

César Vallejo and the Stones of Darwinian Risk

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All were victims of one common obsession, one identical idea—zoological, grotesque, pitiable, a phenomenal absurdity: they thought themselves monkeys and lived as such.¹

The young man who narrates César Vallejo's short story "Los caynas" (1923) is shocked and terrified when he enters the house of a village family to find that those living there more closely resemble monkeys than they do humans. The narrator recoils from the howling and shrieking acrobatics of a woman whose "anthropoid image" is at once mechanical, child-like and bestial. This "regressive zoological obsession" comes as the third and final manifestation of what the narrator vaguely calls "the mysteries of reason [that] become thorns and well up in the closed and stormy circle of a fatal logic" (58, 52). Earlier episodes anticipate this singular species regression with an oblique, mysterious logic. A young man named Urquizo from the same village family falls prey to a peculiar form of madness: he boasts to those assembled at a bar that his horse has the extraordinary capacity to defy gravity and ride inverted, hooves pointing upward. Meeting Urquizo in the street one day, the narrator accidentally slips and bumps into him and evokes the angry protest, "Are you mad?" This last episode of "seeing things in reverse" appears to the shaken narrator as a "more transcendent [madness], nothing less than a ratiocination" (53). The madman's psychic projection and the very certainty with which he insists on his own sanity threaten to overwhelm the secure boundaries of rationality within which reality is recognizable. Reason and madness are in danger of reversing positions, of exchanging places. And, Vallejo implies, these sensory and psychic reversals or inversions proceed according to a deterministic

or "fatal logic" toward the eventual collective retrogression of species.

In what sense, though, should we term the imagined or real species mutation a reversal? For apes to be considered the reversal or inversion of human beings, a Darwinian logic must prevail. What Darwin called "propinquity of descent" amounts to the spatial representation (in family trees or classificatory lineages) of a thoroughly temporalized notion of species; hence, what a species "is" depends on the ancestral (pluralized) species from which it descends. The people of Cayna mime the species from which, according to evolutionary theory, they are descended: the anthropoid apes, the apes whose name derives from their close resemblance to man. As long as the transformation into monkeys can be described as a "resemblance" or "simulation of the anthropoid," as long as the victims are prey to a mental disequilibrium or madness and not to an actual empirical mutation of the species, rationality can be said to lie with the permanence of species self-identity and not, as Darwin maintained, with species mutation. However, as it becomes evident that this regression is communal—no one in Cayna escapes the real or imagined species mutation—so it becomes inevitable that the narrator, who tells us he is "distantly related" to Urquizo's family, will succumb to the unavoidable contagion. In the final coda to the story, the narrator is incarcerated in an insane asylum for his "unreasonable" belief in the fixity of the human species ("Poor thing! He thinks he is a man!" [60]). Reason and madness have obviously reversed positions; less evident perhaps is what this reversal entails: reason and species mutation have become synonymous.

Obviously we are witness to no ordinary natural scientific species mutation. Vallejo's "regressive zoological obsession" deliberately reverses a progressive Darwinian species adaptation to environment. Why would Vallejo represent the life of Peruvian indigenous people as a retrogression of species? The answer to this question is as complex and manifold as the wide-ranging reaches of Darwinism itself. We know, thanks to Jean Franco's book on Vallejo, that the author read the influential popularizer of Darwin, Ernst Haeckel, and that "Los caynas" in particular registers "the shattering effect evolutionist theory had on him."² Haeckel's writings help us to situate the barely concealed terror of Vallejo's narrator as the villagers of Cayna teeter between a mental aberration, in which they closely *resemble* monkeys, and a Darwinian "law of change,"

in which a species *is* its genealogical descent. Haeckel had stressed that nature's "law" was Darwinian natural selection, and further, that this law preserved the unity of nature by controlling the physiological functions of heredity (which preserved features between generations) and adaptation (which modified features according to environment). Precisely this reciprocal action of heredity and adaptation is operating in Vallejo's short story: the law of heredity dictates the narrator's ever-closer capitulation to the inevitable effects of consanguinity; in recognition of the law of adaptation to the environment, he reports with anthropological detachment on the isolated and backward conditions that coincide with the extinction of human civilization.

Haeckel cites Robert Hartmann's *The Anthropoid Apes*, which he says reveals the "unprejudiced findings" of comparative anatomy, these being that "the body of man and the anthropoid ape are the same in every respect."³ Haeckel turns Darwinian materialism into a doctrine that eliminates all metaphysical atavisms; seeking an open confrontation with theology, he cites the eighteenth century natural historian, Buffon: "If we do not take the soul into account, [the orang-outan] lacks nothing that we possess." Reading Haeckel, we sense that Vallejo recapitulates the polemical ferocity of the whole late nineteenth century intellectual climate when he rather characteristically confronts religious transcendence with the most unrelentingly nominalist materialism—summarized perfectly by the title of the poem from *Poemas humanos*, "On the Soul that Suffered from Being its Body."

Darwinian social theories of a conservative, liberal and radical nature flourished in Europe, the U.S. and in Latin America, and what these theories invariably shared was a model of history and society based on progress. Darwin himself sought to avoid the implications of any progressive schema in nature by choosing the term "descent with modification" instead of "evolution."⁴ Nineteenth century social evolutionists, however, based their theories of social progress on the conviction that laws of historical development must be placed on a par with those of biological development. Auguste Comte, the founder of sociology and of positivism, maintained that the province of his "social physics" was to discover "by what necessary chain of successive transformations the human race, starting from a condition barely superior to that of a society of great apes, has been gradually led up to the present stage of European civilization."⁵ This developmental hypothesis coincided with an increased knowledge of anthropoid apes

and, more important, it owed much to the growing contact with so-called "primitive cultures." Travelers' eyewitness accounts of wolf-girls and bear-boys provided a wealth of detail to support the thesis that the orang-utan, on the basis of physical characteristics and intelligence, was the missing link between human beings and the apes.⁶ In addition, philosophic thinking about a hypothetical state of nature was easily historicized, so that Africa, East Asia or America represented the "childhood of the race," the beginnings of European civilization as such. Stephen Jay Gould characterizes these socio-historical theories of progress as illegitimate identifications of evolution with progress, of organic change with organic progress:

The fallacious equation of organic evolution with progress engendered the abuses of Social Darwinism. This discredited theory ranked human groups and cultures according to their assumed level of evolutionary attainment, with (not surprisingly) white Europeans at the top and people dwelling in their colonies at the bottom.⁷

It is the name of the popular Victorian, Herbert Spencer, which we for good reason most closely associate with the Malthusian principle "survival of the fittest." This principle, imported by Darwin into natural science, may very well have provided Darwin the missing link that allowed him to define his own operational principle behind "descent with modification." Natural selection, the theory that the fittest survive and spread their traits throughout the population, is conceived by way of analogy with artificial selection, whereby animal breeders intervene to select desirable traits in animal or plant stocks. But why were Darwin and other Victorians like Spencer so sure that mindless nature could be compared with conscious selection on the part of human beings? It could, of course, be argued that the cultural climate of triumphant industrial capitalism was a necessary precondition for a theory that defined any change as inherently progressive. Spencer explicitly identified survival of the fittest in nature with strongly individualist principles and laissez faire capitalism. Just as in nature the struggle for existence operates to remove the sickly, the malformed and the unfit, Spencer argued, so in society competition eliminates the ignorant, the improvident and the lazy.⁸ Reading "Los caynas" according to Spencerian principles, then, we could say that the villagers are clearly the least powerful and least adapted of all

“variations” to the stern discipline of individualist self-differentiation and economic competition; the retrogression of the species in this case would correspond to the elimination of inferior varieties in the natural environment. Though such individualist and capitalist principles are strongly antithetical to Vallejo’s most deeply held beliefs, in one respect at least, as we shall see shortly, the text suggests that the author surreptitiously seeks to distance himself from those “primitive” village origins denigrated by the metropolis.

Though there is no necessary correlation between Darwinian principles and the racist and laissez faire assumptions of social evolutionism—Marx, after all, wished to dedicate the second volume of *Capital* to Darwin—it was nevertheless this conservative, “scientific” strain of thought that provided the ideological impetus to a whole generation of Latin American positivists. Although conditions varied from country to country, these positivist “reformers” were united in their allegiance to progress and science, viewing these as the means to remedy the perceived economic, militaristic and cultural debilities of their nations. They sought a social order dedicated to the educational and material well-being of its citizens and, toward that end, they gladly sacrificed political liberty, which they identified with anarchy.⁹ As avid Spencerians, they identified the march of progress and civilization with the individualist dominance of the fittest in the economic and political realm. According to the Mexican Justo Sierra, for example, Latin America must develop quickly from a military to an industrial power in order to ward off the insatiable colossus to the north. The dubious logic of substituting a freely accepted “adaptation” to the colonizer in order thus to avoid an imposed colonization clothes itself in legitimizing Darwinian garb: unless they disavow their own history, Mexicans will become the unfit, “a proof of Darwin’s theory . . . in the struggle for existence.”¹⁰ Many Latin American positivists adopted the racist ideologies of their European counterparts in order to justify military defeats. The Argentine, J. B. Alberdi, like Justo Sierra, identified the indigenous Indian population with passive domesticated barbarity—an atavism that must be renounced in favor of development and the accumulation of industrial wealth.¹¹

In Peru, positivism’s greatest impetus came from the disastrous war with Chile in 1879. Peru’s “feudal servitude,” “its weak-willed [Indian] race,” could be no match for Chile’s modern nationalist liberalism, according to Mariano Cornejo. At every step of Cornejo’s

argument, social selection adapts continents in the same way that Darwinian natural selection adapts organisms to their planetary ends. Professing the evolutionary laws of Darwin, Cornejo hardly veils his disgust for those who have been proven unfit:

I don't know how in seven centuries of bowing down so much we have not acquired a hunchback as a distinguishing mark.¹²

"Los caynas" could be read as an allegory or fable in which the unfit are made literally to acquire the "distinguishing mark" that has made them victims in the struggle for the survival of the fittest. The stark alternatives of civilization or barbarism, Enlightenment progress or retrogressive servitude: these are the familiar terms of the eminent Argentine positivist, Domingo Sarmiento. In Vallejo's short story the struggle for existence has been lost and "civilization" proves to be imminently reversible into literal "barbarism." However, given the fact that much of Vallejo's writing makes very clear his political commitments to the oppressed indigenous population of Peru, we would want to argue that the very literalness of the story's species mutation seeks to satirize the Positivists' pseudo-scientific ideals of development and progress. The story would then be a critical allegory seen from the perspective of the social evolutionism that brands those outside "the march of civilization" as barbaric, unfit, or, in more contemporary terms, underdeveloped. Compelling as such an interpretation is in most respects, one aspect of the story remains outside its purview.

When the narrator returns to his village after years of absence to pursue his studies, he witnesses an eerie environment of "inexplicable destruction" and unending silence. Remembering the "anthropoid image" of his distant ancestor, the narrator admits to being "guided by a secret attraction" toward some terrible end (56). Following immediately on this admission, the dreaded but alluring "origin of the species" confronts the narrator most immediately: "the face of my father! . . . a monkey!" He proceeds to call his progenitor a caged gorilla and identify himself again and again as the bearer of civilizing light. All artificial light, including fire, has been eradicated and the narrator's efforts to reach his father of old ("I thought I had made a light in him") are mistaken for the natural light of a star ("Light! Light! . . . A star!" the anthropoid babbles between hair-raising screams). In the next and last encounter with his father, a whole tribe

of monkeys defiantly extinguishes the matches struck by the young man assuming the role of Prometheus. Certainly it could be argued that the “secret attraction,” the alluring but fearful image, consists of seeing his own father prey to this retrogression of species. An Oedipal struggle appears to underlie the narrator’s wish to usurp the parental “civilizing” role in relation to his father. There are after all several *Trilce* poems that dwell on the fall of the child into consciousness, knowledge and time as a result of the betrayal by the instruments of “civilizing light,” speech and the alphabet. And, to seal the case for a necessary psychoanalytic component to our interpretation, the narrator has cast himself as progenitor of the father who conceived him (the son). The young man’s reminder to the father of their familial bond serves as the redeeming catalyst momentarily transforming the monkey into a man of the greatest gentleness:

—My father!—I broke in to beg him, impotent and helpless to throw myself in his arms.

My father then suddenly laid aside his diabolical manner, calmed his wild appearance and seemed in one single impulse to rescue the night of his mind. He immediately slipped toward me, gentle, soft, tender, sweet, transfigured; a man as he must have approached my mother on the day in which their deeply human embrace extracted the blood with which they filled my heart and made it beat in time to the temples of my head and the soles of my feet. (57)

The narrator has himself created the “human” father in the very moment of the sexual encounter that engendered himself, the son. In so doing, the son has placed himself in the position of the “humanizing” mother, whose embrace transforms the “diabolical” male. The fantasy appears to be one of self-engenderment, asserting a freedom from biological generation as such. For even though the son superficially owes his life to the parents’ beneficent extraction of blood for their offspring, here, as in one of Vallejo’s poems, the consanguineous bonds have been inverted such that the son “sustained father/ and mother solely with [his] veiny circulation” (“sostuvo padre/ y madre, con su sola circulación venosa”).¹³

A fragment from the notebooks attributes the longevity of a biblical patriarch to the author’s father, while making the son’s response to that powerfully enduring presence quite clear:

I was far from my father for two hundred years and they wrote to me that he was living forever. But a profound sense of life produced in me the intimate and creative necessity to believe him dead.¹⁴

Focus on a psychoanalytic interpretation of "Los caynas" directs us to reexamine the climactic verdict delivered by a father against his son: "Poor thing! He thinks he is a man! He is mad!" (60). The father's words in this reading thinly veil a patriarch's defiant resistance to his son's maturity and autonomy; a father denies that his son is a man by virtue of being his father, while the son proves his manhood by bestializing his father and casting himself in the role of civilizing liberator. The Darwinian allegory, in this reading then, signifies the author's attempt to "put to death" or drive to extinction his own indentured origins.

Critical attention to this externalized narrative's one moment of quickly displaced self-recognition and interior reflection—"guided by a secret attraction . . . [to] the face of my father! . . . a monkey!"—produces a reading that clearly stands in polar opposition to the communitarian principles of a critical socio-political interpretation. Such a politically engaged interpretation is nevertheless preserved by the total trajectory of the story and in the semantic ambiguity of the father's climactic verdict ("Poor thing! He thinks he is a man! He is mad!"). The father, in such a reading, sardonically refers to the denial of humanity imposed on the Peruvian masses under the harsh capitalist exploitation legitimized by the scientific slogan, the "survival of the fittest." And the narrator at the end of the story is declared mad precisely because he insists he is a man (and not a monkey). Thus, in this reading, it is the Latin American's "mad" (quixotic?) nobility to insist inalterably on his culture and his history, all social evolutionists and positivists to the contrary.

The two interpretations are not easily reconcilable with one another, though Vallejo's text quite simply contains both adaptations of Darwinism to the social order: the dialectical materialism that destroys all systems of entrenched national and class privilege as well as a model of competitive individualism, albeit one displaced to the realm of the unconscious. The narrator's manifest desire that his father forget their Darwinian kinship with the beasts (or, allegorically, the expressed wish that they resist submission to the injustice of "inhuman" class domination) is tempered by a latent struggle with

and rejection of the father and, by extension, a rejection of the isolated and backward life that the father represents. In "Los caynas," an individualist struggle against paternal authority and the internalization of the unacknowledged judgment of the colonizer within the colonized disrupt the univocity of the socio-political interpretation. The psychoanalytic and the socio-political interpretations together do not so much create a critical pluralism as they do a fruitful dialectic in which political solidarity does not cancel out the destructive wish fantasies of the unconscious, nor do the textual fissures of the Oedipal struggle vitiate the political outrage of those perpetually branded as the servile, primitive and child-like ancestors of "advanced" capitalism.

This final scene of "Los caynas" registers all the ambivalence that the phrase "the human" entailed for Vallejo. The pressure of natural science to conceive of all human experience in materialist, if not entirely monistic terms, leads a complex and ambivalent life in Vallejo's writings. In "The Soul that Suffered from being its Body," for example, the common man fighting during the Spanish Civil War suffers to the point of becoming an "unfortunate monkey, Darwin's little one" ("desgraciado mono, jovencito de Darwin"). This bestial retrogression appears interchangeable with a monistic reduction of the spiritual aspects of the human being to a sum of bodily organs ("You suffer from an endocrine gland," "Tú sufres de una glándula endocrínica"). Though diminished to the size and stature of an "atrocious microbe," this reduction of the human to materialist origins and causes carries with it a set of associations not entirely negative. The enormity of the bestial suffering expunges the boundaries of the individual ego and produces a gratuitous heroism of interchangeable proper names ("nicolás or santiago, this one or that one" "nicolás o santiago, tal o cual") and an unaccountable strength, "an autonomous hercules," that memorializes the common man, the "unfortunate monkey." When the human soul suffers from being its body, historically situated suffering ("in the year '38") has turned into the utter subjection to natural history. It is as though Vallejo must reduce what is human to an unrelenting animal suffering incapable of experiencing relief in cognition or memory in order then to raise up and redeem that suffering only momentarily in some unexpected reassertion of the properly historical and human.

The question of how to read Vallejo's Darwinism captures a central interpretive problematic raised by the poetry and prose writings

alike: Is history as a human construct distinct from evolutionary natural history? How should we read Vallejo's relentless monist insistence on the constitution of reality by unmitigated temporal succession—literally or ironically? As an adoption of Haeckel's destructive monism? Or as an ironic intensification of reductive monism and thus a critique of Spencerian and Positivist social models? Vallejo's writings call for a dialectical interpretation that registers the power and authority of the natural scientific model and recognizes in turn that this model will ironically undermine any transfer of natural history to humanly constructed social and political bonds.

In a short fragment from the notebooks, Vallejo reflects on the crucial issue of whether Darwin or Marx is the correct interpreter of history. Is history simply another version of nature, a mirror reflection of evolutionary natural science?

Before the stones of Darwinian risk of which the palaces of Tuileries, Potsdam, Quirinal, the White House and Buckingham are constructed, I suffer the pain of a megatherium that meditates motionless, hind legs on Hegel's head and front legs on Marx's head.¹⁵

Great historical empires have now been reduced to extinction in a perpetual struggle of the fittest. The monumental permanence of famous seats of political power has eroded into the ruins of natural history. The scene is frozen into the motionless rigidity of an allegorical emblem. The observing "I" appears paralyzed into thoughtful silence. His meditation on this destruction brands him a megatherium, a large and long extinct mammal—the very animal whose bones Darwin dug up at Punta Alta on the Voyage of the Beagle. The "I" is rooted in (the heads of!) nineteenth-century dialectical thought at the same time that it has been rejected by natural selection. In many ways this piece recapitulates the antinomies of Vallejo's Darwinism: on the one hand, the human subject is completely immersed in the unprivileged species-being of unredeemed nature; on the other hand, the possibility of a collective human self-transformation, though not actualized, is always held open.

NOTES

1. César Vallejo, *Novelas y cuentos completos* (Lima: Mosca Azul, 1970): 53. All translations of Vallejo are my own.
2. César Vallejo *The Dialectics of Poetry and Silence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976): 10.
3. Ernst Haeckel, *The Riddle of the Universe*, Translated by Joseph McCabe. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1900): 37.
4. See the writings of the great contemporary essayist of natural history Stephen Jay Gould, especially *Ever Since Darwin*, (New York: Norton, 1973) for the uses and abuses to which Darwin's theory has been put.
5. Auguste Comte, *Early Essays on Social Philosophy*, translated by Henry D. Hutton, (London, 1911): 237-38. Quoted by John C. Greene, "Biology and Social Theory in the Nineteenth Century" in *Critical Problems in the History of Science*, edited by Marshall Clagett, (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1962): 422.
6. John C. Greene, *The Death of Adam* (New York: Mentor, 1961).
7. *Ever Since Darwin*, 38.
8. Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics: Or, the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed* (New York, 1882): 413, 426-27. Discussed by John C. Greene in "Biology and Social Theory," 431.
9. I rely on Leopoldo Zea for a general characterization of the positivists. See *Las ideas en Iberoamérica en el siglo XIX*, (La Plata, Argentina: Universidad Nacional de la Plata, 1957).
10. Leopoldo Zea, *Las ideas*, 42.
11. Leopoldo Zea, *Pensamiento positivista latinoamericano*. 2 volumes. (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1980): xiv.
12. "Discurso pronunciado el sábado 22 de agosto de 1891," in Leopoldo Zea, *Pensamiento positivista latinoamericano*, I:343.
13. "I have a terrible fear of being an animal/ of white snow" ("Tengo un terrible miedo de ser un animal/ de blanca nieve") in *Poemas humanos*.
14. César Vallejo, *Contra el secreto profesional*, (Lima: Mosca Azul, 1973), 42.
15. *Contra el secreto profesional*, 19.