



Vol. 4, No. 1, Fall 2006, 1-22

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

**Capital Putamadre: Social Abstraction and
Literary Representation in César Vallejo and José
María Arguedas**

José Cerna Bazán

Carleton College

y se aquilatará mejor
el guano...
que brinda...
salobre alcatraz...

(C. Vallejo, *Trilce*, I)

... saca de la mar putamadre de billetes...
... ¿quién putamadre lo ve...?

(J. M. Arguedas, *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*)

Writing around 1920 in Peru, César Vallejo opened *Trilce*, his famed book of poetry, with the image of the sea bird *alcatraz* (pelican). In the 1960s José María Arguedas crafted his

unfinished novel, *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*, around the fish *anchoveta* (anchovy). What are these humble marine beings doing at the center of these two extremely experimental works of literature? I believe that the appearance of the pelican and the anchovy as major figures in these texts allowed Vallejo and Arguedas to thematize an encounter of the “local” and the “global” in an extremely concrete manner, creating the conditions to see in such an encounter the interplay between the particular of individual life and the general determinations of social life. I will argue here that this was possible because those small bodies played a pivotal role in the economy and the society of Vallejo’s and Arguedas’s lifetimes, and therefore constituted critical points to focalize the fundamental incongruity in society that arises from the uneven development of capitalism, particularly in a peripheral country like Peru. Hence the title of this paper: the sea and its elements, and the human body and its works, were brought together under the logic of capital, and through exchange in the market were transformed into value (a process I synthesize here with the term social abstraction). But this process, while hollowing out the human body and the ecosystem, did not create the mediations the individual needed to make sense of his social and subjective experience.¹ I will attempt to establish

¹ "Social abstraction" refers to the abstraction that arises and exists in social reality as different from (and as the basis of) forms of thought abstraction, or, more specifically, to the abstraction of commodity form as opposed to the abstraction of thought form. For the use of these terms and their theoretical import, I rely on the argument articulated by Alfred Sohn-Rethel in his book *Intellectual and Manual Labour. A Critique of Epistemology* (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1978). In particular, I retain two components of his argument. First, his assertion that "abstraction is [not] the exclusive privilege of thought" (7): "In societies based on commodity production the social synthesis is centred on the functions of money as the 'universal equivalent' [...]. In this capacity money must be vested with an abstractness of the highest level to enable it

a connection between that social incongruity and the fragments of discourse I believe embody the conflictive reactions of the subject immersed in such a situation².

I begin by examining the first poem of *Trilce* (Trilce 1 here) which thematizes a key element of Peru's social reality in Vallejo's lifetime: the excrement of the alcatraz, guano³.

Quién hace tanta bulla, y ni deja
testar las islas que van quedando.

to serve as the equivalent to every kind of commodity that may appear on the market. This abstractness of money [...] consists of nothing but form—pure abstract form arising from the disregard of the use-value of the commodities operated by the act of exchange [in the market] equating the commodities as values. [...] The human labour that has gone into the production of the thing serving as money and into the commodities it serves to exchange determines the magnitude of their value, the proportion in which they are exchanged. But to be labour products is not a property that accrues to the commodities and to money in the relationship of exchange where the abstraction arises. The abstraction does not spring from labour but from exchange as a particular mode of social interrelationship, and it is through exchange that the abstraction imparts itself to labour, making it 'abstract human labour.' The money abstraction can be more properly termed the 'exchange abstraction'" (6).

Secondly, Sohn-Rethel proposes the term "social synthesis" for "the network of relations by which [any] society forms a coherent whole": "As social forms develop and change, so also does the synthesis which holds together the multiplicity of links operating between men according to the division of labour [... Human] activities must interrelate in order to fit into a society, and must contain at least a minimum of [coherence] if the society is to function as a whole... This coherence is what I term 'social synthesis' [...] From this observation I derive the general epistemological proposition that socially necessary forms of thinking of an epoch are those in conformity with the socially synthetic functions of that epoch" (4-5). Sohn-Rethel states that in a modern capitalist society, "the formal characteristics attaching to commodity production and [...] the social synthesis arising from it" provide "the structural form of social being" (8). In the context I am concerned with, the scope of such a synthesis, and the pertaining coherence of the social whole, was limited, and in fact partially in-existent, although commodity production and circulation there existed. A "social being" so altered or defective is an incongruous being: thus the title of this article.

² The assumption implied in my subtitle is that two of the facets of human existence that inform literary language are the presence of such abstraction in reality and the conflictive interaction of the subject with it.

³ Translators provide different English equivalents for the Spanish *alcatraz*: alcatraz, gannet, pelican... I will use *alcatraz* throughout this article.

Un poco más de consideración
 en cuanto será tarde, temprano,
 y se aquilatará mejor
 el guano, la simple calabrina tesórea
 que brinda sin querer,
 en el insular corazón,
 salobre alcatraz, a cada hialóidea grupada.

Un poco más de consideración,
 y el mantillo líquido, seis de la tarde
 DE LOS MAS SOBERBIOS BEMOLES

Y la península párase
 por la espalda, abozaleada, impertérrita
 en la línea mortal del equilibrio.

[I
 Who makes so much noise, not allowing
 the testation of the islands that are still left.
 A little more consideration,
 as it will be late, early,
 and easier to assay
 the guano, the simple cadaverine treasure
 unintentionally offered by,
 in the insular heart,
 brackish pelican, to each hyaloid squall.

A little more consideration,
 and liquid muck, six in the afternoon
 OF THE MOST GRANDIOSE B FLATS.

And the peninsula stands up,
 from behind, muzzled, unterrified
 on the fatal line of equilibrium.⁴

My focus on guano, instead of any other word in this poem is not arbitrary. Opening the book, “guano,” together

⁴ My translation of Trilce 1.

with “alcatraz” and the terms that refer to the bird’s natural habitat (“islands,” “insular,” “peninsula”) saturate the poem. From that point on, guano is projected onto a set of organic elements (“cadaverine,” “liquid muck” in *Trilce* 1) that populate the seventy seven poems of the collection. Among those elements are material fluids like blood, sweat, tears, or cosmic and geological ones like rain and the ocean, as well as excremental materials and other substances that, in constant transformation, become organic matter or its opposite, the inorganic. Also, this staging of guano is part of a major transition in Vallejo’s writing: far removed from the conventions of *modernismo*, and adding a new component to Vallejo’s previous emphasis on the countryside and the Andean highlands, the language of *Trilce* is filled with references to marine life from beginning to end: the first sentence of *Trilce* 1 includes “... las islas que van quedando;” and the last line of *Trilce* 77, the last poem, ends with: “... en la costa aún sin mar” (“on the coast still without a sea”). Finally, in addition to the first poem, guano also appears in other key segments throughout the book.

To reflect on why guano occupies such a salient place in *Trilce* one has to consider the historical context of its commodification. Beginning in the 1840s and continuing for four decades, guano had been the main raw material exported by Peru, in direct response to changes in the British economy, which required this fertilizer for the high farming that supported its great industrial development in the nineteenth

century.⁵ Both foreign and domestic financial firms in Peru received concessions for guano extraction in exchange for loans extended to the state. In the end, the exploitation of guano facilitated the accumulation of capital the Peruvian oligarchy used to develop its economic basis in the final decades of the nineteenth century, before and after its defeat in the Pacific War of 1879-1881.⁶ These firms used profits from the

⁵ José Carlos Mariátegui, writing around 1925, indicated that "el guano y el salitre... cumplieron la función de crear un activo tráfico con el mundo occidental... Este tráfico colocó nuestra economía bajo el control del capital británico al cual, a consecuencia de las deudas contraídas con la garantía de ambos productos, debíamos entregar más tarde la administración de los ferrocarriles, esto es, de los resortes mismos de la explotación de nuestros recursos" (*Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana*. Lima: Amauta, 1973): 24. Heraclio Bonilla specifies that "El empleo creciente de fertilizantes fue una de las innovaciones introducidas en el campo inglés, con el objeto de aumentar la productividad y hacer frente a las exigencias derivadas de la industrialización británica. El empleo del abono peruano, limitado al comienzo, devino constante a lo largo de los 25 años que caracterizaron el *high-farming* inglés" (*Un siglo a la deriva. Ensayos sobre el Perú, Bolivia y la guerra*. Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1980): 430). In addition to Mariátegui's classic *Siete ensayos*, among the studies devoted to the historical period I deal with are Heraclio Bonilla, *Guano y burguesía en el Perú* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1974) and *El Perú entre la Independencia y la Guerra con Chile*, vol. VI of Juan Mejía Baca, ed. *Historia del Perú. El Perú republicano* (Lima: Mejía Baca, 1980); Paul Gootenberg, *Between Silver and Guano* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) and *Imagining Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Manuel Burga and Alberto Flores Galindo, *Apogeo y crisis de la República Aristocrática* (Lima: Ediciones Rikchay, 1980).

⁶ The "guano era" declines as a result of new developments in the British and European economies and the experimentation with synthetic fertilizers, as well as the exhaustion of guano deposits. The Pacific War (1879-1883) brings the era to a close. Bonilla points out that, although "...durante el conjunto del período guanero se exportaron cerca de 10,804,033 toneladas de guano [...y que, asumiendo] un precio promedio de 10 libras esterlinas por tonelada, [...] el rendimiento bruto producido por la venta [habría oscilado] alrededor de 100 millones de libras esterlinas", and therefore Peru's elite had access to "los capitales indispensables para iniciar el restablecimiento de su economía, diversificar su aparato productivo y generar un crecimiento más estable, [el] balance definitivo, sin embargo, [fue] totalmente negativo" (op. cit., 432). Mariátegui indicated that "Este capítulo del guano y el salitre no se deja, por consiguiente, aislar del desenvolvimiento posterior de nuestra economía. Están ahí las raíces y los factores del capítulo que ha seguido. La guerra del Pacífico, consecuencia del guano y del salitre, no canceló las otras consecuencias del descubrimiento y la explotación de estos recursos...cuya pérdida nos reveló trágicamente el peligro de una prosperidad económica

international marketing of guano to establish other firms for the development of industrialized haciendas (especially in the Northern coast).⁷ From the end of the nineteenth century until 1930, these economic groups were the driving force of the first wave of modernization in Peru. Raw material exportation, financial activity and limited industrial agriculture were thus tightly interconnected in Peru during that period, and, as a block, were superimposed onto a predominantly traditional economy still lacking full social division of labour and specialization of the work force. This uneven articulation had an all-encompassing impact on work, culture and everyday life during Vallejo's lifetime, especially in the more modernized areas of the country.⁸

In Trilce 1 the voice that asks "Quién hace tanta bulla..." ("Who makes so much noise...") belongs to an individual immersed in the most current experiences of his time. As that

apoyada o cimentada casi exclusivamente sobre la posesión de una riqueza natural, expuesta a la codicia de un imperialismo extranjero o a la decadencia de sus aplicaciones por efecto de las continuas mutaciones producidas en el campo industrial por los inventos de la ciencia" (op. cit. , 23).

⁷ The "guano era" permitted the accumulation of capital to develop some haciendas in the northern region of Peru that were devoted to the production and export of cotton. The development of industrialized agriculture in the valleys surrounding Trujillo, in the province of La Libertad, from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, has its roots in guano exploitation. It is partly due to this flux of capital that the first apogee of the Chicama Valley haciendas, and others such as Lurifico in the near Valley of Jequetepeque, takes place. See Manuel Burga, *De la encomienda a la hacienda capitalista* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1976); Michael Gonzales, *Plantation Agriculture and Social Control in Northern Peru*; Peter Klarén, *Formación de las haciendas azucareras y los orígenes del APRA*.

⁸ These haciendas, in need of labor with which to increase production for export, caused migration of the population of the northern sierra to work under semiproletarian conditions in the coast. Within this migratory flux, César Vallejo arrived at one of these haciendas, as

voice emphasizes in lines 7-9, guano had a use value as organic matter. For thousands of years marine birds had deposited it on the islands of the Peruvian coast, modifying their shapes in interaction with the entire ecosystem of the oceanic waters (“... que brinda sin querer, / en el insular corazón, / salobre alcatraz...” [“unintentionally offered by, / in the insular heart, / brackish pelican”]), and providing a natural fertilizer that had been used by regional cultures since pre-Inca times. However, this matter now embodied a new social value, as it had been converted into a commodity, which lent a new economic significance to the islands.⁹ The subject speaks now from a particular position within a chain that binds the humble action of the alcatraz to the human activity of guano laborers and to the *testador* (the one doing the “testation” in line 1), and simultaneously encompasses the entire social life of the country, connecting guano and the subject to the international sphere. Together, both alcatraz and subject stand in between the ecosystem and the economic system of Peruvian society in that period. The alcatraz is the bird that catches fish and marine plant life, digests and then defecates them, providing the basis for the fertilizer that, once put on the international market, will facilitate capital accumulation. The subject mediates between that reality and the social

assistant cashier in 1912, from the province of Santiago de Chuco.

⁹ “[A] guano y al salitre, sustancias humildes y groseras, les tocó jugar en la gesta de la República un rol que había parecido reservado al oro y a la plata en tiempos más caballerescos y menos positivistas. España nos quería y nos guardaba como país productor de metales preciosos. Inglaterra nos prefirió como país productor de guano y salitre...[E]l guano y el salitre—que para anteriores civilizaciones hubieran carecido de valor pero que para una civilización industrial adquirirían un precio extraordinario... [...] Las utilidades del guano y del salitre crearon en el Perú, donde la propiedad había conservado hasta entonces un carácter aristocrático y feudal, los primeros elementos sólidos de capital comercial y bancario. Los *profiteurs* directos e indirectos de las riquezas del litoral empezaron a

determinations that exceed him (“Quién...” [“Who”]) throughout the seventy seven pieces of the book.

Against this background, some points about guano and the subject need to be specified. First, as I have noted, by way of his relation to alcatraz-guano-islands, the subject is located in between two realms. On the one hand, he is engaged in a conflictive interaction with a presence (“quién”) that produces the “bulla” [“noise”, “noisy speech”] and interrupts his activity. Although the presence is unknown, and absent from the situation of performance, its impersonality is as real as the subject himself: it not only exceeds his knowledge (“Who...”) but also blocks him from agency (“... ni deja testar...” [“...that does not allow / the testation...”). On the other hand, in contrast with this absent presence, the subject asserts the most tangible actions of the poem: he not only knows that the alcatraz is provider of guano, but also that this substance can be better estimated (“aquilatarse mejor” [“easier to assay”]) in some other time-space frame. Moreover, that substance is deposited in a space (“insular corazón” [“insular heart”]) that fuses his body and the ocean.

Second, this location of the subject is replicated for guano. Guano is a *calabrina tesórea* (“cadaverine tesoría”),¹⁰ that is, a double-faced object: “calabrina” as a bone substance,

constituir una clase capitalista” (Mariátegui, op. cit., 25, 27).

¹⁰ The English “cadaverine” conveys some of the meaning of the Spanish word *calabrina*. In the OED “cadaverine” is “one of the cadaveric alkaloids of Ptomaines”, and “ptomaine” “the generic name of certain alkaloid bodies found in putrefying animal and vegetable matter, some of which are very poisonous”. The explicit or implied meanings of *calabrina* as “skeleton” and “cadaver” can be found in Corominas’s *Diccionario* (see note 11.)

or as dead matter, decomposes and, mixed with other substances, becomes organic matter in the islands; but it is described with the adjective “tesórea,” a *portmanteau* word that also duplicates the noun into, on the one hand, the sound series *oreo, urea, orina...* echoing the organic/excremental meaning of guano, and, on the other, the term *tesoro* “treasury.”¹¹ Like guano itself, that was perceived both as organic substance and as the basis of social wealth in Vallejo’s times, the word “guano” appears in the poem as an emblem of both natural matter and social investement.

Now, at the time that Vallejo writes *Trilce* (1918-1922), the guano boom had already ended and capital accumulation in Peru was based rather on mining and export agriculture. I find in this gap between text and history the very reason for the untimely appearance of guano at the front piece of the book: the poetic text must recuperate this repressed element of a kind of anal stage of the history of Peruvian social wealth to remind society that such a residue—*tesórea: tesoro/surplus*, and *óreo/excrement*—, is being hidden under the aseptic simulacrum of modern capitalist development. If in society money was supposed to be playing its role as universal equivalent for exchange, in the structure of *Trilce* guano was made to compete with such simulacrum. In contrast with the

¹¹ For the explicit or implied meanings of *calabrina* (“skeleton”, “cadaver”) and the sound series *oreo, urea, orina...* see Joan Corominas, *Diccionario crítico etimológico castellano e hispánico* (Madrid: Gredos, 1993), under the entries, *calavera, orate* and *orina*. *Oreo*, of course, refers also to *oro* “gold.” Eshelman’s translation captures well the varied meanings of the adjective-*portmanteau* *tesórea* with his “fecapital” = *fæcal* + *capital*, in *Trilce* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992; Clayton Eshleman, translator). Some translations for the entire line *el guano, la simple calabrina tesórea*, are “the simple fecapital ponk” (Eshleman), “the simple limebrine treasoria” (Seiferle), “the simple cadabrian treasure” (Magda Bogin, in “César Vallejo. Translating *Trilce*”, *Massachusetts Review*, 34, 2, (Summer 1993): 183-192.

expressions of the money-form, which, as coins, paper money, and other financial documents, were stripped of sensory experience, the substance guano imposed its presence in poetry through the subject's smell and touch. Repressed from public memory, Vallejo brings that substance back to the fore in *Trilce*, as an enigma that demands to be deciphered.

Criticism has dealt with this enigma in different manners.¹² I already have established the relation between the figure of guano and its social context to reflect on the hollowness and the imbalance that define material and discursive incongruity in Peru.

With regard to social materiality, the transformation of guano into a fertilizer produced wealth without requiring either industrial development or the creation of a skilled and diversified work force, a situation that epitomized the general structure of the Peruvian economy.¹³ *Trilce* points to such a void of industry and labor, and such defective modernization, by a minimal reference to human productive activity. In contrast, the text is rather overloaded with references to the

¹² In addition to sections devoted to *Trilce* 1 in, among others, books by Américo Ferrari, Alberto Escobar, Eduardo Neale-Silva, and Jean Franco, specific readings of this poem are George Wing, "Trilce I: A Second Look", *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, 35 (1969): 268-84; Donald Shaw, "Trilce I Revisited", *Romance Notes*, 2, (1979): 167-171; and Bernard McGuirk, "From *écriture* to *oralité* in César Vallejo's *Trilce* I" (In Adam Sharman, ed., *The Poetry and Poetics of César Vallejo: The Fourth Angle of the Circle*, Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997).

¹³ "A la explotación de[] guano] no se oponía..., como a la de otros productos peruanos, el estado rudimentario y primitivo de los transportes terrestres. Mientras que para extraer de las entrañas de los Andes el oro, la plata, el cobre, el carbón, se tenía que salvar ásperas montañas y enormes distancias,... el guano [yacía] en la costa casi al alcance de los barcos que venían a buscarlos [...] La fácil explotación de este recurso natural dominó todas las otras manifestaciones de la vida económica del país" (Mariátegui, op. cit., 21).

mineral landscape and marine life as raw material, and, at the other extreme, to already-manufactured goods. In this vacuum of modern human activity, *Trilce* fills the discursive space with still another void: references to finance, commerce or accounting are considerable in the seventy poems, as if the “aquilatar” (“to assay”) of *Trilce* 1 were projected onto the book in a proliferation of meanings around the circulation of abstract value-form.

In this setting, the workings of social abstraction in the market empty out everyday concrete life through the extraction of raw materials from the ecological milieu (“las islas que van quedando” [“the islands that are still left”]) and through the extraction of labor power from the human body: the subject demands “un poco más de consideración” [“a little more consideration”] for his labor or for his lack thereof. Moreover, the defective predominance of exchange value and the lack of productive support, as features that define underdeveloped modernity, are the causes for the absence of a network of social practices that would sustain the intellectual and existential needs of the subject: “ni deja testar” / “un poco más de consideración.”

With regard to representation, the figure of the object cut off from its source in praxis that recurs in *Trilce* stands for that void at the center of the material order as it appeared in Vallejo’s immediate context. Such a split/void is also a material correlate of a subject who, lacking productive activity, has been reduced to the externally-controlled function of “testar.” The subject so isolated, or insulated (see the adjective “insular” in line 8) from his object and his activity, vacillates between two poles. At one extreme, embedded in unmediated

materiality (“calabrina... en el insular corazón”), he is in contact with his most personal time-space and with his bodily speech. At the other extreme, he is disturbed by the dissonant voice of an interpellation coming from social abstraction (embodied in *tesórea*), which I see as the content of the external impersonality that exceeds the subject in line 1.

Incongruity abounds also in *Trilce*’s linguistic materiality, like the mounds of guano covering the islands of the Peruvian coast. Lacking the expected mediations between his individual bodily activity and the abstraction in society, the subject speaks in the strange idiom of *Trilce*. As I have noted, the “bulla” that opens *Trilce* 1 calls attention to a conflictive relationship between two incongruous entities (the absent “quién” and the *testador*). And then that “bulla” is carried over into the very sonority of the language of the poem and the entire book. Inaugurating the proliferation of discursive irregularities that characterize *Trilce*, such “bulla” is transformed into, and amplified by, the multiple lexical and syntactic units encased within the phrase “que van quedando”, which can be read as “que van quedando” (that are still left), but also as “que van / quedan / do” (that leave / they stay / A [the musical note]) and also as “que / van / que / dan / do” (that leave / that give / A).

The spatial incongruity suggested by these differing meanings is projected unto the temporal domain in the second stanza, in the oxymoronic “será tarde, temprano” (“as it will be late, early”), in which two opposing temporalities are collapsed. In the last two stanzas of the poem, chunks of meaning are

juxtaposed in the same line, lines follow lines and stanzas follow stanzas with no logical transitions, and blocks of sounds keep developing signification outside the parameters of syntax and semantics. Words referring to concrete individual objects (like guano) are interspersed in this network, as atomized pieces of consciousness that, even though they are referentially specific, can only hint at the enigma of life (social abstraction) that eludes the subject. Elusive as this enigma is, the subject at least can submerge its verbal traces in the immediacy of a language charged with bodily experience. *Trilce*, defined as an ever-proliferating set of linguistic-cultural multiples, is Vallejo's response to the impersonality of the symbolic order and to the incongruity of social being.

To start reflecting on this matter in a period closer to our era of globalized fictitious capital, I turn my attention now to J. M. Arguedas's novel, *El zorro de abajo y el zorro de abajo* (1970; *Los zorros* here), particularly to the opening section of its first chapter.¹⁴

Roughly fifty years after *Trilce*, Arguedas opens his novel in a setting and in social conditions similar to Vallejo's. The novel takes place in the coastal city port of Chimbote. Once a small town on a beautiful bay on the northern coast of Peru, in the late fifties Chimbote became a boomtown. If British capitalism had found in Peruvian guano one of the sources for its development around 1850, one hundred years later the demands of the international market had transformed the area of Chimbote from a fishermen's small bay into the largest

¹⁴ All my quotations in English come from Frances Horning Barraclough's translation of *Los zorros*, en José María Arguedas, *The Fox from Above and the Fox from Down Below* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000). I will indicate some modifications I make oo

fishing port in the world and Peru into the world's primary producer of fish-meal. During the 1960s, thousands of people, immigrants from the different regions of Peru, piled into the shantytowns sprawling around the city. Several years later, the city was already engulfed by smoke from the fish-meal plants and marked by the permeating stench of processing fish. The new development brought some economic prosperity but also, as a consequence of the boom-and-bust cycles of the fishing industry, converted the urban and human landscape of Chimbote into one more example of underdeveloped modernity.¹⁵

Against this background, *Los zorros* opens with a scene on the sea, describing an industrial anchovy fishery:

Chaucato put out to sea in his small trawler, Sampson I, taking his ten fishermen as crew, ... Day is dawning... The trawler Sampson I ... sailed full speed ahead far out on Chimbote Bay. (27)

Like the alcatraz and guano seen previously, the anchovy stands in for the marine wealth of the region. What is accumulated in Arguedas's time is not the excrement of the alcatraz, but its food, the anchovy. Now, the alcatraz and industrial fishing both compete for that marine body:

An angled line of enormous pelicans appeared over Sampson I.

Half an hour later the trawler dories had spread their 300- and 600-meter-long nets over the shoal of

Barraclough's translation.

¹⁵ For the historical context of this period, especially in Chimbote, see Denis Sulmont and Alberto Flores Galindo, *El movimiento obrero en la industria pesquera (El caso de Chimbote)* (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica, 1972), and Víctor Unyén Velezmoro, *Chimbote: el despertar de un coloso* (Chimbote: Editorial progreso, 1979).

fish. The anchovies were bagged by the nets;... The pelicans descended and went flying along lazily at sea level; they took dragon-sized bites out of the teeming netload... and distended their flaccid pouches and long bills, flapping their wings. Performing like acrobats, they caught mouthfuls of anchovies, scooping them into their bills and then threw back their heads to let dozens of them slide down out of the flaccid pouches...Some huge pelicans got snagged by the edging and the mesh. The dory man would grab them by the bill, lift them up, and fling them into the sea. They would then return to the attack... The boat's hold was full. The dead anchovies were lighting things up; spilling over from the hold onto the deck... (31-32)

...When the line of pelicans appeared..."Great big starvin' bums that's been kicked outa their country," [Chaucato] said, gazing at the majestic double line of birds flying in an acute angle. (31)

Two orders intersect at the beginning of *Los zorros*: the ecological cycle of the alcatraz that eats the anchovy and then defecates it to increase guano on the islands; and the economic cycle of the fishing industry that catches large amounts of anchovy to transform them into fish-meal for export. Thus, the anchovy can be seen as an equivalent of the "calabrina tesórea" of Trilce 1 in that it participates in the organic material order and in the inorganic order of social transaction. This two-sided condition of the anchovy is condensed in one of the imprecations uttered by the main character of this section, the fisherman Chaucato: "estos amos de fábrica hacen parir billetes a cada anchovetita..." ("These factory owners make every little anchovy spawn banknotes..." 31)

In the late sixties, social incongruity had acquired new traits in the Peruvian margins of capitalist development in comparison with Vallejo's times. Exploitation of raw materials was now mediated by industry and a more intense use of

diversified labor. Hence the narrator in every single line highlights the work of thousand of “Chaucatos” working in the fishery. There would be no fish-meal without the body of the anchovy, and there would be no transformation of the fish-meal into a commodity without the labor of these subjects. But this process will have two simultaneous negative effects for the “Chaucatos” in the novel. First, at the end point of this process, fish-meal will vanish from Chimbote’s time-space out into the international market. And, second, this exploitation will empty the immediate social and ecological system. Chaucato says: “Estos blanquiñosos... hambrientos... para el negocio. Nunca llenan su gusto... [M]ás tragones ellos, pa’ comer en la mar” (These white guys... They never, ever get their fill of whatever’s to their taste... they are bigger gluttons for gobblin’ up what’s in the ocean...” 30). It also empties the human body: “[the magnate Braschi,] come gente... les come las huevas [a miles de miles]” (Now [Braschi is] gobblin’ people up ... he eats their nuts” 30). In fact, although it plays a more prominent role, human energy is valued only as raw labor power here, and then released in a milieu that lacks a meaningful cultural infrastructure. Thus, the fishing industry places, at one extreme, capital, represented by the financial enterprises that drive the export business, and, at the other extreme, ecological materiality and the human body. In the gap between those extremes, poverty and prostitution abound: “Miles de miles viven de [Braschi]; en cambio, [Braschi] les come las huevas. Las huevas de Chaucato como los billetes de Chaucato engordan las cantinas y las putas [del prostíbulo] de la “Rosada...”

(“Thousands and thousands are earnin’ their livin’ from [Braschi]; at the same time, [Braschi] eats their nuts. Chaucato’s nuts and Chaucato’s banknotes too are fattenin’ the bars and the broads of the Pink Wing... 30).

The relationship between this incongruity and the speech of Chaucato, and in general language and representation, is one of the most salient features of *Los zorros*. If the performance of the speaking subject of Trilce 1 intertwined speech and the action of *testar/aquilatar*, Chaucato’s fuses speech with the action of fishing:

Chacauto grasped the helm by the spindles. The little vessel began to cut through the waves and buck steadily on the open sea... (29)

[He] stared with gleeful mockery at the radar screen, which pictured the shoal of anchovies with a cluster of tiny streaks...He began to give orders to the crew... (31)

Thus, the interaction between the ecosystem and the accumulation of capital relies on a marine body but also, more explicitly than in *Trilce*, it includes the speaking subject himself. The factories “hacen parir billetes a cada anchovetita” (“These factory owners make every little anchovy spawn banknotes...”), Chaucato says, but then he adds: “[Pero] nosotros, putamadre, les llevamos el material...” ([But,] fuck, we are the ones bringing the stuff in to ‘em”). The ecosystem as body and the body of the fishermen are merged in this link, which is summed up by Chaucato’s statement: “Yo hago parir a la mar” (“I make the ocean give birth...” 31). At the outer limits of underdevelopment, Chaucato is portrayed as divided between mental and physical activity. While carrying out his

duties, he is able, in his own way, to bring to speech the action of “aquilatar” (like the “assaying” of Trilce 1). In his trawler, he picks up the information transmitted by the radio that guides the boats: “Anchoveta a una hora isla Corcovado... a una hora isla Corcovado.. rumbo 180, rumbo 180...” (“Anchovy at one hour from Corcovado Island... At one hour from Corcovado Island...bearing 180 degrees... bearing 180 degrees...” 28). He processes that information to make his own estimates: “Hoy... hacemos cien toneladas...” (“Today... we’re makin’ a hundred tons...”), and then compares the capacity of his own boat to those of other skippers and trawlers: “Doscientas toneladas [ellos], yo cien; doscientas cincuenta [ellos], yo cien...” (“Two hundred tons [them], me a hundred; two hundred fifty [them], me a hundred” 29).

In the last instance, Chaucato’s ruminations refer to a relationship that is external to his everyday universe and that controls his immediate materiality. In what seems like an echo of the first line of Trilce 1, through the whole first chapter of *Los zorros*, we hear about this presence that is absent from direct narrative. Now this “quien” is even named: It is Braschi, the owner of the trawler fleet and magnate of the commercial fishing, for whom the thousand Chaucatos work. In fact, Chaucato emphatically tells us that he knows him, that he was his friend when he was a small entrepreneur. Chaucato even lets us know the most intimate details of Braschi’s sexual activities. But it is as if Braschi were living in Chaucato’s words while he is forever absent from the novel’s diegetic level. I see in this double-faced Braschi only “Braschi,” a character-name

that designates not an individual person but an abstract position in the universe of Chimbote, especially in the chain of economic transactions that justifies its existence as a city port. This kind of specter, present and absent, has become an enigma that can even be simultaneously cause and effect: Chaucato says: “[la mar] parió a Braschi... but [Braschi ha] hecho la pesca” (“[the ocean] gave birth to Braschi... but [Braschi made] the fishery” 30). Finally, this present absence becomes an impersonality that remains beyond Chaucato’s capacity to understand: “¡Braschi es grande!... Dicen que pa’ comer grande, hay que elevarse sobre la mar...” (“Braschi is big/great!... They say to eat a lot you have to soar like a bird over the ocean” 30).¹⁶ Chaucato’s repeated question about the meaning of that external presence points to a split between the narrative and the performative, which structures other parts of the novel in varying ways. Chaucato’s lack of knowledge is presented in the novel as follows.

Chaucato as a character embodies the macho fishermen of Chimbote, and he is endowed with more information and work power than any other man in town. A fisherman comments: Chaucato “saca de la mar putamadre de billetes” (“gets a shitload of bills from the sea”), and another: “[Chaucato], padrazo, padrenuestro” ([Chaucato], great big father, our lord” 36). And yet, at moments he sinks in impotency in terms of power-discourse relations. One of the more telling dialogues occurs when a fisherman, the Violinista, asks him:

¹⁶ I take the term "specter" to refer to Braschi from Michael Regan' work, "Fictionalized Idiolects and Sociolects as Vehicle of a New Mimesis in José María Arguedas's *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*", unpublished manuscript (1997): 61.

... how come[if]... you're such a pal of Braschi's, practically his father, and you're the one who's taught almost all the trawler skippers how to find the anchovies and net'em—how come you got an old boat, a hundred tonner, when they gave these other new guys, who don't know near as much, two-hundred- and even two-hundred-fifty-ton trawlers, so they can earn double what you do? (29)

Overwhelmed by the question, Chaucato remains silent, as if reduced to a blank space, and unable to elaborate public discourse on production and market matters, he withdraws.¹⁷ At that point, Chaucato's human energy reverts into his body: listening to the fisherman's question, the narrator says, "the skipper's face crumbled... His arms hung loose; his lowered eyelid was rather red and drooping; his mouth was fallen on the same side and his cheek somewhat swollen." What Chaucato says, as if recovering from a lapse into passivity, overflows with the force of such reversal:

¹⁷ Regan, op.cit., chapter IV, develops a highly nuanced analysis of this segment of the novel. In part polemicizing with Lienhard's analysis, Regan emphasizes the fact that Chaucato's words are "uttered in a context replete with varying responses to his vociferations" (53) and therefore embody "a textual space wherein the conflict of articulated ideologies can take place in interaction with others and his own existential reality" (62). Regan says that "In the case of the interaction between the violinista and Chaucato [...], Chaucato's attempt to establish dominance confronts an unmediated retort [...] which completely undoes Chaucato's self-construction as uncontested 'patron' [...] In effect, the violinista throws a counterimage of Chaucato's status in the patron's face, smashing the image of dominance founded on violence. Chaucato [...] finds his feet knocked out from underneath him by the seeming innocence of the musician's question" (58-59, 60). I agree with Regan's conclusion that "there is represented in the interchanges between the fishermen [in this segment of the novel] the lack of a dominant, uncontested authority" (69). In that framework, I base my reflection on the fact that it is precisely the content of *that* specific question from the violinist about work and production, and not any other one, that causes the alteration in Chaucato's

—Son of a bitch!... All the pimps at the Cat can see is the shell, the bag the nuts are in. When I really screw you, you'll know, you'll understand... You're in the shit at the Cat, aren't you? And you—who's from over there—you're comin' out here to talk, damnit? (29)

The narration elaborates on Chaucato's discourse as follows:

[Chaucato] went on speaking very softly, almost as if it were his gut talking...

"Two hundreds tons, me a hundred; two hundred fifty, me a hundred... These white boys have different kinds of tricks. They're hungry for the hole, hungry for the dick, and they're just the same about business, too. They never, ever get their fill of whatever's to their taste. Factories, trawlers, wharves, cash; every year they are bigger gluttons for gobblin' up what's in the ocean... Braschi's big! He's got more power than dynamite in his head... in his signature. Fuck, Braschi —you're the one who made the fishery... Now you're gobblin' people up... As for me... fuck, now Chaucato, Braschi's big brother, is against Braschi... Who the fuck ever sees him now in Chimbote?..." (29-30)¹⁸

Chaucato knows that the "mañas" ("tricks") of the Braschis are of some other "laya" ("kind") but that "laya" is of a quality he does not quite understand. And he does know that Braschi, being "grande" ("big"/"great") and having "más potencia que la dinamita... en la firma" ("more power than dynamite in... his signature"), exceeds the spaces and times of Chaucato and Chimbote: "¿quién puta lo ve ahora en

performance that follows.

¹⁸ Frances Horning Barraclough's translation of *Los zorros* renders the Peruvian Spanish *putamadre* of this segment as "hell" or "damnit." I substitute *fuck* for "hell" or "damnit" because I find these English terms to be equivalents of "lighter" terms than *putamadre* like *joder*, *carajo*, etc. *Putamadre*, or *chuchamadre*, are the most charged terms in a scale of lesser-greater expressiveness that conveys rage, amazement, or other intense emotional reactions.

Chimbote?” (“Who the fuck ever sees him now in Chimbote?”). However, as an epitome of raw labor power, he is unable to articulate the abstraction surrounding him.

At the beginning of *Trilce*, faced with what Vallejo called the “abracadabra civil” (“civil abracadabra”)¹⁹, the speaking subject produced a fragmented and dislocated language. Now, in the beginning of *Los zorros*, Chaucato’s speech will be a response to the enigma of his own situation. He feels that he is the one who keeps capital working: “Braschi se lleva mi trabajo” (“Braschi’s makin’ off with what I get outa my work”). And although he cannot capture rationally that relationship, he refuses to accede to the hollowing out of his body: “... no me va a tocar los forros. No se traga madre, ¿no?... No se traga madre, ¿no?” (“he’s not gonna get my nuts... You don’t gulp down your own mother, do you?... You don’t gulp down your own mother, do you?”). In an attempt to fill the gaps in his knowledge, Chaucato finds precisely in his body his only source of certainty. From such a source emerges the crude and at times violent language of Chaucato and other characters in *Los Zorros*. Moreover, this split in the speech act, and the attempts to “remedy” this failure in utterance,²⁰ will be the source for a

¹⁹ In *Trilce*, poem XVII.

²⁰ For a comprehensive theoretical articulation of the split language/body in the speech act, and the failure inhering in performativity, see Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. The Politics of the Performative* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997). Butler indicates “that ... the ‘force’ of the speech act, as it was articulated by both Toni Morrison and Shoshana Felman, has everything to do with the status of speech as a bodily act [...] The speech act [...] is performed bodily, and though it does not instate the absolute or immediate presence of the body, the simultaneity of the production and delivery of the expression communicates not merely what is said, but the bearing of the body as the rhetorical instrument of expression. This makes plain the incongruous

transformation of the whole narrative of *Los Zorros*.

Before the absolute silence Arguedas chose to close his novel (the author-narrator's suicide), he brought to the text the social incongruity of Chimbote. Simultaneously, Arguedas played out the blending of language and body I have described for Chaucato against this content, and made this counterpoint one of the main strategies that structure the novel. Two specific factors inform Arguedas's narrative project. Since Chimbote was a space for the encounter of migrants from the entire Andean area with their diverse languages and cultures, he opened narration to this manifestation of discursive heteroglossia at work in society.²¹ However, far removed from a mere reproduction of dialectal speech, he transformed that language mass into an array of discourses and characters, which, grounded in specific and different social practices, offer the possibility of capturing the traces of social incongruity. In the beginning of *Los zorros*, the "bulla" (noise, noisy speech) of the first line of *Trilce* amplifies its volume, to echo the proliferation of languages in the universe of Chimbote, but also to signal again (and perhaps make sense of) the impersonality that disturbs the experience of the subject.

interrelatedness of body and speech to which Felman refers, the excess in speech that must be read along with, and often against, the propositional content of what is said [...] For Felman, the body that speaks is a scandal precisely because its speech is not fully governed by intention [...]. It is scandalous as well because the bodily action of speech is not predictable in any mechanical way [...] The relationship between speech and the body is that of a chiasmus. Speech is bodily but the body exceeds the speech it occasions; and speech remains irreducible to the bodily means of its enunciation" (152, 155-6).

²¹ Martin Lienhard's book *Cultura popular andina y forma novelesca. Zorros y danzantes en la última novela de Arguedas* (Lima: Tarea-Latinoamericana Editores, 1981) contains the most comprehensive reading of this opening, together with the analysis of the relationship of the text with other key elements at work in the culture of the area.

Despite the differences in genre, literary moment and historical context separating Vallejo's and Arguedas's texts from each other and from our own time, both *Trilce* and *Los zorros* still have much to say about the difficulties of social mediation and representation in Peru. I have tried to show here that the subject of *Trilce*, absorbed in the contemplation of guano, finds in it a greater cohesion of body, work, and time-space, and a figure of his dealings back and forth between his status as individual and the general determinations of social life. Thus, the alcatraz has taken us, in the writings of Vallejo and Arguedas, from its precious excrement to its food, the anchovy, and on to Chaucato, a figure of the interaction between human bodily activity and exchange in the market that produces life and social abstraction. If the simultaneous expression of particular things and the general Thing is a major challenge for thought, that contradictory unit is also a mysterious magnet hidden among/inside the infinite fragments of the poem. Hence the unique abstract-concrete materiality of *Trilce*. In spite of the failure inhering in performativity, and the subject's subordination in the field of knowledge, Arguedas's novelistic language attempts to capture, like infinite anchovies, the traces of a potential concrete universal contained in heterogeneous and specific languages and cultures. That is how Vallejo's and Arguedas's gestures offer us a critical response to the abstract universal of exchange value and its devastating effects in society.