parte." This poetic voice seems to be a unique voice, not just any "one" among many, but an exceptional being in some ways. How does he bridge the one and the many, if at all?*

I suppose you could say that Vallejo bridges the one and the many by writing, especially in Europe, a poetry that is at once political and experimental. His own personal suffering is expressed as such as well as being a link, via his compassion, to the larger community, ultimately humankind.

Eshleman: *In the Introduction to the 1940 version of España, aparta de mí este cáliz, Juan Larrea speaks of the way that Vallejo translated the "New World" to Spain in a language that reflected America. Posthumously, to what extent do you think Vallejo translated a Civil War Spain, especially in the aforementioned collection, to the world at large? Do you see him as a cultural translator between Peru and Spain?*

I do not recall what Larrea wrote in his introduction to *España*. I think that the engine of this book is composed of Vallejo's revolutionary hope for world change as it is shattered by the combined imminence of his own death and his realization that the Spanish Republic is doomed. To what extent he is a "cultural translator," I do not know. His contact with Spain in its death throes must have evoked deep Peruvian memories, and surely brought forth the plight of Peruvian peasants whose lives were as terrible as the lives of those in Spain the Republican government had set out to alter.

Eshleman: *You mention in a 2003 interview in Hunger magazine that "Vallejo's contradictions move like non-sequiturs throughout the poetry he wrote in Europe (1923-1938)." Can you speak to some of these said contradictions and perhaps connect them to the challenges of translation you encountered with his later poetry?*

Vallejo's work, from *Trilce* on, and especially in the *Human Poems*, is a kind of ongoing exercise in the assimilation of contradictions and ambivalences as the very mortar of poetry. Look at "Roster of Bones," "Hat, Overcoat, and Gloves," and "Four Consciousnesses" at the beginning of Part I of *Human Poems*. Or at "There is a man mutilated not from combat," in which the poet tells us that this guy's face is mutilated by peace, that he lost his face via love and not hate. Vallejo's grindstone, as it were, is powered by his belief that there is no rational explanation for how things are, and that it is truer to human experience to let contradictions scrape up against each other, in the poem itself, than to try to keep them out or iron them out, or, to put it another way, to "poeticize" them.

Eshleman: *Your poetry collection (you have many!) Reciprocal Distillations (Hot Whiskey Press, 2007) captures two ideas I want to explore with you. First, the idea of reciprocity between artists. I wonder if you can speak to the way that you see your translation of Vallejo or any other poets you've translated as informing your own original poetry?*

I would refer your readers to the third paragraph on page 687 of *The Complete Poetry of César Vallejo*. The best response to your question that I can give is there, as part of that Translation Memoir: "I have thought more about poetry while translating Vallejo than while reading anyone else. Influence through translation is different from influence through reading the masters in one's own tongue. I am creating an American version out of a Spanish text, and if Vallejo is to enter my own poetry, he must do so through what I have already, as a translator, turned him into. This is, in the long run, very close to being influenced by myself, or better, by a self I have created *to mine*. In this way, I do not feel that my poetry reflects Vallejo's. He taught me that ambivalence and contradiction are facets of metaphoric probing, and he gave me permission to try anything in my quest for an authentic alternative world in poetry."

Eshleman: *Secondly, in Reciprocal Distillations, you take visual art as a jumping off point for your own inspiration; on another occasion, you mention working on William Blake, known for his image/text combinations. Could you speak to the relationship between word and visual image both in your own work and in Vallejo's? Are there any visual artists that you use as inspiration, or whose images appear in your mind, while translating Vallejo?*

I don't use paintings and painters as jumping off points as much as I use them as targets to penetrate, sink into, and then to move metaphorically inside their visual fields. I try not to describe paintings or sculpture but to use them as provocations for "I don't know what you mean by word and visual image" in Vallejo. As a writer, he is without a visual field. However, he is very metaphorical, and perhaps you have such in mind with that question. I have been inspired by all of the painters and paintings I have addressed in poetry (and in prose). I mean, their imaginations have carried me beyond their individual works into my own sense of things, and some, like Chaim Soutine and Leon Golub, have become life companions. There are fascinating resonances between Vallejo and both of these painters. Soutine's Ceret period, in which he broke through into volcanic abstract compositions that anticipate Willem de Kooning, evokes Vallejo's destruction of narrative in *Trilce*. And the Spanish Civil War poems of Vallejo are very compatible with Golub's Goyaesque paintings of American mercenaries.

Eshleman: *What do you make of Vallejo's "IMAGEN ESPAÑOLA DE LA MUERTE," with which he concludes the fifth poem of España, aparta de mí este cáliz? Why all capitals?*

Well, it appears to be the title of the poem (as does "Terremoto" in the *Human Poems*), which occurred to Vallejo after he wrote the poem, so he placed it at the end, indicating it as an afterthought (or afterbirth). We know this thanks to the facsimiles presented in the Moncloa edition I spoke of before. The "Spanish Image of Death" poem appears to have been originally written as one of the *Human Poems* and only via later revision was it moved into the Spanish Civil War sheaf.

Daly: *In your poem, "Spirits of the Head" you write, "Death is a rite of passage, not an end." How do you think Vallejo approached death, especially in España, aparta de mí este cáliz? In what ways was Vallejo's death a new beginning for the publication of his work?*

I think Vallejo's "approach" to death is dense, pervasive, and identified at one point in "Spanish Image of Death":

[for] Death is a being been by force,
whose beginning and end I carry engraved
at the head of my illusions...¹

Eshleman: In fact, death is a devouring cherub throughout these fifteen poems, a terrible and triumphant force, defeated only when all the inhabitants of the earth surround the dead combatant in the poem "Masa." Surrounded by everyone, "the corpse looked at them sadly, deeply moved; / he got up slowly, / embraced the first man; started to walk."² Which is to say that resurrection is possible on what would be an impossible basis (one of Vallejo's great contradictions).

Vallejo's death led to the publication, the following year, by his French widow, of *Poemas humanos*, probably his finest single collection (*Trilce* is more daring, but *Human Poems* has more weight).

Daly: *You seem drawn to translating poets that are politically engaged, for instance, in the case of both Vallejo and your co-translation of Aimé Césaire. Was this a conscious choice on your part, or is it something beyond politics that first drew you to these poets' work?*

Eshleman: I think it is impossible to separate the political from the imaginative in the work of Vallejo and Césaire. I was drawn to both at very different times in my life. I was seeking a confirmation that indeed I was a poet at all when I collided with Vallejo in Kyoto, Japan, 1963. I did not understand *Poemas humanos* but something told me that I would learn something about poetry by attempting to translate it that I would not learn elsewhere. The political in *Human Poems* is never agenda-driven, and always operates on a humanistic level complexed by metaphoric moves one does not associate with traditional political poetry. As I think more about your question, I think I seduced myself to translate *Poemas humanos* because of its

1. The Spanish reads:

que la muerte es un ser sido a la fuerza,
cuyo principio y fin llevo grabados
a la cabeza de mis ilusiones...

2. "Masa" is the twelfth poem in *España, aparta de mí este cáliz*. See pages 610-611 of *The Complete Poetry* for the Spanish and Eshleman's translation.

strangeness and also possibly because having made two summer trips to Mexico, in 1959 and 1960 (my essential breakaway from Indiana), I was at the threshold of a vision of Latin America, and Vallejo stepped in and challenged me to engage it.

I became involved in translating Aimé Césaire much later, in the late 1970s, via my feelings that *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* was one of the essential world poems of the 20th century and that it had not been translated as well as it might be. So I teamed up with Annette Smith and we did it together. Césaire is a Surrealist and, very importantly, one whose revolutionary political point of view is set forth clearly and boldly in his poetry. However, like Vallejo in this regard, he does not write agit-prop. His writing is densely surrealistic out of a Martinican/African sensibility. In no sense is he a mainland French Surrealist, although André Breton, who discovered his work while fleeing France from Fascism in 1941 when he visited Fort-de-France, Martinique, immediately wrote that no one else was using the French language like Aimé Césaire.

So Vallejo is foundational with me, while Césaire is a marvelous poet I discovered mid-career.

Daly: *You write in the Introduction to The Complete Posthumous Poetry (1979) that when you began reading and translating him, Vallejo "got into every corner of my Being." How does Vallejo "haunt" your English, after translating so many of his works? And how has he "haunted" your life?*

Again, I would refer your readers to my Translation Memoir in *The Complete Poetry of César Vallejo* at least for the part of this question referring to his haunting my life. As for how he may have haunted my English: the most pertinent response to that part of the question may lie in the two improvisations I did off translations I had done of Vallejo poems (to be found in "An Ego Strong Enough to Live: Translating and Imagining Cesar Vallejo" in my book, *Archaic Design*, Black Widow Press, 2007). I do not think you "hear" my Vallejo translations in my own poetry. I would like to think that any haunting has been assimilated to the point that it is ground up in my own language.

Daly: *You have mentioned as well, in respect to your own writing, that you think the most delicious space to write from is from a state that might be called "Dreaming Awake," a two-way movement between the subconscious and the conscious. How do you achieve this state?*

I can more or less date when it began to set in: after I had turned Vallejo into a figure in my own poetry in an attempt to incorporate fantasies I had about him while I was translating him (and wanted to keep out of the translations). I think a subconscious release took place while I was working on "The Book of Yorunomado" in 1964. In it, to make a longer and more complicated story short, Vallejo commands me to disembowel myself, and I do so, releasing another figure of my imagination, Yorunomado (this poem can be found in *The Name Encanyoned River*, Black Sparrow Press, 1986). The creation of Yorunomado was a real advance for me and I think it began to stimulate "dreaming awake" activity.

Daly: *In the beginning of Juniper Fuse, your book on the Upper Paleolithic caves you have been exploring for decades now in France, you quote Charles Olson writing to the young poet Ed Dorn, advising him to "dig one thing or place or man...exhaust it. Saturate it. Beat it." Have you exhausted César Vallejo?*

Probably, after 48 years. Of course, rationally I have no way of ascertaining to what extent Vallejo's poetry is an active agent in my subconscious. I do feel as if I have climbed the mountain in completing this translation but you may be right to suspect that gremlins from mountain's interior are still fucking with my mind.

Daly: *In his Chronology in The Complete Poetry of César Vallejo, Stephen Hart mentions an article, "El hombre y dios en la escultura incaica," that Vallejo published in 1936 in Beaux-Arts magazine as one of a number of indications that his interest in pre-Hispanic Peruvian history increased toward the end of his life. How do you think Vallejo would have reacted to your caves project? Do you see the presence of Incan culture in any of his early or later poems?*

In 1937, I know that Vallejo wrote a play, "La Piedra Cansada" (The Tired Stone), that draws on pre-Columbian Peruvian materials. Pre-Hispanic Peru is certainly present in his first book, *Los heraldos negros* (*The Black Heralds*), but it is a small presence, not nearly as strong as Vallejo's conflictual relationship with Catholicism and sex. The poems I have in mind from *The Black Heralds* are "Huaco," "Autochthonous Tercet," and "Imperial Nostalgias."

Daly: *What is your advice to young poets, translators, and critics these days in search of their "project"? How do you know when you've stumbled upon something worth being "saturated in" in terms of translation or otherwise?*

I think that poets should set forth their work as boldly as possible and let others who are attracted to it to figure out, on their own, what to do with it relative to their own possibilities. And I must correct your use of "saturation." I did not stumble upon something "worth being 'saturated in.'" I discovered, quite by chance, a realm in which I could undertake a "saturation job" on. If the idea of such appeals to someone, then it is up to her to find that area, or realm, that has not previously been brought into poetry and attempt to draw it into her own poetic nets. Such "jobs" take decades (I spent over two decades researching and writing *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld*). And any open-ended project can easily get out of hand: for instance, when does one stop research and complete one's book? For many years, Gary Snyder has lived with what he feels is an unfinishable project on ancient Chinese history.

Daly: *You are clearly a prolific writer, artist, translator, teacher, and traveler. So, where are you off to next?*

Next fall, Black Widow Press will bring out *The Grindstone of Rapport*, a 600 page Eshleman Reader, with poetry, prose, and translation (treated more or less equally page-wise).

I am now working on a new collection of poems for Black Widow publication in 2009 or 2010 tentatively called *Anticline*.

I am making my responses to your questions in West Hollywood, not Michigan, where Caryl and I live. We are here for three months while I teach a seminar on translating poetry for the Spanish Department at UCLA.

Each June we usually take a small group of travelers to a few of the Ice Age painted caves in the French Dordogne. We are sponsored by the Ringling School of Art and Design in Sarasota. I lecture on each cave we visit. Such a trip is a pleasant extension of the research I did (in libraries as well as in caves) for *Juniper Fuse*.