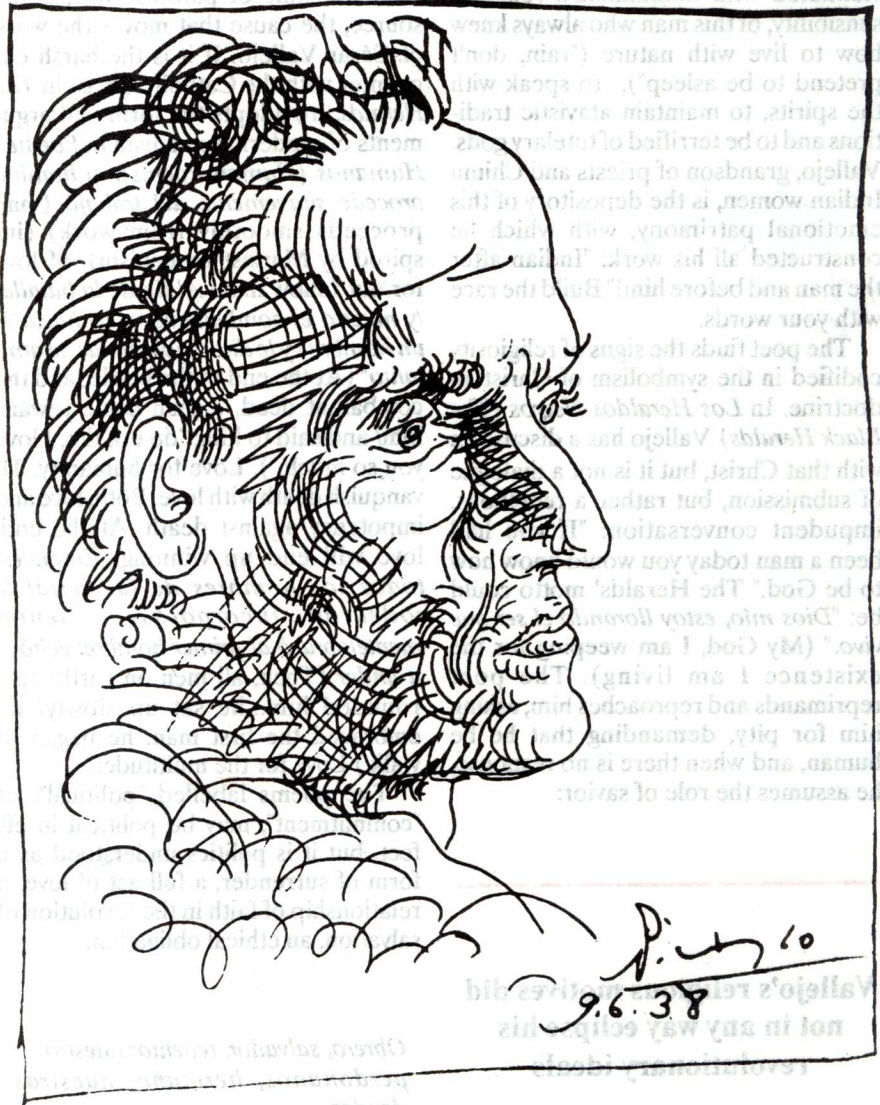


Science and Politics as Religion

Edgar Montiel

Stephen Hart has just published a shortened version of his doctoral dissertation (Tamesis Books Limited, London), entitled *Religion, Politics and Science in the Work of César Vallejo*, which is an appealing, new, polemical invitation to re-read the great Peruvian poet from these three points of view.

Religion, politics and science are not mere facets in Vallejo's writings; they are not loose pieces, but rather they form the very substance of his work. But, would the spine and soul of his discursive corpus not have a central obsession? His work has been selected with a clear Cartesian spirit, and the analytical zeal that motivated him makes the scholar fall into interpretational traps, a fate of the *fallacy of emphasis* that distorts the essential fiber, the point of support, the "just word" with which Vallejo moves the world. In the first chapter, dedicated to religion, one becomes aware of this danger. The author feels that he is moving in quicksand and he defends himself with the reiterated use of the conditional tense, but by means of probabilities he offers his theory: "Vallejo distorts the Catholic creed and points to its ironies...this subversion of the Catholic faith is expressed mainly in two ways, which are 1) anguished, metaphysical questioning of ideas that are generally accepted about the nature of God and 2) the use of blasphemy to describe his erotic experiences."



César Vallejo as seen by Pablo Picasso

Writer. Peruvian diplomat in Mexico.

It is known that as a child, Vallejo had two town priests as grandfathers, that his family was deeply religious and for this reason the name that they give to the *shulca*--the last born infant--was that of Abraham ("the chosen one of the people of God"), or Abrahamsito, as they used to call him. But it is not institutional Catholicism that defines the poet's religious sentiments, it is something with deeper, anthropological roots:

It is the pantheistic spirit of Andean man that is easily merged with the Christian prayer book that makes César Vallejo into a poet of mystical theology and hope, of devotion and rage, of redemption and humanism. Armed with these sentiments he will approach politics and science.

What happens to Vallejo is not an isolated case. Some Peruvian anthropologists have shown that in the Andean world, Catholicism was substantiated with humankind's religious sensibility, of this man who always knew how to live with nature ("rain, don't pretend to be asleep"), to speak with the spirits, to maintain atavistic traditions and to be terrified of tutelary gods. Vallejo, grandson of priests and Chimú Indian women, is the depository of this emotional patrimony, with which he constructed all his work: "Indian after the man and before him!" Build the race with your words.

The poet finds the signs of religiosity codified in the symbolism of Christian doctrine. In *Los Heraldos Negros* (*The Black Heralds*) Vallejo has a discussion with that Christ, but it is not a dialogue of submission, but rather a rebellious, impudent conversation: "If you had been a man today you would know how to be God." The Heralds' motto could be: "Dios mío, estoy llorando el ser que vivo." (My God, I am weeping for the existence I am living). The poet reprimands and reproaches him, asking him for pity, demanding that he be human, and when there is no response, he assumes the role of savior:

Vallejo's religious motives did not in any way eclipse his revolutionary ideals

*Se quisiera(...)
ver a los pobres, y, llorando quedos,
dar pedacitos de pan fresco a todos.
Y saquear a los ricos sus viñedos
con las dos manos santas
que a un golpe de luz
volaron desclavados de la Cruz.*

*(One would want (...)
to see the poor, and, weeping softly,
give them all bits of fresh bread.
And plunder the rich of their vineyards
with the two sacred hands
that with a flash of light
flew unnailed from the Cross.)*

This poem deals with saving the poor and with saving Christ, and Vallejo assumes the responsibility of speaking to God using the informal *tú* (you). It is a dispute between creators, between redeemers. The idea of *transcendence*, of a discussion with a supreme being to recreate some of paradise lost, is the source, the cause that moves the work of César Vallejo. If it is the harsh encounter with the Catholic Christ in *The Heralds*, it adopts the form and arguments of modern humanism in *Poemas Humanos* (*Human Poems*): *el hombre procede suavemente del trabajo* (man proceeds smoothly from work) (inspired by Marxist humanism); of love for our fellow man: *Al fin de la batalla, / y muerto el combatiente, vino hacia él un hombre / y le dijo: "no mueras, te amo tanto"* (At the end of the battle, / and the combatant dead, a man came toward him / and said to him: "do not die, I love you so much."). Love for humanity. To vanquish death with love. Both, love and impotency against death. At the end, love will end up winning: *Entonces, todos los hombres de la tierra / le rodearon... incorporóse lentamente / abrazó al primer hombre: echóse a andar* (Then, all men on earth / surrounded him... he sat up slowly / he embraced the first man: he began to walk.) Love for the multitudes.

The poems labelled "political", of "commitment", may be political in effect, but it is politics understood as a form of surrender, a full act of love, a relationship of faith in the revolution of salvation, an ethical obligation:

*Obrero, salvador, redentor nuestro
perdónanos, hermano, nuestras
deudas.
(Worker, savior, our redeemer
forgive us, brother, for our debts.)*

It is love practiced as a *civil* religion, as a lay relationship with the gods, a love assumed as a way of life, from which it is necessary to interpret his political obligations. This attitude should be emphasized, since the sociological Vulgate has made Vallejo into an earthly, superficial poet, manipulating his Marxist faith, turning his profound message into a matter of barricades and pamphlets. This superficial reading is very common, and it betrays the mineral depth that makes his poetry outcrop. Recognizing Vallejo's laical, religious motives is an obligation of honesty that in no way eclipses his revolutionary ideals, but rather places them in their essential transcendental perspective.

The idea of transcendence, of a discussion with a supreme being to recreate some of paradise lost, is the cause that moves the work of César Vallejo

Marxism and Mysticism

The poet's adherence to Marxism has also been misunderstood as a renunciation of his religious emotion. Genetic patrimony cannot be renounced. His Socialist ideal is a hope, somewhat theological and a matter of faith. In his greatest moments of reading treatises on economic policies, materialist philosophy, and Soviet science, he never ceased to be an esoteric spiritualist. Elsa Enríques, daughter of Elba Huara - a Peruvian ballerina who was a very good friend of Vallejo - told me in Paris in 1979 that, "Cesitar had some splendid, mysterious spiritualist sessions in which he summoned his ancestors and interested attendants". In this way he earned some money, since he was known to be initiated in the occult sciences, and intellectuals and neighbors visited him for this. And she, Elsitita, then nine years old, discreetly helped him give verisimilitude to his mysterious practices, making noise outside the dark room and knocking under the table... He was a gypsy Marxist. Strictly speaking, he was a Marxist thanks to God.

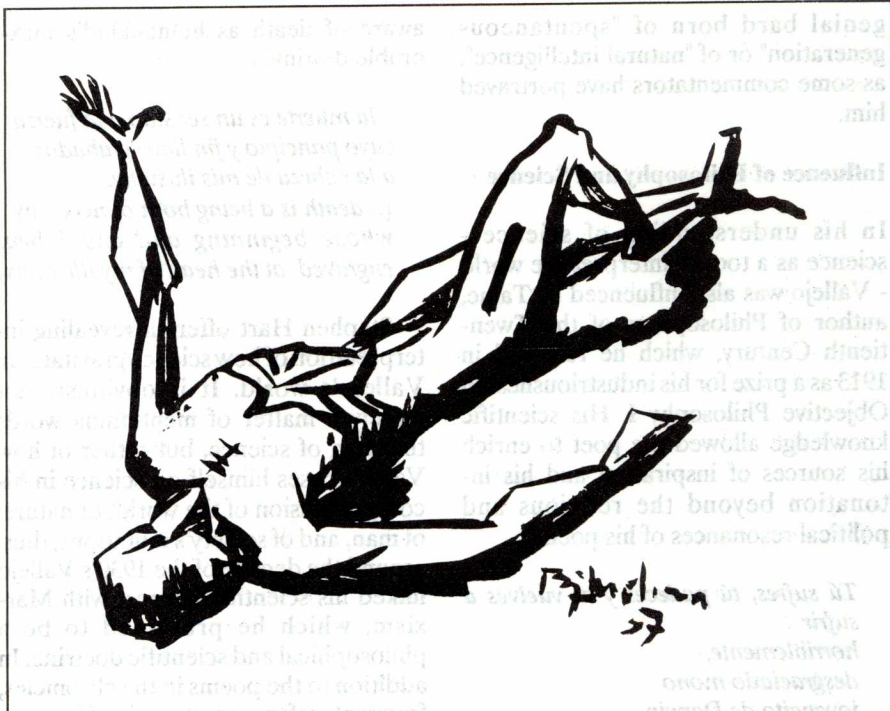
His interest in science should also be seen from this point of view. The pantheistic man has an ordered image of nature and primary causes are recognized in a god the creator.

Vallejo's vanguardism does not deny this concept. He was very interested in Newton, Darwin, and in the inventions of the period; he was passionately fond of movies (he even wanted to make this into an aesthetic philosophy: *La emoción de mi época es una emoción cinematográfica* [The emotion of my time is a cinematic emotion.]) Technology, cinematography, wireless communication, airplanes and the vertigo of speed were the outer symbols of the new generation. The chapter dedicated to science in Vallejo's work is Stephen Hart's theory and original contribution. No one until now has made a systematic analysis of science in Vallejo's poetry. In effect, as Hart notes, Vallejo in his years as a student was an avid reader of the work of Ernest Haeckel, who in those years published a successful book, *The Enigmas of the Universe*, in which he summarized scientific advances of the 19th century (positivism, materialism and Darwinism). This interest in science did not come to him by way of Marxist materialism (which did reinforce and widen his scientific knowledge), but rather by a vocation that originated in his years as a student. It is useful to clarify that Haeckel's book came to his hands as a prize for having been the best student in the 1914 class of Objective Philosophy II (now known as the Philosophy of Science).

An Exemplary Student

At this point, new information of crucial importance should be mentioned, since it can redefine the way the poet has been viewed.

César Vallejo was a brilliant student of exceptional rigor and dedication in secondary school and in the university, which disproves the idea of Vallejo as a dispersed bohemian, an image that many mythomaniacs of literature have created. While in Trujillo last December (at the Peruvian Congress of Philosophy) I had the fortune to become friends with Eduardo Quiroz Sánchez, an old emeritus professor from the university of that city, where Vallejo studied. Quiroz introduced me to his work *César Vallejo, adolescencia y promisión* (César Vallejo, Adolescence and Promise), which he read in the international colloquium held in April, 1988, commemorating the fiftieth



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The poet's scientific knowledge allowed him to enrich his sources of inspiration and his intonation beyond religious and political resonances

anniversary of the poet's death, but for strange reasons his paper remains unpublished. The text demonstrates, with evidence at hand, that Vallejo completed his secondary studies in three years and not in the normal four, because, due to the brilliance demonstrated in his first two years, he was allowed to skip the third and to pass directly to fourth year. In his first years (1905-1906) the adolescent was awarded with silver medals and prizes as the best student, in Spanish Grammar as well as in Ancient and Medieval History. In his three years of secondary school, in 16 of the 34 required classes, he received the highest grade, 20, and in the rest he was graded no lower than 16. In Grammar and French he received 20 points in all years (which explains his ease in reading Baudelaire and the Symbolists of that time), and in Science courses, such as Algebra, Arithmetic,

Zoology and Botany, all of his grades were 20.

Here discipline and a vocation were being forged. For that reason, it did not strike anyone's attention when he entered medical school in 1911 at the Universidad Mayor of San Marcos in Lima, studies that he abandoned the following year for lack of resources to live in the capital.

Returning to his tertiary studies in 1913, now at the University of Trujillo, he enrolled in the school of Philosophy and Literature.

In the first three years of undergraduate school, Vallejo was again showered with many prizes for his performance in classes, such as a Diploma at the end of the year and a book dealing with every discipline. This is when he received the above-mentioned book by Haeckel. In 1914 he received the book *History of Religions* by Max Müller for being the first in the class of Aesthetics and History of Art: and for the class on Sociology, he received *Sociology and Politics* by Gumplowitz. For a poor student from the provinces, receiving these novelties was a true stimulus.

Vallejo's moderation and scientific interest thus remain established from his student years. It is relevant to emphasize this high level of achievement in the university because it prefigures the poet's rigor in the act of creation, the meticulousness of his literary dedication, which have nothing to do with the

genial bard born of "spontaneous generation" or of "natural intelligence", as some commentators have portrayed him.

Influence of Philosophy and Science

In his understanding of science - science as a tool to interpret the world - Vallejo was also influenced by Taine, author of *Philosophers of the Twentieth Century*, which he received in 1913 as a prize for his industriousness in *Objective Philosophy I*. His scientific knowledge allowed the poet to enrich his sources of inspiration and his intonation beyond the religious and political resonances of his poems:

*Tú sufres, tú padeces y tú vuelves a sufrir
horriblemente,
desgraciado mono
jovencito de Darwin,
alguacil que me atisbas, atrocísimo
microbio.
(You suffer, you endure and again you
suffer horribly, unfortunate young
monkey of Darwin,
officer who observes me, extremely
atrocious microbe.)*

For the poet, the knowledge of biological determinism made him

aware of death as humankind's inexorable destiny.

*...la muerte es un ser sido a la fuerza
cuyo principio y fin llevo grabados
a la cabeza de mis ilusiones
(...death is a being born of necessity
whose beginning and end I bear
engraved at the head of my illusions)*

Stephen Hart offers a revealing interpretation of how science gravitates in Vallejo's world. It is obviously not merely a matter of mentioning words that ring of science, but rather of how Vallejo bases himself on science in his comprehension of the world, of nature, of man, and of society's mutations; thus, around the decade of the 1930's Vallejo linked his scientific interest with Marxism, which he presumed to be a philosophical and scientific doctrine. In addition to the poems in the chronicles, frequent references to scientific matters and technological innovations appear.

With respect to his interest in politics, it is worth remembering that Vallejo's progressivism dates from his years as a student in Trujillo, where he formed part of the North Group (1915), the original nucleus of leaders and ideologues who then formed "apristas" (members of the Popular Revolution-

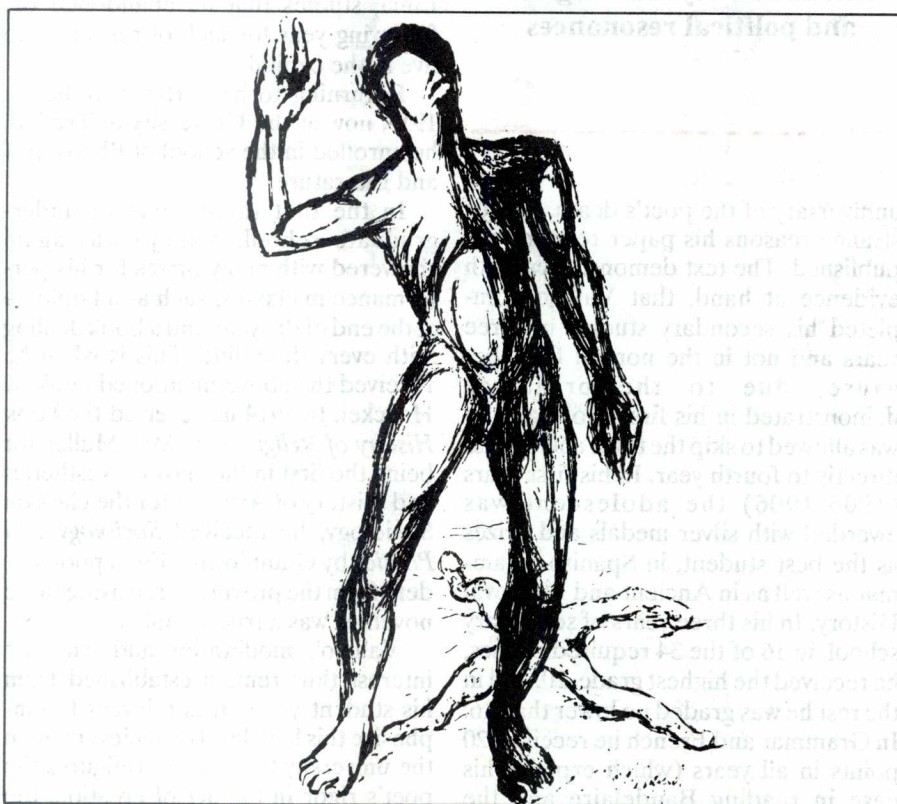
ary American Alliance-APRA, the party now in power in Alan García's government in Peru) and socialist movements. That process of Vallejo's radicalization seems well portrayed by Hart, but he is not convincing in calling the period from 1927 to September, 1929 "Trotskyist." It is an original idea, but the reasoning or documentary evidence do not appear in order to verify it. It is true that during that period Vallejo refers to Trotsky in his chronicles, but there is no apparent connection there, thus it is an abuse of confidence to say that "in that period, Vallejo owed even more loyalty to Trotsky than to Stalin". It is not possible to prove this theory, since not even in moments when Vallejo assumed the cause of Soviet socialism did he adopt the attitude of propagandist bigotry or of submission to loyalties.

In 1928, the year of his trip to Moscow, in an article *Literatura proletaria* (*Proletarian Literature*), he refuted the theory held by the RAPP (Pan Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), which sustained that "the dictatorship of the proletariat was incompatible with the denomination of a non-proletarian non-proletarian literature"; and he goes on to argue his opposition in the following way:

"When Haya de la Torre emphasizes the need for artists to aid revolutionary propaganda with their works in America, I repeat that, in my generic capacity as a man, I find her demand to be a great political proposal, and I sincerely sympathize with her, but in my capacity as artist, I do not accept any slogan or purpose, alien or my own, that even backing the best intentions, subjects my aesthetic liberty to the service of this or that political propaganda".

What indeed turns out to be revealing is when Hart gets to the bottom of the keys of the period of political realization (1932-July 1936). Vallejo is hermetic and cryptic in his criticism of Stalin, his political assassinations and concentration camps:

*Pero hablando más claro
y pensando en oro, eres de acero
a condición que no seas
tonto y rehuses
entusiasmarte por la muerte tanto
y por la vida, con tu sola tumba.
(But speaking more clearly
and thinking of gold, you are of steel
unless you not be
a fool and you refuse
to be so enthusiastic about death
and about life, with your lonely tomb.)*



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