

**“You, Me, and the Ether”:  
Anaesthetics in Vallejo and Eltit**

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*On General Anaesthesia*

In the third of César Vallejo’s *Poemas humanos*, a dismayed and badly damaged speaker surveys his hospital surroundings. From the very beginning of the poem, though, these surroundings open onto other, much vaster spaces, only to close in on themselves repeatedly, in a constant and even vertiginous expansion and contraction of spatial scales. Expansion and contraction, or expansion *in* contraction, for movements outward follow from the speaker’s painstaking registration of the sights and sounds of the ward itself. Thus the shuddering of the hospital’s windows is seen to “elabora[r] una metafísica del universo,” and the buzzings of a fly, humbly “sirviendo a la causa de la religion,” seem to “saludar con genio de mudanza, a los que van a morir” (314). In this echo and reversal of the phrase with which, as every student of Latin learns, death-bound Roman gladiators were said to have addressed the emperor (*morituri te salutant*), the dying men in Vallejo’s poem *receive* salutations from non-human creatures, who are now the ones “about to die.” These creatures contain multitudes, then: their buzzings serve a

greater “causa,” are enlisted by a collective “genio,” and open onto ancient histories. As in many other poems in the often-inhuman *Poemas humanos*, moreover, Vallejo here continually crosses and re-crosses species divides.

In this unsettled context, Vallejo’s speaker poses a question that at first, in its pathos, seems anything but anaesthetized:

¿Cuánto tiempo ha durado la anestesia, que llaman los hombres? ¡Ciencia de Dios, Teodicea! ¡si se me echa a vivir en tales condiciones, anestesiado totalmente, volteada mi sensibilidad para adentro! ¡Ah doctores de las sales, hombres de las esencias, prójimos de las bases! ¡Pido se me deje con mi tumor de conciencia, con mi irritada lepra sensitiva, ocurra lo que ocurra, aunque me muera! Dejadme dolerme, si lo queréis, mas dejadme despierto de sueño, con todo el universo metido, aunque fuese a las malas, en mi temperatura polvorosa. (314-315)

The universe whose metaphysics were elaborated earlier in the poem thus reappears, and here again it takes a contracted form; if, earlier, universal metaphysics was associated with the sound of windows shuddering, here “todo el universo” is measured by a unit with which it would appear to be incommensurable: the speaker’s own “temperatura polvorosa.” What happens in states of wakefulness apparently involves the “embedd[ing]” of the universe here—wherever “here” may be (*CP* 335). It’s not easy to imagine a “temperatura polvorosa,” but the phrase, delivered as it is from within a clinic, suggests a place inside the speaker’s body. In William Rowe’s gloss, “el dolor es inseparable de la entrada del mundo en la persona” (147). When one is anaesthetized, or asleep, on the other hand, sensibility is “turned inward,” and the poem’s logic suggests that this inward turning entails not only a dulling of sensation but also, more devastatingly, an end to contact with “the universe,” its disembedding from the body’s inner dust.

What does it mean to imagine this separation as anaesthesia’s side effect? In his essay “Thinking About Agency and Pain,” Talal Asad urges readers to “think of pain not merely as a passive state...but as itself agentive” (79). Countering contemporary liberal humanist critics, Asad further contends that “pain is not merely a private experience but a public relationship” (81). It follows that “addressing another’s pain is not merely a matter of judging referential statements” (81-82), as Elaine Scarry and others imply when they emphasize the radical incommunicability of pain construed as “private experience.” On the contrary, such address

is about how a particular kind of relationship can be inhabited and enacted.

An agent suffers because of the pain of someone she loves—a mother, say, confronted by her wounded child. That suffering is a condition of her relationship, something that includes her ability to respond sympathetically to the pain of the original sufferer. The person who suffers because of another's pain doesn't first assess the evidence presented to her and then decide on whether and how to react. She lives a relationship. (82)

I will return to the mother's privileged, perhaps emblematic place in Asad's account of agentive pain and sympathetic response. For now, I only want to underscore Asad's sense that suffering can be "a condition of...relationship," meaning, I think, both an already relational condition and a condition (a state or stipulation) that makes relationship and its persistence possible.

This notion may help to account for Vallejo's speaker's suggestion that becoming numb to suffering leads one to lose "the universe"—or that anaesthesia rules out relationship. Far from seeking "to overcome pain conceived as object and as state of passivity" (Asad 84), Vallejo's speaker solicits pain, even begs for it, as one might beg for mercy. This speaker desperately wants to suffer, and he characterizes pain, not its absence, as a state of alertness, suggesting that pain is not a passive state to be avoided, but rather a condition actively and even creatively embodied. And that the speaker solicits this pain from another indicates that, like Asad, he sees suffering as a "condition of...relationship."

Yet rather than merely instantiating Asad's theses—rather than merely illustrating that pain can be, as Asad claims, agentive and relational—Vallejo's text asks readers to conceive of pain in this way in a context in which the condition called "anaesthesia" has already lasted for some time, though how long remains to be determined. The poet figures pain, that is, in a context in which its agentive and relational properties are persistently blocked, forgotten, foreclosed, denied. The clinic in which Vallejo's speaker is confined thus comes to stand for a much broader context of anaesthesia. And the crisis of sensibility that the speaker diagnoses is not his alone. On the contrary, Vallejo's "anaesthesia" names a collective as well as an individual ailment, a shared historical condition.

This notion can help us account for the strangeness of the question: "¿Cuánto tiempo ha durado la anestesia, que llaman los hombres?" Read as relevant to the speaker alone, this question might mean that, having been under anaesthesia for some time, he is regaining awareness of his surroundings and asking simply how long he's been under. But the question's qualifying final phrase suggests that more

is at stake. Like a set of scare quotes, the phrase “que llaman los hombres” indicates that “anaesthesia” is, in fact, a misnomer. It would follow that the doctors’ science does not take away feeling, or leave the patient insensible, but instead relocate feeling, shifting sensibility inward, as in the speaker’s next exclamation: “¡anesesiado totalmente, volteada mi sensibilidad para adentro!” Here the second phrase importantly belies the totalizing claim of the first: if the speaker’s sensibility has been turned inward rather than rendered inactive, then he cannot be *totally* anaesthetized—or, being what is called “anaesthetized” for him means a loss of sensibility that is less than total. Still, although Vallejo’s speaker retains his ability to address the doctors and solicit pain, the desperation of his plea and the distortion of his language register the precariousness of this ability. It is as though the speaker were on the verge of losing his very capacity to speak—on the verge of losing relation.

Admittedly, what happens when one is asleep rather than “awake from sleep” is anyone’s guess. Vallejo does not give the reader concrete ways to feel what Keats might call “the feel of not to feel it” (François). If the universe, in Vallejo’s vivid but elusive image, comes to be embedded in the speaker’s “dusty temperature” when he is allowed to feel his pain, no corresponding images render what happens when he does *not* feel this pain. There is instead, on the other side of the anaesthesia said to be total, only “sensibilidad para adentro.” There are only abstractions, no longer yoked to concrete particulars as were the “metaphysics of the universe” elaborated and the “cause of religion” served earlier in the poem.

It may be the case, though, that the cry addressed to the doctors can only come from such a place of blank abstraction, can only be made only by one who has arrived in the realm of anaesthesia. The state of not quite *not* feeling that is not, and perhaps cannot be, concretely communicated in the poem therefore nevertheless colors the states of feeling that the poem *does* concretely communicate, the conditions that it treats as the alternatives to anaesthesia. The not-felt and not-figured state also informs the words with which the speaker begs to be left with feeling. In particular, the construction “Dejadme dolerme” registers the strange fact that the speaker needs to be restored to his capacity to sense *himself*—but can only be helped in this way by those whom he addresses. Vallejo’s poem thus locates sensation within the speaker’s own body even while it insists that this body is in others’ hands. And precisely this admission that his body is in others’ hands

distinguishes the speaker's suffering from "sensibility turned inward."– If the infinitive "dolerme" registers the reflexivity of this suffering and thus appears to underscore the isolation of the speaker's body in pain (a body that, we are told, can only ever feel its own pain), the imperative "Dejadme" turns outward, so that as a whole the phrase "Dejadme dolerme" inscribes the speaker's pain within a collective, relational context. The speaker's address to his doctors thus undoes, if only barely, the isolation that anaesthetic agents are said to effect.

Although the language of pain and suffering pervades the *Poemas humanos*, the language of anaesthesia is much more local. Yet I have considered the collection's third poem at length in order to suggest that its explicit engagement with anaesthesia sets the tone for what follows, crucially informing the later poems' figurations of pain and their enactments of the "bodily empathy" that Michelle Clayton identifies as increasingly "prominent in [Vallejo's] late poetry" (*Poetry* 179). Thus even when suffering appears to make its presence felt purely and simply, this suffering is necessarily accompanied by the specter of anaesthesia. Indeed, it is as though all of the *Poemas humanos* were set in, or at least against the backdrop of, what the volume's third poem calls "el mundo de la salud perfecta," even when the texts make no direct references to this world's sciences (315).

The speaker in another prose poem, "Voy a hablar de la esperanza," for instance, repeats the phrase, "Hoy sufro solamente" three times. Since the adverb "solamente" here connotes not only simplicity or merelessness, but also solitude, he thus emphasizes that his pain is unadulterated. This pain, he claims "no es padre ni es hijo"; it is "sin fuente ni consume"; it has neither beginning nor end and is neither means nor end (342-343). But the very repetition of the phrase that names his suffering undoes the speaker's insistence on its uniqueness. For this speaker protests too much: it's unclear why anyone whose pain really was so absolute would have recourse to a refrain, let alone to assertions, questions, comparisons, and counterfactuals like these:

Me duelo ahora sin explicaciones. Mi dolor es tan hondo, que no tuvo ya causa ni carece de causa. ¿Qué sería su causa? ¿Dónde está aquello tan importante, que dejase de ser su causa? Nada es su causa; nada ha podido dejar de ser su causa. ¿A qué ha nacido este dolor, por sí mismo? Mi dolor es del viento del norte y del viento del sur, como esos huevos neutros que algunas aves raras ponen del viento. Si hubiera muerto mi novia, mi dolor sería igual. Si me hubieran cortado el cuello de raíz, mi dolor sería igual. Si la vida fuese, en fin, de otro modo, mi dolor sería igual. Hoy sufro desde más arriba. Hoy sufro solamente. (316)

Such questions and answers invite attempts at sense- and image-making even while appearing to forestall all “explicaciones.” At first it would seem as impossible to imagine the extent of the speaker’s pain, figured as it is under the sign of blatant contradiction, as it is to locate a definite cause for it, given that it appears to be by everything and nothing. Without ever having had a cause, the speaker’s suffering could only *not* be caused by something so important that it would appear not to exist; it must follow that causes abound. And yet nothing could cease to be its cause, the speaker claims in a proto-Lacanian formulation. Still, contradictory and even self-cancelling claims of this kind are made alongside others that prompt, or perhaps dare, the reader to give form to what the speaker’s rhetorical questions present as formless, at once unlocatable and everywhere. And that the suffering in question is unlocatable and everywhere—its source by turns far below, or “deep,” and high “above”—already renders “solamente” inoperative, or at least ironic. For, whatever and wherever it is, there can be no doubt that the speaker’s pain is not “simply” anything or anywhere (*CP* 343). No sooner is the speaker’s pain said to be self-generated, for instance—“nacido...por sí mismo”—than it is assigned external, if still not quite conceivable, origins: “Mi dolor es del viento del norte y del viento del sur, como esos huevos neutros que algunas aves raras ponen del viento.” At once parent and offspring, this neuter egg is the product of a *rara avis* but also of the elements in which this bird takes flight. Since what follows the image of the egg is more of the same—a sameness that persists across various states of difference—it would appear that no real change is forthcoming. But the reader cannot be sure, because the signifiers for pain keep shifting, even while their referent is said repeatedly to remain stable.

“Solamente” notwithstanding, then, what’s presented in “Voy a hablar de la esperanza” is not suffering as such, or pain in a “simple” state. Instead the poem records a speaker’s sustained struggle with pain—a struggle to arrive not only at a means of communicating but also at *a way of feeling in the first place* a pain that is not the speaker’s alone. “Yo no sufro este dolor como César Vallejo,” the poem begins, and again its speaker insists: “Si no me llamase César Vallejo, también sufriría este mismo dolor” (316). Like the counterfactuals already addressed, this kind of counterfactual cannot but belie the claims that it appears meant to advance: boldly and repeatedly asserting that he knows whereof he speaks, the poem’s speaker

(speaking in the name of someone other than César Vallejo but inevitably also speaking *as* César Vallejo) betrays a non-knowledge—perhaps calling on the inverse of poetry’s “power to conjure and linger with what it claims not to mean and not to have” (François 462). “Voy a hablar de la esperanza” claims precisely *to* mean and have, that is, what it does not mean and does not have: namely, simple suffering, “sin condiciones ni consecuencias” (316).

Here one can begin to locate anaesthesia even in its absence—even and perhaps especially in the stated presence of unmediated suffering: in the non-knowledge on which the speaker’s knowledge of his pain ultimately founders. The counterfactual that bears on the speaker’s name—“Si no me llamase César Vallejo, también sufriría este mismo dolor”—is different from the others in “Voy a hablar de la esperanza,” though in keeping with the poem’s overall logic or anti-logic. The phrase’s conditional contrary to fact posits no drastic privation or bodily injury, no radical change in substance, and no shift in the predicates attaching to the speaker. Unlike these metamorphoses, all imagined elsewhere in the text, the change imagined by the anomalous counterfactual entails no transformation in the speaker’s belief, being, body, or world; it is solely and strictly a change in the self’s name for itself, and ultimately no change at all: a poet by any other name would feel as acutely. Yet, in its very exceptionality, the phrase, especially when it is read alongside the poem’s beginning, names without thereby relieving what ails the speaker: a modern if not strictly medical kind of anaesthesia.

Daniel Heller-Roazen has treated the coming to prevalence of this anaesthetic condition, drawing on the histories of both philosophy and psychiatry. Heller-Roazen notes that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century psychiatrists arrived at an “understanding of ‘depersonalization’ as a disorder of the common feeling,” relating patients’ profound sense of alienation to an attrition in sensibility, or to outright “insensibility” (284). Patients beset by “depersonalization disorders” reported that they had witnessed and survived “the demise of their ‘selves’” and yet “could reason, with the lucidity of the sane, in the absence of their own ‘persons’” (279). Such reports prompted physicians to reinterpret “the symptoms of what had...been dubbed ‘anaesthetic melancholia’ well into the second half of the twentieth century,” symptoms that included “‘impressions of emptiness,’ ‘sensations of lack, deficit in existence,’ ‘feelings of death,’ and delusional perceptions of the disappearance of the ‘feeling of life and the existence of bodily or spiritual

personality, either entirely or partially” (285).

It would be easy to uncover in “Voy a hablar de la esperanza” signs of precisely this kind; the poem’s opening alone, taking leave as it does of the proper name that is the poet’s own, appears to announce just such a “perception of disappearance.” The “I” has become separated from itself, and, according to this logic, the rest of the poem would chart the painful consequences of this separation. But it is not enough to diagnose Vallejo’s speaker with “depersonalization” or to link the speaker’s disorder with a collective illness, and thus locate “glimmers of a general sensation felt, however dimly, by the aesthetic animal under anaesthesia” (289). Another step is required, and taken by Heller-Roazen, who notes that the “anaesthetic” illness is not merely pathological, or rather, that its pathology may shelter possibility. Heller-Roazen gestures toward this possibility when he concludes his discussion of “The Anaesthetic Animal” bred by modernity:-

Just as the ethics of Antiquity naturally departed from the forms of human sensibility it took to be self-evident, so ours today must begin with an investigation into the absence among thinking beings of any ‘general perception’: how it came about and where its vanishing may still lead. Any ethics worthy of the name must confront the promise and the threat that we may no longer, or may not yet, sense anything at all. (290)

To be sure, Heller-Roazen’s conclusions are sweeping, and I have already argued that the *Poemas humanos* cast doubt on the possibility of any subject’s not sensing “anything at all”—on the capacity of anaesthesia to truly anaesthetize rather than, say, turn “sensibility...inward.” Still, Heller-Roazen’s hesitations between “promise and...threat” and between “no longer” and “not yet” capture the conversion of pathology into possibility that I have argued Vallejo’s collection works to effect. In “Voy a hablar de la esperanza,” as in the third of the *Poemas humanos*, Vallejo underscores what Asad calls pain’s relational status, its potential to relate rather than isolate subjects. And again, Vallejo does so not by pointing to a robust relationality in the midst of pain, but rather by staging relation’s attenuation.

Note that the title “Voy a hablar de la esperanza” crucially holds out a promise that the text itself does not deliver, for the poem never, in fact, gets around to speaking about hope. That this denial is programmatic is indicated by a change that Vallejo made to the poem, crossing out the paragraph that had originally concluded it by naming “hope”: “Y en este corazón, que no ha tenido causa ni careció de ella; en este corazón, sin espalda ni pecho, sin estado ni nombre, sin



fuelle ni consumo, no cabe esperanza ni recuerdo y lo que es aún más triste ¡ah tremenda caída para arriba! cómo ya duelo a mi dolor” (317). The redoubling of pain in this last phrase undoes the immediacy of the “ya,” turning the present tense of the poem into an ongoing rather than punctual state, a time of endurance rather than event. But this endurance is, to return to Asad’s terms, agentive, since the speaker strives to make even his pain suffer what he suffers, somehow subsisting apart from this pain even while he is constituted by it. Though withheld, this conclusion encapsulates this text’s troubling, not to say painful, ambivalence. “[I]remenda caída para arriba” indeed: this ambivalence leaves speaker and reader alike suspended between relation and isolation, between “sharing suffering” and confronting all that stands in the way of such sharing.

### *The Role of Dead Cold*

Published in 2007, Diamela Eltit’s *Jamás el fuego nunca* takes its title and epigraph from another of the *Poemas humanos*. But the novel opens with a scene that marks the distance that separates it from the poet to whom it pays homage. Eltit’s narrator cannot for the life of her remember when Francisco Franco died: “No consigo recordar cuándo murió Franco. Cuándo fue, en qué año, en qué mes, bajo cuáles circunstancias, me dijiste: murió Franco, finalmente se murió echado como un perro” (12). The narrator has all but lost contact not only with the Spanish Civil War, during the course of which Vallejo wrote the *Poemas humanos*, but also with that conflict’s long and anguished afterlife in the range of Latin American dictatorships that Franco’s was seen to have ushered in. Or rather, she has all but lost contact with this period’s coming to an end, with this period *as distinct from* the post-dictatorial present. The dictatorship was over, for her, at least, before it was really over, and conversely the time of consensus that followed Franco’s demise began before it really began.

This, at least, would be one way to read the narrator’s forgetting, though it’s worth noting that this forgetting troubles the narrator deeply from the first. That it does so may mean the narrator’s memory, like pain and relation in Vallejo’s poems, is threatened but not yet annihilated. And the bit of memory that survives, however tenuously, may make all the difference—a possibility to which I will return. The logic of the reading that I have begun to outline would be, again, as follows: Not merely *located in* the post-dictatorial present, Eltit’s narrator would seem to be *limited*

by that present: although she remembers Franco’s having been alive, she cannot recall the moment of his death, the “minor but joyous” event that, for Michel Foucault, “symbolizes the clash between two systems of power: that of sovereignty over death and that of the regularization of life” (249). It is as if the narrator of *Jamás el fuego nunca* were, at the Beckettian beginning of the novel, so thoroughly on the side of life’s “regularization” that she cannot imagine being anywhere else.

“Hace más de cien años que murió Franco. El tirano. Profundamente histórico,” the narrator will decide (17). But in the meantime the difference between her own life and the dictator’s will have been effectively undone, and the “Profundamente histórico” will have become painfully present: the narrator’s bedridden companion, less forgetful than she is, can recall “La muerte pública de Franco, *echado en la cama*, muriéndose de todo, prácticamente sin órganos” (13; emphasis added). But his recollection repeats the novel’s first words, which position the protagonists on their deathbed, or on a bed that becomes the site of a living death: “Estamos *echados en la cama*” (11; emphasis added). Thus, at the outset, Eltit’s protagonists, two former leftist militants who have long since been separated from the other members of their defunct vanguardist faction, are shown to occupy the same position as the dying head of state: their health is failing, and they have failed.

As Rubí Carreño Bolívar notes, most critical treatments of *Jamás el fuego nunca* have emphasized its staging of political failure (191). According to José Antonio Rivera Soto, for instance, Eltit’s text records the obsolescing of a range of Marxian categories, ultimately bearing witness to the fact that “el tiempo utópico que guiaba a un número importante de hombres y mujeres, ha muerto” (129). The horizon toward which past, revolutionary generations saw themselves advancing has receded to the point of disappearance, and this recession has left the living—current, depoliticized younger generations, but also ill-fated and anachronistic former militants like Eltit’s two main characters—facing “el caos temporal” instead of history (127). Thus, for Rivera Soto, Eltit’s novel figures not the Habermasian “exhaustion”—a metaphor that still allows for the possibility of eventual reawakening—but rather, more catastrophically, the outright *extinction* of utopian energies.–

Ángeles Donoso Macaya likewise considers the novel to be a kind of negative example. Whereas Eltit’s other works train readers in ways to produce new affects and to forge new collectivities (70), *Jamás el fuego nunca* instead points up the

limits of any political project that seeks to deny the affective dimension (70). For Donoso Macaya, such denial results in the foreclosure of possibility and the deadening of collectivity, and Eltit's novel teaches this lesson by representing "el devenir póstumo o en ruinas de una célula política" (70), a process metonymically contained in the situation of two militants who, isolating themselves in hiding, become "incapaces de desplegar todas las capacidades de sus cuerpos en el encuentro con otros cuerpos" (72). By this account, Eltit's cellmates are not, as they are for Rivera Soto, sometime believers in history who become more or less helpless bystanders, watching a tragic history—or a tragic end of history—unfold. They are instead active participants in a still-ongoing history, effecting their own exclusion from historical becoming. It is not, then, that utopian time has died, with Eltit's characters—and her readers, Rivera Soto might add—"bearing witness" (Rivera Soto 129). Instead, in sealing themselves off from other affects, bodies, and lives, these characters have effectively killed utopian time and ruled out transformation.

Tellingly, both Rivera Soto and Donoso Macaya turn to Vallejo in their attempts to read *Jamás el fuego nunca* as registering loss, failure, and disaffection. For Donoso Macaya, for instance, Eltit references Vallejo and thus "retorna a la vanguardia...para ilustrar la contradicción de una vida sin afectos. En una 'época carente de marcas,' en este 'siglo que no nos pertenece'...([Eltit] 23), lo único que permanece y que nos pertenece, parece decirnos Eltit en *Jamás el fuego nunca*, es la intensa marca de los afectos" (72-73). This reading is undoubtedly compelling, but its valorization of affect as such risks perpetuating "the fantasy" described by Lauren Berlant in another context: "the fantasy that in the truly lived life emotions are always heightened and expressed in modes of effective agency that ought justly to be and are ultimately consequential or performatively sovereign" (99). In fact, neither Eltit nor Vallejo encourage this fantasy, and *Jamás el fuego nunca* looks to "Los nueve monstruos" precisely because Vallejo's poem radically complicates the experience of "intensity."

In "Los nueve monstruos," Vallejo seems at once to literalize and to radicalize the Pauline declaration: "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now" (Romans 8:22). The poet literalizes this verse by sounding the groans of "the whole creation," with the scope of this "creation" widened to include inanimate as well as animate beings, inorganic as well as organic matter. And Vallejo radicalizes the Pauline verse in two related ways.

First, he separates the suffering of creation from any promise of redemption understood as a final release from suffering. Second, the poet specifies Paul’s “until now”: the groaning and travailing of creation have not simply been continuous “until” the time of writing; instead, “Los nueve monstruos” imagines creaturely suffering as having *increased*. The biblical verse’s “until now” thus becomes a “never before” repeated throughout the poem, including in the lines (italicized below) that give Eltit’s novel its title and epigraph:

Jamás, hombres humanos,  
hubo tanto dolor en el pecho, en la solapa, en la cartera,  
en el vaso, en la carnicería, en la aritmética!  
Jamás tanto cariño doloroso,  
jamás tan cerca arremetió lo lejos,  
*jamás el fuego nunca,*  
*jugó mejor su rol de frío muerto!*  
Jamás, señor ministro de salud  
más mortal  
y la migraña extrajo tanta frente de la frente!  
Y el mueble tuvo en su cajón, dolor,  
el corazón, en su cajón, dolor,  
la lagartija, en su cajón, dolor. (411; emphasis added)

The extraction of “frente de la frente” returns us the speaker’s abortive (because crossed-out) attempt, in “Voy a hablar de la esperanza,” to make his “pain feel pain” (CP 642). Except that whereas the earlier, crossed-out phrase intensifies, the extraction imagined here attenuates, or lobotomizes, leaving a forehead bereft of itself there where “Voy a hablar de la esperanza” leaves pain with a surfeit of pain.

According to Jean Franco, “Los nueve monstruos” suggests a greater degree of desperation within a more concrete world” than what is presented in Vallejo’s earlier work (186). “‘Breast,’ ‘coat-lapels,’ ‘wallet,’ ‘glasses,’ ‘butcher-shop,’ ‘arithmetic,’” Franco continues, glossing the first lines quoted above, “are all parts which suppose a system; indeed they imply a *social* system that produces commodities, shops and methods of calculation. Yet they are bonded only by suffering; thus, in so far as the health of individualistic society is shown in its domination of nature, the symptom of this is suffering” (184; emphasis in original). This allegorical reading accounts for some, but not all, of the urgency of “Los nueve monstruos.” Franco underscores the critical force of Vallejo’s poem, and its exposure of creaturely suffering as a *consequence* of a certain system of health—the product of what Adorno might call “the health unto death”—rather than a matter

of medicine's unfinished business (58). But Franco leaves the specificity of the suffering that "Los nueve monstruos" stages unaddressed. This is also to say she leaves "the anaesthetic animal" untreated.

Although it would be reductive to read "Los nueve monstruos" as merely a document in the history of anaesthesia, or even in the history of literary responses to it, I would argue that the poem represents an attempt to redress "the secularization of pain" charted by Asad (46-48), a process marked by the epoch-making use of ether as anaesthesia (Caton). In the face of pain's subsumption by calculation and its putative separation from relation (both processes enabled by anaesthesia), Vallejo conjures another scene: a scene in which, as Franco notes (186-187), separations of all kinds are refused in order that relations—between human and inhuman beings, among organic and inorganic forms of matter—may be re-imagined and embodied otherwise. If everything is sensate, then everything is susceptible of relation with everything else; no being's or thing's suffering is withdrawn from ethical consideration. But such consideration would have to do away with distance taken to be a guarantee of safety; it would instead have to tarry with distances that, like those in "Los nueve monstruos," "charge so close."— For the extraction of forehead from the forehead names the process that "Voy a hablar de la esperanza" teaches readers to recognize as anything but suffering "simply" or alone (*CP* 343): "solamente." The condition of this suffering is instead relational.

Indeed, "Los nueve monstruos" registers not only the devastation wrought by a millennial "separation from nature" (Franco 184), but also, more immediately, the disastrous consequences of a denial of pain in and through efforts to contain it. Pain chases victims down and seizes them while they are actively denying suffering, trying to drown it out by means of distraction or dreaming: "El dolor nos agarra... / por detrás, de perfil, / y nos aloca en los cinemas, / nos clava en los gramófonos, / nos desclava en los lechos, cae perpendicularmente" (514-515). Pain's growth everywhere, in the poem's first three stanzas, outpaces not only the increase of "the machine" and "livestock"; this growth outgrows our very capacity to gauge it: "el dolor crece en el mundo a cada rato, / crece a treinta minutos por segundo" (512-513). In these early lines, the *ratio* latent in "cada rato" is rendered obsolete, exposed as insufficient, as minutes explode seconds. Subsequent stanzas likewise confound calculation and cause:

Pues de resultas

del dolor hay algunos  
que nacen, otros crecen, otros mueren,  
y otros que nacen y no mueren, otros  
que sin haber nacido, mueren, y otros  
que no nacen ni mueren (son los más)  
Y también de resultas  
del sufrimiento, estoy triste  
hasta la cabeza, y más triste hasta el tobillo (413)

To nearly parodic effect, these lines hollow out the causal markers “pues” and “de resultas,” for it’s inconceivable that, within the framework of *ratio*, pain could ever have as its results such disparate, even incommensurable, effects. The “I” that makes its appearance here, and that Franco calls “strangely subdued” (186), might also be called pathetic in the double sense of impotent and charged with pathos. Indeed, somewhat paradoxically, it’s the pathos of the “I” that strikes the reader as powerless (precisely in failing to strike the reader with force). What possible difference could being “sad”—not miserable, desperate, anguished, horrified, or in any other heightened state, but rather, trivially “triste”—make in the face of universal suffering, in a world of living dead?

This is the question that the introduction of the “I” cannot but prompt. “El sentimiento no resuelve el dolor,” Rowe concludes, in another forceful formulation (57). And the extension of this “sentimiento”—sadness—upward and downward, so that it covers the speaker’s whole body has as its effect a further, if not final, deflation. In his very effort to convey the fullness of his feeling, that is, the speaker exposes its emptiness—its pathetic falling short of the situation within which it arises. And this moment in the poem is crucial in its very dissonance. It’s as though Vallejo’s speaker were departing from the language of Romans to say: “the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together now as never before, and all I can feel in response is sadness.”

“[E]stoy triste...y más triste”: already deflated because belated, the “I” thus further deflates his capacity to feel by naming himself “triste.” And the late arrival and the strangely muted self-characterization of the first person abruptly shift the reader’s sense of the poem’s significance. For crucially Vallejo’s “I” enters only after he has tried to give voice to the suffering of other beings, to participate in the groaning and travailing of “the whole creation.” The acknowledgment of emptiness—if not the “feeling of emptiness” described by the psychiatrists in Heller-Roazen’s account, then at least a feeling of insufficiency with respect to the

endlessly ailing world—in the midst of such giving-voice may be the poem’s central gesture. By means of this gesture, Vallejo situates not-feeling or feeling-less in the midst of feeling, inverting the feeling in the midst of not-feeling that he figured enigmatically in the third of the *Poemas humanos*, which as a whole programmatically refuses the binary opposition between feeling and not, aesthesis and anaesthesia. More immediately, the speaker’s is a gesture that casts its shadow over the apostrophe with which the poem ends:

¡Cómo, hermanos humanos,  
no decirnos que ya no puedo y  
ya no puedo con tanto cajón,  
tanto minuto, tanta  
lagartija y tanta  
inversión, tanto lejos y tanta sed de sed!  
Señor Ministro de Salud: ¿qué hacer?  
¡Ah, desgraciadamente, hombres humanos,  
Hay, hermanos, muchísimo que hacer (413)

Although the speaker echoes Lenin’s question—“¿qué hacer?”—it is unlikely that anything concrete will follow from his words. For, as Clayton notes, if the last two lines above constitute “a call for action,” it is one that clearly “does away with the illusion that anything can be directly accomplished in lyric” (*Poetry* 224). Yet the speaker’s words imply relations all the same; his sadness is emphatically not a condition of isolation, although it is not a condition of perfect correspondence or robust relation, either. However much it may pale in comparison to the worldly suffering of which it is said to be the result, the speaker’s sadness responds to this suffering. Yet feeling the pain of other beings, Vallejo’s speaker also feels that he does not and perhaps cannot feel enough. And the reader is not given to understand that any amount of feeling would redeem her or put an end to suffering. All that there is to do must therefore be done from within the “sufrimiento” that the poem at once redoubles and renders distant, difficult to sense, impossible to feel fully, as “intensidad pura” (Rowe 46).

“Jamás el fuego nunca, / jugó mejor su rol de frío muerto!”: again, these lines have led Eltit’s critics to read *Jamás el fuego nunca* as a work that mourns the passing of political passion, such fire’s “devenir póstumo,” in Donoso Macaya’s evocative phrase (70). But to play a “rol de frío muerto” (where it’s unclear whether “mejor” means “more convincingly” or something else) is not to succumb to a death that is once and done. It is, precisely, to act a part, one that might eventually

be shed so that another role can be taken up, another script begun. Thus, for all its emphasis on abiding and unbearable suffering and notwithstanding its exposure of the “I”’s inability to translate or metabolize this suffering into sovereign action, “Los nueve monstruos” pointedly refuses to pronounce all passion spent. This is the crucial fact or possibility that many of Eltit’s astute readers have missed, even and perhaps especially in their discussions of the novelist’s debt to Vallejo: after the apparent “exhaustion of utopian energies,” the possibility of their reawakening on other terms remains.

Concluding her discussion of “Los nueve monstruos,” Jean Franco writes, “just as the madman projects his obsessions onto the outer world so the ear makes apocalyptic noises in response to all kinds of events and emotions. The nine [in the poem’s title] is the biological programming that underlies all activity and one single cry alone can be subtracted from the cacophony since this is the cry that breaks the monotony, the cry of a new life” (186). Franco’s almost unimaginable image of the ear “mak[ing] apocalyptic noises in response” to what it hears honors the paradoxical *Poemas humanos* in its very elusiveness. Are these auditory hallucinations? Are we meant to conclude that the speaker is a “madman”? How could we come to know an apocalyptic noise when we heard one, and how could the ear come to be an organ for the production as well as the reception of such sounds? Franco’s synesthetic image also tempers the hopefully reproductive note that her next sentence, ending as it does with “the cry of a new life,” sounds: there is “new life” here, but Vallejo’s is a monstrous birth in more ways than one. A “parturitional figure” will come to the fore in Eltit’s text as well, marking less the Marxian maturation of “new, higher relations of production ... in the womb of the old society” than the difficult birth and subsequent, sometimes abortive sheltering of other, and older, forms of life in the times and places that would appear finally to have killed them off (Jameson 77).

#### *Old Obscurities*

*Jamás el fuego nunca*’s final chapter begins with a return to the novel’s opening scene:

En esta cama, en este mismo colchón, claro, si es que todavía se puede nombrar de esta manera, el colchón: *tú, yo y el éter*. El éter estaba allí para resistir los momentos inhumanos. Ximena, Ximena lo consiguió, una botella, dijo, una pequeña botella de éter, dijo y dijo: sí, lo sé, el éter ya no es lo que fue, resulta irrisorio e incluso peligroso, aunque no, no peligroso, no me parece, pero qué vamos a hacer, qué vamos a hacer, lo administramos,



así lo escribió en exactas y pausadas dosis. (159-160; emphasis added)

At this point in the narrator's account, her son is horribly sick, but neither she nor any of the other members of her clandestine cell can take him to the hospital lest they be found out. Hence the ether, relic of a much earlier anaesthesiology: ether is a throwback to a prior phase in medical history,– and the scenes involving ether in Eltit's novel are also themselves throwbacks to prior moments in the text, and to the *Poemas humanos*. These scenes explode temporal measurements in a manner that recalls "Los nueve monstruos," with its minutes per second. And they stay with the question of how (not) to say a suffering that's unbearable in ways that resonate with the speaker's struggles in that poem:

Años de años o años sobre años que se aglutinan para modelar los contornos más comunes de la calavera. Cómo se podría evocar el dolor, el asombro confuso del dolor, con qué imágenes podría rehacer el ascenso de una violencia que era concreta pero, a la vez, se desdibujaba entre una impresionante abstracción. Estuvimos allí, los dos, abortos en un parto que no, no nos sorprendía.

Fue así:

Se inició un proceso frío, el mismo proceso que había sido presagiado por Ximena. Un proceso cubierto por una distancia en la que se alojaba una cuota de simulación. Se inició sin aspavientos un malestar indeterminado.

Te dije:

Algo pasa o algo me pasa. Algo orgánico, automático, así me pareció, ajeno. Yo iba recibiendo los efectos programados de un ataque que no podía repeler. *Todo lo que sentía o pude sentir estaba relacionado con un cuerpo que me resultaba extraño y desapegado.* Íbamos a morir, el niño y yo. No estábamos preparados, no lo estábamos, falló la célula. (160-161; emphasis added)

Here finally Eltit's narrator pronounces the death of what has been "posthumous" throughout the preceding pages. The failure of the protagonists' revolutionary project—the cause of their separation from Ximena and all their other comrades, and the reason for their going underground—coincides, in this retelling, with the death of the narrator's two-year-old son. Indeed, the project's failure becomes a substitute, another name for, this death, as when the devastating last sentence quoted above thus takes the reader from a "we" comprising "el niño y yo" to a broader but not more lasting bond that dissolves here, apparently once and for all.

Thus Eltit's critics have not been wrong to read *Jamás el fuego nunca* as an account of failure; on the contrary, in one sense, they have simply followed the novel's lead. But a failure is not necessarily a definitive end. To label a project failed, in other words, is not yet to address that project's afterlives, its unspent potentials. As Elizabeth Povinelli has argued, “failure is not an ideal form floating outside social space. Failure is instead a socially mediated term for assessing the social world” (23). It follows that critics who treat Eltit's text first and foremost as the record of a post-historical “time whose fire has gone cold” (Rivera Soto 129) may unwittingly advance the very neoliberal logic that they seek to refuse, the logic according to which “any social investment that does not have a clear end in market value...fails” definitively (Povinelli 23). Rather than asking “whether this or that...was or was not a failure,” Povinelli insists, “we need to start asking [after] the measurements of failure, the arts of failure” (23). Povinelli's polemic helps to clarify the stakes of Eltit's dwelling in abandonment, but *Jamás el fuego nunca* itself already insists on failure's social mediation. The verdict or death sentence “falló la célula,” quoted above, is inseparable from the time, space, and relations from within which it is delivered: both those of the past and those of the painstaking reconstruction of that past in the narrator's present impasse.— Likewise, at an earlier moment in the novel, the remembered death of the narrator's son ends an imagined scene of bank robbery and property destruction: “Están asaltando prácticamente todos los bancos, los centros comerciales estallan sin tregua con sus mercaderías diseminadas por los pasillos diseñados por un procedimiento serial, están vaciando las arcas, mueren guardias, muere uno de los asaltantes, muere un niño” (145). In both instances, individual and collective collapses are registered at once. But crucially *in neither instance is collapse either final or finally isolating*.

To be sure, the narrator's son cannot be brought back to life. But the narrator outlives him, just as she outlives the cell whose failure her son's death comes to mark. “Íbamos a morir, el niño y yo,” she remembers: “No estábamos preparados, no lo estábamos.” Still, she lives to recollect, and her recollection bears the traces of the constitutive relationship now lost: “*Todo lo que sentía o pude sentir estaba relacionado con un cuerpo que me resultaba extraño*” (emphasis added). Here Asad's “mother, say,” whose suffering “is a condition of her relationship” returns, and with her the anthropologist's understanding of pain as relational (82). To be sure, there is nothing inherently redemptive about this relational condition (and nothing idealizing

about Eltit's version of maternity); the "Algo orgánico, automático" that happens here is not automatically reparative. But neither does it attest only to an end.

Where has ether gone, then, in this "proceso frío"? "El siglo pena," Eltit's narrator claims, echoing Vallejo's "Los nueve monstruos" at a distance (161). And as the novel draws to a close, it becomes clear that the century in question is still that of the *Poemas humanos* and Francisco Franco. It is still, in other words, a century of "living death" (Franco 193), one in which social mediation takes place in the medium of ether, of anaesthesia: "Estoy, me dices, cansado. / Estás muerto, te contesto. / *La cama y el éter, la sangre y el éter, mis piernas y el éter.*" (162; emphasis added). At no time, though, does ether bring with it either salvation or humanity. On the contrary:

Y aquí vienen todas las células, en grupos que parecen excesivos o interminables, llegan acuciosos justo cuando yo estoy demasiado cansada, vienen a apoderarse de nuestros cuerpos y a auscultar los dolores que tenemos. Nos duele todo. Todo. Nos duelen los huesos y la infección purulenta que emana de algunos de los órganos. ... Las células nos remecen de una manera agresiva y alarmante, quieren sacarme al niño y buscan mi postrera confesión. El niño y yo formamos parte de un tejido celular, somos idénticos, un perfecto genoma humano. No humano, no nunca. (165)

But if the cells belonging to the narrator's son were once and perhaps still would be a "perfect" match with her own, it is those of her companion and sometime comrade with which she is left:

Miro el montón de células que ya están en un avanzado deterioro, me detengo en tus células tiñosas y me dan unas ganas infinitas de decirte: levántate, o decirte: resucita de una vez por todas y salgamos a la calle con el niño, el mío, el de dos años, mi amado niño y llevémoslo al hospital. Debemos llevarlo porque, después de todo, ya no tenemos nada que perder. (166)

At first it is difficult to imagine anything farther from Vallejo's "muchísimo que hacer"—the words that end "Los nueve monstruos"—than this "nada que perder." Whereas the former phrase concludes a call to action, the latter, though a truncated translation or faint echo of Marx, ends a record of resignation. Likewise, whereas Vallejo's phrase points to an excess, Eltit's apparently, indicates only a void, a nothing where something once was. Indeed, the disparity between these two phrases might be read as registering the distance between the historical moment of the *Poemas humanos* and Eltit's, which is to say our own. According to this logic (akin

to the critical logic that declares “the death of utopian time”), Eltit’s ending would echo the last line of “Los nueve monstruos” only to undo it, instead providing a tragic indication of the difference seventy years make. Whereas, Vallejo’s poem suggests, even during the Spanish Civil War, much could still be done—projects could be initiated and hopes rekindled, if only fleetingly and with great difficulty—in our own moment, the enthusiasms that would animate such projects and hopes seem extinguished, such passions spent.

The narrator can thus rescue her child only in a counterfactual formulation, in a fantasy whose nature she discloses to the reader but cannot bring herself to reveal to her comrade, cellmate, and sometime lover, figured here as a mere “montón de células.” The narrator feels “unas ganas infinitas,” an infinite yearning, to give voice to the fantasy that she cannot express—and to do so by delivering commands: “levántate” and, more uncannily, “resuscita.” Indeed, it’s as if, in the time and space that Eltit’s novel imagines, the imperative mood itself—the mood of Vallejo’s “Dejadme dolerme”—had become untenable or fallen silent. Eltit’s narrator is thus doubly bereft: she not only fantasizes retrospectively about performing a rescue operation that she never, in fact, managed to perform; in the almost unbearably claustrophobic world of *Jamás el fuego nunca*, she cannot even convey this desire. Feeling an infinite yearning to speak, she stops short of speech.

All of this seems to serve as a painful reminder that, whereas Vallejo’s poem ended with a gesture toward the future, Eltit’s characters may very well have no future. “[E]l niño, el mío, el de dos años, mi amado niño,” the narrator calls her son, prolonging the sentence as if to compensate for the shortening of the child’s life. But this son has long since died, and he cannot be revived any more than the mound of cells beside the narrator can be restored to health, resuscitated, reconstituted as an integral body, let alone the bearer of a recognizable political will. Historical difference is rendered vividly corporeal here, so that the “montón de células” becomes a collective body as well as an individual one. In the decades since Vallejo declared that there was still much to do, countless bodies—and militant groups—have atrophied, decomposed, become so many heaps of cells beyond repair and without hope of resuscitation. This, according to the prevalent critical reading I have outlined, would constitute the message of Eltit’s text, the bad news it brings about historical difference. Yet—remembering the “Profundamente histórico” offered only after it has been annulled in the novel’s first chapter—I have

been trying to suggest that, through her engagement with Vallejo, Eltit in fact forcefully *refuses* such an understanding of historical difference. To be sure, her refusal is, “of necessity, uttered from within history” (Anidjar 139). Still, it counters the historicism that underwrites our tendency to see the *Poemas humanos* as belonging to a time that is both past and lost. In *Jamás el fuego nunca*, the *Poemas humanos* remain available, and they continue to sustain Eltit’s work after all—indeed, “después de todo” (166).

Appreciating this refusal of historicism means recognizing what’s old—at least a century old—about the “The New Obscurity” that Habermas diagnoses in the wake of the collapse of the welfare state. “When the utopian oases dry up,” Habermas writes, “a desert of banality and helplessness spreads” (16). If Eltit’s readers have tended to locate *Jamás el fuego nunca* in just such a desert, I have argued that the novel must be situated elsewhere, that it presents more than a portrait of exhaustion defined as utter “helplessness.” Even for Habermas, in fact, “The Exhaustion of Utopian Energies” did not mean the disappearance of utopia as such. It meant rather a downsizing of dreams: “The utopian content of the communication community,” as opposed to that of the laboring society, “shrinks to the formal aspect of an undamaged intersubjectivity” (17). For her part, Eltit nowhere holds out the promise of an “undamaged intersubjectivity” to come. Instead, like Vallejo, she makes forms of damage—loss, hemorrhaging, seizure, cellular deterioration—the conditions of relation. These, she shows, are conditions that, in a pained century, no old or new ether can eliminate, and that no one can suffer either simply or alone.

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