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WORKING WITH JOSE

CLAYTON ESHLEMAN

«Where I miss a man
is not getting him & me
around a table...

Third Surface
between the surfaces of our minds
where the whole mystery of talk
bounds & needs
the bounce. The shared
preoccupation. I'm no friend
of heart-to-hearts; for heart
to speak to heart you need
a table. A body. A body
of work. A trade. A box
of swiftian tools.

The Third
is magic—
it unlocks the heart.
Heart to heart is dumb squish.
We need
the artifice of order, something
to talk around,
an obstacle. A stump.»

—Robert Kelly, *THE LOOM*, Section 2

José and I would sit together at a table (generally in his kitchen), each of us with a copy of Vallejo—our stump. Although in our case as translators, we were only sometimes talking around Vallejo—more often, we were talking through or with him, as if he were participant as well as obstacle. But Kelly's sense of «the shared preoccupation» leading to meaningful talk holds as a metaphor for our relationship through Vallejo. The often insurmountable difficulties of his text brought about a kind of mountain-climbing friendship. In a magical way, a heart to heart conversation, in fits and starts, before, during, and after work occurred, that while not lengthy nor «confessional,» makes me feel that I know José better this way than had I met him any other way. For the heart to heart as such, is only an aspect of a larger heart to heart involved with talking through Vallejo. The stressing of this as opposed to that, the give and take, the compromises necessary for a satisfactory working relationship—all these «textual» matters—are perhaps more heart to heart than shared personal information. Although I would not have one without the other.

I met José in 1971 when I was looking for someone to go over with me the 4th of 5th draft of César Vallejo's *ESPAÑA, APARTATA DE MI ESTE CALIZ*. Throughout the 60s, I had worked on the 95 other poems that with *ESPAÑA* make up Vallejo's posthumously published poetry. And in 1968 I had published the 9th draft of these 95 poems (they were then referred to as *POEMAS HUMANOS/HUMAN POEMS*), ending my Translator's Foreword with the following words: «But I will elaborate no more. My work is done.» During these years I had checked each draft with a different person, then incorporated that person's suggestions in a new draft and checked it with a different person etc. This was a very frustrating process, as not only did different people offer different suggestions, but the suggestions were often guesses, wrong guesses that I would have to later undo.

Without going into greater detail about my work on Vallejo in the 60s, it is appropriate to say here that José was the first person I met who I felt that I could work with as co-translator, with whom I would share equal responsibility for the success of failure of our work. There were a number of reasons for such feelings (I was certainly sick of going from one informant to another), but the most important ones were that José immediately struck me as honest—in the sense that he would say he did not know something if he did not know it and not simply offer a guess—scrupulous, and of con-

siderable literary intelligence. He also struck me as stubborn, but as I am too, I figured that our tug-of-war might come to something.

So we worked together for about 7 years, at first on the ESPAÑA poems, and then on a retranslation of the other 95 poems, which involved doing 9 more drafts based on my published 9th draft. Other than a year that I spent in France when we tried, and gave up, working through the mail, we worked around 10 hours a week.

A marvelous complex of emotions is stirred when I think back on our work together. At times we were like two beavers, both gnawing at different angles into the Vallejo-tree, assuming it would fall, hoping it would fall at the angle each of us were setting it up to fall, but unsure if it would fall at all and if it did, which way e.g., does this line really mean anything? It looks like nonsense but doesn't «feel» like nonsense, meaning: have we simply not found its sense? But to push on and on is to risk making sense of what is actually poised on the edge of sense and nonsense, so how do we translate the line that way?

Sometimes José would know what a phrase meant and explain it to me—a fine explanation that, written down, would be 4 or 5 times as long as what Vallejo had written. Then it was up to me to find a way to say it as succinctly as the author. And I would come up with something that I thought was brilliant—and José would say, no, that is a little different. Back and forth. At times very trying for both of us. At times, as if our tug would break and we'd fall back from each other, angry, isolated, out of mutual give and take.

But the latter did not happen. We grumbled and argued, but we stayed within the arena of an ongoing possibility that could only be resolved through sharing and compromise. The danger was, and we were both very aware of it, that my American rendition of a line might contain nuances which José did not pick up, but which had he picked up, he would have felt shaded the meaning/non-meaning away from what Vallejo had written. And on my part, there was always the fear that in José's explanation of something, I would hear the wrong stress—or that in his fluent but not perfect English, he would misplace the stress and that I would emphasize *that* in contrast to something else.

The gain from all of this was that we were very, very careful at the same time that we laughed a lot, because on one level we were in an absurd situation: not only could we not match the connotative density of much of Vallejo (we would have to choose one word in

English to translate a word that might actively mean several different things in Spanish), but we also knew that no matter how hard we tried to offer an interpretation in place of a translation of something, that most of our translations were interpretations. Plus: our own backgrounds were surely filtering into the finished product. At one end of the spectrum, José belonged to a more reserved, traditional approach to literature which, in a sense, Vallejo had one foot in. At the other end, as a post-WW II American poet, I find myself in a very loosened up language which had been knocked about for years, now, by common speech, slang, obscenity etc. Vallejo also engaged this aspect of language in Spanish in a way that (given his time, and the much greater rigidity of Spanish when compared to American English) was much more striking, and odd, than were it to be done today by an American poet.

Thus when was José's probable emphasis of his end of the spectrum more apt or when was mine? Since Vallejo spanned this spectrum that I am imagining here, we were always somewhat in the dark. That we could continue to work together under these circumstances, daily, weekly, yearly, is something I feel very proud of—for both of us.

Los Angeles, December 17, 1980.