

**BETWEEN THE DESERT AND
THE GARDEN: INSCRIPTIONS
OF ALTERITY IN THE WORK OF
JOSÉ ÁNGEL VALENTE**

Manus O Duibhir

LITERATURA ESPAÑOLA, TEORÍA DA
LITERATURA, E LINGÜÍSTICA XERAL /
ESTUDOS DA LITERATURA E DA CULTURA /
FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

2016

**BETWEEN THE DESERT AND
THE GARDEN: INSCRIPTIONS
OF ALTERITY IN THE WORK OF
JOSÉ ÁNGEL VALENTE**

Asdo.....

Manus O Duibhir

LITERATURA ESPAÑOLA, TEORÍA DA
LITERATURA, E LINGÜÍSTICA XERAL /
ESTUDOS DA LITERATURA E DA CULTURA /
FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

2016



I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my mother Maureen, who always told me one more story.



Acknowledgements

During my doctoral studies I was the beneficiary of the *María Barbeito* predoctoral funding program of the *Xunta de Galicia*, and also received support for travel to international conferences as part of my membership of the Research Groups of the *Área da teoría da literatura e literatura comparada: Unha análise da obra narrativa de Rosalía de Castro: fundamentos teóricos e metodolóxicos* and *La producción del lugar. Cartografías literarias y modelos críticos*

I would like to thank, first of all, my director, Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza, for his support and patience throughout this entire process. His rigour and intellectual seriousness have been exemplary. Among my colleagues in the *Área da teoría da literatura e literatura comparada* at the University of Santiago de Compostela, I have benefited greatly from the brilliance of teachers and colleagues, especially those that I have worked with most closely: María Rabade de Cebreiro, César Domínguez, and Margarita Candeira García. Claudio Rodríguez Fer facilitated my access to the *Cátedra Valente*, and provided many insights into the life and work of Valente. Fran, *el guardián del templo*, and the library staff at the *Facultade de Filoloxía* were extremely helpful and professional. I would also like to thank the members of the Hispanics Department at University College Cork: Stephan Boyd, with whom I spent the first of my *estancias*, and Martín Veiga, who read the thesis in its entirety. Thanks too go to Jonathan Mayhew, whose comments and advice were invaluable. At Trinity College Dublin, where I spent the second of my *estancias*, I would especially like to thank Caitriona Leahy, for her exceptional generosity and encouragement, and also Sarah Smith, David Scott, and Balasz Apor. Also at Trinity, my fellow students at the Long Room Hub, Feargus Denman, for whom the phrase *entretien infini* could have been invented, and Mairéad Ní Craith, Fergus Robson, and Tim Murtagh, offered me friendship, shelter, the odd pint, and, from their respective disciplines, multiple ways at thinking the world. In Dublin I also enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of the Trinity Philosophy Reading Group, and the hospitality of Norah Campbell and Cormac Deane. At the University of Liverpool I learnt much in my discussions of Iberian Jewish culture with Sizen Yiacoup. I have been supported throughout by friends – both longstanding and those I met along the way – and family. None of this would have been possible without Ana Bela, who was always *a mi lado, y más próxima a mí que mis sentidos*.

D'une poignée de sable nous ferons un commencement de jardin .

(Edmond Jabès)

*All the dead voices.
They make a noise like wings.
Like leaves.
Like sand.*

*Like leaves.
They all speak at once.
Each one to itself.
Rather they whisper*

*They rustle.
They murmur.
They rustle.
What do they say?*

*They talk about their lives.
To have lived is not enough for them.
They have to talk about it
To be dead is not enough for them.*

*It is not sufficient.
They make a noise like feathers.
Like leaves
Like ashes*

(Samuel Beckett).

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	11
CHAPTER I: FRAMING VALENTE	25
1.1 THE DESERT AND THE GARDEN.....	25
1.2 POETIC LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY.....	29
1.3 HERMENEUTICS AND THE WORD.....	35
1.4 VALENTE AND THE EARLY GERMAN ROMANTIC THEORY OF LANGUAGE.....	39
1.5 THE PHILOSOPHY OF ALTERITY	44
1.6 AESTHETICS AND ALTERITY	50
CHAPTER II: IMAGINATION AND THE POETICS OF KNOWLEDGE.....	55
2.1 CASSIRER AND LANGER: IMAGINATION AND THE POETICS OF KNOWLEDGE.....	55
2.2 IMAGINATION AND THE POETRY OF MEDITATION.....	62
2.3 AMBIGUITY OF THE IMAGE IN POEMAS A LÁZARO	71
CHAPTER III: VALENTE AND COMMUNITY.....	83
3.1 ANTIGONE: SPEAKING FOR THE OTHER.....	83
3.2 FIGURATION OF LANGUAGE IN THE EARLY POEMS.....	90
3.3 JEAN LUC NANCY AND THE UNWORKED COMMUNITY.....	101
3.4 VALENTE AND COMMUNITY: THE INTERRUPTION OF MYTH.....	108
3.5 COMMUNITY IN THE LATER POEMS.....	114
CHAPTER IV: THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDS.....	123
4.1 VALENTE AND JEWISH TRADITION.....	123
4.2 VALENTE AND SCHOLEM.....	127
4.3 SCHOLEM AND BENJAMIN: READING KAFKA.....	133
4.4 AMBIGUITY OF THE VOICE.....	139
4.5 THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDS.....	145
CHAPTER V: VALENTE AND JABÈS.....	149

5.1 POETRY AND EXILE	149
5.2 THE BOOK OF FLAME.....	155
5.3 VALENTE, THE BOOK, AND THE WRITING OF THE BODY.....	161
5.4 HOME AND HOMELESSNESS	167
5.5 VALENTE, JABÈS, AND THE FRAGMENT	175
CHAPTER VI: ASH: THE POETICS OF TESTIMONY IN VALENTE AND CELAN.....	185
6.1 VALENTE READING CELAN.....	185
6.2 AUSCHWITZ AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF TESTIMONY.....	192
6.3 NARCISSIM AND IRONY: VALENTE, JIMÉNEZ, AND MACHADO	198
6.4 MIRRORS OF THE OTHER	203
6.5 ORPHEUS AND MEDUSA.....	211
6.6 CONCLUSION: REMNANTS OF AUSCHWITZ/HIROSHIMA	218
CHAPTER VII: VALENTE AND THE POETRY OF THE BODY	221
7.1 THE SINGULARITY OF POETRY: VALENTE AND MARIA ZAMBRANO	221
7.2 THE INTERTWINING: MERLEAU PONTY AND THE FLESH OF THE WORLD.....	230
7.3 CORPORALITY IN THE EARLY COLLECTIONS.....	234
7.4 MATERIAL MEMORIA, MANDORLA, EL FULGOR.....	241
CHAPTER VIII: VALENTE AND THE POTENTIAL OF THE MATERIAL.....	253
8.1 MUSIC AND ROMANTIC IMMANENCE	253
8.2 METAMORPHOSIS AND MATERIALITY	257
8.3 POTENTIALITY AND MATERIALITY IN VALENTE’S POETRY.....	264
8.4 MATERIAL MEMORIA.....	271
8.5 TRES LECCIONES DE TINIEBLAS.....	279
CONCLUSION.....	287
ABBREVIATIONS	297
BIBLIOGRAPHY	299
APPENDIX: SUMMARY	319





INTRODUCTION

The depth and complexity of José Ángel Valente's work have provoked what Julián Jiménez Heffernan (2004) describes as an "industria (a veces comparsa) exegética montada en torno al poeta" (199). We can trace the development of this "industry" from the late 1970s, with Ellen Engleson Marson's short study of the *Poesía y poetica de José Ángel Valente* (1978), through the 1980s, with Milagros Polo's (1983) unapologetically subjective study of Valente's poetry and thought, in which she emphasizes Valente's position as a poetic and political outsider; Santiago Daydí-Tolson's (1984) analysis of the intertextual resonances in the poems, which he combines with a concern for the development of distinctive enunciative positions in Valente's poetry; Miguel Mas's short study (1989), more of an extended essay than a rigorously academic work, which offers a unifying vision of Valente's career as a search for the Word that underlies language; to, at the end of the decade, Eva Valcarcel's (1989) exploration of the central symbols in Valente's poetry.

At the beginning of the following decade, Claudio Rodríguez Fer edited two significant collections of essays (1992 and 1994) on Valente's work, with the first of these gathering important reviews and essays on the poet, allowing us to track the development of his critical reception in the readings of critics, fellow poets, and academics from the 1950s until the late 1980s. The 1990s also saw two other important collections of essays dedicated to the Galician poet: *El silencio y la escucha* (1995), directed by Teresa Hernández Fernández, and *En torno a la obra de Valente* (1996), the result of a colloquium on Valente's work held at the Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid. At the start of the new century, Nuria Fernández Quesada's anthology, which is accompanied by short texts by

philosophers, literary scholars, and poets, *Anatomía de la palabra* (2000), reflects the sustained attention paid to Valente's writings, despite the prevailing *poesía de la experiencia* of the time. Armando Lopez Castro's two collections of essays (2000 and 2002) provide, respectively, a reiteration of some of Valente's major theoretical statements, and a close reading of the later collections running from "Interior con figuras" to "Fragmentos de un libro futuro," whereas Antonio Dominguez Rey's *Limos del verbo* (2002) brings together a number of articles and reviews that draw upon the phenomenological tradition that is so pertinent to Valente's thought.

In the 1990s, Valente's work also attracted approaches that could be framed within a more generally deconstructive perspective. Jiménez Heffernan's 1998 study of the links between English metaphysical poetry and the Spanish tradition, *La palabra emplazada: Meditación y contemplación de Herbert a Valente*, culminates in a chapter dedicated to Valente's poetry, in which the author claims that "lo que precede no ha sido más que una larga excusa para poder hablar de Valente" (327), and combines an erudite investigation of the Galician poet's approximations to metaphysical poetry with theoretical reflections that owe much both to the work of Harold Bloom, but also, if in a critical vein, to the legacy of the work of Paul de Man, and in the more specific context of the study of Spanish poetry, Philip Silver. Jiménez Heffernan also devotes various essays collected in *Los papeles rotos* (2004) to Valente. José Manuel Cuesta Abad (1999) concludes his exploration of the rhetoric of the enigma, indebted to the thought of Blanchot and Derrida, and to the broader twentieth century hermeneutic tradition, and which includes essays on literary figures that are of central importance for Valente – Mallarmé, Celan, Zambrano – with a discussion of the Galician poet's conception of a foundational *antepalabra*. Cuesta Abad also participated in the aforementioned collection curated by Teresa Hernández Fernández, with

an essay that traces the tendency in Valente's poetry towards a dissolution of the poetic self in the indeterminacy of the corporal, and contributes an important essay on the negative categories – *silencio*, *vacío*, *nada* – in Valente's poetry in the more recent collection dedicated to his work, the publication from 2010, edited by Jordi Doce and Marta Agudo, *Pájaros raíces en torno a la obra de José Ángel Valente*. Also in the 1990s, and again taking an approach that is indebted to aspects of the deconstructive moment, the American scholar Jonathan Mayhew dedicated a chapter of his *Poetry of Self-Consciousness* to the “logocentrism” of Valente's late work (1994: 66-79), identifying within it a tension, similar to that which I will explore in this thesis, between Valente's poetics of plenitude and a hermeneutics of infinite deferral. In this regard, Mayhew writes: “In many cases, his self-conscious poetic manifestos refer not to their own practice but to an ideally infinite language that is unrealizable by its very nature. In the poetics of the ineffable, a poem that fails to live up to its stated intention cannot necessarily be considered a failure, since its aim – to say the unsayable – is never intended to be achievable” (74).¹

In the first decade of the twenty first century, Valente's work was the focus of a number of doctoral studies. Carlos Peinado Elliot's *Unidad y transcendencia: estudio*

¹ Mayhew has been one of the major Anglophone commentators of Valente's work, and has been consistent in placing Valente's poetry in the context of a “late modernism” that would include writers such as Beckett and Celan. For Mayhew (2009), Valente's “poetic achievement resides in a kind of distillation, or *translation*, of a Heideggerean tradition of poetic modernity, in a specifically Spanish context.... Valente is not the originator of the modern tradition: he is, rather, the quintessential *late* modernist, putting the pieces together in brilliant but belated fashion” (86). Mayhew's readings of Valente are insightful and in consonance with the influence of Heideggerean philosophy on his thought, an influence which, as Mayhew remarks, is also present in Zambrano's work. I would argue, however, that Valente's work, and his reading of the philosophical tradition, does not place him in a “belated” high modernist position in relation to contemporary literary trends. I argue that Valente's engagement with the post-heideggerean philosophy of Levinas, and the wider tradition of what I term philosophical and poetical alterity, but which could also be loosely termed “postmodern,” means that his writing and thought develop in ways that are fully contemporaneous with the philosophical and poetical currents of his time, despite what seems his anachronistic position in the context of the more playful poetry of the *novísimos* of the 1970s and the realist poetics of the 1980s. Valente's work does not remain “behind” others in an imaginary temporal succession of styles. Rather, he chooses to develop his poetry in a trajectory that exists alongside alternative possibilities.

sobre la obra de José Ángel Valente (2002) unifies the dialectic of immanence and transcendence in Valente's work under the rubric of an *eros* for the Levinasian category of the Other. David Conte Imbert's *La palabra de lo singular: figuraciones del origen entre lírica y filosofía* (Martin Heidegger, Claudio Rodríguez, José Ángel Valente) (2006) contains important reflections on Valente's theorization of the material in terms of Heidegger's later philosophy, reflections that are summarized in his contribution to *Referentes europeos en la obra de Valente*, which also contains essays by Manuel Fernández Rodríguez, Jonathan Mayhew, María Lopo, and Rosa Marta Gómez Pato (2008). The year 2008 marks a veritable cascade of academic theses centered on the Valente's work. Manuel Fernandez Rodriguez's doctoral thesis (2008) is exhaustive in its rendering of Valente's narrative production, whereas José A. de Ramos Abreu (2008) is equally thorough in his mapping of Valente's theorization of poetry, and the context in which theorization took place. In the same year, José Luis Fernández Castillo's study of the convergences between the work of Valente and Octavio Paz, *El ídolo y el vacío: La crisis de la divinidad en la tradición poética moderna: Octavio Paz y José Ángel Valente*, explores both poets' relation to the transcendent in the context of the modern "death of God"; Fatima Benlabbah's *En el espacio de la mediación. José Ángel Valente y el discurso místico* (2008) provides a fascinating reading of Valente's engagement with the traditions of Sufi mysticism, and touches on aspects of Valente's reading of Jewish tradition that I will explore in depth here. For her part, Ioana Ruxandra Gruia explores the centrality of the work of T.S. Eliot for both Valente and Jaime Gil de Biedma in her *Escribir el tiempo: Huellas de la obra de T.S. Eliot en la obra de José Ángel Valente y Jaime Gil de Biedma*. Finally, the following year saw the publication of Jorge Machín Lucas's *José Ángel*

Valente y la intertextualidad posmoderna mística, which reads Valente's poetry and thought in terms of a postmodern "religious turn."

We can add to these academic works the recent journal issue dedicated to the poet, the "Dossier sobre José Ángel Valente" that appeared in *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* (2014), which comes twenty years after the special edition of *Insula* dedicated to the poet's work in 1994. Recent years have also seen the recent publication of two biographical works on the poet published by the *Cátedra Valente*, *Valente Vital* (2012 and 2014), the collection of essays derived from a conference on Valente's work that took place in Almería in 2010, *El guardian del fin de los desiertos*, the publication in 2012 of the poet's *Diario anónimo*, edited by Andrés Sánchez Robanya, and the recent edition of a number of autobiographical short prose texts, collected in the appendix of the *Obras completas II*, under the title *Palais de justice*.

This necessarily abridged enumeration of the critical attention Valente has received reflects the repercussion of his poetry, and especially his philosophically inflected theories of language, in Spanish literary and academic circles.² The ever increasing academic production is a challenge to anyone attempting to create new readings of Valente's work. The question arises as to whether it is possible to say anything new with regard to a poet who has had many expert readers. Perhaps more pertinently, given that any study of Valente must in some ways draw on previous studies, every new reading must in some way consider its relation to previous interpretations, and how it can build on these. In this

² Despite Valente's tendency to depict himself as an outsider figure with regard to Spanish letters, he is, as Marcela Romano writes in 2002: "...considerado, hoy, uno de los mayores poetas dentro del campo intelectual español, y precisamente se encuentra en el centro (no en los márgenes) de muchas discusiones. Desde ya hace más de una década ha sido varias veces premiado, su poesía fue objeto de diversos encuentros y jornadas, y existen libros y revistas monográficas dedicadas con exclusividad a su producción. La extensa bibliografía circulante en torno a su obra y aquí citada da clara cuenta de ello. Por otra parte, muchas casa centrales dentro del mercado editorial español han publicado y publican su obra: Seix-Barral, Tusquets, Alianza, Cátedra, Círculo de Lectores" (141).

introduction I will frame these questions in terms of the readings of Valente I regard as especially relevant to the arguments that I will develop in this thesis. I will attempt to show how these readings of the poet suggest the general approach that I will take towards Valente's work.

The first of these readings is José Manuel Cuesta Abad's contribution to *El silencio y la escucha*, "La enajenación de la palabra." Here, with admirable concision, Cuesta Abad raises many of the tensions that I argue are central to an understanding of Valente's poetry and thought:

Las creaciones poéticas en las que toma forma la crisis ideológicamente múltiple de la modernidad comparten con las más antiguas concepciones de la poesía una aparente fascinación común: la experiencia imaginaria de la plenitud del Ser. En términos demasiados generales, digamos que la poetización de esa experiencia tiende en sus comienzos a una plasmación afirmativa de las intuiciones ontológicas, mientras que cede, en los casos más significativos del agonismo estético moderno, a la seducción de una negatividad abismal que se recrea a menudo en un sentimiento de vacuidad metafísica. (49)

That is to say, if the crisis of modernity has meant the death of God and the absence of metaphysical grounding for human knowledge and language, this crisis has been felt in the tension between Romantic conceptions of poetry according to which Being comes to presence in the poem through the workings of the imagination, and a post-Romantic, or counter-Romantic, poetry, in which the poem points to the abyss or absence of a fundamental metaphysical ground. For Cuesta Abad, however, this absence of a fundamental metaphysical ground coincides with a modern "concepción *in-trascendente*" of poetic language, an ambivalence that implies that "la negación de trascendencia metafísica convive con la sacralización formal de la inmanencia (meta)poética" (51). It is in this context that Cuesta Abad understands Valente's work as "un modelo de tematización de la crisis ideológica que subyace a los principios constructivos de

numerosas poéticas de la modernidad post-romántica” (52). The pathological desire to experience the plenitude of Being in words that are perceived as alienated from this foundation, a suffering for the *logos*, manifests in the poems in the thematization and figuration of the insufficiency of language, in images of solitude, darkness, and emptiness, which accompany an evocation of an originary linguistic foundation, but also a thematization of the “materialidad” of poetic language. For Cuesta Abad, in modernity this original language remains as a “reverberation” in a poetry that performatively, and in its very materiality, refers to what it cannot say: “Lo que reverbera al fin en la palabra enajenada de Valente es el deseo de expresar el Lenguaje genesiaco y purificador que el mito eternamente nos promete y la historia en el tiempo nos deniega” (66).³

Cuesta Abad’s reading brings us to the heart of the tensions that characterize modern poetry in general, and Valente’s poetry in particular, and which are defined by the desire to ground and resacralize poetic language in the context of an achieved nihilism. In the chapter that concludes Cuesta Abad’s *Pájaro y enigma*, these tensions are framed in terms of Wittgenstein’s claim, in section 6.4312 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, that “the solution to the riddle of life in time and space lies outside time and space”(87). As Cuesta Abad notes, the phrase refers to the difficulty of speaking of that which exceeds the limits of a language that is inherently spatial and temporal. For Valente’s poetry, we might say that the absolute Word that exists outside space and time can only be expressed in human language through a demonstration of the necessary insufficiency of language, a demonstration that mystical tradition has carried out through its paradoxical linguistic

³ For Valente, writing in the context of the mystics, it is precisely this desire for the absolute that constitutes the human, as it is what exceeds necessity. Writing on San Juan de la Cruz, Valente comments: “El deseo sería la faz verdaderamente humana de la necesidad. No hace el hombre que desaparezca, sino que la hace sobreaparecer, la hace sobrevivir a su satisfacción. Sería así el deseo la necesidad sobrevivida. En cierto modo, la reducción de la necesidad, de las necesidades – fin de toda ascética – es inversamente proporcional al crecimiento del deseo – fin de toda mística” (OCII: 396).

practices, what Michel de Certeau (1982) describes as the specific “manières de parler” (156) of the mystics.⁴ Cuesta Abad claims, in an argumentation that is similar to the Anselm’s ontological proof of God’s existence, that the linguistic capacity to speak of an “outside” of language necessarily implies this outside, a presupposition of language that is at the same time foundational and unavailable: “Que la palabra poética anuncie lo que enuncia supone una anterioridad que, sin embargo, no contrae relación ninguna con un acaecer posterior o con una posteridad sucesiva y sucedida en la que la lo enunciado-anunciado se consumaría haciéndose presente” (311). The difference between pre-modern religious belief and modern nihilism is that this “outside” of language is understood, in the former context, as ultimately remitting to the divine, and in the latter context, as leading towards a fundamental absence.

We might move here to the second reader of Valente with regard to whom I configure my work, the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben. Agamben has written on Valente – the talk he gave on the poet at a conference that took place at the *Residencia de Estudiantes* in Madrid in 1992 is included in the collection *En torno a la obra de Valente*. I will give a more detailed reading of this essay in a later chapter, but in this introduction I prefer to turn to one of Agamben’s earlier essays, in which he lays out the fundamental aspects of the theory of language that informs his reading of Valente, a theory that is relevant to our discussion here. This essay, “The Idea of Language,” originally published in Italian in 1984 in the magazine *Aut Aut*, forms part of the collection of essays, published in English in 1999, *Potentialities*. In it, Agamben explores the concept of revelation in the

⁴ Referring to the deictic status of the mystical oxymoron, De Certeau writes: “D’autre part, l’oxymoron appartient à la catégorie des ‘métasémèmes’ qui renvoient à un au-delà du langage, comme le fait le démonstratif. C’est un déictique: il montre ce qu’il ne dit pas. La combinaison des deux termes se substitue à l’existence d’une troisième et le pose comme absent. Elle crée un trou dans la langage. Elle y taille la place d’un indicible” (1982: 198-199). I will discuss the importance of deixis in Valente’s work in a later chapter, in the context of Giorgio Agamben’s writings on Auschwitz and poetic testimony.

context of Anselm's ontological argument. Revelation is that which is absolutely heterogenous to reason. It is not the case that revelation is paradoxical or absurd; it is rather a truth that founds reason, but that cannot be expressed in the form of a linguistic proposition. What is revealed in revelation is rather "unveiling itself, the very fact that there is an openness to a world and knowledge" (40). For Agamben, and in the context of the modern absence of the divine, revelation is implied in every discursive utterance, but only if we understand revelation as the revelation of the necessary presupposition of the existence of language itself, that which opens for us a world and knowledge. The ontological argument, according to which naming the divine necessarily implies its existence, would, in this context, apply to language, the only entity that is necessarily presupposed in every utterance.

Agamben argues that the philosophical discourse of modernity is fundamentally bound to this thought of the fact of language, and, equally, that contemporary philosophy is acutely aware of the insufficiency of its language, its incapacity to construct a meta-language that could speak the necessary presupposition of language that is implied in every saying. For Agamben, this is the case with hermeneutics, in which "every act of speech also renders present the unsaid to which it refers, as an answer and a recollection" (44), but also with the grammatology of Derrida, though in the "negative structure of writing and the *gramma*" (44).⁵ Ultimately, this leads to the situation in which "what theology proclaimed to be incomprehensible to reason is now recognized by reason as its presupposition. All comprehension is grounded in the incomprehensible" (45). Like Wittgenstein's fly, we see through the glass, but we cannot see the glass itself. In modernity, the presupposition of language takes the place of God, leaving us with no metaphysical foundation for our

⁵ For a discussion of the complex relation between Agamben and Derrida that describes the commonalities and difference in their approaches see Donohue (2013) and Attell (2014).

words:

Nihilism experiences this very abandonment of the word by God. But it interprets the extreme revelation of language in the sense that there is nothing to reveal, that the truth of language is that it unveils the Nothing of all things. The absence of a metalanguage thus appears as the negative form of the presupposition, and the Nothing as the final veil, the final name of language. (45)

Philosophy then truly becomes the handmaiden to theology, with its most fundamental truth an incomprehensible presupposition. But even more, philosophy now pulls back the veils of ontology, theology, and psychology, leaving us for the first time in our history completely alone with words, with no divine Word to limit the infinite play of meaningful propositions. If it is true that language is the absolute presupposition of all enunciation, and that we cannot return to a foundational ontology or theology that would ground our truth claims, the task of philosophy, for Agamben, is to find, beyond nihilism, a way to speak the medium of our knowledge, to maintain “a discourse that, without being a metalanguage or sinking into the unsayable, says language itself and exposes its limits” (46). In this essay, Agamben identifies this discourse in a Platonic “idea of language” itself, which he describes as language which is neither a word (a metalanguage), nor an object outside language (God, the Name, etc.). Rather, the “idea of language” is language as immediate mediation, a “vision of language itself” that “constitutes the sole possibility of reaching a principle freed of every presupposition” (47).⁶ In this way, Agamben believes that there is an alternative to philosophies that understand language as an infinite play of propositions that cannot find an anchoring in entities that exist beyond subjective intention, philosophies that he takes to be nihilistic.

As we will see, these considerations are of great relevance to a reading of Valente’s

⁶ We might liken Agamben’s description of the “vision of language” to what Valente describes when he writes, taking from Ernst Bloch’s notion of the *vor-schein*: “Palabra inicial o antepalabra, que no significa aún porque no es de su naturaleza el significar sino el manifestarse” (OCII: 302).

work, which can be understood as a struggle with the limits of language. If at times Valente seems to claim that the poetic word takes on the fullness of Being, and at others seems to resign himself to a language that cannot grasp that of which it speaks, a struggle José Olivio Jiménez (1972) describes as the dialectic of “palabra plena, palabra hueca” (238), Agamben’s theories of language might provide a way out of the dilemma of mystification and nihilism that have haunted modern poetry since the Romantics. Equally, however, we should note that these are complex problems, and in no way should Agamben’s theories be seen to provide a solution or a definitive reading of Valente’s work.⁷ Rather, they allow us to better trace the tensions that underly the his poetry and poetics, and also point to a tendency in twentieth century European philosophy, exemplified in the work of the various thinkers that I will place in relation to Valente in this thesis – María Zambrano, Emmanuel Levinas, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, Jacques Derrida, Maurice Merleau Ponty, Jean Luc Nancy – to attempt to think beyond, or otherwise to, the ontological and theological categories that constitute the backbone of Western philosophical tradition.

It is in this context that we can turn to an important work on Valente that is pertinent to the themes that I will develop in this thesis – Carlos Peinado Elliot’s indepth study of Valente’s poetry and thought, *Unidad y transcendencia*. Peinado Elliot describes, from a Levinasian perspective, the place of otherness in Valente’s work, and sees within it a “dialogical” poetics dedicated to the other that opposes a totalizing “ontological” poetics that is part of the legacy of Idealism. Concluding, Peinado Elliot writes:

⁷ As Miguel Casado notes, in perhaps one of the most insightful essays written on Valente’s work: “La necesidad de totalizar que impulsa a la crítica y comparte el propio autor en su proyección extratextual (ver sus entrevistas, por ejemplo) choca con el carácter conflictivo de su práctica y la defensa que siempre realizó de lo fragmentario. Quizá su lectura requiera en este momento recordarlo, reemprender el camino desde los poemas sin grandes pretensiones: solo hacer pie, recuperar un terreno abierto, incluso a costa de que parezca que se rebajan los objetivos” (2012: 154).

A lo largo del presente trabajo hemos analizado la crítica de la totalidad procedente del idealismo, hasta llegar al sí mismo separado de todo. La unidad se reconstruye a partir del amor, en el cual se revela el Otro. La reconstrucción de la unidad sigue en la obra de Valente dos caminos, semejantes a dos corrientes filosóficas que han partido de la crítica al idealismo: el pensamiento dialógico y la ontología. Mientras que en el primero el Otro mantiene siempre la más radical y absoluta trascendencia, en el segundo se muestra subordinado al Ser. En la obra de Valente aparece desde el Otro que jamás puede ser absorbido por el Mismo, entablando una relación eterna con éste mediante el deseo, hasta la disolución completa en el Universo. En esta investigación hemos fijado nuestra atención fundamentalmente en la trascendencia, el absoluto que no se diluye en la totalidad. (437)

Peinado Elliot's identification of a division between a dialogic and ontological thought is similar to the tension that I will define as central to Valente's work, and with him I identify a structure of immanent transcendence that is characteristic of both Levinas's philosophy and aspects of Valente's poetry.

In this thesis, however, I am more interested in emphasizing the contradictions that are inherent in Valente's poetry and poetics, and will argue that the tension between these two paths for thought is a productive one that defines Valente's work. Whereas the Romantic poetics of the imagination upon which Valente at times draws posits the unity of word and world, and the ideal of a community bound by a common mythical resources, the philosophers of alterity which inform many of his ideas define literature precisely as that which resists the mythic identification of the individual with the whole in the immanence of community. Similarly, the ways in which Jewish mystical tradition has, in the twentieth century, come to be paired with a hermeneutics that defers ultimate meaningfulness, an intellectual pathway that is central to many of Valente's reading of major Jewish writers of the twentieth century, is difficult to reconcile with the Christological resonances of the Romantic theorization of the symbol, and the twentieth century inheritors of these ideas – Ernst Cassirer and René Guénon, to name but two writers that inform Valente's more

positive theories of poetic language – that are key to understanding aspects of Valente’s poetry and poetics. Valente’s thematization of the feminine, and his deployment of the binary clichés of a masculine rationality and a feminine creativity that would be synthesized in a poetic androgyny, leaves him open to justified feminist critique.⁸ On the other hand, we can see in Valente’s readings of Sophocle’s *Antigone* how the poet resists the traditional placing of the feminine outside the fields of politics and history; rather, in Valente’s understanding, Antigone is the only character in the play capable of effecting historical change.

I argue that these tensions in Valente’s work can be indicated by two fundamental tropes through which he defines language. The first is that which defines the spatial locus for the nostalgic evocation of an originary pure language, the language of the garden; the second is the fragmented language that relates to an absence the poem does not overcome, the language of the desert.⁹ In this thesis I will explore these tensions, contextualizing them

⁸ In an interview with Nuria Fernández Quesada included in *Anatomía de la palabra*, Valente describes his vision of a feminine imaginative creativity: “Cada escritor, hombre o mujer, tiene una androginia fundamental. Desde el punto de vista masculino, el hombre tiene que dar una gran libertad a su elemento femenino para que salgan en él los elementos de sensibilidad, de imaginación, que son propios de este” (141). Valente leaves himself open here to the charge of essentialism. In this regard, Diane Fuss (1990) writes: “Essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the “whatness” of a given entity. In feminist theory, the idea that men and women, for example, are identified as such on the basis of transhistorical, eternal, immutable essences has been unequivocally rejected by many anti-essentialist poststructuralist feminists concerned with resisting any attempts to naturalize human nature” (xi). In feminist theory the articulation of an anti-essentialist framework is often associated with the positions articulated in Judith Butler’s seminal *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, which argues for the performativity of gender roles as opposed to the perceived essentialism of a previous generation of feminist thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and Julie Kristeva. Feminist theory since the 1990s, including Fuss’s own work, has tended towards complicating this polarity, and one could cite in this regard the work of Elizabeth Grosz (1994), Vicky Kirby (1997), and Karen Barad (2007). Jonathan Mayhew identifies some of these tensions in Valente’s work in “El signo de la feminidad: Género y creación poética en José Ángel Valente,” which forms to the special edition dedicated to Valente in *Insula 570-571* of March, 1994. For Mayhew: “Aunque sus ensayos y poemas hacen eco de las teorías de escritura femenina, a la vez perpetúan la tradición de la escritura masculina que presenta a la mujer como objeto” (13).

⁹ I choose these two tropes, which occur at various times throughout Valente’s work, because of their profound cultural resonance, and because of the ways in which both spaces have been associated with theories of language within Western cultures. The space of the Garden remits to the Biblical Eden, and the perfect language of Adam and Eve, in which, as Umberto Eco remarks, “the *modo essendi* of things were identical with the *modi significandi*” (45). The many cultural resonances attached to the desert include exile and solitude, the going out of the people of Israel from Egypt in

both in terms of Romantic theorization of the absolute, but also in terms of a the continental philosophy of the postwar. In this sense, too, my work differs from Peinado Elliot's, in that his thesis, at least in terms of twentieth century philosophy, is based almost entirely on the presuppositions of Levinas's work. In my approach, I explore Valente's poetry and thought from the perspective of a series of thinkers and poets – Maurice Blanchot, Walter Benjamin, Jean Luc Nancy, María Zambrano, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, Edmond Jabès, Paul Celan – who, despite their diversity, can be gathered together in terms of their commitment to, or philosophy of, alterity. From this perspective I will argue that it is possible to read Valente's work beyond, or otherwise to, the alternatives of being and nothingness, the garden and the desert, and to plot the ways in his work in which the futility of the attempt to recover a pristine past is replaced with hope in a future yet to come.¹⁰

the Old Testament, but also with the ascetic practices of the Early Christians. The Biblical exile of the Jews in the desert finds a linguistic equivalent in the fallen nature of human language after the expulsion from the Garden and the confusion of tongues after Babel. In modernity, it is connected with nihilism and the retreat of the divine. Vicente Luis Mora (2010) discusses the centrality of the metaphor of the desert in Valente's work: "Desgarramiento, fractura. He ahí la clave. Desajuste *orgánico* entre el interior del hombre y el mundo, sensación de herida, soledad interior, apartamiento. El desierto como metáfora natural del desafuero interno. El vacío, el silencio, la nada como elementos retóricos que surgen de manera instintiva. El poeta *fuerte*, el privilegiado, como sensor sociológico superdorado de esa fractura psicológica, que intenta asociar con la cultura, convertir en cultura mediante un lenguaje en vías (tortuosas) de extinción, escribir 'desde el desierto, / pues de allí ha de nacer un clamor nuevo'" (426). I will further explore the importance of the desert for Valente in a later chapter dealing with his reading of the work of Edmond Jabès.

¹⁰ In this regard, I argue, with Jordi Arduñuy (2010), that Valente's poetry is ultimately orientated towards a utopian future: "...o la palabra es un signo imperfecto por su "indeterminación" – y entonces la poesía, la cultura toda, no es más que un juego – o es testimonio simbólico de una infinitud espiritual y, por tanto, contiene un germen verídico de utopía. Los ensayos de Valente, como su poesía, están comprometidos con la segunda opción y son un valioso aporte al humanismo que en ella se funda" (201). I will, however, attempt to show the ways in this utopian vision is arrived at only through a complex engagement with a literary and philosophical context which offers both conservative and nihilistic alternatives to the crisis of modernity.

CHAPTER I: FRAMING VALENTE

1.1 THE DESERT AND THE GARDEN

In an interview given at the end of his life, published on the 3rd of May, 2000, in the cultural section of the *La Vanguardia* newspaper, Valente describes a childhood experience. In the years directly after the war, when the prisons of Galicia were full of republican fighters or sympathizers, the *rojos*, Valente's father brought him to visit some friends who had been incarcerated for their political sympathies. Valente recounts meeting the gaze of the imprisoned men and the influence this experience had on his later political sensibilities – “desde entonces yo soy rojo” (3).

Valente's childhood identification with the *rojos* is indicative of the ethical stance that in some ways defines his adult life, a stance that could be described, in the terminology of the twentieth century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, as a commitment to otherness or alterity. Valente's understanding of the history of the Iberian peninsula is framed in terms of this commitment. He sees the process of state formation as defined by the marginalization or destruction of difference. As he remarks in an essay from 1993, “Poesía y exilio”:

El 31 de marzo de 1492 empieza en la historia peninsular y, en términos generales, en la historia de la Europa moderna, el ciclo de las grandes diásporas con la expulsión de los españoles judíos. La península ibérica había sido hasta entonces tierra de recepción, de acogida, de mezcla, de impura y germinal diversidad. Ese signo de incorporación y de cruce se invierte para dar paso a una estructura político-social caracterizada por el cierre y la exclusión. La ideología y la estirpe, la Inquisición y la limpieza de sangre imponen su ley. No hay cabida para protestantes, erasmistas, alumbrados, judíos, moriscos o – más tarde, pero como fenómeno de igual naturaleza – para afrancesados, masones, republicanos. Se inicia así un prolongado y tenaz proceso de aplastamiento de la diferencia en un país que había nacido y se había conformado en la diversidad. (OCII: 681)

Though Valente's vision of pre-reconquest Iberia may be somewhat idealized,¹¹ his statement reflects an interest in the historically marginalized religious, cultural, and political traditions of the peninsula, a commitment to otherness that takes on a particular relevance to the contemporary landscape of postwar Europe.¹²

In this thesis I aim to explore Valente's poetry in term of this commitment to otherness. I will argue that Valente's ethical stance can help us to understand the tensions inherent to his theory of poetic knowledge, his reading of the poetry of contemporary Jewish postwar writers, Paul Celan and Edmond Jabès, his relationship to Spain and Galicia and the problematic notion of community, the importance of the body, as well as the presence of death and the elegiac in his work. I believe that an approach to Valente's poetry and poetics from this perspective allows us to place his poetry in the context of philosophical and literary responses to the absolute violence of the twentieth century. In order to explore this relationship between Valente's poetry and an ethics of alterity, however, it is necessary to attend to the tensions within his work, between a poetics of plenitude, a poetics that remits to the symbolic space of the garden, and a poetics of negativity, the spatial equivalent to which would be the desert.

Valente's poetry has been described, following his own description of Juan Ramón Jiménez's work, as a constant circling around an immobile center.¹³ His speech at the

¹¹ As Richard Fletcher (2000) writes: "Early medieval Spain was multicultural in the sense of being culturally diverse, a land within which different cultures coexisted; but not in the sense of experiencing cultural integration.... It is a myth of the modern liberal imagination that medieval Islamic Spain was, in any sense that we should recognize today, a tolerant society" (84).

¹² Tony Judt (2005) describes the period after the second world war as one in which the cosmopolitanism that had once characterized many parts of Europe is replaced by a network of "hermetic national enclaves where surviving religious or ethnic minorities – the Jews in France, for example – represented a tiny percentage of the population at large and were thoroughly integrated into its political and cultural mainstream" (8).

¹³ Julián Jiménez Heffernan cites Valente's description of Juan Ramón Jiménez's poetry to describe Valente's own work: "...los distintos períodos de la obra de Juan Ramón Jiménez no dibujan una progresión horizontal, sino una especie de progresión circular alrededor de un centro absolutamente inmóvil" (qtd. in Jiménez Heffernan, 1998: 329).

Círculo de Bellas Artes in 1999 seems to confirm this, in its recognition that his first poem, “Serán ceniza,” contains in potential the major themes of his entire production. It is also true that his ethical stance remains the same throughout his career: Valente always sympathizes with the unorthodox, those that remain outside of or are oppressed by structures of power. Is it possible, however, to identify paradoxes, or *grietas*, in his poetics?¹⁴ Perhaps one of the most obvious ambiguities in Valente’s work is his figuration of the *vacío*, whether in mystic, Mallarmean, Heideggerian, or post-structuralist guise, and the related infinite deferral of meaning, and his poetics of knowledge, which itself derives from a lineage of thought which we can trace to the writings of Vico and Humboldt, the Romantic theorization of symbol as unity of word and world, T.S. Eliot’s description of the “objective correlative,” and the theory of symbolic forms of Ernst Cassirer and Susanne K. Langer.¹⁵ This division can be related to tensions in the modern theorization of the subject: to the ungrounded subject that cannot know itself in the irony of the early German Romantics, Friedrich Schlegel, and Novalis, and the postmodern subject who is constituted

¹⁴ I follow here the provocative comments of José Luis Gómez Torres (2014), who, discussing the contemporaneity of Valente’s work, writes: “...frente a la tentación simbolista de la Gran Obra, tal vez haya que asumir que en buena medida una obra sigue siendo contemporánea no tanto a pesar de sus contradicciones como en buena medida a causa de ellas. Como si a través de sus fisuras, de las grietas que ponen en peligro el edificio asomaran inesperadas ventanas, otras posibilidades de sentido” (4). Similarly, Marcela Romano (2002) perceptively describes the various tensions within Valente’s writings: “Al tiempo que trabaja con los materiales programáticos de la poesía social precedente, parece reescribir(se) con la voz utópica de la modernidad y de otros imaginarios trascendentalistas, para, en ocasiones, problematizar estos paradigmas en la puesta en escena de las facturas y carencias de una palabra ya imposibilitada de significar, en los bordes de todo relato moderno” (11). For his part, Miguel Casado describes the interpenetration of opposing poetic attitudes throughout Valente’s career, and the ways in which his poetry contradicts and anticipates the positions set out in his poetics: “Hay al menos dos poéticas en los ensayos; pero no puede encontrarse una correlative division en dos de la poesía: no es que ésta sea, ni mucho menos, unitaria, pero mantiene siempre una forma similar de moverse, de relacionarse consigo misma” (2012: 157).

¹⁵ Arthur Terry (2002) notes this ambivalence in Valente’s work in relation to the contrast between the epistemological confidence of “Conocimiento y comunicación” and the more circumspect deferral of meaning in “La Hermeneutica y la cortedad del decir.” Terry writes: “Aunque los últimos resultados de esto tardarán algún tiempo en mostrarse en su poesía, no hay duda que representa un momento decisivo en lo que piensa Valente de la creación poética. Del conocimiento al ‘no conocimiento’, o, mejor dicho, al ‘conocimiento de un no saber’: esto es la fuerza directora de una gran parte de la poesía posterior de Valente” (126).

precisely by a lack of self-identification, we can oppose the subject that is ultimately transparent to itself in the modern tradition that stretches from Descartes, to Kant, and to Hegel.¹⁶ In wider terms, these divergences in modern conceptions of language and subjectivity relate to the problematics of modern nihilism, the lack of grounding for values and knowledge in a culture that has lost its ultimate metaphysical foundation.¹⁷

These *grietas* perhaps allow for some new readings of Valente's poetry, and also for the possibility of elaborating on the dilemmas that face a poet who combines a Romantic heritage with a postwar sense of ethical commitment. In the context of the contemporary Spanish literary history, and the dispute between a *poesía de la experiencia* that would regard aspects of Valente's poetic theory as mystified¹⁸ (Valente for his part refers witheringly to the poetry of the *otra sentimentalidad* in his final interview¹⁹), perhaps a reading of Valente's work attentive to the contradictions in his poetic theory, and the wider context within which these contradictions arise, could allow us to approach the work from a position that requires neither an act of poetic faith, nor a rejection of it based on an empirical skepticism. To carry out this task we must first return to the Romantic moment,

¹⁶ Paul de Man relates what he terms the "aesthetic ideology" of Romanticism to conceptions of subjective self-identity. Referring in the landmark essay, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," to contemporary criticism's conception of Romanticism, de Man remarks: "There is the same stress on the analogical unity of nature and consciousness, the same priority given to the symbol as the unit of language in which the subject-object synthesis can take place, the same tendency to transfer into nature attributes of consciousness and to unify it organically with respect to a center that acts, for natural objects, as the identity of the self functions for a consciousness" (1983: 199-200).

¹⁷ As Jurgen Habermas (1987) notes: "Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; it has to create its normativity out of itself. Modernity sees itself cast back on itself without any possibility of escape" (7).

¹⁸ Luis García Montero writes, alluding implicitly to the work of Valente: "El tradicionalismo se disfraza de odios direrentes según los tesoros que vigila.... Concibo la poesía como un oficio, un género de ficción que necesita el conocimiento técnico y muchas horas de trabajo. No se trata de dar testimonio notaria de una vida, sino de crear vida y experiencias morales en el artificio del texto. Frente a la cursilería decimonónico del silencio lírico y las esencias ocultas, prefiero aceptar que la poesía es una cuestión de palabras" (qtd. In García Visor, 569).

¹⁹ Responding to a question posed in "Una encuesta de 2000" as to whether literary or everyday experience is most important for poetic creation, Valente responds: "Sería, ciertamente, muy de agradecer que los poetas o grupos epigonales en quienes encuentra origen esta falsa cuestión empezasen a ir a la escuela" (OCII:1614).

and to the tensions that exist in the formulation of Romantic and Idealist theories of poetic language, tensions that I argue are also relevant to a reading of Valente's poetry.

1.2 POETIC LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

The tensions in Valente's poetics can be identified in a close reading of two major statements on the nature of poetic language, "Conocimiento y comunicación," written in 1957 and first published in 1963, and "La hermenéutica y la cortedad del decir," which was first published in the *Amaru* magazine in 1969 – both essays would form part of the collection of essays, *Las palabras del tribu*, published in 1971. In "Conocimiento y comunicación," Valente elaborates a poetics that hinges on the relationship between experience, memory, and poetic language. The essay should be read in the context of Vicente Aleixandre's apology for poetry of 1955, in which Aleixandre defended, in consonance with the work of the poet and literary critic Carlos Bousoño, the idea that poetry should first of all have a communicative function.²⁰ Valente opposes this idea. For the Galician poet, poetry, more than communication of a pre-existing reality, is the reconstruction of an experience that is lost in everyday communicative language. Valente argues that in this way the poem is a form of knowledge, that it reconstitutes singular and unrepeatable experiences that escape articulation in everyday language. We can identify here the influence of T.S. Eliot and his concept of the "objective correlative," which the American poet defines in his essay from 1921, "Hamlet and his Problems," as the poetic capacity to create emotional states.²¹ For Eliot, the poem does not communicate an

²⁰ Aleixandre's views were first expressed in a series of aphorisms published in 1950 in *Insula* under the title "Poesía, moral, público," and later elaborated upon and published under the title *Algunas caracteres de la nueva poesía española* (1955). For the context and significance of these debates within the contemporary discourse on poetic language in the Spanish literary sphere, and Valente's protagonism in this regard, see Ramos Abreu (2008: 23-58).

²¹ Ioana Ruxandra Gruia explores the influence of Eliot in the work of Valente and Jaime Gil de Biedma in her doctoral dissertation, *Escribir el tiempo: Huellas de T. S. Eliot en Jaime Gil de Biedma y José Ángel Valente*. She traces the ways in which Valente's relationship to Eliot is mediated by Luis Cernuda's prior engagement with the English literary tradition,

emotional or psychological interiority. As he explains in an essay from 1933, “The Modern Mind,” “...the poet may hardly be aware of what he is communicating; and what is there to be communicated was not in existence before the poem was completed. ‘Communication’ will not explain poetry” (138).²² Valente argues, taking from Eliot, and the Eliot influenced work of Eliseo Vivas, that the poem makes manifest an aspect of reality that is its “object,”²³ and that this object can only be known through the creative process: “Todo poema es, pues, una exploración del material de experiencia no previamente conocido que constituye su objeto. El conocimiento más o menos pleno del objeto del poema supone la existencia más o menos pleno del poema en cuestión” (OCII: 42). Poetry’s value, from this perspective, lies in its capacity to reconstitute the singular aspects of experiences that escape our everyday language. The citation from Marcel Schwob’s *Vies Imaginaires* that

and strengthened by his spell as a *lector* in Oxford, during which he read Eliot’s work intensely. Ruxandra Gruia quotes from an interview Valente gave in 1993: “El estar fuera de España, y concretamente en Inglaterra, en mis primeros tiempos de poeta, fue determinante para que yo no me sumara a la mera copia- que es lo que abunda- de Cernuda. Yo entiendo las influencias de otra forma: hay que seguir los pasos de quien admiras, reconstruir su itinerario y tratar, como dice Harold Bloom, de destruirlo y superarlo. Intento hacer eso en Inglaterra. Allí entré en contacto, en su propia lengua, con poetas inglesas que para mí fueron muy decisivos: en la generación mayor, Eliot, y en la siguiente, Auden. Leo intensamente a Eliot en poesía y en prosa y el ensayista me lleva de la mano a la poesía metafísica, que el mismo trajo a la poesía moderna. Por esa vía, Eliot me acercó a Cernuda, quien realizó una trayectoria similar a la de él” (qtd. in Ruxandra Gruia, 8). Julián Jiménez Heffernan’s *La palabra emplazada: meditación y contemplación de Herbert a Valente* is a brilliant exploration of these connections in the context of a reading of English metaphysical poetry, a theme to which he returns in the essay “Cernuda por razones equivocados” (2004). Carlos Peinado Elliot (2003) compares the final fragment of Eliot’s “Little Gidding” with Valente’s *El fulgor*, in terms, relevant to this thesis, of Levinas’s philosophy. Jordi Doce (2005: 27-28) provides the background to the arrival of Eliot’s work in the Spanish literary sphere in the attempts of the poets gathered around the *Cruz y raya* literary magazine to “rehumanize” Spanish literature in a neo-Catholic vein after the exhaustion of the avant-gardes, an influence that is especially noticeable in Valente’s *Poemas a Lázaro*.

²² These lines are underlined in Valente’s edition of Eliot’s *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, which dates from 1955. We can presume that Eliot’s arguments provided part of the intellectual armature for Valente’s intervention in the contemporary polemics of *conocimiento vs. comunicación* in which his essay partakes.

²³ Valente derives this terminology from Eliseo Vivas’s “The Object of the Poem,” included in the collection of essays, *Creation and Discovery*, from 1955, according to which “The poet’s gift consists in discovering the not-yet-discovered subsistent values and meanings that make up his poem’s object in the creative act which is the revelation of that object in and through the language to his own and to his reader’s minds” (138). Another important intellectual genealogy that informs this essay is the theory of symbolic form, which stretches from Susanne K. Langer, to Ernst Cassirer, to Humboldt, and to Vico. We will refer to the importance of this tradition, and its implications for a theory of the imagination, in our second chapter.

Valente includes in a footnote to the essay could serve as a definition of his own conception of poetry: “El arte...se sitúa en el extremo opuesto de las ideas generales: no describe más que lo individual, no desea más que lo único. El arte no clasifica; desclasifica” (qtd. in OCII: 41).²⁴

Poetic language attentive to the singularity of experience is opposed in the essays that make up this collection to what Valente repeatedly refers to as the “crystallized” discourse of ideology. In “Tendencia y estilo,” first published in *Insula* in 1961 and later forming part of *Las palabras del tribu*, Valente criticizes poets who follow the fashionable tendencies of literature in place of developing a genuine style, arguing that slavish adherence to the tenets of the social realism of the postwar era ultimately resulted in an avoidance of reality, as to unthinkingly follow a trend or “tendencia” is to fail to develop a unique style, which for Valente is necessary for the art-work to reveal truths that can only be grasped through artistic expression. Literary social realism in this context would be “fruto de un fenómeno de cristalización ideológico del pensamiento marxista que, operando en contra de sus propios enunciados, vino a coartar gravemente las posibilidades de acceso del escritor a la realidad” (OCII: 61-62).²⁵

The struggle between poetry as mere ideological conveyor of a supposed pre-existent reality and poetry as discovery of reality is represented for Valente in Sophocles’s

²⁴ Valente quotes Flaubert in this regard in the entry for the 9th of May, 1980 of the *Diario anónimo*: “Para describir un fuego llameante y un árbol en la llanura, permanezcamos ante ese fuego y ese árbol hasta que no se parezcan, no se nos parezcan, a ningún otro árbol y a ningún otro fuego” (DA: 196).

²⁵ Here Valente is questioning the tenets of the predominant social realism of the first generation of poets after the Spanish civil war. In a wider sense, Valente’s argumentation reflects a contemporary European debate as to the social value of poetry. As opposed to Sartre, who argues in his 1948 essay, *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, that lyric poetry is essentially autotelic and therefore apolitical, Valente here shows the influence of Adorno’s description of the social value of poetry, his contention in “Lyric poetry and society,” that poetry, like all great art, “gives voice to what ideology hides” (1991: 39)

Antigone, which he discusses in an essay written in 1968, “Ideología y lenguaje.”²⁶ For Valente, Creonte represents the order of the city and the revealed God, whereas Antigone represents the realm of possibility, the possibility of new Gods and an alternative social order: “Antígona existe para forzar una nueva manifestación de lo divino que, en última instancia...consiste en la sanción de una nueva órbita de humana libertad” (OCII: 76). Antigone’s resistance to the law of the city also implies a resistance to its language. For Valente, language under totalitarian regimes becomes corrupt, a public language that “es necesario preservar de toda grieta, de toda fisura, de todo cambio” (OCII: 77). Poetic language has a restitutive value in this context. In its creative becoming it resists crystallized ideological discourse, and it is in this sense that Antigone restores “la palabra de raíz poética, creadora y, por eso mismo, denunciadora de un lenguaje público que reducido a la inmovilidad impositiva del discurso ha perdido validez, es decir, se corrompe, está corrupto” (OCII: 77). Poetic language is tied to movement and becoming.²⁷ Opposed to an immobile and totalizing institutional language, it provides an unfolding knowledge of singular and unrepeatable aspects of experience, breaking open a crystallized, totalizing language and revealing the possibility of movement towards an alternative future.

Valente’s theorization of the relation between poetic language and society in his essays from the 1950s and the early 1960s betray the influence of the Eliotean critical

²⁶ Antigone is a key figure for Valente, and he refers to the character on various occasions throughout his work. The relevance of this discourse, which constitutes a resistance to totalitarianism is clear, and I will develop these connections in a later chapter.

²⁷ In the essay “El poder de la serpiente” Valente describes Alexandre’s *Pasión de la tierra* in a way that could apply to his own literary aspirations: “Corresponde a *Pasión de la tierra* el momento de fluida apertura de una palabra poética explosiva y libérrima que ninguna opción condiciona. Es el mundo de las formas insumisas, de las formas que se destruyen para perpetuar su multiplicación; el mundo de la forma como acción, como generación ... pues lo que existe en verdad no es la forma, sino la trans-forma o la meta-forma, la metamorfosis o la transformación” (OCII: 170).

environment to which he was exposed during his spell in Oxford as *lector*.²⁸ Valente's time in Oxford coincides with the era of "New Criticism" in English letters, and the predominance of the Cambridge lecturer F.R. Leavis. In the *Diario Anónimo* entry for March 1961, Valente writes "Conocimiento y comunicación – F.R. Leavis p.13" (60), referring to Leavis's influential *New Bearings in English Poetry*, a work to which he also approvingly refers in his "Oxford, 1956," published in the *Indice de artes y letras* of the same year. Leavis argues in this work that Romantic poetry, understood as the "direct expression of simple emotions" (9), had, by the end of the nineteenth century, decayed into a pretentious poetastry, a dream language removed from the realities of social life. For Leavis, this poetry was inadequate to the conditions of twentieth century mass society; the modern poet (the paradigm here is Eliot) should be "unusually sensitive, unusually aware, more sincere and more himself than the ordinary man can be" (13), and capable of uniting his unique insight with expressive means that would, given the social conditions of the twentieth century city, be very different to those adequate to the world of the early nineteenth century. It is important to note that this adequation will not be on the level of thematics; paraphrasing Eliot, Leavis quips that if the motor car enters poetry it will do so as the "modern's perception of rhythm has been affected by the internal combustion engine" (24). Poetry, then, is the privileged discourse that, in the totality of its rhythm and organization, can be the "objective correlative" to the affective life of the twentieth century city-dweller. The quality of the poem will depend on the extent to which it is able to suggest and discover emotions that are adequate to the age. What Eliot, in his well known

²⁸ Valente was a *lector* in Oxford from the years 1955 to 1958, during which time he researched the influence of Spanish, and especially Catholic devotional, literature on English letters of the time. He also managed to unearth an original manuscript of Gongora's *Soledades*, a discovery that brought him into conflict with his erstwhile teacher in Madrid, Dámaso Alonso. Manuel Fernández Rodríguez (2012: 311-490) provides a full account of Valente's time in Oxford, and the poetic influences he cultivated there, in *Valente vital (Galicia, Madrid, Oxford)*.

discussion of the metaphysical poets, describes as the “disassociation of sensibility,” would be the disjunction in English literature from the seventeenth century between emotion and thought that can only be recovered through a poetry that conforms in its rhythms and images to the social configuration within which it is written.²⁹

The influence of these ideas on Valente’s thought are made especially clear in his reading of the poetry of Rafael Alberti in the essay “La necesidad y la musa,” first published in *Insula*, in May, 1963. Here Valente follows the critical presuppositions of the Eliot and Leavis to the letter, defining one of the central problems of the modern age as the “quiebra entre la experiencia personal y la experiencia colectiva,” which he connects to “el problema de fondo al que aludía Antonio Machado al referirse al agotamiento de la lírica y al desgaste de lo que él ha llamado sentimentalidad romántico simbolista” (OCII: 159). For Valente, the disintegration and atomization of modern societies is expressed in the work of the modern writers (he lists Kafka, Musil, Faulkner, Camus, and Beckett) in “formas exasperadas de la subjetividad, de lo patológico, del absurdo, de la inmovilidad de la condición humana, en la sustitución de un universo de seres próximos o prójimos por un universo de individuos adyacentes o contiguos clausurados en su experiencia personal y en la mitificación, por último, de la incomunicabilidad de esa experiencia” (OCII: 159). The necessity that confronts the writer is to move beyond these myths of corrosion towards a new mythology of the collective.³⁰ It is in this sense that Valente reads the significance of

²⁹ As Eliot writes: “The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Guinicelli, or Cino. In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden” (1948: 287-288)

³⁰ Valente indicates the Romantic provenance of these ideas when he quotes, in the same essay, a letter from Schelling written to Hegel in 1796: “Mientras no hayamos transformado las ideas en obras de arte, es decir, en mitos, carecerán de interés para el pueblo” (OCII: 161). It is important to note that the moderns were also concerned with the possibility of creating a new mythology for contemporary life. As Robert Langbaum writes in his *The Poetry of Experience*, in words

Alberti's turn away from the neo-popularism and neo-baroque fashionings of his earlier collections towards the anti-rhetoricism of the poems from the 1930s, his *El poeta en la calle* and *De un momento a otro*. This turn marks, for Valente, Alberti's attempt to arrive at a "mitificación de lo nuevo" (OCII: 163), in which the means of poetic expression would be adequate to the social conditions in which the poetry exists. Alberti's subsequent return to Gongorism presents, in this context, a self-acknowledged failure, in which the poet recognizes his incapacity to marry form and content: in Eliot's terms, Alberti wallows in his "disassociation of sensibility."³¹

1.3 HERMENEUTICS AND THE WORD

Valente's arguments for the social value of poetry are related to a poetics of origins, a poetics that is explicitly formulated in his 1969 essay, "La hermenéutica y la cortedad del decir."³² Here Valente elaborates on the links between poetry and memory described in "Comunicación y conocimiento":

El más breve poema lírico encierra en potencia toda la cadena de las rememoraciones y converge hacia lo umbilical, hacia el origen....Toda operación poética consiste, a sabiendas o no, en un esfuerzo por perforar

that Valente underlines in his edition of this work: "Eliot and Joyce show with uncompromising completeness that the past of official tradition is dead, and in this sense they carry nineteenth-century naturalism to its logical conclusion. But they also dig below the ruins of official tradition to uncover in myth an underground tradition, an inescapable because inherently psychological pattern into which to fit the chaotic present" (10).

³¹ Valente's reading of the career of Miguel Hernández, also included in *Las palabras de la tribu*, mirrors in many ways his understanding of Alberti's trajectory. For Valente, the neo-baroque virtuosity of Hernández's Gongora inspired first collections hides a more profound voice that comes to the fore in the less rhetorical civil war poems, which, according to Valente, because of their simpler form are more adequate to the reality they aim to convey: "Me parece claro en todo caso que estamos ante productos distintos de la actividad poética, no solo porque los medios expresivos se hayan depurado o cambiado, sino porque esa depuración o cambio responde a un planteamiento diferente del poema mismo. Se trata, simple y llanamente, de que el poema converja o no con todos sus medios hacia la realidad; de que esos medios existan sólo en función del contenido de realidad que el poema revela; de que, por último, ese contenido de realidad y la estructura verbal en que se aloja sean inseparables" (OCII: 183).

³² David Conte Imbert (2006) reads this nostalgic aspect of Valente's work in the light of Heidegger's later philosophy. For Conte Imbert, Valente's work is defined by a desire for an origin that is always "desplazada": "La existencia misma del poema nos muestra así la vigencia del desgarrar, por el que sigue pronunciándose en virtud de una quiebra enunciativa que, para el sujeto de dicho enunciación o el flujo de lenguaje que lo atraviesa, reconoce en su configuración desgarrada la actualidad de su propio origen" (642).

el túnel infinito de las memoraciones para arrastrarlas desde o hacia el origen, para situarlas de algún modo en el lugar de la palabra, en el principio, en *arkhé*. (OCII: 82-3)

These lines are reminiscent of those from Eliot's "The Dry Salvages," which assert that "the past experience revived in the meaning / Is not the experience of one life only / But of many generations – not forgetting / Something that is probably quite ineffable: The backward half-look / Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror" (1963: 195). Both poets here sustain a poetics of origins that can be traced, in part, to the theories of language developed in Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. If, for the neo-classical age, language was a transparent conveyor of content, with differences between languages deemed insignificant as compared to a supposed neutral propositional content, for the Romantics, language and life are intimately related, as each language allows for a culturally specific expression of lived emotions that are formalized in literary tradition. Thus, the literary forms remit to the emotional life of generations – a culture's emotional life is fossilized in literary expression. Eliot and Valente both reveal the influence of the Romantic theories of language in their belief that lyric poetry constitutes an archive of the communal emotions and experiences that elude historical record, and that each word implies an infinite thread of possible meanings that ultimately remit to an pre-discursive origin, whether a "primitive terror" or a generative but non-significant *logos*.³³

The *antepalabra* Valente describes is a fundamental element of his poetics, re-occurring throughout his essayistic production. In this chapter it is impractical to attempt to

³³ Though Eliot famously rejected the Romantics in favour of the metaphysical poets, much of his poetic theory is, as Jordi Doce notes (2005: 37-66), fundamentally bound up with Romantic theories of language. This Romantic heritage is reflected in his positing in "On Poetry and Poets" of a correlation between language and the expression of the emotional life of a people (the fundamental intuition of Humboldt), and in the claim that language should approximate to the spoken language of a given epoch, a claim that, as Doce shows, for Cernuda becomes the criteria through which to evaluate Spanish literary history. Valente's distrust of rhetoric is perhaps derived from this conception of the superiority of poetry that thinks more than sings – the Eliotean preference for Donne over Milton.

trace the various elaborations on the theme of the poetic desire for a foundational but inaccessible *logos* in the entirety of Valente's writings. I will instead focus on one of the most definitive declarations of Valente's theory of poetry, the reading given at the *Círculo de Bellas Artes* in the year 1999. Valente begins his talk with a comparison of the Biblical *logos* from the Gospel of St. John and the Melasian word *No*, which, according to the ethnographical research he relies upon, means word, act, and thought.³⁴ The chief of the Melasian community is this word, the incarnation of Being, and thus, on their contact with Christianity, the Melasians allegedly demonstrated a profound interest in the first lines of the Johannine gospel, *en arche en ho logos* (in the beginning was the word). The poetic word, for Valente, is conditioned by a consideration of this *logos*, the *antepalabra* which, without entering into signification, contains in potential the totality of language. Poetic language would be, from this perspective, a language that is defined by its approximation to this foundational Word which is "eje o piedra capitular de toda auténtica creación poética; una aproximación, digo, a la palabra, al verbo, al *logos*" (OCII: 1593).

Poetry that relates to this foundational Word relates to a fundamental otherness that is unavailable to the rational capacities of humans. Speaking in the context of the mystical heritage that so influences his work, Valente can describe poetry as the expression of the "entender no entendiendo" or "intelligere incomprehensibiliter" of San Juan de la Cruz and Nicolás de Cusa. The poem in this sense is the fragment of an experience of absolute alterity – for the mystics, an experience of the divine, or in the post-theological worldview of modern philosophy, an unmediated experience of the noumenal thing in itself beyond

³⁴ Valente derives his information from the 1947 study of Maurice Leenhardt, *Do Kamo: La personne et le mythe dans le monde mélanésien*. It is interesting to note that Leenhardt's conception of the function of the word *No* in Melasian culture is in fact closer to a more contemporary theorization of the performativity of speech acts, as opposed to the theological resonances that Valente draws from his research. For a critical study of these ideas see Clifford (1982: 210-213).

consciousness – and therefore a language of the desert that records its own insufficiency:

Empieza la palabra poética en el punto o límite extremo en el que se hace imposible decir. Es necesario llegar al borde, al precipicio donde comienza lo imposible. Viaje, dice Georges Bataille, al término de lo posible. Y esa palabra no pertenece propiamente a la ciudad, sino que a la ciudad le sobreviene o le llega. ¿Y de dónde viene y qué dice esa voz? Viene de un no lugar. Viene del desierto, real o simbólico. (OCII: 1594)

For Valente, this limit experience implies of an emptying of the subject, in which creativity is related to a passive “escritura por espera” or “escritura por escucha” (OCII: 1597) in the empty spaces – desert, unfurnished rooms, bare passageways – that form the enunciative locations of his poetry. Paradoxically, the process of self-kenosis allows for the tracing of origins, which Valente describes as a descent into three realms of experience and memory: that of the person, the community, and ultimately, the material.³⁵ In each case the poem is a fragment that attempts to incarnate or recuperate aspects of these realms that are lost in the passage of time: “El poeta ha vivido una experiencia y la palabra se hace revelación espontánea del discurrir sin que la voluntad del poeta la determine” (OCII: 1605). Again, we are reminded of the Eliotean “objective correlate,” and might recall here the lines from Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, which Valente quotes on many occasions throughout his life: “we had the experience but missed the meaning. And approach to the meaning restores the experience in a different form” (1963: 194).

It is from this perspective that we can understand Valente’s arguments in “La hermenéutica y la cortedad de decir,” in which he reads Michel Foucault’s *Les mots e les choses* and *Le naissance du clinique*, and explores Foucault’s assertion that words, as signifiers, hold in themselves infinite potential – their infinite interpretability. This is a “cadena fatal” (OCII: 84) of interpretation which Valente wryly abides by as he interprets

³⁵ Valente describes the trajectory of his poetic career as following: “el ciclo de descenso a la memoria personal, el ciclo del descenso a la memoria colectiva, y el ciclo del descenso a la memoria de la material, la memoria del mundo” (OCII: 1595).

Foucault's ideas in terms of one of the "grandes *topoi*...de la poesía europea" (OCII: 84), the ineffability of mystical experience or the "cortedad de decir" (OCII: 84). Here Valente introduces the mystical thematic that is central to his work as a whole. The paradox of mystical experience is that those who undergo it lose themselves in ecstasy, but on their return from this state seek to express their experience in words. The contradictory and oxymoronic language of the mystical poets thus makes visible its inadequacy with regard to the experience it wants to express:

En efecto, la cortedad del decir, la sobrecarga de sentido del significante es lo que hace, por virtud de éste, que quede en él alojado lo indecible o lo no explícitamente dicho. Y es ese resto acumulado de estratos de sentido el que la palabra poética recorre o asume en un acto de creación o de memoria. (OCII: 88)

The argument is paradoxical: the poetic language of the mystics expresses an infinite incapacity to assume meaning, but expressing this insufficiency allows for the presence in language of the unspeakable. Valente's description of the insufficiency of language remits to the long tradition of mystical paradox, the knowledge in ignorance that is often described as light in darkness. It also coincides with the modern conception of language, exemplarily formulated in the work of the early German Romantics, Novalis, Hölderlin and Friedrich Schlegel, and renewed for modern poetry in the work of Mallarmé, according to which human language is a fallen, fragmented remnant of the originating *logos*, the constituting but now absent linguistic plenitude or *vacío* towards which moves the absolute desire of the poem.³⁶

1.4 VALENTE AND THE EARLY GERMAN ROMANTIC THEORY OF LANGUAGE

³⁶ For a sophisticated reading of the relation between Valente and Mallarmé in terms of the negativity or "vacío" of poetic language see José Manuel Cuesta Abad (2010). The importance of Mallarmé for Valente's work is reflected in his use of words from the "Tombeau de Edgar Allan Poe" as title for his first collection of essays. I will elaborate on the Mallarmé's theories of poetic language and their relevance for Valente's work in a later chapter.

Valente's poetics involve a certain ambiguity. There are points at which Valente suggests that poetry is not only a form of knowledge, but that it is capable of embodying real presence, that the poetic word is a type of revelation, if not of the divine, then of the very material of experience. Conversely, the *antepalabra* or *logos* that is at the center of Valente's work is often posited as an absence; the poetic word always "approximates" to its absolute foundation, and is a fragment, residue, or remnant, of that which is always unavailable.

Valente's discussion of language in "La hermeneutica y la cortedad del decir" exhibits many of the aspects of the Romantic poetics of origins that thought since the 1960s has taught us to distrust, but at the same time it seems to contradict his more confident assertions as to the capacity of poetic language to constitute a special type of knowledge in the symbolic unification of the ideal and the sensual, and this tension continues throughout his poetic career. How are we to understand this apparent paradox, and what does it imply for the ethical stance that underlies his work? To understand what is at stake in these questions it is necessary to return to the original formulations of the modern theory of literature, ideas that make possible Valente's theory of poetic language, and the contradictions it entails.

The roots of the tensions that underlie Valente's poetics in *Las palabras del tribu* can be traced to the writings of the early German Romantic project, which itself arises as a response to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant had limited the powers of human knowledge with his critiques. Post-Kantian philosophy had to deal with his demolition of philosophical ontology and rational theology, the fact that Kant had proved that human reason can have no knowledge of the thing in itself or of the absolute. Kant's immediate successors, Jacobi, Reinhold, and Fichte, will try to reintroduce the possibility of a relation

to the absolute through, respectively, feeling, intellectual intuition, and subjective idealism. The writers of the *The Earliest Program for a System of German Idealism* – Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin – would, on the other hand, place the aesthetic at the height of all possible knowledge, and claim that ideas must become sensual, a new mythology, in order to achieve universal progress:

I am now convinced that the highest act of reason is an aesthetic act, in that reason embraces all ideas, and *that in beauty alone are truth and goodness joined together*, The philosopher must possess as much aesthetic power as the poet. The people with no aesthetic sense are our philosophers of the letter. The philosophy of the spirit is an aesthetic philosophy.³⁷ (1997: 72-73)

The belief that philosophy cannot attend to its ultimate content – the unrepresentable absolute – stimulates the early Romantics to compensate for this failure with what has been termed a “speculative theory of art,”³⁸ in which the aesthetic object would embody that which eludes the rational capabilities of reflection, or what Kant calls the understanding. These ideas are incorporated in English language poetics in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his theorization of the unifying powers of the imagination as manifest in the poetic symbol, which he famously describes in *The Statesman’s Manual* as:

The translucence of the Special in the Individual, or of the General in

³⁷ Hegel will eventually repudiate these ideas, arguing in his *Aesthetics* that Art is a thing of the past. Though for Hegel art can give knowledge of the absolute, it only does so on the level of intuition, and is therefore inferior to the knowledge arrived at in religion and philosophy. It is interesting to note, also, the inherent anti-Judaism in the text, with the philosophy that limits itself to the level of understanding described as the philosophy of the letter, whereas the union of the ideal and the sensual in beauty is the Christian philosophy of the spirit, reflecting the Christological resonances of the Romantic and Idealist theorization of symbol. In this regard George Steiner writes in his *Grammars of Creation* (2001): “When we speak of analogy, of allegory, of symbolism, of formal and substantive transformations, when we invoke ‘translation’ in the full sense, we adduce, consciously or not, the evolution of these key terms from within the patristic, early medieval and scholastic labours to define, to explain, the perpetually repeated miracle of Holy Communion.... At every significant point, Western philosophies of art and Western poetics draw their secular idiom from the substratum of Christological debate (67).”

³⁸ The term comes from Jean Marie Schaeffer’s well known study, *L’art de l’âge moderne*, which describes the development of the relationship between poetry and philosophy from Kant to Heidegger. For Schaeffer, the sacralization and essentialization of art within the modern tradition has impoverished our understanding of the real practices of artists, and robbed us of a critical (and criticable) language through which to understand their works.

the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part of the Unity, of which it is representative. (1972: 30)

Manfred Frank, in his *Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism* describes the development of this idea in early German Romantic thought, especially that of Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel, in which poetry would present that which is unrepresentable, the absolute, through irony, fragment, and wit. As opposed to the function of myth in the *Earliest Program for a System of German Idealism*, or the theorization of the symbol of Schelling and Coleridge, in which the universal would shine through the particular, the fragmentary poetics of Schlegel maintains that poetry presents only negatively, through an aesthetic revelation of the infinite longing that defines the “I.” In Schlegel’s Romanticism, as opposed to the near contemporary Idealism, it is impossible to come to know the ultimate presuppositions that ground our knowledge. In this respect his thought is inimical to that of Hegel, for whom philosophy consisted in the progress of absolute self-knowledge through the dialectical workings of the Spirit.³⁹ For Schlegel, on the other hand, as Frank remarks, “self-being owes its existence to a transcendent foundation, which does not leave itself to be dissolved into the immanence of consciousness” (178). The impossibility of integrating this otherness into a philosophical system of knowledge, or reaching complete subjective self-identity is, for Schlegel, mitigated by the aesthetic capacity to present the unthinkable in beauty. As Frank writes:

³⁹ Elizabeth Zaibert Millan (2007) emphasizes the difference between the fragmentary project of the early German Romantics and the totalizing ambitions of their Idealist contemporaries: “The work of the early German Romantics was not work that awaited completion, even culmination, in Hegel or Schelling. The themes of incompleteness and incomprehension that we find in their work are reflected in the literary forms that they used to present it: the use of the fragment, for example, was *not* the result of a lack of resolution, a blameworthy incompleteness, in the sense of something that was meant to be finished and never was. Early German Romantic philosophy is incomplete not because the Romantics *failed* to finish their work but rather because they were convinced that a complete system could never be built” (46).

The inexhaustible wealth of thought with which we are confronted in the experience of the beauty of art becomes a symbol of that which in reflection is the unrecoverable foundation of unity, which must, due to structural reasons, escape the mental capacity of dual self consciousness. Early German Romanticism, in a polemical dismissal of the classical use of this term, names this type of symbolic representation allegory. (178)

The early German Romantic conception of symbolic language is not, however, to be confused with the Idealist theorization of the symbol in which the ideal would be present in the sensual. Rather, what Schlegel terms allegory and Romantic irony is the result of the essential instability of the attempt to present that which is unconditioned in the conditioned forms of art. The poem reveals the existence of the absolute, but only in the sense that it makes visible its infinite failure to express that which is inexpressible in the conditioned media of human artworks. Frank argues that the thought of the early German Romantics, as opposed to the systematic philosophies of Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling, leave the door open for the anti-foundational philosophies of the twentieth century. When Novalis writes “Everywhere we seek the unconditioned but find only things” (qtd. in Frank: 24), he is pointing towards an attitude in which seeking without hope of finding an absent absolute becomes the only recourse of a thought that aims to ground itself in the traditional categories of metaphysics.⁴⁰

The early German Romantic approach coincides with Valente’s arguments in “La hermenéutica y la cortedad del decir.” For the Romantics, the experience of the aesthetic object does not provide us with knowledge of the absolute; rather, the experience of beauty negatively confirms for us the existence of the absolute which we cannot know through reflection. But it is important to remember, if we take into account the developmental path

⁴⁰ We might recall here the arguments of Gianni Vattimo (1988), perhaps the most ardent defender of the nihilistic tendency in late twentieth century philosophy, for whom “weak thought” is a way “of experiencing truth, not as an object that can be appropriated and transmitted, but as a horizon and a background upon which we may move with care” (13).

that Frank sketches for early Romantic thought, that in modernity, and in Valente's work, this absolute comes to be figured as a fundamental absence, a *nada* or *vacío*. On the other hand, Valente's arguments for the power of poetic language to reconstitute that which is lost in experience, as outlined in "Comunicación y conocimiento," seem to have more in common with Romantic theories of poetic symbol in which the unifying powers of the imagination would allow for an elevated form of knowledge and a confirmation of subjective self-identity. This second vision of poetry as a form of knowledge relying on the power of the imagination, which in the twentieth century will be taken up by Ernst Cassirer, Elias Vivas, and Susanne K. Langer, is on the other pole of the movement that defines Valente's poetics. In the following sections I will outline the difficulties inherent in Valente's championing of a poetics of imagination in the context of his appropriation of a contemporary philosophy of alterity, the leading figure of which is Emmanuel Levinas.

1.5 THE PHILOSOPHY OF ALTERITY

We have identified a major division in the thought of the Romantic period, between a Speculative Idealism, the representative of which would be Hegel, in which a total system comprehends the absolute in the subject's coming to know itself, and according to which the power of the imagination expressed in the poetic symbol would combine the intelligible and the sensuous, and a tendency within early German Romanticism towards an ungrounding of the subject in relation to a transcendent absolute that can never be comprehended in human knowledge, and only negatively presented in the allegorical or ironic procedures of a fragmentary art. It is instructive, in this regard, that the major philosopher of alterity in the twentieth century, Emmanuel Levinas, should title his first major work *Totalité et infini*. Levinas, too, identifies a fundamental division in modern Western thought, between totalizing systems under which all singularity would be

subsumed, and philosophical approaches that retain a transcendent realm that is absolutely other. For Levinas, as he comments in interview with Phillippe Nemo, “Toute la marche de la philosophie occidentale aboutissant à la philosophie de Hegel, laquelle, à très juste titre, peut apparaître comme l’aboutissement de la philosophie même” (80). And it is precisely this tradition, of which Hegel is the ultimate representative, and which is founded on the notion of the primacy of ontological Being, that Levinas’s philosophy resists.⁴¹

Levinas’s writings can be understood, also, as a response to Heidegger’s thought, inflected by Levinas’s horror at Heidegger’s collaboration with the Nazi regime in the 1930s. In a key early text, “L’Ontologie est elle fondamentale?,” from 1951, Levinas demonstrates the ways in which his thought is both indebted to Heidegger, writer of an “eternal book” of philosophy, but also tries to move beyond him. Although Heidegger’s *Being and Time* is a profound critique of the onto-theological philosophy of the West, which poses Being as a supreme entity, thus forgetting that the Being of beings *is not*, for Levinas, Heidegger’s thought still understands beings in terms of a horizon or opening of Being, and thus partially negates them. Levinas wants to think beyond or outside the notion of Being, and finds a way to this thought in human inter-relation, which he argues is characterized not by knowledge but by pre-semantic invocation and address:

L’homme est le seul être que je ne peux rencontrer sans lui exprimer cette rencontre même. La rencontre se distingue de la connaissance précisément par là. Il y a dans toute attitude à l’égard de l’humain un salut – fût-ce comme refus de saluer. La perception ne-ce pas projetée ici vers l’horizon – champ de ma liberté, de ma pouvoir, de ma propriété – pour se saisir, sur ce fond familier, de l’individu. Elle se rapporte à l’individu pur, à l’étant comme tel. (19-20)

For Levinas, the relation to the other is to be conceived in religious rather than ontological terms, and its characteristic discourse is prayer. “Religious” here does not refer to any

⁴¹ For a thorough discussion of the ways in which Levinas’s philosophy can be read as a resistance to Hegel see Ari Simhon (2006).

mystical or transcendent aspect of this relation, but what Levinas calls the infinite demand the face of the other imposes upon us. The signifying of the face exceeds our capacities of understanding, based as they are on placing singularities within contexts and horizons of knowledge, and imposes upon us an infinite responsibility towards a singularity that cannot be subsumed under a universal concept. This argument, which places the ethical relation to the other as first philosophy, is the foundation and recurring theme of all of Levinas's thought.

The first major elaboration of Levinas's philosophy is his 1961 text, *Totalité et infini*. Here Levinas poses a fundamental question: is it possible that we are duped by morality? In the context of war, morality seems to lose its validity, as actions are undertaken only with an end in sight, ultimately the end of survival through victory over the enemy. For Levinas, the art of war renders morality derisory; it is opposed to morality in the same way the philosophy is opposed to naïveté. The translation of war in philosophical terms is "le concept de totalité qui domine la philosophie occidentale" (6). Opposed to totality, Levinas posits an "idea of infinity," which he derives from Descartes's *Meditations*, the only idea the ideatum of which is absolutely transcendent. This idea of infinity is, according to Levinas, analogous to the relationship of the "I" and the Other – the presence of the other human being that is the undeniably addressed to us in the experience of the face is absolutely transcendent, but, at the same time, in relation to the "I," placing an infinite demand for justice upon it.

Levinas's second major work, published in 1974 and entitled *Autrement qu'être ou Au delà l'essence*, can be seen as an elaboration of his earlier attempts to resist the philosophical tradition in which Being is the fundamental ontological category. If Hegel's philosophical system is a total one, which comprehends both being and non-being in its

dialectical process, and therefore cannot be refuted on its own terms, the total system can only be resisted through thought that escape the dichotomy of being and non-being, thought that is, as Levinas puts it, *otherwise than Being*. Levinas's innovation is to place this transcendent "otherwise than Being" not at the level of the unconditioned absolute that would exist beyond human interaction, but at the very opening of relationship between humans, in the pre-original responsibility which, before conscious will or freedom, constitutes our subjectivity. Levinas's philosophy is thus based on a paradoxical "immanent transcendence,"⁴² in which first philosophy, which is normally based on the ontological category of Being, is instead founded on the immediacy of ethical relation.

It is important to note the centrality of language for Levinas's thought, a centrality that is developed fully in *Autrement qu'être*. Here Levinas distinguishes between what he calls the Saying (*le dire*) and the Said (*le dit*). In order to understand this distinction it is best to start with Levinas's discussion of predication. For Levinas, a predicative sentence – A is B – implies a reduction of alterity to the same. The verb, traditionally thought of as conveying movement and duration, in relation to the noun fixes reality in nomination : "par l'ambiguïté du logos - en l'espace d'une identification - être, verbe par excellence où résonne, où s'expose l'essence, se nominalisé, se fait mot désignant et consacrant des identités, ramassant le temps...en conjuncture" (54). This is what Levinas understands as the "l'amphibologie de l'être et de l'étant" (49), where the relation between verb and noun in predication freezes the movement of time. The Saying, which corresponds to diachronous duration, is absorbed in the Said, which corresponds to the synchronicity of denomination. The result is that:

⁴² As Michel Blanchot writes in the essay "Notre compagne clandestine," dedicated to Levinas: "La transcendance dans l'immanence, Lévinas est le premier à s'interroger sur cette étrange structure" (1980 : 85). Valente underlines these words in his copy of Blanchot's text.

La phénoménalité – l'essence – se fait phénomène, se fixe, rassemblée en fable, se synchronise, se présente, se prête au nom, reçoit un titre. L'étant, ou une configuration d'étants, émergent thématiques et s'identifient dans le synchronisme de la dénomination (ou dans l'unité indéphasable de la fable), se font histoire, se livrent à l'écrit, au livre où le temps du récit, sans se renverser, recommence. (54)

For Levinas, the correlation of the Saying and the Said in which entities become fixed and memorable occurs, so to speak, under the auspices of Being. His thought, on the other hand, aims to think *otherwise than Being*, to describe a first philosophy that would precede the dialectic of being and non-being. His discussion of the Saying that would not be absorbed in the Said in an attempt to draw out a theory of language that would be adequate to this non-ontological philosophy.

The question arises, then, as to how to describe a Saying that is not in correlation with the Said, which would remain otherwise than Being, refusing the synchronicity of memory and history in which entities are manifest. For Levinas, this Saying is precisely the exposure to another that is at the heart of his conception of the subject. The subject, in Levinas's thought, is not characterized by identity or self-consciousness, but by a fundamental responsibility to the Other, a fundamental exposure that he describes in terms of the sensible, vulnerability, passivity, and proximity. The self here is "vie corporelle vouée à l'expression et au donner, mais vouée et non pas se vouant: un soi malgré soi, dans l'incarnation comme possibilité même d'offrande, de souffrance et de traumatisme" (65). This subject, in Levinas's terms, undergoes temporality as the process of senescence, or biological aging. This unwilling and unconscious undergoing of time means that there is a "disjonction de l'identité où le même ne rejoint pas le même: nonsynthèse, lassitude" (67). Saying is this very depositioning of the subject, in which the approach to the neighbor is made. It is communication, but only as the "condition de toute communication, en tant

qu'exposition" (61).⁴³ There is a parallel here in Levinas's theory of language and that of Agamben. Saying, or what Agamben describes as an experience of language as opening to a world, is prior to all objectification but is not an absence before language; it is rather the very communicability of communication, the happening of language as event rather than meaning, the signifyingness dealt the other in proximity, in which the subject "s'approche du prochain en s'ex-primant, au sens littéral du terme en s'expulsant hors tout lieu, n'habitant plus, ne foulant aucun sol" (62).

There is evidence that Valente read Levinas: his library contains various works by the French philosopher and Valente cites him on numerous occasions, and it is also the case that Levinas's philosophy is fundamental to an elaboration of a philosophical ethics of alterity in the twentieth century.⁴⁴ If, as I argue, Valente's work is determined by a profound ethical commitment to the others of history, the victims of totalitarian violence that he connects not only with the twentieth century but with the history of European expansion, the question as to how his poetry can relate to the ethics of alterity as developed by Levinas and others allows us to contextualize and understand its significance. To do so

⁴³ There is a clear parallel here between Levinas's arguments and Valente's discussion of the poetry of Paul Celan, which he describes as "Raíz de la comunicabilidad, pero no comunicación en sí misma, como tan trivialmente se ha querido" (OCII:759). Indeed, as I will show in a later chapter, Valente's reading of Celan is fundamentally indebted to Levinas's reading of the German language poet.

⁴⁴ Valente cites Levinas on six separate occasions: in the essay "La memoria del fuego" published in *Variaciones sobre el pájaro y la red* in 1991, in *Notas de un simulador*, which comprises texts written between 1989 and 2000, in the essay "Sobre la unidad de la palabra escindida" included in the collection *La experiencia abisal*, and first published in the *Libros* supplement of *El País* on the 2nd of January 1990; *El regreso de Edmond Jabés*, published in the *Culturas* supplement of *Diario 16* on the 30th of September, 1989; and in two *Cartas al director* to *El País*, on the 12th of January and 1st of February, 1996, in which the author defends a notion of charity. Although Valente does not discuss Levinas's thought in detail in these texts, it is clear that the philosopher's ethics of alterity are important to him, and are for him relevant to contemporary poetry, specifically that of Edmond Jabés and Paul Celan. The connection between an ethics of alterity and a commitment to singularity is revealed in "Vallejo y la proximidad," first published in 1987 and included in *La experiencia abisal*: "Como en muy precisas formas de la sensibilidad o del pensamiento éticos contemporáneos, el yo se trasciende en la poesía de Vallejo por la infinita intercalación del otro.... Ese hombre, el semejante, el otro, el próximo o el prójimo, irrumpe en la poesía de Vallejo en su singularidad, en su particularidad, haciendo reventar ... el vientre hidrópico de las ideologías y el edificio aplastante de la macrohistoria" (OCII: 620).

we first consider the ways Levinas's philosophy might be relevant to a theory or practice of poetry.

1.6 AESTHETICS AND ALTERITY

Levinas never wrote a systematic account of the literary. In fact, as his close friend Maurice Blanchot notes in his *Entretien infini*, itself an imaginary dialogue with the philosopher, despite his writings on art and literature, gathered in the collection *Noms propres*, Levinas appears at times to “se méfie des poèmes et de l'activité poétique” (76). Representation, the category under which Levinas understands artistic expression, is for him problematic, as ethical relation to the other is immediate, and cannot be duplicated in the mediated representations of artworks. This distrust of the artistic is at the heart of perhaps Levinas's major statement on the status of art, “La réalité et son ombre.”

“La réalité et son ombre” was first published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1948, and was prefaced with a polemical editorial disclaimer, defending Jean Paul Sartre from what was perceived as the article's implicit criticism of Sartre's conception of *littérature engagée*. Levinas begins his essay with a critique of the conception of art as a privileged form of knowledge, the conception of it as a metaphysical intuition of the essence of things that forms the basis of Valente's arguments in “Conocimiento y comunicación.” For Levinas, on the other hand, art is defined precisely as non-truth and non-knowledge. The images of art do not lead to truth, or knowledge of that which is represented, they are, rather “l'événement même de l'obscurcissement, une tombée de la nuit, un envahissement de l'ombre” (126). An image fascinates, blinding us to concepts, marking “une emprise sur nous, plutôt que notre initiative: une passivité foncière” (127) that disengages us both from reality and from ourselves in a sphere that is neither conscious nor unconscious. The

artistic image suspends time in an *entre-temps*, in which “horizon de l'avenir est donné, mais l'avenir en tant que promesse d'un présent nouveau est refuse” (143).

For Levinas in “La réalité et son ombre,” then, the prospect of a “committed art” is questionable, as art, “essentiellement dégagé, l'art constitue, dans un monde de l'initiative et de la responsabilité, une dimension d'évasion” (145). Considerations of art in an earlier work, *De l'existence à l'existent*, published in 1947, do, however, seem to sketch possibilities for linking the ethical and the aesthetic. Here Levinas discusses those modern art-works which resists figuration, and which are presentations of the material aspect of the artistic medium – paint, stone, ink – rather than attempts to represent a reality that they are not. This he sees as the artistic artifact's resistance to the destructive action of vision, which places particular beings in terms of a horizon of prior understanding. In this way Levinas accords artistic practices the capacity to retain the singularity of things and resist their subsumption under the conceptual horizons of Being:

Les recherches de la peinture moderne dans leur protestation contre le réalisme procèdent de ce sentiment de la fin du monde, de la destruction de la représentation qu'il rend possible. La liberté que le peintre prend avec la nature n'est pas mesurée à sa juste signification quand elle est présentée comme procédant de l'imagination créatrice ou du subjectivisme de l'artiste. Ce subjectivisme ne saurait être sincère que s'il cesse précisément de se prétendre vision. Si paradoxal que cela puisse paraître, la peinture est une lutte avec la vision. Elle cherche à arracher à la lumière les êtres intégrés dans un ensemble. Regarder est un pouvoir de décrire des courbes, de dessiner des ensembles où les éléments viennent s'intégrer, des horizons où le particulier apparaît en abdiquant. Dans la peinture contemporaine, les choses n'importent plus en tant qu'éléments d'un ordre universel que le regard se donne comme une perspective. Des fissures lézardent de tous côtés la continuité de l'univers. Le particulier ressort dans sa nudité d'être. (78-79)

The materiality of modern art works resist the destructive act of vision, and are related to the Levinasian concept of the “*il y a*,” which describes an exteriority that escapes human understanding, and also the philosophical categories of modern philosophy:

Notion de matérialité qui n'a plus rien de commun avec la matière opposée à la pensée et à l'esprit dont se nourrissait le matérialisme classique, et qui, définie par les lois mécanistes qui en épuisaient l'essence et la rendaient intelligible, s'éloignait le plus de la matérialité dans certaines formes de l'art moderne. Celle-ci c'est l'épais, le grossier, le massif, le misérable. Ce qui a de la consistance, du poids, de l'absurde, brutale, mais impassible présence; mais aussi de l'humilité, de la nudité, de la laideur. L'objet matériel, destiné à un usage, faisant partie d'un décor, se trouve par là même revêtu d'une forme qui nous en dissimule la nudité. La découverte de la matérialité de l'être n'est pas la découverte d'une nouvelle qualité, mais de son grouillement informe. Derrière la luminosité des formes par lesquelles les êtres se réfèrent déjà à notre dedans - la matière est le fait même de l'*il y a*. (79-80)

The experience of the *il y a* is a relation to a world beyond the intentionality of the subject, a relation that Levinas often describes in terms of a nocturnal or mystic experience in which subjectivity is profoundly altered. It is the world of things beyond or without the projection of human consciousness that modern art attempts to make present in its refusal of figuration and its use of the humble, nude materiality of objects that seem only contingently elevated to the status of art works.⁴⁵

It is difficult to articulate, however, a clear link between the ethical and the aesthetic in Levinas's writing. "La réalité et son ombre" is notable in its distrust of the artistic. Levinas suggests that the artwork may lead beyond a horizon of vision reductive of otherness, but his iconoclasm leads him to distrust the artistic image, which fascinates and deludes, presenting us with a caricature of a face rather than the pure relation to absolute alterity that for Levinas constitutes the ethical. Working from these arguments, it is hard to imagine any art, apart, perhaps, from the pure forms of abstract painting, which would satisfy Levinas's criteria. The questions posed by Levinas's ideas for a theory of literature are perhaps best explored in the work of Maurice Blanchot, who was a contemporary and friend of Levinas. In his *L'entretien infini*, which is structured as an imaginary dialogue

⁴⁵ We will see, in a later chapter, how Levinas's discussion of the materiality of contemporary art-works has much in common with Valente's discussion of the materiality of Antoni Tàpies's paintings.

with an interlocutor who can be taken to be Levinas, Blanchot writes:

Comment parler de telle sorte que la parole soit essentiellement plurielle? Comment peut s'affirmer la recherche d'une parole plurielle, fondée non plus sur l'égalité et l'inégalité, non plus sur la prédominance et la subordination, non pas sur la mutualité réciproque, mais sur la dissymétrie et l'irréversibilité, de telle manière que entre deux paroles, un rapport d'infinité soit toujours impliqué comme le mouvement de la signification meme? Ou bien encore comment écrire de telle sorte que la continuité du mouvement de l'écriture puisse laisser intervenir fondamentalement l'interruption comme sens et la rupture comme forme ? (9)

Here Blanchot is referring to a dilemma, also inherent to Valente's work, in which a desire to remember the past in writing is allied with recognition of its irrecuperability, and in which a desire for communicative relation with the other through speech is mitigated by a respect for the absolute alterity of that which is desired. This ambiguity is reflected in Valente's work, in which a theory of poetic vision that supposedly constitutes a specific type of knowledge coincides with a more skeptical approach to the capacity of poetic language to embody truth, in which the images of poetry would only relate their infinite incapacity to unite world and word. We will examine this ambiguous relationship with the poetic image in Valente's work in our second chapter, linking it to contradictions in Valente's reading of literary history and in his understanding of the powers of poetic language.



CHAPTER II: IMAGINATION AND THE POETICS OF KNOWLEDGE

2.1 CASSIRER AND LANGER: IMAGINATION AND THE POETICS OF KNOWLEDGE

Valente's poetics describe an infinite desire for a lost origin that is the mark of early German Romanticism. This relation to an alterity that is infinitely other is also at the heart of Levinas's ethics and Blanchot's writings on literature, with the proviso that for Levinas, desire does not move towards an unconditioned and transcendent absolute, but towards the paradoxical immanent transcendence of the absolutely singular human other. The expression of this desire is perhaps one of the most prominent aspects of Valente's production, whether it is desire for communion with the dead, the lover, the past, the material of the world, or the victims of history. The moments in which desire is fulfilled, when the claim is made that the word becomes flesh, and the moments in which desire is denied, or infinitely expanded, when the fragment refers only to a central absence, correspond to the two poles of Valente's writing, between which we can attempt to delineate an ethics of writing. It is in this context that we can read the ambivalence in Valente's work with regard to poetic images, which, in terms of the symbolic theory that informs his poetics, should allow for a more profound knowledge of reality, but which in his poetry are often described as illusory.⁴⁶ This ambiguity can be related to the ambiguous relation to artworks of Levinas's philosophy, which is defined by a persistent iconoclasm. Levinas and Blanchot both place the question of vision at the heart of their writings on art and poetry, and Blanchot defines the ethical moment in poetry as that in which the other is

⁴⁶ Carlos Peinado Elliot (2002) notes the contraposition of the "imagen banal" and the "palabra única" in Valente's work. For his part, José Luis Fernández Castillo (2008), in his reading of the commonalities between Valente and Octavio Paz's writings, explores Valente's resistance to the image in the context of a modernity understood as "el ocaso del ídolo y la emergencia de un vacío" (15).

infinitely desired but never enclosed within a horizon of vision. It is appropriate then, in attempting to define an ethics of alterity within Valente's work, to explore what I will argue is a struggle with vision and imagination that is characteristic of his poetry.

Comparing Valente's work to that of Juan Ramón Jiménez, Jiménez Heffernan writes:

Valente siempre se ha defendido de la euforia trascendental del panteísmo y el egoísmo modernistas. Y lo ha hecho siempre desde una ejecución incompleta del ejercicio ignaciano. En lugar de componer el lugar, asiste a su descomposición. Las ruinas de una ciudad abrasada constituyen una imagen recurrente en su lírica. Dicha descomposición es un requisito insoslayable en el protocolo de destrucción que antecede a la creación. Valente ingresa en el ejercicio ignaciano cuando la visión ya ha tenido lugar. Sólo le interesa la disciplina de autoabnegación que sigue al ejercicio: la resaca visionaria, el retorno al espacio confinado, el cierre de las ventanas y las puertas, la espera en el silencio y la tiniebla. Nada cabe en ese lugar interior y remoto, ni siquiera la esperanza. (1998: 370-71)

This is certainly the case for much of Valente's poetic production. Valente often doubts the power of poetic language and its images to reconstitute past experience. The following extract from one of the fragmentary poems that make up the collection from 1989, *Al dios de lugar*, is a good example of this mode:

Imágenes

de imágenes.

Que queda en los espejos,
en los largos pasillos naufragados,
en el recinto pálido del aire,
en el testimonio del testigo de quién.

Resuenan victoriosos los timbales
sobre las sumergidas formas rotas,
el viento y sus cenizas.

Desaparición.

(OCI: 478)

The images of memory, or of the poem, are insufficient to reconstitute that which is lost in the passing of time and the destruction of history. In fact, the poem's power resides in referring, if only negatively, to the "sumergidos formas rotas" that are elided in the triumphalist representations of history celebrated by the victorious. We are reminded here

of Walter Benjamin's description of history as the procession of the victorious that hides the disasters of the victims,⁴⁷ or Levinas's description of the Said of historical narrative that fixes the diachronous in the synchronicity of memory and being. Rather than attempting to fix in images the suffering of the past, the voice in Valente's poem attempts to create a profound passivity, a "recinto pálido del aire" or a "desaparición" that would allow for the non-appropriative relation to a past that cannot be represented in the cultural forms of the present. It is surprising, then, in this context, that Valente's first essays delineate a theory of poetic knowledge which is based on the power of images and the symbolic imagination.

Reprising these theories in a contribution to the *ABC* newspaper in 1996, an essay entitled "El don," Valente poses the fundamental questions regarding the relation between poetry and knowledge that are at the center of his earliest writings on poetry:

He ahí el corazón del problema: la relación entre lenguaje y verdad, la enunciación de una verdad ya determinada y el alumbramiento, mediante el lenguaje, de una verdad previamente desconocida, las formas de la discursividad y las formas de la intuición, la superación, en el arte, de la contradicción entre unas y otras formas de conocimiento mediante lo que Novalis llamaba 'la actividad productiva' (abolición del principio de contradicción). (OCII: 724)

Valente is referring here to a division between a discursive language conceived as mimetically reflecting a given state of affairs, and a poetic language that creates and discovers truths that are unavailable to other discourses. Valente links the first vision of the relationship between language and truth to the logical positivism of Rudolf Carnap, which

⁴⁷ As Benjamin writes in his seventh thesis on the philosophy of history: "Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to the other" (1968: 256).

would regard poetic or metaphorical language as mere pseudo-statement with no propositional truth content. Valente instead argues for the existence of a “genuina semántica más allá de los límites del lenguaje discursivo” (OCII: 725), which he connects to a tradition of thought that moves from Humboldt, to Schopenhauer, to Cassirer, and to Whitehead. Fundamental to this thought is the existence of “...un posible material simbólico no sujeto al pensamiento proposicional y a la ‘sintaxis lógica del lenguaje’” (OCII: 725).

It is this tradition of thought that informs Valente’s conception of poetry as a process of discovery as articulated in “Comunicación y conocimiento.” It is important to trace the genealogy of this thought to fully understand Valente’s arguments for the epistemological claims of poetry.⁴⁸ In his *Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic*, Hazard Adams identifies the roots of the tradition that Valente alludes to in the writings of J.G. Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt, and their idea that “language is constitutive of thought, that thought takes form in language” (25). Form, here, is not to be conceived as a frame or container, or as opposed to content, but “a mode of activity that shapes and projects” (25); in the words of Humboldt, “languages are not really means for representing already known truths but are rather instruments for discovering previously unrecognized ones” (qtd. in Adams: 25). The phrase is a succinct summation of Valente’s own approach to language in his early essays, and shares with it a vision of language as a creative, constitutive act. Humboldt does, however, recognize the possibility that language may exclude some aspects of experience:

⁴⁸ Surprisingly, Andrew Debicki does not mention Humboldt, Cassirer, or Langer in his study *Poesía del conocimiento: la generación española de 1956-1971*, nor is this aspect of Valente’s thought discussed in Ellen Engelson Marson’s *Poesía y poética de José Ángel Valente*. In general, the importance of Cassirer’s symbolic forms and the tradition from which it derives, which as Andrés Sánchez Robanya points out in his introduction to the *Diario anónimo*, is one of the poet’s “referencias más queridos del poeta” (DA: 28), receives insufficient attention in the critical and academic reception of his work, which often emphasizes the aspects of Valente’s poetry that are more pertinent to the modern tradition of poetic negativity. Ramos Abreu (2008: 35-62), however, gives a thorough exposition of the relevance of this tradition as the basis for Valente’s ideas in “Conocimiento y comunicación.”

“The most commonplace observation and the profoundest thought, both lament the inadequacy of language, both look upon that other realm as a distant country toward which only language leads—and *it* never really” (qtd. in Adams, 26). But ultimately, Adams argues, Humboldt’s vision of language is a fundamentally positive one, in which language creates a “nature beyond nature,” which is not a platonic otherworldliness but the ordering of phenomenon into a comprehensible universe, what Adams calls, following Giambattista Vico, a fiction.

The thought of twentieth century German philosopher Ernst Cassirer can be seen as a continuation of this tradition. Working with a neo-Kantianism inflected by the tradition of thought on the poetic symbol that developed in eighteenth and nineteenth century Germany and England, Cassirer advanced an elaborate theory for the constitutive powers of language in his three volume *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and the shorter *An Essay on Man*. The former is an attempt to broaden a conception of epistemology beyond the strict limits of discursive reason proposed by the contemporary theories of language of the logical positivists. The constitutive function of symbols is at the heart of Cassirer’s thesis, as he relates in the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*: “the fundamental concepts of each science, the instruments with which it propounds its questions and formulates its solutions, are regarded no longer as passive images of something given but as *symbols* created by the intellect itself” (75). This is also the case in other areas of human cultural expression – in art, myth, and religion: “All live in particular image-worlds, which do not merely reflect the empirically given, but which produce it in accordance with an independent principle. Each of these functions creates its own symbolic forms which, if not similar to the intellectual symbols, enjoy equal rank as products of the human spirit” (78).

According to Cassirer, myth is related to appearance and change in its concrete

manifestations, whereas empirical thought abstracts from sense experience to find regularities and form hypotheses. Myth is not representative or allegorical; in it, word and thing are united. In myth, as Cassirer writes in the second volume of his major work: “the ‘image’ does not represent the ‘thing’; it *is* the thing; it does not merely stand for the object, but has the same actuality, so that it replaces the thing’s immediate presence” (38). Religion, on the other hand, “takes the decisive step that is essentially alien to myth: in its use of sensuous images and signs it recognizes them as such – a means of expression which, though they reveal a determinate meaning, must necessarily remain inadequate to it, which ‘point’ to this meaning but never wholly exhaust it” (238). Religion is tropological thought, reading the world as an allegorical surface pointing to a supersensory reality. Mysticism, according to Cassirer, brings this tendency to its limits as it absolutely negates that which in religion has the status of allegory, the sensible world. Empirical scientific discourses, on the other hand, create their own binary opposition, but instead of the religious division of the sensory and the supersensory, their guiding divisions are that of subject who contemplates an object world that is comprehended in terms of reductive formulae.⁴⁹

Art, as Cassirer argues in his *Essay on Man*, is the attempt to reunite that which is divided in both religion and science, through the merging of image and reality. Artistic expression, unlike everyday language or scientific knowledge – “abbreviations of reality” (143) that depend upon a process of abstraction – is a “discovery of reality” (143). Art is a “continuous process of concretion” that “gives us an intuition of the form of things” (143).

⁴⁹ We could describe the tensions we have identified in Valente’s poetics in terms of Cassirer’s typology of symbolic forms. Whereas on one pole, language would be mystical, annulling any real referent, on the other, it would be mythic, or Orphic, creating the world it sings.

The function of art is then, for Cassirer, to intensify and purify that which is given to the senses. It recognizes and attends to what the Irish poet Louis McNeice termed “the incorrigible plurality of things,”⁵⁰ and thereby restores a sense of the “infinite possibilities which remain unrealized in ordinary sense experience” (145). Art, for Cassirer, is a return to the unified images and language of myth, and it is “one of the greatest privileges of art that it can never lose this ‘divine age’” (154).⁵¹ The poet imbues the natural world with his or her own inner life, and then externalizes this unity of mind and nature in “visible or tangible embodiment not simply in a particular material medium – in clay, bronze, or marble – but in sensuous forms, in rhythms, in color pattern, in lines and design, in plastic shapes” (154). In this sense, the materials and forms that are specific to art “teach us to visualize, not merely to conceptualize or utilize, things. Art gives us a richer, more vivid and colorful image of reality, and a more profound insight into its formal structure” (188). The links between Cassirer’s theory of art and Valente’s arguments in “El Don” and “Conocimiento y comunicación” are clear. Both describe a “mythical” artistic practice, attentive to the singular and with the capacity to deny the abstractions of empirical method through an intuitive image language that constitutes a special type of knowledge.

In a footnote to “Conocimiento y comunicación,” Valente describes the arguments of a disciple of Cassirer, Susanne K. Langer, and her concept of “presentational form,” formulated in the influential work first published in 1942, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*. Presentational form, in Langer’s thought, refers to the meaningful elements of music, painting, myth, and lyric poetry, which can express the elements of experience that escape the “discursive forms” as defined by the

⁵⁰ The lines are taken from MacNeice’s famous poem “Snow,” from *Poems*, 1935.

⁵¹ For Jean Luc Nancy (1991: 71-81), on the other hand, and as we will see in a later chapter, modern literature is precisely the interruption of myth.

logical positivists. Valente adds his own version of the term, describing the poem as “una forma aparicional del conocer” (OCII: 40-41).⁵² The terms of the argument are visual – whereas discursive logic tends towards abstraction, poetry deals with the immediate and sensual, the visual and the imaginative. Valente, in the tradition of Romantic poetics and with the authority of the symbolic theories of Cassirer and Langer, argues that the images of poetic language are embodied forms that constitute a unique knowledge. In effect, Valente’s poetic credo is a theory of the imagination. In this chapter I will briefly trace the changing conceptions of the imagination over time. I will argue that the tensions within Valente’s poetics, his wavering between a faith in the power of poetic language and despair at its failure, have to do with the instability of Valente’s understandings of the relationship between the faculty of the imagination and literature.

2.2 IMAGINATION AND THE POETRY OF MEDITATION

Valente’s argument for poetic knowledge in “Conocimiento y comunicación” is bound up with vision, the image, and the faculty of the imagination. It posits a special type of imaginative knowledge that is supposedly closer to the truth of things than the abstractions of propositional speech. In the context of the ethics of alterity, however, we have shown that Levinas’s description of a relation to infinite alterity in the face of the other, transposed by Blanchot to the infinite desire of poetry for an immediate relation to reality that is unavailable due to the mediation of language, is fundamentally iconoclastic. For Levinas and Blanchot, the imagination can be reductive of otherness, an illusory faculty that subsumes the other within its own horizons. What Levinas finds attractive in the brute

⁵² It is important here to note the influence also of Ernst Bloch, and his theorization of the *Vor-schein*, the preappearance of that which has not come to be but which announces itself in the artwork. As Valente comments in his essay from *La piedra y el centro*, “Sobre la operación de las palabras sustanciales”: “El *Vor-Schein* es para Bloch el modo del ser que despierta la conciencia utópica y le indica lo que todavía no ha llegado a ser en todo el abanico de sus posibilidades” (OCII: 302). I will return to Bloch’s descriptions of utopian desire and their relevance to Valente’s work at the end of this thesis, in which I place these in relation to Levinas’s conception of death.

materiality of modern art is its resistance to the horizon of vision, its resistance to the placing of things within the horizon of the Said. There is, then, in both Levinas's and Blanchot's writings a distrust of vision: the light of significance is replaced by what Blanchot calls in his essay "La littérature et la droit à la mort," a "étrange lumière impersonnelle" (1949: 318), in which that which is occluded in language can appear without forgoing its alterity. The distrust of vision is, paradoxically, given the importance of Cassirer and Langer's theory of symbolic form in "Conocimiento y comunicación," an important element of Valente's work, and to explore this paradox it is necessary to examine the historical concept of the imagination, and the ways in which the various traditions that constitute Valente's intellectual and artistic background contribute to this ambiguous relation to images and the imagination.

A key essay in this context is Valente's "Luis Cernuda y la poesía de la meditación," included in *Las palabras del tribu* and written in 1962. Here Valente reprises a narrative of the interrelation of English and Spanish literary history, derived from Luis Cernuda, who himself is working from the essays of T.S. Eliot. These views were given their full development in 1954, when Louis L. Martz published his well known study, *The Poetry of Meditation*, which attempted to show how the meditative exercises of the counter-reformation, and especially the Spiritual Exercises of Ignasius de Loyola, exercised a great influence on what had been termed the "Metaphysical poetry" of seventeenth century England.⁵³⁵⁴ The breath of this influence led Martz to rename the poetry of the period "The

⁵³ Bugliani Knox (2011: 5-20) describes the fortunes of Martz's thesis in relation to the poetry and thought of John Donne. After a general acceptance in the decades following the publication of Martz's study, in the latter two decades of the twentieth century critics tended to minimize the influence of Catholic meditative practices in the English poetry. Bugliani Knox, for her part, emphasizes the importance of the concept of "discretion" in Donne's work, which for her is directly derived from the spiritual exercises of the counter-reformation.

⁵⁴ In the essay "Cernuda por motivos equivocados," Julián Jiménez Heffernan (2004) points out the failings in Martz's thesis, which ignores the fact that the structures that Martz ascribes to "meditative" poetry are in fact widespread in

Poetry of Meditation,” giving him the title of his book. Martz’s work was of fundamental interest to Valente, and allowed him to create a narrative of a poetic tradition shared by both Spanish and English language poets of the seventeenth century, lost in Spain, but subsequently recovered in the twentieth century through the incorporation of English Romantic poetics in the work of Miguel de Unamuno and Luis Cernuda.

For Valente, influenced here by Martz, the poetry of meditation is a tradition not limited to the poetry of the seventeenth century, but one that includes poets such as “Blake, Wordsworth, E. Dickinson, Yeats, Eliot, Rilke [...]” (OCII: 140). These poets are allied in their ability to mix, in the Eliot inflected words of Martz, who Valente quotes, “passion and thought” (qtd. in Valente, OCII: 139). Valente goes on to describe Coleridge’s doctrine of the unifying capacity of the imagination as a key moment in the development of the master category of “poetry of meditation,” thereby revealing a problematic aspect of his, and Martz’s, narrative – the Romantic understanding of the workings of the imagination is so far removed from the early-modern sense of the word that it is doubtful whether it is legitimate to use the same term in such different cultural contexts.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, “poetry

Western poetry from the medieval period. The essay is also relevant to our concerns here as Jiménez Heffernan gives an insightful reading of the ways in which Cernuda’s understanding (and misunderstanding) of English poetry is mediated in the work of both Valente and his contemporary Jose Gil de Biedma through their readings of, respectively, Martz’s *Poetry of Meditation*, and Robert Langbaum’s *The Poetry of Experience*. For Jiménez Heffernan, Valente’s reading of Cernuda as an anglophile inheritor of an originally hispanic “poetry of meditation” amounts to a cultural strategy that belies the true nature of Cernuda’s poetry.

⁵⁵ In the conclusion to his work Martz claims that Hopkins, Yeats, and Eliot are heirs to the tradition of meditative poetry, inspired by the spiritual exercises of the counter-reformation, and the functioning of the imagination in their work should be understood in this context. Martz here reveals the overdetermination of his thesis by Eliot’s essay “The Metaphysical Poets”, according to which the English poets of the seventeenth century were defined by their capability of “transmuting ideas into sensations, of transforming an idea into a state of mind” (1948: 290). Eliot, as is well known, identifies in the poetry of Milton and Dryden the beginnings of a “disassociation of sensibility” (288) that leads to the reflective sentimentality of the poet from the eighteenth century onwards. For Martz, the poetry of meditation and its concomitant use of the imaginative faculty that he identifies in Hopkins, Yeats, and Eliot would be the survival of this capacity to unify thought and experience. The elision of Romantic theories of language and imagination is remarkable, and reminiscent of Eliot’s diminution of the Romantic movement, which, in many ways, makes his theorization of poetry possible.

of meditation” is a heuristic tool that allows Valente to examine the poetry of Cernuda in terms of counter-reformation meditative practices in which “la composición del lugar y el análisis mental de sus elementos se combinan de modo típico con el poder unificador del impulso afectivo” (OCI: 143). This is a version of the combination of imagination (in the pre-modern sense of thought of the material), understanding, and will that was the foundation of the meditative exercises, but which in Valente’s argumentation is conflated with a Romantic theorization of the poetic symbol. It is clear, then, that Valente positions himself within a poetic lineage with the peculiar capacity to both retrieve a glorious past – the achievements of Spanish Renaissance and Baroque spiritual writings – and to simultaneously “modernize” a Spanish poetry that had failed to learn the most important lessons of the Romantic moment. In this way, Valente develops the Cernudian thesis according to which the contemporary poet’s duty is reintroduce a meditative element to a Spanish poetry that tends towards the empty versifying that Unamuno called “pseudo-poesía, huera descripción o elocuencia rimada” (qtd. in Doce, 2005: 114).

It is worth pausing here to consider the possible difficulties of this thesis in terms of the Romantic and pre-modern conceptions of the imagination. John Lyons, in his *Embodied Thought: Before Imagination*, gives a concise definition of the term “imagination” in its Aristotelian acceptance:

The Aristotelian current takes a nonjudgmental, rather pragmatic approach toward imagination, seeing it as an inevitable part of most thought processes. Everything that we think of as material – whether remembered, perceived in the present, conceived as fictitious or hypothetical, expected, or dreamed – is thus, in the broad tradition of imagination (*phantasia*) the work of imagining. Conversely, thoughts that do not take the form of sense perception (or the simulation of sense perception) do not make use of imagination. (xii)

Imagination, or *phantasia*, was for Aristotle an intermediary faculty, one that we share with animals, and whose purpose was to treat the raw material of experience, converting

sense to image. The early-modern conception of the imagination, indebted to the Aristotelian tradition, should not to be confused with the Romantic usage denoting a creative, unifying force often related to metaphor. Imagination in the early-modern context has to do with the material and the sensuous, though it does not have to relate directly to the materially present; it is an inner faculty through which it is possible to contemplate absent or possible material objects, and the changes that these can undergo. It is related to interiority and the possibility of contemplating realities different from prevailing conditions, a faculty central to renaissance and early modern religious meditative practices, but also to the necessity to maintain a non-spontaneous, controlled exteriority in court societies.

Lyons traces the roots of the meditative practices of the early moderns to the Aristotelian conception of the imagination and to the meditative practices of the Stoic philosophers – Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius – whose essays contain some of the most important, and influential, discussions of the imaginative faculty. The importance of the imagination for the Stoics lay in the fact that it allowed the individual to control her personal reality: “to form habits in the way we perceive things and to become skilled in tactics to moderate the impact of certain dangerous sensory impressions and to amplify those that are useful” (6). The imagination thus allowed for the capacity to create an inner sanctum, an escape from the noise of a crowded world, and it also allowed the devotee to virtually undergo traumatic events, thus reducing their impact should they occur. Through imagination one could engage with the experiences of others, imagining their pain and suffering, even if these are experiences removed from the life of privilege, such as that enjoyed by Marcus Aurelius or Seneca. The Stoic practice of imaginative projection allows for empathy with others, allowing one to imagine their suffering, but also allows the

individual to imagine experiences they have never undergone, including, as Montaigne describes in a famous essay, the experience of death.⁵⁶ It is this concept of the imagination that informs the spiritual exercises of Ignacio de Loyola, and it is difficult to reconcile with the world forming creative and unifying force that informs the poetics of Coleridge and Schelling, or the theory of symbolic forms of Cassirer and Langer.

Valente's understanding of the imagination is bound up with these early-modern concepts of the imagination, as filtered through the meditative practices that spread throughout Europe during and after the counter-reformation within which the imagination had an important role. Structured meditative practices, involving the three steps of imagination (composition of place), understanding (analysis), and will (colloquy) had been popularized by the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignacio de Loyola and the numerous guides to meditation that became popular in Europe in the century after its publication. It can be argued that "El espejo," from Valente's first collection, shows the influence of the structures of meditative poetry and the pre-modern use of the imagination as related by Martz:

Hoy he visto mi rostro tan ajeno,
tan caído y sin par
en este espejo.

Está duro y tan otro con sus años,
su palidez, sus pómulos agudos,
su nariz afilada entre los dientes,
sus cristales domésticos cansados,
su costumbre sin fe, sólo costumbre.
He tocado sus sienes: aún latía
un ser allí. Latía. ¡Oh vida, vida!

Me he puesto a caminar. También fue niño
este rostro, otra vez, con madre al fondo.
De frágiles juguetes fue tan niño,

⁵⁶ I refer here to the essay "De l'Exercitation," in which Montaigne discusses his capacity to imagine his own death in the intermediate state between consciousness and unconsciousness he experienced after a fall from his horse.

en la casa lluviosa y trajinada,
en el parque infantil
– ángeles tontos –
niño municipal con aro y árboles.

Pero ahora me mira – mudo asombro,
glacial asombro en este espejo solo –
y ¿donde estoy – me digo –
y quién me mira
desde este rostro, máscara de nadie?
(OCI: 71)

The poem follows the meditative structures of composition of place (imagination), analysis (intelligence), and affective address (will). The face is described in detail, from the “pómulos agudos” to the “nariz afilado.” In the second movement of the poem, the past is made present with the mind’s wandering – “me he puesto a caminar” – marking the intellectual processes of the intelligence in its retrieval of memories. In the final lines, analysis and colloquy combine in the poetic voice’s questioning, “¿donde estoy?” Here, however, there is no divinity to which the voice can address itself and the illusion of permanent self-presence is destroyed. The poem remains, the remnant of past experience, the “mascara de nadie.”

Similarly, the Hamlet inspired “La cabeza de Yorick” from *Poemas a Lázaro* uses the resources of the baroque *memento mori* in its detailed contemplation of a human skull:

La cabeza de Yorick
es pelada y redonda: examinemos
la cabeza de Yorick
el bufón, el alegre
cuenco donde el ojo bailó,
la frente donde
para siempre descansa el pensamiento.

Tomemos su cabeza
como una hueca caja,
donde ni el aire finge
un residuo de alma.
Ésta era Yorick,
de pies y risas hábiles

y palabras certeras.

Tomemos en silencio
su desnuda cabeza.

La cabeza de Yorick
es pelada y redonda: examinemos
la cabeza de Yorick
el bufón y dejémosla
caer de nuevo al polvo como
si nos decapitásemos.
(OCI: 115-116)

Here also we could claim that the poem follows to some degree the structures Martz identified.⁵⁷ We are presented with an image, the skull of the fool Yorick, and thereupon invited to consider the tension between the “desnuda cabeza” and the life – “pies y risas hábiles / y palabras certeras” – that it once possessed. The imaginative faculty here remains on the level of the material, leading to analysis, but there is no movement towards the transcendent. It is the representation of the very material presence of the skull, in which “ni el aire / finge ser un residuo de alma,” that allows us to think about what precisely is *not* present within it, the life and soul with which it was once animated. The final line, similar to the ending of “El Espejo,” shatters the complacency of the contemplative attitude through powerful metaphoric effect, creating a sensation of violent rupture that is both a definitive ending but also a refusal of harmony and subjective self-assurance.

Whether or not these poems are directly influenced by Martz’s ideas is not, however, what is at issue here. Rather, through reading the poems from this perspective I hope to draw out some of the tensions and complexities that are inherent in Valente’s understanding of the relationship between images, the imagination, and the truth claims of

⁵⁷ It is significant that Martz should mention the gravedigger scene in his discussion of the centrality of death to the meditative tradition: “The most striking aspect of all such meditations, whether by Persons, or by Donne, or by so different a spirits as Robert Herrick, is the full self-awareness of the vision: the eye of truth that cuts aside all cant, looking with a grim, satirical humor upon all the follies of the world, seeing the worst of life and death with the poise of a detached, judicious intellect: the very poise of Hamlet in the gravedigger’s scene” (137).

poetry. The imaginative process that structures “El Espejo” and “La cabeza de Yorick” seems to resist the theory of poetic knowledge as described in “Conocimiento y comunicación.” The imaginative experience in these poems seems instead to lead to the revelation of a central absence, of self and of the divine, and points to a lack of faith in the unificatory powers of poetry, precisely opposed to the arguments of “Conocimiento y comunicación,” and the poetics Valente claims to inherit from the Romantics and Cernuda.

The collection *A modo de esperanza*, from which “El Espejo” is taken, is in part concerned with what Valente would later describe as the first descent into memory, memory of the personal. Many of the poems are autobiographical, dedicated to members of the author’s family. The poems, however, betray ambivalence with regard to the power of memory, which, again, is related to the power of the imagination. In “Aniversario,” the poetic voice attempts to imagine the experience of death – “Tal vez ahí tendida, / no comprendes/nada de lo que vive” – and even tries to imagine the physical changes that might occur in a life after death: “Aún te pienso / con el rostro de siempre / y los cabellos, en su reino / de humo, un poco grises. / No tengo ojos / para más” (OCI: 74). The absurdity of the attempt is clear. Imaginative projections can lead us to picture a life after death, filled with grey smoke and aged wraiths, but as the poem ends the vanity of this presumption is recognized: “no importa; / no puedes comprenderme. / Todo ha sido cortado” (OCI: 75). Communication with the absolute alterity of the dead is impossible, but we cannot fail to imagine that alterity, to clothe otherness in images, as we present the divine in idols. The pathos of these last lines reflects an attitude towards language that both values the power of the imaginative faculty in its capacity to allow us to virtually engage with the experience of that which is absolutely other, but at the same time recognizes the limits of this power. Like the word that refers only to its own infinite interpretability in “La

hermeneutica y la cortedad del decir,” the image here can only refer to our finitude and to the limits of our knowledge.

2.3 AMBIGUITY OF THE IMAGE IN POEMAS A LÁZARO

The choice of title for Valente’s second collection, “Poemas a Lázaro,” is significant. The figure of Lazarus come back from the dead is resonant within the context of a postwar moment, and implies both the survival of a catastrophe, but also the importance of remembering those who have died. Lazarus, who reminds us that the past can return, could be the emblem for a poetry, such as Valente’s, which is driven by a desire to recuperate in poetic language that which time (*las hojas, la lluvia*) has destroyed. Lazarus is a figure of hope, but he is also a figure of death, of alterity. Luis Cernuda recognizes something of this in his great poem, “Lázaro.”⁵⁸ Though the Sevillano’s poem ends with a powerful image of renewal, Lazarus also feels himself “un muerto / andando entre los muertos” (171). Lazarus’s liminal status reflects the tensions within Valente’s poetry. If Valente’s work moves between a Romantic faith in the creative word and a iconoclasm that distrusts the powers of the imagination, so Lazarus embodies an ambivalent movement between faith in renewal and horror at that death which walks among men.

The second section of *Poemas a Lázaro* opens with “Entrada al sentido”:

La soledad.
El miedo.
Hay un lugar
vacío, hay una estancia
que no tiene salida.
Hay una espera
ciega entre dos latidos,
entre dos oleadas

⁵⁸ Written in the Autumn of 1938, by which time Cernuda was living in England and teaching at the independent Cranleigh School in Surrey, the poem reflects, in the words of the author in his *Historial de un libro*, a feeling, which coincides with the Franco-British appeasement of Hitler at Munich that effectively decided the Spanish Civil War, of “sorpresa desencantada, como si, tras de morir, volviese otra vez a la vida” (404). For a discussion of the figure of Lazarus in Valente’s poetry see Antón Risco (1973).

de vida hay una espera
 en que todos los puentes
 pueden haber volado.
 Entre el ojo y la forma
 hay un abismo
 en el que puede hundirse la mirada.
 Entre la voluntad y el acto caben
 océanos de sueño.
 Entre mi ser y mi destino, un muro:
 la imposibilidad feroz de lo posible.
 (OCI: 113)

The opening five lines of the poem define the pathetic locus of many of Valente's poems: a solitary voice cries out in an empty space. This space is liminal: "entre dos latidos," "entre dos oleadas," "entre el ojo y la forma," "entre la voluntad y el acto," "entre mi ser y mi destino."⁵⁹ It is in this liminal space, the point of mediation between the sensible and the intelligible, the act and its potential, from which the poetic voice speaks. The poetic imagination would be, from a Romantic perspective, attentive to both these realms, articulating relations between language and material, light and darkness. The poem, however, resists the passage from will and act; the wait between two heart beats never ends as the bridge between them has been destroyed. It is on the very boundary between speech

⁵⁹ These lines are reminiscent of those from Eliot's "The Hollow Men":

Between the idea
 And the reality
 Between the motion
 And the act
 Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
 And the creation
 Between the emotion
 And the response
 Falls the Shadow

Between the desire
 And the spasm
 Between the potency
 And the existence
 Between the essence
 And the descent
 Falls the Shadow (1963: 85-86)

Life is very long

and the silence that precedes it from which the poetic voice speaks, fascinated by its own impotence. In Levinas's terms, this inbetween time describes the time of patience, which is a waiting without object, "una espera ciega." It describes a desire that does not intentionally aim at an imagined transcendent, but defers to the incommensurability of absolute alterity.

In "Los olvidados y la noche" the poetic voice explores the capacity of poetic images to recuperate that which has been lost in the passing of time:

Cuando aparecen ante mí, terrible,
suavísimos rostros,
sus contornos se mezclan
y adelantan una sola figura.
Bajo la transparente piel
de aquel amor y el agua solitaria
brillan los ojos de mi madre antes
de haberme concebido.

¿Soy yo quien pasa o sois vosotros?,
¿quién está detenido?,
¿quién abandona a quién?,
¿quién está inmóvil o quién es arrastrado?

Madre después de tanto
hilarme a tu pupila,
después de haber edificado un reino de esperanza,
después de haber soñado
cuanto soy, cuanto tengo,
no habré hablado contigo.

¿Pero podríamos hablar?,
¿hay tiempo?

Dadme un día,
detened un día
el implacable paso,
el terrible descenso
– vuestro, mío –
para que pueda así
escoger la palabra, el adiós, el silencio:
para que pueda hablaros.

Mientras escribo sobre mi cuerpo,

el mundo habrá pasado,
habrá cerrado el ciclo,
completado el retorno
de su nada a su origen,
y yo seré antepasado pálido
de mi futuro olvido.

Puedo decir que esta misma noche
vuestro feroz recuerdo ha devorado
mi amor,
envejecido el rostro de mis hijos,
mutilado los besos,
reducido mi pecho a soledad.

Porque nada de lo vivido
puede daros más vida:
sé que no soy,
que no me pertenezco.
Pasé por vuestros ojos
y creí desgarrarlos, arrastrarlos conmigo,
mas fue vuestra pupila la que hizo presa en mí....
(OCI: 118-19)

The poem is set out in terms of vision. The poetic voice imagines the faces of the dead combining to form a single terrible figure, from which shine the eyes of his mother. The mother's eyes are creative, her dreams creating the child and the man who speaks in the poem. The poetic voice desires that his own creative powers will allow for communication with a ghostly mother, but the passing of time is implacable, and writing only confirms the absence of that which is past: "Mientras escribo sobre / la resistencia de mi propio cuerpo / el mundo habrá pasado / habrá cerrado el ciclo / completado su retorno / de su nada a su origen, / y yo seré antepasado pálido / de mi futuro olvido." The voice, which exists only in writing, refers its own paradoxical temporal status – it both affirms itself as presence but, as writing, necessarily survives the presence and intention of an authorizing subjectivity; it is a remnant, an "antepasado pálido" of a living human being.

The poem posits a strange reversal of memory: it is the strength of a creative vision, set to the future, which allows for a future memory to take place, but the actualization of

the mother's hopes for her son can only be realized in her absence, in the same way that the writer is absent from the poem that is actualized in an infinite number of possible readings. The comprehension of the impossibility of retrieving what is past, the rupture in the thread of generations, leads to a brutal confrontation with the necessity and solitude of death, the reduction of love and the mutilation of the kiss. The conclusion stages this final extinction of memory in night:

Inmensa noche. Solitaria noche.
(Despojado de mí busco mi cuerpo en vano,
sigo en vano mi voz.)

Noche: mi sueño
no la puede durar.
(OCI: 120)

The poem is a voice that is divorced from a body, a space within which the non-human "resto" of the absent subject speaks of loss.⁶⁰

In the following poems, "Tuve otra libertad" and "La luz no basta," the hope that the creative imagination allows is again contrasted with its capacity to deceive. In the former poem, the "muro" and "cielo," perhaps related to a now questioned Catholic belief system, limit vision and dream:

Los muros eran altos
para no ver,
los cielos eran altos
para no ver: el sueño
alto para no ver
más sueño que el soñado....
(OCI: 120)

The limitations of a mechanical religiosity are revealed in the impossibility of exceeding the images of the deity to enter into a genuinely religious relation to the absolute alterity of

⁶⁰ As José Jiménez writes: "Para José Ángel Valente la poesía es *un* resto, en el que se refleja la fragmentariedad del mundo en que vivimos. Un mundo en el que la aspiración a la totalidad, característica del clasicismo, se ha hecho ya inviable" (1996: 60). We will return to this concept of poetry as remnant in our later discussion of Valente's relation to Paul Celan and the difficulties of witnessing as explored in Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* (2002).

the divine. Vision in this context is reduced to a teleological movement towards an end that it bears within itself: “La semilla caía y enterraba / con ella la mirada / redonda para el fruto” (OCI: 121). This “otra libertad” creates a sense of plenitude: “El aire estaba lleno / de poder y de pájaros, / el cuenco maternal / de hondo reposo, / la oración de respuesta / y de luz suficiente” (OCI: 121). The security of life is guaranteed by the “promesa de un dios,” the stable relation between the earth and the heavens. The final lines, however, signal a disillusion with this merely sufficient spiritual light: “Y todo / pudo ser pasto oscuro / de otro dios, de otro sueño” (OCI: 121). A life lived within a horizon of plenitude and teleological movement towards an absolute being becomes a “pasto oscuro.” In this way the poem marks a resistance to the subsumption of individual existence towards dissolution in the absolute. It suggests the possibility of a vision, dream, or light that would remain in the space “Entre / el deseo y su objeto,” relating to the other in a relation defined by a perpetually maintained desire.

“La luz no basta” again returns to the questioning of vision:

La luz [...], pero no basta;
 no me basta mirar.
 Porque empapada está el mirar de sueño,
 Contagiada la luz por el deseo,
 engañados los ojos hasta el blanco
 candor de la pupila....
 (OCI: 121)

Vision is infected with desire, giving us the illusion that we can completely possess, and thereby negate, that upon which we gaze: “Ojos siempre infantiles, / ávidos del engaño, / sobornados por cuanto finge el aire” (OCI: 121). The poetic voice prefers the faculty of touch: “Tacto que no adivina, / tacto que sabe quiero, / ganapán receloso, / zafio leal palpando, / para creer, el tenue / residuo del milagro” (OCI: 122). It is significant that the poetic voice privileges touch rather than sight as a form of knowledge, given that Valente’s

early poetics are based precisely on the capacity of the imagination to create knowledge in symbolic form. Here, on the other hand, it is touch that provides a knowledge of things: “... la simple certeza / de las cosas que toco / y me ofrecen su lomo / melancólico y manso / de domésticos canes” (OCI: 122). There is a sense that this is a knowledge that maintains the alterity of things, a relation without appropriating vision that lends the objects of our world the singularity of animal life.

“El sueño” concludes this group of four poems, all of which are centered on the semantics of vision and imagination, and their opposites, obscurity and blindness. Here, “el sueño” is personified as an angel-like figure: “Abre sus grandes alas / sus poderosos brazos / de lenta sombra y noche grande” (OCI: 123). The dream is described as an invading force “...halaga, / porfía y nos rodea, / hasta que al fin caemos / en su seno girando / como plumas, girando / interminablemente” (OCI: 123), which though illusory and productive of images, is related to darkness and death: “Ésta es la inerme paz, la sosegada / mentira de la sombra / El sueño multiplica / su rostro en un espejo / sin fin: vértigo quieto, inmóvil / torbellino” (OCI: 123). This allegory of a dream could represent the two poles of Valente’s struggle with vision. Images, like dreams, are illusory, giving us nothing but a false sense of presence, or dissolving the singularity of objects under a horizon of being. But images are also related to the night, their failure to make present that which is absent is itself a way of relating to this absence as absence, as if we could trace the outline of the past, the “sumergidos formas rotas,” from the traces that false images leave in their wake. That Valente creates an allegorical personification of dream to denounce the mystification of images shows both their frailty and their inescapable power.

“Son los ríos,” the title of which is derived from Manrique’s *Coplas*, and which appears in the third section of the collection, explores the themes of mortality that define

the *Poemas a Lázaro* as a whole, but also turns on the ambiguous status of images and the faculty of vision. It opens with an orphic warning: “No te detengas, sigue: / no vuelvas la mirada” (OCI: 128). Rather than expressing a desire to recuperate the past, the poetic voice warns against memory. The past self, the cadaver of a child, a failed love, are memories from which the voice attempts to escape. It is better to “saltar ciegamente” from river to river until time slows, and that which has past dissolves into the anonymity of death. The poem is almost a plea against poetry, against its tortuous rememberings, its broken images that reveal only death and darkness, the absence of that which is recalled. If language is a bringing to light, the poem relates to that which the light destroys.

The following poem, “Pero no más allá” again describes the unintended consequences of the creative imagination:

Cúantas veces he dicho vida y cúantas
tal vez muerte escondía sin saberlo,
cúantas habré cegado la esperanza,
cúantas, creyendo luz, habré arrojado
palabras, piedras, sombra, noche y noche
hacia el sol que amo tanto.
(OCI: 130)

The poetic voice struggles against its medium; the images of the poem perhaps hide a more ordinary light, or destroy that which they attempt to maintain. We are reminded here of Blanchot’s Hegelian reading of Mallarmé in “La littérature et le droit à la mort,” which describes the destructive nature of language, its negation of the flesh and blood existent in the ideality of words:

Je dis: cette femme. Holderlin, Mallarmé et, en général, tous ceux dont la poésie a pour thème l'essence de la poésie ont vu dans l'acte de nommer une merveille inquiétante. Le mot me donne ce qu'il signifie, mais d'abord il le supprime. Pour que je puisse dire: cette femme, il faut que d'une manière ou d'une autre je lui retire sa réalité d'os et de chair, la rende absente et l'anéantisse. Le mot me donne l'être, mais il me le donne privé d'être. (312)

The capacity to replace the flesh and blood woman with a linguistic abstraction for Blanchot reveals human finitude, the human capacity for death. Poetry, on the other hand, is for Blanchot the attempt to retain that which is negated in language:

Le langage de la littérature est la recherche de ce moment qui la précède. Généralement, elle le nomme existence; elle peut le chat tel qu'il existe, le galet dans son parti pris de chose, non pas l'homme, mais celui-ci et, dans celui-ci, ce que l'homme rejette pour le dire, ce qui est le fondement de la parole et que la parole exclut pour parler, l'abîme, le Lazare du tombeau et non le Lazare rendu au jour, celui qui déjà sent mauvais, qui est le Mal, le Lazare perdu et non le Lazare sauvé et ressuscité. (316)

It is this context that we might understand the character of Lazarus as he reappears in “El resucitado,” and the struggle with vision that determines the poem: “A veces su mirada / caía tiempo y tiempo / sobre la clara forma de un objeto/ y parecía interrogar / – ¿Qué sabes tu de mí?” (OCI: 139). Lazarus, like the poet, distrusts his vision, understanding that his gaze perhaps destroys that upon which it lights: “Tal vez aquello / que a nosotros nos sirve / para ganar certeza / no le bastaba a él: / como si detrás de sus manos / otros menos visibles / convirtieron en polvo / cuanto pudo tocar” (OCI: 139). Another type of vision is suggested here, one that would recognize the singularity of objects in the world, relating to the world in a contemplative, non-masterful way: “Solía contemplar / solitario los campos, / la faena de todos / la humilde tierra abierta, / donde cada mañana/ se alzaba milagrosamente el sol” (OCI: 139). The vision of a world without objects, an inhuman lucidity, is available to Lazarus, a liminal figure whose gaze preserves that which the light destroys.

The single long poem that constitutes the fifth part of *Poemas a Lázaro* is an extended exploration of the struggle that defines the collection as a whole.⁶¹ It describes a train

⁶¹ In the entry for the 3rd of November, 1959 of the *Diario Anónimo* Valente writes: “Cuando escribí “La salida” (varias semanas de la primavera del 56) es posible que tuviera más inmediatamente presente la estructura de los *Cuartetos* de

journey, an allegory for the passing of time in which the voice contemplates that which has passed and that which is to come. The darkness of what is past and the light of possibility is figured in the train's entering a long tunnel: "Parecía la sombra demasiado larga, / demasiado hondo y invencible. / Pero al cabo saltaba, siempre otra vez, la vida / del lado de la luz" (OCI: 153). In italics, a voice seems to whisper to us:

*Luchando a solas contra el sueño.
Siempre.
En la alta vigilia
conjurando mi vida
contra su maleficio.*

*Como un atleta oscuro
ha avanzado,
invadiéndolo todo. Apenas
resiste el pensamiento,
allá en lo hondo,
a su dominio.*

*Un gallo canta lejos,
remota, en la frontera
difícil de la sombra.
Siempre, siempre.
Y a la luz me encomiendo....
(OCI: 154)*

These lines describe many of the elements of what I have termed the struggle with vision in Valente's poetry. "Sueño" is dream, and is most obviously connected with death, but we can also take it to mean the illusory power of images. The voice describes a lonely vigil, a resistance against the powers of sleep. The bringer of darkness, but also of false light, is an invasive "atleta oscuro," which only the extreme edges of thought can resist. The voice holds out hope in a "siempre, siempre" of impossible desire for the coming of dawn, marked by the distant crowing of the cockerel. It is as if the poem finds its worth on this limit point between waking and dream, in which elements of the pre-subjective world

Eliot, por ejemplo. Creo ahora, sin embargo, que el poema se relaciona por vínculos más estrechos con Baudelaire. En realidad podía haberse desprendido enteramente de este verso: "Amer savoir, celui qu'on tire du voyage!" (DA: 39).

come to presence and are retained on the frontier of linguistic sense and sensuality.

Memory is an overwhelming force in the poem, figured as a cruel child who returns to haunt the man he grew to be.⁶² Again, in italics, the voice reflects:

*De cuantos reinos tiene el hombre
el más oscuro es el recuerdo.
Oh qué feroz acometida
contra una vida de tantas muertes.
La sombra cierra a las espaldas
con un bramido lento y sordo.
Sobre las huellas del que huye
su ciego reino se proclama....
(OCI: 156)*

Memory here is seen as unduly appropriative of the otherness of the dead. In truth darkness reigns over the past for those of us who are still caught in the movement of time. The images outside the carriage pass rapidly, and few of them can be retained: "...más y más / imágenes veloces nos envuelven. / Van devorándose / unas y otras sin cesar y tantas / presencias hacen / solamente un olvido" (OCI: 158). There is perhaps only one that could be "nuestra / no sujeta a la muerte" (OCI: 158). But life is always bound up with darkness: "Cien veces más veloz / que nuestro pensamiento, / pasa del amor a olvido / ciegamente la vida" (OCI: 158). At this irreparable loss the poetic voice cries out to a higher power:

*Por eso ahora,
a medio caminar,
en medio del camino
– porque éste es el tiempo
y no lo ignoro – digo
otra vez la plegaria:
'Que despertemos en tu nombre,
que despertemos en tu reino,*

⁶² Miguel Casado notes Valente's ambivalent relation to personal memory in this and other poems: "Queda ahí, en todos los casos, la amaneza de un peligro grave, surcado de hechos y términos violentos, que parece poseer una fuerza incontrolable y ante lo cual solo cabe la huida. La mención de la infancia siempre conlleva esta turbiedad oscura y viscosa, que no deja de fluir en vida. La memoria no es una facultad intelectual abstracta e implica por fuerza la constitución del inconsciente y, entreverados con sus oscuridades, los conflictos en que se delucida y conforma la identidad. La negación de la memoria conlleva el velado, la negación de estos ámbitos; de ellos se huye, se quiere huir" (2012: 164-165).

*que despertemos en tu duración,
así en la tierra
como en el cielo,
Padre'
(OCI: 159)*

There is a sense that this cry is made more in desperation than in any real expectation of fulfillment. Similar to the desire for a pure, creative word that would unite word and thing, or a poetic image that could embody the material of the past, this is a desire that is both necessary and infinite. It is simply the capacity for address, the invocation of the divine as opposed to its presence, which constitutes the religious pathos of this moment. The change in emotional tonality after this invocation is towards calmness and acceptance:

Ahora sumo imágenes,
rostros, acciones, nombres,
peso el amor.
Ésta es la cuenta al cabo:
estamos solos.
Alrededores son, postrimerías,
ecos remotos cuanto llega ahora
de más allá de la distancia....
(OCI: 160)

Images are remote echos of that which is beyond distance, they fail to embody past experience, and perhaps even delude us, but this delusion may give a greater truth, the truth of both the irreparability of the past and the necessity of remembering this loss, clothing it in the figures, the *peso* and *cuenta*, of the poem. This infinite task is what constitutes our ethical responsibility, to the past and to the alterities that surround us. It is in this sense that the voice declares that “Todo/se hace destino,” and at the same time implies that we will never finish our task, but rather that “con paso lento / y el corazón entero en la firmeza, / ingresemos despacio en la enorme salida” (OCI: 160).

CHAPTER III: VALENTE AND COMMUNITY

3.1 ANTIGONE: SPEAKING FOR THE OTHER

We have identified in Valente's poetry a tension between the Romantic desire, mediated by the poetics of Eliot and Leavis, as well as the theory of symbolic form of Cassirer and Langer, to repair the divided consciousness of the modern citizen, and a negative poetics that recognizes the impossibility of return in the infinite insufficiency of language to embody the absolute. In this chapter I will discuss this tension in terms of Valente's reading of Sophocle's *Antigone*, and its relevance to the relationship between poetry and community.

In a lecture given at Harvard University in 2004, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney discusses, in terms of his own experiences in the conflict-ridden North of Ireland, the contemporary resonance of the play that he translated as *The Burial at Thebes*, Sophocles's *Antigone*.⁶³ Sophocles's play pits the desire of Antigone to grant her brother Polyneices a full burial against the decision of her uncle, and leader of the *Polis*, Creon, to leave Polyneices's body lie untended outside the walls of the city, carrion for wild animals. For Heaney, Creon's cruelty could not but bring to mind certain events of what are often termed the Northern Irish "troubles," and specifically the rage of a community that was not allowed to escort the body of a dead IRA hunger striker, Francis Hughes, whose family were friends and neighbours of the poet, directly from the prison where he died to his native village of Toome. For Heaney, the British government's appropriation of the body of the deceased was, among other things, an affront to the nationalist community's sense of

⁶³ The talk was published in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* as "Title Deeds: Translating a Classic" (2004).

place, what in Gaelic is termed *dúchas*, a term that implies “connection, affinity, or descent due to longstanding” and the elevation of these to “a kind of ideal of the spirit, an enduring value amid the change and the erosion of all human things” (qtd. in Heaney, 413). In this opposition Heaney is following Hegel’s influential reading of the tragedy, according to which Antigone represents the particular ethical commitment to kin and household Gods, whereas Creon represents the universal law of the city state. For Hegel, in pagan Greece the opposition cannot be overcome as the *aufhebung* of the universal and particular in the “concrete universal” is only possible in post-Christian modernity.⁶⁴

Heaney’s reading of *Antigone* raises questions that are also central to the thought and poetry of Valente – the relationship of the poet and poetry to the community and its language, the importance of poetry as remembrance, and our ethical duty to the victims of violence. To frame these questions in terms of the philosophical oppositions that determine our approach to Valente’s work, we might think of Antigone’s defiance in terms of the resistance of a singular alterity to the modern conceptions of dialectic movement towards the absolute, whether this absolute is conceived in terms of the state or in terms of the wholeness of individual identity. These questions are central to a philosophical discourse on community that developed in the 1980s and 1990s, in the work of thinkers who can be placed within the category of philosophers or thinkers of alterity – Maurice Blanchot (1984), Jean Luc Nancy (1991), Giorgio Agamben (1993) – and which has its contemporary articulation in the work of Roberto Esposito (2009 and 2010). Contextualizing aspects of Valente’s work in the light of this discourse of community, I will attempt to further explore the contradictions in Valente’s work. I will begin with a discussion of Valente’s readings of the play that are included in *Las palabras del tribu*.

⁶⁴ For a concise summary and criticism of Hegel’s reading of Antigone see Mills (1986: 131-152). George Steiner’s *Antigones* (1984) remains a standard introduction to the enormous literature on, and adaptations of, Sophocle’s text.

Valente's two essays dedicated to Antigone were published in 1968 ("Ideología y Lenguaje" in *Ínsula*) and 1969 ("La respuesta de Antígona" in *Papeles de Son Armadans*). Both readings are closely related. In the later text, which is placed previous to the earlier in the sequential ordering of *Palabras del tribu*, Antigone's sacrifice is framed in terms of the achievement of a new horizon of possibility for historical experience. According to Valente, "parece naturaleza de héroe trágico romper con su sacrificio los condicionamientos históricos que le han dado existencia para abrir una nueva posibilidad temporal, una nueva expectativa humana" (OCII: 69). In the context of the drama, Creon's discourse is that of the "inflación del estado" (OCII: 69), in which the expansion of state control implies an increase in efficiency, but at the price of a concomitant reduction in liberty. This lack of liberty is reflected, in Valente's eyes, in the actions of Ismene, the Chorus, and the Guard, whose behaviour is based on the necessity of physical survival rather than ethical choice. The very efficiency of the state in its capacity to absolutely determine human action undermines its validity, and makes visible the contingency of its power, which is reflected in the corporal stench (the decaying body of Polyneices) that undermines the pillars of justice and precludes Tiresias's sacrifices to the Gods. If, in the Periclean model of the state, the civic law (justice) coincides with the law of the revealed Gods (truth), in Sophocle's tragedy it is Antigone's task to "negar esa verdad" (OCII: 73), to fight against the Gods of the city so as to reveal hidden Gods and historical possibilities. As Valente writes: "Antígona existe para forzar una nueva manifestación de lo divino que, en última instancia, es decir, en la culminación del sacrificio trágico, consiste en la sanción de una nueva órbita de human libertad" (OCII: 76). In an interesting twist on traditional interpretations of the tragedy, Valente does not consign Antigone to the realm of the pre-political; rather, for the Galician poet she is the only character in the drama who is capable

of creating historical change: “Antígona es la aberración peligrosa del espíritu, una nueva manifestación de la conciencia libre del hombre en la material de la historia que la imposición de lo estatuido reifica. Por eso, de la pareja Antígona-Creonte sólo Antígona es creadora de historia, de devenir (OCII: 75).

Valente’s reading of Antigone coincides to some degree with Judith Butler’s interpretations of Sophocle’s work in her series of short essays, *Antigone’s Claim*, as she also reads the play in a way that allows Antigone to step out of the pre-political sphere in which Hegelian and Lacanian readings had placed her. In the Hegelian scheme, Antigone stands for the kinship relationships that must be partially overcome so that the male citizen can come into being. The mother must give up her son so that he may fight for the state, a process that she resists, thus becoming both the foundation and the enemy of the state, the “everlasting irony of the community.”⁶⁵ Similarly, for Lacan, the realm of the Symbolic (a quasi-transcendental category that is not natural but at the same time not contingent or social), is derived from an understanding of the incest taboo as the universal norm that transforms biological relations into cultural ones. The Lacanian Symbolic is, in Butler’s reading, “what sets limits to any and all utopian efforts to reconfigure and relive kinship relations” (20). In Lacan’s theory, the transcendental kinship positions determine the linguistic structures of the Symbolic, which are the basis of social life. Antigone, in this context, is understood as speaking from an impossible subject position with regard to the transcendental symbolic structures of kinship, and her destruction is the consequence of the sheer incoherence of her enunciative position in relation to these constitutive norms.

⁶⁵ Hegel’s phrase is the title of Luce Irigaray’s well known discussion on the play in her *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985: 214-226). Butler’s approach differs from that of Irigaray’s in that it avoids the investment of female corporal difference that is at the heart of Irigaray’s work. For a collection of feminist writings on *Antigone*, many of which elaborate on the problematics of theories of feminine corporal specificity as against the social construction of gender, see the collection of essays edited by Fanny Söderbäck: *Feminist Readings of Antigone* (2010).

Butler problematizes Hegel and Lacan's approaches to *Antigone*, arguing that they both ignore the fact that we can "critically assess the status of these rules that govern cultural intelligibility but are not reducible to a given culture" (17). In the context of kinship relationships, the contemporary legalization of gay marriage and, perhaps more subversively, the recognition of familial relations that do not coincide with the strictures of marriage, demonstrate the possibility of reconfiguring what are perceived in modern thought as necessary structures for cultural intelligibility and reproduction. *Antigone*, from this perspective, is "precisely the one with no place who nevertheless seeks to claim one within speech, the unintelligible as it emerges within the intelligible, a position within kinship that is no position" (78). In this way, *Antigone*, in her enunciation of subject positions and relations that are beyond cultural intelligibility, performs the ultimately political act, which is to question the boundaries between the political and the private, to question the naturalized and depoliticized categories upon which the polis is founded. As Butler remarks:

If kinship is the precondition of the human, then *Antigone* is the occasion for a new field of the human, achieved through political catechresis, the one that happens when the less than human speaks as human, when gender is displaced, when kinship founders on its own founding laws. (82)

Butler's reading of *Antigone* also coincides in some ways with Valente's other reading of the play, which approaches it in the more specific terms of a theory of language, his article, written in 1968, "Ideología y lenguaje." Here the "inflación del estado" (OCII:76) implies a necessary occlusion of a language that might resist a totalizing order: "...todo orden institucionalizado lleva siempre consigo una institucionalización del lenguaje, pues éste ha de eludir las formas pugnaces de una realidad que, por su propia naturaleza, tiende a irrumpir del subsuelo histórico" (OCII: 76). For Valente, Creon's language is similar to

that of any totalizing social order; it is what Henri Lefebvre (1966) terms *discours*, a reified public language that Antigone's words, which are "de raíz poética" (OCII: 76), denounce.⁶⁶ It is in this sense that Valente argues for the political efficacy of poetic language, which does not have to conform to the tenets of social realism to be politically significant:

La corrupción del lenguaje público, del discurso institucional, falsifica todo el lenguaje. Sólo la palabra poética, que por el hecho de ser creadora lleva en su raíz la denuncia, restituye al lenguaje su verdad. He ahí uno de los ejes centrales de la función social (tan debatida y tan poco entendida entre nosotros) del arte: la restauración de un lenguaje comunitario deteriorado o corrupto, es decir la posibilidad histórica de "dar un sentido más puro a las palabras del tribu." (OCII: 78)

In these lines we have a succinct exposition of Valente's argument for the social value of poetic language, one that he will repeat on many occasions throughout his career. This theory of the social value of poetry coincides with a vision of politics in which the genuinely political act is seen as one in which the limits of the possible are overcome in a movement towards the impossible. That is, if ideology is the naturalization of relations that are in fact social, the genuinely political act is to reveal the contingency of a given social order. For Valente, a corrupt language is a language that coincides with a social order that is hostile to change, that is without *fissura*, and the poet's task in this context is to reveal new linguistic possibilities that would imply the possibility of a new social order, new divisions between the political and the non-political. In the context of our reading of *Antigone*, this possibility is related to the irruption within the political of those who, according to the divisions upon which the political sphere is raised, have no voice within it, someone who, like Antigone, as Butler puts it, "is dead in some sense and yet speaks" (77).

⁶⁶ Valente takes from Lefebvre's Marxist theory of the reification of language discussed in *Le langage et la société*. There are two editions of this work in Valente's library, one, the French edition from 1966, the other, the Spanish edition from 1967.

Thus Valente can argue that the political import of his work, in the context of the postwar Spain in which he writes, lies in the attempt to create a poetic language that would resist a Francoist public language which he would later describe as constituting a linguistic “estado de ocupación” (OCII: 1216). Valente identifies this corruption of language not only as a characteristic of society under the fascist Spanish dictatorship, but also characteristic of contemporary neo-liberal governments.⁶⁷ It is important to remember, also, that in the context of Spanish history, the figure of Antigone is especially important, as her ethical stance is based on a desire to declare publically a grief that can find no legitimate expression within the polis. It is impossible not to link this desire to the contemporary silencing of the suffering of the losing side in the Civil War, and the fact that, even today, the bodies of the victims of violence lie in unmarked graves throughout the country. Perhaps no figure exemplifies the injustice of a society in which the victims of violence cannot receive proper burial than that of Lorca, to whom Valente dedicates the following memorial in *Fragments de un libro futuro*:

Desde Granada subimos hasta Víznar. Vagamos por el borde sombrío del barranco - ¿Dónde?, decíamos. Era el otoño. Los hermanos, las viudas, los hijos de los muertos venían con grandes ramos. Entraban en el bosque y los depositaban en algún lugar, inciertos, tanteantes. ¿En dónde había sucedido? – Lo mataron a él, decía la mujer, pero también mataron a otros muchos, a tantos, a éstos que ahora nadie ya recuerda. – Él ya no es él, le dije. Es el nombre que toma la memoria, no extinguiible, de todos.

(Víznar, 1988)

(OCI: 558)

⁶⁷ As Valente notes in his interventions to the congress “40 anni di poesia in spagna: tra realism e avanguardia,” which took place from the 7th to the 8th of October, 1976 in Venice: “En regimens fascistas, cuya natureleza totalitarian es manifiesta, el poder opera sobre el lenguaje brutal y directamente, mediante sistemas de censura o incluso de eliminación física. En otros sistemas se actúa sobre el lenguaje por manipulación indirecta, ocupando el lenguaje – gracias, en gran parte, a los llamados *mass media* – con contenidos prefabricados, con paquetes de información (packaged information)” (OCII: 1219-1220). We might turn here to a contemporary, neoliberal version of this institutionalized language, the “bankspeak” described by Franco Moretti and Dominique Pestre (2015).

The body of Lorca, like the unburied body of Polyneices, becomes the figure through which a grief that could not find legitimate expression within the Francoist state begins to speak, and reflects the way in which for Valente, the subversion of language and the exploration of the enunciative complexity of testifying for the victims of violence constitutes the political task of the poet within his community.

3.2 FIGURATION OF LANGUAGE IN THE EARLY POEMS: BETWEEN THE AIR AND THE EARTH

The problems central to Valente's reading of *Antigone* – the relation between the poet, his language, and the wider community – are taken up in many of the poems of his first five major collections of poetry – *A modo de esperanza*, *Poemas a Lázaro*, *La memoria y los signos*, *Breve son*, and *El inocente*. *Presentación y memorial para un monumento*, which we will not explore in detail here, is composed entirely of fragments that represent what could be understood, in Valente's terms, as language in an "estado de ocupación" – the hate-filled language that inspires dogmas of various hues, whether Stalinist, Fascist, or Catholic.

It is worth examining in detail the figurations of language through which Valente approaches these issues in this early half of his career, as the poems reveal certain tensions that I argue are central to his poetic project. On the one hand, Valente's description of a corrupt public language oscillates between images of linguistic putrefaction and decay, conceived in organic terms, and the denunciation of empty words, meaningless signifiers that float in a vacuum. On the other hand, the language of truth is also figured in organic terms, with a healthy growth opposed to the rotten fruit of the language of lies. The desire to break with existing linguistic conventions and create new political horizons exists alongside a desire to restore the memory of generations to a society that experiences the traumas of war as a profound rupture. The poet longs for a poetic language that could

found or celebrate a sense of community, but at the same time recognizes the dangers inherent in the jingoism that can cause a false sense of solidarity based on the exclusion of others. I will argue that these contradictions, which are manifest in the collections of poetry up until the collection *Interior con figuras*, allow us to read the political import of the stylistic and thematic transformation visible in the poet's work from this collection on, and also allow us to explore the difficulties involved in writing poetry that is attentive to historical and political context, while at the same time negotiating a literary and philosophical tradition in which the desire to cast poetry as a "new mythology" that would found a community in which each member identifies themselves with a communitarian essence entails the dangers of a totalitarian exclusion of otherness. I will begin with a reading of the poems in the first five collections that are given over to the theme of language and community.

In "La rosa necesaria," from *A modo de esperanza*, the poetic voice appeals for a language that would allow for the creation of a polis bound by shared experience:

La rosa no;
la rosa sólo
para ser entregada.

La rosa que se aísla
en una mano, no;
la rosa connatural al aire
que es de todos.

La rosa no,
ni la palabra sola.

La rosa que se da
de mano a mano,
que es necesario dar,
la rosa necesaria.
La compartida así,
la convivida,
la que no debe ser
salvada de la muerte,

la que debe morir
para ser nuestra,
para ser cierta.
Plaza,
estancia, casa
del hombre,
palabra natural,
habitada y usada
como el aire del mundo.
(OCI: 85)

Despite the Heideggerean overtones of a language that would be “estancia, casa / del hombre,” what is described here is a language that exists as pure exchange, and which can circulate between members of a community metonymized as a “plaza.” “La rosa necesaria,” seems to demonstrate an adherence to the view expounded in the early 1950s by Vicente Aleixandre and Carlos Bousoño, according to which poetry should be above all communicative, a view which Valente would later repudiate. This stance is repeated, with a subtle variation, in the critique of representative democracy in the penultimate poem of the collection, “Acuérdate del hombre que suspira...” (OCI: 98), which opposes the experience of the subject “...tan singular, tan oscuro, tan diario / que me toco, río, y muero a la vez” (OCI: 100) to “Ellos, los poderosos /...los que suelen hablar / en representación de todo el mundo” (OCI: 100).

The latter poem, however, does not simply create a division between an abstract political discourse and the singular experience of the carnal human being who laughs, eats, and cries, but also attempts to give voice to those whose enunciative position prohibits their political speech, allowing us to see the fault line along which the division of the political and the non-political is drawn, implying that the truly political act would be similar to that of Butler’s Antigone – the reformulation or the destruction of the division itself. It is from this perspective that we can understand the political task of the poet, who, as we are told the poem from *Breve son*, “Segunda homenaje a Isadore Ducasse,” “debe ser

más útil / que ningún ciudadano de su tribu” (OCI: 264), but is only so in regard to his knowledge of “diversas leyes implacables / La ley de la confrontación con lo visible, / el trazado de líneas divisorias” (OCI: 264). That is, the poet’s difficult task is to redraw the lines of the political and the non-political, and give voice to those who are refused the right to speak in the public sphere. The preceding poem, “El crimen,” pushes this questioning of enunciative position to its limit. Reminiscent of Butler’s description of the irruption of Antigone’s speech in the political sphere, the poem is spoken from the position of a murder victim, the impossible position of enunciation that reflects a refusal of a political system that silences the powerless.⁶⁸

Poemas a Lázaro is characterized by a more ambiguous attitude towards the capacity of poetic language to effect political change. In the “Primer poema” that opens the collection the “odiosamente inútil” poetic voice asks: “cuento los caedizos latidos / de mi corazón y ¿qué importa?, / ¿qué sed o qué agobiante / vacío llenaré de un vacío más fiero” (OCI: 107). The political power of the poem in this context would only arise from the poet’s absorption in the community:

Para vivir así,
para ser así anónimamente
reavivida y cambiada,
para que el canto, al fin,
libre de la aquejada
mano, sea sólo poder,
poder que brote puro
como un gallo en la noche,
como en la noche, súbito,
un gallo rompe a ciegas
el escuadrón compacto de las sombras.
(OCI: 108)

⁶⁸ It is significant that in María Zambrano’s version of the play, her *La tumba de Antígona*, the action takes place within the tomb of Antigone, itself an impossible position of enunciation.

Here, the political efficacy of poetry would lie in the destruction of the poetic prerogative to speak and express subjective interiority. Rather, in the anonymity of the poetic voice a communitarian experience would unfurl in language. “Objeto de poema,” from the same collection, seems to flatly contradict the optimism with regard to poetic communication expressed in “La rosa necesaria.” Here, the “object” of the poem is hidden by an excess of words whose potential to deceive related precisely to that airy lightness that in the previous poem was their virtue: “Te pongo aquí cercado/ de palabras y nubes: me confundo” (OCI: 133). There is a distrust of common language, and a Cavafy influenced disdain for the public sphere: “...hablo / de lugares communes, pongo / mi vida en las esquinas / no guardo mi secreto” (OCI: 133). This distrust of public language is not, however, a retreat into solipsism, but should be viewed more as a reaction to what is perceived as a corrupted public sphere. “La plaza” expresses this suspicion of language in terms of a nostalgia for a time in which public discourse was capable of uniting a community:

Aquí alguien habló
tal vez a hombres unidos
en la misma esperanza.
Tal vez entonces
tuvo en verdad la vida
cauce común y fue la patria
un nombre más extenso
de la amistad o del amor.
Aquí
latía un solo corazón unánime....
(OCI: 146)

This unitary language would express the heartbeat of an organic community that moves in unison. In “La mentira,” the possibility of a language that would unite a community and express the truth is described in organic terms, a language that would “enarbolar la verdad” (OCI: 149) as opposed to the “palabras de globos hinchados” (OCI: 149) of the

“mercadores de mentira” (OCI: 149). In the following poem, “Sobre el lugar del canto,” language is again described with organic metaphors of generation:

La cólera terrible de la tierra
que no alimenta la raíz del aire
y se acuesta en la tierra boca abajo.

La palabra que nace sin destino.
.....
Un fruto triste se desgarró y cede
más débil que su propio podredumbre.
(OCI: 150)

Already in these first two collections we can see a figurative tension that has a significance throughout Valente’s work and which we have linked to the tensions that I argue underlie his work as a whole. It is expressed in the tension between a poetics of generation in which poetic language figured as organic growth would unite a community as a totality, and a vision of language as unbounded, a transparent substance “connatural al aire” (OCI: 85), the very lightness of which allows for linguistic exchange and thereby communitarian relation. Language conceived in this, second, sense can be understood either positively or negatively, as that which can freely circulate among citizens or as that which deceives, a sterile word, “ebrio de nada,” which empties the plaza, once the place for the celebration of community, but, in the context of the postwar, the site that reveals the destruction of solidarity: “...piadosamente, / en el aire extinguido, / mi mano toca ahora / la soledad” (OCI: 146).

“La memoria y los signos” again takes up the thematics of a new poetic language that would work against the corrosive language of the Spanish public sphere. “Con palabras distintas” imagines a poetry that “hirió de muerte al necio / al fugaz señorito de ala triste” and which “...vino a nuestro encuentro/ con palabras distintas, que no reconocimos, / contra nuestras palabras” (OCI: 201). The final section of the collection, section VII, deals

almost entirely with the question of the relation between poetic language and community. In “Un canto” the thematics of speaking for another, or allowing those who are silenced to enter the public realm, returns:

La explosion de un silencio.

Un canto nuevo, mío, de mí prójimo,
del adolescente sin palabras que espera ser nombrado,
de la mujer cuyo deseo sube
en borbotón sangriento a la pálida frente,
de éste que me acusa silencioso,
que silenciosamente me combate,
porque acaso no ignora
que una sola palabra bastaría
para arrasar el mundo,
para extinguir el odio
y arrastrarnos....
(OCI: 213)

“Como una invitación o una súplica” recounts the difficulty of discovering a “brizna del mundo” (OCI: 214) behind the shroud of a cliché ridden language whose “ritmos componían / el son inútil de la letra muerta / y de la vieja moralidad” (OCI: 214). Language is personified, and the potential for change is shown as something internal to its functioning, but only if they are emptied of their normal significance: “pues ellas mismas todavía esperan / la mano que las quiebre y las vacíe / hasta hacerlas intelligibles y puras / para que de ellas nazca un sentido distinto, / incomprehensible y claro / como el amanecer o el despertar” (OCI: 215). The following poem, “No puede a veces,” is more pessimistic as to poetry’s powers. There is, perhaps, a time for poetry within a community that celebrates and sacralises itself through song, but equally, as the first line of the poem reads, “No puede a veces alzarse al canto lo que vive” (OCI: 216). In a recurrent trope in these poems, the failure of language is linked to the failure of generation, what in the previous poem is described as “hilos rotos,” in “No puede a veces” finds its equivalent in “la solidificación del tibio / fluido seminal en los lechos vacíos” (OCI: 216). The place of

communitarian celebration is replaced by “vastos salones preparados / para un ceremonial que no veremos” (OCI: 216). The restorative function of poetry, the notion, dear to Wordsworth (spots of time) and Eliot (approach to meaning is approach to experience) is lost: “Y la memoria / irreparable, hunde su raíz en lo amargo” (OCI: 216).

The penultimate poem of this section, “Para oprobio del tiempo,” is a devastating dissection of this time which makes the celebration of community in poetry an impossible task, and also the poem in Valente’s work that makes most obvious reference to *Antigone*. Similar to the stench that shows the corruption of Thebes, the broken world of the poem contains “...algo que había quedado sin sepultar / y hedía” (OCI: 217). The public sphere is falsified; rather than a plaza where the community can convene it has become “...un ensayo general / con trajes, música, el director de escena / y un telón espantoso cayendo de improviso / antes de terminar el tercer acto” (OCI: 217). Behind the theatrical generations of royalty, the “...sucesión / de los monarcas godos,” there is something “roto o insepulto,” something that remains to be said, but unsaid, diminishes language itself: “Unas palabras eran / por su sonido falsas, se veía. / Otras por su inocencia, peligrosas y alevés” (OCI: 218). But if this time is not propitious to poetry that might inspire an effective revolution in the present, there is the possibility that the “candidez azul de las palabras” (OCI: 218), given their irrepressible and uncontrolled circulation, might in the future reach actors with the capacity to change the given order: “las palabras, que no nos pertenecen, se asocian como nubes / que un día el viento precipita / sobre la tierra / para cambiar, no inútilmente, el mundo” (OCI: 219).

The tension between generation and discontinuity, empty or decaying words against the organic language of truth, returns in the final work of Valente’s most obviously

politically charged writings, *El inocente*. The first two sections of the long poem “Sobre el tiempo presente” crystallize these tensions:

Escribo desde un naufragio,
desde un signo o una sombra,
discontinuo vacío
que de pronto se llena de amenazante luz.

Escribo desde el tiempo presente,
sobre la necesidad de dar un orden testamentario a nuestros
gestos,
de transmitir en el nombre del padre,
de los hijos del padre,
de los hijos oscuros de los hijos del padre,
de su rastro en la tierra,
al menos una huella del amor que tuvimos....
(OCI: 298)

From the historical rupture of war the poetic voice gives itself the task of restoring memory and the experience of generations. But, paradoxically, this task can only be carried out through the creation of a new language and under the aegis of a new mythology:

Con lenguaje secreto escribe,
pues quién podría darnos ya la clave
de cuanto hemos de decir.
Escribo sobre el hálito de un dios que aún no ha tomado forma,
sobre una revelación no hecha,
sobre el ciego legado
que de generación en generación llevará nuestro nombre....
(OCI: 299)

The poet’s task is not only to write about the past, but to write in a new language that redefines that which can be said, creating, like Antigone, “una nueva manifestación de lo divino” that would allow for “una nueva órbita de human libertad” (OCII: 76), and, paradoxically, through rupture create a new generational thread. “El poema,” from the same collection, describes this language:

Si no creamos un objeto metálico
de dura luz,
de púas aceradas,
de crueles aristas,

donde el que va a vendernos, a entregarnos, de pronto
reconozco o presencie metódica su muerte,
cúando podremos poseer la tierra....⁶⁹
(OCI: 303-304)

This “objeto incruento,” paradoxically, allows for the communal possession of the earth; that which refuses exchange, “resistente a la vista / odioso al tacto” (OCI: 304), is precisely that which founds a community that shares a common world. This hard, metallic language is opposed to the decaying language of “Crónica, 1968”:

Las palabras se pudren.

El que da una palabra da un don.
El que da un don deja vacío el aire.
El que vacía el aire coloniza la tierra.

Pero bajo la tierra las palabras se pudren.
Las palabras se llenan de un hipo triste de animal ahíto
de un hipo de hipopótamo tardío,
y que mucho que brille su arco iris no traen la paz,
sino el sebáceo son del salivar chasquido
y el hilo deglutido de la muerte.

Las palabras se pudren, son devueltas,
como pétreo excremento,
sobre la noche de los humillados.
(OCI: 308)

Here, the twin aspects of language are invoked. Language can freely circulate in exchange, in this way allowing for the construction of a common world.⁷⁰ But this can also be a

⁶⁹ These lines are reminiscent of Blanchot’s description of Lautréamont’s *Chants de Maldoror*, which Valente underlines in his copy of the volume *Lautréamont et Sade* from 1967: “...cette coupure âpre, froide, des mots, exactement semblable à celle du rasoir dans un visage, cette décision acérée qui déjà s’affirme et, si elle ne renverse pas la langage, fait de lui une lame si tranchante que, par quelque côté qu’on la saisisse, elle coupe, elle déchire” (155-156). I will discuss the importance of Lautréamont’s poetry for Valente in a later chapter.

⁷⁰ Julián Jiménez Heffernan (2004: 201- 252) and (2010: 329-360) explores the importance of the word “don” in Valente’s poetry in the context of Derrida’s writings on the paradoxes of gift-giving. For Jiménez Heffernan, Valente’s poetry aims to be original pure donation, but cannot escape the essential repeatability of language. In the Bloomian terms that Jiménez Heffernan uses, Valente’s melancholy derives from his inability to “poner un huevo lírico y aniquilar la descendencia, acuñar una moneda y borrar su efigie, redactor un poema y cancelar su ascendencia y transmisión” (252). His agony is that of “reconocer, en sus monedas, trozos de habladuría heredada, fragmentos de jerga” (252). While Jiménez Heffernan’s readings are brilliant, he perhaps underestimates the conservative aspects of Valente’s

language that creates a “vacío,” which, in this context, has the negative connotations of “empty words.” Putrefaction, on the other hand, remits to the semantic field of rot and decay that Valente uses to describe both Spanish society, which like Thebes lives under the stench of unsanctified corpses, and a corrupt public language. Literature that conforms to traditional norms and that dignifies a community is, in this conjuncture, impossible, and only serves to denigrate the victims of totalitarian violence.

These first five major collections of Valente’s work – *A modo de esperanza*, *Poemas a Lázaro*, *La memoria y los signos*, *Breve son*, and *El inocente* – are characterized by a sustained critique of the public language of Francoist Spain, and the expression of the need to create a new poetic language that would lay bare the shortcomings of that social and political world, and at the same time serve in the foundation of a new communitarian self-understanding. The language of the regime is figured rhetorically as both a “vacío” and as a rotting corpse, the language of the empty plaza or the ceremonial room from which the public is excluded. Opposed to this is a poetic language, which is the organic language of generations, that which connects the present and the past, but also that which allows for the rupture of existing conditions, the inclusion of enunciative positions that are excluded from the public sphere, and the opening of horizons towards a future of liberty. It is clear, however, that there are profound tensions within Valente’s approach to the political potential of poetic language and its relation to the wider community. Whereas “La rosa compartida” describes a transparent language that would be easily shared among members of a community, “El poema” describes an “objeto incruento” that would resist any facile reading, while “La mentira” imagines an organic language that would “enarbolar la verdad.” The desire to rupture existing linguistic convention and to include the excluded

poetry and poetics, his desire to place himself within a genealogy, if of his own fashioning, and thereby grant his work status.

within the public sphere coexists with a more conservative desire that poetry restore the memory of generations, framed in terms that are themselves exclusive – “del hijo al padre.” We might also ask ourselves whether there are dangers in the desire that poetry founds a community. Valente himself seems to point to these possible dangers in the “Canción de cuna” included in *Breve son*, in which a motley group of Francoist dignataries chant in unison:

- ¡Somos las fuerzas vivas,
somos las fuerzas vivas,
somos las fuerzas vivas
de toda la nación!...
(OCI: 262)

The nationalist rhetoric invoked, and implicitly criticised, reminds us of the dangers inherent in the desire that poetry become a new foundational mythology for a community, a danger that was central to intellectual exploration of the notion of community that began with the work of Jean Luc Nancy’s influential text, *La communauté désœuvrée*, to which I now turn.

3.3 JEAN LUC NANCY AND THE UNWORKED COMMUNITY

Nancy’s major work on community was published in 1986 under the title *La communauté désœuvrée*, and later published in English in 1991, with the addition of two further chapters, as *The Inoperative Community*.⁷¹ In the preface to his work Nancy defines the question of community in terms of a politics of the left. Politics of the right would be, from this perspective, concerned simply with administration and order. Politics of the left, on the other hand, would mean that “at the very least, that the political, as such, is receptive to what is at stake in the community” (xxxvi). This means that the very possibility of the political, which in contemporary democracies seems to give way to

⁷¹ For purposes of convenience I will quote from the English version of the text, which includes essays excluded from the earlier French edition.

economic models of efficiency, is based on life in community. And life in community is, for Nancy, always based on a relation to an alterity. In fact, in order to *be* at all, we must first *be in relation* to that which is other, and Nancy here takes on a Levinasian discourse of the “face of the other” in order to describe this “being-in-common” within community, the existence whose “exemplary reality is that of ‘my’ face always exposed towards others, always turned toward an other and faced by him or her, never facing myself. This is the archi-original impossibility of Narcissus that opens straight away onto the possibility of the political” (xxxvii-xxxviii).

For Nancy, however, this thinking of the political and the community as the expropriation of the self in its being-in-common with another has, in the modern conceptions of community that stem from Rousseau, been replaced by an idea of the immanent community, conceived as “the sharing, diffusion, or impregnation of an identity by a plurality wherein each member identifies himself only through the supplementary mediation of his identification with the living body of the community” (9). These conceptions are precisely the “closure” of community, as being-in-common is a relation that never allows itself to be absorbed into a common substance outside of relation: “Being *in common* has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity that would no longer be exposed. Being *in common* means, to the contrary, *no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity, and sharing this* (narcissistic) ‘lack of identity.’ This is what philosophy calls ‘finitude’...” (xxxviii). That is, community is the ecstatic experience of the singular (as opposed to the atomic individual) being, the *clinamen* it undergoes in its relation to the other that is excessive, that does not allow itself to be appropriated in a process of self-identification.

The singular being's experience of that which is other is related to its finitude, and therefore the experience of community is intimately bound up with the experience of death.⁷² It is from this understanding of community that Nancy is able to construct a critique of modern conceptions of a "lost" community. Nancy identifies a tendency in modern thought, developing from Rousseau but also present in Hegel, to describe a prior state of social development in which a pristine state of community prevailed. Though this vision of community can be framed in the historical context of Rome, the first Christian communities, or medieval brotherhoods, for Nancy, the most important model for community as conceived by the moderns is ultimately the Christian Eucharist. The modern conception of community would be, from this perspective, the modern way of conceiving of the irruption of the divine into the immanence of human existence. Community so thought might be a reaction to the withdrawal of the divine in modernity, the replacement of the *Deus Absconditus* with the *Deus Communis*. In modernity, we replace the experience of the other that defines being-in-common with a desire for absolute immanence expressed as nostalgia for a lost community. This desire for absolute immanence is destructive of the very spacing, the relation with alterity, which constitutes true community. In fact, the desire for immanence in community constitutes its very suppression. Absolute immanence can only be achieved in death, and for Nancy this explains the self-destructive tendencies of nationalist societies. Nazi Germany, which moved from the extermination of those considered other to the brink of absolute self-destruction, would be the prime example of this tendency, and it is possible to argue that in this case societal self-destruction actually took place, at least, as Nancy notes, "with regard to certain aspects of the spiritual reality of the nation" (12). A similar process can be seen

⁷² We should note here the Heideggerian analytics of finitude, or *Dasein's* being toward death, as the background to Nancy's thought.

in the mythico-literary figure of the self-destructive suicide of lovers, or in the self-sacrifice of the subject for the state, which for Hegel was the profound expression of the achievement of objective spirit. Thus Nancy can argue that

The fully realized person of individualistic or communistic humanism is the dead person. In other words, death, in such a community, is not the unmasterable excess of finitude, but the infinite fulfilment of an immanent life: it is death itself consigned to immanence; it is in the end that resorption of death that the Christian civilization as though devouring its own transcendence, has come to minister to itself in the guise of a supreme work. (13)

If, in the Hegelian system, death can be sublated in terms of the dialectical movement of history towards the absolute community yet to come, for Nancy, there is no sublation of death within community. Death is always singular, marking the limits of our experience and constituting our finitude. Death is never sublated in the pseudo communitarian terms of homeland, soil, blood, or nation; on the contrary, it is that which reveals the true nature of community as the impossibility of immanence. That is, when we witness the death of the other we are presented with what we cannot ourselves experience but that which is at the same time our innermost truth, our finitude. When we witness the death of the other with which we cannot participate we are presented with the limits of our experience, our birth and our death, which are inscribed for us negatively in this witnessing. The most profound experience of ourselves as finite beings (as we cannot experience our own birth or death) is this witnessing which simultaneously tells us a profound truth of community – the impossibility of immanence or fusion within it. As Nancy writes: “In a certain sense community acknowledges and inscribes – this is its particular gesture – the impossibility of community” (15). It is in this sense that Nancy argues that the community is that which is “unworked,” as it is constituted by the sharing or co-appearance of finitude that cannot be made into a work, that is, that which would be a transcendent embodiment of community

outside of the communication without communion of singular beings: “There is nothing *behind* singularity – but there is, outside it and in it, the immaterial *and* material space that distributes it and shares it out as singularity, distributes and shares the confines of other singularities, or even more exactly distributes and shares the confines of other singularity – which is to say of alterity – between it and itself” (27).

But what is the relevance to literature of Nancy’s discussion of community? A hint is given at the end of the first essay of *The Inoperative Community* in which Nancy describes the place of lovers in the work of Georges Bataille, for whom, as Nancy notes, “community was first and finally the community of lovers” (36). For Nancy, adapting but changing Bataille’s ideas, if lovers reveal something about community it is not that they form a special bond above society, but because they “expose that fact that communication is not communion” (37). Lovers are at the extreme limit of communication, touching each other in the joy of intimacy, but nevertheless know of no communion, and are as such something like the exemplars of community. Literature, for Nancy, would be the writing of this speechless co-appearance of beings in the singularity of loving relation:

There is community, there is sharing, and there is the exposition of this limit. Community does not lie beyond the lovers, it does not form a larger circle within which they are contained: it traverses them, in a tremor of ‘writing’ wherein the literary work mingles with the most simple public exchange of speech. Without such a trait traversing the kiss, sharing it, the kiss itself is as despairing as community is abolished.
(40)

Nancy further develops his arguments for the centrality of literature to his conception of community in the second essay of the collection, “Myth Interrupted.” He begins with a description of the “primal scene” of myth – a storyteller gathers a group around a tribal fire and narrates to them the story of their origin and the founding of their community. The story is told in a language that is “no longer the language of their exchanges, but of their

reunion – the sacred language of a foundation and an oath” (44). This scene is for Nancy also mythic, it is the “myth of myth” that is the invention of Romanticism, the latter possible to define as “the simultaneous awareness of the loss of the power of this myth, and as the desire or the will to regain this living power of the origin and, at the same time, the origin of this power” (45). For Nancy, and in the modern context (what myth might have meant to pre-modern societies is a question left unexplored), the desire to appropriate a mythic origin for an absolutely self-identical community is at the root of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century, and is inseparable from the historical nightmare of Nazism. In this context, as that which allows societies to project a pristine origin and posit themselves as the destiny of humankind, the modern mythmaking is a profound danger. It is, however, impossible to completely disengage with myth. This having to do with myth – moving between the poles of lamenting its exhaustion or investing in the “will to the power of myth” (46) – is what Nancy describes as “the interruption of myth” (47) and which he relates to literature.

To understand this connection it is first necessary to return to the modern conception of mythic language. Beyond the “positive, historical, philological, or ethnological” (48) resources that may be employed to understand myth, Nancy emphasizes the linguistic status ascribed to myth in modernity as “a primordial language: the element of an inaugural communication in which exchange or sharing in general are founded or inscribed” (48). This is the myth of myth as original speech of plenitude, founding the essence of the community. This speech, in the phrase used by both Coleridge and Schelling, is “tautological,” saying nothing but itself as the very “cosmos structuring itself in nature” (49). It is the language that gives rise to a world, and which “...communicates itself, and nothing else. Communicating itself, it bring into being what it says, it founds its fiction”

(56). That is, though myth is figuration, in this context, and reminiscent of the theories of Cassirer and Langer, it is understood as a special type of “poetico-fictioning ontology, an ontology presented in the figure of an ontogony where being engenders itself by figuring itself, by giving itself the proper image of its own essence and the self-representation of its presence and its present” (54). Thus myth represents the fusion of world and will, and also of man with God, nature, and other men. It communicates itself as “a myth belonging to the community, and it communicates a myth of community: communion, communism, communitarianism, communication, community itself taken simply and absolutely, absolute community” (57). It is this operative function of the myth of myth towards the creation of an absolute community that leads Nancy to term it “totalitarian.”

For Nancy, however, because being-in-common is constituted by the mutual “compearance” (*comparution*) or exposure of singular beings to one another in relation there is always resistance to mythological conceptions of community that would in effect drown being-in-common in an absolute structure of social immanence. Nancy asks himself whether there exists a myth that would describe this being-in-common in a way that resists totalitarian community, what Blanchot describes as “the unavowable community” (qtd. in Nancy, 58). For Nancy, the description of being-in-common as he understands it could only relate to myth as this latter’s “interruption”: “the unavowable community, the withdrawal of communion or communitarian ecstasy, are revealed in the interruption of myth. And the interruption is not a myth” (58). If being-in-common is what constitutes true community, it is impossible to place, it only exists on the limits described by two singular beings exposed and shared to one another. Whereas myth would imagine this sharing as communion, what Nancy terms “literature” or “writing” would be the exposure of the “limit upon which communication takes place” (67), “the indefinitely repeated and

indefinitely suspended gesture of touching the limit, of indicating it and inscribing it, but without crossing it, without abolishing it in the fiction of a common body” (67).

3.4 VALENTE AND COMMUNITY: THE INTERRUPTION OF MYTH

It is clear that Nancy’s vision of community maps onto the basic oppositions that structure this thesis, which are condensed in the title of Levinas’s 1961 work, *Totalité et infini*. Whereas the non-closure of being-in-common is defined by an infinite approximation of singular beings at the limits of their ecstatic exposure, community, as conceived by a certain modernity, implies the totality of closure and immanence in the absolute identification of the individual with the whole (though it is important to remember here that an atomized individualism is also totalitarian in the ways that it presumes an absolute identity of self). For Nancy, the modern discourse of myth, which includes an ideology of a pure originating language, coincides with the totalization of community. Literature, on the other hand, would be the “interruption” of myth, the inscription of the unavowable limit experience that defines being-in-common, reflecting the eternal incompleteness that is implied in the sharing of stories, poems, and thoughts that define the limits of the work. Literature “interrupts” myth because, in modernity, it constantly figures a mythic origin for itself that this very figuration interrupts. For Nancy, this interruption is the essence of a genuine literary communism, which “consists, in its entirety – it is total in this respect, not totalitarian – in the inaugural act that each work takes up and that each text retraces: in coming to the limit, in letting the limit appear as such, in interrupting the myth” (68).

These ideas are obviously relevant to the work of Valente, both in his desire to restore a communal language that he believed had been damaged by the impositions of the Francoist dictatorship, but also in his arguments for the specificity of poetic language,

derived, from among other sources, mythological theories of language according to which there exists a pristine original language to which poetry reverts. These ideas are repeated in various ways throughout Valente's career, whether in the guise of Eliot's attempts to create a new mythology for the modern, Ernst Cassirer and Susanne K. Langer's theories of symbolic form, the Christian thematics of communion and the Word made flesh of the Gospel of Saint John, René Guénon's writings on the language of birds, or the anthropological investigations of Maurice Leenhardt. For Nancy, these theories of a pure, originary language, all of which, in the context of modernity, can ultimately be traced to elements of the Romantic and Idealist philosophies invoked in the introductory chapters to this thesis, imply at least the danger of a concomitant vision of total community in which each individual would find its truth in the transcendent communitarian essence. It is important to note, therefore, the opposing tendency in Valente's work, which describes a resistance to closure and totality that his tenacious defence of the *arche-logos* would seem to deny.

This tension is perhaps never more visible in Valente's written work than in a key essay published in 1982 in the collection *La piedra y el centro*, "Sobre la operación de las palabras sustanciales" (OCII: 300). In discussing Leenhardt's text, *Do Kamo: La persona y el mito en el mundo melanesio*, Valente notes the French anthropologist's rendering of the Kanak word "No," which signifies, according to Leenhardt, both word, action, and thought: "Esa palabra Melanesia...es una palabra total. Su proyección sobre la comunidad es, esencialmente, una encarnación...El jefe...tiene o es la palabra: palabra total, palabra matriz, que antecede a la locución, al acto, y al pensamiento, y que, a la vez, los contiene" (OCII: 300). For Valente, this vision of language maps onto pagan, Jewish, and Christian conceptions of divine language, and are still present in modern conceptions of the poetic

word. For Valente, poetry only exists in relation to this “palabra inicial que dice el principio o el origen” (OCII: 304) that founds the community. It is clear here that Valente exemplifies the mythical discourse that Nancy identifies as a pathological aspect of modern European cultures. But even in this essay we can also see a tendency to resist closure and the subsumption of all phenomena and relations under the arch-category of the *arche-logos*. This is reflected in the discussion of the dawning word of the same essay: “Así pues, el modo de esa preaparición es el despertar: límite, frontera, filo, lugar de lo todavía indistinto, lugar del comienzo o del origen, lugar del combate con el ángel...Tal es la extraña aventura de la palabra poética, aventura del comienzo perpetuamente comenzando: aventura del alba” (OCII: 303). Here the poetic word is that which always begins, never coming to a completion or returning to the Word to which it relates. Rather, it exists on a limit point, an adventure of the dawn as eternal beginning in which the poetic word always comes too late, is always a belated beginning that figures what it wants to be.

In modern poetry, these arguments are bound up with the notion of the specificity of poetic language, and there is no figure, after the German Romantics, more associated with this idea than Stéphane Mallarmé. Famously, Mallarmé, in his “Crise de vers,” outlined the central oppositions that would become operative in modern theories of poetic language – the distinction between “essential” and “common” or “brute” language, a distinction which was later disseminated in the influential poetics of Paul Valéry. It is important to closely examine the detail of Mallarmé’s ideas on language, and draw out complexities within them that are relevant to our discussion of the relations between poetry, the poet, and his or her community.

Though Mallarmé seems to draw a clear distinction between poetry on the one hand and prose on the other, a close reading of “Crise de vers” undermines such a simplistic

duality. In the context of the “crisis of verse” in the nineteenth century, the invention of new verse forms that do not coincide with traditional forms such as the Alexandrine, Mallarmé discusses the Cratylan desire that words coincide with what they denote, that language become an unmediated form of expression. Unfortunately, the proliferation of languages, the fact that “nuit” is more reminiscent of light than “jour,” reflects the fact that:

Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême :
penser étant écrire sans accessoires, ni chuchotement mais tacite encore
l'immortelle parole, la diversité, sur terre, des idiomes empêche personne
de proférer les mots qui, sinon se trouveraient, par une frappe unique,
elle-même matériellement la vérité. (244)

In fact, words, rather than embodying the things that they denote, destroy them. In oft-quoted lines, Mallarmé writes: “Je dis : une fleur ! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets” (251). This is the case for poetic language and for the language of the crowd, both of which ultimately can be reduced to silence, the silent exchange of money in the case of ordinary language and the silence of the essential poetic language which reduces the object to a “presque disparition vibratoire” (251).

For Maurice Blanchot, writing in “Le mythe de Mallarmé,” the significance of the distinction the poet makes between the two languages lies in the way in which the work of art oscillates between a making present of that which is absent while simultaneously demonstrating the impossibility of the coincidence between presence and absence. That is, whereas through custom our utilitarian everyday language allows us to believe that words transparently refer to objects of the world, providing the illusion of immediate and spontaneous access to them, the poetic work of art, in its “densité, l'épaisseur sonore” (44) reminds us that the “présence réelle et affirmation matérielle du langage lui donnent pouvoir de suspendre et de congédier le monde” (44), thereby producing the feeling of an

absence. The work, then, oscillates constantly between its own presence as language and the absence of the things to which it refers. It is in this context that we can understand what Blanchot terms the *deseouvement* of the work, a term which we can understand as analogous to Nancy's description of the "interruption" of myth. For Mallarmé in "Crise de vers," the poetic work of art aspires to become the total word that would retain that which is destroyed in language, "un mot total, neuf, étranger à la langue et comme incantatoire" (252). But the work could only achieve this status in silence, and its presence as language constantly undermines its claims – it is its own unworking or *desoeuvrement*. The moment that the work declares itself as a totality that retains the presence of things it becomes a being, thereby excluding that which it would embody, and thus Blanchot can claim that, ultimately, there is never any work.

The question remains, however, as to how to the pertinence of these arguments as to the nature of poetic language and the poet's relationship to his community. Mallarmé's poetry is generally considered as hermetic and "obscure," an elitist artistic practice that is far removed from political concerns, an elitism that seems confirmed in the French poet's many disdainful discussions of the "foule," and the necessity of preserving poetry from their profaning gaze. The bald assertion in the essay from 1862, "Hérésies artistiques: l'art pour tous," that "L'homme peut être démocrate, l'artiste se dédouble et doit rester aristocrate" (1945: 259) is a concise summary of this theme in Mallarmé's critical writings. At the same time, however, Mallarmé evinces a profound fascination with communal and even popular cultural gatherings: the musical theatre, the opera, the symphony, dance, and ballet.⁷³ Much has been written on the pertinence of all these cultural forms for Mallarmé's thought, and it is impossible here to investigate their significance in terms of his work in

⁷³ See here the study of Paula Gilbert Lewis (1976), and also that of Jacques Rancière (1996).

depth. Rather, here I will focus on a communal cultural event that leads to the heart of our discussion and which is also described in Valente's work, the celebration of the Christian Eucharist.

Mallarmé dedicates one of the short prose pieces of the triptych that makes up the section of *Divagations* entitled "Offices" to Catholicism, and more specifically, the Eucharist. "Catholicisme" is the centerpiece of the three texts in which Mallarmé intertwines the themes of religion, music, and community. He begins with a definition of the human, whose specificity is the fear that it can only associate with hunger and death, which is in a more profound sense a relation to nothingness that is a consequence of the human awareness of finitude. The Catholic Mass in this sense would have value only in terms of its circumstance and pomp, its celebration of an absent God, "soustraite au mets barbare que désigne le sacrament" (289). This would be a celebration of a community that should be understood as allegorical rather than symbolic, and is the model of the "fetes futures" in which "communion ou part d'un à tous et de tous à un" would occur around the "place que le desservant enguirlande d'encens, pour la masquer, une nudité de lieu" (291). Bertrand Marchal (1988: 316) reads "Catholicisme" as a response to the modern death of God, in which the ultimate foundation of religiosity – a fear of the nothingness of human finitude that was covered over with the figure of the Divine – is realized as such, and becomes the foundation for a new faith in a national collectivity. It is, however, possible to read Mallarmé's writings on these themes from another perspective, in which the gestures of communal celebration refuse what Rancière describes as "...l'euchristie de la presence réelle à soi d'un peuple défini comme communauté des origins, d'un peuple appelé à devenir lui-même l'oeuvre d'art totale" (75).⁷⁴ Rather, we can understand Mallarmé's

⁷⁴ Rancière is here describing Mallarmé's resistance to Richard Wagner's conception of the total work of art. Rancière's discussion of Mallarmé and community is pertinent to my discussion here as he too argues for that excessive remainder

description of the Mass that witnesses the absence and not the presence of the divine as a gesture that defines, in a Christian context, the ultimate resistance to, or interruption of, the myth of community.

It is in this context that we can read the desacralization of the Catholic mass in the opening poem of the collection *El fulgor*. In this poem the mass does not culminate in the presence of the divine in the sacramental wine, but the wine itself is filled with the power of negativity, the “insidioso fondo” of a “dios incognito” that reduces the things of this world to “ceniza.” Like Mallarmé before him, Valente seems fated to desire a poetry that would renew the community and in the meantime to create sumptuous allegories of the nothing.

3.5 COMMUNITY IN THE LATER POEMS

It is here that we can return to the tensions that we identified in Valente’s exploration of language and community in the first half of his career. Ultimately these tensions can be reduced to the division between a mythic language that unites word and world and binds a community, and a corrupt language that ruptures a community that has lost its connection with past generations. The call for a new language and for the inclusion of the voices of the excluded within public discourse is framed in terms of a restoration of the public sphere in which the celebration of community would be the expression of an genealogical history in which each member identifies with an original and total Word which absorbs him/her, “para ser así anónimamente / reavivada y cambiada” (OCI: 108).

That this division leads to tensions within Valente’s poetry is inevitable. Working from the presupposition of an opposition between community and nihilism puts the poet in a difficult position – either he accepts a loss of linguistic value and meaning, or he defends

of Mallarmé’s work, which he identifies in the motif of the siren and the siren’s hair in the poems, constitutes an element that exceeds the dialectic of absence and presence.

the existence of a mythic poetic language that unites word and world, thereby falling into the trap of the totalizing discourse of community that Nancy identifies. The Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito (2009), writing in a similar vein to Nancy, allows for a reformulation of this opposition that might help us create an alternative to the path that Valente takes in his earlier works. For Esposito, modern thought on the relation between community and nihilism pits the presence of the *thing* of community against the destructive *nothing* of nihilism. His argument is that this opposition leads to the difficulties we encountered in Valente's work – the dilemma between political quiescence or totalizing communitarianism.

What is necessary, for Esposito, is to recognize that nihilism and community are bound up with each other. Like Nancy, Esposito identifies community with the *munus*, the sharing that constitutes community, the fact that to enter into community the subject must encounter the other, and that being in common is precisely this – the “sequence of alterations that never coalesce into a new identity” (26). Subjects in community do not possess any quality that constitutes their essential identification with a communitarian totality; rather, their very dispossession, their alteration in the face of the other, constitutes their place within the community. Thus, “community is structurally inhabited by an absence – of subjectivity, identity, and property” (26-27). In fact, the very being of community is this absence, the gap that relates subjects in a common giving of themselves without recompensation; as Esposito notes, the term *munus* refers to a gift given, that which is always excessive with regard to exchange.

For Esposito, modern thought on community from Hobbes on errs in attempting to fill in this lack, creating the totalizing category of the sovereign in an attempt to guarantee the coherence of a community, but in effect annihilating the essence of community, the gap of

relation between subjects, replacing it with a direct relation between the individual and the sovereign, or the absolute identity of subjects united under the general will. But these schemes, based as they are on a false conception of inter-relation, the anomic fight of all against all, creates a more radical nihilism, as that which they are supposed to recreate, a non-historic golden age of pristine community, is non-existent. The communitarian attempt to retrieve the lost origin that would found community inevitably leads to violence, as this origin that would allow for an absolutely saturated community is always unavailable, and ultimately the search for it leads to violence against those perceived as outside the community, but also to the self-destruction of the community itself. For Esposito, the contemporary world, in which the lack of stable sense is exacerbated by globalization, allows for the opportunity to escape modern concepts of community. The sheer lack of sense would allow us to ultimately let go of the illusion of transcendent categories that would ground our understanding of the world, and would reveal a “world reduced to itself, able to be simply what it is” (35). Our communities would be the passage “between this immense devastation of sense and the necessity that each singularity, each event, each fragment of existence must be in itself meaningful” (35). I take Esposito here to mean that, in the absence of illusions of transcendent grounding of our communities, we have the opportunity to reappraise their constitutive lack as something other than privation. If there were communal celebration in this society it would be based not on the transcendent Word made flesh of the Christian Eucharist, but on the ephemeral garlands of incense that Mallarmé describes in his *Divagations*.

It is in this context that we can read the relation between community and poetry in Valente’s later work, which stretches from “Interior con figuras” to his final “Fragmentos de un libro futuro,” and in which the references to political and communitarian themes

diminish, and his poetic language becomes more abstract and self-referential. This movement from a more obvious engagement with political themes, whether through direct reference to political events and cultural decay, or through the collage poems in which the most dangerous clichés that lent support to the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century are laid bare, does not mean that Valente completely discontinues his exploration of the relation between poetic language and community. Paradoxically, it might be best to explore the notion of community in Valente's later towards that which is generally taken to be its opposite, the emptiness of the "vacío."

Esposito identifies Martin Heidegger as the thinker who first opened the question of the interconnection of community and nothingness. Esposito reads Heidegger's essay from 1950, "The Thing," as the first recognition that the thing is constituted in its essence as nothingness, and that this intermingling of the thing and the nothing is relevant to a discussion of community. Heidegger's essay turns on his famous example of the jug, the everyday thing which is constituted by a hollow space. The absence that allows that allows the jug to exist as a thing that can be filled with liquid serves to show that an object can have as its essence the void. Heidegger goes on to relate this void with the etymological roots of donation, the *munus*, which he then relates to the Germanic roots of the word "thing," which signify reunion or meeting place. This *munus*, or giving, is associated, in Heidegger's essay, with the pouring of liquid from the jug, an act that, for Heidegger, constitutes a "gathering." If contemporary nihilism, for Heidegger, is the destruction of "nearness," the flattening of all entities to a distanceless homogeneity in media culture, the giving of the void that occurs in the pouring of liquid from the jug is the maintenance of "nearness," the distance in relation that constitutes community.

It is significant, in this regard, that one of the earliest poems in which Valente takes up the theme of the “vacío,” “El cántaro” from *Poemas a Lázaro*, seems to be inspired by Heidegger’s discussion of the jug in “The Thing”:⁷⁵

El cántaro que tiene la suprema
realidad de la forma,
creado de la tierra
para que el ojo pueda
contemplar la frescura.

El cántaro que existe conteniendo,
hueco de contener se quebraría
inánime. Su forma
existe sólo así,
sonora y respirada.

El hondo cántaro
de clara curvatura,
bella y servil:
el cántaro y el canto.
(OCI: 134)

In a conceptually difficult pun, reminiscent of Heidegger’s tortured musings on the word “nothing,” the equivocal significance of the word “hueco” is used to imply that the “cántaro” would not exist if it was void of the void, if it lacked emptiness: “hueco de contener se quebraría / inánime” (OCI: 134). The “cántaro,” which we know, through paronomasia, is also the “canto,” without an animating breath that is also a void would be “inánime,” and further, would not fulfil the classical duty to be both beautiful and useful. The emptiness that is the essence of the “cántaro” is similar to the silence that constitutes the poem in the second fragment dedicated to Antoni Tàpies included in *Material memoria*: “...el poema tiende por naturaleza al silencio. O lo contiene como material natural” (OCI: 388). We can read this silence or “vacío” in Heideggerean terms, as that

⁷⁵ José Antonio Llera (2010) provides a fascinating reading of this poem, connecting the “forma” described within to the polemics on the nature of poetic language of Valente’s time, and mentions the Heideggerean resonances of the poem. Llera does not, however, mention the specific Heideggerean text I link to Valente’s poem in my reading here.

which constitutes the resistance of the poem to the destruction of the distance of relation that constitutes community.

From this perspective, the second half of Valente's career would not be a solipsistic turning from communitarian issues towards a hermetic discourse that refuses communication. Rather, the development of Valente's poetry reflects a radicalization of a communitarian impulse, but one in which the immanent transcendence of the distance of relation becomes the centre of the poems. This tendency is nowhere more evident than in the erotic poetry of the later collections.⁷⁶ "El deseo era un punto inmóvil" from *Interior con figuras* is an outstanding example:

Los cuerpos se quedaban del lado solitario del amor
como si uno a otro se negasen sin negar el deseo
y en esa negación un nudo más fuerte que ellos mismos
indifinidamente los uniera.

¿Qué sabían los ojos y las manos,
qué sabía la piel, qué retenía un cuerpo
de la respiración del otro, quién hacía nacer
aquella lenta luz inmóvil
como única forma del deseo?
(OCI: 356)

The lovers in the poem negate themselves so that the ecstatic relation that they share becomes the expression of their love. The "lenta luz inmóvil" that inhabits the space of relation is the form of their desire, that which binds them in the separation of unknowing eyes, hands, body, and breath. The collection *Mandorla* can be seen as dedicated entirely to this space of relation. The mandorla, as Valente explains, in the space formed in the intersection of two circles, the space of mediation that neither party controls. It is in this

⁷⁶ Christine Arkininstall (1993) draws a distinction in Valente's work, similar to the difference I note here, between his description the destruction of difference in communal relation under fascism and the maintenance of difference in erotic relation: "Esta fusión amorosa de dos cuerpos en uno es la antítesis de la asimilación del cuerpo colectivo de España a la ideología franquista. Mientras que en la primera instancia los cuerpos de los amantes, aunque unidos, siguen conservando su individualidad, en la segunda las diferencias individuales se hallan completamente borradas por la homologación forzada del pensamiento" (102).

context that we can understand the motif of “concauidad” which reappears throughout the collection. This is the concavity that is produced in the intimate and joyful separation of lovers, as described in “Borde”:

Tu cuerpo baja
lento hacia mi deseo.
Ven.
No llegues.
Borde
donde dos movimientos
engendran la veloz quietud del centro.
(OCI: 411)

It is difficult not to recall here Nancy’s invocation of the lovers as the exemplars of community that literature witnesses, a witnessing that makes visible the extreme limits at which singularities are mutually exposed in the sharing of community while at the same time never dissolving in communion. Whereas in Christian tradition the mandorla surrounds representations of Christ and signifies the presence of divine power in the flesh, here it is the empty space of a communion that is never realized.

In his *The Coming Community*, Giorgio Agamben describes the contemporary world of spectacle and linguistic alienation in terms of the Kaballistic “isolation of the Shekinah” (80.1),⁷⁷ the isolation of the manifestations of the divine from the divine itself. Valente at times responds to this isolation of language from its ground in the relation to an *arche-palabra*, the Word before the word, that occurs in various guises throughout his work, and which remains present in many of his declarations on poetry right up to his death. The difficulty of such a stance in terms of community, and in terms of Valente’s commitment to those who are excluded from nationalistic communities, is clear – the Word before the word is a hierarchical and inevitably totalizing grounding of the communal. Valente’s

⁷⁷ Valente heavily underlines this section of in the Spanish edition of Agamben’s work which is in the personal library that he donated to the University of Santiago de Compostela.

poetry, however, along with the various essays in his career dedicated to figures of ungrounding – *silencio, nada, vacío* – make clear the complex tensions that underlie his, and modern poetry's, relation to politics and community. For Agamben, the attempt to reground language is futile. Rather, it is better to attempt to derive from achieved nihilism the separation of language from being would allow language itself to be revealed as the immanent grounding of community:

Only those who succeed in carrying it to completion without allowing what reveals to remain veiled in the nothingness that reveals, but bringing language itself to language will be the first citizens of a community with neither presuppositions nor a State, where the nullifying and determining power of what is common will be pacified and where the Shekinah will have stopped sucking the evil milk of its own separation. Like Rabbi Akiba, they will enter into the paradise of language and leave unharmed. (82.3)

It is perhaps this experience of language without metaphysical ground that Valente describes in the third fragment of *El fulgor*, which bears the epigraph “Materia”: FORMÓ / de tierra y de saliva un hueco, el único / que pudo al cabo contener la luz (OCI: 463). The poem reveals both the negative power of the linguistic, which forms a “hueco,” but also its somatic production in the commerce of saliva and earth. The relation between this “hueco” and the “saliva” and “tierra” of embodied enunciation, the very *materia* or matter of language itself, is for Agamben the axis around which turns the community to come. In our next chapter we will explore how this thought of the material experience of language can allow us to plot a path between the twin dangers of totality and nihilism, the garden and the desert.



CHAPTER IV: THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDS.

4.1 VALENTE AND JEWISH TRADITION

In our second chapter we examined the paradoxes inherent in Valente's championing of the poetic imagination in his theoretical writings on poetry, and the simultaneous distrust of images as expressed in the poems of his early collections. This distrust of images is, of course, part of the neo-platonic and Christian mystic traditions that inform Valente's work, according to which the inner vision, which is a vision beyond vision, constitutes the paradoxical blindness and insight of an experience of the unity of being beyond becoming.⁷⁸ But the distrust of vision is also part of Jewish culture, with its prohibition of graven images of the divine, and something of this tradition is expressed in the philosophy of Levinas, for whom vision implies an enclosing of alterity within the same. For the modern philosophies of community that we explored in our third chapter, the figure of the Jew, as David Nirenberg (2013: 387-422) shows, is conceived as that which resists the formation of communities bound through a mythology of reason. In Nirenberg's reading, Hegel takes the Jewish peoples as a necessary but prior stage in the development of the reason coming to know itself; like the figure of the woman, the figure of the Jew stands for the failure to overcome opposition, a fatal adherence to the flesh of the letter as opposed to the spirit of reason. In the following chapters I will explore aspects of Valente's reading of Jewish tradition, and more specifically his reading of Jewish mystical tradition, in terms of the concerns of this thesis. I will argue that Valente's ethical commitment to the

⁷⁸ Pierre Hadot (1993) describes in this regard the Plotinian metaphor of the sculptor who creates a perfect vision of the purity of his own soul: "Bit by bit, the material sculpture conforms itself to the sculptor's vision. When, however, sculptor and statue are one – when they are both one and the same soul – soon the statue is nothing other than vision itself, and beauty is nothing more than a state of complete simplicity and pure light" (21).

excluded draws him towards the figure of the Jew as other, but that also he finds within Jewish theories of language, as mediated by Gershom Scholem, resources for his own theories of poetic creation. I will attempt to show how Valente's approximation to the culture of Judaism, both contemporary and historical, is relevant to the tensions that I have identified in his work.

Jewish culture and experience are constant references in Valente's writings, manifest both in his investigations of Iberian Spanish history and spirituality, and in his reading of contemporary European poetry, and noteworthy here are his translations of and relationships to contemporary Jewish poets, Paul Celan and Edmond Jabès.⁷⁹ Writing in 1992, Valente describes the 500 year anniversary of the conquest of Granada and the discovery of the Americas as a moment not for celebration, but for reflection.⁸⁰ The historical date is for Valente laden with the significance of the ethnic and cultural "cleansing" to which Jewish populations within Europe were subject under both Castilian hegemony in medieval and early modern Spain, and twentieth century totalitarianism in Europe. But, beyond this historical consideration of the fate of Jews in Spain and Europe, Jewish culture, and especially the esoteric linguistic theories of the Kabbalah, profoundly inflects Valente's understanding of the nature of poetic language. In the following chapters I will explore Valente's engagement with Jewish writers and thought, moving from his reading of Gershom Scholem's work, to his preoccupation, shared with Edmond Jabès,

⁷⁹ Valente translated and wrote essays on the work of both men, and had a close personal relationship with Edmond Jabès. For a discussion of the links between Valente and Celan's work see Johnathan Mayhew, "Valente's 'Lectura de Paul Celan': Translation and the Heideggerian Tradition in Spain" (2004.) For a detailed description of the relationship and correspondence between Valente and Jabès see Milagros Lopo, "José Ángel Valente y Edmond Jabès. Reconocerse en la palabra" in *Referentes europeos en la obra de Valente* (2007), and also the section she dedicates to Jabès, "Edmond Jabès y la resonancia" in *Valente Vital* (2014: 463-471).

⁸⁰ In "Edmond Jabès: judaísmo e incertidumbre", Valente writes: "...nos aproxima el tema al año de conmemoración del quinto centenario de 1492, fecha luctuosa en la que yo – como español – tengo poco que conmemorar y mucho que reflexionar" (OCII: 666).

with the experience of exile, and, finally, to a reading of the work of Valente and Paul Celan in terms of survival and testimony. I will attempt in all of these engagements to show that the tensions that define Valente's poetics, tensions that are inherent to modern thought on language and poetry, are of relevance to the difficulties of thinking ethics and poetry in the Europe of the twentieth century

In the previous chapters I sketched a basic division within Valente's poetics between a conception of poetic language based on a theory of symbolic form in which experience is restored through the unifying powers of the poetic imagination, and a renunciation of this belief in a fragmentary poetics that limits itself to the recognition of the infinite insufficiency of language to retain a plenitude of meaning. This division can be traced back to the poetics of Romanticism and the aesthetic reaction to the limits set by the Kantian critical project, in which the idea that poetic language compensates for the failings of philosophy in its presentation of the absolute is opposed to a conception of poetic language as fragmented, referring negatively in its very incompleteness to an absolute that is infinitely other. In the twentieth century, and in the anti-totalitarian climate of the postwar, an ethics of alterity was developed that was based on the refusal of the enclosure of otherness in dialectical process. This ethics bases itself on a relation to alterity that is defined by distance, a responsibility to the presence of the face and the maintenance of its otherness which, it is argued, constitutes a first philosophy before ontology. The opposition that is revealed in the title of one of the foundational works in this tradition, Emmanuel Levinas's *Totalité et infini*, can be understood as in some ways mapping onto this division in Romantic poetics, with the totality of the Romantic symbol opposed to the infinity of the literary fragment.

It is possible to read the ethical import of Valente's poetry in terms of the division I have identified. But this division does not exhaust the possibilities of a theory of literature. If a belief in the capacity of poetic language to grant a special, unitary knowledge of reality or the absolute is mystified, it does not necessarily follow that we have to accept the conclusions of a hermeneutics according to which meaning is ultimately ungrounded in an infinite deferral of significance. The notion of infinite deferral of meaning, while avoiding the dangers of a totalitarian poetics, also brings with it the danger of a complete ungrounding of language in which it is impossible to guarantee the validity of any truth claims. In these chapters I will consider these issues in terms of a tradition of thought that is deeply connected with Jewish experience in the twentieth century, working through the ideas of Giorgio Agamben, Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot, and the writings of Franz Kafka, Edmond Jabès, and Paul Celan, and in terms of the difficulties in recognizing the de-centering of subjectivity and the undermining of foundational thought that is the consequence of the development of modern philosophy and poetics that has developed since the early German Romantics, but at the same time, attempting to formulate an ethics beyond the negative foundations – *vacío, nada, silencio* – that characterize aspects of Valente's thought on poetic language. In this chapter I will explore these issues in the context of Valente's engagement with this tradition of Jewish thought in the work of Scholem, Benjamin, and Kafka. I will analyze the ways in which the prismatic works of these writers, as different and enigmatic as they are, can be understood as inheriting a specifically Jewish concern for language, one in which a sense of the infinitude of hermeneutical process coincides with a consideration of the revelatory language of the divine. It is in the spaces between these attitudes to language that I will

attempt an alternative understanding of the paradoxes of Valente's poetic discourse. I will begin by relating one of Franz Kafka's most evocative modern parables.

4.2 VALENTE AND SCHOLEM

In Kafka's "A Dream," Joseph K wanders through a crowded graveyard. Gliding on moving paths, K is drawn to a freshly dug mound of earth, which he spies beyond a multitude of distracting flags and banners. He jumps from the path and lands near the mound of fresh earth into which two men place a tomb stone. An artist arrives and begins working on the stone. He engraves the words "Here Lies" and then pauses. He turns towards K and they exchange embarrassed glances. Now the artist starts to write, in inferior lettering to his previous attempt, the letter J. Frustrated with his incompetence he stamps on the ground. At this point K seems to come to a realization. He moves towards the mound and scratches the earth. It is thin and opens to reveal an abyss into which he falls. As he descends, floating, into the void, he gazes upwards and sees his own name inscribed in glorious gold lettering on the tombstone. He awakes.

Falling into a grave the inscription of the name becomes apparent to K for the first time. It is only in the moment of death, a fall into an abyss, that his name can be revealed. The tale could be read as an allegory of a certain attitude to language that is both ancient and modern, according to which human language carries within it secret depths that are not exhausted in communicative language, a hidden truth of language embodied in a divine Name. For the leading scholar of Kabbalah in the twentieth century, Gershom Scholem, the intuition that there is something in language that exceeds communication is central to all mystical discourse, and is especially important in the Jewish esoteric traditions, which conceive the world as created through, and constituted by, divine language, with human language carrying within itself an echo of the foundational but unspeakable Name of God.

As we have seen, this intuition is also at the heart of much modern poetics, with the proviso that God is replaced by an essential nothingness, an absence that underlies language that is comprehended in the word “nihilism.”

Valente is uniquely placed with regard to these traditions, both as an expert in various mystic traditions – Christian, Jewish, Sufi, and Buddhist – but also as a poet and inheritor of the modern, negative poetics of Stéphane Mallarmé.⁸¹ The significance of Valente’s appropriation of these traditions is related to the historical moment in which he writes. Valente’s career begins in a postwar era where the experience of totalitarian violence and the destruction of European Jewry had shattered faith in the fundamental values of Western culture, but equally, where this same violence provokes the search for an ethics that can survive nihilism. To understand Valente’s response to this fundamental tension within Western thought is to understand one of the most rigorous explorations of the possibilities for a discourse that can survive the nihilism of the second half of the twentieth century. It is appropriate, then, that Valente’s work should be profoundly influenced by Jewish theology and writing, and key twentieth century Jewish thinkers, including Scholem and Benjamin.

⁸¹ As Fatiha Benlabbah notes: “Explícita o latente, directa u oblicua, la presencia de lo místico no deja de ser constante y sobre todo consciente. En efecto, Valente reactualiza lo mística con plena consciencia de rehabilitar una tradición que más allá de lo meramente religioso, ha marcado el ámbito literario también. La apertura de espíritu del autor y su ansia universalista, han hecho que su reactualización englobe la tradición mística en su pluralidad: las místicas judías, cristiana y musulmana encuentran así en el espacio escritural valenteano un espacio que las reunifica” (35). But, as Benlabbah perceptively points out, Valente’s relation to the traditions of mysticism is not one of passive reproduction, but an act that implies new ways of thinking of both historical and poetical experience that are relevant to the present: “Cuando Valente reactualiza el discurso místico, éste se nos presenta como en un espejo que no se limita a reflejarlo, sino que lo ilumina, lo interpreta y lo convierte en un lenguaje sobre la experiencia poética. Dicho de otro modo, el encuentro de la palabra de Valente con el discurso místico abre en su obra horizontes teóricos que al mismo tiempo que ofrecen una nueva aproximación o lectura del discurso místico que ha sido durante mucho tiempo condenado a la marginación, permiten la elaboración de una concepción diferente de lo poético. Valente obra desde la conciencia que la desconstrucción de procesos históricos, cognitivos y literarios que han producido una acumulación de discursos y por consiguiente, el olvido o la marginación de otros, es capaz de permitir ver con otros ojos, de otra manera, lo antiguo y lo moderno, y revela todas las posibilidades de un discurso que fue ocultado por el olvido y la marginación. Su rehabilitación de lo místico implica una visión de la mística, en cuanto que experiencia existencial y creativa, y por ende, de la tradición y de su relación con la modernidad” (41).

Valente's contact with Jewish esoteric tradition is mediated by the work of Gershom Scholem, a mediation that is perhaps unavoidable given Scholem's dominance of the study of Jewish mysticism in the twentieth century.^{82 83 84} It is notable, then, that a close reading of what could be called Scholem's linguistic theory reveals important commonalities with Valente's writings on poetic language. Scholem's interest in the Kabbalah was in part a response to what he saw as a bourgeois rejection of mysticism in the nineteenth century, when Jewish scholarship was focused on presenting Judaism as a "rational" religion.⁸⁵ Scholem's interest in Kabbalah was shared by Walter Benjamin, a friend with whom he maintained a lifelong correspondence.⁸⁶ Both Scholem and Benjamin, if to a different

⁸² Shaul Magid, in his online entry on Scholem in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, cites Martin Buber's comments on Scholem's dominance of the field of Jewish Mysticism: "all of us have students, schools, but only Gershom Scholem has created a whole academic discipline!"

⁸³ Valente's library contains fourteen titles, dating from 1960, of Scholem's authorship, and Valente cites him on numerous occasions, most notably in "La hemeneutica y la cortedad del decir," in which the Spanish poet describes Scholem's works as "indispensables" in order to understand the continuing relevance of theories of divine language, and especially to understand the ways in which, "Una de las grandes corrientes condensadoras de esa tradición, la cábala, vivió incrustada en el mndo del cristianismo occidental ... no solo al tiempo en que aquél se configuró como un gran orbe político, sino en su modernidad" (OC II: 89). Valente was also an assiduous reader of Benjamin's work, with the first collection of the German thinker's essays, in French translation, contained in his library dating from 1959. It is significant, in the context of our discussions here, that in the essay, "Del conocimiento pasivo o saber de quietud," first published in *El país* in 1978, Valente compares the "fundamentación abiertamente teológica de la teoría del lenguaje de Benjamín" (OCII: 606) with the theories of language of both María Zambrano and Ernst Bloch. The way in which Valente describes Zambrano's work also holds for his understanding of Benjamin: "La historia del pensamiento occidental podría leerse en buena medida como la historia de la desencarnación del logos A la desencarnación del logos correspondería la corrupción del lenguaje, la inadecuación de los nombres y el exilio de la palabra. El saber de los claros del bosques volvería a ser un saber de la palabra como lugar de la reconciliación. Lugar de la absoluta latencia del ser, lugar de lo poético" (OCII: 607).

⁸⁴ Valente's interest in the Kabbalah was profound, as reflected in the wide range of literature dedicated to the theme that remains in his personal library. During his time in Geneva he even attended seminars on the subject given by Carlos Suarès, author of the well known work on the Kabbalah from from 1962, *La Kabale des Kabales. La Genèse d'après la tradition ontologique*. See here Valente Vital (*Ginebra, Soboya, Paris*), 271-274.

⁸⁵ Writing in the preface to the first edition of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Scholem states: "The great Jewish scholars of the past century ... had little sympathy—to put it mildly—for the Kabbalah. At once strange and repellent, it epitomized everything that was opposed to their own ideas and to the outlook which they hoped to make predominant in modern Judaism" (1).

⁸⁶ This correspondence is published in English as *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940* (1992). Benjamin's letters, edited and annotated by Theodor Adorno and Scholem, were first published in

degree and with diverging emphases, hold an attitude towards language influenced by the centrality of the linguistic in Kabbalistic theology, constituting what could be termed a “metaphysics of language.” Though Scholem in his writings on the Kabbalah does not make clear to what extent his own vision of language coincides with that of the traditions he studies, it is possible to delineate a linguistic theory in his work. Shira Wolosky writes in this regard:

Scholem’s linguistic theory – and it is as a full-fledged theory of language that Scholem’s writings must be regarded, and not merely as a collection of descriptions or observations – has an integrity and force of its own, even beyond questions of Scholem’s historical account of the Kabbalah. (2007: 165-166)

But what are the elements of this theory of language, and in what way can these be relevant to a discussion of Valente’s poetry?

Wolosky outlines three interrelated elements of Scholem’s linguistic theory: 1) an ontology of language; 2) hermeneutic multiplicity; and 3) a negative theory or theology of representation. The first of these elements has to do with the importance Jewish cosmogony granted to language. For the Kabbalists, God’s creation of the world is a linguistic act, a result of divine self-expression, as Scholem notes in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*: “All creation – and this is an important principle of most Kabbalists – is, from the point of view of God, nothing but an expression of His hidden self that begins and ends by giving itself a name, the holy name of God, the perpetual act of creation” (117).

German in 1978. The English edition, translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, is published as *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin* (1994). For an illuminating discussion of the relationship between the two men, as well as Scholem’s writings on Benjamin, see Michael Hamburger (1982). Also useful here is Robert Alter (1991) and Susan A. Handelman (1991). Scholem reflects on his relationship with Benjamin in his *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (1981).

The priority of language in Kabbalah is reflected in the cosmological scheme of its foundational text, the *Sefer Yetzirah* or book of creation, according to which God created the universe from the combination of letters and numbers. The world is not only created through divine language, but is also a linguistic structure, a decipherable reality that ultimately remits to the ineffable Name of God. The Name of God is the ultimate foundation of both the world as language, and language as spoken by humans, the existence of which, according to Scholem in his essay from 1972, “The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah,” determines the intuition among mystics that “language includes an inner property, an aspect which does not altogether merge or disappear in the relationships or communications between men” (60).

The Name as fundamental but absent ground of language is analogous to the Kabbalistic conception of the hidden God, the boundless or infinite *Ein Sof*, which is the divine in itself, as opposed to the characteristics of the divine that are manifest in creation. For the Kabbalists, the *Ein Sof* does not reveal itself in a way that could be comprehensible to human reason. In order to be understood, therefore, revelation must be mediated through human language. This implies, however, that there is something that is communicated in language that, at the same time, exceeds its limits, a surplus of significance that is not exhausted in communication. Human reason can only deduce the existence of the *Ein Sof* through an experience of the infinite possibility of linguistic interpretation, the abyss that constitutes both tradition and the limits of language. As Scholem writes in the essay “Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism”:

Revelation is, despite its uniqueness, still a *medium*. It is the absolute, meaning-bestowing, but itself meaningless that becomes explicable only through the continuing relation to time, to the Tradition. The word of God in its absolute symbolic fullness would be destructive if it were at the same time meaningful in an unmediated (undialectical) way. (296)

The expression of ultimate Being is beyond human linguistic understanding and can only be communicated through a language that requires the supplement of interpretation to move towards completion. Here we can see how the three elements of Scholem's linguistic theory combine. The world is a world of language, an expression of the divine, the totality of which remits to his ineffable Name. The Name, as that which exceeds communication, and which if fully communicated would be destructive, is the motor of tradition and commentary, an essential negativity that provokes an infinite chain of interpretation that moves towards an origin that is always other.

The correspondence between Scholem and Valente's approaches to language are striking. As we have already seen, Valente too places the infinite interpretability of words that relate to an ineffable linguistic origin at the center of his considerations in "La hermeneutica y la cortedad del decir":

La imaginación poética moderna ha reflejado – aunque negativamente, en buena parte – esa impulsión hacia el origen, pues no ha dejado de girar en círculos cada vez más angostos en torno a la palabra plena de sentido y a la vez históricamente cortada del mundo de las significaciones. (OCII: 83)

But for Valente, this Word cannot remain completely removed from the created world, "ha de poder hablar de su sentido, de los estratos de sentido que en ella se unifican, o posibilitar esa aproximación al sentido en que solo – poéticamente – puede ser restaurado la experiencia" (OCII: 83). For Valente, hermeneutics supposes that every signifier contains a surplus of meaning, that every utterance falls short of the meaning that it potentially contains, what is described in the context of a topos of ineffability as the "cortedad del decir." The insufficiency of language requires an infinite hermeneutics through which human language can attempt to move towards the primordial Word.

At this point in the essay Valente turns to the Jewish tradition, citing Scholem's identification of an "actitud metafísicamente positiva respecto del lenguaje considerado como el instrumento propio de la divinidad" (OCII: 89) in the Kabbalistic writings. Valente mentions here Scholem's discussion of the linguistic exercises of Abulafia de Zaragoza, for whom the repetition of a single verse of Genesis over a whole day, a process that empties the signifier of its apparent meaning, could reveal the hidden properties of language which link it to the transcendent. Significantly, Valente places Kafka within this tradition of Jewish language mysticism, as an "eslabón próximo de una larga cadena sumergida" (OCII: 90), citing Kafka's well known description of the infinity of words in his correspondence with Felice Bauer.⁸⁷ It is this infinite sense of words, the fact that they are infinitely interpretable – a fact that, paradoxically, becomes most apparent when they are emptied of meaning – that Valente, following Kabbalistic theories of language he derives from Scholem, connects with the creative Word of God. This allows him to reverse Juan Ramón Jiménez's judgment that the world of the poet, the ineffable, condemns him to silence; for Valente, "El poeta, en puridad, solo puede escribir puesto que su mundo, lo inefable, le condena a la palabra" (OCII: 90).

4.3 SCHOLEM AND BENJAMIN: READING KAFKA

Valente's reading of Scholem allows him to construct a poetics that is founded on the infinite interpretability of language. But, like Scholem, he lives in a post-metaphysical world, in which the divinity has been replaced with the void. This poetics ultimately finds as its center only the absence of the absolute towards which the poem moves. In this sense,

⁸⁷ It is significant that in the French edition of the essay I have cited in English here, "Le nom et les symboles de dieu dans la mystique juive," which is the edition that is conserved in Valente's library, Valente underlines the following excerpt on Kafka from a letter Scholem sent to his publisher Salman Schocken: "C'était bien là l'expression parfaite et insurpassée de cette frontière que les oeuvres de Kafka – prises comme la forme sécularisé de la sensibilité kabbalistique chez d'une esprit moderne" (1983: 7-8).

Valente's poetics can be understood as following the modern impulse, if with the mediation of Scholem's version of Jewish esoteric theories of language, famously described by Heidegger in his commentaries on the work of Rilke as the singing of the traces of the absent Gods. This absence of the divine is of course a preoccupation of the moderns, but framed in terms of infinite hermeneutic process can be seen to coincide with the development of postmodern thought that runs from Heidegger to Gadamer to Derrida. On the other hand, the essentialist aspects of Valente's poetics, his belief that poetic language can provide a special, mythical knowledge that goes beyond rational capacities, restoring what is lost in everyday experience and allowing for the foundation of community in the recuperation of the unity that exists before the separation of subject and object, can be understood as precisely the type of logocentric that much of the thought of the second half of the twentieth century has been dedicated to undermining. But is there an alternative way in which we can view Valente's poetics, one that would avoid the dangers of nihilism, without falling into a mystified belief in the union of word and world? One possible path through which we could begin to imagine this alternative vision of poetic language can be glimpsed in the correspondence between Scholem and his friend Walter Benjamin, and especially in their discussion of the writing of Franz Kafka.

Scholem and Benjamin, who met as students, kept a lifelong correspondence in which they discussed key elements of their related, if divergent, intellectual projects. One of the highlights of this correspondence is their discussion of Franz Kafka. Both men were fascinated by Kafka's work, and read it as fundamentally bound up with the experience of writers who, like themselves, were raised in assimilated Jewish communities in Western Europe. In this sense, Kafka's work, with its decrepit and violent father figures, and its depiction of interminable and irrational procedural systems, is linked to the contemporary

decline of the transmission of Jewish culture. Scholem and Benjamin appear to agree on the basic tendency within Jewish culture – the decline of tradition – but there are subtle, but significant, differences in how they understand it.

These differences can be traced in the correspondence between the two men between 1932 and 1940, which Scholem would later edit and publish. In 1934 Benjamin was busy with the writing of his first major statement on Kafka, and sent Scholem his first draft of this work. Scholem's reply included a didactic poem written in response to *The Trial*, part of which I reproduce here:

Are we totally separated from you?
Is there not a breath of your peace,
Lord, or your message
Intended for us in such a night?

Can the sound of your word
Have so faded in Zion's emptiness,
Or has it not even entered
This magic realm of appearance?

The great deceit of the world
Is now consummated.
Give then, Lord, that he may wake
Who was struck through by your nothingness.

Only so does revelation
Shine in the time that rejected you.
Only your nothingness is the experience
It is entitled to have of you.
(446-447)

For Scholem, revelation is only revelation of the absence of the absolute – the infinite alterity of the *Ein Sof* now fully realized in a world without tradition. Through a reading of sacred texts, and infinite commentary upon them, the tradition could relate, if only negatively, to the ineffable Name that underlies sacred words, but which could never be grasped in a philosophical system. Kafka's tale, according to Scholem, reflects the fact that in modernity we have lost the ability to read the scriptures and understand tradition in a

way that would allow us even to enter into this infinite movement towards the absolute alterity of the divine. In this way, though Scholem is explicitly a theist, his characterization of the negativity of Kabbalistic beliefs and their repercussions in modernity allows him to create a religious genealogy to contemporary nihilism that stretches much beyond the nineteenth century.⁸⁸ Benjamin, who on the one hand is more secular than Scholem, sees in the Jewish esoteric writings a way to resist nihilism and the ungrounding of language.

Thus, in his reply, Benjamin refers to Scholem's poem, and its description of the "nothingness" of the divine in the context of modernity, arguing that he (Benjamin) endeavored "to show how Kafka sought – on the nether side of that 'nothingness,' in its inside lining, so to speak – to feel his way toward redemption" (449). How can we understand this "nether side" of nothingness? In another letter to Scholem, in 1938, Benjamin, in the context of a demolition of Max Brod's biography of Kafka, gives his final word on the Czech writer's work. Quoting from a contemporary writer on science, Benjamin notes the bizarre nature of contemporary experience, in which even the simplest movement – entering a room – is rendered utterly strange in the context of current scientific knowledge: the room is moving, made up of sub-atomic particles that only by chance allow each gesture to be completed. This is the modern world that Kafka describes, but crucially, for Benjamin the nature of this world is mediated in Kafka's work by Jewish tradition. Kafka's relation to this tradition is, however, an exceptional one. According to Benjamin he does not "see" the tradition, internalizing its doctrines. Rather, Kafka "eavesdrops" on tradition. Rather than perceiving the system of laws (Halakah) that the

⁸⁸ These views are expressed in a short article "Der Nihilismus als religiöses Phänomen" (1974). David Biale (2011) discusses the way in which Scholem's denial of the immediacy of revelation and a correlative glorification of tradition allows for a thought that tends towards nihilism, but retains something of the divine. Thus, Biale argues, for Scholem Kafka's writings are both "canonical and nihilistic" (55). For a relevant discussion of Benjamin and Scholem's debates on Kafka see Handelman (47-61).

parables of Jewish tradition (Haggadah) imply, Kafka sacrifices “truth for the sake of clinging to transmissibility” (565), retaining the form of the parable in his stories but without a concomitant meaning. Thus Kafka’s stories retain merely the “rumor” of true things along with wisdom squandered – folly. In this sense Benjamin can describe Kafka’s works as failures. Significantly, however, the absence of truth in the works is compensated for by an “infinite hope” that is gifted by fools to angels, and perhaps, to humans.

If we are to understand the stakes at play in the subtle differences between Scholem and Benjamin’s reading of Kafka, and the “infinite hope” that the key intermediary figures in the story embody, it is useful to return to another aspect of Benjamin’s thought, his theory of language. In an essay entitled “Language and History: Linguistic and Historical Categories in Benjamin’s Thought,” Giorgio Agamben quotes the following paragraph from Benjamin’s preparatory notes to his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*:

The messianic world is the world of total and integral actuality.... Its language is the idea of prose itself, which is understood by all humans just as the language of birds is understood by those born on Sunday. (qtd. in Agamben, 49)

Here there is a conflation of language and history, with the messianic world of universal history – implying the redemption of all the possibilities that are destroyed in the progression of time – coinciding with a language that like the pre-babelic Adamic language, or the “language of birds,” would be understood by all humans.

For Benjamin, the original Adamic language is a language of pure nomination that is a-historic and without meaning, a language in which nothing is communicated apart from the communicability of language itself. The fall of Adam and Eve implies a fall from this pure language to meaningful discourse, but also a fall from the atemporal to the historic: discourse is born with history. It is in this context that Agamben understands the Augustinian distinction between name and discourse. Discourse, the syntactical

arrangement of words in propositional statements, would coincide with the passing of time. The name, on the other hand, is something that is always prior. We are always given names through transmission; they reach us “in-descending” and their origin is unavailable to us. Because we cannot grasp this origin we can only speak of it; in itself the original language of nomination is unsayable. For Benjamin, what remains of this pure language today is what is meant in the aggregate of all tongues, a meaning that is made evident in the simple existence of the possibility of translation, or what he terms the shadow of grammar, what is meant in language but cannot be said.

As Agamben notes, Benjamin’s arguments are similar to those of Scholem. The meaningless Name exists as a presupposition of discursive language: “languages mean to say the word that does not mean anything” (53). Agamben also notes the adaptation of these ideas in the contemporary hermeneutic tradition in Gadamer’s work, in which the priority of the horizon of interpretation implies that understanding is subject to an unending hermeneutic process that tends towards an ultimate meaningfulness that can never be reached. For Agamben, however, Benjamin’s thought is marked by the ambition to interrupt what Gadamer and Scholem perceive as the infinite chain of interpretation, to achieve the elimination of the unsayable in a language that would be revelation without mediation. Rather than accepting the asymptomatic non-coincidence of Name and discourse, for Agamben, “the actual construction of this relation and this region constitutes the true task of the philosopher and the translator, the historian and the critic, and, in the final analysis, the ethical engagement of every speaking being” (59).

It is this context that we can understand Benjamin’s desire to reach the “nether side” of nothingness in Kafka’s work. Understanding Kafka’s tales as sacrificing truth for an experience of the very transmissibility of tradition is analogous to the rejection of the

unsaid, the negative presupposition of a divine Name, in language. It is the very transmissibility of tradition, without an accompanying doctrine, what could be described as the very communicability of communication, which is the only hope that is left for humans, though this hope is written in the language of folly, a language without meaning understood by angels and animals, the universal language of birds.

4.4 AMBIGUITY OF THE VOICE

Valente's appropriation of Kabbalistic theories of language, and his repeated references to the unreachable foundations of language seem to allow us to formulate his approach to language in terms of a nihilism whose only succor is the infinite potential of interpretation. But it is possible, too, to understand Valente's work as a struggle against nihilism, which posits a limit to language that would not be founded in an unsayable word outside of language, but on what Valente has termed an "experiencia carnal de las palabras"(OCII: 459).

In a short essay, "No amanece el cantor" included in the 1996 collection, *En torno a la obra de José Ángel Valente*, Agamben discusses Valente's poetry in terms of this struggle, framed in an exploration of the relationship between poetry and experience. For Agamben, the founders of the vernacular lyric tradition, the medieval troubadours, do not combine poetry and experience as conceived in terms of a Romantic poetics of expression, but neither do they absolutely separate the two. Rather, when the poems speak of love this should be understood as referring to the "tentativa de experimentar el acontecimiento vivo del lenguaje como fundamental experiencia amoroso" (49). Love in the poems is "la experiencia del puro acontecimiento de la palabra" (50), an experience of language as a fundamental opening or revelation.⁸⁹ For Agamben, this experience of language makes

⁸⁹ It is notable that Valente, in his speech at the *Círculo de bellas artes* of 1999, paraphrases Agamben's words almost to the letter: "Los trovadores entendían por amor el fundamento de la palabra poética. La mujer es igual en el mundo

possible a poetry in which relations between subject and object are abolished, giving rise to the diverse modern figurations of a posthuman subjectivity, the “je est autre” of Rimbaud, the Medusa of Celan, or the Angel of Rilke. In this context, “la poesía, el poeta mismo, son aquí un laboratorio en el que todas las figuras conocidas de la subjetividad están, por así decirlo, dislocadas, alteradas, transformadas...en figuras subhumanas, subdivinas, metahumanas” (51). Through a reading of the first poem of *No amanece el cantor*, and an excursus on the Heideggerian notion of Holderlin as the “poet of poetry,” Agamben concludes that Valente’s poetry is a type of genesis, or generation, but that this generation in the word is without subject or object, an experience of language beyond the subject that is an “eterno y genetivo no amanecer del cantor” (57).

To better understand Agamben’s reading of Valente’s work we might turn to the recent English translation of a work originally published in 2005 as “Vocazione e voce” (Vocation and Voice) in the collection *La potenza del pensiero*. Here, Agamben discusses the use of the German word *Stimmung* in the work of Heidegger and Hölderlin. As Agamben notes, *Stimmung* is a notoriously difficult term to translate. It is connected etymologically to the sphere of music, and relates to *Stimme*, the voice (for Agamben, its presence as a term in modern thought reflects modernity’s debt to Judaism; whereas Greek tradition relates revelation to vision, in Judaism, revelation is communicated in the voice that speaks), and the semantic field of harmony and intonation. The fact that in modernity, and in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, *Stimmung* comes to mean “mood” mirrors for Agamben a wider cultural change in terms of how Western culture perceives emotion. That which was once understood in theological terms is transposed to the psychological sphere

trovadoresco al acontecer de la palabra, al acontecimiento del lenguaje. La mujer es la razón del trovar y así se unifican cuerpo, palabra y mundo” (OCII: 1596).

– for the Greeks, *eros* was a God; for the moderns it is an emotion, an aspect of human psychology.

Stimmung in Heidegger's work refers to *Dasein*'s fundamental emotional attunement or orientation to the world. It is important to remember, however, that Heidegger retains some of the exteriority of the earlier conceptions of emotional states. As *Dasein* is always thrown into a world that is always already there, there is a negativity in *Dasein*'s relation to its surroundings, and thus the fundamental emotional attunement of *Dasein* is anxiety, the sense of homelessness of the human who is thrown in a world that is always other. Yet this sense of anxiety has no specific object, there is no correlation in this anxiety between a subject and an object that this subject would intend. The *Stimmung* relates to the ontological as opposed to the ontical – not the world *as* it is, but *that* the world is. Before knowing and perception, the *Stimmung* accompanies *Dasein* in its opening to the sheer fact that the world is. Agamben returns to classical theories of the passions to show that what is true of the *Dasein*'s relation to the world is also true of its relation to a language that is always prior to it, in that “an excess emerges between man and that which belongs most to him as his own, namely, *logos*, language” (2014: 498). Agamben glimpses a possibility to describe the relation between the human and his language in a way that shortcircuits the presuppositional structure that has defined modern conceptions of language through a consideration of the theory of the *stimmung*. He argues that in the medieval melding of love, a *stimmung*, not understood simply in terms of human interiority or psychology, and poetry, in which what is “called *amor*, love or *Minne* in each case designates the experience of dwelling in the origin of the word, the situation of *logos en arche*” (501) a relationship with language is enacted that interrupts the infinite chain of interpretation implied in the work of Scholem and Gadamer. In this context the capacity of the human to

free itself from the metaphysical presupposition of language is linked to the capacity to experience language as an erotic melding of voice and word in poetic language:

Freedom is possible for speaking man only if he can come into the clearing of language and, grasping the origin, find a word that is truly and wholly his – that is human. A word that is his voice, just as the song is the voice of the birds, the chirp is the voice of the cicada, and the bray is the voice of the ass. (501)

Agamben's understanding of lyric poetry can be opposed to the linguistic theory that Valente takes from Scholem, in which the potential for infinite interpretation allows for a movement towards the absolute alterity of the Word. For Agamben, it is precisely this unsayable that it is necessary to overcome if we are to realize the full potential of the human, to free it from both nature and language and thus allow that "history become the nature of man" (501). It is only in the capacity to transform the vocation of language into the voice of speech that man can achieve his freedom. It is possible to describe this tension within Valente's poetics in his description of the voice and its relationship to the "nada" or "vacío" from which poetic language arises.

In a late text, "La experiencia abisal," originally published in 1999 in the philosophy magazine *ER*, Valente provides his most detailed exploration of the negativity or "nada" which informs his work. Discussing his collection *Mandorla* as an exploration of the erotic and religious overtones of this symbol of a generative abyss and connects it to tendencies within modern art:

Hemos considerado la mandorla como un espacio vacío, vacío pleno, nada, donde precisamente por tal razón puede producirse la cópula de lo visible y de lo invisible. Espacio, pues, inocuado, tal vez insondable, que nos reclama hacia un interior no finito de sí. El arte de la modernidad, en todas sus manifestaciones, ha sentido el vértigo de esa infinitud. (OCII: 748)

Valente mentions as examples here the work of painter Bram van Velde, which is an attempt to “mostrar lo invisible” (qtd. in Valente, OCII: 749), but also, and with more relevance to his work, Mallarmé’s exploration of nothingness as described in his letters of 1867 and 1886 to Henri Cazalis. Moving back in time to the seventeenth century, Valente cites the speech pronounced by the rhetorician Emanuel Tesauro in Turin in 1634, “La metafísica del niente” which connects the idea of a foundational nothingness with voice:

¿Qué cosa más vana...que la voz...fugaz portadora de las auras,
frágil preso de los vientos, torbellino estrepitoso, estrépito volante, vuelo
sin alas, alma sin vida, imagen sin cuerpo, pintura sin colores, hija del
hálito, hermano del suspiro, terror del sueño, veneno del silencio, destello
del oído, leve, inestable, vana, vagabunda; nube, viento, soplo, sombra,
Nada. (qtd. in Valente, OCII: 757)

These words shed new light on what is perhaps Valente's most beautiful poem of negativity, “Palabra” (*Material Memoria*):

Palabra
hecha de nada.

Rama
en el aire vacío.

Ala
sin pájaro.

Vuelo
sin ala.

Órbita
de qué centro desnudo
de toda imagen.

Luz,
donde aún no forma
su innumerable rostro lo visible.
(OCI: 378-379)

We could title this poem “Voz”, the negative foundation or “aire vacío” from which language arises. This voice as negative foundation occurs at various moments in Valente's

work. The voice in “Voz desde el fondo” retains the structure of revelation: it is literally senseless – “Nada significaba / su pura luz, transparencia o señal / del fondo solo” (OCI: 348) – but nevertheless finds meaning.

There is, however, an alternative way to understand voice in Valente’s work. In an essay on Flamenco, “El cante, la voz,” from the collection *La experiencia abisal*, Valente writes:

Toda poesía, por culta que sea, por hermética que nos resulte, busca siempre en lo más oscuro de sí su elemento corpóreo, el misterio de su encarnación, la voz. Se hace o es cantar, canción, canto, cante. (OCII: 625-626)

The voice here is the non-significant, but rather than referring to an unsayable origin, refers to nothing but its own existence: “la voz canta ante todo sobre sí mismo o dentro de sí mismo”⁹⁰ (OCII: 626). It is a limit point in language:

Cuando el cantador alcanza ese límite extremo, cuando en su cante llega al punto en que la oscuridad y la luz se unifican, ha entrado en el territorio primordial de lo poético, territorio donde el hombre es el poseído de la palabra: territorio del duende, o del ángel, o del demonio o del dios. (OCII: 626)

The limits of language are reached in a presentation of the voice as an “elemento corporeo,” in this sense referring not to a divine Name, but to the very mystery of its own incarnation, what we might call, following Agamben, the event of language as an erotic experience.⁹¹ In this experience of language subjectivity is profoundly altered, entering the

⁹⁰ Antonio Domínguez Rey provides the most in-depth discussion of the philosophical implications of the notion of voice in Valente’s poetry in his article “La voz en el vacío” (2002: 28-35). For Domínguez Rey, writing in a Heideggerian (*dialogos*) and Nietzschean (tragedy) context, the voice is that which combines separation and unity: “La voz del canto es apariencia fónica de la apariencia natural del ser en cuanto impulso no contenible. Fractura del velo, desvelamiento vibrátil” (31-32).

⁹¹ Adriana Caravero (2005) argues, in a work that is much indebted to both Levinas and Agamben’s theories of language, for a conception of the uniqueness of the voice as a way of escaping logocentric conceptions of language, and maintains that this conception of the voice can be related to Levinas’s conception of the *Saying*: “For as the Hebrew tradition itself teaches, the voice in fact maintains a relation—of distinction, anteriority, and excess—with speech, in a way that seems perfectly adapted to the role that Levinas calls on *Saying* to express. It is certainly not a stretch to indicate in the voice a communication of oneself, a physical proximity of the one to the other, as such prior to any

territory of the *duende*, the angel or the God, a subjectivity that in Valente's work is archetypically represented in the liminal figure of Lazarus, as in the following poem from *Interior con figuras*:

Lázaro

Al final solo queda
la voz, la voz, la poderosa voz
de la llamada:

- Lázaro,
ven fuera.

Animal de la noche,
sierpe, ven, da forma
a todo lo borrado.
(OCI: 340)

For Benjamin, in his 1934 essay, the “infinite hope” that is given in Kafka's tales comes from the intermediary figures, those who have no “firm place in the world, firm, inalienable outlines” (113). Valente too is fascinated by limit figures, and repeatedly refers to Lazarus, the liminal figure between life and death, an animal of the depths or serpent who is called forth by a powerful voice. Lazarus is called, receives his vocation, to give form to all that has been destroyed, but this vocation can only be realized in the absence of normal subject relations, in an language like that of the birds, in which the voice would refer only to its own presence.

4.5 THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDS

In an important essay included in the collection, *Elogio del calígrafo*, which is aptly entitled “La lengua de los pajaros,”⁹² Valente explores the idea of the pristine language of the Garden of Eden before the fall, the place which, according to the Qu'ran, allowed for

consideration of what is said. In the voice both uniqueness and relation—indeed, uniqueness as relation—manifest themselves acoustically without even taking account of what is Said. The voice, which is embodied in the plurality of voices, always puts forward first of all the *who* of saying. As a faithful testimony to the uniqueness of the one who emits it ... the voice not only dethrones the ‘subject’ of traditional metaphysics, but it renders this subject ridiculous” (30).

⁹² This article was first published in two parts, in *Diario 16*, 23rd of September, 1995, and in *El País*, with the title “El reino milenario,” on the 14th of October, 1995.

communication with animals, a language of birds. Valente connects representations of the garden, specifically that of Hieronymous Bosch, to the Kabbalah, noting the depiction of God reading a book on the reverse panels of Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights," which Valente takes as a reference to the Kabbalistic belief in the pre-eminence of the Book, what Scholem's successor, and critic, Moshe Idel (2002) describes as the world and even God absorbing capacity of the divine text.⁹³ The garden, in this tradition, is the place where the fall from an originary language has not taken place, and in which human language would have the same creative capacity to name as the divine. In this context Valente mentions the *Paraiso Cerrado* of baroque poet Pedro Soto, a description in words of the poet's "carmen"⁹⁴ which is both poem and country garden, crowned with the song of the nightingale:

...el ruisenor, el Anfion con vuelo
 asido al blando ramo,
 sube en la voz y se avecina al cielo;
 de firmes sostenidos
 hecho de si reclamo....
 (Qtd. OCII: 564)

⁹³ Idel titles chapters I and II of his *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* "The World Absorbing Text" and "The God Absorbing Text: Black Fire on White Fire," these titles reflecting the pre-eminence of the text in Jewish tradition.

⁹⁴ In his essay Guénon discusses the sacred nature of rhymed language and related it to the etymological roots of the word *carmen*: "C'est pourquoi une tradition islamique dit qu'Adam, dans le Paradis terrestre, parlait en vers, c'est-à-dire en langage rythmé On peut en retrouver les traces jusqu'à l'antiquité occidentale classique, où la poésie était encore appelée «langue des Dieux», expression équivalente à celles que nous avons indiquées puisque les «Dieux», c'est-à-dire les Dévas, sont, comme les anges, la représentation des états supérieurs. En latin, les vers étaient appelés carmina, désignation qui se rapportait à leur usage dans l'accomplissement des rites, car le mot carmen est identique au sanscrit Karma, qui doit être pris ici dans son sens spécial d'action rituelle ; et le poète lui-même, interprète de la langue sacrée à travers laquelle transparait le Verbe divin, était vates, mot qui le caractérisait comme doué d'une inspiration en quelque sorte prophétique. Plus tard, par une autre dégénérescence, le vates ne fut plus qu'un vulgaire «devin », et le carmen (d'où le mot français « charme ») un «enchantement », c'est-à-dire une opération de basse magie; c'est là encore un exemple du fait que la magie, voire même la sorcellerie, est ce qui subsiste comme dernier vestige des traditions disparues" (41-42). The relevance of Guénon's work to our discussion is clear, as is his importance for Valente, whose library contains many of the French writer's texts.

The nightingale is a winged Anphion, and we might recall here that Anphion, son of Zeus and Antiope, was capable of playing the lyre so perfectly that he could control the objects of his world, an orphic figure of unity with nature. The nightingale ascends towards the heavens by the strength of a voice that sings only of itself, “hecho de si reclamo.” Soto de Rojas’s description, in the lines preceding those quoted, of the “camachuelo” who “se escucha y en su canto se enamora” could equally apply to the nightingale or, from Valente’s perspective, the poet. In both cases, the song sings nothing but its own presence, experiencing its own language as an amorous experience. This is a vision of language before the fall, a creative language whose only content is its own revelation.

The poem is nostalgic, portraying a return to that which was divided at the fall. In Valente’s words it describes:

El memorable momento en el que un ave canta desde el séptimo cielo o mansión o morada y su canto unifica todo lo viviente, comunica al hombre con los animales, las plantas y las aguas, y abre el oído de todas las cosas del mundo al entendimiento de la lengua solar, perdida, rítmica, la lengua de la iluminación, la lengua de los pájaros. (OCII: 535)

It is easy to criticize this assertion of a unifying poetic language as a mystified, Romantic ideology. But from another perspective, that of Benjamin and Agamben, we can understand these lines as a vision of a language without presupposition, a language that could allow for the formation of human communities based not on extra-linguistic presuppositions of race, nation, or Name, but on that which is common to all humans, the very fact of the existence of the medium of language and its embodiment in singular voices.

The limits of language, that which lies outside of representation, is here simply an experience of the matter of language, language that presents nothing other than its own existence. Valente, like Benjamin, describes this as a “language of birds,” in which the

division between the non-significant Name and discourse is collapsed in a poetic experience of words. Such an experience of language would allow us to navigate between the poles of Valente's poetics, between the garden, a mystified vision of linguistic plenitude, and the desert, the postmodern belief in the infinite interpretability of words that is constructed on the scaffolding of Jewish Kabbalah. The extent to which Valente takes his utopian vision of a language of birds as a genuine ethical foundation to escape the crisis of nihilism is debatable, though his poetry and poetics are an exemplary investigation of these themes. To undertake such a journey requires a transformation in subjectivity that has been expressed in modernity by figures of the inhuman, and here we might recall the multitude of such figures in the work of Kafka, and the fact that in *A Dream* K only comes to know his name at the moment of death. Valente's last published poem, the posthumous "Anónimo: versión," a poem without authorship, also seems to refer to the impossibility of this moment, the profound alteration of subjectivity in the blinding transparency of the language of birds:

Cima del canto
el ruiseñor y tú
ya sois lo mismo.
(OCI: 582)

CHAPTER V: VALENTE AND JABÈS

5.1 POETRY AND EXILE

If Valente on occasion describes poetic language as a language of birds linked to the space of the garden, he also holds an alternative approach to language, the spatial correlate to which is the desert. The garden and the desert could be seen as spatial analogues of the poles that define the tension within Valente's poetics that I identified at the beginning of this work, and which I related to tensions within Romantic literary theory.⁹⁵ In the former approach, poetic language recuperates that which is lost in experience; in the latter, poetic language marks an essential absence. In the previous chapter we sought to find an alternative path through this dilemma in Agamben's reading of Benjamin's essays on language, and noted the importance of Jewish esoteric traditions in Valente's work. In this chapter, I will concentrate on the negative aspect of Valente's conception of poetic language in the context of Jewish tradition, focusing on Valente's relationship to the French language poet, Edmond Jabès, for whom, as we will see, the desert is a symbolic space of central importance.

Valente's first contact with Jabès's work was in the mid 1970s, but he claims that his relationship to the French poet is not simply defined in terms of influence. Rather, on reading the French language poet's work Valente claims that he came to a renewed understanding of his own career, and the importance within it of the intellectual concerns

⁹⁵ The importance of the desert in Valente's work has been explored by Peinado Elliot (2002: 313-333), who connects it both with Valente's reading of Jabès as a poet of exile, and the mystical thematics of the *salida* of the self who moves beyond itself in its encounter with the other. In this way, "El desierto pone al hombre ante un absoluto: frente al cerrazón de la ciudad (símbolo de la totalidad), en el exilio se descubre la apertura extrema, un absoluto infinitamente trascendente, que nunca puede ser agotado, un más allá de todo, siempre y por siempre más allá, que aunque se aloja en lo posible y lo despliega abriéndolo a sí, lo rebasa sin fin" (320). See also Vicente Luis Mora's aforementioned contribution to *Pájaros raíces*, "Desierto contra espejo."

he shares with Jabès, which are linked both to the Jewish experience of exile, but also to the importance of the text and textuality in Jewish tradition. Thus Valence can write: “Hace el encuentro con Jabès que yo me reconozca a mi mismo, me dota de una identidad, de una estirpe, de una ascendencia” (OCII: 663).

Jabès is profoundly influenced by Jewish traditions, according to which human language marks a fall from an unpronounceable divine Name. Poetry would be the marking of the fall or “wound of language,” a language which always refers to its separation from its origin, and a movement towards, but never coincidence with, this alterity, an alterity that is marked in the note at the “seuil du livre” of *Le livre des questions*: “Marque d’un signet rouge la première page du livre, car la blessure est invisible à son commencement” (12). In this sense poetry has an essential link to the experience of exile, and resonates with the historical experience of the Jews, and also to the contemporary Spanish experience of politically motivated displacement.

Jabès’s own life was marked by the experience of exile; he left Egypt for Paris as a young man due to political circumstances.⁹⁶ These experiences are reflected in a poetry that is informed by a sense of uprootedness, dedicated to the experiences of the marginalized and displaced. As Valente notes, in a later essay dedicated to Jabès, “Sobre la unidad de la palabra escindida,” “...la imagen que más nos aproxima a la poesía de Edmond Jabès sea la del exilio o la extranjería, la figura del extranjero en la que se perfila el rostro del otro, apenas visible, a punto de desaparecer en la soledad natural del camino” (OCII: 637). Valente, as a political exile himself, and as a poet with a firm commitment to

⁹⁶ Jabès, along with many Jewish and other non-Muslim Egyptians, was expelled from Egypt in 1957, as part of a process of decolonization and the rise of Egyptian nationalism that climaxed in the years of the Suez Crisis. Speaking of this experience, Jabès remarks: “Cette rupture m’a, en effet, cruellement marqué. Je crois l’avoir donnée à voir, presque physiquement, dans chacun de mes livres. J’ai quitté l’Égypte parce que j’étais juif. J’ai donc été amené, malgré moi, à vivre une certaine condition juive, celle de l’exilé” (1980 : 53-54). For a history of the Jews in Egypt in the first part of the twentieth century, a history in which Jabès’s family played a significant part, see Krämer (1989).

marginalized others, clearly sympathizes with Jabès's personal experiences and his explorations of the theme. But beyond the genuine human sympathy for the plight of the exile, Valente's consideration of exile is connected to metaphysical concerns that inform his vision of poetic creation, as he writes in an essay dedicated to Luis Cernuda from 1993, "Poesía y exilio," the experience of exile in the postwar era "nos hizo reflexionar sobre el exilio mismo como forma de la historia y *de la creación*" (OCII: 682) (Italics mine). This prominence of exile as existential but also creative concern is evident in Valente's reading of work of Gershom Scholem, and especially Scholem's rendering of the Kabbalistic cosmology of Isaac de Luria.

As Scholem relates in his *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism*, Luria was part of the community of exiled Sephardic Jews that settled in Sefad, in what is today Israel, after the expulsions of 1492. His doctrines diverge from previous Kabbalistic formulations, especially in his description of the cosmological process. Scholem relates how earlier Kabbalistic descriptions of creation imagined an emanative neo-platonic process, in which God projects from within himself the external world. This is a simple, one way process. Luria, however, explored the fundamental paradoxes inherent in this conception of divine creation: how could there be a world if God is everywhere? How can there be things that are not God? How could creation come from nothing if God is omnipresent? Luria's solution was the doctrine of the *Tsimtsum*, according to which, as Scholem notes: "God was compelled to make room for the world by, as it were, abandoning a region within Himself, a kind of mystical primordial space from which He withdrew in order to it in the act of creation and revelation" (261). The first act of creation is the creation of an empty space – the divine retreats in order to allow for the creation a universe that is not himself. Scholem interprets the doctrine of the *Tsimtsum* with regard to the historical experience of

Jewish exile. The effective retreat or self-banishment of God in the *Tsimtsum* would in this context be “the deepest symbol of exile that could be thought of” (261).⁹⁷

Exile, and Scholem’s description of the cosmological process of exilic creativity, is central to Valente’s understanding of the experience of the poet in the aftermath of the civil war. In “Poesía y exilio,” Valente identifies exile as fundamental to his understanding of Spanish history, and also outlines, taking from Scholem, the connections between the historical experience of exile and the negations that he argues are fundamental to creative process. For Valente, the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 marked only the beginning of a cycle of expulsions that would culminate in the civil war, all of which were the result of the functioning of “una estructura política social caracterizada por el cierre y la exclusion” (OCII: 681), itself the basis of a “prolongado y tenaz proceso de aplastamiento de la diferencia en un país que había nacido y se había conformado en la diversidad” (OCII: 681). As I have already noted, the interrogation of history and the recognition in it of the centrality of exile and oppression, as opposed to Francoist narratives of heroic Castilian expansion, leads to a consideration of exile not just in terms of its historical facticity, but also as part of the creative process. It is in this context that we can understand the process of creation as described by Valente in his “Cinco fragmentos para Antoni Tapiès”:

Quizá el supremo, el solo ejercicio radical del arte sea un ejercicio de retracción. Crear no es un acto de poder (poder y creación se niegan); es un acto de aceptación o reconocimiento. Crear lleva el signo de la feminidad. No es un acto de penetración en la materia, sino pasión de ser penetrado por ella. Crear es generar un estado de disponibilidad, en el que la primera cosa creada es el vacío, un espacio vacío. Pues lo único que el artista acaso crea es el espacio de la creación. Y en el espacio de la creación no hay nada (para que algo pueda ser en él recreado). La creación de la nada es el principio absoluto de toda creación:

Dijo Dios –Brote la nada.
Y alzó la mano derecha

⁹⁷ Scholem’s projection of Lurianic cosmology onto history, as well as many other aspects of his understanding of Kabbalah, have been criticized by his successor Moshe Idel (1988: 264-267).

hasta ocultar la mirada.
Y quedó la Nada hecha.
(OCI: 387)

For Valente, poetic creation requires a primary self-negation, analogous to Scholem's description of the self-retraction of the divine in Lurianic cosmogony, in which the first thing to be created is an interior emptiness from which the poem would emerge. If the poetry of Valente's generation is founded on an absence, an absence of the dead, the victims of violence, and also of the poets in exile, whose voices were barely visible in the distance to those who remained, poetry as a process of self-exile is the singing of this loss:

Perdimos las palabras
a la orilla del mar,
perdimos las palabras
de empezar a cantar.
Volvimos tierra adentro,
perdimos la verdad,
perdimos las palabras
y el cantor y el cantar.
(OCI: 237-238)⁹⁸

These concerns are reiterated in an essay Valente dedicates to Jabès, "La memoria del fuego."⁹⁹ Here, Valente discusses Jabès's experiences of solitude in the desert outside of Cairo, where he sought to achieve the evacuation of the self that would allow for the revelation of the essential word:

Estado, pues, de disponibilidad y de receptividad máximas caracterizado por la tensión entre ausencia e inminencia que tan profundamente marca la entera tradición judía. Ausencia e inminencia del Nombre en el no lugar donde se inicia la revelación, en el desierto, en el exilio – o marcha infinitamente prolongada en el interior de esa ausencia – único espacio real en que esa palabra encuentra manifestación.

⁹⁸ Commenting on this poem in the context of a discussion of the postwar exile of Spanish intellectuals, Valente writes: "Nacimos, pues, de la palabra perdida y de su vacío en nosotros. Yo mismo, en un libro temprano, sentí la intensidad de esa pérdida, y ese sentimiento se hizo canción" (OCII: 687).

⁹⁹ This essay is a version of a talk Valente gave at the colloquy *Ecrire le livre (autour d'Edmond Jabès)* held at the *Centre Culturel International de Cerisy-la-Salle* between the 13th and 20th of August 1987, the proceedings of which were published as *Ecrire le livre (autour d'Edmond Jabès)*.

(OCII: 432)

Exile in this sense is both an historical experience but also an exercise of self-negation through which a purified poetic language can reveal itself:

...multiplicado ejercicio del espíritu, reactuación del éxodo, entrada en el absoluto territorio del ser errante, aproximación radical a un estado de desnudez o transparencia, en el que las palabras, dice Moises Cordovero en el *Sefer Guiruchim*, se pronuncian a si mismas. (OCII: 433)

The themes of self-negation and exile that are central to Valente's understanding Jabès's poetry, and which for him are connected with Kabbalistic conceptions of the creative self-alienation of God, are complemented by the centrality of the themes of textuality and the Book in both men's work. In the same essay dedicated to Jabès, Valente refers to the story of the "Burned Book," which recounts the gesture of the Hassidic Rabbi Nahman of Braslaw, who burnt one of his books in order to restore it to a "más intensa forma de existencia" (OCII: 433). For Valente, the act of burning the book is a radical representation of a tradition in which the authority of the text does not imply a "discurso impositivo o totalitario" (OCII: 433). This subversive moment of burning a sacred text points to an important aspect of Valente's poetics of origin, in which the positing of a founding *antepalabra* does not limit linguistic freedom and autonomy. As we will see, in Valente's work the seemingly nostalgic desire for an originary Word can coexist with a belief that the origin is itself always already a rupture, a withdrawal of divine presence that allows for an infinite hermeneutics that can be orientated towards the future as much as to the past. The Book in this sense can be conceived as totality, that which replaces reality, but also, in the sense that the Book is constructed through an unlimited hermeneutical process, as that which resists closure and totality. It is this tension that defines Valente's poetics and which I will explore in this chapter in the context of his relationship to

elements of Jewish tradition and the poetry of Edmond Jabès.

5.2 THE BOOK OF FLAME

Writing on Jabès in 1964, Jacques Derrida links a sense of Jewish displacement with questions of textuality, quoting from the *Le livre des questions* a phrase that describes Jews as a “race issue du livre” (qtd. in Derrida, 99). The citation is apt, as the book and textuality are of central importance for Jabès, who writes in the text Derrida refers to:

Si Dieu est, c'est parce qu'Il est dans le livre; si les sages, les saints et les prophètes existent, si les savants et poètes, si l'homme et l'insecte existent, c'est parce qu'on trouve leurs noms dans le livre: Le monde existe parce que le livre existe; car exister, c'est croître avec son nom. (32-33)

Jabès's words reflect the importance of the book in Jewish culture. Moshe Idel, in his *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*, describes the development of this pre-eminence. Idel recounts the change from a nomadic Judaic religiosity, focused on the Tabernacle, to a more stable religiosity of the Temple, to the renomadization of postbiblical Judaism in which books and their study become central. In postbiblical Judaism, “God is encountered within sacred texts rather than sacred spaces” (3). According to Idel, these changes have profound implications in terms of the mediums of divine theophany: God is no longer perceived as freely entering reality using the spaces of the Temple and Tabernacle at will, but is now a constant presence, inhabiting the literal signs of a sacred book. Gershom Scholem, who, as already mentioned, is the major mediator of Kabbalah in the twentieth century, explored the significance of the book in this tradition in a text that would have a major influence both on Valente, but also on Jabès and Jacques Derrida.

In the chapter entitled “The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism” in his *On the*

Kabbalah and its Symbolism,¹⁰⁰ Scholem describes the various interrelated conceptions of the Torah in Jewish Kabbalah. These, he argues, are derived from three fundamental principles: the principle of God's name, the conception of the Torah as organism, and the infinite meaning of the divine word (37). The belief that the Torah contains the divine name of God is a long held one in Jewish commentary. Scholem describes how this belief was linked to theurgic practices, in which divine names derived from the Torah were used in incantation. The theurgical use of divine names in magical practices is one way of understanding the esoteric nature of the Torah; another is that which Scholem claims developed among the Gerona Kabbalists of the twelfth century, according to which the Torah in its totality is the single name of God. This idea combined with earlier elements of Aggadic tradition, which describe the divine as, before creating the universe, creating the Torah, from which he read the laws of the cosmos and brought reality into being. Finally, Scholem describes a further step, in which the divine is conflated with the Torah, quoting the early fourteenth century Kabbalist, Mehaem Recanati: "for the Torah is not something outside Him, and He is not outside the Torah" (qtd. in Scholem, 44).

The second principle upon which Scholem elaborates is the conception of the Torah as an organism. Strangely, Scholem's discussion of the "organic" Torah concentrates mostly on the distinction in tradition between the written and the oral Torah. Scholem details the traditions which describe an original Torah that was held in potential by God and which consisted of both the written words of the Pentateuch and the totality of oral commentary upon it. This pre-existent Torah consisted of words of black fire on words of white fire. But, paradoxically, the white fire refers to the written Torah, whereas the black fire is the

¹⁰⁰ Valente takes from this text in his argument for the infinite layers of meaning in the sign in his "La hermeneutica y la cortedad del decir." Moshe Idel (2002: 76-79) has shown that for Jacques Derrida, too, this section of Scholem's work is important, and even traces Derrida's famous "il n'ya pas de hors texte" to Scholem's discussion of the conflation of the divine and the text in medieval Kabbalism.

oral Torah, which is necessary for the original written Torah to take corporeal form. Only certain prophets, such as Moses, are allowed to gaze on the original written Torah in its fullness. For most humans it is invisible, inhabiting the spaces between the letters. The implications of these doctrines are, as Scholem notes, profound. They mean that “strictly speaking, there is no written Torah here on earth.... The mystical white of the letters on the parchment is the written Torah, but not the black of the letters inscribed in ink” (50). The original written Torah is invisible to us, what Scholem terms a “purely mystical concept” (50), and the letters that are visible to us are only so through the mediation of the oral Torah, the result of interpretations of what is hidden.

Scholem’s discussion of the third conception of the Torah in Jewish mysticism, its infinite meaning, is complex, exploring the intricacies of various types of Kabbalistic hermeneutical techniques. To summarize his ideas it is better to turn to the first chapter of his book, in which he gives a more general account of the mystic’s attitude to scripture:

What happens when a mystic encounters the holy scriptures of his tradition is briefly this: the sacred text is smelted down and a new dimension is discovered in it....The mystic transforms the holy text, the crux of this metamorphosis being that the hard, clear, unmistakable word of revelation is filled with *infinite* meaning....The word of God must be infinite, or, to put it in another way, or to put it in another way, the absolute word is as such meaningless, but it is *pregnant* with meaning. Under human eyes it enters into significant finite embodiments which mark enumerable layers of meaning. (12)

This passage reveals a strange paradox of the Kabbalistic approach to sacred writings. It is because of the absolute authority of the divine that his book allows for unlimited interpretation. The absolute word is unavailable to human perception and thus the words of the Torah available to us are veils that reveal nothing more than its concealment.¹⁰¹ God is,

¹⁰¹ Elliot R. Wolfson (1999: 113-154) discusses the importance of secrecy in the Kabbalah, which he defines as an esoteric, rather than a mystic, tradition, and one in which there is a simultaneity of concealment and revelation - as the

therefore, both presence and absence, present in the white spaces of the Torah, but at the same time absent, in that we can only relate to this space through the interpretation of the printed words of the text that are already mediations, veils that refer to the absolute foundation of the divine Name that is beyond human comprehension. As Scholem notes: “Precisely because they preserve these foundations of the traditional authority for all time, they are able to treat Scripture with the almost unlimited freedom that never ceases to amaze us in the writings of the mystics” (13).

Scholem’s discussion of the Kaballah implies that the words of the Torah are already mediated, and that the process of interpretation is therefore necessarily infinite, an open-ended movement towards the meaningless but meaning bestowing Name of God. In his reading of Jabès’s work, Jacques Derrida refers to this play of presence and absence in Kaballah:

Dieu s'est séparé de soi pour nous laisser parler, nous étonner et nous interroger. Il l'a fait non pas en parlant mais en se taisant, en laissant le silence interrompre sa voix et ses signes, en laissant briser les Tables. Dans l'Exode, Dieu s'est repenti et l'a dit au moins deux fois, avant les premières et avant les nouvelles Tables, entre la parole et l'écriture originaires et, dans l'Écriture, entre l'origine et la répétition (32-14; 33-17). L'écriture est donc originairement hermétique et seconde. La nôtre, certes, mais déjà la Sienne qui commence à la voix rompue et à la dissimulation de sa Face. Cette différence, cette négativité en Dieu, c'est notre liberté, la transcendance et le verbe qui ne retrouvent la pureté de leur origine négative que dans la possibilité de la Question. La question, « l'ironie de Dieu » dont parlait Schelling, se tourne d'abord, comme toujours, vers soi. (103)

The withdrawal of the Divine and the unavailability of his Name allows for the mystic’s hermeneutic freedom. If in Jewish tradition the commentaries of the Talmud were an essential part of the process of Divine revelation, which was not completed in the words of the Torah, the Kabbalistic approach radicalizes this tendency, and it becomes more and

name of God is written YHWH but pronounced Adonai, so “all the matters of the supernal world are hidden and revealed” (115).

more difficult to define the borders between interpretation and subversion.

Jabès, as Rosmarie Waldrop notes, was an assiduous reader of Scholem's texts,¹⁰² and it could be argued that Jabès accentuates the nihilistic elements in his work, becoming what could be termed a Kabbalist without God. For the Kabbalists, the original Torah is unavailable to us; the words we read on the sacred texts are already mediations, and need human commentary to move towards the original but illegible divine writing that inhabits the spaces of the book. This scheme retains a sense of divine authority, but it also grants great power to the human interpreters of the revealed word – to come into existence the Book requires the interpretation of humans. If God, as Jabès argues, is an essential nothingness, commentary is necessarily infinite, leading from silence to silence, fragmented by the gaps and white spaces which surround each question of his texts. The process of commentary that is enacted in *Le livre des questions* is inevitably infinite, ungrounded by divine authority. Like Kafka's texts, they retain the rumour of things sacred, the form of Talmudic commentary, but without the transcendent grounding of these. God, for Jabès, is simply a "métaphore du vide," with Judaism a concomitant "tourment de Dieu, du vide" (87).

The Kabbalistic conception of the pre-eminence of the Torah is also an important aspect of Valente's conception of poetic creation. This is most clearly elaborated in his acceptance speech on receipt of the VII Reina Sofía prize for Iberoamerican poetry in 1999. In his speech Valente recalls, in terms derived from Scholem's work, the tradition according to which "Dios crea mediante la contemplación de la palabra en la Tora, creada a su vez mil años antes de la tierra" (OCII: 1585). Similarly, in an essay written in 1989, to

¹⁰² Waldrop, a friend and translator of Jabès discusses his reading of Scholem in *Lavish Absence* (2002): "When Gershom Scholem comes up in conversation Edmond always comments on his love of words. 'That's what he has in common with the Kabbalists, only he calls it philology'" (87).

mark the end of the decade and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Valente writes: “re asumimos una muy remota tradición, según la cual la Tora está escrita en los espacios blancos que separan una letra de otra. Escritura invisible o intersticial. Lo blanco. Cerámica con figuras sobre fondo blanco” (OCII: 1459). In this regard we might refer to the poem Valente cites in his discussion of the Torah, his “Cerámica con figuras sobre fondo blanco,” from *Interior con figuras*:

Cómo no hallar
Alrededor de la figura sola
lo blanco.

Dragón, rama de almendro, fénix.

Cómo no hallar
alrededor del loto
lo blanco.

Del murciélago al pez o a la rama o al hombre,
el vacío, lo blanco.

Cómo no hallar
alrededor de la palabra única
lo blanco.

Fénix, rama, raíz, dragón, figura.

El fondo es blanco.
(OCI: 341)

The poem is indicative of Valente’s obsession with the white spaces around the text, the blank canvas on which the painted figure appears, or the silence before the word or music. The white space stands for the nothingness, the void left after the withdrawal of God that allows for the emergence of language and history. The movement of figures in the poem – “Del murciélago al pez o a la rama o al hombre” – do not imply a hierarchical structure in which the the movement of signifiers would come to rest in an ultimate signified. Rather, the chain continues – “Fénix, rama, raíz, dragón, figura.” The white space that surrounds

the figures, the “fondo,” is not a metaphysical ground that guarantees the ultimate meaningfulness of words, but rather the space in which they propagate in infinite dispersion.¹⁰³

If this is the case, however, why retain the rhetoric of origin? Derrida would argue that this schema is necessary, that hermeneutic freedom can never completely escape from the logocentric structures of Western thought. Thus, on Jabès: “La liberté s’entend et s’échange avec ce qui la retient, avec ce qu’elle reçoit d’une origine enfouie, avec la gravité qui situe son centre et son lieu” (101). The tension in Valente’s poetry between a desire for linguistic plenitude and a linguistic scepticism the result of the destruction of ontological foundations can be understood precisely in terms of this freedom which struggles with that which constrains it, in which, to paraphrase Mallarmé, the book is already an explosion, the One another name for infinite dispersal.

5.3 VALENTE, THE BOOK, AND THE WRITING OF THE BODY

Valente’s readings of Jabès conform to a contemporary hermeneutics, influenced by Scholem’s writings on the Kabbalah, in which poetry refers to its own infinite interpretability. As we have argued, however, Valente’s work is complex, and there are aspects of it that resist the notion of infinite hermeneutic process. One of the ways in which he struggles against the nihilism implied in Jabès’s work is in his thematization of inscription, what could be called the body of writing. Discussing the work of his friend, the

¹⁰³ Fernández Castillo discusses the significance of the color “blanco” in the context of the Taoist tradition that informs the poem: “De esta forma, en el poema de Valente, el blanco propicia el cambio, la transformación, que algunos de los elementos representados como el dragón o el fénix aluden simbólicamente, unificándolo en la latencia plena de formas potenciales que rebasa en lo no presente a las presencias reveladas..... La representación plástica sobre la cerámica se transforma por último en objeto verbal, relación de la palabra en su manifestación poética con la alteridad del silencio que aparece así cargado igualmente de potencialidad incondicional y no limitada”(439). Fernández Castillo’s work is relevant here as he discusses at length throughout his study the importance of “blanco” as a symbol of the absolute potential of language that informs the work of Valente, Octavio Paz, Mallarmé, and Juan Ramón Jiménez.

Catalan painter Antoni Tàpies, Valente describes in it “la intensa percepción de ese irrenunciable vínculo de la incrustación, el tatuaje, la incisión, es decir, la escritura con el cuerpo” (OCII: 1576). If Valente’s sustains a poetics of origins, it is often the case, as in this citation, that this origin refers to the initial moment of writing, the confrontation with the blank page and the moment of textual inscription.

This fascination with inscription is present from the beginnings of Valente’s career. In “Destrucción del solitario,” from *A modo de esperanza*, the problematics of writing are figured in terms of a contemplation of “un cuerpo ciego”:

Durante toda la noche
contemplé un cuerpo ciego.
Un cuerpo,
nieve de implacable verdad.
¿Con qué animarlo,
Obligarlo duramente a vivir?
Tenía entre mis manos
una materia oscura,
barro y aire mortal,
una materia resistente a mis manos,
que no podía vencer.
Y busqué en lo más hondo
la palabra,
aquella que da al canto
verdadera virtud.
Estaba solo.
Un cuerpo ante mis ojos:
le di un nombre,
lo llamé hasta mis labios.
No lo pude decir....
(OCI: 77)

We can imagine the confrontation with the “cuerpo ciego” described in the poem as that of the writer confronted with the blank page. The poem describes the solitude of the poet, who in his autonomy is abandoned by God, inhabiting His silence in a vigil for a day that may never dawn. The poet’s creative process is likened to that of the divine – through naming he creates life. But the attempt to return to the creative language of nomination is a

failure, the name cannot be pronounced, and what remains is an infinite vigil, the promise that remains as promise, for the song would acquire “verdadera virtud.”

We might ask ourselves, however, as to the significance of the “materia” in the poem. Julián Jiménez Heffernan, in a fascinating exploration of the concept of the material in Valente’s work,¹⁰⁴ links it to Paul Valéry’s comparison of linguistic signs and money. For Valéry, the poet refuses words as exchange value, desiring a pure word that would only exist as an effaced coin, resisting circulation in an economy of exchange, the material “soporte” of metal, silver, or gold. But, as Jiménez Heffernan remarks, the poem can never completely escape from circulation – it is both bound up with all the other poems and, ultimately, despite the experiments of Dada and the Russian Avant-Garde, never entirely escapes making sense. We can frame, then, Valente’s struggle to achieve the pure materiality of words in terms of a dual concept of writing, one in which the performativity of inscription is opposed to the lightness of a word that circulates in an economy of shared meaning.

It is possible to link the tension in Valente’s aspiration for the pure materiality of the word – the struggle between inscription and sense – to one of Derrida’s major statements on Jewishness, his commentary on the poetry of Paul Celan (a commentary I believe is pertinent in many ways to Jabés’s work), published as “Shibboleth.”¹⁰⁵ In this essay Derrida likens the writing of poetry to the marking of the body of circumcision. Circumcision takes place one time only, and yet, it remains as a mark of the singular event of its own inscription. Derrida elaborates on this repeatability of the singular in terms of the structure of the date. A date refers to an absolutely singular event, necessarily effacing

¹⁰⁴ The chapter “Material Valente,” included in the collection *Los Papeles Rotos* (2004).

¹⁰⁵ Given that “Shibboleth” is based on a talk first given in English at the University of Washington in 1984 I will cite from the English rather than the French version of the text.

this singularity through denotation, but at the same communicating this effacement. Derrida argues that this structure of effacement of the singular through denotation is a way in which to understand poetry: as Jabès claims that the first page of his book is marked with the wound, so Derrida imagines the date as descriptive of the “cut or inscription that the poem bears in its body like a memory, the mark of a provenance, of a place or a time” (18), and that the poem “begins in the wounding of its date” (18). This effacement of the singular is marked in the very inscription of the poem: “the date must conceal within itself some stigmata of singularity if it is to last longer than that which it commemorates – and this lasting is the poem” (19). These two aspects of the date – its readability within a system which allows for repetition and spatio-temporal placement, and the singularity of the event that it inscribes, mirror the paradox of poetic enunciation, what Celan refers to in his Meridian speech as the uncanny fact that “the poem speaks!” The poem or the date, (Derrida also uses the terms signature, moment, place, gathering of singular marks) shows that within writing inheres “something not shown, that there is a ciphered singularity: irreducible to any concept, to any knowledge, even to a history or a tradition” (33).

The tension that Jiménez Heffernan identifies in Valente’s approach to the “materialidad” of the word is structurally analogous to Derrida’s discussion of the date. Words are both singular, marks that happen one time only, and repeatable, their meaning constantly renewable in the absence of their signer, intended reader, and referent. It is in this context that we can understand Jabès repeated references to writing as “wound,” what he describes in *Le livre des questions* as its fidelity and its treachery:

...car je suis écriture
et toi blessure
T’ai je trahi Yukel
Je te surement trahí
(34-35)

The singularity of linguistic inscription is betrayed by the repeatability of words that can mean at any time or place. It is significant in this respect the many poems in which Valente includes or appends a date. In “Elegía menor, 1980” Valente records the suicide of an anonymous woman:

El viernes,
Treinta y uno de octubre
de este año cualquiera,
una mujer saltó
del puente de Vessy al río
Arve.

Su cuerpo fue recuperado
por los hombres del puesto permanente.

El otoño desciende en avenidas,
procesional y enorme, hasta los bordes
amarillos del aire.

Salud hermana.

En la noticia anónima
no te acompañan deudos
ni cercanos amigos.

Sólo un rastro
de soledad arrastran sin tu cuerpo
los dolorosos ríos.
(OCI: 434)

The poem turns precisely on the play of fidelity and treachery that Jabès identifies in the act of writing. It begins with exact temporal locatives, the certainty of the past simple (una mujer saltó) and the exactness of the date (El Viernes / treinta y uno de octubre), and the shifter “este.” But this certainty is undermined by the the adverb, “cualquiera.” “Whatever” year implies that the poem can be reread, that each time the poem is enunciated the “este año” refers both to the moment in the past but also to a moment in the present, the time of the poem’s speaking. The woman’s death is recorded in a “noticia anónima,” in the absence of friends and mourners. This absence is perhaps an existential difficulty, reflective of that special loneliness that can only be found in great cities, but also a

necessity of writing: the woman's posthumous existence is recorded in her absence, in the solitude of the letter.¹⁰⁶ We can read the last lines "Sólo un rastro / de soledad arrastran sin tu cuerpo / los dolorosos ríos" (434) as referring to the presence of the letter, a "rastro" on paper that survives both in the absence of the body of the woman, but also bears that corporal absence on the body of the letter, the stigmata or wound of her non-presence.

The date and writing are also central to the following prose fragment from *No amanece el cantor*:

Quería escribir *unter den Linden*. Escribir las palabras en el mismo lugar al que designan. Igual que los *graffiti*. Decir ante un simbólico público alemán *der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*. Como si yo mismo fuese un campesino de esa tierra. Decirlo con amor y con tristeza. El día dos de noviembre, un día de difuntos, de mil novecientos noventa, ya casi al término de siglo, el aire es tenue aquí y frío y luminoso. Una niña cruza en bicicleta, haciendo largas eses descuidadas, los vestigios del límite aún visibles.

(Berlín)

(OCI: 496)

The poem stages three types of writing. In the first, the poetic voice desires to write on the world, to graffiti the words *Unter den Linden*, the title of a twelfth century poem and also the name of one of Berlin's main boulevards, on the place which they denote. Secondly, to pronounce the famous words from Celan's "Todesfugue," *der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*, in the German public sphere, a gesture that is both meaningful and performative. Finally, a third type of inscription is invoked, a child drawing curves with the path of her bicycle. This final type of writing is implicit in the naming of the date, the 2nd of November, 1990. It corresponds to the poem as pure inscription, a marking of

¹⁰⁶ María Lopo, in *Valente Vital: Ginebra, Saboya, París*, records Valente's feelings of unhappiness on his moving to Paris in the early 1980s: "En definitiva, esta primera etapa en París parece haber estado intensamente marcada por un profundo agotamiento y por la experiencia de la soledad en la gran urbe, quizá nunca antes experimentada tan radicalmente en la vivencia del poeta" (424).

singular experience that is lost in meaning but retained in the wound of the date. It alludes to the poem as remainder, “los vestigios del límite aún visibles.” The paradox of the poem is that it remains, it speaks, and yet, in its literality, holds within itself the mark of the absolutely singular, which is also the absolutely other. It is in this context that we might read this fragment from of Valente’s final poems, which bears the epigraph “Tiempo,” from *Fragmentos de un libro futuro*:

Efímera
construyo mi morada.
Trazo un gran círculo en la arena
de este desierto o tiempo donde espero
y todo se detiene y yo soy sólo
el punto o centro no visible o tenue
que un leve viento arrastraría.
(OCI: 581)

The “I” of the poem remains as an almost disappearance, and the poem stages this fragility in its representation of the marking of sand, a staging of the very effacement to which the poem testifies. In *Paisaje con pájaros amarillos* this impossible survival in the written word is again enacted through the marking of sand: “Sobre la arena trazo con mis dedos una doble línea interminable como señal de la infinita duración de este sueño” (OCI: 497). Without God the words we use are dispersed, entering into infinite chains of relation without ground. What replaces the origin that could guarantee meaning in these texts is the very materiality of inscription, the mark that remarks that which is effaced in language, what remains between the infinite dispersal of words and the singularity of historical experience.

5.4 HOME AND HOMELESSNESS

We have already noted the importance of exile, both as historical experience and as a framework in which to cast a theory of language, in Valente’s work. Valente, following the

theses of Américo Castro and the work of his friend, Juan Goytisolo, imagines the history of the Iberian peninsula in terms of a gradual expulsion of religious and ethnic others carried out under the aegis of expansionist Catholic Castille. The Spanish civil war, from this perspective, would be just another episode in a history characterized by racist visions of homogeneity and purification. It is clear that for Valente this version of Spanish history can be applied in some degree to the genocides of twentieth century Europe, if with the proviso that the villain in this context would be not the Catholic Church, but an instrumental rationality that creates the conditions for barbarism. The tension in Valente's poetics, between the symbolic embodiment of experience and the negative figuration of absence, in this context can be shifted to the idea of a poetics of origins. As Gianni Vattimo notes, modern thought can be understood to constantly refer to itself in terms of foundations. In the context of a discussion of Nietzsche and Heidegger, Vattimo writes that for these philosophers:

...modernity is in fact dominated by the idea that the history of thought is a progressive 'enlightenment' which develops through an ever more complete appropriation and reappropriation of its own 'foundations'. These are often also understood to be 'origins', so that the theoretical and practical revolutions of Western history are presented and legitimated for the most part as 'recoveries', rebirths, or returns. The idea of 'overcoming', which is so important in all modern philosophy, understands the course of thought as being a progressive development in which the new is identified with value through the mediation of the recovery and appropriation of the foundation-origin. (15)

In Marxist terms, and similar to the desire that the word embody the past that characterizes Valente's poetics, this reappropriation seeks to refound existence on a ground of use-value that would escape the alienation and relativity of exchange-value. For Vattimo, the significance of Nietzsche's thought lies precisely in the refusal of this reappropriation of origins; his dissolution of being into generalized exchange value implies the negation of all original foundations.

The importance of the concept of foundation to modern thought is related to the construction of the modern nation state, in which mythologies of foundation are used to create national territories defined as cultural and ethnically homogenous spaces.¹⁰⁷ The tension in Valente's thought between a poetics of origins, in which the poem is guaranteed by a transcendent *logos*, and his more nihilistic poetics of absence, can be mapped onto this mythology of national foundation, and is especially relevant to Valente's reading of his own existential and linguistic origins, in the collection of poems written in his native Galician, *Cántigas de alén*.¹⁰⁸

The *Cántigas de alén* are defined by the movement of departure and return, and the problematization of an origin that is always "desplazada," in which leavetaking can be a form of homecoming: "Alongarme somente foi o xeito / de ficar para sempre" (OCII: 509), "Terra allea e máis nosa, alén, no lonxe" (OCII: 511). The paradoxical conflation of leaving and return implies that there is no simple return to an origin. As in the poetics of Jabès (and the philosophy of Derrida), the origin is already a rupture. The question of origins is directly addressed in the short autobiographical prose piece dedicated to the Galician poet, Luis Pimentel. Valente begins:

Eu nacín en ningures. Ou non nacín. Ou nacín – de ter nacido, se ben cadra – nun lugar que xa non existe. Por iso lle chamo Augasquentes. Non lle atopo outro nome na miña memoria, por mais que nela furgo. E por iso ninguén podería probar que non se chama así. Ou pode que Augasquentes fose o nome da face non visible dun lugar que cecáis se designase no mapa doutro xeito. Entón, vai saber ti ónde eu nacín, de ter nacido, digo. (OCI: 529)

¹⁰⁷ For an analysis of the functioning of these myths see Balibar (1991: 86-106). Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* is indispensable for any discussion of the development of national consciousness.

¹⁰⁸ Valente's only collection of poetry written in Galician has been the object of insightful commentary from María Rabade de Cebreiro (2010), and Margarita García Candeira (2013). Claudio Rodríguez Fer (1992, 1995, and 2010) has written the most indepth commentary on Valente's relationship to Galician language and letters. Rodríguez Fer (1998) also carried out two "Entrevistas vitales" with Valente in the late 1990s, in the first of which the poet speaks at length of his Galician upbringing.

The poetic voice, a no-one who speaks, was born no-where, in a place that no longer exists. The absence of both geographical and enunciative place allows, however, for the poetic freedom to name this *no-lugar*, “Augasquentes,” as opposed to the official name, “Ourense.” The piece reveals itself as a positing, the freedom of writing to always create beginnings, but never to organically derive from the place which the word designates. The place here is the non-place of language. In this regard Valente follows closely the example of Jabès, for whom the book is the ultimate place of the human, as in it is demonstrated the irrecoverable gap between meaning and being that constitutes human freedom. As Jabès writes in *Le soupçon le désert*: “Le livre est, peut être, la perte de tout lieu; le non-lieu du lieu perdu. Un non-lieu comme une non-origine, un non-present, un non-savoir, une vide, une blanc” (71). In this non-place of writing a voice speaks, a *nadie* who speaks from a *no-lugar*, and in so doing paradoxically defends the absence of place as the place of the human. As Jabès writes in *Le Livre des marges*: “Cette absence, en quelque sorte, de place, je la revendique. Elle confirme que le livre est mon seul lieu, à la fois le premier et l’ultime. Lieu d’un non-lieu, plus vaste, où ou je me tiens” (180).

It is significant, too, that in this poetry of origins that Valente writes in an idiomatic Galician, a language that does not accord with the standardized Galician that was created in the twentieth century, and which the Galician scholar María Rábade de Cebreiro describes as “muy complejo y alejado de toda uniformidad, en donde resuenan neologismos, arcaísmos, localismos, y términos remisibles a estratos de la tradición literaria tan distantes como la lírica medieval gallego-portuguesa, el neo-popularismo, el romanticism, el simbolismo o la vanguardia (2010: 476).¹⁰⁹ Valente’s gesture immediately

¹⁰⁹ Margarita Garcia Candeira writes with regard to this linguistic choice: “O emprego dunha linguaxe precaria e impura é solidario cunha refutación da ética da orixe e, nese senso, as Cántigas formulan unha proposta desterritorializada sobre a identidade galega mediante unha nostalxia violenta que matiza outras propostas máis tópicas sobre a saudade”

provokes questions as to what it means to “have” a language, and, moreover, a language that resists linguistic standardization. If in his linguistic choices in *Cántigas de alén* (the insertion within it of *localismos* and *vulgarismos*) Valente seems to posit a Galician mother tongue, a language of the hearth, home, and community that is authentically “his,” a short prose text, written in 1997, “Figura de home en dous espellos,” seems to contradict this claim. In this text Valente discusses his relation to Castilian and to Galician, but, paradoxically, precisely the sense of non-possession. The short piece deals with the difficulty of autobiography, which for Valente always implies a fiction:

¿Quen é ese *eu* lonxano de *min* que me mira disposto, sexa con frialdade o con recóndita ledicia, a disecarme?...Óllame a *min* que, en definitiva, non teño existir e non son máis que o seu reflexo nun espello. ¿Cál? Non ten o escritor máis espello que a linguaxe. É ésta o espacio reflectante onde o sí mesmo se ve como un outro. (OCII: 1613)

Language here is what one does *not* have – it is that which constitutes the subject in the non identification between the I that speaks (*eu*), and the silenced me (*mim*) that it reflects in its mirror. Valente, who could be said to have two mother tongues, Spanish and Galician, a *figura entre dous espellos*, possesses neither of them.

We might pause here and consider this statement in the context of European conceptions of our relation to what we often term our “native” language. As Yasemin Yildiz (2012: 7-10) points out, at the end of the eighteenth century, languages, which had previously been considered in themselves insignificant with regard to a semantic content, come to be seen as inflecting content, limiting the efficacy of translation, or the possibility of true creativity in a language that is not one’s own. The mother tongue becomes the

(2013: 111). García Candeira’s theoretical approach to *Cántigas de alén* in this essay, in which she combines the Freudian theorization of melancholy with the Deleuze and Guatarri’s concepts of deterritorialization and minor literatures differs from the emphases of my own approach, but arrives at similar conclusions- Valente’s approach to Galician language complicates what might on the surface seem like a simple song of nostalgia for lost linguistic and existential origins.

repository of national spirit, and fluency in a language is conflated with genetic belonging conceived in terms of a unique biological origin that situates the individual automatically in a kinship network and, by extension, in the nation. To have a language is to bear a property that defines one's identity as a member of a community, and to create the boundaries between one community and another.

Thus, notions of the purity of the mother tongue are bound up with the drive for communitarian homogeneity. The violence involved in imposing the standardized national languages is well known, and it is worth recalling that the first grammar of a modern European language, the Castilian, was designed both so that the memory of the royal achievements would not be forgotten, but also so that the new subjects of the Catholic Kings would be able to understand the laws to which they were to be subjected.¹¹⁰ In modernity, however, language becomes part of a generalized biopolitics, the genealogical desire to trace the origins of a pure language, which runs alongside a desire to protect languages from outside contagion (we might recall here the French efforts to resist Americanization) are analogous to the efforts of the nation state to define its communitarian origins and exclude those who are seen as threatening the health of the communitarian body. In Freudian terms, and in light of Valente's discussion of his fundamental non-possession of his languages, linguistic purity is the fetishistic compensation for a gap or absence implied in our linguistic self-constitution, it is the attempt to preserve the

¹¹⁰ Ignacio Navarrete (1994) shows how Nebrija's grammar was devised with a view to arrest the perceived cultural lag of a country that was becoming an empire but had not created the cultural and linguistic hegemony that empire requires: "The key to Nebrija's concept of history is his notion that Castile is at a pivotal instant, which he links typologically to the rule of Solomon in Israel, Alexander in Greece, and Augustus in Rome. Not all nations achieve this moment, and it has literally moved westward and arrived in Spain. It is the time when great empires come into their own, but also when they begin to decline; and while ordinarily political dominance is accompanied by cultural hegemony, in Spain's case the latter feature is lagging. Nebrija's previous hit grammar next hit will facilitate the extension of the Spanish empire by allowing foreigners to learn the language, and its perpetuation by insuring that future generations will always be able to read it" (20).

wholeness of the mother, or the mother tongue, in order to disavow castration and lack. Thus, to say, as Valente does, that he speaks but does not have a language is to question one of the most fundamental constructs of modern nationalist identity.

In his *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*, Jacques Derrida explores this paradoxical simultaneity of speaking and not having a language in ways that are very pertinent to Valente's description of his relation to Galician. In this text Derrida makes a series of seemingly contradictory claims: I have only one language, it is not mine (13); it is possible to be monolingual and speak a language that is not your own (19); we only ever speak one language / we never speak one language (21). For Derrida, these paradoxical claims reveal a basic aspect of language that returns us to our previous exploration of Agamben's theory of language: this is that every linguistic utterance carries with it a presupposition, which is nothing more than the existence of language itself, and that it is impossible for us to speak of this presupposition. For Derrida, this absent metalanguage is "une langue [qui] est promise, qui à la fois précède toute langue, appelle toute parole et appartient déjà à chaque langue comme à toute parole" (126-127). Similar to the imagined community we discussed in a previous chapter, this promised language does not exist and yet remains the ever absent ground towards which our soteriological impulses tend. So, as much as we want to find a fundamental ground for words, the attempt to do so can only give rise to what Derrida terms "la rage appropriatrice, à de la jalousie sans appropriation" (46) which cannot accept "cette langue qui n'arrive pas à demeure" (129).

Derrida's discussion of the impropriety of language, its infinite promise of the wholly other, allows us to understand the tension in Valente's writing of his linguistic and existential home. His writing in a non-standard Galician is an attempt to enact a "mother tongue," a language of the home and of the fireside, which would escape the necessarily

homogenizing structures of state language normalization, even if in this case it would be a matter of a minority language and a regional government. This is a jealous reappropriation of language, an attempt to return to a language that would resist exchange, an effaced coin that becomes the founder of value, a golden sun: “o sol, será como unha velha / moeda esverdeada do ferruxe” (OCI: 517). But this reappropriation is impossible. Our relation to language is one of deprivation. There is no original language which would be ours, that would completely express our selves. Rather, Derrida describes language as constituted of words that exist “comme s’il n’y avait que arrivées, donc des événements, sans arrivée” (118). Our desire is to reconstitute a language that would not be an event, a “first language” that did not take place. This is the desire for the Word that Valente expresses throughout his career, and which in the second poem of the collection is figured, as in Jabès work, as a wound of language:

Anceio
O verbo crea o movemento
Da luz no fondo
Das marguradas augas.
Mañan,
non pouses inda
os teus paxaros louros
no meu peito ferido.
(OCI: 507)

This is a desire for an impossible return that motivates his lament for what never was: “Coitelo da door do que non fumos, / fondo ferir o pranto do non nado” (OCI: 523). Valente’s poems in this collection are a lament for the impossibility of return and a recognition that the words we speak are never ours, that language is, in the words of Derrida, “la langue est à l’autre, venue de l’autre, *la* venue de l’autre” (127).

For Jabès, in words from *Un étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format* that Valente underlines, the writer is the essential foreigner, who exiles himself in writing:

“Interdit, partout, de séjour, el se réfugie dans le livre d’où le mot l’expulsera. C’est chaque fois à un nouveau livre qu’il devra, provisoirement, le salut” (24). As Valente’s prose poem describes the appearance of the self as other in the mirror of language, so for Jabès the writer “emprunte au langage su visage” (24). From this perspective, the book is infinite, and is the space in which the non-coincidence of the linguistically constituted self, the fact that all humans are in a profound sense foreigners, is marked. It is in this context that we might read the refusal of closure and return in the final poem of Valente’s collection written in Galician, the “Cántiga do eterno irretorno”:

QUERO ficar asín, solo, no lonxe,
sen ninguén, sen naide,
paxaro que no ar infindo voa,
no baleiro do ar
cara ó hourizonte onde xamais se chega,
e nunca xa poder – ficar asín –
voltar á orixe para sempre borrada.
(OCI: 537)

5.5 VALENTE, JABÈS, AND THE FRAGMENT

A reader of Valente and Jabès’s work, if asked to identify similarities between both writers, might remark their shared tendency towards the fragmentary. Jabès’s *Le livre des questions* is made up of fragmentary dialogues, which, as we read through the pages, become less and less assignable to an identifiable speaker. There is a penchant for the aphoristic, the self-reflective exploration of the nature of language itself. Valente’s work shares this fragmentary impulse. *Presentación y memorial para un monumento* is a collage of diverse voices spouting some of the worst slogans of the twentieth century. He writes a collection of aphorisms – *Notas de un simulador* – that describes his fundamental intuitions as to the nature of poetic language and creative process, and two collections – *Treinta y siete fragmentos* and *Fragmentos de un libro futuro* – are explicitly defined as a

gathering together of lyric fragments. It would be possible to explore the formal attributes of these fragments, but for our purposes, and keeping in mind the questions of writing and alterity, I prefer to examine the philosophical stakes at play in Valente and Jabès's commitment to the fragment, to consider it as concept rather than form, and to place them in relation to the overarching preoccupation of this thesis, the consideration of Valente's work in terms of the philosophy of alterity. To do so it is necessary to return to the major Romantic thinker of the fragment, Friedrich Schlegel.

In the oft-quoted Fragment 24 of the *Athenaeum*, Schlegel writes: "Many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written" (21). Later, in the Fragment 77 he describes the dialogue, which we can take as the "symphilosophy," or collaborative method of Schlegel and his circle of which the *Athenaeum* fragments are the prime example, as "a chain or garland of fragments" (77). The Fragment 206 states: "A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete within itself like a porcupine" (206). Schlegel's enigmatic phrases lead us to reconsider the traditional notion of a fragment. The literary fragment can be understood in philological terms, an incomplete remnant of an ancient text, but Schlegel reminds us that modern works are *already* fragments as soon as they are written. As Rodolph Gasché notes in his foreword to the English translation of the fragments, Schlegel's concept of the fragment resists the lure of a broken totality to which the part would negatively refer: "Rather than a piece to be understood from the whole of which it would be a remainder, or a broken part, the Romantic fragment is a genre by itself, characterized by a concept of its own" (viii). In this Schlegel is holding to his concept of Romantic poetry, which, as Fragment 116 reads, is "progressive, universal poetry" (31) the essence of which is "that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected" (32). The

Romantic fragment as concept (not form) supports a vision of poetry that is never reconciled into the totality of the art-work. For Schlegel, the fragment shows that completion can only ever be achieved in a singular and finite manner, and that even the greatest system – and system is a key word here, referring to totalizing “systemic” philosophies – are ultimately fragments.

The role of the fragment in Schlegel’s thought is complex, and here I give a necessarily brief and incomplete characterization of his description of it. More relevant for my arguments is the way in which the concept of the fragment works its way into twentieth century discourse, and how it becomes significant for Valente and Jabès in terms of a philosophy of alterity that informs their writing. A key thinker in this regard is Maurice Blanchot, whose understanding of the fragment coincides precisely with the resistance towards the totalizing tendencies of modern philosophy alongside a commitment to alterity in the context of the experience of the genocides of the Second World War. Blanchot, like the early German Romantics, attempts to think the fragment on its own terms, refusing to cast it in dialectic opposition to an absent totality. Writing on the work of Rene Char in the collection of essays from 1969, *L’entretien infini*, Blanchot contrasts the poetic fragment with a conception of the fragment that would place it in relation to a totality that has either been ruptured or is to be achieved. For Blanchot, the fragment should be thought not as privation, or as a moment in a dialectical process, but as “un autre mode de accomplissement” (452).¹¹¹

¹¹¹ It is significant, for our arguments of this chapter, that Blanchot connects the fragmentary with the experience of exile: “Il faut essayer de reconnaître à l’éclatement ou à la dislocation une valeur qui ne sois pas de négation. Ni privative, ni non plus seulement positive: si l’alternative et l’obligation de commencer par affirmer l’être quand on veut le dénier étaient ici, enfin, mystérieusement rompues. *Poème pulvérisé* : écrire, lire ce poème, c’est accepter de ployer l’entente du langage à une certain expérience morcellaire, c’est-à-dire de séparation et de discontinuité. Pensons au dépaysement. Le dépaysement ne signifie pas seulement le perte du pays, mais une manière plus authentique de résider, d’habiter sans habitude ; l’exil c’est l’affirmation d’une nouvelle relation avec le Dehors. Ainsi, le poème

It is notable, in terms of the importance of the Book in Valente and Jabès's poetics, that Blanchot's discussions of the fragment, and the meaning of the fragment in the work of the early German Romantics, is bound up with the concept of the Book. In a short text that Blanchot dedicates to the Romantics in *L'entretien infini*, "L'Atheneum," he describes the importance of the Book in Romantic thought. For the Romantics, the Book, by which they meant the novel, would be the total form, which, like the Bible, would not represent but replace reality. But, as Blanchot notes of Novalis, the total work would itself be left incomplete, and the claim would even be made that only way to complete it would be through an essentially fragmentary art. This, for Blanchot, is "l'un des pressentiments les plus hardis du romantisme: la recherche d'une forme nouvelle d'accomplissement qui mobilise – rende mobile – le tout en l'interrompant et par les divers modes de l'interruption" (525).

For Blanchot, the Romantics here construct a Romantic exigency of the fragment, one that demands an excess with regard to the closure of the total art-work. In their practice, and in Friedrich Schlegel's pronouncement that the fragment should be a self-enclosed entity, like the hedgehog, Blanchot sees a regressive movement towards totality, but the fragmentary imperative which he identifies in the Romantics is for him a revolutionary moment, in which a concept of writing is developed that would exceed the movement towards dialectical resolution that characterizes systematic and totalizing philosophies. In *L'écriture du désastre*, Blanchot describes this fragmentary imperative:

Interrompue, elle se poursuit. S'interrogeant, elle ne s'arroe pas la question, mais la suspend (sans la maintenir) en non-réponse. Si elle prétend n'avoir son temps que lorsque le tout – au moins idéalement – se serait accompli, c'est donc que ce temps n'est jamais sûr, absence de temps en un sens non privatif, antérieure à tout passé-présent, comme

fragmenté est une poème non pas inaccompli, mais ouvrant un autre mode d'accomplissement, celui qui est en jeu dans l'attente, dans le questionnement ou dans quelque affirmation irréductible à l'unité" (451-452).

postérieure à toute possibilité d'une présence à venir. (98)

The fragmentary imperative implies a questioning that cannot receive an answer, and a temporality that escapes the horizons of past, present, and future. As such it dismisses the system conceived as invincible and omnipresent unity; the very persistence of the fragmentary imperative, which never manifests itself, but remains as “énergie de disparaître” (100) that escapes the dialectic of presence and absence that is resolved in totality, implies a permanent jamming of the dialectic machine. Fragmentary writing becomes “le nécessaire impossible” that “n'appartiendrait pas à l'Un pour tant qu'elle s'écarterait de la manifestation” (100).

Blanchot engages with this thought of the fragmentary and the One in his reading of Jabès, included in his collection of literary essays from 1971, *L'Amitié*. For Blanchot, Jabès's *Le livre des questions* marks a double rupture, the historical rupture of Jewish experience in the twentieth century, but also the original rupture of language, before history, “...le lieu où s'institue la parole, celle qui invite l'homme à ne plus s'identifier avec son pouvoir. Parole d'impossibilité.” (254). As for Derrida, Jewish tradition, in which the tablets of the law are always secondary, the re-writing of an absent original, implies for Blanchot an inherent negativity in Jewish conceptions of language, in which commentary, as the necessary mediation of the unassimilable Word of God, is co-original to the sacred texts that are themselves already mediations. This original unoriginality is reflected for Blanchot in Jabès's fragmented writings:

...l'ensemble de fragments, de pensées, de dialogues, d'invocations, de mouvements narratifs, paroles errantes qui constituent le détour d'un seul poème, je retrouve à l'œuvre les puissances d'interruption par lesquelles ce qui se propose à l'écriture (le murmure ininterrompu, cela qui ne s'arrête pas), doit s'inscrire en s'interrompant. (253)

In Jabès's texts the ruptures of both Jewish history and its relation to language speak in the

interruption of writing. The poet is the figure takes on the never-ending responsibility to the question that resists the closures of systemic philosophies. In this way Blanchot can claim, echoing one Jabès's central motifs, that the experience of the writer and the experience of the Jew are bound by this fundamental experience of originary rupture:

Les deux expériences, unies et désunies, celle du judaïsme, celle de l'écriture...ont donc leur commune origine dans l'ambiguïté de cette rupture, rupture qui laisse intact et même révèle, par son éclat, le centre (le noyau, l'unité), mais qui est peut-être aussi l'éclat du centre, le point excentré qui n'est centre que par l'éclat de la brisure. (256)

I have already noted the importance of the fragment in Valente's work, as reflected in the formal aspects of many of his poems, and in his decision to designate two of his collections *Treinte y siete fragmentos* and *Fragmentos de un libro futuro*. The final fragment of the first collection, which is also the first fragment of the latter reads:

Supo,
después de mucho tiempo en la espera metódica
de quien aguarda un día
el seco golpe del azar,
que sólo en su omisión o en su vacío
el último fragmento llegaría a existir.
(OCI: 335-336)

The poem describes the impossible time of waiting, a waiting for a final fragment that would form a harmonious totality. This wait is impossible as it is only in its omission or absence that the final fragment can exist – its existence is impossible as to be a final fragment would mean its subsumption in the totality and therefore its disappearance. This fragment, which is first and last of each respective collection, marks the infinite dispersal of the book. In this sense that we can understand Blanchot's description writer's task in his essay on Jabès: "Car il reste vrai que l'attente vide, désertique, qui retient celui qui écrit au seuil du livre, faisant de l'écrivain le gardien du seuil, de son écriture un désert et de l'homme qu'il est le vide et l'absence d'une promesse" (254). The fragmentary imperative

implies for all three writers a permanent exile in the desert from which there is no return to a past or future plenitude.

It is possible to trace the fragment as form in Valente's work, but here, and in keeping with Blanchot's claim that the fragmentary exigency is cannot be satisfied by a formal or stylistic fragmentation, I will concentrate on one piece, which though seemingly non-fragmentary (a prose piece in one continuous paragraph), is an exemplary exploration of the themes – writing, alterity, fragmentation – of our discussion. This text is the story entitled “El guardián del fin de los desiertos,” included in the collection of short texts, *Palais de Justice*, and which was dedicated to Edmond Jabès.

The text is addressed to a “tú” who is the eponymous “guardián del fin de los desiertos.” The piece starts with a bald reference to alterity: “El problema era el otro” (OCII: 883). But this is an *otro* that “salía o crecía como rama inocente del dedo índice de tu mano izquierda” (OCII: 883). It is not hard to imagine here that this “otro” refers to writing, the uncontrollable dissemination of words on the page that is described in terms of the movement of a snake through the desert: “se iba convirtiendo lentamente en serpiente para escurrirse hacia los arenales” (OCII: 883). The “tú” seeks to control this dissemination of the written word but it is already “demasiado tarde” (OCII: 883). There is a tremendous irony here as we are reminded that it is truly *demasiado tarde*, as we are reading words that have already escaped in writing, have already become other in our reading and interpretation. Therefore we may read the words “tú eras el único indicio de que él existía” as an ironic address of writing to itself, to the fact that the writer is only an aftereffect of writing, the “hueco rumor” (OCII: 883) that remains in a writing that lacks authorial presence.

The infinite wait of the guardian, who we are told will never be relieved, is related to

the infinity of hermeneutic process. The text describes messengers who arrive once a year, and for whom return from the limit point of the desert is impossible: “Recebas mensajeros con órdenes precisas, a los que nunca podrías dar respuesta o a las que dabas respuestas en un pliego secreto enteramente blanco, pues ninguna inscripción que en él hiciese llegaría a su destino” (OCII: 884). To arrive at the text in search of a definitive meaning is a futile endeavour. The text implies a process in which reading opens the potential for more writing and reading, and thus the messengers become trapped in the desert, a blank page marking the infinite potential for hermeneutic process.

The text ends with a description of the arrival of the other. The other in this case can refer to the positivity of action, the world and the “grande estruendo de sus armas” (OCII: 885). The relation to the other, however, is not one of opposition. The guardian has learnt in his infinite waiting to become “hueco, vacío, grieta sin cesar” (OCII: 885). There is no opposition to the other, no sound apart from a “rumor.” What speaks in the poem is the excessive remainder of the poetic voice, which survives as fragment, refusing the resolution of the text. Writing here is “sólo vacío, galería o antesala de paredes altísimas y de ciegos espejos desertados” (OCII: 885). There is no opposition in this infinite void. Nothing remains apart from an infinite passivity that refuses the closure of meaning. For both Valente and Jabès, to write is to create a remnant of a self, a voice that survives in the desert but that cannot be conjoined to the intention of an author, or contain the uncontrollable diffusion of meaning that is implied by writing. In this way, Valente’s relation with Jabès coincides with those parts of his work that aspire to a writing of absolute indeterminacy, a writing that is admirable in its resistance to totality, but can also be criticized, *pace* Agamben, in its refusal to ground truth claims that could have emancipatory potential, or in its incapacity to provide an ethical place for the human.

These are complex issues, and open unto questions of ethics and writing, questions that we will explore in the following chapter, in the context of the necessity and impossibility of poetic witness.





CHAPTER VI: ASH: THE POETICS OF TESTIMONY IN VALENTE AND CELAN

6.1 VALENTE READING CELAN

We have already discussed the importance of Jewish culture, and more specifically, the importance of Jewish esoteric theories of language as mediated by the work of Gershom Scholem, in the construction of Valente's poetics. If aspects of this appropriation of Jewish tradition can seem to lead Valente towards a modern theory of poetic language that would base itself on absence of a fundamental ground for meaning, it is also true that it is possible, following Benjamin and Agamben, and also Levinas's conception of the Saying as opposed to the Said, to read his poetry in terms of an experience of language itself, in which the negative presupposition of the absolute but absent Word is replaced by what Agamben in his essay on Valente calls the "acontecimiento vivo de la palabra como fundamental experiencia amorosa" (49). Both of these approaches diverge from an opposing theory of poetic language that Valente articulates in his "Conocimiento y comunicación." Here, Valente, influenced by Cassirer and Langer's theories of symbolic form, argues for the constitutive powers of a mythic poetic language that would grant knowledge of aspects of experience that is lost in other forms of linguistic expression.

The stakes at play in these diverging conceptions of poetic language are significant in terms of a possible ethics of writing. For the ethical philosophy of the postwar era, and the theories of literature that are often termed "deconstructive" (Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida), the notion of the unity of language and experience in the poetic symbol is an archetypal form of Romantic mystification, and ultimately related to nationalistic, and potentially fascist, political movements. For the poetics of singularity of Maurice Blanchot,

derived in part from Levinas's philosophy, the infinite striving towards an unreachable alterity, the desire that remains as desire, constitutes the ethical element of poetic expression, as it coincides with an approach to the other that allows it to remain as other. For Agamben, these approaches run the risk of undermining the ethical grounding of the subject, and are therefore problematic. If we are to understand Valente's work within the specific context of the philosophy and literary theory of the postwar era, then, it is necessary to pay attention to the complex tensions that exist between these views of poetic language, and their significance in terms of an ethics of writing.

It is not a question here of an absurd moralizing, in which Valente's theories of language would be placed on trial, a verdict of ethical guilt or innocence concluding the exploration of his work. Rather, these philosophical and theoretical contexts, and the profound tensions within modern poetics which are revealed within them, allow us to understand the various ways in which Valente comes to terms with the complexities of a poetic and philosophical tradition of which he has a wide and sophisticated knowledge. In a broader sense, the tracing of Valente's self-positioning with regard both to the modern tradition and to his, significantly in the context of the postwar era, Jewish contemporaries, allows us to at least begin to explore the Heideggerean question, a fundamentally ethical one – *Wozu dichter?*¹¹² In this chapter I will discuss this question in terms of Valente's relation to the writings of Paul Celan, the significance of whose work in the context of the postwar needs no elaboration. I will argue that both Valente and Celan's work offer a reply to Heidegger's question, one which German philosopher was unable to give,¹¹³ a response

¹¹² The phrase of course comes from Heidegger's essay on Rilke, originally given as a lecture in 1946, on the twentieth anniversary of the poet's death. It is published in English as Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1975: 87-140).

¹¹³ I refer here to Heidegger's notorious silence in the wake of the Nazi genocides. These issues, and Heidegger's relationship to Celan, are explored in Phillipe Lacoue Labarthe's *La poésie comme expérience* (1986).

that draws on intuitions that are fundamental to the writing of modern poetry, and which allows us to read their work as testimony to the experiences of the victims of totalitarian violence.

The work and life of Paul Celan play a significant part in Valente's understanding of the poetry of the postwar era. For Valente, writing in 1999, Celan's poems constitute "la obra del poeta europeo que más definitivamente ha marcado su siglo" (OCII: 759). The importance of Celan's work for Valente is reflected in the references to the Romanian poet's work throughout Valente's essayistic production,¹¹⁴ his translations of Celan's poetry, published as *Lectura de Celan: Fragmentos* in 1993, and his incorporation of motifs from Celan's writings into his own poetic work.^{115 116}

¹¹⁴ Valente refers to Celan in his essay on Jabés, "La memoria del fuego," which is included in *Variaciones sobre el pájaro y la red* (1991); in his "Cuatro referencias para una estética contemporánea" first published in the *Revista de Occidente* in 1996 and later published in the posthumous anthology *Elogio del calígrafo* from 2002; in "Del conocimiento pasivo o saber de quietud," first published in the *Arte y Pensamiento* section of *El País* magazine and later collected in the posthumous volume *La experiencia abisal* from 2004; "Bajo un cielo sombrío," first published in *Rosa Cúbica* in 1995 and also collected in *La experiencia abisal*; "Palabra, linde de los oscuro," published in *El País* in 1999 and included in *La experiencia abisal*; "Situación de la poesía: el exilio y el reino" which was first published in a collection of essays from 1974 edited by Julio Ortega and published by Tusquets Editores, *Palabra de escándalo*; and finally in "Así pasen cinco años" in the *ABC Cultural* supplement of the 8th of December, 1995.

¹¹⁵ Valente takes the title of his 1982 collection, *Mandorla*, from Celan, and places the words "In der Mandel – was steht in der Mandel? Das Nichts" as epigraph to the poems. The two poems from *Fragmentos de un libro futuro*, that bear the epigraphs "Tubinga, otoño tardío," and "Memoria de Paul Celan, en la muerte de Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, fines de 1991" reference Celan. The first recalls the Celan poem that Valente translated as "Tubinga, enero," a piece which makes reference to the poet Holderlin's final madness, and also, implicitly, to the relationship between Celan and Heidegger. The second is a more intimate apostrophe to the deceased Celan on the occasion of the death of his wife, Gisèle Celan-Lestrange. The fragment "Al norte..." from the same collection, echoes Celan's "In den Flüssen," a poem Valente translates in his *Lectura de Celan: Fragmentos*.

¹¹⁶ Jonathan Mayhew's essay, "Lectura de Paul Celan": Translation and the Heideggerian Tradition in Spain (2004) is one of the most substantial readings of Valente's relation to Celan, in which the American scholar outlines the post-Heideggerian hermeneutic tradition that binds the two writers. For Mayhew: "Valente's main purpose in translating Celan is to affiliate himself with a European modernist tradition, or, more precisely, to situate himself within the Spanish literary tradition as the most exemplary representative of modernist poetics. Valente enjoyed a unique and privileged role in the Spanish literary politics of the last two decades of the twentieth century. Celan served Valente well, since the latter was able to identify himself with one of the most prestigious poets of postwar Europe while also using Celan's theory of communicability to denounce the "realist" poetics of his own time" (87). This is certainly the case. Valente's role as the mediator of Celan's work in Spain is undoubted, and something the author witnessed at the recent celebration of a two day symposium on Celan in Spain held at the University of Cáceres, in which the figure of Valente was almost as central as that of Celan himself. In my reading of the relation between the two men I will not

For Valente, Celan's work bears witness to the experiences of the victims of twentieth century violence – it is a remnant or survival of genocide. In an essay dedicated to Edmond Jabès, included in *Variaciones sobre el pajarito y la red*, Valente discusses Celan's work precisely in this context of survival: "Palabra que renace de sus propias cenizas para volver a arder. Incesante memoria, residuo o resto cantable: 'Singbarer Rest,' en expression de Paul Celan. Pues, en definitiva, todo libro debe arder, quedar quemado, dejar solo un residuo de fuego" (OCII: 434). In a later essay, first published in the mid-nineties and entirely dedicated to Celan, "Bajo el cielo sombrío," Valente repeats this connection between poetry and survival. Valente begins his essay with the words "La palabra poetica es palabra dicha contra la muerte. Tal es su primaria razón de ser" (OCII: 713), and quotes W.H. Auden's dictum that "Poetry makes nothing happen, it survives" (OCII: 713). Valente ends his essay with a reference to Celan's "Todesfuge," again in the context of survival: "Las cenizas, el humo, los sepultados en el aire. Los nunca renunciables. Tal es la profunda raíz poética de la supervivencia, de su supervivencia, de su nunca morir en la memoria" (OCII: 716).

The linking of poetry and survival is complemented by Valente's description of Celan's poetry in terms of a play of light and darkness. Valente imagines Celan's poetry as a descent into darkness from which a new language can be recuperated that would be a refusal of the language of the organizers of genocide: "El genocidio se organizó, sabido es, por medio del lenguaje, con su carga mortal en la palabra, y tan sólo podía ser purgado en la palabra, restituyendo ésta a su ser, arrancándola de los largos, sumergidos, infernales

concentrate on the validity of Valente's understanding of Celan's work, nor its significance in terms of the polemical debates of the Spanish literary sphere in which Valente participated. Rather, I will attempt to show how Valente's reading of Celan is mediated by the contemporary philosophical discourse of alterity, and derive from this reading the possibility of understanding his work as a poetry of witness. For a more sympathetic reading of the relevance of Celan's work for Valente, which situates this relation in terms of the weak messianism of Adorno, Bloch, and Benjamin, see Gómez Toré (2014).

tuneles de la sombra” (OCII: 714). It is in this point of indistinction between light and darkness that the poetic word as survival exists: “Justo en esa frontera de la indistinción, frontera terrible (‘La poesia no se impone, se expone,’ Celan, 1969), la voz poética opera lo imposible: salva de su mortalidad a la palabra misma que nos hiera a la muerte y sólo gracias a esa voz – Lázaro, ven – se abre, sobre el abismo y sobre la sombra, la vía de la supervivencia, de la no extinción” (OCII: 715). For Valente, Celan struggles with a linguistic and poetic tradition that has been tainted by the catastrophic genocide carried out German speakers in the twentieth century. The difficulty, for a Jewish survivor of the camps, of writing poetry in the language of the executioners of Europe’s Jews, and of testifying to the enormity of the catastrophe that befell his people, is reflected in the extraordinary contorsions of Celan’s poetic language, the inherence within it of darkness and light.

In another essay dedicated to Celan, the “Palabra linde de lo oscuro: Paul Celan,” written for *El Pais* in 1999, Valente reiterates this vision of Celan’s poetry as a descent into darkness, and references that which for him is the other essential aspect of the German writer’s poetics: his belief, expressed in the 1958 “Bremen Discourse,” that poetry, like a message placed in a bottle, is written for an other:

Un mensaje cifrado que retiene en el interior de si toda su luz.
Botella al mar. Hasta que otra mano, otra mirada, una escucha distinta, lo
acojan, lo reciban, y justo en ese acto se transformen. Palabra, Verbo.
Para habitar de nuevo entre nosotros. (OCII: 760)

It is important to remember that this relationship to the other is not one that can be understood in terms of communication. Rather, on Valente’s reading what is communicated is the very possibility of communication itself. Here the poem speaks as:

Mano, botella sin destino y cargada a la vez de destino como
infinitamente multiplicada posibilidad. Hay otra mano que espera en una
playa, en el límite móvil de las aguas, cuyo encuentro perfecciona el acto

jeroglífico de la escritura. Raíz de la comunicabilidad, pero no comunicación en sí misma, como tan trivialmente se ha querido. (OCII: 759)

The poem speaks to an other, but finds its ultimate value in communicating the possibility of communication as such. The question arises here as to how to understand this description of a language that communicates its own possibility?

To begin to answer this question, it is instructive to turn to Valente's introductory remarks in his translations of Celan's work. Here, Valente configures this relationship to the other in terms that are derived from Levinas's philosophy of alterity. I reproduce in full the third of the four short texts that preface the collection:

Dar por cierto el conocimiento del otro es ignorar que este presunto conocimiento es una mera proyeccion de nuestro yo. Suprimida esa proyeccion ocultante, el otro solo puede ser percibido como esencialmente desconocido: la faz misteriosa del otro. Y, tambien, solo en la medida en que es percibido como un misterio, puede el otro ofrecernos como fuente posible del conocer y del amar. Con el que yo asi percibo como otro y con el que asi como a otro a mi mismo me percibe puedo construir un mundo, una relacion o un espacio de fluido intercambio de la diferencia con la diferencia. El misterio esta en la diferencia misma; y en ella, la raiz del conocimiento y del amor. Pensamiento, este, que no traiciona su estirpe: la del pensar, la de la radical heterogeneidad del ser. Su naturaleza esencialmente dialógica. (OCII: 645-46)

Valente expresses the fundamental problem of Levinas's thought: the difficulty of creating a relation to alterity that would not bind this alterity within the horizon of the self. Instead of a relationship in which the "I" would find in alterity its own reflection, Valente proposes a Levinasian relationship to the other, in which difference is maintained in a relation that is "dialogic" rather than "dialectic."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ For the French philologist, and interpreter of Celan, Jean Bollack, on the other hand, Celan's work should not be understood in terms of the tradition of alterity. As Bollack states in interview with the Catalan poet, essayist, and translator, Arnau Pons, published in *Quimera* No. 201, published in March, 2001: "Hay que saber que el principio dialógico es lo más falso en la interpretación de Celan, ya que en su poesía el otro está dentro de la misma obra y nunca fuera de ella, mientras para Levinas y Buber el otro es siempre el Otro. Pero en Celan nunca. El otro es él mismo. De ahí que yo insista tanto sobre el 'tú,' ya que el 'yo' y el 'tú' están en diálogo permanente en su poesía Se trata, pues, de

From this perspective, Celan's poetry communicates the very possibility of communication itself, the "raíz de comunicabilidad," implying a relation to alterity that would refuse the assumption of otherness in the horizon of the self, a language that would be, in Valente's terms, "sobreintencional." This conception of Celan's poetry is reiterated in Levinas's essay, written in 1972, "De l'être à l'autre."¹¹⁸ For Levinas, when Celan in his Bremen address describes poetry as a handshake, reducing the poem to a gesture, he is referring to the poem as that which "précède toute thématization; c'est en lui que les qualités se rassemblent en choses; mais le poème laisse ainsi au réelle l'altérité que l'imagination pure lui arrache" (53). Thus it is that "un chant monte dans le donner, dans l'une pour l'autre, dans la signification même de la signification. Signification plus ancienne que l'ontologie et le pensée de l'être" (56). It is clear that Valente's approach to Celan's work is inflected by Levinas's work, and more specifically, Levinas's reading of Celan in *Noms propres*. Whether Levinas's reading of Celan is valid or not, his discussion of the possibility, or impossibility, of writing in a language that would precede thematization and which would be non-appropriative of otherness is fundamental to Valente's poetry and poetics. The attempt to write in this language is central to Valente's response to the violence of the twentieth century, and his assumption of the ethical duty to bear witness to its victims.

la exclusión de todo principio dialógico tal y como se lo encuentra expuesto en Levinas y Buber. Celan ha acabado con Buber, de una cierta manera" (57). More generally, Bollack's readings of Celan, which are exhaustive and brilliant, are accompanied by a theoretical framework based, *contra* Heidegger, but also *contra* the continental philosophy that follows Heidegger, and that informs aspects of this thesis – Gadamer, Ricouer, Levinas, Derrida – and seeks to return defend the meaningfulness of the text with a centrality of the author, as opposed to the pluralism of sense and decentering of the author of postwar thought. From Bollack's perspective, ventriloquized by Pons, Valente's reading of Celan's work would be "claramente ontológica, religiosa, gratamente oscura, cuando no apropiativa" (41).

¹¹⁸ Valente's library contains a copy of this essay, which is included in the collection *Noms propres*, which is copiously underlined.

In this chapter I will explore the connections between Valente and Celan, and argue that their work shares fundamental concerns: an ethical commitment to otherness and to the victims of violence, a belief that poetry is not simply communicative language but a remnant of an inexpressible absence, and a shared difficulty in attempting to bear witness that is framed in terms of the notion of survival. In this reading I will incorporate Giorgio Agamben's exploration of ethics after Auschwitz, and his description of the ways in which poetic language can speak for those who have been deprived of language. I will argue that the difficulty of testimony that Agamben describes with regard to Auschwitz can be related to the fundamental philosophical tensions that I have identified in this work and which are apparent in Valente's rendering of the Narcissus myth and his reading of the poetry of Antonio Machado and Juan Ramon Jiménez. Finally, I will discuss, in the context of Maurice Blanchot's essay "Le gaze de Orphée," Valente's characterization of poetry as a descent into darkness, and the significance in this descent of the *mirada*.

6.2 AUSCHWITZ AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF TESTIMONY

Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* is the third volume of his *Homo Sacer* series. The overall aim of this project is to delineate a macro-narrative according to which Western culture is characterized by a process of inclusive-exclusions in which elements of human experience or certain types of human beings are included within the law as its own exclusion, allowing for an unlimited exertion of power and violence upon them. The extermination of European Jewry in the Nazi camps would be the culmination of this process, an event that is both exceptional but at the same time an ever-present possibility in a European culture that is still, according to Agamben, structured in accordance with the

creation of “bare life,” the life that cannot be sacrificed, but equally, can be killed without compunction or redress.¹¹⁹

Agamben begins his work by distinguishing between historical knowledge of the camps and our understanding of their ethical significance. There are authoritative works on the large scale killing of the Nazis, and it is possible to recreate in great detail the processes that led to and constituted the camps.¹²⁰ But the horror of the camp means that there is “a reality that necessarily exceeds its factual elements” (12). The distance between the detailing of the facts of the camps and a true understanding of the significance of the events that went on within them reflect, for Agamben, “the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension” (12). This is a problem of testimony, and for Agamben reflects the fact that testimony has at its very core an essential lacuna, the absence or silence of the victim to whom testimony refers. The Italian philosopher claims his work is both a commentary on testimony and an attempt to listen to this lacuna, to the unsaid, and thereby to begin to formulate an ethics that would be equal to the ultimate test of any contemporary ethics, to be *more Auschwitz demonstrata*.

Agamben’s work centers around this difficulty of testimony, the difficulty of bearing witness to those who have passed, and especially bearing witness to the figure of the *Musselman*, those prisoners who were so maltreated as to lose the capacity to eat, speak, or

¹¹⁹ In the first of this series, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben writes: “The protagonist of this book is bare life, that is, the life of homo sacer (sacred man), who may be killed and yet not sacrificed, and whose essential function in modern politics we intend to assert” (8).

¹²⁰ Agamben cites here Raul Hilberg’s *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961). We could also add more recent works such as Saul Friedlander’s (1997 and 2007) two volume study of the Nazi persecution of the Jews, or Nikolaus Wachsmann’s (2015) history of the camps, which avoids the error, perhaps present in Agamben’s work, of equating the complexity of the various systems of extermination and slave labour that were carried out in the many Nazi death camps with the single example of Auschwitz.

defend themselves, and who invariably died in the camps. The *Musselmen* are the “complete witnesses,” in that they suffered the full brunt of the organized brutality of the camps, but are also, for that very reason, those who did not survive to bear witness. This means that “testimony contains a lacuna. The true witnesses cannot bear witness; the survivors, proxy witnesses, speak in their stead” (34).

For Agamben, the impossibility of bearing witness to the experience of the complete witness mirrors an essential lack in all human language. He writes:

Perhaps every word, every writing is born in this sense, as testimony. This is why what is borne testimony to cannot already be language or writing. It can only be something to which no one has borne witness. And this is the sound that arises from the lacuna, the non-language that one speaks when one is alone, the non-language to which language answers, in which language is born. It is necessary to reflect on the nature of that to which no-one has borne witness, on this non-language. (38)

The consideration of this “non-language” can be related to poetry. Agamben mentions here the famous letter of Keats to John Woodhouse of 1818, in which the English poet describes the instability of the poetic character. Keats writes “as to the poetical Character...it is not itself – it has no self – it is everything and nothing – it has no character” (qtd. in Agamben, 112). For Keats, the poet has no identity as he is always “filling in for some other body” (ibid), and is constantly at the risk of self-annihilation. This emptying out of the poetic character is, however, necessary for the creation of beauty, and the poet links the pain involved in this process to the creation of the poem: “I will assay to reach a high a summit in poetry as the nerve bestowed upon me will suffer” (ibid). For Agamben, this relation of poetry to desubjectification is a constant in the Western literary tradition, from the classical invocation of the Muses to Rimbaud’s “je suis un autre” and the heteronyms of Fernando Pessoa, and reflects the essential instability of all subjectivity, which he links to the constitution of the self in the enunciation of language shifters.

Agamben's discussion of language shifters is derived from the linguistic theory of Emile Benveniste.¹²¹ For Benveniste, "enunciative instances" (Agamben uses Roman Jakobson's equivalent term, "language shifters") are those elements of language – pronouns such as "I," "you," demonstrative adjectives like "this," or adverbs such as "here," and "now" – whose meaning is dependent upon the context in which they are enunciated. Agamben writes: "Unlike other words, these signs do not possess a lexical meaning that can be defined in real terms; their meaning arises only through reference to the event of discourse in which they are used" (115). That is, the shifters only have significance in terms of the time and space within which they are enunciated. In the case of the pronoun "I," what is referred to is not any substantive reality, but simply to the fact of linguistic occurrence, the fact that someone is speaking, or, more accurately, that language is happening, here and now. It follows that for Benveniste the word "I" does not refer to a consciousness or person that would exist before the "I," but to the constitution of the person as a subject who says "I." For Agamben, this implies that to become a subject is to simultaneously go through a process of desubjectification, as the psychosomatic individual must "fully abolish himself and desubjectify himself as a real individual to become the subject of enunciation and to identify himself with the pure shifter 'I'" (116). In speaking the "I" subjectivity arrives, but at the same time is taken up in a language that refers only to its own occurrence; in this moment both the "flesh and blood individual and

¹²¹ Agamben is here discussing Benveniste's *Problème de linguistique générale*, and the sections in it that deal with enunciation and pronouns. Valente's library contains a copy of the work. Valente was aware of both Benveniste's and Ramon Jakobson's work on linguistic shifters. In the entry for the 5th of July, 1981 of the *Diario Anónimo*, he writes: "Emile de Benveniste, 'La nature des pronoms,' en *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966. *Shifter* es el término empleado por Jakobson para indicar una categoría del signo lingüístico que está 'lleno de significación' sólo porque está 'vacío.' *Esto...se espera la aparición del referente. Yo y tú: yo soy el referente del 'yo' sólo cuando el que habla soy yo. Cuando empiezas a hablar tú el yo te pertenece a ti*" (DA: 213).

the subject of enunciation are perfectly silent” (117). In other words, in saying “I” the self only comes to be in its identification with an impersonal language. Agamben employs Benveniste’s description of the paradoxes of subjective enunciative to better understand the difficulty of bearing witness: the fact that the only complete witnesses of Auschwitz, the *Musselmen*, are those who are necessarily incapable of bearing witness.

The paradoxes of testimony remit to a fundamental aspect of human subjectivity, reminding us that “human beings are only human insofar as they bear witness to the inhuman” (121). The living being can only appropriate language on the condition of falling into a silence that marks the fact that the processes of subjectification and desubjectification are thoroughly bound up with one another. Agamben argues that Western metaphysics and thought of language is an attempt to reconcile this fundamental hiatus between living and speaking being, whether in the form of an “I” before language or a silent voice of conscience. But for the Italian philosopher, outside “theology and the incarnation of the Verb, there is no moment in which language is inscribed in the living voice, no place in which the living being is able to render itself linguistic, transforming itself into speech” (129). Testimony is precisely that which occurs in this “non-place of articulation” (129). At the site of this disjunction between voice and word, *phone* and *logos*, Agamben places the witness, the figure that is human only inasmuch as it bears witness to the chiasmatic relationship between the human and the inhuman, between the possibility and the impossibility of speaking that constitutes the subject: “the authority of the witness consists in his capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak – that is, in his or her being a subject” (158).

We can see here a structure analogous to that of Agamben’s description of Benjamin’s “language of birds.” The relation between the human and the inhuman is one of immanent

alterity, in which that which could be conceived as an unspeakable before language – voice, consciousness, the subject before speech – is placed within the testimonial structure of the speech act itself. Subjectivity, from this perspective, is made up of a paradoxical crossing over of the “inseparable division and non-coincidence between the inhuman and the human, the living being and the speaking being, the *Musselman* and the survivor” (157). If biopolitics is for Agamben the attempt to produce a separated, inhuman bare life as survival, that which is subject to the most extreme forms of violence known to history, testimony, which shows that there can only be subjectivity with a concomitant desubjectivity, or that there can only be speech with a concomitant incapacity to speak, “refutes precisely this isolation of survival from life” (157). Testimony reveals the constant, chiasmatic relation of the human and the inhuman, the survival of the inhuman within the human.

For Agamben, the witness’s relation to language is like that of the poet, as the poetic word, in which the enunciatory identification with language is admitted, “is the one that is always situated in the position of a remnant and that can, therefore, bear witness. Poets – witnesses – found language as what remains, as what actually survives the possibility, or impossibility, of speaking” (161). By this I take Agamben to refer to the tradition of the “impersonal” in poetry, which in his essay on Valente he links to the troubadours and the “language of birds,” and here links to the masks of Pessoa and Machado. In these works poetic enunciation is not conceived in terms of the expression of a psychological interiority. Rather, poetic enunciation here emphasizes an absence of the self, exposing the chiasmatic relation between between the possibility (enunciation) and the impossibility (the silence of those who are absent) of speaking that is demonstrated in witnessing. To

bear witness is to speak from this zone between presence and absence that Agamben relates to what Levi called the “dark shadows” (162) of Celan’s poetry.

6.3 NARCISSIM AND IRONY: VALENTE, JUAN RAMÓN JIMÉNEZ, AND ANTONIO MACHADO

In terms of the wider arguments of this thesis, we can place Agamben’s writings on Auschwitz in terms of the refusal of the grounding of the self in reflection that is one aspect of the modern philosophical tradition. By “reflection” I refer to the tradition in modern philosophy, exemplified in the philosophy of Descartes and Kant, in which the philosophical enterprise is based upon a relation of the self to the self in reflection that grounds our knowledge of the world. Rodolphe Gasche, in his influential study of the work of Jacques Derrida, *The Tain of the Mirror*, describes this concept of philosophical reflection as a “name for philosophy’s eternal aspiration for self-foundation” (13). Reflection, the semantic and etymological connotations of which suggest a schema in which the mind, a mirror, receives the light of the objects of the world, and also sees itself in this process, in effect a mirror looking upon itself, becomes, with the philosophy of Descartes, the unsurpassed principle of thought. For Descartes, it is impossible to derive knowledge from grounds that are ontologically and theologically outside mental processes; certainty can only be found through reflection, through a consideration of the experience through which the objects are apprehended. Gasche writes:

By lifting the ego out of its immediate entanglement in the world and by thematizing the subject of thought itself, Descartes establishes the apodictic certainty of self as a result of the clarity and distinctness with which it perceives itself. Through self-reflection, the self – the ego, the subject – is put on its own feet, set free from all unmediated relation to being. In giving priority to the human being’s determination as a thinking being, self-reflection marks the human being’s rise to the rank of a subject. It makes the human being a subjectivity that has its center in itself, a self-consciousness certain of itself. This is the first epoch-making achievement of the concept of reflection, and it characterizes modern metaphysics as a metaphysics of subjectivity. (13-14)

Descartes's attempt to satisfy philosophy's "eternal aspiration" for self-foundation fails, however, in terms of another of philosophy's fundamental drives – the desire to explain the totality of noumenal reality. Kant's critical project, which aims to uncover the conditions of possibility for our knowledge of the world, recognizes that our metaphysical pretensions are necessarily inconsistent. We can only have knowledge of that which is given according to the transcendental categories of experience – the noumenal realm of things in themselves lies outside our knowledge. Furthermore, there seems to be a fundamental antinomy between the unity of the "I" in identity, and its division, the mind looking back on mind, in the process of reflection. In Kant's thought this duality is characteristic of the faculty of understanding, and is coeval with the opposition between subject and object. For Kant this opposition is unsurmountable, and if unity can be thought, it is only as a necessary presupposition, or, in Gasché's terms "only as a hypothetical necessity, or as an abstract and absolute beyond (*Jenseits*), that is, an object only of human faith and strife" (27). Hegel's revolution will consist of radicalizing reflection towards what has been termed an "absolute idealism," in which oppositions are subsumed in the unity in totality of the identical and the non-identical. Thus Hegel's system achieves the unity of difference and non-difference that Kant's thought could only presuppose.

As Frederic Jameson (2010) notes, there is a certain "narcissism" inherent to absolute idealism, implied in the fact that alterity in Hegel's scheme can always be subsumed within the dialectical process of Reason that implies that we "search the whole world, and outer space, and end up only touching ourselves, only seeing our own face persist through multitudinous differences and forms of otherness" (131). If anything binds, despite their differences, the philosophers of the phenomenological tradition since Heidegger – Bataille, Levinas, Blanchot, Merleau Ponty, Zambrano, Agamben, Derrida, to limit myself to the

thinkers that appear in this work – it is a resistance to this narcissism. For these thinkers, to paraphrase the title of Gasche’s study, the speculative process of the mind as mirror is interrupted, or, at least, the limits of speculation are recognized in the “tain” of the mirror, the “lustreless back of the mirror” (6) that constitutes an alterity that escapes reflection.

It is in this context that we can read the thematization of the mirror and the the gaze, “el espejo” and “la mirada,” in Valente’s poetry, through which he constructs speculative dramas of self-relation, of constitution and of loss of the self. And it is also in this context that we can understand the distinction Valente draws in his early essays between the poetry of Juan Ramón Jiménez and Antonio Machado.¹²² For Valente, Jiménez is the inheritor of the egoism of certain aspects of the Romantic and Symbolist traditions: “...lo que J.R.J. entiende por poesía, por poeta, por hombre y mundo, etcetera, pertenece al mismo orden de supuestos que puso en marcha y mantuvo hasta sus últimas consecuencias el desarrollo de ese extenso y rico movimiento europeo que conocemos con el nombre de simbolismo” (OCII: 107). In Valente’s reading, this means that Juan Ramón maintains a “sentimentalidad clausurada” (OCII: 108) that sees in the world only a reflection of the self, a “visión radical y totalizadora de la irrealidad del mundo y de la suprema, solitaria y suficiente realidad del yo” (OCII: 112). This attitude is distilled in the lines Valente quotes

¹²² Valente draws this distinction in “Juan Ramón Jiménez en la tradición poética del medio siglo,” an essay first published in 1957 in the *Índice de Artes y Letras*, and included in *Las palabras de la tribu*. It is important to note the coincidence of Valente’s criticism of Jiménez with Sartre’s criticism of Baudelaire in *Qu’est ce que la littérature*. In the entry for the 18th of October, 1959 of his *Diario anónimo*, Valente makes reference to Sartre’s reading of the poetry of Baudelaire in this work, in which the French philosopher criticizes Baudelaire’s narcissism in precisely the terms that Valente employs to criticize Jiménez. The importance of the figure of Narcissus for modern poets is well known. As Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza (1998) notes in this regard, Narcissus is a recurrent figure in the work of “Ivanov, Rilke, Valéry, Eliot, Lezama Lima [...] Puede ejemplificar la concepción solipsística de la expresión lírica, que denunciaba ya en 1804 Jean Paul Richter, y sobre la que, por ejemplo, Antonio Machado incidía en sus *Reflexiones sobre la lírica*.... Pero la referencia a este mito no sólo apunta a la resistencia del texto lírica a representar la identidad de su enunciadador sin disturbarla. Como sugerían agudamente las palabras de Machado, bajo la influencia de Narciso, habrá que situar sobre todo la misma problematización de esa identidad, no tan definida cuando el azogue del espejo falta o bien, por cualquier irregularidad, deja sentir patentemente su intermediación, como ocurre con el lenguaje en la escritura poética, animando lo que, con ceño platónico, podríamos tachar de fantasmagorías. Al fin y al cabo, el drama de Narciso no es otro que el de la extrañeza fatal ante la imagen propia” (20).

from *La estación total*: “Yo todo: poniente y aurora; / amor, amistad, vida y sueño. / Yo solo / universo” (OCII: 111).

Machado, though indebted to the Symbolist tradition, takes, according to Valente, a further step, moving from a totalizing egoism to a poetry that is based on the existence of a “tú esencial” (OCII: 112). Valente quotes Machado in this regard:

Se diría que Narciso ha perdido su espejo, con más exactitud que el espejo de Narciso ha perdido su azogue, quiero decir la fe en la impenetrable opacidad del otro, merced a la cual— y solo por ella— sería el mundo un puro fenómeno de reflexión que nos rindiese nuestro propio sueño, en último término, la imagen de nuestro soñador. (qtd. in OCII: 108)

Valente obviously approves of Machado’s break from forms of what he takes to be Romantic/Symbolist egoism, and of his conception of the “incurable *otredad* de lo uno” (OCII: 115), and relates this stance to irony. Irony here is understood as:

...movimiento de participación que complica al creador en las mismas leyes de la realidad que reconoce. El recinto de lo subjetivo queda abierto, se destruye en cierto modo al reconocerse como tal.... La ironía es un atisbarse o verse de lo uno, que toma así distancias de sí mismo y se descubre diversificable, alterable. (OCII: 117)

In terms of Machado’s thought we can connect this irony to the scepticism of Juan Mairena, but also to Abel Martín’s vision of the erotic as a relation in which “El espejo del amor se quebraría [...] Quiere decir Abel Martín que el amante renunciaría cuanto es de espejo en el amor, porque comenzaría a amar en la amada lo que, por esencia, no podrá nunca reflejar su propia imagen” (300). And this relation to alterity is linked to a metaphysics in which the conclusions of any philosophical system are always excessive with regard to its premises, in which A is not equal to A.¹²³

If Juan Ramon Jiménez’s work shows the mark of the Idealist tradition in philosophy, and the totalizing aspects of this, the modern thinker most associated with irony is

¹²³ For a discussion of Machado’s thought relevant to our arguments here see Barqau (1975).

Friedrich Schlegel, who, at the beginning of this work, we placed on one pole of the Levinasian distinction of totality and infinity. It is useful here to turn Schlegel's well known text, "On Incomprehensibility," and within this his discussion of irony. Schlegel's text turns on the impossibility of comprehension. For Schlegel, comprehension or understanding is always aporetic – there is always an excess to understanding because understanding cannot fold back upon itself and possess itself entirely, and every attempt to do so implies infinite regress – we are necessarily confronted with the problem of understanding our understanding of our understanding. And this is precisely what is revealed in irony, which is the undecidable double movement of a language that constantly provokes a rereading. In this regard Schlegel describes an irony that "contains and incites a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the unconditioned and the conditioned, between the impossibility and the necessity of communication" (1997: 124). The instability of Schlegel's irony, its chiasmic saying and unsaying, corresponds to Agamben's discussion of testimony; it reveals the impotence that is at the heart of linguistic utterance, the necessary and paradoxical presence within understanding of its own impossibility. As the German literary theorist Werner Hamacher comments:

As the medium of the possibility and impossibility of communication, language – and that is in every case the language of irony – is always a broken, fragmented language, a language distanced from itself. It must offer itself in always other meanings, in an uncontrollable flight of allosemies and allegories, as always other than meaning, always other than language, and only thereby as language "itself": as exposed, disrupted, abandoned language, language without language. (1996: 19)

Ironic language is language that remains beyond what on first appearance seems its primary denotative function, the constant undoing of what is said pointing to an incapacity to speak. Valente's poetry, too, often alludes to this difficulty of speaking, the struggle between the desire to express the experiences of a self or an absent other and the ironic and

Machadian recognition of the temporalizing effects of language, the fact that linguistic enunciation of the self implies a split between a constitutive event of language and a subject that is silenced in this very enunciation. The recognition of this impossibility of speaking is especially relevant in the postwar era, both in terms of its significance as a poetic expression of philosophical resistance to totalizing discourses, and in terms of bearing witness to the suffering of the past. It implies a refusal of a closed identity, the reduction of the other to the same, and a poetry that bears witness in its marking of an impossibility of speaking. In this context we can identify in Valente's understanding of poetry a struggle between conceptions of self-unity and the recuperation of experience on the one hand, and the irretrievable loss of the past and the non-coincidence of identity. This is a struggle which gains special poignancy in the context of the attempt to bear witness to the victims of totalitarian violence.

6.4 MIRRORS OF THE OTHER

In Valente's prose work these issues are played out most obviously in his discussions of the figure of Narcissus, and the exchange of gazes in his essays on San Juan de la Cruz. Valente's use of the figure of Narcissus, to which he makes reference in his essay on Machado, is continued in his "Pasma de Narciso,"¹²⁴ which describes what he understands as the "soterrado" meaning of the myth. This hidden aspect of the Narcissus myth resists later understandings of it as an allegory of self-contemplation, of the self-reflective process of mind looking back on mind. Rather, for Valente the myth reveals an essential alterity in self-relation, in which what is seen in the water is not an echo, a confirmation of the self, but an vision of the self as other, which allows for a relation with a paradoxical alterity that abides in the same: "En la mediacion del espejo de las aguas, el si mismo se descubre

¹²⁴ This essay appears as part of the collection of essays *La piedra y el centro*, first published in 1982.

como otro y ambos quedan amorosamente unificados – pasmo de Narciso – en la vision” (OCII: 277). As in Agamben’s discussion of testimony, in which the chiasmatic relation between the human and the inhuman defines poetic enunciation, and as irony remits to a saying and unsaying that is inherent to all language, so the image of Narcissus describes the survival of the image beyond the life or death of the subject: “La imagen que Narciso ve está más allña de la muerte El mito de Narciso es pues un mito de amor, de supervivencia o de resurrección” (277). For Valente the dialectic relation of self and other is related to desire. Later, in the piece “Verbum absconditum,” which is included in the 1992 collection of essays, *Variacions sobre el pájaro y la red*, he writes, in the context of a discussion of desire and the mystic poetry of San Juan de la Cruz:

El deseo de esa posibilidad de desdoblamiento que – como inicialmente en el mito de Narciso – engendra del si mismo al otro, a ese otro especular cuyo deseo deseamos y en cuyos ojos – los ojos deseados– deseamos que su deseo, el de él, el deseo del otro, nos haga existir. El deseo que nos lleva a buscar esa mirada no puede encontrar sosiego. (OCII: 397)

In “El Ojo del Agua,” which again forms part of *La piedra y el centro*, however, Valente returns to the rhetoric of unification in his discussion of the lyrics from the *Cántico Espiritual*:

Oh cristalina fuente,
si en esos tus semblantes plateados
formase de repente
los ojos deseados
que tengo en mis entrañas dibujados.
(OCII: 313)

According to Valente, in this moment, “la Amada se constituye en su interior-entranas- como mirada del Amado,” she constitutes herself in “el alumbramiento del mirar del otro: del otro de si, del infinitamente otro que la constituye” (OCII: 314). It is in this context that Valente refers to Hegel’s citation of Maester Eckhart: “El ojo con el que veo a Dios es el

mismo ojo con el que Dios me ve” (315). This is the moment of union, “Unidad del mirar: unidad del ser en el ojo o en la mirada unica” (OCII: 315).

We can see here a tension in Valente’s figuring of the relationship of consciousness to alterity, between a description of subjective unity in the relationship of the “I” to itself as other, and of the decentering of the self in the process of self-reflection that is characterized by infinite regression. In the short text “Boceta improbable,” written in 1994 for the *ABC Cultural*, Valente discusses this decentering of the self in terms of the impossibility of creating a self-portrait: “Para retratarse hay que mirarse a si mismo. Pero cuando trato de mirar a un presunto mi mismo, siempre veo a otro y, por lo general, no suelo reconocerme” (OCII: 1497). This vision of the self as other, according to Valente, implies a profound destabilization of identity, and here he quotes from the Fernando Pessoa’s heteronym, Bernardo Soares, “Comprendí en un relámpago íntimo que no soy nadie. Nadie, absolutamente nadie” (OCII: 1497). The process of self-reflection leads to a recognition of difference, in which the self recognizes its temporal character, the fact that it is on every occasion a positing of language, and therefore can never coincide with itself in a moment of self-identification. For Valente, the recognition of the alterity of the self is connected with death: “La última vez que quise interrogar a mi imagen, reflejada como antaño en el espejo.... Vi, con toda nitidez, la elegante figura de un caballero vestido de negro que con gesto inequívoco, de una leve y cordial ironía, me invitaba a pasar del otro lado” (OCII: 1498). The non-coincidence of the self in reflection is a result of a linguistic positing that marks our temporality, and therefore our finitude. Valente seems to reaffirm this non-coincidence of the self in a talk given in Santiago de Compostela in 1997, “Figura de homen en dous espellos.” Here, describing his position as a Galician writer, Valente’s Narcissus is no longer reconciled in a speculative unity but framed in terms of the

linguistic marking of time and a desire for unity that is never fulfilled: “Non ten o escritor mais espello que a linguaxe. E esta espazo reflectante onde o si mesmo se ve como un outro.... Narciso non se ama a si mesmo, ama a outro que se reflexa nas augas, a imaxe temporal doutro de si cas augas alonxan para sempre” (OCII: 1535).

The problems of self-relation that I argue are central to Valente’s poetry are evident from his early work, most obviously so in “El espejo,” from *A modo de esperanza*, which can be understood as a staging of the processes of subjectification and desubjectification that are inherent in linguistic enunciation. “El espejo” turns precisely on the ironic disjunction between the linguistic enunciation of the “I” and a muted presence, represented in the speculative relationship between a voice and a face seen in a mirror that is “tan ajeno / tan caído y sin par / en este espejo” (71). The face is objectified, dehumanized in the description of its “nariz afilada entre los dientes / su cristales domesticos cansados” (71). The poetic voice turns from the presence of this lifeless face towards memory, and an imaginative regression to a childhood state, only to return to the shock of the confrontation with a reflective externality with which it cannot be reconciled: “Pero ahora me mira – mudo asombro / glacial asombro en este espejo solo – / y donde estoy – me digo – / y quien me mira/desde este rostro, mascara de nadie?”(71). Paradoxically, the imaginative regression along the path of memory intensifies the distance between the voice and the voiceless presence of the face, leading to a complete undermining of a sense of self. The impossibility of fusing the linguistically constituted self and a subjectivity that would exist before language, represented by the face, can only lead to a performance of the very distance the poetic voice wishes to overcome. The language shifters that predominate in the poem – “Hoy he visto,” “este rostro,” “ahora me mira”– mark this distance, telling us that language, not the subject, speaks, becoming a “mascara de nadie” that bears witness to

a mute subject. The voice asks “donde estoy?” a question to which we might reply, following Agamben, that the “I” here stands in non-coincidence of the living being and language, the non-place of testimony that constitutes the subject’s only dwelling place.

“El Crimen”, from the same collection, again stages the disjunction between the enunciative act of language and the living human being. The enunciative position is that of a dead man who wakes “como siempre, pero / con un cuchillo / en el pecho” (97). The voice describes the investigation of his own murder, but admits that he himself has “nada que declarar” (98). The poem again stages the paradoxes of the relationship between enunciation and silence. The dead man speaks in a language that bears witness to his silence, or better, language speaks bearing witness to the silence of an alterity inherent in every linguistic utterance. “El crimen” allows for what Agamben sees as the specific enunciative capacity of poetry, the ability “to place oneself in one’s own language in the place of those who have lost it” (161), a performance that is especially obvious in a poem which makes the dead speak. One of the many ironies in the poem is that the voice claims that his own murder “carece de testigos” (98). In this case the poem speaks, bearing witness as remnant, that which survives the possibility and impossibility of speaking. The fragility of the remnant, its survival as the mere marking of non-coincidence between voice and subject, is rendered visible in the paradoxical Homeric accusation: “No hay pruebas contra nadie. Nadie/ ha consumado mi homicidio” (98). The poem speaks, a “nadie” who speaks as witness.

Valente’s great poem of witnessing from *Poemas a Lazaro*, “Los olvidados y la noche,” turns on the struggles between inversion and separation. The poem describes temporal inversions, the eyes of the dead mother shine from a time before the poet’s birth “brillan los ojos de mi madre antes / de haberme concebido” (118), and spatial

reversibility: “¿Soy yo quien pasa o sois vosotros? / ¿quién está detenido? / ¿quién abandona a quién? / quién esta inmóvil o quién es arrastrado?” (118). But in the poem the relation with the other is undermined by temporality; the poetic voice can never choose the word that could halt the “implacable paso, / el terrible descenso” (118). In truth, the subject can never speak: “Mientras escribo sobre / la resistencia de mi propio cuerpo, / el mundo habrá pasado, / habrá cerrado el ciclo / completado el retorno / de su nada a su origen, / y yo seré antepasado pálido / de mi futuro olvido” (119). The ironic self-distanciation reaches a pitch here, as we are confronted with a performative contradiction, a voice that tells us of the impossibility of speaking. It is in this context that the poem is remnant, a “nada” that remains, which does not speak of the dead, but rather, in refusing the synthesis of self and other, and speaking of the gap between self and language, testifies to their absence “sé que no soy, / que no me pertenezco / Pasé por vuestros ojos / y creí desgarrarlos, arrastrarlos conmigo, / mas fue vuestra pupila la que hizo presa en mi” (OCI: 119). The poem is a remnant that speaks from between two silences, that of the subject who cannot speak and that of the dead who are without voice “y a un lado y otro lado / permanecemos solos, / dando voces, llamandonos, / gesticulando, mientras / la corriente se ensancha y yace / consumido el crepúsculo” (OCI: 120)

The thematics of witnessing are central to the collection *La memoria y los signos*, as confirmed by the title of the poem which opens the first section, “El testigo”:

Amanece sobre el nieve.
La noche ha sido larga.
Hay una hiriente claridad o amenazadora inocencia.

No podría decir que velo aunque este en pie,
sino que alguien que tal vez contemplara mi sueño
me impidiese cerrar los ojos
con su muda presencia.

Los que duermen están

lejos en su recinto,
y aunque gritara ahora
no podría alcanzarlos.

Me pregunto qué ha pasado esta noche,
por qué acudo a mi mesa,
con quién es el convite.

Amanece sobre la nieve.
¡Y a qué altura sobre mi frente
inmóvil
nace la claridad!

Aguardo.

Alguien puede llegar, venir de pronto,
no sé quién, conociendo
más que yo de mi vida.
(OCI: 164)

The voice speaks from a limit time, the menacing innocence of dawn after a long night. It is haunted by a mute presence, which we can connect to the dead that lie unreachable in their graves. There is a desire for a communion with the dead, though it is implied that this communion may never arrive. But it is impossible to avoid a relation to the very absence of the dead, the mute presence that “me impidiese cerrar los ojos.” There is, as in many of Valente’s poems, a sense of imminence, an unbearable tension between presence and absence that gives weight to the enunciation. This tension reflects the difficulty of the poem’s witnessing, its speaking in the place of both the silent subject before speech and of the dead that lie in unmarked graves, those whose absence is implied in words that testify to a non-knowledge at the heart of linguistic enunciation: “conociendo / más que yo de mi vida.”

In “El autor en su treinta aniversario”, from the same collection, the problems of self-relation are again explored in the context of the memory of the suffering of the victims of violence. The poem begins in the liminal space to which Valente’s work obsessively returns – “al borde de nacer o de morir” (OCI: 169). There follows a reflection on the

nature of representation: “Como el modelo no es vida / en el pincel, sino material / que aún no imita la vida, inmóvil / permanezco dentro / de mi propia visión” (OCI: 169). This is a commentary on the paradoxes of writing and representation. In the same way that a model is only such after it has been represented, so one becomes a writer only as an aftereffect of writing. What can be represented can only be represented *a posteriori*, as a function of representation, and as such what is registered in representation is an absence, structurally equivalent to the silence of the subject of testimony. In this sense the voice can refer to the model before representation as “materia / que aun no imita la vida” (OCI: 169)

The contemplation of the other, past, selves from which the poetic voice is irreparably divorced leads to a recognition of the discontinuity of selfhood, of the separation from the past: “Objeto / ciego de mi propia visión, petrificado / perfil de niño tenebroso, / el hombre que contemplo no desciende/ de su memoria sino de su olvido” (OCI: 170). The irreparable distance from a past self, a child that can only be “pretrified” in the language of the poem, is mirrored in the relation to the dead of the civil war: “Como podría pues reconocerlo / en la presencia opaca de otras vidas, / en los lentos cadáveres perdidos / bajo los puentes rotos / de otro país al que pertenecemos” (OCI: 170). “En qué respiración o en qué latido”: the voice longs for another time, another breath - what Celan in his “Meridian” speech calls a “turning of the breath” or *Atemwende* – or another heartbeat, in which “la esfera del reloj se abrirá en dos pedazos,” so as to detain the passing of time and allow for the desire to move “hacia la sombra” (OCI: 170), to recuperate that which has passed. In this limit time, “en el umbral del año,” and at the momento of inspiration, “en la terrible red del aire detenido” (OCI: 169) a cruel hope awaits: “Aguardo, / zarpa cruel de la esperanza, un día / tu bautismo sangriento” (OCI: 171). The cruelty of this hope has to do with the paradoxes of witnessing, the extent to which the subject of testimony is only such

to the extent that he does not correspond to his language. From this perspective, the poem as remnant is perhaps the ultimate form of witnessing that our culture possesses, as it implies the destruction or emptying of the self – “empuja el corazón / quiébralo, ciégalo, / hasta que nazca en él / el poderoso vacío / de lo que nunca podrás nombrar” (OCI: 79). The poem is the hollow space that remains after this self-kenosis, an “estancia desnuda” in which “el hombre no conserva / ningún vínculo cierto, personal / con su vida” (OCI: 170).

6.5 ORPHEUS AND MEDUSA

The sense of personal loss and non-identity of the self that is recorded in Valente’s poems of self-contemplation in his early collections matches a sense of loss with regard to the victims of violence, whose silence is marked in the poems. In this way Valente’s poetry carries out an operation on language in which the poem becomes remnant, a testimony that remits both to the silence of the victims and to the silence that is inherent in every act of speech. We have shown how the difficulties and paradoxes of bearing witness are played out in the aporias of self-relation within the poems of Valente’s earlier work, but there is also another major motif with which Valente attempts to come to terms with the past that is relevant to his reading of Celan, his description of a “descent” towards the darkness of memory.

In this regard we can return to the work of Maurice Blanchot, and his essay “Le regard d’Orphée,” from the collection of essays published in 1955 as *L’Espace littéraire*, which Valente had read by at least 1968 – in the entry recorded in his *Diario Anónimo* of the 6th of September, 1968 Valente quotes from Blanchot’s essay: “Quand Orphée descend vers Eurydice, l’art est la puissance par laquelle s’ouvre la nuit” (DA: 132). In the same entry he writes the following, which will later be included as part of the *Notas de un simulador*:

La visibilidad de lo invisible. La forma que lo invisible toma en la mirada es la de su perdida. Lo invisible queda así vista como tal, como en

cierto modo queda lo indecible dicho en el lenguaje. Hay algo en la palabra poetica vuelta hacia lo indecible que corresponde a la mirada de Orfeo vuelta hacia lo invisible. (DA: 132)

Valente also cites Blanchot's citation of Keat's famous letter to John Woodhouse in the same essay, commenting: "No hay determinaciones de un yo carente de identidad en el estado de disponibilidad infinita de la palabra poética. Por eso corresponde a esta la órbita de lo sobreintencional" (OCII: 132).

Valente's understanding of poetic enunciation here, and his citing of Keats, shows the common heritage from which he, Blanchot, and Agamben derive elements of their poetics.¹²⁵ Blanchot, like Agamben, believes that poetry desires that which is not given in language, and is itself a marking of that which language necessarily excludes. Agamben, in his Benjamin inflected theory of language goes further than this, arguing that the absence that is marked in poetic enunciation is better understood in terms of a chiasmatic relation between desubjectification and subjectification that is constitutive the self, and that, beyond absence, the poem can allow for an experience of the coming to be of language that founds selfhood. Agamben's reading of the modern poetic tradition, and the negative categories upon which it relies, is suggestive, and allows us to find a path between the poles of nihilism and mystification. Problematic, however, is the way in which Agamben's argumentation follows so closely that of his precursors, of whom Blanchot is an important example. It would be possible to retain most of Blanchot's work in accordance with Agamben's ideas, with the proviso that any presupposition that is not language is replaced with Agamben's "vision of language." This is the case with "Le regard d'Orphée," which treads much the same ground as Agamben's discussion of poetry in *Remnants of Auschwitz*. In this reading of the relation between Valente and Blanchot, therefore, I will

¹²⁵ Thomas Carl Wall, in his *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, Agamben*, draws out the common concerns of these three thinkers.

not constantly check Blanchot or Valente's work for elements that diverge from Agamben's reading of the poetic tradition. Such a critique is already implied given the prior discussion of Agamben's work but should not be seen as a limiting factor or a "right" answer.

Blanchot's essay explores the paradoxes of the myth of Orpheus. Orpheus is a poet because he desires the obscure point of origin, the other night within night that the veiled face of Eurydice represents. His desire is the desire of art – to approach the origin of night and, in turning away, draw it back towards the light. This is a version of the Hegelian dialectic, in which even the negativity of death can be recuperated for spirit. The Orphic legend is a refusal of the dialectic, as Orpheus sacrifices the law of art in his desire to gaze upon the face of this other night, in the process losing both Eurydice and his work. For Blanchot, the moment of turning back to gaze into the face of Eurydice is the moment of inspiration. Driven by the desire to see Eurydice when she is invisible, Orpheus desires the "l'étrangement de ce qui exclut toute intimité, non pas la faire vivre, mais avoir vivante en elle la plénitude de la mort" (228). But it is only in breaking the law of art that work can surpass itself, and "s'unir à son origine et se consacrer dans l'impossibilité" (232). The myth represents the paradox of writing, the fact that "l'on n'écrit que si l'on atteint cet instant vers lequel l'on ne peut toutefois se porter que dans l'espace ouvert par le mouvement d'écrire. Pour écrire, il faut déjà écrire" (234). Blanchot links this paradox to the automatic writing of the Surrealists. For Breton, automatic writing, which might appear the most facile of exercises, is in fact the most rigorous, as it implies a complete depersonalization in which the writer "a ne plus d'avoir l'oreille que pour ce que dit la bouche d'ombre" (qtd. in Blanchot, 186). Automatic writing, and the experience of writers such as Holderlin, Keats, Mallarmé, and Hoffmansthal, leads Blanchot to define the relation

to language of the writer in terms remarkably similar to those of Agamben: “C’est cela que nous rappelle d’abord l’écriture automatique: le langage dont elle nous assure l’approche n’est pas un pouvoir, il n’est pas pouvoir de dire. En lui, je ne puis rien et dit ‘je’ ne parle jamais” (187). Here, the “plural” writing that Blanchot imagined was the requirement of Levinas’s ethics of alterity is related to the silencing of the writer who sacrifices his self and his work in order to testify to an absence that evades recuperation in dialectic.

The moment in which Orpheus turns back to gaze at Eurydice is for Blanchot the paradoxical moment of inspiration, in which both art and poet are destroyed, but which is necessary for the creation of the work. Celan’s well known “Meridian” text, an address given on the receipt of the Georg Buchner prize in 1960, describes something very similar to Eurydice’s destructive gaze. In the address Celan describes the work of art as the result of a Medusa gaze that freezes the natural. For Celan, this gaze is the uncanny in art, and it obliges the artist to forget himself: “Art makes for distance from the I” (44). This uncanniness of art is related to a certain attitude to language, exemplified in the figure of Lucile from Buchner’s *The Death of Danton*. Lucile, unlike the other characters, who can speak fluently of art, and whose dying words eloquently express a nobility of spirit, is “somebody who hears, listens, looks and then does not know what it was about. But who hears the speaker, ‘sees him speaking,’ who perceives language as a physical shape and also...breath, that is, direction and destiny” (39). She holds, then, a relation to language that is similar to Valente’s description of poetry as the “raiz de la comunicabilidad,” what Agamben calls the “language of birds,” and what Levinas terms the Saying as opposed to the Said. Especially important for Celan is the moment in which Lucile calls out “Long Live the King” at the moment of Danton’s execution, an act of solidarity that will cost her her life. Poetry, for Celan, is like this self-destructive moment, it is a “homage

to the majesty of the absurd which bespeaks the presence of human beings” (40), which we might take as the majesty and absurdity of a humanity in which the “I” marks both the saying and the unsaying of the self.

It is this context that we can understand Valente’s concluding comments to his essay “Palabra, linde de lo oscuro: Paul Celan”:

La voz de Paul Celan ha bajado a la noche, ha descendido las infinitas escalas de la sombra, oculta o ocultada, muda o no manifiesta, y ha engendrado en ella una palabra nueva, una nueva manifestación. Terrible, laborioso nacimiento.” (OCII: 760)

These words describe a poetry that bears witness to that which cannot be brought to language; it is poetry that is “cargada aun de la sombras de que ella misma emergía, húmeda de lo oscuro, de lo que al cabo daba testimonio” (OCII: 760). The destruction of the self in this descent to night also implies a linguistic indeterminacy in which the words of poetry testify to the very occurrence of language itself, the fact that the poem, before it means, is destined for “otra mano, otra mirada, una escucha distinta, lo acojan, lo reciban, y justo en ese acto lo transformen” (OCII: 760). “Son los rios,” from *Poemas a Lazaro* describes an Orphic setting that owes much to Blanchot’s work:

No te detengas, sigue;
no vuelvas la mirada.
No podemos volvernos.
Todo lo que ha muerto
me alcanzaría ahora.

Como el agua primera
del descenso de un rio
me sigue cuanto he ido
arrancando a mi paso,
cuanto he desgajado,
cuanto ha ido muriendo.

No vuelvas la mirada;
no te detengas.
Baja
en la oscura corriente

mi cadaver de niño,
un rostro entre la sombra,
el caido silencio
de aquel amor, aquella
rota imagen del sueno.

No podemos volvernos.
Ellos siguen su curso,
seguros, con su opaca
tenacidad de muertos.

Pero tú ven conmigo;
nunca vuelvas los ojos.
Saltemos ciegamente
hacia mas y mas cauce,
hasta que el tiempo aquiete
sus pasos en la noche
y cuanto nos seguia
al cabo nos alcance.
(OCI: 129)

The poetic voice refuses to turn back to face the past which pursues it "...cuanto he ido / arrancando a mi paso, / cuanto he desgajado, / cuanto he ido muriendo." Only in death, when "el tiempo aquiete / sus pasos en la noche" (129), will the fragments of a life resolve themselves in darkness. Valente here seems to describe the process of creation, the terrible truth that the poem implies the destruction of the self, but is at the same time the discourse in which this destruction is implied. The tensions between the desire to express the self, to hold on to self-identity, and the poetic necessity to mark the destruction of the self, constitute the poem as testimony.

In *Material memoria*, the encounter with a gaze, which could be that of Eurydice, is recorded:

La repentina aparición de tu solo mirar en el umbral de la puerta que ahora abres hacia adentro de ti. Entré: no supe hasta cuál de los muchos horizontes en que hacia la oscura luz del fondo me absorbe tu mirada. Nunca había mirado tu mirar, como si solo ahora entera residieses en la órbita oscura, posesiva o total en la que giro. Si mi memoria muere, digo,

no el amor, si muere, digo, mi memoria mortal, no tu mirada, que este
largo mirar bajo conmigo al in exhausto reino de la noche. (OCI: 384)

The voice is fascinated by the gaze, forgetting self and home, and falling towards another darkness, an “oscura luz” of which the poem bears witness. The neo-platonic and mystic resonance in the coincidence of opposites is here transferred to the experience of the “mirada,” which is not just a relation to the gaze of the other, but a relation to the very capacity for vision that the presence of the other implies: “nunca había mirado tu mirar.” As in Blanchot’s essay, there is a paradoxical relationship here between memory and survival. The poem survives, as a remnant of the unspeakable, but only at the cost of the death of personal memory. A love and a gaze without end, pure communicative relation without subject position to the other, survive the death of the self.

Mandorla, the collection that is named after and preceded by the words from Celan’s poem of that name – “In der Mandel – was steht in der Mandel? Das Nichts” – describes this descent to the night in the context of an erotic relationship. The body and the female sex here take the place of the absolute alterity to which the poem moves. The first poem, “Mandorla,” presents us with a strange conflation of passivity and penetration: “Me entraste al fondo de tu noche ebrio / de claridad” (OCI: 409). Here, that which penetrates is also that which receives, a play of concave mirrors that is a characteristic of Valente’s poetry of this period.¹²⁶ The light in darkness, a metaphor traditionally associated with mystical knowledge, is here related to the Mandorla, the concave space which, like the poem, is the visible form of an absence. The transfixing gaze and the play of light in darkness are again visible in “Material memoria, III”:

Tu decías será de noche amor.

¹²⁶ The figuration of concavity is a recurrent element in Valente’s poetry, linked to his poetics of passivity and conception of creation of and from nothingness : “Forma,” from *Mandorla* is an example of this recurrent theme: “Extensión de tu cuerpo en los espejos/ hacia mis manos cóncavas de ti” (OCI:409)

century is central to his self-definition, a fact that is reflected in the fact that Valente's first poem from *A modo de esperanza* praises the ash, the fragile, destroyable human, and his poetry, like that of Celan's, can be seen as testimony to this fragility. In its form it is "El residuo que solo nos deja / lo que ha sido llama" (OCI: 252). The poem is remnant, and as such speaks of an impossibility of speaking, as Celan reminds us, the poem speaks in the place of another, and perhaps the wholly other. It is in this sense that Valente can reverse Juan Ramon's dictum that the poet is condemned to silence. On the contrary, the poet's task is to bear witness to a silence, to mark this silence in his words. This task is articulated in the powerful long poem that completes *El dios de lugar*, and which is dedicated to the *Hibakusha*, the survivors of the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Here Valente answers Adorno's challenge as to writing after Auschwitz:

Y después de Auschwitz
y después de Hiroshima, cómo no escribir.

¿No habría que escribir precisamente
después de Auschwitz o después
de Hiroshima, si ya fuéramos, dioses
de un tiempo roto, en el después
para que al fin se torne
en nunca y nadie pueda
hacer morir aún más a los muertos?...

que otros horrores, es la experiencia imposible de elaborar, asimilable únicamente como resto" (2010: 350). I would argue here that it is purely assertion to identify, or place on a scale of importance, one or other historical moment as having a definitive or authentic relation to Valente's poetry. It is important to note, however, that Valente tends to avoid an ethnocentric vision that limits human suffering to the example of Auschwitz, as evidenced in his continued references to the dropping of the atomic bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and the colonization of South America. More convincing is Jiménez Heffernan's idea that Valente's relation to the temporal *grietas* of the civil and second world wars run parallel to, or are involved with, a fundamental attitude towards language evoked in the poems point: "Pero en ambos casos, la guerra española y la guerra mundial, Valente se ampara en suturas históricas...para poder dar contorno a la traumática experiencia repetida que escande su propia temporalidad, la del donante retráctil, una experiencia que obtuviera, en sus poemas anteriores, por un lado, una sobredeterminación semiótica de procedencia místico-metafísico, luego clásico (sátira política en Roma), por otro una inflación emotiva amorfa, *plangente*, melancólica, romántica. La disistencia, insisto, de Valente, es mucho más primordial. No requería ni del destierro real ni del holocausto transferido. Le bastaba echar las cartas líricas..." (2010: 350).

(OCI: 483)

Valente's poetry is written in an aftertime, a "después" in which the weight of absence is constantly marked. This responsibility for the "ceniza," present in his earliest poems, is again articulated at the end of his career, in the powerful poem from *Fragmentos de un libro futuro*:

El humo aciago de las víctimas.

Todo se deshacía en el aire.

La historia como el viento dorado del otoño
arrastraba a su paso los gemidos, las hojas, las cenizas,
para que el llanto no tuviera fundamento.

Disolución falaz de la memoria.

Parecía

como si todo hubiera sido para siempre borrado.

Para jamás, me digo.

Para nunca.

(*Sonderaktion*, 1943)

(OCI: 545)

The poem resists the destructive movement of time, its presence, speaking for the other, surviving in relation to their absence. For never and ever, the two words, *jamás* and *nunca*, make present a negative temporal category, and mark the absence that words create, an interminable absence in which the poem survives.

CHAPTER VII: VALENTE AND THE POETRY OF THE BODY

7.1 THE SINGULARITY OF POETRY: VALENTE AND MARIA ZAMBRANO

In a previous chapter we briefly discussed Valente's linking of inscription to the body, which we read in terms of the Derridean thematics of the signature and repetition. But mention of the body and corporality open upon far wider interpretative possibilities. This is reflected in Valente's work, in both the essays in which he explores the marginalization of the body in Christian tradition and modern philosophy, and also in the pervasive presence of the corporal in his poetry, which reaches a height in his later collections, in particular *El Fulgor*, which is constituted almost entirely of fragmentary apostrophes to the *cuerpo*. It is clear that for Valente, the body constitutes one of the categories of alterity to which his work is dedicated.¹²⁸ Paradoxically, in Valente's poetry, references to the body, which has traditionally been connected with darkness and unreason, are semantically entwined with references to light, which has traditionally been connected to the mind and reason, allowing him to describe, in a fragment from *El fulgor*, a "luz corpórea" (OCI: 449). In this chapter I will explore both Valente's prose and poetry on the body and frame his corporeal discourse in terms of the thought of Maria Zambrano and Maurice Merleau Ponty,^{129 130}

¹²⁸ Arthur Terry (1992) highlights the centrality of the corporal in Valente's work, and the ways, which we will explore in this chapter, Valente attempts to overcome the traditional divisions of material and spiritual that determine how the body is thought in Western culture: "In one of the statements which accompany the poems of *El fulgor* (1984), Valente speaks of a 'dialogue with the body or within the body, in bodily matter (bodyspirit) as a totality'. Two things catch one's attention here: the insistence on the body as matter or substance and the refusal to separate body and spirit – a refusal Valente takes as central both to poetic creation itself and to the tradition of mystical writing in which he finds one of its most powerful analogues. The notion of a 'dialogue' suggests something else: the sense in which the poems that follow are not so much a meditation on the body as an attempt to break down the kind of detachment this might imply and to create a situation in which the body itself may 'speak'" (75).

¹²⁹ Claudio Rodríguez Fer gives an overview the complex personal, spiritual, and intellectual interests of Valente and Zambrano in *Valente Vital: Ginebra, Saboya, París* (142-201). Discussing these ties, Rodríguez Fer writes: "Las numerosas referencias a la historia, la literatura, la filosofía, el arte, y la espiritualidad, nos permiten señalar algunos núcleos de interés e inspiración comunes al poeta y a la filósofa. Así, por ejemplo, la tragedia de la historia reciente de España, marcada por la guerra y la dictadura, que los lleva al exilio...y desde cuyos escombros han de levantarse para vivir y crear su obra. La presencia de la tradición literaria española en figuras como Cervantes o Jorge Manrique. La

who also place the relationship between the body, light, and visibility at the centre of their concerns. I will argue that the complex questions that arise in reading Valente's engagement with the body, and which are reflected in the semantic overlapping of corporality and light, can relate to the dilemmas that I posed with regard to Valente's poetry and thought at the beginning of this work.

In a text included in the collection *Variaciones sobre el pájaro y la red*, "Los ojos deseados," Valente describes the paradoxical position of the Catholic Church with regards to the body. Given that Christianity is based on the unification of the divine and the corporeal, the epiphany in the flesh of the Lord Jesus Christ, it seems puzzling that in the religious traditions of the West "la sensualidad o la sexualidad quedan excluidas como lugar de experimentación de lo divino, o, simplemente, se perfilan como factor interferente de tal experimentación" (OCII: 386). Valente had already referred to this paradox in an earlier essay from *La piedra y el centro*, "El misterio del cuerpo cristiano," affirming that "La noticia o la nueva del Evangelio es corporal...y la escisión entre el espíritu y el cuerpo no cristiana" (OCII: 280). Valente identifies the excision of the body and the soul or spirit

heterodoxia mística encarnada por Miguel de Mlimos. El romanticismo de Holderlin o Goethe. La modernidad próxima de Rosalía de Castro. La admiración por Antonio Machado y Luis Cernuda. La amistad con Lezama Lima y Luis López Aranguren. La presencia de poetas como Gil de Biedma, Carlos Barral o Alfonso Costafreda en el panorama de la poesía del momento. La fuerza simbólica de la mitología. El magisterio de Aristóteles, de la escuela del estoicismo, del maestro Ortega y Gasset, del arabista Louis Massignon. Las diversas fuentes de que emana el símbolo de la Aurora: Nietzsche, la Biblia. Los ritos espirituales ancestrales a los que se asocia el monumento megalítico de la taula menorquina o la tumba de Il Tuffatore en Paestum. La simbología de la tradición judeocristiana: el Árbol de la Vida, el primer hombre, la Virgen, Lázaro, Job, el ángel" (2014: 200). Armando López Castro (2013), for his part, traces three phases of the relation between both writers: "La relación de María Zambrano con José Ángel Valente ha pasado por tres fases o etapas: la admiración, la complicidad y el distanciamiento. Su escritura, de naturaleza religiosa, se ofrece como una posibilidad abierta" (155).

¹³⁰ Dionisio Cañas's (1984) insightful study of the *generación del cincuenta* poets (Brines, Rodríguez, Valente) is the most sustained engagement with the Merleau Ponty's relevance to the work of Valente, and in his investigation of the *mirada* in Valente's poetry shares some of the concerns of this chapter. Cañas, however, does not focus on the theme of corporality in Valente's later poetry, arguing that, at the time of writing, Valente "...de su primera y más obvia postura crítica social, pasó por otra etapa criticopoética, y se ha instalado prácticamente en un plano idealista y de pura espiritualidad," (187) a stance that is clearly at odds with the development of my arguments here. Cañas also does not engage in depth with Merleau Ponty's later writings, especially the posthumous *Le visible et le invisible*, which is at the heart of my reading of the latter's relevance to Valente's poetry.

with “ciertas formas del pensamiento griego,” which in the later essay he will specify as the Platonic separation of the body and the soul which infiltrates Christianity through the writings of the third century theologian Origen of Alexandria.

Valente’s identification of the influence of Greek thought on the Christian world, and the consequent devaluation of the body, is also relevant to the history of modern philosophy. If Greek thought had separated the mind and body, and Christianity had adapted this division to its separation of immortal soul and mortal body, Descartes took a further step, in that in his dualistic scheme the soul or mind is completely removed from nature – the *res cogitans* can have no part of the *res extensa*. Furthermore, for Descartes, the *res cogitans* is the only true foundation of knowledge. In his quest for certainty Descartes reaches the conclusion that only the fact that one thinks is indubitable, a point from which he constructs his theory of knowledge and of the world. The opposite position, empiricism, according to which knowledge comes only through experiences that imprint themselves on the mind, does not fundamentally alter the dualistic nature of Descartes’s scheme, or its representation of the world as soulless machine. Among the Romantic thinkers, there was recognition of the difficulties in Descartes’s foundational thinking. They remained, however, beholden to the fundamental dichotomies that we have identified. Mind and matter remained oppositional categories, if capable of dialectical relation. In the philosophy of Hegel the reflexive subject, ultimate expression of the process of world spirit or mind, would realize historical progress, at the expense of those deemed of lesser cultural worth. The division between mind and matter remains, as it has been throughout the philosophical tradition, isomorphous with the divisions between being and becoming, masculine reason and feminine folly, civilization and savagery. Modern scientific approaches, in which the mind is simply a function of brain synapses and

neurons, are, as Elizabeth Grosz (1994) notes, a simple inversion of the idealistic conceptions of mind, reducing mind to matter, but failing to explain the interrelation between the two. For Grosz, who approaches the relation of mind and matter from a feminist perspective which seeks to question the traditional pairing of the feminine and the corporal, the task for contemporary thought is to overcome the mind/body dualism without reducing one of the terms to the other. In this regard she calls for an “understanding of embodied subjectivity, of psychical corporeality” that would be expressed in “metaphors and models that implicate the subject in the object, that render mastery and exteriority impossible” (23).

The attempt to overcome the mind/body dualism, and to create a new metaphoric of the body, involves, I argue, a consideration of the place of light in philosophical tradition. A fundamental article in this regard is that written in 1956 by the renowned scholar of Gnosticism, Hans Jonas, in which he discusses the traditional “Nobility of Sight” within philosophical thought. Jonas relates the ways in which, from Plato onwards, sight has always been privileged with regard to the other senses when it comes to the bases of human knowledge. Sight is supposedly less dependent on time; its synchronicity means that it allows us to escape the becoming of the pre-Socratics in order to apprehend the being of the ideal forms.¹³¹ It also allows us to contemplate things at a remove, supporting the theoretical attitude that implies the division of subject and object. Martin Jay, however, notes the ambiguities of Plato’s account of vision.¹³² Though sight is the vehicle for knowledge of truth, it is only such if it is shorn of its attachment to the earthly realm. The

¹³¹ Jonas’s account here, opposing the frozen world of vision to movement and becoming, is reminiscent of Levinas’s discussion of the synchronicity of vision and the Said.

¹³² Jay’s *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in the Twentieth Century French Thought* (1994) provides a thorough introduction to the history of sight and is the account which I follow here.

prisoners in Plato's cave only gain knowledge when they tear themselves away from the moving shadows of the world and emerge into the light of the sun through reason. Truth is achieved through inner vision as opposed to the senses, through speculation rather than observation. The inner path opens onto two main avenues, both of which can be opposed to the empirical tradition – knowledge through the light of reason, or knowledge through neo-platonic or mystical visions, both of which sacrifice sensible experience for the unity of being or of the divine.

It is notable, in this regard, that María Zambrano, in her *Poesía y filosofía*, returns to the Platonic metaphor of the cave to describe what for her is the fundamental difference between the poet and the philosopher. Zambrano claims that philosophical thought is characterized by a violent rejection of the immediacy of sense perception, an asceticism that refuses the heterogeneity of the sensible world in favour of an experience of unity of being. The philosopher is he who escapes the chains that bind him to the natural world, and to other humans, in order to find a transcendent truth in the blinding light of the sun of reason, and in this sense the philosopher's vision is "un género de mirada que ha dejado de ver las cosas" (15). The poet, on the other hand, is for Zambrano the figure who remains entranced by things, faithful to the primitive revelation of things that Aristotle defined as *thaumazein*, or wonder: "Fieles a las cosas, fieles a su primitiva admiración extática, no se decidieron jamás a desgarrarla" (17). The poet desires the truth incarnate in things, but without restrictions: "el poeta quiere una, cada una de las cosas sin restricción, sin abstracción ni renuncia alguna" (22). Whereas philosophy wants to possess its foundation, the poet accepts being as a gift that always exceeds him. In this sense, poetry implies the fundamental passivity of the poet. Whereas the philosopher decides his fate in a moment of violence that culminates in a foundational self-possession, the poet accepts "que no es

possible poseerse a sí mismo” (109). Poetry always exceeds the capacities of the poet; it is a gift of grace due to which “se mantiene el poeta vacío, en disponibilidad siempre” (108).

It is not difficult to see parallels between Zambrano’s discussion of poetry and Levinas’s description of alterity. In Levinas’s work, the self is defined by a passive suffering for the Other. The Levinasian self can never secure for itself a foundation in being or subjectivity; it is defined by a relation to an alterity that infinitely exceeds it. For Zambrano, this is precisely the position of the poet:

El poeta no quiere ser, si algo sobre él no es. Algo sobre él, que le domine, sin lucha; que le venza sin humillación, que le abraza sin aniquilarle. No puede aceptar una existencia solitaria, al borde del vacío; una existencia ganada por su sola voluntad. (94)

It is for this reason that poetry “no puede nunca quedar cerrada” (89), because it is the mediation of that which escapes all systematization, beyond being, “servidumbre a un señor que está más allá del ser” (109). For Zambrano, as for Levinas, this relation to the beyond being is a carnal one. If in Levinas’s work the Platonic good beyond being is felt in the movement of the caress, a caress that exceeds intentionality, so too Zambrano describes a poetic experience of the carnal: “El poeta vive según la carne y mas aún, dentro de ella. Pero, la penetra poco a poco; va entrando en su interior, va haciéndose dueño de sus secretos y al hacerlo transparente la espiritualiza” (62).¹³³

Though Zambrano speaks of this experience as a “conquista” of the flesh, it is more accurate, given the general tenor of her arguments, to frame her description of the body in terms of a poetic experience of singular alterity. Zambrano employs the concepts of grace, gift, or charity to describe this alterity within the corporal. The poet experiences the

¹³³ For Levinas, in words that Valente underlines in his copy of *Totalité et infini*: “La caresse consiste à ne se saisir de rien, à solliciter ce qui s'échappe sans cesse de sa forme vers un avenir jamais assez avenir à solliciter ce qui se dérobe comme s'il n'était pas encore. Elle cherche, elle fouille. Ce n'est pas une intentionnalité de dévoilement, mais de recherche : marche à l'invisible” (288).

anguish of separation that is implicit in language, but unlike the philosopher, who uses language to find the underlying truth of things and then returns to define the “número, peso, y medida” of the revealed existents, the poet seeks to return to the chaos of existence before language: “retrocede en busca del sueño primero, para dibujarlo” (97). That this chaos exists, and is operative in the world, is signalled by the charitable donation or gift of revelation itself, that which the poet recognizes can never be reduced or possessed, and which the philosopher chooses to ignore. The poet’s words, which remain subservient to the carnality of song, “no llega a la actualización del poder” (94). The poet is subservient, as the prisoner in the cave is entranced by the play of shadows, the poet is “encadenado por el canto” (94), but this subservience to the gift of song also implies the poetic experience, which is both linguistic and corporal, an interpenetration of spirit and material in words reduced to their indeterminate potential, as Valente puts it, “al punto cero, al punto de la indeterminación infinita, de la infinita libertad” (OCI: 65).¹³⁴

These interlacings between the body and light are further discussed in María Zambrano’s major statement on Valente’s work, the essay “José Ángel Valente por la luz del origen.” Here, Zambrano effects a division between the speculative light which imprisons the “sujeto del conocimiento,” allowing him to “situar las cosas sin verlas” (9), and the “luz remota” that is the “herida” of the poet. We can imagine this as a wound that marks the constitutive limits of knowledge, the relationship of the human to a light that is the medium that allows one to situate things within in the world but which is not visible to the human eye. It is in this context that we can understand the following fragment from *No amanece el cantor*: “Veo, veo. Y tú ¿qué ves? No veo. ¿De qué color? No veo. El problema no es lo que se ve, sino el ver mismo. La mirada, no el ojo. Antepupila. El no

¹³⁴ I will further discuss the relevance of the concept of potentiality for a reading of Valente’s poetry in the following chapter.

color, no el color. No ver. La transparencia” (OCI: 492). The aspiration here is for an experience, or vision, of language. To adapt Wittgenstein’s analogy, the fly wishes to contemplate the glass that traps it in the bottle.¹³⁵ In Agamben’s terms this would be an experience or vision of language as revelation, or what Valente terms the “preaparecer” of language as “indeterminación infinita.” At this moment, according to Zambrano, poetry and philosophy combine in an experience of their own limits.

It is in this context that Zambrano understands the figure of Lázaro in Valente’s poetry. Lázaro is a figure of the inbetween, existing in the undecideable fold between mortality and eternity, the point at which it is necessary to “afirmar y negar a la vez del todo: ser y realidad, patria prometida y patria irrecognoscible, vacío, amor, libertad, amor siempre” (13). The poem, in this sense, reveals the illusions of our conceptions of a reality that is divided between subject and object, but also the impossibility of escaping from this illusion through speculative thought. The poem, as an experience of the limits of knowledge, is from this perspective: “lugar donde el exilio por ello se revela. El exilio del ser de la luz, de ser luz, ya que el templo, tiempo pasado, tiempo transparente, revela siempre. El exilio, lugar del hombre en la poesía” (14).

It is significant, too, that Zambrano chooses in her essay to discuss a poem that is a homage to a painter, Luis Fernandez. Valente’s poem is the following:

Luis Fernández: Llega de otro lugar noticia de su muerte

Hoy han venido todas las palomas juntas, Luis Fernández,
como
salidas de tus luces y tus sombras.

Hoy, en noviembre de un año en que los números diríase

¹³⁵ As Jacques Ancet remarks in his reading of the poem: “Ceguera y videncia: las cosas se descanecen en la luz que las hacía visibles – los colores en el no-color. Y el ego con ellos.... Un acto que precede al ojo porque lo engendra y se manifiesta en él al mismo tiempo.... Entonces nada es visible y todo es mirada” (1995: 154-155).

conjugan sus potencias más oscuras.

Irrumpió la bandada de palomas
tiñendo de blanca
el amarillo y el verde naturales.

Tú te pusiste del lado más secreto
de lo nunca visible.

Hubo una flor, un vaso y un cuchillo.

Hay un cirio de luz incorruptible.

Había en bandas planas la visión de lo único.

La rosa calcinada en el espejo
de su propia memoria
y el implacable insomnio de las calaveras.

Una bandada de palomas inunda lo amarillo.
Nacen desde la muerte alas y luces.
Luz y sombra contiguas.

Luis Fernández,
la materia arrasada es la señal del fuego.
(OCI: 352)

The poem references both the death of the painter, and motifs – doves, rose, skulls – from various of his paintings. Temporal markers dominate the poem – the news of the painter’s death arrives “hoy,” whereas the one line descriptions of the paintings move from past simple (Hubo), to present (Hay), to past imperfect (Había). These are followed, however, by a verbless description of the “rosa calcinada”: “La rosa calcinada en el espejo / de su propia memoria / y el implacable memoria de las calaveras.” It seems at this point as if the predominance of temporal markers in the poem is in fact part of a strategy to undermine our sense of temporal lineality, a reading that is supported by the immediacy of address in the final lines: “Luis Fernandez / la materia arrasada es el señal del fuego.” Zambrano’s reading conforms to this view, in that she sees poetry as the remnant of time destroyed, that which remains as the “rosa calcinada”: “El tiempo destruido es quietud y diafanidad que

permite la aparición de lo único, tras de haber sido atrasada la material que el sueño arrastra” (16). In the colours of the painting, the “amarillo y verde naturales” Zambrano believes we can sense the “remota luz” which exists outside of time, the “...lado más secreto / de lo no visible: Luz del ser donde ningún fantasma de la luz aparece, al borde de la no-manifestación. Inolvidable luz del ángel” (18). But it is important here that the “luz remota” be understood simply as the point from which the “nacimiento de la mirada” arises. The “luz remota” is not an ontological prior state from which we have fallen, but the fundamental opening of revelation, the liminal space of the angel, the linguistic equivalent to which is language as such. The poem, in this sense, marks the attempt to remain at the point before which things are intended by consciousness, given “número, peso, y medida.”

7.2 THE INTERTWINING: MERLEAU PONTY AND THE FLESH OF THE WORLD

Zambrano’s work exists within the context of what is often termed twentieth century “continental philosophy,” which is characterized by its challenging of the dualisms of Western culture and the theories of knowledge. In a discussion of the work of two major figures of this tradition, Martin Heidegger and Merleau Ponty, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes this revolutionary aspect of their work. What both thinkers have in common is their resistance to the belief that our knowledge of reality is mediated by “ideas” that are in effect representations, existing within the mind, of the world without, a scheme that allowed Descartes to claim that “I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have within me” (26). Taylor argues that Descartes’s thought still provides the basic structure of many of our common-sense, but also philosophical and scientific conceptions of human knowledge, according to which:

Knowledge of things outside the mind/agent/organism only comes about through certain surface conditions, mental images, or conceptual schemes within the mind/agent/organism. The input is combined, computed over, or structured by the mind to construct a view of what lies

outside. (27)

For Taylor, the significance of Heidegger and Merleau Ponty's work is to challenge this basic underpinning of Western epistemology. Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein*, or human being in the world, showed that we do not approach the world in accordance with conceptual beliefs. Rather, we are immersed in the world in a way that is better described as "coping." Our ability to navigate a mountain pathway, for example, does not depend on our prior consultation of a detailed map, but on our preconceptual coping with the obstacles and entrances that such a path is made of. Our coping in the world is bound up with our incarnation in bodies that are necessarily bounded in time and space, as Taylor writes, drawing from Merleau Ponty:

The most primordial and unavoidable significances of things are, or are connected to, those involved in our bodily existence in the world: our field is shaped in terms of up and down, near and far, easily accessible and out of reach, graspable, avoidable, and so on. (46)

This pre-conceptual "coping" is the form of understanding that is ever-constant in our engagement with the world, notwithstanding our ability to occasionally "disengage," and think in universal terms.

Merleau Ponty's project aims to overthrow the dualistic notions of subject and object, mind and material, which have been central in Western philosophical and religious traditions. The culmination of this tendency is his conception of "the flesh" (*le chair*), detailed in his unfinished final work, *Le visible et le invisible*. Here, Merleau Ponty describes the strange paradoxes that arise if thought is given to the faculty of touch. His example is what happens when we touch our hands, our right hand with our left hand. In this case the left hand is *touched* by the right, but, at the same time, the left hand also *touches* the right. The left hand has the "double sensation" of touching and of being

touched. This is a strange reversibility in which the categories of subject and object reveal themselves as undecidable. Merleau Ponty argues that this reversibility also applies to sight: we perceive the world but we also form part of the world, and are therefore necessarily perceivable. The aspect of the world which is visible to us is, in fact, just a surface that implies immeasurable depths of possible visibility, depths in which our own bodies, in their aspect of things that are potentially visible, are necessarily involved. It is in this sense that Merleau Ponty can describe a “narcissisme fondamentale de toute vision” (181) in which “voyant et visible se réciproquent et qu’on ne sait plus qui voit et qui est vu” (181).

Merleau Ponty is not simply stating here that human beings can be seen by others; rather, he is making an *ontological* claim that seeks to bypass the dualistic structure of subject and object, describing a position in which the human is both subject and object, never present to itself in self-reflection or identity, and in which mind and matter are the reverse and obverse sides of the same “flesh,” which is itself not a thing but a “posibilité, latence et chair des choses” (173). For Merleau Ponty, the flesh is neither matter, nor mind, nor substance. Escaping the traditional categories of philosophy, it would be better designated with the term “element” in a usage akin to that to which the ancients applied to earth, water, air, and fire, but in this case signifying a “un chose générale, à mi chemin de l’individu spatio-temporel et de l’idée, sorte de principe incarné que importe une style d’être partout où il s’en trouve une parcelle” (182). Our bodies coexist with things in this flesh of the world. We are a “remarkable variant” of the “constitutive paradox” of all visible things.

In this way Merleau Ponty can describe the body as:

...un ensemble de couleurs et de surfaces habitées par un toucher, une vision, donc *sensible exemplaire*, qui offre à celui qui l’habite et le sent de quoi sentir tout ce qui au-dehors lui ressemble, de sorte que, pris dans le tissu des choses, il le tire tout à lui, l’incorpore, et, du même

mouvement, communique aux choses sur lesquelles il se ferme cette identité sans superposition, cette différence sans contradiction, cet écart du dedans et du dehors, qui constituent son secret. (176-177)

Nevertheless, as Merleau Ponty points out, this reversibility, or the absolute coincidence of seer and seen, toucher and touched, is never realized in fact. Either my right hand is touched, and is no longer that which touches, or it remains that which touches, but then it is not really touched. We can always experience the transition from one experience to another, but it is as if there what Merleau Ponty describes as a “hinge” between them, that remains hidden from us and which means that we always remain on one or the other side of the reciprocal relations of the body. This “hinge” or “fold” at which the visible and the invisible coincide would be point of preflexive and preobjective unity of the body, in which the relation of the visible with itself that traverses me and constitutes me as seer is effected.

Though Merleau Ponty’s arguments center on the intertwining of vision and touch, or the visible and the tangible, he also discusses the application of his ideas for an understanding of language, and more specifically, literary language. Merleau Ponty writes of Proust’s description of Swann’s appreciation of a phrase – five notes - from a sonata which for him makes present the essence of love. For Merleau Ponty, Proust’s description of Vinteuil’s sonata reveals the strange intermingling of the ideal and the sensual, the invisible and the visible, that can only be expressed in the singular forms, resistant of paraphrase, of artistic expression. The notes express the “essence of love,” but this ideality is not something that exists in a sphere that transcends them, or that could be better understood in, for example, the formal languages of mathematics or musical notation; rather it is an “idée qui n’est pas le contraire du sensible, qui en est la doublure et la profondeur” (193).

This intertwining of the ideal in the sensible is, for Merleau Ponty, the prerogative of artistic expression, whether music, painting, or literature. It is important to emphasize that peculiar structure that Merleau Ponty is trying to get at here. The invisible of which he speaks is *of* this world, inhabiting it, sustaining it, and making it visible. This is not a transcendent ideal in the Platonic sense, or the Word made flesh of symbol; the ideas of which Merleau Ponty speaks exist only within an immanent relationship to the carnal texture of words, notes, and shades:

Comme la noirceur secrète du lait, dont Valéry a parlé, n'est accessible qu'à travers sa blancheur, l'idée de la lumière ou l'idée musicale doublent par en dessous les lumières et les sons, en sont l'autre côté ou la profondeur.... Nous ne voyons pas, n'entendons pas les idées, et pas même avec l'œil de l'esprit ou avec la troisième oreille: et pourtant, elles sont là, derrière les sons ou entre eux, derrière les lumières ou entre elles, reconnaissables à leur manière toujours spéciale, toujours unique, de se retrancher derrière eux. (195)

The structure that Merleau Ponty describes can, again, allow us to plot a path between the twin difficulties of a nihilistic vision of language as essentially ungrounded, and a mystified, logocentric vision of language that would find its guarantee in transcendent being. Rather, Merleau Ponty offers a type of immanent transcendence, an ideality of the flesh, which is founded on the very singularity of the artistic artefact, its resistance to paraphrase, within which it is possible to understand Valente's poetics of origins. In this chapter I will trace some fundamental motifs in Valente's work – the play of light and darkness, the importance of sight and the gaze, and the increasing preoccupation with the body – describing the ways in which these are figured in terms of originary, limit experiences, referring to an *already* that is not that of a divine creator, but of a corporeal being-with that precedes reflection.

7.3 CORPORALITY IN THE EARLY COLLECTIONS

One of the extraordinary aspects of Valente's work is that many of the themes that will

be developed over his poetic career are prefigured in the first poem of his first collection, “Serán Ceniza.” The twin motifs of corporality and light are no exception. The poem reads:

Cruzo un desierto y su secreta
Desolación sin nombre.
El corazón
tiene la sequedad de la piedra
y los estallidos nocturnos
de su materia o de su nada.

Hay una luz remota, sin embargo,
y sé que no estoy solo;
aunque después de tanto y tanto no haya
ni un solo pensamiento
capaz contra la muerte,
no estoy solo.

Toco esta mano al fin que comparte mi vida
y en ella me confirmo
y tiento cuanto amo,
lo levanto hacia el cielo
y aunque sea ceniza lo proclamo: ceniza.
Aunque sea ceniza cuanto tengo hasta ahora,
Cuanto se me ha tendido a modo de esperanza.
(OCI: 69)

“Serán ceniza,” a reworking of Quevedo’s “Amor constante despues de la muerte,” is, like Quevedo’s poem, a defense of the flesh, of the “ceniza amante” that resists the division of body and soul. The remote light that constitutes hope in the poem allows for a relation to an alterity that might somehow survive the absolute separation of death. Though the certainty of death may exceed thought – “no haya / ni un solo pensamiento / capaz contra la muerte” – there can be a relation with a “luz remota” that exceeds human intentionality but affects the voice in the depth of its flesh, its “ceniza” – “no estoy solo.” In the context of the arguments of this thesis, we can understand this light as the medium through which things can be understood but which itself cannot be grasped. It is significant that in “Destrucción del solitario,” from the same collection, this limit experience of the medium of understanding is connected with incapacity of thought or expression. The poem

describes the confrontation between the gaze and the body, but the standard relationship between the masterful seer and the manipulable material is subverted, with the material becoming “una materia resistente a mis manos, / que no podía vencer” (OCI: 77). The material that the poem describes is the very “material” of language, which is nothing but the ungraspable existence of language itself. Similar to what Benjamin describes as the poetic vision of the idea of language, the poetic voice can bring this body of language before its gaze, but cannot express it in human language: “Un cuerpo ante mis ojos: / le di un nombre, / lo llamé hasta mis labios. / No lo pude decir” (OCI: 77).

Many key poems of Valente’s second collection, *Poemas a Lázaro*, also deal with the body, refusing the Christian privileging of the soul at the expense of carnality. In the first section, which is composed almost entirely of apostrophes to an absent or unreachable God, the poetic voice pleads “...júzgame ahora, / sobre el oscuro cuerpo / del amor, del delito” (111). In “El alma,” which directly follows the poem just cited, a questioning voice asks:

¿Dónde apoyar la sed
si el labio no da cauce?
¿Dónde la luz
que el ojo ya no sabe?
¿Y dónde el alma al fin
sin forma errante,
en qué cámara ciega,
anónima en qué aire?

No, tú no existirás
en la espera terrible,
sin rama en que posarte,
hasta que el barro sople sobre ti
y en nueva luz te alce
a tu reino completo,
para hacerte visible a los ojos del Padre.
(OCI: 111)

Though written in an explicitly Christian tonality that Valente will later attenuate, these

poems prefigure his career-long preoccupation with the corporal. Listing oppositions based on the ideal and the real – sed/labio, luz/ojo – that cannot exist independently, Valente seeks to show the folly of the structuring divisions of body and soul. Just as thirst or light cannot exist without lips or eyes, so the soul cannot exist without the “barro” of the human body.¹³⁶

In *La memoria y los signos* Valente’s preoccupation with the body is again evident. “Razón de estar” is an ironic reasoning of the unreasonable, our corporal limitation in time and space:

Terrible estar aquí contemplando este cuerpo.
Imposible ignorar de qué lado quedarse.
Abandonar el ciego lugar de la batalla
sería inútilmente perderla para siempre.

Atado estoy, atado, maniatado.
Sólo esta sombra tengo veraz, abrasadora,
estas manos que habito y estos ojos que invade
la vida como un río de impura certidumbre.

Estoy en este aire que resiste mi peso,
mi gravedad, mi dura memoria del futuro.

Cuerpo que he contemplado. Sus límites. La noche.

Cuanto digo no puede alzarse hacia otro cielo.
(OCI: 183-184)

This sense of inescapable embodiment is reiterated in “No mirar,” from the same collection:

¹³⁶ For Jiménez Heffernan (1998), his reading informed by both Donne and Derrida, the poem refers to the fact that the soul can only be referred to metonymically, as a non-presence, and thus is a product of the material world which it transcends. Here, unity would refer to the inherence in a material and finite inscription of an irreducible capacity to create tropes that refer to the alterity of that which is not: “La palabra es alma-pájaro que genera escritura en su batir de alas.... No hay trascendencia en ese batir de alas: estamos siempre en la palabra, y la palabra es materia. Y la poesía es estar, estar en esa materia: entonar cantos y hacer cántaros.... Cuando se pierde la conciencia de que lo trascendental es un residuo figurativo de la palabra, cuando lo trascendental, incluido su mayor escándalo retórico que es el alma, se literaliza, esto es, se desviste de su sentido figurado, su finitud, su contingencia, entonces se produce una inflación ideológica que Valente repudia de manera enfática” (361).

Escribo lo que veo,
aunque podría soñarlo
si no tuviera ojos para ver
y un reino de ceniza al alcance del viento,
si no estuviese en una jaula
aprisionado por mis ojos,
si mi reino no fuera de este mundo,
si no me apalearan
y me dieran también aceite y pan
para tapar los agujeros hondos de la muerte
con dolor compartido.

Si no fuera por eso y no estuviese
al pie de la escalera todavía,
con la ropa pequeña,
llorando por mi madre
ausente y otras cosas.

Si mi cuerpo insepulto no tuviese
tan triste la mirada,
roto el pernil,
encenagado el llanto.

Si estuviéramos solos.

Si la noche
jamás retrocediese
y el hilo, en fin, de la esperanza roto
nadie pudiera hilarlo.
Si otro niño reciente no llamara
a mi puerta de ahora
con aquellas palabras.

Si mi reino no fuera de este mundo,
si no tuviese ojos
para ver, si no fuese
no mirar imposible[...]
(OCI: 172)

The poem connects embodiment with social conscience. The poetic voice places corporeal embodiment, the impossibility of not seeing, above the powers of the imagination. Equally, however, what seems like a simple defence of realism is undermined by the construction of confusing enunciative structures, in which the adult voice of the present overlaps with its own, past, voice as a child – “Si no fuera por eso y no estuviese / al pie de la escalera

todavía / con la ropa pequeña, / llorando por mi madre / ausente y otras cosas” – and also by the description of futures impossible to foretell – “y el hilo, en fin, de la esperanza roto / nadie pudiera hilarlo.” The poem turns on the tension between the limits of the corporeal and the capacity of singular art-works to embody the ideals of hope, but also to create a shared space in which pain becomes “dolor compartido.”

La memoria y los signos is significant in the development of Valente’s discourse on the body, as it is here that Valente takes up the erotic themes that are a central part of his work in an extended manner. At the end of a series of extraordinary poems, section IV of the collection, we find “Sé tú mi límite”:

Tu cuerpo puede
llenar mi vida,
como puede tu risa
volar el muro opaco
de la tristeza.
Una sola palabra tuya quiebra
la ciega soledad en mil pedazos.

Si tú acercas tu boca inagotable
hasta la mía bebo
sin cesar la raíz de mi propia existencia.

Pero tú ignoras cuánto
la cercanía de tu cuerpo
me hace vivir o cuánto
su distancia me aleja de mí mismo,
me reduce a la sombra.

Tú estás, ligera y encendida,
como una antorcha ardiente
en la mitad del mundo.

No te alejes jamás.

Los hondos movimientos
de tu naturaleza son
mi sola ley.

Retenme.

Sé tú mi límite.
Y yo la imagen
de mí, feliz, que tú me has dado.

(OCI: 185-186)

The poem describes a type of reversibility, in which the self is constituted in the encounter with the other, which is the hallmark of Valente's erotic poetry from this period. Truth, which in the Platonic tradition is arrived at through escape from the corporal, is here found in the carnal experience of the other, the "hondos movimientos / de tu naturaleza." Solitude, which for the Descartes was the condition of truth, here only leads to shadow, whereas the erotic relation leads to blinding light of truth, the transcendence of the Platonic sun becomes the "antorcha ardiente / en la mitad del mundo" of the corporeal. It is in this context that we can read the stunning final lines from "Esta imagen de ti," a poem from the same section of *La memoria y los signos*: "Memoria de tu voz y de tu cuerpo / mi juventud y mis palabras sean / y esta imagen de ti me sobreviva" (183). The truth of the self is found in the memory of corporeal presence of another, the voice and the body of the beloved.

The next series of important erotic poems in Valente's work are to be found in section II of *Interior con figuras*, written between 1973 and 1976. The first poem from this section, "La noche," again reminds us of the importance of erotic relation in Valente's work:

Déjame ahora
que, igual que tú con la palabra *tú*
que así prolongas
para que sea el nombre que has querido darme,
acaricie tu largo cuerpo duro,
el brillo de tu piel que un vaho
mortal humedecía.

Y déjame aún beber
la sed inagotable de la noche.

Cuánta sed engendramos
para que nunca nadie de aquella sed dijera:
fue extinguida.

Y ahora te digo déjame aún beber
En la manida misma de tu sed
tu sed.

Retenme, cierva,
poder lunar,
 en la raíz del agua.
(OCI: 353)

Similar to the Eckartian and San Juanian desire to possess the very gaze of the other, here the poetic voice cries out to experience the desire of the other, to drink their very thirst, the “manida misma de tu sed” referring obliquely to San Juan’s “Fonte que mana y corre.” In terms of Merleau Ponty’s philosophy, we could describe what is expressed here as a desire to experience the fold, the point at which the “I” and the other meet in chiasmic relation, the mystical “raíz del agua” that drives the erotic movement of the poem. It is for this reason that in the same section desire can be described as a “punto inmóvil” around which the lovers turn. The “luz remota” that informed Valente’s first poem is here transformed into a “luz inmóvil,” the unknowable center point between two bodies that are chiasmatically entwined around the fold of the flesh.

Interior con figuras marks a turning point in Valente’s poetry, which becomes from now on more abstract, less referential (though the collections referring to the death of his son, and the elements of *Fragmentos de un libro futuro* that concern the poets own mortality are exceptions to this), and almost entirely lacking in the satirical vein that characterized earlier collections. This “adelgazamiento” of the poetry coincides with an increased thematization of light and the body, which is especially evident in *Material memoria* (1977-1978), *Mandorla* (1982), and *El fulgor* (1984). It is to these collections that I now turn.

7.4 MATERIAL MEMORIA, MANDORLA, EL FULGOR

Valente attaches the following quote from Lezama Lima as an introductory epigraph to *Material memoria*: “La luz es el primer animal visible de lo invisible.” It is clear that we are entering a territory in which the thought of Merleau Ponty, which is developed around

the themes of light, visibility, and invisibility, is relevant. This “animality” or corporality of the light is, indeed, prefigured in poems from *Interior con figuras*. In “Días de septiembre en Sinera, 1976” Valente writes “Tiende su luminoso cuerpo el aire / y en su declive roza / el sol los incendiados cuerpos, / viejo mastín celeste, / con su luz más secreta” (369). In “Canción de otoño” we find “Fino animal de sombra/ que unifica la noche, / extiende / tu cuerpo transparente sobre el aire / para que el sacrificio sea consumado” (371). In both cases what is immaterial – the night, the air – is personified in terms of animal corporality. What is expressed here is the desire that the immaterial become material, or what in the linguistic and theological context that Valente often refers to, the Word becomes flesh.

As already mentioned, this desire places Valente in an invidious position: either he believes that this is really possible, in which case he can be easily dismissed as a mystified Romantic. On the other hand, to posit language as a purely rhetorical exercise that fails ultimately to provide truths as to the nature of reality opens the door to a nihilistic groundlessness that the whole tenor of his work seems to want to avoid. Merleau Ponty’s theorization of the flesh as the common space in which the endlessly multiplying folds that constitute our world and subjectivity seem, like the linguistic theories of Benjamin and Agamben that we have already discussed, to allow a path out of the dilemma which we have posed. In the exploration of corporality of *Mandorla*, and *El Fulgor*, we can see that the path that Valente maps out in his poetry with regard to the writing of the body is in many ways similar to that inscribed in the work of Merleau Ponty.

The concern with limit experiences, the sacrality of the corporeal and the erotic, and the intersection of light and darkness are central aspects of the collection from 1982, *Mandorla*. The Mandorla refers to the space of intersection between two circles, which in

the Christian tradition was the space in which images of Christ were placed, reflecting the interpenetration of the divine and the flesh, but which Valente frames in terms of erotic experience. In Merleau Ponty's terms we might imagine the Mandorla as the ungraspable point of the fold, at which the reversibility of the visible and the invisible takes place. The dawn is the privileged temporal locus for these liminal experiences:

EL AMANECER es tu cuerpo y todo
lo demás todavía pertenece a la sombra.

Tus lentas oleadas fuerzan
la delgada membrana
del despertar.

Anuncias qué: no el día,
sino la quieta
duración del latido
en la sombra matriz.

Te anuncias,
proseguida y continua como
la duración.

Durar, como la noche dura,
como la noche es sólo sumergido cuerpo
de tu visible luz.
(OCI: 416)

Again the poem explores the paradoxical entwining of the body and light. The body is the dawn, opposed to night, but at the same time, announces not the day, but the “quieta / duración del latido / en la sombra matriz.” The body, like the Levinisian face, signifies, but only the zero point or opening of pre-subjective addressivity, it communicates nothing more than the opening towards a world.

The following poem in the collection, “Albada,” returns to this liminal temporality:

Cuando feraz tu cuerpo se deshace
en líquidas sustancias,

cuando al amanecer a tu deriva encuentro
fragmentos de mí mismo naufragados

y a tientas vuelvo a entrar en tus entrañas,
en la oscura raíz del sueño siento
con qué puro poder puedes llamarme.
(OCI: 416)

Here, a fragmented subjectivity is constituted only as a result of a shattering erotic experience. The desire to found the self in the other is fundamental but at the same time is ultimately impossible; the self is never absolutely grasped, and there is always an outside – the other, the “oscura raíz,” – upon which the illusion of an absolutely transparent selfhood will break. This constitution and deconstitution of the self in the other is powerfully evoked in “Graal,” which follows “Albada”:

Respiración oscura de la vulva.
En su latir latía el pez del légamo
y yo latía en ti.
Me respiraste
en tu vacío lleno
y yo latía en ti y en ti latían
la vulva, el verbo, el vértigo y el centro.
(OCI: 417)

Here, the breath, the respiration traditionally associated with the immaterial soul, is confounded with the body and the female sex. Breath becomes heartbeat, and the “I” palpates in the other, “yo latía en ti.” The extraordinary final line the rhythmic repetition of words imitates the beating of the heart, describing how the “I” finds its center in the other but only in abandoning itself to a process of desubjectivisation.

In the other poem from this collection that describes the dawn we read:

La primera caída de la nieve
y el silencio tenaz de la naturaleza
en el amanecer.
Me esfuerzo en descifrar un pájaro,
¿No acudirá en definitiva el día
mudo en el antedía

de tanta claridad?

Late en mi mano un pájaro,
la longitud entera de su vuelo
en el primera silencio de la nieve.

¿Quién eres tú?
¿Qué despierta contigo
en este despertar?
(OCI: 421)

The poem again turns towards dawn and to the blinding light of the “antedía” that exists before the light in which we place the objects of the everyday. This before-time is the time of poetry, which seeks to maintain the potential of language, the silence intake of breath before speech, in the words of the poem: “Late en mi mano un pájaro/ la longitud entera de su vuelo/ en el primera silencio de la nieve.” But this relationship with language implies a relationship to an unknowable alterity: “¿Quién eres tú? / ¿Qué despierta contigo / en este despertar?” The edge of language can be addressed, invoked, but not spoken.

It is instructive to read these dawn poems in relation to the prose poems that form part of the third section of *Mandorla*, entitled “Poema.” A key fragment here is that dedicated to José Lezama Lima, the “maestro cantor”:

Maestro, usted dijo que en el orbe de lo poético las palabras quedan retenidas por una repentina aprehensión, destruidas, es decir, sumergidas en un amanecer en el que ellas mismas no se reconocen. Hay, en efecto, una red que sobrevuela el pájaro imposible, pero la sombra de éste queda, al fin, húmeda y palpitante, pez-pájaro, apresada en la red. Y no se reconoce la palabra. Palabra que habitó entre nosotros. Palabra de tal naturaleza que, más que alojar el sentido, aloja la totalidad del despertar.

Momentos privilegiados en los que sobre la escritura descende en verdad la palabra y se hace cuerpo, materia de la encarnación. Incandescente torbellino inmóvil en la velocidad del centro y centro mismo de la quietud.
(OCI: 424)

These fragments describe a poetics in which the light of dawn functions as a “luz remota.”

Again, this is not an ideal or transcendent light, but the immanent alterity of light as medium which both destroys and retains the poetic word. What Valente is describing here is an experience of language that on other occasions he describes as a linguistic “preaparecer,” a term derived from the work of Ernst Bloch and Susan K. Langer. Like the medium of light that allows for sight but cannot be seen, the medium of language can be spoken of but cannot be said. The poem is a form of language that turns towards this shadow, a “pez-pájaro” that in its reclusion from purely communicative language, gives of itself to contemplation in the chiasmatic crossing over of corporality and sense. It is in the very singularity of the poem, the foregrounding of the sensual aspects of language that makes it resistant to paraphrase, that allows for the inherence within it of a strange ideality, or perhaps more accurately, alterity. It is in this sense that we can understand Valente’s theological language when he describes the poetic word as “material de la encarnación.” The poetic word denies the duality of body and soul in its resistance to paraphrase, the immanent transcendence of its corporal singularity.

El fulgor, from 1984, constitutes Valente’s most concentrated engagement with thematics of corporality and the body. Almost all of the thirty-six fragments that make up this short collection contain the word “cuerpo,” and of those that do not, semantic elements that imply corporality – órganos, sangre, corazón, branquias, entrañas – predominate. Notable also is the recurrence of apostrophes to the body, in which the body is addressed as a “tú.”¹³⁷ Amongst the presence of so many bodies it is significant that absence and empty spaces are also a central aspect of the collection. In this regard it seems to continue a thematics of absence that is suggested in the final poem of *Mandorla*, “Muerte y

¹³⁷ Jacques Ancet (1996), commenting on *El fulgor*, writes : “Cuerpo doble y a la vez único, donde el yo sólo se descubre en el tú.... El yo no es otro, está en el otro. Y lo que aquí habla es el despertar del cuerpo – del yo – en el cuerpo del otro. Cuerpo que, metafóricamente, es el del lenguaje” (19).

resurrección”:

No estabas tú, estaban tus despojos.

Luego y después de tanto
morir no estaba el cuerpo
de la muerte.

Morir
no tiene cuerpo.

Estaba
traslúcido el lugar
donde el cuerpo estuvo.

La piedra había sido removida.

No estabas tú, tu cuerpo, estaba
sobrevivida al fin la transparencia.
(OCI: 437)

The poem returns to the motifs of Lazarus and the risen Christ. If Lazarus in previous poems often symbolized the remnant, a figure of survival after death that was connected to the duty to remember the victims of war, in this case there is a far more ambivalent relation to the corporeal. We are told that death is something incorporeal, that what remains after death is translucence and transparency. In the context of a relation to poetic language, we might recognize here something of the conflicting desires in Valente’s poetry for a language that would be pure transparency, and a language that relates to the body and the viscous materiality of the “fondo,” which is often related to the erotic. The presence of the poem, however, implies that the “cuerpo” remains after the desire for the pure word. The ambiguity of the final lines suggesting that it “transparency” *is survived* in a “cuerpo” that survives as poem. Similarly, the final lines of the first poem of *El fulgor* points to a mutual absence: “No estoy. No estás. / No estamos. No estuvimos nunca / aquí donde pasar / del otro lado de la muerte / tan leve parecía” (443). These poems seem to refer to the irony of poetic absence, the fact that the written words of the poem imply the absence of enunciator, but also, in the specificity of their “flesh” refer to a relation to a radical

linguistic indeterminacy

The second fragment of *El fulgor*, which includes the epigraph “Memoria de K.”¹³⁸ seems to confirm this reading:

Olvidar.
 Olvidarlo todo.
 Abrir
al día las ventanas.
 Vaciar
la habitación en dónde,
húmedo, no visible, estuvo
el cuerpo.
 El viento
la atraviesa.
 Se ve sólo el vacío.
Buscar en todos
los rincones.
 No poder encontrarse.
(OCI: 444)

Here, as opposed to the tendency that we have identified in Valente’s work to emphasize embodiment, there is a process of kenosis or self emptying. The following fragment III shares this motif of excavation of the self: “El cuerpo / caído sobre sí / desarbolaba el aire/ como una torre socavada / por armadillos, topos, animales/ del tiempo, / nadie” (444-445). Fragment X develops these themes, with the addition of semantic elements – the voice, the dawn, the empty room – that re-occur in Valente’s production:

Extensión del vacío
en las estancias del amanecer.

No puedo incorporarme, cuerpo,
en ti.
 La voz
desciende muda con los ríos
hacia el costado oscuro de la ausencia.

¹³⁸ The “K” here refers to Kafka, and is an almost direct quotation from the diaries: “Forget everything. Open the windows. Clear the room. The wind blows through it. You see only its emptiness, you search in every corner and don’t find yourself” (155).

(OCII: 447)

In fragment XV, the body is again connected with empty spaces:

Cuerpo, lo oculto,
el encubierto, fondo
de la germinación,
la luz,
delgados hilos
líquidos,
medulas,
estambres con que el cuerpo
alrededor de sí sostiene
el aire, bóveda,
pájaro tenue, terminal, tejido
de luz corpórea al cabo
el despertar.
(OCI: 449)

It is as if, to reach the zero-point, a process of self kenosis is necessary. Rather than the ascetic process whereby ascension towards the divine is achieved through a mortification of the flesh, here, a descent towards the deepest entrails of the body leads to the blinding light of revelation:

XIX
Para la longitud de las caricias
de las lentas palabras que aún no pude
decir, para el descenso
moroso a las riberas, cuerpo,
de ti, adonde
florece el despertar, anémona,
hoja extendida en el reverso
de su misma luz,
cumplido
cómplice de tu noche, cuerpo,
señor oscuro
de tu tan cegadora claridad.
(OCI: 451)¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Referring to this spiritualization of the material, Cuesta Abad (1995) writes: "Si la espiritualización de la sensualidad material ha sido siempre un anhelo del lenguaje poético que debe afrontar la tensión de lo contradictorio, el *espiritualismo corporal* de Valente se presenta como una traslación desintegradora de la unidad del Yo poético a la interioridad performativa de la material" (68).

The poetic desire is that words remain in the impossible place at the coming of language. In terms of the metaphors of light and darkness that govern *El fulgor*, the poetic desire is to remain at the moment of dawn, before the coming of the day:

XX

Amanecer.

La rama tiende
su delgado perfil
a las ventanas cuerpo, de tus ojos.

Pájaros. Párpados.

Se posa
apenas la pupila
en la esbozada luz.

Adviene, advienes,
cuerpo, el día.

Podría el día detenerse
en la desnuda rama,
ser sólo el despertar.
(OCI: 451)

The poem is constituted of a series of reversals – the things of the world have agency, the branch offers its shape to the eyes, the pupils, which are become birdlike, alight on the branch – mirroring the constant oscillation of reversibility. The poetic voice desires to grasp the ungraspable, to hold in unity the fold in the flesh between seer and seen, but the poem reminds us that it we always speak too late, that to say the word dawn is already to exist in the light of day. The impossibility of this task is expressed in the language of incapacity and muteness that is central to many of the fragments in the collection:

XXV

Entrar,
hacerse hueco
en la concavidad,
ahuercarse en lo cóncavo.

No puedo
ir más allá, dijiste, y la frontera
retrocedió y el límite
quebrose aún donde las aguas
fluían más secretas

bajo el arco radiante de la noche

XXVI

Con las manos se forman las palabras,
con las manos y en su concavidad
se forman corporales las palabras
que no podíamos decir.
(OCI: 453)

The attempt to return to a pre-reflexive experience of language and world implies a process of self-emptying in which intentionality is denied. In such a state words are “destroyed.” That is, the poet attempts to relate to language simply as medium, in the same way as the mystic attempts not to see things, but to see the light through which the things in the world are visible, the *extasis blanche* of which Michel de Certeau has written.¹⁴⁰ Valente’s poetry is the aftereffect of such an experience, and the empty concave spaces he describes reflect the transparency of a language that is, at the same time, at the deepest heart of the corporal. These are limit experiences described in a language that has many similarities with the mystic traditions that Valente draws from, but also the tradition of modern poetry which is defined by the estrangement of subjective positioning.

The Irish philosopher Richard Kearney develops these connections in an essay on what he describes as the “Sacramentality of the Flesh” in Merleau Ponty’s writings. According to Kearney, Merleau Ponty’s work implies, in common with many mystical procedures, and also with the Husserlian *epoché*, the suspension of opinion and intentionality so as to better appreciate the “holy *thisness* and *thereness* of our flesh and blood existence” (162). In this reading, Merleau Ponty’s thought, in attempting to bypass the traditional philosophical dualisms of mind and body, recuperates the religious language of the Communion and the Eucharist, if from an agnostic perspective. What results is a

¹⁴⁰ See de Certeau’s *La Faiblesse de Croire* (315-318).

“recovery of the divine within the flesh, a kenotic emptying out of transcendence into the heart of the world’s body” (155), in which the divine becomes “a God beneath us rather than a God beyond us” (155). While Kearney’s essay obviously remits to the theological groundings of Western thought on symbols, it is important to remember that he rightly identifies Merleau Ponty’s mingling of the ideal and the sensual in the aesthetic is a thoroughly immanent process, in which the ideal never transcends the material in which it inheres. In this sense we should understand the self-emptying of God, similar to the Lurianic theology described in an earlier chapter, as a complete negation of the foundational Being, which, nevertheless, allows for an inherence of an alterity within the depths of the materiality of the artwork. The practices of self-negation that Valente recommends, and his search for a paradoxical light in the center of what has traditionally been conceived as darkness, the body, can also be understood in this context. It is in this sense that we can read the fragment “Ícaro,” from *Mandorla*: “Caer fue solo / la ascención al fondo” (OCI: 422), and the final fragment from *El Fulgor*, in which the motifs of light, darkness, the corporal, and the concave, cast, for a moment, their dark light in our imagination:

XXXVI
Y todo lo que existe en esta hora
de absoluto fulgor
se abrasa, arde
contigo, cuerpo,
en la incendiada boca de la noche.
(OCI: 458)

CHAPTER VIII: VALENTE AND THE POTENTIAL OF THE MATERIAL

8.1 MUSIC AND ROMANTIC IMMANENCE

In his 1812-13 *Lectures on Belles Lettres*, Samuel Coleridge, paraphrasing A.W. Schlegel, makes the distinction between mechanical and organic forms:

The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material – as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form on the other hand is innate, it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward Form. Such is the Life, such is the form. Nature, the prime genial artist, inexhaustible in diverse powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms. (1972: 495)

This is a particularly clear adumbration of Coleridge's organicism, his conception of creative process in poetry as analogous to that of the organic development of seed to plant. This organicism is a reaction to the mechanism of the eighteenth century, which Coleridge related to the lesser faculty of the fancy, and to the writings of secondary authors who imitate rather than create.¹⁴¹ As is well known, Coleridge borrows heavily from the work of Friedrich Schelling, who in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* attempted to overcome the duality of mind and nature through the positing of a productive will that expressed itself both in unconscious nature and in conscious human subjectivity.¹⁴² The highest principle of the system is the productivity of the will, that which is in itself unlimited, but whose products are the limited objects of the natural world. It is impossible

¹⁴¹ M.H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) is a seminal study of romantic organicism. His analysis of Coleridge in this regard (167-176) is especially pertinent.

¹⁴² The literature on Coleridge's borrowings from German philosophy is enormous. For a succinct discussion of these themes that highlights the influence of Schelling's philosophy in Coleridge's theory of the imagination see Bode (2008: 588-619).

for the divided I of consciousness to reflexively grasp its own origin as a unity of unconscious and conscious creativity; the ultimate unity of this productive will could only be rediscovered in artistic creativity, in which the unconscious and conscious aspects of the absolute I combine. From this perspective the forms of the world became a secret language, the “original, as yet unconscious, poetry of the spirit” (12) that is continuous with the conscious creativity of the human being, and manifest in the work of art. Thus the natural world, which had been, under Cartesian philosophy, and later Newtonian physics, reduced to material extension, regained its intrinsic meaningfulness, its objects becoming the unconscious expression of a creativity that finds its highest expression in human art works.

It is significant, in this regard, the place that music finds in Schelling’s philosophy. In his *Philosophy of Art*, Schelling defines art simply as the “emanation of the absolute” (17) in which the infinite is taken up into the finite, or the finite is formed into the infinite. In music, the particular informing of unity into multiplicity is rhythm. Rhythm is the “periodic subdivision of homogeneity whereby the uniformity of the latter is combined with variety, and this unity with multiplicity” (110). This transformation of the accidents of sequence into the necessity of rhythm corresponds to, or more accurately, *is* “the primal rhythm of nature and the universe itself, which by means of this art breaks through into the world of representation” (17). Verbal art, whether lyric, epic, or dramatic, is also defined by quantitative rhythm, the existence of which separates it from sequential, non-poetic language. For Schelling, these are arts which, like music, subjugate temporality within themselves in their total structures as organic wholes: “A *poetic work* in the larger sense is a *whole* possessive of its own internal time and momentum, and thereby separated from the larger whole of language and completely self-enclosed” (206). Of all the poetic arts, lyric

is the closest to music, both in the variety of rhythms it employs, its tendency towards freedom, but also because, like music, in Schelling's understanding, in lyric "no actual concrete form expresses itself, but rather only an inner disposition, no object, but rather a mood" (210).¹⁴³

Octavio Paz, in his study of romantic and post-romantic poetry, *Los hijos del limo*, discusses some of the roots of Schelling's thought. Paz argues that the analogic worldview, the conception of the world as shadow or reflection of a divine reality, which had been central to medieval and renaissance thought, and exemplified poetically in the work of Dante, returns, after the predominance of neo-classical poetic systems, to the heart of Romantic poetics. It had survived as a "secret religion" in the beliefs of marginal occult groups such as the Kabbalists, Gnostics, and Alchemists, many of these with a connection to libertarian and revolutionary tendencies, which formed an important part of the Romantic moment. Paz highlights the centrality for these conceptions of world, and the poetics that are inspired by them, of rhythm:

En el caso del romanticismo la revolución métrica consistió en la resurrección de los ritmos tradicionales de Alemania e Inglaterra. La visión romántica del universo y del hombre: la analogía, se apoya en una prosodia. Fue una visión más sentida que pensada y más *oída* que sentida. La analogía concibe el mundo como ritmo: todo se corresponde porque todo ritma y rima. La analogía no sólo es una sintaxis cósmica: también es una prosodia. El mundo es un poema; a su vez, el poema es un mundo de ritmos y símbolos. Correspondencia y analogía no son sino

¹⁴³ The importance of Schelling's philosophy of art, and the relations that he describes within it of music and lyric poetry, relations that I necessarily simplify given the difficulty of the text, for the subsequent theorizations of poetry and music in the nineteenth century are difficult to underestimate. Though Arthur Schopenhauer criticized identity philosophy, his conception of music as expressive of the will is certainly derivative of Schelling's work. The influence of both Schelling and Schopenhauer is evident in Nietzsche's youthful discussion of tragedy, and the importance therein of the lyric poet's capacity to hear, to tune in, so to speak, to a fundamental emotional tonality or *stimmung* is redolent of Schelling's description of lyric poetry as expressing nothing but an inner disposition. Similarly, Wagner's ambition to stage the total work of art is at least indirectly influenced by Schelling's thought. For an insightful discussion of the relevance of *stimmung* for the theorization of modern poetry see Cuesta Abad (2010a). Music, as we will see, is also central to Valente's conception of poetry. *José Ángel Valente. Memoria sonora* (2003), collects valuable essays in this regard.

nombres del ritmo universal. (70)

According to the Mexican poet, the English and German Romantics translated this conception of a rhythmic, analogical world to their poems, adapting their works to the rhythm of the spoken word and native poetic traditions. In the romance languages this change in prosody is expressed as a rebellion against strict syllabic versification.

This tendency, for Paz, explains the anarchic tendencies within romance, especially French, prosody in the second of the nineteenth century:

Hugo deshace y rehace el alejandrino; Baudelaire introduce la reflexión, la duda, el prosaísmo, la ironía – la cesura mental tendiente, ya que no romper el metro regular, a provocar la irregularidad, la excepción – Rimbaud ensaya la poesía popular, la canción, el verso libre. (72)

The revolt against the chains of neo-classical versification coincides with the return of the analogical worldview. Paz argues, however, that the beliefs that informed the analogical poetry of Dante are different from those that inform the work of Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Dante founds his cosmology on the transcendent power of divine love. In Baudelaire, to quote the famous lines from Yeats, “the center does not hold.” The world may be a conjunction of metaphors, but these are in constant movement and there is no ultimate guarantor of meaning: “la pluralidad de textos implica que no hay texto original” (79). The poet translates a coded reality, but the poem itself is another text to be decoded, and this process is infinite: “Escribir un poema es descifrar al universo sólo para cifrarlo de nuevo. El juego de la analogía es infinito: el lector repite el gesto del poeta: la lectura es una traducción que convierte al poema del poeta en el poema del lector” (79). Baudelaire’s poetics confront a void which will become a central concern for modern lyric poetry, the interrogation of which is epitomized by Mallarmé’s unfinished *Livre*. The desire to escape a fallen language and the persistence within Romanticism of a language conceived as what Foucault calls in *Les mots y les choses* “leur être énigmatique, monotone, obstiné, primitif”

(58), will ultimately give way to a poetics of silence, the aspiration that writing become a blank page that says the nothing that underlies all things, and in doing so, says all. This was, as we have already seen, the ultimate aspiration of the poetic experiments of Mallarmé. In the counter-romantic discourse of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, the absolute is a void that can only be expressed in the absence of words.

What we have termed Valente's poetics of the desert is in consonance with the modern tradition of negativity. But, as we have seen, there is another aspect of Valente's poetry, which we have described in terms of a poetics of the garden, which is fundamentally bound up with Romantic conceptions of poetic language as the informing of the infinite in the finite poetic symbol. In this context, Valente can express his understanding of poetic creation in exuberantly organicist terms, as in the following fragment from *Mandorla*:

ESCRIBIR es como la segregación de las resinas; no es acto, sino lenta formación natural. Musgo, humedad, arcillas, limo, fenómenos del fondo, y no del sueño o de los sueños, sino de los barro oscuros donde las figuras de los sueños fermentan. Escribir no es hacer, sino aposentarse, estar. (OCI: 423)

In this chapter I will discuss this tension in the context of Valente's conception of the material, paying special attention to the importance in his work of two categories that have always been conceived as other with regard to philosophical knowledge, music and the animal, and arguing that a reading of his poetry in light of Giorgio Agamben's theory of potentiality allows us to identify once more the structure of immanent transcendence that escapes the dilemma of being and nothingness that haunts modern philosophy and poetics.

8.2 METAMORPHOSIS AND MATERIALITY

An alternative way in which this aspiration to, through language, experience that which is beyond language, is expressed in what Georges Bataille describes in his *Théorie de la religion* as the "mensonge poétique de l'animalité" (19). Bataille, writing in

consonance with a tradition of modern thought which understood animal experience in terms of its immanence to the surrounding world, compares the Romantic aspiration to unite word and world in poetry with the modern desire to gain an unmediated experience of reality imagined to be that of the animal.¹⁴⁴ The poetic desire for unity, for a non-mediated experience of either a transcendent divine or an immanent materiality, finds in the gaze of the animal an inescapable attraction. The animal exists in a liminal space: it can meet our gaze and yet live in unmediated relation to the world, in which it exists “comme l’eau dans l’eau” (32). Its eyes offer the prospect of a consciousness without human subjectivity, what Bataille terms, recalling neo-platonic and mystical thematics of blindness and insight, a “vision où nous ne voyons rien” (21). It is this vision towards which, according to Bataille, poetry tends, and therefore the experience of the animal, which opens a depth that is attractive and familiar, because it is the depth of our own unknowable, pre-subjective biological being, becomes the focus of poetic desire. Human conceptions of a divine being, on the other hand, would be a reaction to the ultimate horror that the continuity of existence, which our linguistic capacity allows us to elide, provokes; it would be a symptom of the negative awareness of our tangible but ungraspable experience as beings in continuity within a world without transcendence.

In a sense, Bataille is here reviving one of the oldest divisions in Western culture, that

¹⁴⁴ The conception of animal life as life in immanence is central to twentieth century thought, as reflected in Martin Heidegger’s discussion of Rilke’s term, the Open, in his essay “Wozu Dichter,” originally given as a lecture in 1946, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the poet’s death. Rilke’s description, in the eighth of the *Duino Elegies*, of the separation of humans from the Open, which animals enjoy in joyful immanence, is opposed by Heidegger, who argues that humans are the only animals who are able to relate to the Open as such. This opposition relates to the tripartite division that Heidegger sketches in other works, according to which animals are poor in world, things are worldless, and humans have world. In both cases, however, the animal is considered in terms of its immanence to its surrounding environment. For a careful consideration of these themes, and the grounding of Heidegger’s ideas in the work of the biologist Jakob Von Uexkull, see Agamben (2003). For a more general treatment of the animal question throughout Western history see Elisabeth de Fontenay (1998). For an introduction to the recent rise of what has been termed the “animal turn” in the humanities see Matthew Calarco (2008).

between philosophy and poetry. As already mentioned, María Zambrano refers to this in her description of the primordial Platonic scene from Book VII of *The Republic*, that which describes the prisoners in the cave. The prisoners, who are entranced by the flickering shadows cast by the flame at their backs upon the cave wall, come to philosophical knowledge only when they escape their bonds and emerge into the harsh light of day outside the cave. For Zambrano, the text describes the movement from poetical to philosophical knowledge. The poet is he who lives immersed in his world, his gaze fixed on the movements of “this” leaf or “this” creature, whereas the philosopher is he who searches for the unity of Being beyond the processes of change that constitute the world of animate and inanimate things. Poetry, in this context, would that which stays “en los arrabales, arisca y desgarrada diciendo a voz en grito todas las verdades inconvenientes; terriblemente indiscreta y en rebeldía” (14). More recently, Jacques Derrida has linked the singularity of poetic language, its resistance to the abstractions of philosophical thinking, with the question of the animal: “Car la pensée de l’animal, s’il y en a, revient à la poésie, voilà un these; et c’est ce don’t la philosophie, par essence, a dû se priver” (1999: 258). If philosophy is the discourse that negates singularity, ignoring the addressivity of the gaze of the animal, poetry is the discourse that takes on the gaze of the other: “Comme tout regard sans fond, comme les yeux de l’autre, ce regard ‘dit’ animal me donne à voir la limite abyssale de l’humain: l’inhumain ou l’anhumain, les fins de l’homme” (263).

In Valente’s work, as we have seen, the attempt to write the unwritable experience of pre-subjective unity is marked in the liminal figures – the animal, the angel, the *funámbulo* – that recur in the poems. This liminality relates to the oscillation that we referred to in a previous chapter, between poetic language’s unavoidable presence as such, and the absences it existence implies. In his “Ensayo sobre Miguel de Molinos,” Valente discusses

this impossibility of writing that which writing denies in terms of the paradoxes of mystic speech, the “tensión entre el silencio y la palabra que el decir del místico sustancialmente conlleva, porque su lenguaje es señal, ante todo, de lo que se manifiesta sin salir de la no manifestación” (OCII: 317). It is instructive, in this regard, that in the same essay in which he describes the impossibility of a rational understanding of the mystic experience, Valente chooses the following text from the twelfth century Japanese poet, Kamo no Chomei:

Considera la vida de los pájaros y de los peces. Jamás el pez se cansa del agua; pero, no siendo pez, nunca podrás saber lo que el pez siente. Jamás el pájaro se fatiga del bosque; pero, no siendo pájaro, nunca comprenderás sus sentimientos. Igual sucede con la vida religiosa y la vida poética: si no las vives, nada comprenderás jamás de ellas. (qtd. in Valente, OCII: 318)

The writings of the mystics, and, it is implied, the writings of the poets, relate to an experience of unity that is compared to the life in immanence of the animal. These writings are an “invitación a la experiencia o una experiencia que se sitúa en los límites de la experiencia posible” (OCII: 319), and which implies both the “salida del si-mismo” and the “transformación de la palabra de instrumento de la comunicación en forma de la contemplación” (OCII: 319). The poetic contemplation of language, its removal from the sphere of pure communication, allows for a limit experience that is likened to the animal’s immersion in its world.

This linking of poetic experience and animality is central to the essay Valente dedicates to Vicente Aleixandre’s *Pasion de la tierra*, published in *Las palabras del tribu*. For Valente, Aleixandre’s 1929 collection, along with the subsequent collections *Espadas como labios* and *La destrucción y el amor*, are the most clearly surrealist influenced works of the Generation of 1927, exceeding Lorca’s *Poeta en Nueva York* and Alberti’s *Sobre los ángeles* in this regard. For Valente, Aleixandre’s work in this period constitutes “un mundo poético que todavía es pura posibilidad de proyección en formas múltiples, no sujeto aún a

los condicionamientos de su natural desarrollo en una obra larga, continua, que va buscando y, por supuesta, encuentra las líneas mayores de su configuración y de su coherencia” (OCII: 165). This is precisely a work that does not complete an “Obra” with a capital “O,” but expresses the “la nostalgia infinita de la obra posible” and the “proteica apertura a la posibilidad” (OCII: 166) in which “la forma no existe más que para dejar de existir, pues lo que existe en verdad no es la forma, sino la trans-forma o la meta-forma, la metamorfosis o la transformación. He ahí el proceso que ha de culminar en *La destrucción o el amor*” (OCII: 170).

It is in this context that we can understand the importance of the figure of the serpent in Valente’s reading of Alexandre. For Valente, the serpent is the ambiguous figure of metamorphosis that can symbolize both the feminine and the masculine, life and death, change and eternity. It can also, as Jung notes, relate to movement or constellation within the subconscious that manifests itself in the social world. It is a symbol that relates to:

...lo genesíaco, del proceso oscuro de la generación, de la ascensión de las fuerzas del fondo hacia la superficie o hacia la luz.... Este movimiento irruptor de lo subliminal...trae consigo la vida y con ella las formas de su destrucción que son a la vez las formas de su multiplicación.... El poder ambivalente del símbolo como encarnación de la ambigüedad misma del acto creador o como forma en la que quedan simultáneamente asumidas la afirmación y la negación. (OCII: 173)

That is, the serpent represents the ambivalence of a poetry of origins in which darkness and light, dream and wakefulness coexist. In the Aristotelian terms that Valente employs, the animal represents the epiphany of the material in the form. It is a liminal figure, which, as Eduardo Cirlot (1992: 407-410) reminds us, is traditionally connected with evil, matter, and the feminine, but which at the same time is capable of taking on form, if only to lose this form again in processes of metamorphosis. The serpent is the symbol of the process of formation and deformation, what Wallace Stevens describes as “...form gulping after

formlessness, / Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances / And the serpent body flashing without the skin” (409), standing for the specificity of a poetic language that seeks to unwork itself, return to a point at which words no longer destroy the things to which they refer.

It is this motif of metamorphosis, in Valente’s understanding, which links Aleixandre’s early collections to the *Cantos* of Lautréamont.¹⁴⁵ As Valente comments in an essay from the same collection, *Lautréamont o la experiencia de la anterioridad*, Maldoror’s capacity for metamorphosis in his struggle against the Demiurge can only take place in a world that is “anterior al mundo, donde la palabra queda a la vez dicha y negada, y el lenguaje en un estado de disponibilidad infinita, como el vuelo del milano real cuando ya el ave vuela sin finalidad o objeto...en el estado de suspensión o vuelo inmóvil de la palabra única (residuo o fondo de una palabra universal) sobre la legión de las palabras posibles” (OCII: 253). It is not difficult to see here the connection between the serpent and the “milano real”: both figures symbolize a language that exists for itself, that resists exhaustion in communicative language, and in its resistance to closure allows for unlimited creative freedom. The unlimited animal metamorphoses that the *Cantos* describe would be from this perspective reflective of both inhuman creativity of nature, but also the infinite creativity of a poetry that orientates itself according to the unconscious becoming and transformations of a language not ruled by subjective intention.

Lautréamont’s poetry describes animals, but, beyond this representation of animals, Gaston Bachelard (1965) identifies a certain “animalization” of the text, a non-subjective impulse that runs through it and is expressed in the constant metamorphoses of animal

¹⁴⁵ María Lopo (2013) describes the centrality of the work of Lautréamont for Valente, and also the possible connections between Valente’s “Agone,” the name he gives to his son Antonio in the poems, and the adolescent “Aghone” of the *Cantos*. Valente read Lautréamont in the first half of 1969, an experience he describes in his diaries: “La lectura y anotación de *Maldoror* me ha llevado estos meses a una serie de lecturas *irradiadas*” (DA: 138).

figures.¹⁴⁶ If, as Schelling argues, the ultimate principle of life is a productive will that produces the ever-changing forms of nature, and which in the human is expressed in aesthetic works, there is something inhuman in human creativity. It is this inhuman hunger for form that, paradoxically, draws the language of the *Cantos* towards an ultimate formlessness, a pure potentiality that holds an infinite capacity for embodiment in the myriad of animal shapes that the text presents. This movement towards formlessness is central to Valente's discussion of the "materia" in his "Cinco fragmentos para Antoni Tàpies."

In this short text, appended to the collection from 1979, *Material memoria*, Valente presents Tàpies's work as the "presencia radical de la material que llega a la forma" (OCI: 388). If, in accordance with the Aristotelean concepts that dominate Western thought, form, rather than matter, constitutes the substance of a thing, it being impossible to compose predicates that relate to an indefinite primal matter, here, in a break with philosophical tradition, the indefinite material manifests itself in definite form as such. But the material that becomes manifest does so in the mode of "...formación: formas que se desuelven a sí mismas en la nostalgia originaria de lo informe, de lo que en rigor es indiferente al cambio y puede, por tanto, cambiarse en todo, ser raíz infinita de todas las formas posibles" (OCI: 388). Valente clarifies the nature of this overcoming of the division of matter and form: "La forma no figura: es. La forma es la materia. La material – la materia en el cuadro o en la composición – no es sustentáculo de nada sobreimpuesto. No

¹⁴⁶ Bachelard, writing in a vitalist vein that has much to do with the Romantic theories outlined at the start of the chapter, and which Valente underlines in his copy of the text, states: "...jamais le beut ne peut être simplement reproduit; il faut d'abord qu'il soit produit. Il emprunte à la vie, à la matière même, des énergies élémentaires qui sont d'abord transformées, puis transfigurées. Certaines poésies s'attachent à la transformation, d'autres à la transfiguration. Mais, toujours l'être humain, par le poème véritable, doit subir une métamorphose. La fonction principale de la poésie, c'est de nous transformer. Elle est l'œuvre humaine qui nous transforme plus vite: un poème y suffit" (104-105).

es materia de ninguna forma sino forma absoluta de sí” (OCI: 388). This last quote reproduces Coleridge’s distinction between an organic creativity and a mechanical imitation of reality, a conception of the process of artistic creation that, as we have seen, runs from Schelling to twentieth century forms of vitalism, with the proviso that in the twentieth century the productive life forces are entirely immanent, not relating to any absolute, and becoming visible in poetic language in what Bachelard calls a “langue instantanée” (97).¹⁴⁷ The description of the art-work applies equally for poetic language, which, for Valente, is a language that exists in and for itself, related to the protean properties of a matter that retains the infinite disponibility of potentiality. To further understand the centrality of the potentiality of the material in Valente’s poetry, and the ways in which his theorization of it brings him close to the Romantic theorization of the symbol, but also distances him from it, we must explore the philosophical significance of the terms potentiality and materiality.

8.3 POTENTIALITY AND MATERIALITY IN VALENTE’S POETRY

It is at this point that we can consider the relation between poetry and materiality in terms of the Aristotelian conception of potentiality. As is well known, Aristotle conceives objects as consisting of both matter and form. In order to explain change, Aristotle argues that in all change something is gained and something is lost; when Aristotle’s skin is tanned by the sun his pallor is lost, but Aristotle’s dark skin pigmentation is gained – Aristotle himself remains throughout the change. That which changes is the form; that which remains is the matter. In the same way, a lump of bronze retains its material

¹⁴⁷ Bachelard writes, in words which, again, Valente underlines: “Voilà un en effet un oeuvre que n’est pas née de l’observation des autres, qui n’est pas née exactement de l’observation de soi. Avant d’être observée, elle a été créé. Elle n’a pas de but, et c’est une action. Elle n’a pas de plan, et elle est cohérente. Son langage n’est pas l’expression d’une pensée préalable. C’est l’expression d’une force psychique qui, subitement, devient un langage. Bref, c’est une langue instantanée” (97).

bronziness when it is formed into a statue, but loses its previous form as a lump of bronze. Matter and form are linked, in Aristotle's thought, with the pairing of potentiality and actuality. The bronziness of the metal is the potentiality that is actualized in the form of the bronze statue. It is important to note here that the lump of bronze is not itself a subsistent prime matter; it is, rather, a poor form, it has a definite shape which in itself can be understood as a kind of unworked form. Matter, for Aristotle, is pure potentiality, and is in itself unknowable.

In an essay, first given as a talk in Lisbon in 1996 and later published in English in the collection *Potentialities*, "On Potentiality," Giorgio Agamben discusses this concept in ways that are relevant to our discussion of Valente's notion the material. Agamben begins his discussion with an aporia inherent in the Aristotelian discussion of the faculties of perception in *De Anima*: namely, that it is impossible to sense the faculties, or the potentialities, of sense. That is, though we have the capacity or faculty of sight, hearing, etc., it is impossible to see or hear these faculties as such, even though they "contain fire, earth, water, and the other elements of which there is sensation" (qtd. in Agamben, 178). For Agamben, this inability reveals a profound aspect of the nature of potentiality: potentiality is not simply non-being; it is, rather, the *existence* of non-being. This existence of the negative is central to Aristotle's discussion of a certain type of potentiality, the potentiality of a person who has a given ability, such as an architect, a craftsman, or a poet. Here, the actualization of a potentiality does not imply the alteration of the person, as in the case in the more general sense when we say a child has the potential to become president. An architect remains an architect whether she builds a house or not. In fact, the potentiality of the architect is based precisely on the fact that she can choose, if she wishes, *not* to build a house. In this context, potentiality is fundamentally related to impotentiality: there can be

no passage from potential to act without the concomitant potential not to act. Human beings are those who can experience their own impotential, their own capacity not to act.

At this point, however, we might ask ourselves as to the actuality of this potential not to act. Does this aspect of potentiality disappear in actualization, or can it in some way maintain itself in the passage from potential to act? Agamben approaches this question with a quote from Aristotle's metaphysics: "A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotential" (qtd. in Agamben, 183). This statement can be seen as a simple description of the passing of potential into actuality, but, given that the potential not to be is a fundamental aspect of potentiality, Agamben takes this statement to mean that, along with the potential *to*, the potential *not to* must also pass into the act, and be preserved within the act as it is, as the potential not to be or act.

But what is the pertinence of these arguments for the understanding of artistic creation? In what way can we understand the survival of the potential not to act or create be maintained in the actuality of the art-work? Agamben's clearest explanation of these processes is his unpublished lecture, given in the European Graduate School in 2014, "Resistance in Art."¹⁴⁸ Here Agamben argues that true artistic mastery always retains impotentiality in art. This is, for him, reflected in Kafka's allegories of artistic creation, the story of Josephine the Mouse Singer who does not know how to sing and yet can entrance her people with her feeble whistling, and the great swimmer who breaks a world record and yet claims not to know how to swim. Similarly, the imperfections of great artists, the mannerism of the late Titian, or the refusal of Navajo weavers to form a perfect pattern, are acts of resistance, the refusal to exhaust potentiality in act that constitutes their style. Lack

¹⁴⁸ "Giorgio Agamben. Resistance in Art. 2014." *YouTube*. YouTube, 02 Mar. 2015.

of taste, for Agamben, often results from the desire to pass directly from potential to act, thereby ignoring the potential not to, which is, for him, constitutive of human freedom. Poetry, which is a contemplation of language that resists its purely communicative functions, suspends and deactivates language, rendering it – in an aspiration that is reminiscent of Valente’s desire for poetry to retain an “*infinita disponibilidad*,” to fly like a “*milano real*.”

Though Agamben does not mention him in this context, we can turn here to the writer that Valente cites in his “*Cinco fragmentos para Antoni Tápies*,” Gustave Flaubert. It is significant that Valente chooses to cite the moment from Flaubert’s *La Tentation de saint Antoine* when the Saint, after witnessing a mesmerizing parade of both mythologic and real beasts, followed by the quickening metamorphoses and mingling of animals, plants, and inanimate objects, declares his unity with this natural flux, exclaiming: “*Etre la matiere*.” I quote in full the Saint’s delirious reverie:

Ô bonheur ! bonheur ! J’ai vu naître la vie, j’ai vu le mouvement commencer. Le sang de mes veines bat si fort qu’il va les rompre. J’ai envie de voler, de nager, d’aboyer, de beugler, de hurler. Je voudrais avoir des ailes, une carapace, une écorce, souffler de la fumée, porter une trompe, tordre mon corps, me diviser partout, être en tout, m’émaner avec les odeurs, me développer comme les plantes, couler comme l’eau, vibrer comme le son, briller comme la lumière, me blottir sur toutes les formes, pénétrer chaque atome, descendre jusqu’au fond de la matière, – être la matière! (275-276)

The text describes a series of metamorphoses that culminate in dissolution in the potentiality of the material. Saint Antoine’s desire to become one with the material has often been understood in terms of Flaubert’s attachment to the Spinozistic monism,¹⁴⁹ but we can also understand the derealisation of both nature and symbol in terms of an artistic unworking. Here, what Flaubert on another occasion called his “*absolute style*” is rendered

¹⁴⁹ Derrida (1987) describes Flaubert’s attachment to Spinoza as “*hyperbolique*” (310)

as a desire to return to a language that remains as pure potential, the language of Bartleby, the scribe who, as Agamben reminds us, commits the ultimate ethical act through his refusal to write.¹⁵⁰

This thesis – that Antoine’s desire to unite with the material is also a desire that language resist its communicative function and maintain within itself its potential not to be – is strengthened if we take into account Proust’s reading of Flaubert’s work. According to Proust in his short essay “A propos du ‘style’ de Flaubert,” and in the context of a discussion of the grammatical errors that are frequent in Flaubert’s writing, “Généralement les grands écrivains qui ne savent pas écrire comme les grands peintres qui ne savent pas dessiner n'ont fait en réalité que renoncer leur ‘virtuosité,’ leur ‘facilité’ innées, afin de créer, pour une vision nouvelle, des expressions qui tâchent peu à peu de s'adapter à elle” (74) The inability to write, which is the mark of mastery, is also the resistance of literature, the retention of the ultimate human freedom, the potential not to, within the work. In the case of *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, this freedom is linked with the metamorphosis of animal forms that, as in Lautréamont’s *Cantos*, grasp after the formlessness of the material that Valente describes both as the “la nostalgia infinita de la obra posible” and the “proteica apertura a la posibilidad” (OCII: 166).

It is in this context that we can read the significance of silence in Valente’s work. Silence which is the “materia natural” (OCI: 388) of the poem is that part of it that remains as potential not to be language, and it is in this sense that a “poema no existe si no se oye, antes que su palabra, su silencio” (OCI: 388). Indeed, one of the innovations of the avant-garde music of Valente’s time, the explorations of John Cage, was the realization that silence is a constitutive aspect of all music – in Cage’s experimental work, nothing

¹⁵⁰ The final essay in the collection *Potentialities*, “Bartleby, or on Contingency,” explores the refusal of Melville’s character in the context of the potential not to that we have been discussing here.

happens.¹⁵¹ Valente's "Arietta, opus III," unites these concerns in its description of a musical piece that combines the themes of music and silence, form and material:

1

Forma
(en lo infinitamente abierto hacia lo informe).

2

El silencio se quiebra
en trino por tres veces
y la materia de la música
ya no es sonido sino transparencia.

3

El tema se disuelve en la cadena
interminable de las formas.
El movimiento iguala a la quietud
y la piedra solar
a lo perpetuamente alzado y destruido.

4

Delgado,
tenue,
agudo,
el timbre hila
la melodía al corazón del aire.
Entra en la sombra,
busca a tientas
lo inferior disparado hacia lo alto.
¿Dónde
está tu voz que ya no encuentra
respuesta?

Ahora
se funda en la materia
feraz del mundo, en las cosas que son,
que han sido o que serán,
el solitario.

Cantible,
hacia adentro.

5

¹⁵¹ We might refer here to Cage's "Manifiesto," written in 1952, which, in a typographical composition that is impossible to reproduce here, claims that in writing, hearing, and playing a piece of music "nothing is accomplished" (xii). That is, nothing, or silence, is present in the work. Also relevant to our discussion here are Cage's remarks on the "White Paintings" series of Robert Rauschenberg, which he describes as a "poetry of *infinite possibilities*" (103).

Para que el hilo tan infinitamente se prolongue,
para que sólo quede por decir
la total extensión de lo indicible,
para que la libertad se manifieste,
para que andar al otro lado de la muerte sea
semplice e cantible
y aquí y allí la música nos lleve
al centro, al fuego, al aire,
al agua antenatal que envuelve
la forma indescifrable
de lo que nunca nadie aún ha hecho
nacer en la mañana del mundo.
(OCI: 363-364)

It is important to note that the Beethoven sonata that Valente describes, the *Piano Sonata No. 32 in C Minor, Op 111*, is part of the later works of the composer, which exemplify the surpassing of virtuosity that Agamben claims mark the inoperative works of the master. Theodor Adorno (2002), in his writings on Beethoven, which would be ventriloquized in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, describes this "late style" precisely in terms of an unworking of the work. *Arietta* would be, from this perspective, the work in which the "the hand of the master sets free the masses of material that he used to form; its tears and fissures, witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the I confronted with Being, are its final work" (566). Beethoven's later style frees itself from the ideal of the completed work; their "catastrophe" is a giving of the potential not to be within the work, in which the freedom that constitutes the human is revealed. It is in this context that we can understand Valente's lines, "para que sólo quede por decir la total extensión de lo indecible, para que la libertad se manifieste, para que andar al otro lado de muerte sea / *semplice e cantible*" (OCI: 364). Beethoven's unworking of the totality of the work allows for the presence within it of the "forma indescifrable / de lo que nunca nadie aún ha hecho / nacer en la mañana del mundo," the silence that is the ultimate material of both music and poetry.

It is in this context, too, that we can understand the poem that follows “Arietta, opus III” in the collection, which is titled simply “Materia”:

Convertir la palabra en la materia
donde lo que quisiéramos decir no pueda
penetrar más allá
de lo que la materia nos diría
si a ella, como a un vientre,
delicado aplicásemos,
desnudo, blanco vientre,
delicado el oído para oír
el mar, el indistinto
rumor del mar, que más allá de ti,
el no nombrado amor, te engendra siempre.
(OCI: 364-365)

Here, willed creation is destroyed in favour of a passive acceptance of the material. It is only through the passive experience of listening, as if to a “vientre,” the place of the biological passage from potentiality to actuality, that the poem can arise. Unnamed love, or potentiality, is heard as an indistinct rumour of the sea, a white noise that exceeds the intentionality of the human subject, and which allows for the engendering of a poem that combines the delicacy of form with the nudity of the material, retaining in this way the liberty inherent in its own moment of inception. At the same time, the resistance of potentiality, its refusal of the totality of completion, which we identified as a significant aspect of Valente’s poetry and poetics, denies the Romantic vision of the organic wholeness of the poem. The collection that follows *Interior con figuras*, *Material memoria*, will be dedicated to the writing of beginnings, and the inherence within the poem of its own unworking.

8.4 MATERIAL MEMORIA

As I have already mentioned, *Material memoria* is prefaced with a citation from Lezama Lima: “la luz es el primer animal visible de lo invisible” (OCI: 376). The quote places animality at the point of creative inception, the unattainable light of the beginning is

like an animal in that it presents to us an radical opening to language and communication that constitutes the human but is at the same time the thing most difficult to grasp. The collection as a whole is determined by this relation to that which is both immanent and transcendent, as reflected in the opening poem:

OBJETOS de la noche.
Sombras.
Palabras
con el lomo animal mojado por la dura
transpiración del sueño
o de la muerte.
Dime
con qué rotas imágenes ahora
recomponer el día venidero,
trazar los signos,
tender la red al fondo,
vislumbrar en lo oscuro
el poema o la piedra,
el don de lo imposible.
(OCI: 377)

Words here are figured as material entities, with a “lomo animal” that is capable of “transpiración.” It is significant that these words are opposed to “rotas imágenes” that might “recomponer el día venidero.” As we saw in our previous discussion, Valente’s conception of an animalized language implies the superation of images in the exuberance of animal metamorphoses that ultimately dissolve themselves in the material. It is this desire that the poem escape linguistic exchange, becoming part of the natural world, an animal or a stone, that is the “don de lo imposible.” Returning to Agamben’s theory of potentiality, we might say that the poem, a suspension and deactivation of language, is a gift, in that it is excessive with regard to communicative linguistic exchange. Valente’s poem refers to this aspect of poetic language, the way in which it suspends purely communicative language, and in so doing preserves within the poem the indeterminacy of potentiality.

It is for this reason that the collection is filled with figures of liminality, the “aurora,” the “amanecer,” the “ocaso,” the “funámbulo,” the “umbral.” All of these terms refer to the liminal moment of creation, in which the potential not to be is freed within the act. The third poem of the collection, “La aurora,” refers to this realization within the poem of its own impotentiality:

LA AURORA
sólo engendrada por la noche.

Yo no depuse
el ramo húmedo
que tú me diste de tus lágrimas
para ir al otro lado de la sombra.

Fui devorado.
Pero tú dijiste
que no podía
morir.

La aurora.
(OCI: 377- 378)

Here, beginning, the “aurora” is complicit with “la noche.” As the potential not to be is retained in the actual, and as the poem retains within itself its own unworking, so the dawn of the poem can only occur with the complicity of night, its potential non-occurrence. The clausuration of the poem between two beginnings, two “auroras,” marks the constant indeterminacy between being and not-being that exists in the deployment of a potential that retains its capacity not to be in act. Rather than a circular closure of the finished art-work, the final dawn marks the survival within the poem of its own potential non-occurrence. The pairing of survival and devoration is also present in another poem of the collection, the “Tres devoraciones,” the second section of which reads:

Él te devora a ti, tú
me devoras, yo
te devoraría a vosotros mientras
un muerto inacabable nos devora
que abre feliz autófagas sus fauces.

which Valente's poetry shares the contemporary philosophical desire to resist the metaphysical opposition of being and nothingness, onto-theology and nihilism. Here the poem describes an alternative, an inherence of alterity within immanence in an experience of the limit, of the zone of potentiality in which the "sombra" and the "luz" cannot be divided. This flitting between visibility and invisibility is the prerogative of a writing that constantly refers to its own potentiality not to be, as in "Figura," which directly follows "El ángel" in the collection:

Yo vi al funámbulo
como instantánea luz,
solo en la línea única.
Cruzó el abismo
(sobre el vertical feroz del miedo,
sobre el rencor oscuro de lo ínfimo).
(OCI: 379 - 380)

The poem is like the tightrope walker, maintaining itself upon the dividing line between presence and absence, form and formlessness, in the barest space, the "ínfimo," that separates it from oblivion.¹⁵³

If the angel is a figure of liminality in Valente's poetry, so too is the animal. In *Material memoria*, animality is connected, counter-intuitively, with the air. This is the case in final poem from the opening sequence of four that are distinctive in their use of capitalization of the first words rather than a title set against the text of the poem, a procedure that is also used for the final eight poems of the collection, those in between having a more conventional setting. This fourth poem reads:

BAJABA como un gran animal no visible el aire
a abreviar lo celeste.

¹⁵³Paolo Valesio (1995) highlights this poem as "...típico de la que podríamos llamar ética de la modernidad.... La genealogía de esta imagen funambulesca coincide con la parábola delpensamiento lírica modernista – por lo menos: Nietzsche, Palazzeschi, Govoni, Ungaretti, etc. – En esta figura solitaria, frágil, precaria, hay algo así como un tierno desafío a la vida, desafío que es una de las perspectivas clave de lo ético en la poesía moderna" (228).

Y nosotros lo contemplábamos maravillados
en las cabañas húmedas del miedo.

La noche recubrió nuestra miseria.

El aire abría
la latitud total de la mañana
y extendía la luz, y la caballería
a vista de las aguas descendía.
(OCI: 378)

The paradoxical invisibility of the face of the angel is repeated here, but this time with the personification of invisible air as animal. This manifest invisibility is an object of marvelled contemplation. The poem is an allegory of its own peculiar status as language that gives itself to contemplation as such. The “aire,” like sight or the capacity to speak, becomes available as such. In this way the poem refers to its own suspension of language, through which it retains its own impotentiality, but also to the exuberant freedom of its creative unfolding. This is the context in which we can read the final lines, taken from San Juan de la Cruz, which describe this absolute freedom of artistic creation, the “latitud total de la mañana.”

“Las nubes” again marries the transparency of air with the body of the animal:

Como un gran pájaro que se abatiera hacia el ocaso
para beber en él
la última gota de su propia luz,
el aire
hecho forma en las nubes.
Alas como de oscura transparencia,
cuerpo no material de una materia
que sólo hubiese sido
fuego o respiración en el rastro solar,
las nubes,
leve espesor casi animal del aire.

Como un pájaro roto en muchas alas
que se precipitasen en la noche
ebrias sólo de luz,
las nubes.
(OCI: 382-83)

Clouds are always in movement, forming and deforming themselves as the visibility of that which is invisible, the air. The central lyrics here confirm the paradoxical visibility of the invisible that is central to the collection as a whole: “Alas como de oscura transparencia, / cuerpo no material de una materia / que sólo hubiese sido / fuego o respiración en el rastro solar.” Like words, the clouds are the body of the strange material, a breath or a solar trace, which we might liken to the Aristotelian concept of matter, the pure potentiality that includes its own impotentiality, and that actualizes itself in the poem. The words of the poem, the “nubes,” have the “leve espesor casi animal del aire,” they are related to their own non-being or silence, and retain a nostalgia for the inform that Valente associates with an “animalization” of language, the constant metamorphoses that represent for him the freedom of creative expression.

This nostalgia for the inform is often expressed in Valente’s poetry with the symbol of the fish, as in the following fragment:

COMO el oscuro pez del fondo
gira en el limo húmedo y sin forma,
desciende tú
a lo que nunca duerme sumergido
como el oscuro pez del fondo.
Ven
al hálito.
(OCI: 384)

The fish is a metaphor for the pure potentiality that exists in the depths of the material.¹⁵⁴

The poetic voice directs itself to a “tú” that we can take to be its own language. The words

¹⁵⁴ In the entry for the 21st of May, 1977 of his *Diario Anónimo*, Valente writes: “El pez, la concha, y la sílaba OM (Guenon, *Símbolos*)” (DA: 175). Here Valente is referring to the chapter entitled “Quelques aspects du symbolisme du poisson,” originally written in 1936, and contained in Guenon’s *Symboles fondamentaux de la science sacrée*, a copy of which is in Valente’s library. Here Guenon observes that in Hinduism the first manifestation of Vishnu is as a fish, and it is in this form that the deity passes on the wisdom of the Veda after the cataclysm and the beginning of the present cycle. Interestingly, for our arguments here, according to Guenon, the continuation of sacred wisdom is connected with the primordially of sound: “L’affirmation de la perpétuité du Vêda est d’ailleurs en relation directe avec la théorie cosmologique de la primordialité du son parmi les qualités sensibles (comme qualité propre de l’éther, âkâsha, qui est

of the poem describe its own movement between actuality and potentiality, its return to the silence, the breath or “hálito” that precedes but also saturates it. Valente, in the “Cinco fragmentos para Antoni Tàpies,” cites Picasso: “Si se acerca un espejo a un verdadero cuadro, el espejo deberá cubrirse de vapor, de aliento vivo, porque el cuadro está vivo” (qtd. in OCI: 389). Similarly, the poem has its respiration, its palpitations. These are the movements of poetic language between the breath and speech, potentiality and actualization, which are fundamental to it. If poetry is defined by the tension between line and sense, the intake of breath that marks the caesuras of enjambment is as fundamental to the poem as the words that surround them.¹⁵⁵ In this way the poem, uniquely says that nothing, its own impotentiality, that remains to be said, and this is its resistance:

NADA quedaba de la música
que no fuera tu cuerpo en el reposo
que ha seguido al amor.

Ni quedaba del tiempo nada que pudiera
ni de ti ni de mí
ser dicho todavía.

(OCI: 385)

It is in this context that we can understand the final poem of the collection, and return to the difficulties that define this thesis, the dilemma of mythical illusion and nihilistic despair:

MIENTRAS pueda decir
no moriré

Mientras empañe el hálito
las palabras escritas en la noche

le premier des éléments); et cette théorie n'est pas autre chose, au fond, que celle que d'autres traditions expriment en parlant de la création par le Verbe : le son primordial, c'est cette Parole divine par laquelle, suivant le premier chapitre de la Genèse hébraïque, toutes choses ont été faites" (112-113).

¹⁵⁵ For Agamben (1999), enjambment, or the opposition of a metrical limit to a syntactical limit, defines the exceptionality of poetic language: “the possibility of enjambment constitutes the only criterion for distinguishing poetry from prose” (109).

no moriré.

Mientras la sombra de aquel vientre baja
hasta el vértice oscuro del encuentro
no moriré.

No moriré.

Ni tú conmigo.

(OCI 386)

The poem compares the liminal moment of breath becoming word with the most intimate intertwining of two bodies in lovemaking – the indeterminate moment of the coming to be of language is thus conceived as an erotic experience of the potential of language as such, which is the guarantor of a life in common that does not depend on the onto-teleological metaphysical categories that can never fully ground themselves, and are thus vulnerable both to nihilism, and to what Derrida describes as the consequent madness of reappropriation. This experience of language, which in Valente’s work is bound up with animal symbolization, will be the focus of the final section of this chapter, which considers the collection *Tres lecciones de tinieblas*.

8.5 TRES LECCIONES DE TINIEBLAS

Tres lecciones de tinieblas was written contemporaneously with *Material memoria*, and can be seen as a companion piece, elaborating, in the context of a Jewish theology of the letter, the same contemplation of the material as its sister collection.¹⁵⁶ As Valente comments in a text dedicated to Edmond Amran el Maleh, “El maestro de la llama”: “En ellas está la generación infinita de la materia y de los mundos. No pertenecen al orden de la

¹⁵⁶ *Tres lecciones de tinieblas* has been the focus of various articles written on Valente, most of which concentrate on the mystical Jewish or Christian elements of the poem, and in this regard we can cite Frank Savelsberg (2001), Carlos Peinado Elliot (2010), and (2011), and Esther Ramón (2014). The various religious elements that are combined in the text have also been traced in detail in Benlabbah (2008: 371-411), according to whom: “*Tres lecciones de tinieblas* consiste en definitiva en poner en práctica...una doble tradición secular, la tradición Judea-cristiana: a través del género musical sacro del barroco francés, entronca con el rito católico que tiene su origen en la Edad Media cuando la lectura de las Lamentaciones de Jeremías formaba parte de la liturgia de los tres últimos días de Semana Santa.... La otra tradición es la Cábala y su método interpretativo basado en la combinación de las cifras y letras” (410). I differ from these readings, which are all erudite and insightful, in that I place the collection in the context of a discussion of contemporary conceptions of immanence.

forma, sino al orden de la formación” (OCII: 703). In the “autolectura” attached to *Tres lecciones de tinieblas*, Valente describes their relation to the sacral music of the baroque composer François Couperin, but also the music of other composers in the same tradition – Victoria, Thomas Tallis, Charpentier, Delalande. For Valente “del lento depósito de esas composiciones fue desprendiéndose o formándose un solo principio iniciador o movimiento que subyace en toda progresión armónica y que ha sido llamado justamente *Ursatz*” (OCI: 403).¹⁵⁷ The *ursatz* is pure potential, a “potential expresivo universal,” and musical variation, from this perspective, is a “meditación creadora sobre el movimiento primario, sobre una forma universal” (OCI: 403). The fourteen Hebrew letters that head each of the fourteen texts that make up the collection would correspond to this *ursatz*. They are what Valente terms the “eje vertical” (OCI: 403) that contains the “infinita posibilidad de la materia del mundo” (OCI: 403). The “eje horizontal” (OCI: 403), that of the texts themselves, would be the “eje de la historia, el eje de la destrucción, de la soledad, del exilio, del dolor, del llanto del profeta” (OCI: 403). The proximity of these two levels reflects their constant intertwining, the “perpetua resurrección” (OCI: 404) of potentiality in actuality in a collection that Valente describes as a “canto de la germinación y del origen o de la vida como inminencia y proximidad” (OCI: 404).

The collection begins with the *Alef*, the letter that in the Kabbalistic book of creation, the *Sefer Yetsirah*, is the unvoiced letter that accompanies all the others and from which all

¹⁵⁷ Valente takes this term from the work of musicologist Heinrich Schenker, for whom it denoted the fundamental structure of every musical composition. For a discussion of the organicism that underlies Schenker’s work, and also his use of the horizontal/vertical trope, in this case a gendered, creative “female” nature and “masculine” human artifice, see Snarrenberg (1994: 29-56). Peinado Elliot’s (2002: 345-399) analysis of the *Tres lecciones de tinieblas* is relevant for our arguments in this chapter as he relates the intertwining of the one and the many in the poem in terms of rhythm and musical variation: “Mediante el procedimiento de la variación, la Palabra crea la multiplicidad. Al mismo tiempo, la repetición que entrelaza unos elementos con otros confiere unidad al texto. El poema se presenta como unidad, originada por la Palabra que ha creado lo múltiple. Se observa en el poema la tensión entre la palabra que es discontinua y la continuidad del ritmo y la melodía, que une entre sí lo separado” (404).

creation comes. This unpronounceable letter embodies the structure that we have been discussing in this chapter. It implies the presence of an absence, the “materia” of the poem that retains within itself the potential not to be. This instability of the forms, their constant implication with their potential absence, is expressed in the fourth fragment of the collection, which bears as its title the letter “Dalet”: “Tejí la oscura guirnalda de las letras: hice una puerta para poder cerrar y abrir, como pupila o párpado, los mundos” (OCI: 398). Similarly, the eight piece, “Jhet,” describes the survival of potentiality in act, and the concomitant indeterminacy of a language, both *raíz* and *llama*, that is offered for contemplation:

Jhet

Deja que llega a ti lo que no tiene nombre: lo que es raíz y no ha advenido al aire: el flujo de lo oscuro que sube en oleadas: el vagido brutal de lo que yace y pugna hacia lo alto: donde a su vez será disuelto en la última forma de las formas: invertida raíz la llama.
(OCI 400)

It would be possible to interpret all of the fourteen texts that make up *Tres lecciones de tinieblas* in this vein, but I prefer to pause here and consider the significance of the collection in terms of the wider concerns of the thesis. These are fundamentally based on the tension within Valente’s work between a discourse, influenced in part by the Romantic conception of the symbolic, in which the poem would embody lived experience, a poetics of plenitude in which word and life are fused within the poem, and, on the other hand, a poetics of negativity, in which the poem never resolves itself as a unified whole. The discourse that defines the poems in *Material memoria* and *Tres lecciones de tinieblas* seems to avoid these twin poles of immanence and transcendence. Rather, within them, alterity, the poem’s potentiality not to be, is immanent to the poems in a relation that I have termed “immanent transcendence.” An essay on the work of Gilles Deleuze, “Absolute

Immanence,” contained within Agamben’s *Potentialities* will help us to understand this paradoxical formulation in a way that is pertinent to *Tres lecciones de tinieblas*.

In this essay, Agamben engages with one of Deleuze’s final texts, the short piece entitled “Immanence: A life...,” a text that attempts to describe one of Deleuze’s most difficult concepts, the “plane of immanence,” in terms of the problematics of life and vitalism. Agamben pays attention to the punctuation of the title, “Immanence: A life...,” and especially the function of the colon. As Agamben notes, the colon plays an ambiguous function in punctuation. It represents both a separation and a linkage: “each of which is in itself partially complete. In the series that goes from the equals sign (identity of meaning) to the hyphen (the dialectic of unity and separation), the colon thus occupies an intermediary function” (222). Agamben links this “intermediary function” of the colon in the phrase to Deleuze’s readings of Spinoza and what his conceptualization of immanence. Immanence, in Spinoza’s thought is absolutely determinate. That is, it has a cause, but this cause is, paradoxically, immanent to itself. If there is a univocity of Being in which God is all, in order for this totality not to be absolutely immobile, God must be the cause of himself. And here Deleuze finds the “vertigo of philosophy” (qtd. in Agamben 226), the impossibility of thinking absolute immanence without the return of some form of transcendence or alterity. Agamben identifies a graphic expression of this vertigo in the use of the colon sign in the title of Deleuze’s essay. For Agamben, the colon “represents the dislocation of immanence within itself, the opening to an alterity that remains absolutely immanent – immanation” (223), what Deleuze describes in terms of an “transcendental empiricism.”

The colon, then, refers to the paradoxical retention of the transcendent in the immanent that we have discussed in the context of Valente’s work, and also of the work of

thinkers such as Blanchot, Levinas, and Merleau Ponty. It is significant, in this regard, that Deleuze refers, if disapprovingly, to the necessary illusion of the return of the transcendent within the material that the thought of these thinkers represent in “Immanence: A life....” We might say that Levinas and Merleau Ponty do not attempt, as Deleuze does, to think past the paradoxical but necessary presence of alterity within the immanent that Deleuze’s colon represents. Rather, their thought remains at the level of this relation derived from non-relation, and is dedicated to describing the crossings in which there is “neither distance non identification” (222) that define it. The same, I would argue, is the case for Valente in *Tres lecciones de tinieblas*, as I will try to make clear from the reading of three fragments from the collection.

The fragment “He,” which I reproduce here, describes processes of generation in terms of the respiration of an originary animal, the fish:

El latido de un pez en el limo antecede a la vida: branquia, pulmón,
burbuja, brote: lo que palpita tiene un ritmo y por el ritmo adviene: recibe
y da la vida: el hálito: en lo oscuro el centro es húmedo y de fuego:
madre, matriz, materia, stabat matrix: el latido de un pez antecede a la
vida: yo descendí contigo a la semilla del respirar: al fondo: bebí tu
aliento con mi boca: no bebí lo visible. (OCI: 398)

The poem figures the crossing without passage, immanation of an alterity that remains within the immanent, as the rhythmic beating of the “pez,” or the expiration and inspiration of the breath, “el hálito.” The poetic voice addresses an other, and drinks from its breath in a descent to the origin, which is the invisible. Here we might speak of a “transcendental empiricism,” an experience of an invisible alterity that remains entirely immanent, implied by the connecting of each sentence in the text with a colon. If the colon is the sign that marks both separation and linkage, the poem describes a relation to an origin that is both absolutely separate from us but at the same time fundamentally our own. This origin would

be the opening of or capacity for language itself, that which we experience in our contemplation of a language that would be, in Agamben's terms, inoperative.¹⁵⁸

"Tet," a text of astonishing power, describes this process of generation and convergence of an immanent causality:

La sangre se hace centro y lo disperso convergencia: todo es reabsorbido desde la piedra al ala hasta el lugar de la generación: las aves vuelan en redondo para indicar el centro de lo cóncavo: el mundo se retrae a ti: porque el vientre ha de ser igual al mundo: engéndrame de nuevo: hazme morir de un nuevo nacimiento: respírame y expúlsame: animal de tus aguas: pez y palomo y sierpe. (OCI: 400)

Again the immanent processes of generation are reabsorbed towards a central point of immanation. Here world and cause are one, "el vientre ha de ser igual al mundo," in the same way that alterity is contained within what Merleau Ponty called the "flesh of things." And it is for this reason that regeneration can be combined in the three animals that make up the three fundamental animal "elements" of Valentes poetry, the "pez," the "palomo," and the "sierpe," which stand for, respectively, the subterranean forces of matter, the airlike form, and the constant metamorphoses of form and formlessness (sierpe), the separation and connection of matter and form that constitute the unfurling of immanation that does not resolve itself in a definitive totality.

The final text of the collection, "Nun," describes this unfolding of things:

Para que sigas: para que sigas y te perpetúes: para que la forma engendre a las forma: para que se multipliquen las especies: para que la hoja nazca y muera, vuelva a nacer y vea la imagen de la hoja: para que las ruinas de

¹⁵⁸ Cuesta Abad (1999) makes a similar point with regard to the use of the colon in *Tres lecciones de tinieblas*, with the alterity immanent to language framed in terms of the performativity of linguistic enunciation: "El uso insistente y repetido, deliberadamente tenaz, de esa puntuación concita la atención en un aspecto metalingüístico del texto que digámoslo así, sugiere la anterioridad de la palabra poética cuya enunciación – aquí y ahora, "ante sí" – no cesa de hablar de sí misma. El signo de puntuación elegido por Valente es el signo de toda apertura (:), el punto inaugural y concluyente del decir reinscrito, desdoblado en una superposición prometedor, preludiado por una expectativa a la escucha que anuncia en cada caso la entera plenitud de lo enunciable....Pero además los dos puntos son el signo que anticipa la palabra del otro, el decir ajeno, el discurso directo, lo actuable por todo acto de expresión, la llegada perpetuamente en ciernes del Acto de Habla" (326).

los tiempos juntos sean la eternidad: para que el rostro se transforme en rostro: la mirada en mirada: la mano al fin en reconocimiento: oh Jerusalem. (OCI: 402)

In this description of the unfolding of immanence it is worth noting the repetition of the subordinating conjunction of purpose, the “para que.” The text is in effect a series of fragments, linked by colons, which are lacking a main clause that would transform them into a complete sentence – if the “para que” represents a teleological movement towards a final cause, the absence of closure represents the absence of the latter. The suspension of finality is compensated for by the vocative “Oh Jerusalem,” a despairing cry to an absent God. But this very appellation to the absent divinity, and the progression of history itself, is only possible due to the dislocation within an immanence that is its own cause, the leaf that is born, dies, and is reborn, and sees the “la imagen de la hoja.”

The thematics of the face in the text is reminiscent of Levinas’s philosophy, in which the theological unknowability of the divine is translated into the infinity of human relation in the face of the other. We might return here to the final section of *La Tentacion de Saint Antoine*, in which the Saint becomes one with the material. This unification, however, is the penultimate moment in the drama. After this experience, dawn breaks, and Antoine raises his gaze to the sky and sees the face of Jesus Christ in the sun. We can interpret this vision in terms of Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism. It is an experience of the alterity within the blinding totality of things that allows for freedom. In terms of the wider concerns of this thesis, it corresponds to Valente’s unworking of poetry, the resistance of the poem to both totality and nihilism, the garden and the desert, in an experience of the infinite potentiality of the material.



CONCLUSION

We have identified a fundamental tension within Valente's poetics, which is defined, on the one hand, by a poetics of plenitude, in which poetic language would restore that which is lost in the abstractions of language, providing a new mythology for a community that has lost fundamental binding values, and on the other, by a poetics of negativity, in which words refer only to an ultimate absence. These tensions are figured in Valente's work in the motifs of the garden and the desert. In the context of Romantic and Idealist philosophies of the end of the eighteenth and start of the nineteenth centuries, this duality can be thought of in terms of the difference between the aesthetic theories of Schelling, Coleridge, and Hegel, in which the absolute comes to presence in the poetic symbol, and the fragmentary poetics of Friedrich Schlegel, in which the relation to the absolute can only be figured negatively, or allegorically. In terms of subjectivity, this difference can be thought of in terms of the identity of the subject that comes to know itself in Cartesian reflection and Hegelian dialectic, or the subject that intends its object in Husserlian phenomenology, and the ironic subjectivity of Schlegel, in which the subject can never attain self-identity. In hermeneutics, the division might be understood as that between a world in which meaning is invested by the subject, as in Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms, and the infinite hermeneutic process of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. In each case, we are confronted with a dilemma that seems to lead to a choice between either a mystified or totalizing philosophy, and thought that allows for no fundamental grounding for human language and knowledge.

The philosophers and writers through whose work we have read Valente's poetry and poetics resist this alternative. As different as they are, they all, in various ways, attempt to

think an alterity that would inhere within immanence. They are, in effect, attempting to think beyond or outside Being, beyond or outside Being conceived as a fundamental ground. The roots of this thought are found in Heidegger's critique of onto-theology. For Heidegger, the philosophical tradition was defined by the forgetting of Being, its hypostasization as a supreme Being, a being without predicates that was the foundation of all that exists. Heidegger, on the other hand, conceived Being as the Being of beings, a Being that *was not*. Levinas goes further than Heidegger in that he wants to think of a transcendence that is independent, or otherwise, to Being. He argues for the possibility of this thought in his description of the primacy of the relation with the Other, a relation which comes before subjectivity and which disturbs or disquiets and thought of the Same, that is, any thought which allows for the primacy of being, or which places the subject against a world in a position of contemplative mastery. The thought of the Other would break the correlation between consciousness and the objects intended by it.

This thought of the transcendent and incommensurable outside that affects us in a paradoxical relation without relation is, I argue, fundamental to the work of the thinkers I have discussed here. In Blanchot's writings on literature, literature is that which relates to an alterity that is elided in language – Orpheus sacrifices his desire to bring Eurydice to the light, the desire to create the total work, and turns to the darkness that is irrecoverable for the light of knowledge. Agamben's work, which has been central to many of the arguments put forth in this thesis, argues that subjectivity is constituted through an experience of language, in which the subject relates to an unknowable somatic self only in the chiasmatic structure of witnessing. Poetry, which for Agamben is the inoperability or unworking of language, would be the discourse that in Western culture has been most attentive to this rupture within subjectivity, and therefore a privileged form of testimony to the suffering of

the ultimate victims of modern bio-politics, the *musselmen* of the concentration camps, its survival related to the maintenance within it of impotentiality. Merleau Ponty's description of the "intertwining" of the flesh retains the structure of a chiasmatic immanent transcendence in terms of the corporal. The "zero-point" is the ungraspable and unknowable space that in which the seer and the seen enter in a complete and mutual interpenetration in the flesh of things that exceeds the ontological categories of being and nothingness. Jean Luc Nancy's theories of community again resist the twin possibilities of plenitude or nihilism. The community conceived as immanence is the reverse side of the supposed disintegration of the community in nihilism – what Jacques Derrida terms the "madness of appropriation" would be the futile response to a nihilism that is the result of an idea of complete community that it supposedly negates. Nancy, in a thought that is profoundly influenced by Levinas, imagines community only in terms of the disappropriation of the subject in its relation to the other. Literature, in this context, would be the staging, but also the unworking of the mythic thought that founds the immanent community.

In my reading of Valente's work I have attempted to show the complexity of his relation to the modern tradition of thought and literature in which the tensions that the thinkers alluded to above refer. In many ways his theories of poetic language are "logocentric," positing a fundamental ground to which poetic language would ultimately remit. Though there are many sources for these ideas, not least the neo-platonic and mystical traditions that inform many aspects of the modern conception of poetry, I have concentrated on the Romantic period, as I argue that the great modern articulation of the tensions that underlie Valente's poetics can be traced to this moment. That is, Valente is a logocentric poet in two ways. In one sense, Valente's theory of poetry is logocentric in the

manner of Schelling and Coleridge, in that Valente takes on their organicist poetics and the theory of the poetic imagination, this last mediated by the work of Ernst Cassirer and Susanne K. Langer, and also in the way he adopts conceptions of myth and symbolic language from thinkers such as Rene Guenon. In a second mode, Valente is logocentric in the manner of Friedrich Schlegel, whose thought, though resisting the aesthetics of the symbol and the imagination, still holds out the desire for an absolute that can only be referred to in a language that is insufficient with regard to its content. Schlegel's thought, however, denies the self-identity of the subject, and opens the door to nihilistic philosophies in which the absolute gives way to the void. In the same sense that Gershom Scholem was able to develop a genealogy of nihilism from the development of the Kabbalah, so Schlegel's writings became congenial to many of the theorists of post-structuralism, who saw in it the precursor to their own thought.

In this thesis, however, I asked whether there is a way to think Valente's poetry beyond the ontological options of being and nothingness, community and nihilism, or inherent meaningfulness and infinite hermeneutics. I developed my reading of the poems in terms of a tradition of contemporary thought, in which Jewish thinkers predominate, and whose central figure is Emmanuel Levinas, that tries to think otherwise than Being, and in which the limits of human knowledge and finitude are subtly redrawn through thought of the enigma of the presence within the immanent that is the infinite alterity of the other human being, and the elaboration of this thought in terms of a conception of language as radical opening to a world before subjective or communicative intention. Though these thinkers exhibit many differences, in each case there is an attempt made to think a paradoxical immanence of the transcendent, an indivisible remainder that refuses dialectical appropriation. I have read Valente's work, then, often against the grain of his

pronouncements on poetic language, seeking to find the *grietas* between his poetics and his poetry, and identifying that within it that points towards an idea of poetic language as remnant, that which remains after the disasters of twentieth century history.

To conclude, therefore, is difficult, as this thought provokes an idea of ultimate inconclusion, it would be what Levinas describes as a pure question, a question that seeks no response. It is perhaps best, then, to explore in this inconclusive conclusion the presence within Valente's poetry of that which has always been understood as the marker of human finitude, death, and ask whether there can remain, at this limit, something that remains to be said.

In an early poem from *A modo de esperanza*, "Consiento," Valente writes:

Debo morir. Y sin embargo, nada
muere, porque nada
tiene fe suficiente
para poder morir.

No muere el día,
pasa;
ni una rosa,
se apaga;
resbala el sol,
no muere.

Sólo yo que he tocado
el sol, la rosa, el día,
y he creído,
soy capaz de morir.
(OCI: 79-80)

The triad of rose, sin, and day are reminiscent of the triad that structures Cernuda's "El Poeta" from *Vivir sin estar viviendo*, which Valente cites in reference to Coleridge in his essay from 1962, "Luis Cernuda y la poesía de la meditación":

Cuando en ella un momento se unifican,
Tal uno son amante, amor y amado,
Los tres complementarios luego y antes dispersos:
El deseo, la rosa y la mirada.

(Qtd. in OCII: 373)

The *ella* in the poem refers to the poetic work that would unify subject, desire, and object. Valente's poem, on the other hand, is more concerned with human finitude, the knowledge of which separates the human from the temporality of the sun and the rose. To be human, in this context, would be to be capable of death. Here we can see the influence of Heideggerian thought. For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, death for *Dasein* must be "distinguished from the going-out-of-the-world of that which merely has life" (284), which would be a mere perishing (*verenden*). Death is the proper of man, the "possibility of the impossibility of *Dasein*" (294), and thereby the "possibility which is one's ownmost" (294), which cannot be related to the experience of another. It is in this sense that, for Heidegger, as for Valente, *Dasein* is capable of death.

Levinas, in a series of lectures from 1975 and 1976, published as *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, carries out a complex critique of Heidegger's rendering of death as the not-yet that is the privileged capacity of *Dasein*. For Levinas, Heidegger's thought conforms to the philosophical tradition that he describes rationality as:

...ce résultat saisissable, compréhensible, par rapport à quoi la durée nous inquiète par son pas-encore, par l'inaccompli. Idéal du sensé pour une conscience s'attachant au terrain inébranlable du monde, c'est-à-dire à la terre sous la voûte du ciel. Rationalité d'une pensée pensant à sa mesure, à son échelle, par rapport à laquelle toute recherche, tout désir, toute question sont devenir, constituent un pas-encore, un manque, sont le non-satisfaisant, représentent d'indigentes connaissances (130).

Here, death is understood as pure annihilation or nothingness, the end of *Dasein*. For Levinas, Heidegger's approach leaves unexamined the sheer unknowability of this nothingness, the enigma that cannot be reduced to what he terms, describing Heidegger's philosophy, the "epic of being." The alterity of death is not commensurable to human knowledge, but can be thought of in terms of desires and questions, as "à l'infini

conviendrait des pensées qui sont désirs et questions” (132). These would be pure desires, and pure questions, that do not aim at anything that would be commensurate to them, but remain in a paradoxical relation without relation to the unknown. The disquiet provoked by these desires and questions constitutes the emotional rupturing of the Same by the Other, which Levinas relates to both the pre-original relation to the other, and the affective impact of the death of this latter: “La mort dans la visage de l’autre homme est la modalité selon laquelle l’alterité par laquelle le Même est affecté, fait éclater son identité de Même en guise de question qui se lève en lui” (133). This rupturing of the identity of the Same through the affective relation to the Other coincides with Levinas’s theory of the subject as fundamentally responsible, with this responsibility constituting an originary deposition of the subject that would never coincide with itself through reflection. For Levinas, “Je suis responsable de l’autre en tant qu’il est mortel”(53). As opposed to the Heideggerean thinking of death as a fundamental property, here, death is impropriety, suffered in responsibility to a debt that is beyond all recompense.

In Valente’s later work, this sense of responsibility for the death of the other is marked in the many poems he writes on the tragic passing of his son, Antonio. “Paisaje con pájaros amarillos,” which forms part of the collection from 1992, “No amanece el cantor,” is dedicated entirely to recounting the suffering this event provoked. For Levinas, in lines from *Totalité et infini* that Valente marks in his edition of the work, the relation of the father and the son is emblematic of the structure of transcendence in immanence that informs his thought. The father is, in a sense, the son, but yet at the same time is other: “c’est moi étranger à soi” (299). The relationship with the son, which need not be taken in a literal, biological sense, reflects the depth of affective relation to the death of the other.

This paradoxical identity with the other is present in many of the fragments which question beyond the knowable:

YO CREÍ que sabía un nombre tuyo para hacerte venir. No sé o no lo encuentro. Soy yo quién está muerto y ha olvidado, me digo, tu secreto. (OCI: 498)

AHORA ya sé que ambos tuvimos una infancia común o compartida, porque hemos muerto juntos. Y me mueve el deseo de ir hasta el lugar en donde estás para depositar junto a las tuyas, como flores tardías, mis cenizas. (OCI: 499)

PARA cuán poco nos sirvió vivir. Qué corto el tiempo que tuvimos para saber que éramos el mismo. Mientras el pájaro sutil de aire incubaba tus cenizas, apenas en el límite soy un tenue reborde de inexistente sombra. (OCI: 502)

It is, in a sense, possible to share the death of the other, as the relationship with the other is always a relation with an unknowable, a relation prior to knowledge and intention that constitutes the subject as other to itself. This is not to take away the sting of death, the profound absence that it marks, but rather to restore within it, beyond nothingness, the enigma, the relation without relation that escapes the absurdity of finitude, but also the consolation, for Levinas in itself based a limited thought of being, of eternal life. The poem remains as a question: "...me dan la clave del enigma / en la pregunta misma sin respuesta / que hace nacer la luz de mis pupilas ciegas" (OCI: 580), testimony to the unknown that is less than nothing, the enigma of the death of the other, the "tenue reborde de inexistente sombra."

In a wider sense, Levinas's thought of death here opens on to questions of temporality and the social. Reading the utopian philosophy of Ernst Bloch, Levinas argues that Bloch's thought allows for "une dimension de sens où se pense un au-delà de l'être et du néant" (107). This is because the temporality of utopia exceeds the temporality defined by Heidegger as having no other meaning than the "to-be-toward-death." Rather, for Bloch,

time relates to a utopia that exceeds all predetermined being-towards. If man is alienated, his work incomplete, the relation towards death of the human is conceived in terms of this incompleteness, and the melancholy that is felt is determined by an exteriority – a social world of alienation – rather than the innermost possibility of impossibility. The emotional tonality of death would not, in this circumstance, be reduced to a fundamental anxiety, the Heideggerian *angst*; rather, anxiety would be only a mode of a melancholy for the world undone. Time, in this context is reduced to hope, and this hope is nourished by the glimpse of a completed world, which Bloch argues can be attained in culture, and is astonishment, “cet instant où la lumière de l’utopie pénètre dans l’obscurité de la subjectivité” (100). This is the possibility that Benjamin and Agamben describe as the “infinite hope” of the language of birds, or what Valente terms the infinite disponibility of a poetic language that is experienced as a “preaparecer,” or, in Bloch’s terms, a *vor-schein*. It is fitting then, that the last poem of *Fragmentos de un libro futuro* should, as we have already mentioned in an earlier chapter, refer to the moment of achieved utopia, the moment in which song of the nightingale and the voice of the poem unite:

Cima del canto.
El ruiseñor y tú
ya sois lo mismo.
(Anónimo: versión)
(OCI: 582)

The poem is written in time, and as such, despite its claim to unity, is essentially incomplete. And yet, it offers to death a meaning that exceeds finitude, being, and nothingness – the hope of an enigmatic time to come that exceeds the knowable, which is, for Levinas, analogous to the significance of our pre-original responsibility to the other. Valente’s career begins with the figuration of the desert, the symbol of absence, and ends with the figuration of the Edenic language of birds, the symbol of presence. Between, or

outside, these lies the experience of the language of hope, the pure question or the desire that remains desire. It is in this sense that we can speak of the inscription of alterity in the work of José Ángel Valente.



ABBREVIATIONS

José Ángel Valente:

OCI Obras Completas I

OCII Obras Completas II

DA Diario Anónimo





BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abrams, M. H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. New York: Oxford UP, 1953.

Adams, Hazard. *Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic*. Tallahassee: Florida UP, 1983.

Adorno, Theodor W. *Notes to Literature*. Trans. Shierry Weber NicholSEN. Vol. I. New York: Columbia UP, 1991.

---, *Essays on Music: Theodor W. Adorno*. Comp. Richard D. Leppert. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie. Berkeley, CA: U of California, 2002.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*. Trans. Liz Heron. London: Verso, 1993.

---, *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1993

---, "No amanece el cantor." Ancet et al. 47-57.

---, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998.

---, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999.

---, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone, 2000.

---, *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2004.

---, "Vocation and Voice." Trans. Kalpana Sheshadri. *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 40 No. 3 (Winter 2014): 492-501.

---, "Resistance in Art." *YouTube*. YouTube, 02 Mar. 2015. Web. 01 Jun. 2015

Agudo, Marta, and Jordi Doce, eds. *Pájaros raíces: En torno a José Ángel Valente*. Madrid: Abada, 2010.

Aleixandre, Vicente. *Algunas caracteres de la nueva poesía española*. Madrid: Instituto De España, 1955.

Alter, Robert. *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem*. Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1991.

Ancet, Jacques. "El ver y el no ver: apuntes para una poética." Hernández Fernández 143-155.

---, "La voz y el dolor." Ancet et al. 17-22.

Ancet, Jacques et al. *En torno a la obra de José Ángel Valente*. Madrid: Alianza, 1996.

Ardanuy, Jordi. "Los ensayos de Valente: Sociología y mística en la fundamentación del humanismo." Agudo and Doce 183-202.

Arkininstall, Christine Reta. *El Sujeto en el exilio: Un estudio de la obra poética de Francisco Brines, Jose Angel Valente y Jose Manuel Caballero Bonald*. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993.

Aseguinolaza, Fernando Cabo, and Germán Gullón. "Entre Narciso Y Filomena." *Teoría del poema: La enunciación lírica*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998. 11-39.

Attell, Kevin. *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction*. New York: Fordham UP, 2014.

Bachelard, Gaston. *Lautréamont*. Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1965.

Balibar, Étienne. "The Nation Form: History and Ideology." *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. By Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein. London: Verso, 1991

Barad, Karen Michelle. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke UP, 2007.

Barjau, Eustaquio. "Antonio Machado: Entre la poesía y la filosofía." *Antonio Machado, teoría y práctica del apócrifo: Tres ensayos de lectura*. Esplugues De Llobregat: Editorial Ariel, 1975. 51-75.

Bataille, Georges. *Théorie de la religion*. Paris: Gallimard, 1973.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*. Ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno. Trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago & London: Chicago UP, 1994.

---, *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. London: Pimlico, 1999.

---, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Peter Demetz. Trans. Edmund F.N. Jephcott. New York: Schocken books, 2007.

Benjamin, Walter, and Gershom Scholem. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*. Ed. Gershom Scholem. Trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992.

Benlabbah, Fatiha. *En el espacio de la mediación: José Ángel Valente y el discurso místico*. Santiago De Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2008.

Biale, David. *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2011.

Blanchot, Maurice. *La part du feu*. Paris: Gallimard, 1949.

---, "Le mythe de Mallarmé. *La part du feu*." Paris: Gallimard, 1949.

- , "La littérature et la droit à la mort." *La part du feu*. Paris: Gallimard, 1949. 293-331.
- , *L'espace littéraire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1955.
- , *Le livre à venir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1959.
- , *Lautréamont et Sade*. Paris: Editions De Minuit, 1967.
- , *L'entretien infini*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969.
- , *L'amitié*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971.
- , *L'écriture du désastre*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980.
- , "Notre compagne clandestine." *Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas*. Ed. François Laruelle. Paris: J.M. Place, 1980. 79-87.
- , *La communauté inavouable*. Paris: Editions De Minuit, 1984.
- Bode, Christopher. "Coleridge and Philosophy." *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. Frederick Burwick. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. 588-619.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- , *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*. New York: Columbia UP, 2000.
- Aseguinolaza, Fernando Cabo. "Entre Narciso Y Filomena." *Teoría del poema: La enunciación lírica*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998. 11-39.
- Cage, John. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973.
- Calarco, Matthew. *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*. New York: Columbia UP, 2008.

Cañas, Dionisio. *Poesía y percepción: Francisco Brines, Claudio Rodríguez y José Ángel Valente*. Madrid: Hiperión, 1984.

Cano, José Luis. "José Ángel Valente." *Poesía española del siglo XX*. Madrid: Guadarrama, 1960. 515-520.

Casado, Miguel. "Entre dos reinos (José Ángel Valente)." *La palabra sabe*. Madrid: Libros de la resistencia, 2012. 149-84.

Cassirer, Ernst. *An Essay on Man: an Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1944.

---, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol 1*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. New Haven: Yale UP, 1953.

---, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol 2*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. New Haven: Yale U.P., 1955.

Cavarero, Adriana. *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Trans. Paul A. Kottman. Stanford CA.: Stanford UP, 2005.

Celan, Paul. *Collected Prose*. Trans. Rosmarie Waldrop. Manchester: Carcanet, 1999.

Cernuda, Luis. *La realidad y el deseo: (1924-1962); Seguido de historia de un libro (La realidad y el deseo)*. Madrid: Alianza, 2000.

Cirlot, Juan Eduardo. *Diccionario de símbolos*. Barcelona: Editorial Labor, 1992.

Coleridge, Samuel. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Lay Sermons. Vol. 6*. Ed. R.J. White. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972.

Conte Imbert, David. "La palabra de lo singular: figuraciones del origen entre lírica y filosofía (Martin Heidegger, Claudio Rodríguez, José Ángel Valente)." Diss. Carlos III de Madrid, 2006.

---, "José Ángel Valente y Martin Heidegger, desde las divergencias entre poesía y filosofía." Fernández Rodríguez et al. 79-126.

Clifford, James. *Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World*. Berkeley: U of California, 1982.

Cuesta Abad, José M. "La enajenación por la palabra (Reflexiones sobre el lenguaje poético en Valente)." Hernández Fernández 49-77.

---, *Poema y enigma*. Madrid: Huerga & Fierro, 1999.

---, "Momentos de atención." *La transparencia informe: Filosofía y literatura de Schiller a Nietzsche*. Madrid: Abada, 2010a. 119-170.

---, "Figuras en fantasma." Agudo and Doce. 203-238.

Daydí-Tolson, Santiago. *Voces y ecos en la poesía de José Ángel Valente*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 1984.

Debecki, Andrew P. "José Ángel Valente: Lectura y relectura." *Poesía de conocimiento: La generación española de 1956-1971*. Madrid: Júcar, 1987. 169-198.

De Certeau, Michel. *La fable mystique: XVIe-XVIIe siècle*. Paris: Gallimard, 1982.

---, *La faiblesse de croire*. Ed. Luce Giard. Paris: Éd. Du Seuil, 1987.

De Man, Paul. "The Rhetoric of Temporality." *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1983. 187-228.

---, "The Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image." *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1984. 1-18.

Derrida, Jacques. "Edmond Jabès et la question du livre." *L'écriture et la différance*. Paris: Editions Du Seuil, 1967. 99-116.

---, "Une idée de Flaubert." *Psyché. Inventions de l'autre*. Paris: Galilée, 1987. 305-325.

---, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*. Paris: Galilée, 1996.

---, "Une idée de Flaubert." *Psyché. Inventions de l'autre*. Paris: Galilée, 1987. 305-325.

---, "L'animal que donc je suis." *L'animal autobiographique: autour de Jacques Derrida*. Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet. Paris: Galilée, 1999. 251-301.

---, "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan." *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005.

Doce, Jordi. *Imán y desafío: Presencia del romanticismo inglés en la poesía española contemporánea*. Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 2005.

Domínguez Rey, Antonio. *Limos del verbo (José Ángel Valente)*. Madrid: Verbum, 2000.

Donahue, Luke. "Erasing Differences between Derrida and Agamben." *Oxford Literary Review* 35.1 (2013): 25-45.

El Maleh, Edmond Amran. "El cuerpo viviente de la letra." Hernández Fernández 101-108.

Eliot, T. S. *Selected Essays, 1917-1932*. 2nd ed. London: Faber and Faber, 1948.

---, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. London: Faber and Faber, 1955.

---, *T.S. Eliot Collected Poems*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963.

Esposito, Roberto. "Community and Nihilism." *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 5. 1 (2009): 24-36.

---, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2010.

Fernández Castillo, José Luis. "El ídolo y el vacío. La crisis de la divinidad en la tradición poética moderna: Octavio Paz y José Ángel Valente." Diss. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2008.

Fernández Quesada, Nuria, ed. *Anatomía de la palabra*. Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2000.

---, "José Ángel Valente: Siempre he sido absolutamente sensible al mundo circundante." Fernández Quesada 131-149.

Fernández Rodríguez, Manuel. *El tejedor de redes. Análisis integral de la narrativa de José Ángel Valente*. Ourense: Deputación & Cátedra José Ángel Valente, 2006.

---, "José Ángel Valente y la modernidad poética romántica." Fernández Rodríguez et al. 9-78.

---, "José Ángel Valente, el exilio como raíz." Rodríguez Fer, *Valente: el fulgor y las tinieblas* 139-151.

Fernández Rodríguez, Manuel et al. *Referentes europeos en la obra de Valente*. Santiago de Compostela: Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, 2007.

Ferrari, Américo. "El poema: ¿último animal visible de lo invisible?" Ancet et al. 23-32.

Flaubert, Gustave. *La tentation de Saint Antoine. Éditions*. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1954.

Fletcher, Richard. "The Early Middle Ages: 700-1250." *Spain: A History*. Ed. Raymond Carr. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. 63-89.

Fontenay, Elisabeth de. *Le Silence des bêtes: La philosophie à l'épreuve de l'animalité*. Paris: Fayard, 1998.

Foucault, Michel. *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966.

Friedlander, Saul. *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939*, New York: HarperCollins, 1997.

---, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

García Montero, Luis. "Poética." *El último tercio del siglo (1968-1998): antología consultada de la poesía española*. Ed. Jesús García Visor. Madrid: Visor, 1998.

Gasché, Rodolphe. *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986.

Gilbert Lewis, Paula. *The Aesthetics of Stéphane Mallarmé in Relation to his Public*. Plainsboro, NJ: AUP, 1976.

Gomez Tore, Jose Luis. "Valente en tiempos de miseria." *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 763 (2014): 4-17.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.

Gruia, Ioana Ruxandra. *Escribir el tiempo (huellas de T.S. Eliot en Jaime Gil de Biedma y José Ángel Valente)*. Granada: Editorial De La Universidad De Granada, 2008.

Guénon, René. *Symboles de la science sacrée*. Paris: Gallimard, 1962.

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1987.

Hadot, Pierre. *Plotinus, or the Simplicity of Vision*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1993.

Hamacher, Werner. *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996.

Hamburger, Michael. "Scholem and Benjamin." *Grand Street* 1.4 (1982): 128-37.

Handelman, Susan A. *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thoughts and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas*. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991.

Heaney, Seamus. "The Jayne Lecture: Title Deeds: Translating a Classic." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 148.4 (2004): 411-26.

Hegel, Georg W. F., Friedrich Hölderlin, and Friedrich W.J. Schelling. "The Earliest Program for a System of German Idealism." Trans. Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*. Ed. Jochen Schulte-Sasse. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1997. 72-73.

Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

Hernández Fernández, Teresa, ed. *El silencio y la escucha: José Angel Valente*. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra/Ministerio De Cultura, 1995.

Hilberg, Raul. *The Destruction of the European Jews*. Chicago: Quadrangle, 1961.

Hill, Leslie. *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch*. London: Continuum, 2012.

Idel, Moshe. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.

---, *Absorbing Perfections, Kabbalah and Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2002.

Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985.

Jabès, Edmond. *Le livre des questions*. Paris: Gallimard, 1963.

---, *Le livre des ressemblances*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.

---, *Un étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format*. Paris: Gallimard, 1989.

Jabès, Edmond, and Marcel Cohen. *Du désert au livre: Entretiens avec Marcel Cohen*. Paris: P. Belfond, 1980.

Jameson, Frederic. *The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit*. London: Verso, 2010.

Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought*. Berkeley: U of California, 1993.

Jiménez, José. "El vuelo de la imagen." Ancet et al. 59-74.

Jiménez, José Olivio. "Lucha, duda y fe en la palabra poética" *Diez años de poesía española: 1960-1970*. Madrid: Insula, 1972. 223-242.

Jiménez Heffernan, Julián. *La palabra emplazada: meditación y contemplación de Herbert a Valente*. Córdoba: Universidad, 1998.

---, *Los papeles rotos: Ensayos sobre poesía española contemporánea*. Madrid: Abada Editores, 2004.

Jonas, Hans. "The Nobility of Sight." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 14.4 (1954): 507-519.

Judt, Tony. *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*. New York: Penguin, 2005.

Kafka, Franz. *The Diaries of Franz Kafka: 1914-1923*. Trans. Martin Greenberg, with the co-operation of Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1949.

---, *The Complete Stories*. Trans. Nahum N. Glatzer. New York: Schocken, 1971.

Kearney, Richard. "Merleau Ponty and the Sacramentality of the Flesh." *Merleau-Ponty at the Limits of Art, Religion, and Perception*. Ed. Kascha Semonovitch and Neal DeRoo. London: Continuum, 2010. 147-166.

Kirby, Vicki. *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Knox, Francesca Bugliani. *The Eye of the Eagle: John Donne and the Legacy of Ignatius Loyola*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2011.

Krämer, Gudrun. *The Jews in Modern Egypt: 1914-1952*. Seattle: Washington UP, 1989.

Lacalle Ciordia, María de los Ángeles. "La presencia del ángel en la poesía de José Ángel Valente." *Cuadernos del Marqués de San Adrián*, 1. (2001): 27-45.

Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *La poésie comme expérience*. Paris: Bourgois, 1986.

Langbaum, Robert. *The Poetry of Experience; the Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*. New York: Norton, 1963.

Langer, Susan K. *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*. New York: New American Library, 1962.

Leavis, F. R. *New Bearings in English Poetry; a Study of the Contemporary Situation*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1954.

Leenhardt, Maurice. *Do Kamo: La personne et le mythe dans le monde mélanésien*. Paris: Gallimard, 1947.

Lefebvre, Henri. *Le langage et la société*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966.

Lévinas Emmanuel, « La réalité et son ombre », in *Les imprévus de l'histoire*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1994.

---, *Totalité et infini; Essai sur l'extériorité*. La Haye: M. Nijhoff, 1961.

---, *Noms propres*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1974.

---, *Autrement qu'être ou Au-delà de l'essence*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1990.

---, *De l'existence à l'existant*. Paris: J. Vrin, 1990.

---, *Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1991.

---, *Dieu, la mort et le temps*. Paris: Grasset, 1993.

Lévinas, Emmanuel, and Philippe Nemo. *Ethique et infini: Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*. Paris: Fayard, 1982.

Lewis, Paula Gilbert. *The Aesthetics of Stéphane Mallarmé in Relation to His Public*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1976.

Llera, José Antonio. "La forma y el vacío creador en 'El Cántaro' de José Ángel Valente." *Agudo and Doce*. 383-401

López Castro, Armando. *Pájaro y enigma. Estudios sobre José Ángel Valente*. Ourense: Abano, 2000.

---, *En el límite de la escritura: poesía última de José Ángel Valente*. Ourense: Abano, 2002.

Lopo, María. "José Ángel Valente y Edmond Jabès. Reconocerse en la palabra." *Rodríguez Fernández et al.* 149-184.

---, "Valente e Lautréamont." *José Ángel Valente: Memoria sonora*. Santiago De Compostela: Universidade De Santiago De Compostela, 2013. 81-89.

Lucas, Jorge Machín. *José Ángel Valente y la intertextualidad mística postmoderna: Del presente agónico al presente eterno*. Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2010.

Lyons, John D. *Before Imagination: Embodied Thought from Montaigne to Rousseau*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005.

MacNeice, Louis. *Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1935.

Magid, Shaul. "Gershom Scholem." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 30 Oct. 2013. Web. 10 Jun. 2014.

Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Igitur ; Divagations ; Un Coup De Dés*. Paris: Gallimard, 1985.

Marchal, Bertrand. *La religion de Mallarmé: Poésie, mythologie et religion*. Paris: J. Corti, 1988.

Marson, Ellen Engelson. *Poesía y poética de José Ángel Valente*. New York: Eliseo Torres & Sons, 1984.

Martz, Louis Lohr. *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954.

Mayhew, Jonathan. "'El signo de la feminidad': género y creación poética en José Ángel Valente." *Ínsula*, 570-571 (1994): 12-17.

---, "The Word Made Flesh: Logocentrism in the Later Work of José Ángel Valente." *The Poetics of Self-Consciousness: Twentieth-Century Spanish Poetry*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1994. 66-79.

---, "Valente / Tàpies: The Poetics of Materiality." *Anales de Literatura Española Contemporánea* 22: 1-2 (1997): 91-102.

---, "Valente's Lectura de Paul Celan: Translation and the Heideggerian Tradition in Spain." *Diacritics* 34: 3-4 (2004): 73-89.

---, "Valente y Beckett, afinidades e influencias." Fernández Rodríguez et al. 127-148.

---, "Valente, Gamoneda, and the 'Generation of the 1950s'." *The Twilight of the Avant-Garde*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2009. 65-102.

Merleau Ponty, Maurice. *Le visible et le invisible*. Ed. Claude Lefort. Paris: Gallimard, 1964.

Millán-Zaibert, Elizabeth. *Friedrich Schlegel and the Emergence of Romantic Philosophy*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2007.

Mills, Patricia Jagentowicz . "Hegel's Antigone." *The Owl of Minerva* 17.2 (1986): 131-152.

Montaigne, Michel de. "De L'exercitation." *Essais. Tome I*. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1962.

Mora, Vicente Luis. "Desierto contra espejo." Agudo and Doce 421-436.

Moretti, Franco, and Dominique Pestre. "Bankspeak." *New Left Review* 92 (2015): 75-99.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota, 1991.

Navarrete, Ignacio Enrique. *Orphans of Petrarch: Poetry and Theory in the Spanish Renaissance*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.

Nirenberg, David. *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2013.

Nuño, Ana. "El ángel de la creación. Entrevista a José Ángel Valente." *Quimera*, 168 (1998): 8-13.

Palley, Julian. "El ángel y el yo en la poesía de José Ángel Valente." Rodríguez Fer, *José Ángel Valente. El escritor y la crítica* (1992): 312-330.

---, "José Ángel Valente, poeta de la inminencia." Rodríguez Fer, *Material Valente* 43-55.

Pardo, José Luis. *Fragmentos de un libro anterior*. Santiago de Compostela: Universidade.de Santiago de Compostela, 2004.

Paz, Octavio. *Los Hijos del limo: Del romanticismo a la vanguardia*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1974.

Peinado Elliot, Carlos. *Unidad y trascendencia. Estudios sobre la obra de José Ángel Valente*. Sevilla: Alfar, 2002.

---, “La imagen banal y la palabra única: en torno a un poema de José Ángel Valente.” *Comunicación: revista internacional de comunicación audiovisual, publicidad y estudios culturales* 1 (2002a): 189-202.

---, “La alteridad en Eliot y Valente: en torno a “Little Gidding” y El fulgor.” *Cauce. Revista de Filología y su Didáctica* 26 (2003): 349-390.

Pons, Arnau and Patrick Llored. “Conversación con Jean Bollack.” *Quimera* 201 (2001): 34-57.

Ramos Abreu José A. de. *La fascinación del enigma: La poética de José Ángel Valente en sus ensayos*. Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 2008.

Rancière, Jacques. *Mallarmé: La politique de la sirène*. Paris: Hachette, 2011.

Rivera Fernández, Raquel, ed. *José Ángel Valente. Memoria sonora*. Ourense: Deputación Provincial De Ourense, 2013.

Rodríguez Fer, Claudio, ed. *José Ángel Valente: El escritor y la crítica*. Madrid: Taurus, 1992.

---, *Material Valente*. Ed. Madrid: Júcar, 1994.

---, “Valente en la lengua del origen.” Hernández Fernández 119-141.

---, “Entrevista vital a José Ángel Valente: de Ourense a Oxford.” *Moenia* 4 (1998): 451-464.

---, “Entrevista vital a José Ángel Valente: de Xenebra a Almería.” *Moenia* 6 (2000): 185-210.

---, *Valente: El fulgor y las tinieblas*. Ed. Lugo: Axac, 2008.

---, "Valente dende as cartas de alén." *Moenia* 10 (2010): 125-131.

---, *Valente Vital (Galicia, Madrid, Oxford)*. Ed. Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2012.

---, *Valente Vital (Ginebra, Saboya, París)*. Ed. Santiago de Compostela. Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2014.

Romano, Marcela. *Imaginarios re-(des)-encontrados: Poéticas de José Ángel Valente*. Mar de Plata: Martin, 2002.

Sánchez Robanya, Andrés. "La poesía de José Ángel Valente: suma de una lectura." Hernández Fernández 173-193.

---, "Sobre dos poemas de José Ángel Valente." Ancet et al. 41-46.

---, Introduction. *Diario Anónimo: 1959-2000*. By José Ángel Valente. Ed. Andrés Sanchez Robanya. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2011. 7-30.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Paris: Gallimard, 1964.

Savelsberg, Frank. "Aproximación a Tres lecciones de tinieblas de José Ángel Valente." *Moenia* 6 (2000) 51-125.

Schaeffer, Jean-Marie. *L'art de l'âge moderne. L'esthétique et la philosophie de l'art du XVIIIe siècle à nos jours*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992.

Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Von. *The Philosophy of Art*. Trans. Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1989.

Schlegel, Friedrich. *Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Peter Firchow. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1991.

---, "On Incomprehensibility." Trans. Jochen Schulte-Sasse. *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*. Ed. Jochen Schulte-Sasse. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1997. 118-127.

Scholem, Gershom. "The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism." *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*. New York: Schocken, 1969. 32-86.

---, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala." *Diogenes* 20.79 (1972): 59-80.

---, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York: Schocken, 1995.

---, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism." *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*. New York: Schocken, 1995. 282-303.

Schulte-Sasse, Jochen. *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1997.

Simhon, Ari. *Levinas critique de Hegel*. Brussels: Ousia, 2006.

Snarrenberg, Robert. *Schenker's Interpretive Practice*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Söderbäck, Fanny, ed. *Feminist Readings of Antigone*. Albany: State U of New York, 2010.

Stamelman, Richard Howard., and Mary Ann. Caws, eds. *Ecrire le livre: Autour d'Edmond Jabès: Colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle*. Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1989.

Steiner, George. *Antigones*. New York: Oxford UP, 1984.

---, *Grammars of Creation: Originating in the Gifford Lectures for 1990*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001.

Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry and Prose*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1997.

Taylor, Charles. "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture." *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau Ponty*. Ed. Taylor Carman. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 26-49.

Terry, Arthur . "The Body and the Place of Writing" *Romance Studies* 10.2 (1992): 75-87.

---, *La idea del lenguaje en la poesía española. Crespo, Sánchez Robayna y Valente*. Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2002.

Valcárcel, Eva. *El fulgor o la palabra encarnada. Imágenes y símbolos de la poesía última de José Ángel Valente*. Barcelona: PPU, 2009.

---, "El palpitante pez pájaro. Sobre la experiencia de la palabra poética según Lezama y Valente." *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 600 (2000): 25-30.

Valesio, Paolo. "El contorno de la ausencia (Reflexión sobre la poesía valentiana)." *Hernández Fernández* 217-255.

Valente, José Ángel. "He Vivido Esperando La Revelación." Interview by Ima Sanchís. *La Vanguardia* [Barcelona] 03 May 2000: 3.

---, *Obras Completas*. Ed. Andrés Sánchez Robayna. Comp. Claudio Rodríguez Fer. Vol. I. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2006.

---, *Obras Completas*. Ed. Andrés Sánchez Robayna. Comp. Claudio Rodríguez Fer. Vol. II. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2008.

---, *Diario Anónimo: 1959-2000*. Ed. Andrés Sánchez Robayna. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2011

Vattimo, Gianni. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988.

Vivas, Eliseo. *Creation and Discovery; Essays in Criticism and Aesthetics*. New York: Noonday, 1955.

Wachsmass, Nikolaus. *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2015.

Wall, Thomas Carl. *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, Agamben*. New York: State U of New York P, 1999.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig Von. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness. London: Routledge, 2002.

Wolfson, Elliot R. *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*. New York: Seven Bridges, 1999.

Wolosky, Shira. "Gershom Scholem's Linguistic Theory." *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* (2007): 165–205.

Yildiz, Yasemin. *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*. New York: Fordham UP, 2012.

Zambrano, Maria. "José Ángel Valente por la luz del origen." *Moenia* 6 (2000): 9-20.

---, *Filosofía y poesía*. Mexico: Fondo de cultura económica, 2006.

---, *La tumba de Antígona y otros textos sobre el personaje trágica*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2012.

APPENDIX: SUMMARY

En una entrevista dada al final de su vida, y publicado el día 3 de mayo, 2000, en la sección cultural del periódico *La Vanguardia*, Valente describe una experiencia de su infancia. En los años directamente después de guerra civil, cuando las prisiones de Galicia estuvieron llenas de simpatizantes del lado republicano, los “rojos,” su padre le llevó para visitar unos amigos que habían sido encarcelados. Valente cuenta como entrecruzó miradas con los prisioneros, y como esa experiencia tuvo una fuerte influencia en su evolución ética y política posterior, y afirma – “desde entonces soy rojo.”

La identificación infantil con los perdedores de la guerra indica una postura ética que define en muchos sentidos su vida adulta, una postura que podría ser descrita, en la terminología del filósofo francés Emmanuel Levinas, como un compromiso con la otredad o la alteridad. El entendimiento de Valente de la historia de la península ibérica tiene su fundamento en este compromiso. Valente entiende el proceso de la formación del estado español en términos de la marginalización o la destrucción de la diferencia. Aunque la visión de una Iberia medieval “tolerante” puede ser un anacronismo, sus declaraciones en cuanto a los procesos de “purificación” étnica y la marginalización de las culturas no cristianas en la península ibérica resalta su compromiso con la alteridad, un compromiso que asume una relevancia especial en el contexto de la Europa de la posguerra, en que las fronteras y las identidades nacionales vuelven a ser particularmente rígidas.

En esta tesis investigo la escritura de Valente en términos de este compromiso con la alteridad. Sostengo que la postura ética de Valente en cuanto a la otredad nos ayuda a entender las tensiones inherentes a sus teorías del lenguaje poético, su lectura de escritores contemporáneos judíos, Paul Celan y Edmond Jabès, su relación con España y con Galicia

y la noción problemática de la comunidad, la importancia del cuerpo, tanto como la presencia de la muerte en su obra. De esta manera situó su poesía en el contexto de las respuestas filosóficas y poéticas a la violencia absoluta de las guerras del siglo veinte. Para explorar esta relación entre la poesía de Valente y la ética de la alteridad es necesario prestar atención a la complejidad de su obra, las tensiones entre las varias poéticas que informan su pensamiento y su obra, tensiones que están especialmente visible en su defensa de la capacidad de la poesía de recuperar la experiencia perdida, una poética que remite al espacio simbólico del jardín, y su defensa de una poética negativa, que remite al espacio simbólico del desierto.

Comienzo la tesis con un análisis de uno de los ensayos clave en la construcción de la poética temprana de Valente, “Comunicación y conocimiento.” En este ensayo Valente se distancia de la poética contemporánea de Vicente Aleixandre y Carlos Bousoño, según lo cual la poesía tiene, en primer lugar, una función comunicativa. Para Valente, la poesía es, primeramente, una forma de conocimiento. Valente basa sus ideas en gran parte en la obra del filósofo alemán Ernst Cassirer, y su teoría de las formas simbólicas, ideas que tienen sus raíces en la teorización romántica de la imaginación y del símbolo. Noto que estas ideas son muy alejadas de la filosofía ética de Levinas, y la elaboración de esta filosofía en clave literaria en la obra de Michel Blanchot, dos figuras que son fundamentales para Valente y también para la elaboración de un pensamiento de la otredad en la Europa de la posguerra. En el análisis de las dos primeras colecciones de Valente, *A modo de esperanza* y *Poemas a Lázaro*, registro en sus poemas una actitud ambivalente en cuanto a las imágenes y la capacidad de la poesía de unir palabra y mundo que su poética más positiva parece negar.

En el tercer capítulo abordo la cuestión de la relación entre el poeta y su sociedad. Analizo los ensayos que Valente escribe sobre la *Antígona* de Sófocles, en que defiende la importancia de la poesía como lenguaje que resiste lo que vea como el lenguaje “cristalizado” del poder. Para Valente, la figura y lenguaje de Antígona representa la resistencia al poder y la capacidad de crear nuevas estructuras políticas y sociales. Sostengo que esta lectura de la tragedia contradice interpretaciones predominantes, como las de Hegel y Lacan, según las cuales Antígona representa el ámbito de lo pre-político. Comparo los ensayos de Valente con el *Antigone’s Claim* de Judith Butler, en que la escolar feminista sostiene que Antígona representa la capacidad de crear historia, de enunciar posiciones políticas que nunca han encontrado lugar en la esfera pública. Elaboro estos argumentos en términos de la relación entre la poesía de Valente y la noción de comunidad. Analizo la figuración del lenguaje en las primeras colecciones de su obra, y la tensión entre la figuración del lenguaje como substancia etérea, divorciado del mundo, y la figuración del lenguaje como substancia orgánica, uniendo la comunidad como totalidad. Relaciono esta tensión con la teorización de la comunidad de Jean Luc Nancy y Roberto Esposito, y sugiero la posibilidad de una alternativa al dilema entre totalidad y nihilismo que caracteriza el discurso moderno sobre la comunidad.

En el cuarto capítulo comienzo mi indagación en el interés que Valente manifiesta durante su carrera en la cultura judaica. Resalto la importancia de la figura de Gershom Scholem, y la interpretación de la cábala de este, para la construcción de la poética de Valente. Analizo la teoría lingüística de Scholem, y muestro como esta informa algunos aspectos de lo que podría ser denominado la hermenéutica infinita de Valente. En una comparación de la lectura de Kafka de Scholem y Walter Benjamin, intento mostrar, en la luz de la obra de Giorgio Agamben, una alternativa al dilema que estructura la tesis, entre

una hermenéutica infinita y una creencia mistificada en la unión de palabra y mundo en la palabra poética. En este contexto aporto una relectura de la significancia de la “voz” en la poesía de Valente, y también uno de sus ensayos claves, “La lengua de los pájaros.”

En el siguiente capítulo sigo con mi exploración de los vínculos entre Valente y la cultura judaica con una investigación de su relación con el poeta francés, Edmond Jabès. Identifico la experiencia común de los dos poetas del exilio, y noto que esta experiencia se traduce a una teoría de la creatividad poética que es derivado de la obra de Scholem. Recalco la importancia en la tradición judaica del Libro, y como, en la poética de Valente y Jabès, y en la cábala, la centralidad del libro implica una libertad hermenéutica fundamental. El tema del exilio es central en la colección dedicada a Galicia, “Cantigas de alén,” y en mi lectura de la esta noto el lenguaje no oficial empleado en el texto. Pregunto aquí la significancia del intento de volver a un lenguaje familiar, no oficial, y lo vinculo con el ensayo de Jacques Derrida, *El monolingüise de l'autre*. Llego a la conclusión de que en esta obra Valente subraya tanto el deseo de volver a un lenguaje puro y la imposibilidad de cumplir tal fantasía. Finalmente, noto la centralidad del fragmento en la obra de los dos poetas, relacionando este con la teorización del fragmento de Friedrich Schlegel.

En el último capítulo sobre Valente y la cultura judaica, examino la importancia para Valente de la figura de Paul Celan. Para Valente, Celan era el poeta más importante de la posguerra, una referencia poética y ética ineludible cuyo trabajo existe como una sobrevivencia o resto del genocidio. En mi lectura de los dos poetas empleo el trabajo reciente de Giorgio Agamben sobre el testimonio después de Auschwitz, en lo cual el filósofo italiano describe la estructura paradójica del testimonio, el hecho de que el testimonio siempre implica un silencio, el silencio de la víctima que no puede expresar en sus propias palabras lo que le ha sucedido. Vinculo esta discusión de la imposibilidad del

testimonio a las estructuras enunciativas de la poesía, y la lectura de Valente del “narcisismo” en la obra de Juan Ramón Jiménez y Antonio Machado. Analizo en la obra de Valente las maneras en que su poesía se mantiene como un discurso que testifica la ausencia de las víctimas de la violencia totalitaria, y la necesidad ética de dejar consonancia de esta ausencia en los poemas.

Después de la exploración del judaísmo en la obra de Valente, se vuelve hacia otra categoría que podría ser denominado como otra en cuanto a la tradición filosófica occidental, la del cuerpo. Valente identifica como una de las patologías de la cultura occidental la degradación del cuerpo como impureza en relación con el espíritu. Su poesía, argumenta, es un intento de superar la división entre cuerpo y alma (o espíritu, o mente) que caracteriza nuestra cultura. En este contexto cito uno de las referencias más importantes en la vida de Valente, la filósofa María Zambrano, y su descripción, en *Poesía y filosofía*, de la división platónica entre la filosofía, que intenta abstraer de la experiencia inmediata, y la poesía, que se mantiene encadenada al devenir de las cosas. Examinó la lectura que Zambrano aporta de la obra de Valente en su ensayo “Valente por la luz del origen” en lo cual vincula la cuestión del cuerpo con la de la luz. En este contexto hago referencia a la filosofía de Maurice Merleau Ponty, y su entrelazamiento del cuerpo y luz en su obra póstuma, *Lo visible y lo invisible*. Tomando de la obra de Merleau Ponty, analizo la estructura de alteridad inmanente que rige muchos de los poemas de Valente dedicado al cuerpo.

En el último capítulo de la tesis vuelvo hacia la teorización romántica de la poesía en la obra de Friedrich Schelling. Recalco la importancia de la música en su *Filosofía del arte*, y lo conecto con la importancia de la música, y del silencio, en la obra de Valente, pero desde una perspectiva que resiste las tendencias totalizadoras del filósofo alemán. Si

la música existe en tradición moderna como cifra de una experiencia inmediata de la realidad, la animalidad también empeña un papel parecido. Es en este contexto que analizo la lectura de Valente de Lautréamont y Vicente Aleixandre. Subrayo el hecho de que en sus intentos de relacionarse con la música y la experiencia animal del mundo, la obra de Valente registra la misma estructura de alteridad inmanente que identifiqué en su escritural del cuerpo. Relaciono esta estructura con la filosofía de Levinas, para lo cual la presencia del Otro nos confronta con lo que es una experiencia paradójica de una trascendencia que es, al mismo tiempo, inmanente al mundo.

En la conclusión muestro como los diferentes partes de la tesis están conectados y como en ellos se manifiesta las maneras en que la obra de Valente se inserta dentro del contexto de una tradición de pensamiento de la posguerra que se define por un rechazo de las categorías fundamentales de la ontología y un compromiso fundamental con la alteridad. Identifico una tensión radical en la poética de Valente, que se define, por una parte, por una poética de la plenitud, en que el lenguaje poético recuperaría lo que se pierde en el lenguaje común, así proviniendo una nueva mitología para una comunidad que ha perdido valores y lazos fundamentales, y, por otra parte, una poética de la negatividad, en que las palabras se refieren a una ausencia radical. Se refleja estas tensiones en la obra de Valente en los motivos del jardín y del desierto. En el contexto de las filosofías románticas e idealistas del fin del siglo XVIII y principios del siglo XIX, esta dualidad puede ser pensado en términos de la diferencia entre las teorías estéticas de Schelling, Coleridge, y Hegel, en que el absoluto se manifiesta en el símbolo poético, y la poética fragmentada de Friedrich Schlegel, en que la relación con el absoluto solo se puede figurar negativa o alegóricamente. En términos de la hermenéutica, esta división es análoga a la diferencia entre un mundo en que la significancia es investida por el sujeto, y el proceso de infinita

interpretación del *Verdad y Método* de Gadamer. En cada caso, estamos confrontados con un dilema que parece llegar a una elección entre una filosofía mistificada o totalizadora y un pensamiento que socava los fundamentos del conocimiento y lenguaje humano.

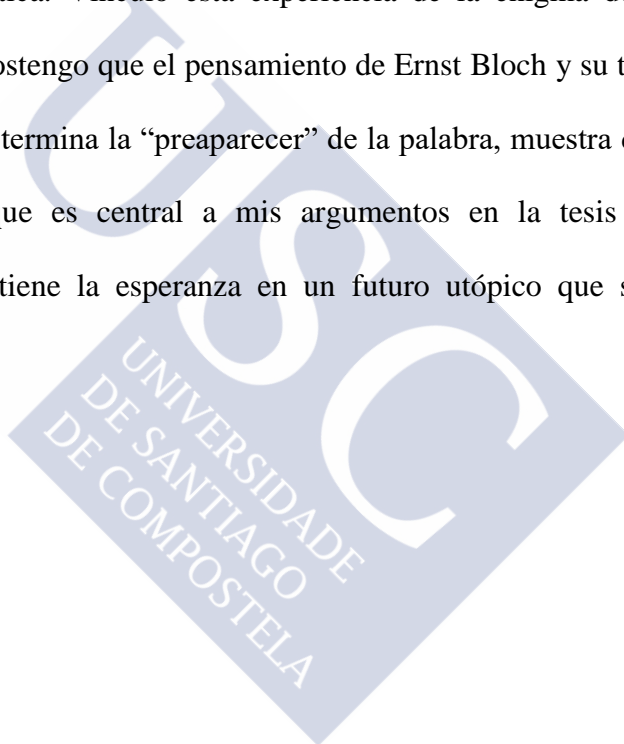
Los filósofos y escritores con los he leído la obra de Valente resisten esta alternativa. A pesar de las diferencias entre ellos, todos intentan, en maneras diferentes, pensar una alteridad que sería inherente a la inmanencia. Están, en efecto, intentando pensar más allá de las categorías de ser y no-ser que son fundamentales para la filosofía occidental. En este contexto, la filosofía de Levinas, que pretende ser una filosofía “más allá” del Ser, substituyendo esta por una experiencia pre-subjetiva del Otro ser humano, una experiencia que es excesivo en cuanto a cualquier intención subjetiva, es clave. Aquí tenemos una relación con una trascendente e incommensurable “afuera” que nos afecta en una relación inmanente. Esta estructura de alteridad inmanente es, sostengo, fundamental a la obra de los pensadores que he mencionado en esta tesis. En la escritura de Blanchot, literatura es lo que nos pone en relación con una alteridad que se elide en el lenguaje. Para Agamben, cuya obra ha sido central en muchos de los argumentos que propongo aquí, la subjetividad se constituye en una experiencia del lenguaje, en que el sujeto se pone en relación con su propio incognoscible ser somático en la estructura quiasmática del testimonio. La poesía, que para Agamben es la inoperatividad o deshacimiento del lenguaje, sería el discurso que en la cultura occidental ha sido más atento a esta ruptura dentro de la subjetividad, y por lo tanto una forma privilegiada de testimonio al sufrimiento de las víctimas de la violencia totalitaria. Lo que Merleau Ponty describe como el “entrelazamiento” de la “carne” repite la estructura de la alteridad inmanente que he identificado. El “punto cero” que el filósofo francés propone como un espacio intermedio en que conciencia y cosa se interpenetra, como el pensamiento de Levinas, es un intento de

escapar las categorías ontológicas del ser y la nada y que se revela en las formas del arte que son, al mismo tiempo, “ideales” y “carneles.” Similarmente, en el trabajo de Jean Luc Nancy y Roberto Esposito existe una resistencia a las alternativas del ser la comunidad y la nada del nihilismo que se expresa en la capacidad de la literatura, en la terminología de Nancy, de “interrumpir” el mito comunitario.

En mi lectura de Valente, por lo tanto, he intentado mostrar la complejidad de su relación con la tradición moderna de la filosofía y la poesía. Su pensamiento poético es a veces “logocéntrico,” postulando la existencia de un *logos* o verbo ideal a la cual la poesía tiende, pero, por otra parte, su poesía muchas veces tematiza su propia insuficiencia, la autonomía de un lenguaje apartado del mundo en lo cual el significado es infinitamente deferido. En esta tesis, sin embargo, propongo la posibilidad de una salida de las opciones – ser o nada, comunidad o nihilismo, palabra plena o palabra hueca – que la tradición moderna nos ha legado. En la obra de Levinas, Blanchot, Benjamin, Agamben, Merleau Ponty – todos pensadores centrales para Valente – encuentro una manera de leer la poesía que resiste las categorías dominantes de la ontología. Leyendo la obra de Valente a contrapelo de muchos de sus dictámenes sobre la naturaleza de la palabra poética, intento buscar en las grietas en su poética y su poesía un pensamiento de la poesía que se constituye como resto de los desastres del siglo veinte.

Concluyo la tesis con una discusión de la muerte en la obra de Valente y de Levinas. Levinas, en una serie de seminarios llamado *Dieu, le mort, y le temps*, distingue su entendimiento de la muerte de la de Heidegger. Para Heidegger la muerte es la posibilidad más íntima del ser humano, el ser humano es el único animal que entiende su propia finitud y así el único animal que tiene la muerte como una capacidad. Para Levinas, pensar la muerte de esta manera es reducirla al horizonte del ser humano. Más bien,

Levinas vea en nuestra relación con la muerte algo parecido con nuestra relación con el Otro. La muerte es algo que nos afecta, visceralmente, pero al mismo tiempo es absolutamente inconmensurable con nuestro conocimiento. En la muerte de un ser querido – Levinas da como ejemplo la muerte de un hijo – la muerte nos afecta, y en el caso de un hijo un parte de nosotros, literalmente, muere. Muestro que los poemas de Valente escrito después de la muerte de su hijo responden a esta experiencia de la muerte del otro que nos afecta, en que parte de nosotros también muere, pero que es, al mismo tiempo, absolutamente enigmática. Vinculo esta experiencia de la enigma de la muerte con la esfera de lo social, y sostengo que el pensamiento de Ernst Bloch y su teorización del *Vorschein*, lo que Valente termina la “preaparecer” de la palabra, muestra que la estructura de alteridad inmanente que es central a mis argumentos en la tesis corresponde a un pensamiento que mantiene la esperanza en un futuro utópico que se vislumbra en la experiencia artística.





This thesis aims to explore the poetry of José Ángel Valente in terms of his ethical commitment to alterity. It is argued that Valente's ethical stance can help us to understand the tensions inherent to his theorization of poetry – a poetics of plenitude (the garden) and a poetics of absence (the desert). These tensions are traced in a reading of Valente's relation to the Jewish thought of Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin, the Jewish poets, Paul Celan and Edmund Jabés, his relationship to Spain and Galicia and the problematic notion of community, his writing of the body and the animal, as well as the presence of death in his work. These themes are linked with a twentieth century philosophy of alterity, represented by the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, Maurice Merleau Ponty, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben.

