

“The Miserable Supper”: César Vallejo and the Poetics of Communion

Adam Glover

Abstract

This essay examines the image of the Eucharist in the poetry of the Peruvian writer César Vallejo (1892-1938). I argue that unlike his modernista forebears, Vallejo regularly employs the Eucharist not as an image of the ecstasy of sexual union, but instead as an image of guilt, melancholy, frustration, and loss. In one sense, such images can be read as deliberately blasphemous distortions of the Christian picture of the Eucharist Vallejo imbibed as a child. My central thesis, however, will be that the same images can also be read, perhaps in part against Vallejo’s own intentions, not as distortions of the Eucharist but as offering insights into the nature of the sacrament itself. I develop this thesis in two parts. First, I argue that despite the centrality to eucharistic theology of the themes of communion, spiritual intimacy, and “real presence”—themes that made it an almost irresistible poetic symbol of sexual desire—the Eucharist itself is also and fundamentally a sacrament of absence, delay, and failure. Second, I suggest that by drawing, however implicitly, on these latent elements of eucharistic theology, Vallejo’s poetry opens up a space to think about certain aspects of the sacrament which the modernistas’ erotic exuberance tended systematically to obscure.

Keywords

César Vallejo, poetics, communion, Eucharist, Latin America

In his classic 1896 sonnet “Ite, missa est,” the Nicaraguan *modernista* poet Rubén Darío (1867-1916) imaginatively recreates an erotic encounter with an anonymous woman in terms drawn unmistakably from the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist. The snowy whiteness of the woman’s body, for instance, evokes the color of the eucharistic bread, while in her eyes the poet discerns the “sacred frequency of the altar” and describes her “spirit” as the “host

of my amorous mass.”¹ Although Darío is perhaps the best-known example, the Eucharist as an image of erotic desire and sexual union exercised a powerful fascination over a wide range of Latin American *modernista* poets. In a series of deeply erotic poems, for instance, the Uruguayan poet Julio Herrera y Reissig (1875-1910) describes his beloved’s lips as “the fiery host of her Eucharist” and her kiss as a “rosy Eucharist.”² One finds similar images in the Mexican poet Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera (1859-1895), who depicts his beloved as a “temple” that encloses a “shining Host,” and in José Juan Tablada’s (1871-1945) “Black Mass,” where the poet imagines his lover’s “frenzied hair” as a “radiant monstrosity” that houses a white, naked body.³ The proliferation of such images is unsurprising, of course, not only because the Eucharist has long been construed, in religious and non-religious contexts alike, as a symbol of erotic desire,⁴ but also because the *modernistas* themselves were well known in general for bending religious imagery to profane purposes.⁵ Within this symbolic universe, the Eucharist played two key roles: first, it served as a point of connection between the physical and spiritual aspects of sexual union; and, second, it functioned as the symbolic embodiment of the power of words (the priest’s words,

¹ Rubén Darío, “Ite, missa est,” in *Prosas profanas y otros poemas* (Mexico: Librería de la Vda. de Che Bouret, 1901), p. 85. *Modernismo*, a uniquely Hispanic fusion of Romanticism and Symbolism, should be carefully distinguished from Anglophone Modernism. For a good general description, see José Olvio Jiménez, “Introducción,” in José Olvio Jiménez, ed., *Antología crítica de la poesía modernista hispanoamericana* (Madrid: Hipérior, 1989).

² Julio Herrera y Reissig, “Plenilunio” and “El beso,” in Ángeles Estévez, ed., *Julio Herrera y Reissig: Poesía completa y prosas* (Madrid: ALLCA XX, 1998), pp. 230, 397.

³ Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, “De blanco,” in *Poesías*, vol. 2 (Mexico: Librería de la Vda. de Che Bouret, 1887), 121-122; and José Juan Tablada, “Misa negra,” in Héctor Valdés, ed., *José Juan Tablada: Los mejores poemas* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1993), pp. 22-23.

⁴ This theme is already present as early as Gregory of Nyssa and Saint Ambrose, both of whom read the Eucharist in light of the specifically erotic elements of the Song of Songs. See, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *In canticum canticorum*, homily 10 (PG 44: 989), and Ambrose, *De sacramentis*, 4.2 (PL 16: 477). A similar theme is central to Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, on which see Sheila Naya, *Dante’s Sacred Poem: Flesh and the Centrality of the Eucharist to the Divine Comedy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). For a good account of the same theme in Golden Age Spanish poetry, see Arantza Mayo, “‘Parece lo que no es, y no es lo que parece’: Guises and Disguises in Poems to the Most Holy Sacrament,” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 86.5 (2009): pp. 751-761. In a fine recent book, Brannon Hancock has extended this conversation to the uses of Eucharistic imagery in postmodern narrative fiction: see his *The Scandal of Sacramentality: The Eucharist in Literary and Theological Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

⁵ Richard A. Cardwell, “La lírica finisecular en la encrucijada del *modernismo*,” in J.A. Almansa and J.L. Bretones, eds., *Villaespesa y las poéticas del modernismo* (Almería, Spain: Universidad de Almería, 2004), p. 104.

the poet's word) not only to describe reality but also to transform it.⁶

In a certain sense, the Peruvian poet César Vallejo (1892-1938) fits neatly into this tradition. Widely regarded as one of the most original and creative voices in twentieth-century Latin American literature, Vallejo is also easily among Latin America's most religious non-religious writers.⁷ The paradox is intentional. The grandson of two Spanish priests, Vallejo intended from an early age to follow in their footsteps, a plan enthusiastically encouraged by his parents. By his early twenties, however, the poet had experienced a profound crisis of faith that led him to abandon not only his intention to study for the priesthood but also the Catholic faith itself. And yet despite this crisis of faith, Vallejo's poetry is full of images drawn from Christian theology in general and Catholic eucharistic theology in particular.⁸ Despite important similarities, however, Vallejo's treatment of the Eucharist diverges significantly from that of his *modernista* forebears. To be sure, the Peruvian poet can employ the sacrament as a metaphor of the ecstasy of sexual union, but rather more frequently—and certainly more interestingly—it figures in his poetry as an image of guilt, melancholy, frustration, and loss.⁹ In one sense, and as various critics have pointed out, such images can be read as deliberately blasphemous distortions of the Christian picture of the Eucharist Vallejo imbibed as a child.¹⁰ But—and this will be my central thesis—the same images can also be read, perhaps in part against Vallejo's own intentions, not as distortions of the Eucharist but as offering insights into the nature of the sacrament itself.

⁶ For more on the importance of the transformative or “magical” capacity of language in modern poetry in general, see especially Gerald L. Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language: A Critical and Historical Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975). For good accounts of *modernismo's* appropriation of this tradition, and its relationship to Romanticism in general, see Cathy Jade, *Rubén Darío and the Romantic Search for Unity: The Modernist Recourse to Esoteric Tradition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), and Jade, *Modernismo, Modernity and the Development of the Spanish American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

⁷ The best general account of Vallejo's life and work continues to be Jean Franco's classic *César Vallejo: The Dialectics of Poetry and Silence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). See also Stephen Hart, *César Vallejo: A Literary Biography* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2013). References to Vallejo's poetry are taken from Clayton Eshleman, ed., *César Vallejo: The Complete Poetry: A Bilingual Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). Texts will be cited parenthetically by page and line number. Except where otherwise noted, I follow the published English translations.

⁸ See especially Alejandro Lora Risco, “Numinosidad y catolicidad en la poesía de Vallejo,” in *Hacia la voz del hombre: ensayos sobre César Vallejo* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Andrés Bello, 1971), p. 91-115.

⁹ See, e.g., Carlos Javier Morales Alonso, *César Vallejo y la poesía posmoderna: otra idea de la poesía* (Madrid: Editorial Verbum, 2013), p. 160, and Stephen Hart, *Religión, política y ciencia en la obra de César Vallejo* (London: Tamesis, 1987), pp. 17-18.

¹⁰ Morales Alonso, *César Vallejo*, p. 169, and Franco, *César Vallejo*, p. 29.

I develop this thesis in two parts. First, I argue that despite the centrality to eucharistic theology of the themes of communion, spiritual intimacy, and “real presence”—themes that made it an almost irresistible poetic symbol of sexual desire—the Eucharist itself is also and fundamentally a sacrament of absence, delay, and failure.¹¹ Second, I suggest that by drawing, however implicitly, on these latent elements of eucharistic theology, Vallejo’s poetry opens up a space to think about certain aspects of the sacrament which the *modernistas’* erotic exuberance tended systematically to obscure.

My argument is thus part literary-critical and part theological. On the one hand, the goal is to tease out some of Vallejo’s most potent and revealing eucharistic imagery, a theme often mentioned by critics but rarely subjected to sustained and detailed analysis. On the other hand, I shall also be concerned to trace the theological implications of such imagery, with an eye to showing how Vallejo’s poetry draws our attention to a certain negativity latent in the Eucharist itself. I make this argument in two broad movements parts, beginning in Section I with a broad account of Vallejo’s poetic response to God’s absence from the world, with special attention to a set of poems in which that absence and its implications are figured in terms drawn explicitly from Christian eucharistic theology. Then, in Section II, I turn to a series of erotic poems in which Vallejo at once appropriates the *modernista* link between Eucharist and sexual desire and subjects it to a searching critique.

1. Poetry in a World Without God

“I was born on a day/that God was ill” (160, lines 1–2).¹² Thus begins “Espergesia,” the final poem in *The Black Heralds* (1919), Vallejo’s first collection of poetry. The title term, *espergesia*, is a neologism often explained as a combination of *esperma* (“sperm”) and *génesis* (“genesis”), though one can perhaps also hear in it a fusion of *esperanza* (“hope”) and *analgesia* (“analgesia”). Here I will concentrate on the first and return in a moment to the second. At the most basic level, the first etymology juxtaposes two different and ostensibly incompatible accounts of human origins: one drawn from the Christian story of special divine creation, the other from the

¹¹ This claim is likely to sound to strange at first hearing, and it will obviously require (and receive) significant elaboration as the essay develops. To get a provisional sense of what I have in mind, see Denys Turner, “The Darkness of God and the Light of Christ: Negative Theology and Eucharistic Presence,” *Modern Theology* 15 (1999): pp. 143–158.

¹² For an interpretation of Vallejo’s “sick God” that complements my own, see Michael A. Gómez, “La presentación de Dios en tres poemas tempranos de César Vallejo,” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 81.3 (2004): pp. 379–91.

impersonal scientific vocabulary of spermatozoa, ova, and zygotes. In a somewhat more expansive sense, this conflict between divergent origin stories frames a broader struggle in Vallejo's life between what Franco calls "the privileged individual of Christianity" and the "cosmic speck" to which evolutionary theory had reduced the human species.¹³ Vallejo was deeply influenced by evolutionist and positivist thought, and it may have been his encounter with these thinkers that marked the final demise of his childhood faith. Yet despite the unmistakable traces of positivist and evolutionist thought that flicker about the pages of some of his poems, he never managed to muster any special sympathy for the more buoyantly optimistic interpretations of humanity's manumission from the fetters of religious belief.¹⁴ Quite the opposite in fact. For Vallejo, what Nietzsche had already called the "death of God" meant not only the demise of orthodox religion, but also of the possibility of meaning and significance in general.

The rest of "Espergesia" spells out the point clearly. In the third stanza, for example, Vallejo describes a "void/in my metaphysical air/that no one shall touch" (160, trans. modified). The shift from "God" to "metaphysical air" expands the range of Vallejo's complaint beyond the confines of orthodox religious belief to include what Max Weber famously called "the disenchantment of the world": the general sense that, in the absence of God and his surrogates, the world itself had grown pale, fragile, full, and flat. The sixth stanza spells out in more detail the effect of this loss on Vallejo's practice as a poet:

Everyone knows that I am alive,
that I chew . . . and they do not know
why in my poetry galled winds,
untwisted from the inquisitive
Sphinx of the Desert,
screech an obscure
coffin anxiety. (160, lines 21–27)

Here the poet's life ("I am alive") is reduced to the crudely physiological function of "chewing," while his verse in general, having definitively surrendered the prophetic function it might have enjoyed in an older *modernista* poem, is likened to inarticulate "screeches" that suggest "an obscure/coffin anxiety." Finally, in the stanza's closing lines, the "Desert," capitalized, stands as an unmistakable symbol of exile and sterility, while the "inquisitive Sphinx," that merciless

¹³ Franco, *César Vallejo*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁴ For more on the role of evolutionary theory in Vallejo's work, see Christiane von Buelow, "César Vallejo and the Stones of Darwinian Risk," *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 14.1 (1990): pp. 9–19. For more on positivism, see Hart, *Religión, política y ciencia*, pp. 63–4.

riddler of Greek and Egyptian mythology, implicitly poses questions the poet is incapable of answering.

Similar themes appear in a wide variety of Vallejo's poem, both early and late,¹⁵ but perhaps no single text distills more clearly his sense of divine abandonment than "The Black Heralds," the title poem of Vallejo's first collection. The poem is framed at beginning and end by a series of "blows" or "strikes" (*golpes*) that the poet strains mightily and vainly to describe and explain. The first stanza reads:

There are blows in life, so powerful . . . I don't know.
Blows as from the hatred of God; as if, facing them,
the undertow of everything suffered
formed pools in the soul . . . I don't know. (24, lines 1–4, trans.
modified)

Franco is right to locate the occasion of this poem in Vallejo's sense of the utterly "gratuitous nature of evil," though to "gratuitous" we should also add "inexplicable" or "unfathomable."¹⁶ In the second line, for instance, the poet suggests the "hatred of God" as the source of his suffering, but this initial explanation immediately proves tentative and inconclusive. First, as in English, the Spanish genitive "odio de Dios" (hatred of God) is ambiguous between a subjective and objective construal: is it "God's hatred" (subjective) or "hatred for God" (objective)? The answer, I suspect, is both: the poet's hatred for a God whose unqualified indifference to human misery—"You feel nothing for your own creation," Vallejo says elsewhere of God ("Dados," 134, line 9)—can only be interpreted as willful disdain. Perhaps more importantly, the phrase "the hatred of God" is not an affirmation but a tentative and guarded simile ("as from the hatred of God"). The image, already adumbrated in the desolate "I don't know" of the first line, is of a poet casting about in desperate inarticulacy for the dark and inscrutable source of his misery. Already at this point, then, Vallejo's deep skepticism of the Romantic myth of the poet as a visionary, Orphic seer is on full display: in a world shorn of divine presence and the possibility of salvation, the poet himself is thrown in with the common herd, reduced to a kind of bumbling idiot incapable even of discerning the precise cause of his hopelessness, much less of conjuring it away through the magic of the poetic word.¹⁷

¹⁵ See especially Franco, *César Vallejo*, 36ff. and Lora Risco, "Numinosidad y catolicidad en la poesía de Vallejo," pp. 91-115.

¹⁶ Franco, *César Vallejo*, p. 32.

¹⁷ The literature on the Romantic motif of the poet as a seer and language as magical is massive. For good overviews, see especially Bruns, *Modern Poetry*, and Thomas M. Greene, *Poetry, Signs, and Magic* (Newark: University of Delaware press, 2005).

The remaining lines of the first stanza add more in the way of precision while yet retaining the same sense of puzzled incomprehension that characterizes the opening image. In line 4, for instance, the root of the verb translated as “form puddles” (*empozarse*) is *pozo* (“well”). The image is revealing. In both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament, wells regularly figure as images of revelation and regeneration. In John 4, to give just one example, the gospel writer uses the occasion of Jesus’s encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well in Sychar to draw an explicit link between physical water and spiritual “living water” that “gushes up to eternal life” (John 4:14). For Vallejo, by striking contrast, the well is an image of stagnation and putrefaction, while the soul itself is cast neither as the locus of the image of God, nor as the guarantor of immortality, but as the foul depository of “everything suffered.” Even this explanation, however, is framed at one end by a tentative “as if” and at the other by a reassertion of the poet’s ignorance: “I don’t know.”

In the second stanza, Vallejo, in a kind of dark counter-image of the biblical motif of angelic visitation, briefly suggests ominous “black heralds” dispatched by an hypostatized “Death” as the occasion of his suffering (24). In the third stanza he takes up the same theme in explicitly eucharistic terms:

They are the deep falls of the Christs of the soul,
of some adored faith blasphemed by Destiny.
Those bloody blows are the crackling of
bread burning up at the oven door. (24, lines 9–12, trans. modified)

The “falls” of line 9 is a theologically charged term, but here Vallejo wrenches it from its traditional context as a descriptor of sinful humanity and applies it instead to Christ himself: Christ is thus imagined as a victim of the fall and hence as incapable of offering salvation from it. The pluralization of “Christs” in the second half of the line has the related effect of stripping away Christ’s uniqueness and thus of trivializing his salvific work. This inversion of traditional religious motifs continues in the stanza’s remaining lines. The Spanish adjective *adorable*, for instance, literally means “worshipable” (from the verb *adorar*, “to worship”), but it also suggests, as in English, something slightly precious and superficially obliging. As the second half of the line makes clear, moreover, the poet’s erstwhile “adorable faith” has proven ultimately unequal to the harsh “Destiny” that now mocks it with apparent impunity. This set of images and counter-images comes to a head in the stanza’s final two lines, where the “blows” of the opening stanza, now “bloody,” are likened to the “crackling” of burnt bread. Bread, of course, is a key biblical motif, and here one hears echoes not only of the Eucharist but also of Christ’s self-identification as “bread from heaven” that leads to “eternal life” (John 6:40–41). For Vallejo,

however, it is now too late in history to avail oneself of its redemptive potential: the day of salvation has passed; the bread has been left too long in the oven. Interestingly, then, the poet here represents the eucharistic bread not as absent but as ruined: it is still *there*, still present, but it is no longer effectual, no longer capable of supplying the deliverance it once promised. In this sense, Vallejo's Eucharist is somewhat analogous to an allegory in Walter Benjamin's sense: like those "vast and trunkless legs of stone" of Shelley's "Ozymandias," it stands as a ruin that points beyond itself to an absent wholeness.¹⁸ The Eucharist itself is therefore not a lost symbol but a symbol of loss: the present reminder of a past glory now reduced to rubble.

But the connection is perhaps stronger still. For Vallejo, after all, the "bloody blows" are not merely analogous to burnt communion bread; they *are* burnt communion bread ("those bloody blows are the cracklings..."). Here the second of the two possible etymologies of *espergesia* I mentioned earlier is potentially illuminating. If, in one sense, Vallejo's neologism can be explained as a combination of *esperma* and *génesis*, it is also possible to hear in it a fusion of *esperanza* ("hope") and *analgesia* ("analgesia") and then to construe the term as a whole to mean "the dulling of hope." But there is yet another possibility besides. In fact, if *esperanzanalgesia* strikes us as a plausible etymology in general, it may be worth noting that Vallejo suppresses the negative prefix *ana-*, suggesting, perhaps, that he wishes to evoke not *analgesia* but rather something like *algesia* (not itself a Spanish word but nonetheless strongly reminiscent of the Greek *algos*, "pain"). Taken in this sense, *espergesia* would mean not the "dulling of hope" but instead the "pain of hope": that is, the pain occasioned by hope itself. "There is no greater pain," Francesca tells Dante in *Inferno* V, "than remembering happy times in the midst of misery."¹⁹ And so too, it would seem, for Vallejo: once the possibility of hope has been lost, the very symbols of hope become themselves agents of despair. The Eucharist itself thus turns out to be not merely a symbol of the poet's suffering but also its occasion.

In "The Black Heralds," Vallejo's inverted vision of the Eucharist as a source of pain and despair, though clearly present, is nonetheless fleeting and underdeveloped. In other poems, the same theme receives significantly more detailed elaboration, often in the context of the ostensibly sacred dimensions of eating. In these poems, however, as in "The Black Heralds," the sacredness of food becomes for Vallejo an occasion to lament his own inability to access the transcendent,

¹⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ozymandias," in Bruce Woodcock, ed., *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley* (Ware: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2002), p. 194. For Benjamin's account of allegory and ruins, see Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1998).

¹⁹ Dante, *Inferno*, V.121-123 (my translation).

spiritual, or sacramental aspects of ordinary experience. A poem from *Trilce* (1922), Vallejo's second collection, makes the point well. Described by one critic as a "poem of orphanhood," "Trilce XXVIII" was written after Vallejo had left his boyhood home in Santiago de Chuco for Lima, a week's journey by horse, train, and boat.²⁰ The poem is divided into two parallel scenes, each of which evokes the death of the poet's mother and the absence of his father through images of food and eating.²¹ In the opening lines, the poet describes the experience of dining alone:

I've had lunch alone now, and I've not had any
 mother, or may I have, or help yourself, or water,
 or father who, over the eloquent offertory
 of ears of corn, asked for his postponed
 image, between the greater clasps of sound. (222, lines 1–5, trans.
 modified)

Here Vallejo figures the solitude of the meal through a series of absences that belong to two importantly different categories: first, the absence of individuals and substances ("mother," "father," and "water"); second, the absence of words and phrases ("may I have" and "help yourself"). The two categories mutually inflect one another. On the one hand, the second category of absences ("may I have" and "help yourself") is of special significance because it draws our attention to the expressly linguistic character of the poem. In one sense, of course, Vallejo is obviously writing a poem, and poems are obviously things made of words, but here the poet makes an explicit theme of this fact by framing his evocation of the dinner scene at least in part through the direct reproduction of spoken language. This thematization of the verbal character of the poem serves in its turn as an implicit reminder that the first category of absences are themselves also linguistic phenomena: however much they may appear to refer to independent, extralinguistic entities, the terms "mother," "father," and "water" are in fact no less verbal utterances than "may I have" and "help yourself." Taken in this sense, moreover, the stanza as a whole has as its central theme the powerlessness of words, and hence the powerlessness of the poem itself, to generate the sort of presence for which the poet longs. The precise thematic valence of that powerlessness becomes apparent in lines 3 and 4, where the poet's father presides over the "eloquent offertory/of the ears of corn." Each aspect of the line is significant. The term "offertory," for instance, casts the

²⁰ *Trilce* consists of 77 untitled poems arranged by Roman numerals.

²¹ Vallejo's mother died in 1918, before this poem was written. His father would die in 1924. On the theme of "orphanhood" in this and other of Vallejo's poems, see Nohora Viviana Cardona, "Las imágenes poéticas de César Vallejo," *Poligramas* 21 (2004): pp. 67-78.

father as the celebrant at a kind of domestic mass in which “ears of corn” replace the eucharistic bread. The “ears of corn” themselves (*choclos* in Spanish) represent a typical Peruvian meal and thus link the poem’s eucharistic connotations to the specific material conditions of Vallejo’s childhood and adolescence, now lost forever.²² In one sense, then, the poem can be read as a straightforwardly theological allegory: having been cut off from the presence of his mother and father, Vallejo stages a poetic meal, modeled unmistakably on the sacrament of the Eucharist, that is designed both to reenact and to recover that presence. In fact, just as the Christian celebration of the Eucharist involves the repetition of key phrases aimed at calling forth the presence of Christ in the bread and the wine (e.g., “This is my body,” “Do this in memory of me,” and so forth), so Vallejo likewise directly reproduces bits of spoken language aimed at calling forth the presence of the poet’s childhood. As we might have expected, however, the ritual fails. Amid the “brokenness” of the family home and the “darkness” of the mother’s “kitchen,” the poet is condemned to “dine on nothingness” (lines 10, 26–28, translation modified).

An earlier poem, “The Miserable Supper,” develops a similar theme in more detail. “The Miserable Supper” is a savagely ironic text in which Vallejo reimagines the Last Supper not as an image of communion and intimacy but of misery and hopelessness. The opening lines read:

How long will we wait for what is
not owed to us . . . And in what corner will we stretch out
our poor knee forever! How long before
the cross that inspires us will not rest its oars.
How long will Doubt toast our nobility
for having suffered! . . . (122, lines 1–6, trans. modified)

The opening phrase “How long . . . ?” echoes the voice of the Psalmist (“How long, oh Lord?” – 13:1) or of Job (“How long will you torment me?” – 19:1), and thus situates Vallejo’s poem within a long biblical and prophetic line of complaints addressed to God in the midst of suffering. The link comes immediately undone in the second line, however. If the psalmist cries out in the name of the unjustly aggrieved and thus reasonably expects divine succor, Vallejo makes it clear that he is awaiting “what is/not owed to us.” As in “The Black Heralds,” then, an ostensible image of hope (i.e., the expectation that God will hear one’s cries and come to one’s aid) is transformed into an image of despair. The rest of the stanza bears out the point. The “poor knee” of line 3, for instance, suggests a pose of prayerful supplication, but the poet anticipates no response:

²² *Choclo*, also called Peruvian corn or Cuzco corn, is a large-kernel variety from the Andes region and eaten in parts of Central and South America.

his knee will be bent “forever.” Similarly, the “cross that inspires us” of line 4 frames the poet’s condition in terms of the central Christian symbol of salvation and rescue—a connotation reinforced by the fact that the Spanish *alienta*, like the English “inspires,” literally means “breathes” or “breathes into.” Vallejo, however, represents the cross not as a source of salvation, but, strangely, as a boat that “will not rest its oars,” a possible allusion to Charon, the mythological ferryman who conveys the souls of the dead across the rivers Styx and Acheron into the underworld. In Christian theology, of course, the cross is also an image of suffering, but always of suffering inscribed with the eschatological horizon of the Resurrection. For Vallejo, by contrast, it is now *simply* an image of suffering, of life as a kind of everlasting crucifixion. The central theme, then, already announced in the verb “waiting” (*esperando*) of the opening line, is one of indefinite postponement and delay: of waiting and hoping—the Spanish *esperar* carries both senses—for what will never arrive.

The next stanza develops the same theme yet more explicitly. “We have already sat so/long at this table,” the poet tells us, “with the bitterness of a child/who at midnight, cries from hunger, wide awake” (122, lines 7–9). Despite the occasion of the poem (a “supper”), there is, ironically, no food, while the poet himself is reduced a sobbing child overcome with bitterness. The absence of physical sustenance immediately yields a corresponding—and correspondingly ironic—absence of spiritual nourishment. For instance, the term translated “wide awake” (*desvelado*) also means “revealed” or “unveiled,” but here the only revelation is that there is no revelation save an endless “midnight” that refuses to give way to “an eternal morning.” The final stanza draws together the various threads of the poem into an explicitly eucharistic image:

Resting on my elbows
all bathed in tears, I repeat head bowed
and defeated: how much longer will this supper last.
There is someone who has drunk too much, and he mocks us,
and approaches and withdraws from us—like a black spoonful
of bitter human essence, the tomb... (122, lines 14–19, trans.
modified)

The “how long . . . ?” of line 16 links the concluding stanza back to the first, while the question as whole (“how long will the dinner last”) repeats the central theme of indefinite, hopeless waiting. In the remainder of the stanza, that hopelessness modulates into something rather more akin to straightforward agony. The “someone” of line 4, for instance—possibly a symbol of Christ, who presides over the “miserable supper”—is represented as a burlesque drunkard who not only fails to sympathize with the suffering of his guests, but also taunts them by at once approaching and retreating, revealing

himself and then withdrawing.²³ Finally, in the concluding lines, the poet makes clear the poem's eucharistic implications while simultaneously distorting them nearly beyond recognition. Rather than bread and wine, for instance, the insufferable drunkard of the previous lines offers a "black spoonful/of bitter human essence." The "black spoonful" suggests bile, a traditional symbol of anger or wrath, while the subsequent description effectively inverts the traditional connotations of the eucharistic elements. In the first place, what should be a source of what Aquinas calls "spiritual sweetness" is instead "bitter."²⁴ Even more importantly, if for Christian thought the Eucharist is, as Ignatius of Antioch puts it, the "medicine of immortality" (*pharmakon athanasias*), then for Vallejo it is a *pharmakon* in a rather different sense: poison rather than cure, decisively "human" rather than divine, and leading not to eternal life but to the "tomb."²⁵ If, in the biblical narrative, the Eucharist prepares the way not only for the agony of the Crucifixion, but also for the glory of the Resurrection, Vallejo here offers a truncated version of the tale, one that makes the Last Supper not the herald of resurrection, but the antechamber of death—a death which, as the ellipsis at the end of the stanza suggests, promises to be perpetual.

2. The Poetics of Communion

As before, then, Vallejo here draws on certain images and motifs of eucharistic theology to make a point ostensibly at odds with the connotations traditionally associated with those images. This way of stating the point, however, raises a different set of questions. Up to now I have been operating with a fairly standard, albeit largely implicit, picture of the Eucharist and its role within Christian faith and practice. According to that picture, the Eucharist is primarily a symbol of unity and communion, both with other members of the community and with the eucharistic Christ in whose body and blood the community gathers to share. As St. Paul remarks in 1 Corinthians 10:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing [*koinonia*] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing [*koinonia*]

²³ For a related interpretation of this figure, see Chrystian Zegarra, "Culpa, castigo y no redención en *Los heraldos negros* de César Vallejo," *Hispanic Poetry Review* 8.1 (2006): pp. 55-68.

²⁴ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 3a, a. 79, q. 8.

²⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *Ephesians*, 20:1, in Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translation*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 198. In "Ascuas" [Embers], another poem published in *The Black Heralds*, Vallejo likewise casts the Eucharist as a kind of "virus" that poisons the communicant ("Ascuas," 36, line 18).

in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Cor. 10:16-17)

The cup and the loaf, the material elements of the Eucharist whose institution Paul will shortly recount (1 Cor. 11), here stand at the center of complex symbolic universe. In one sense, of course, they refer to actual, physical food: the material elements that constitute the Eucharist as a meal. In another sense, however, the materiality of the cup and the loaf have the effect of producing a spiritual *koinonia* in Christ's body and blood. At the same time, because all members of the community partake of the same bread, those who are united to Christ are likewise united with one another. Through its union with the one bread, which is also Christ's one body, the community likewise becomes one body.

This, as I say, is a fairly standard picture, one that highlights the Eucharist's unitive, communion-producing function as the central liturgical act of the Christian community. Within the view, of course, there is a great deal of debate and disagreement, not least regarding the precise valence of the term *koinonia*, but the standard patristic and medieval view—and certainly the view with which Vallejo would have been most familiar—is that the bread effects a “sharing” in Christ's body because it *is* Christ's body. Catholic theology has traditionally explained this point in terms of transubstantiation. According to this view, upon consecration, the eucharistic elements really become Christ's body and blood while yet retaining the appearances of bread and wine. Christ himself is thus “really present” in the eucharistic celebration, not merely “in signo vel figura,” as the Council of Trent has it, but also “substantialiter.”²⁶ This, it seems clear to me, is the picture operative in the *modernistas'* appropriation of eucharistic imagery for erotic purposes, just as it is also the screen against which Vallejo casts his inverted, negative image of the sacrament.²⁷ For the *modernistas*, on the one hand, the Eucharist's promise of ontological, rather than merely symbolic, union supplies the occasion for imagining sexual intercourse as a form of physical communion that implies or generates spiritual communion. In Darío's “Ite, missa esta,” for instance, the beloved, as the “host” of the poet's “erotic mass,” is the place where erotic desire becomes a simultaneously physical and spiritual reality. For Vallejo, by

²⁶ Council of Trent, in Phillip Schaff, ed., *Bibliotheca symbolica ecclesiae universalis: The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1919), Session 13, Canon 1.

²⁷ This should not be taken in any sense to imply that the *modernistas* employ the Eucharist in a theologically orthodox fashion, much less that they themselves are theologically orthodox. The point is simply that the *modernistas* seem to be relying on a traditional interpretation of the Eucharist in terms of presence and communion, even if they are deploying that interpretation in a heterodox, non-traditional manners and contexts.

striking contrast, the same promise of ontological union serves instead to cast into sharp relief precisely the failure of communion in all its forms. Vallejo's, in other words, is a kind of "anti-Eucharist": a Eucharist wrenched from its context and compelled to serve a symbolic function at odds with its traditional connotations.

In another sense, however, what I have called Vallejo's "anti-Eucharist" is perhaps not really an anti-Eucharist at all. In fact, rather than a distorted counter-image of the Eucharist, it may instead offer a window onto certain aspects of the Eucharist that the *modernista* picture works to obscure. That, at any rate, is what I would like to suggest in the remainder of this essay. Perhaps we can get at this point by looking more closely at another poem from *The Black Heralds*. The opening stanza of "For the Impossible Soul of My Beloved" reads:

Beloved: you have never wanted to take shape [*plasmarte*]
as my divine love has devised.
Remain in the host,
blind and untouchable,
the way God exists. (124, lines 1–5 trans. modified)

The term "Beloved" establishes from the beginning the poem's erotic theme, while the remainder of the opening two lines situates that theme within an explicitly theological context. The key verb, *plasmare*, from the late Latin *plasmare*, literally means to "mold matter so as to give it a determinate shape."²⁸ The pronominal form *plasmarse*, employed here, accordingly means something like "to take on a physical form" or "to assume a particular shape." Both *plasmare* and its Latin root derive in turn from the Greek verb *plassō*, meaning to "form" or "mold." Importantly, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, *plassō* is a theologically loaded term employed both in the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible and in the Christian New Testament to refer to divine creation. In Genesis 2:7, for instance, we learn that "God formed [*eplasen*] man from the dust of the ground." Similarly, the author of 1 Timothy reports that "Adam was created [*eplasthē*] first, then Eve" (2:13), while in Romans Paul asks rhetorically, "Will the creature [*to plasma*] say to the creator [*tō plasanti*], 'Why have you made [*epoiēsas*] me thus?'" (9:20). As the remainder of the stanza makes apparent, Vallejo is clearly thinking in these terms. The reference to "my divine love" in line 2, for instance, suggests that the poet sees himself as a kind of demigod who seeks to give "shape" and "form" to his beloved. In the third stanza, he echoes the same theme when he writes that "faith" is the "forge where I burned/the earthy iron of so much woman" (124). And yet if the poet is a kind of demigod, he is also a manifestly failed demigod:

²⁸ *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*, "Plasmare," def. 1 (www.rae.es).

despite his efforts, the beloved refuses to come to presence, refuses to assume the “form” his divine love has “devised.” In that failure, moreover, lies the first hint that Vallejo’s treatment of the Eucharist may not be simply a matter of willful blasphemy.

Notice especially the stanza’s final three lines: “Remain in the host, /blind and untouchable, /as God exists.” The presence of “host” makes clear that Vallejo intends his poem to be read in specifically eucharistic terms, while the remainder of the stanza supplies a series of clues about how to understand the eucharistic reference. At first glance, one is tempted to construe the lines as a straightforward negation both of eucharistic theology itself and of its interpretation at the hands of the *modernistas*. Specifically, whereas for the *modernistas* the Eucharist functions as an image of spiritual and bodily communion, Vallejo subverts these traditional connotations and instead offers a kind of dark parody in which communion with the absent beloved, like communion with an absent and non-existent God, is unachievable. The absence of God thus comes to serve both as symbol and cause of the beloved’s “impossible soul”: in a world bereft of divine presence, even those human relationships that might fill the void left by God’s departure grow frail and ineffectual.

At second glance, however, the same cluster of images suggests a slightly different interpretation. In his account of the Eucharist near the end of the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas distinguishes what he calls “threefold significance” of the sacrament. In one sense, he says, the Eucharist refers to the past insofar as it is a commemoration of Christ’s passion and death. In another sense, it refers to the present insofar as it signifies the *unitas* or *communio* of the pilgrim church. In yet a third sense, it refers to the future insofar as it foreshadows or prefigures (*praefigurativum*) the *fruitio Dei*: the full revelation of Christ’s presence in the eschaton.²⁹ Aquinas’s account is complex and nuanced, and there is no space here to tease out all of its implications. I want simply to note two points. The first point is that for Aquinas, as for Catholic theology in general, Christ is really, bodily present in the Eucharist—and this simply because Aquinas accepts as an article of faith that, upon consecration, the material elements of the Eucharist do not merely signify Christ’s body and blood but actually *become* that body and blood. It is precisely this fact, as I noted earlier, that helped make the Eucharist an attractive symbol of erotic desire among the *modernistas* and their heirs. But there is also a second point, equally important: if Christ is indeed “really present” in the Eucharist, that presence is also interpenetrated by a deep and abiding “real absence.” As Aquinas’s distinction makes clear, Christ’s real presence in the host is also a *prefiguring* presence, one that points beyond itself

²⁹ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 3a, q. 75, a. 1.

to a still fuller presence that awaits the faithful in the kingdom of God. As Denys Turner has pointed out, even on the Catholic view the communication of Christ's presence in the Mass necessarily "fails of ultimacy" simply because the "Eucharist is not yet the kingdom of the future as it will be in the future" but instead "points to it as absent."³⁰ Turner's thought is that however present Christ may be in the Eucharist, the Eucharist itself nonetheless remains a *sign* of the kingdom and not the actual kingdom. As a sign, moreover, it always promises a fullness of future presence that it itself never quite delivers. And this, in turn, is just to say that the Eucharist has an irrevocably eschatological orientation: as the sign-like bearer of Christ's sacramental presence, it stretches out toward, but does not coincide with, the full realization of that presence in the eschaton.

One way of understanding this point would be to say, as Aquinas in fact does, that sacraments occupy a kind of intermediary position, an eschatological *medius* between the present, in which truth is glimpsed "through a glass darkly," and the future, in which "all truth will be openly and perfectly revealed."³¹ Another, slightly more provocative way of making the same point would be to say that the Eucharist is in some sense designed to fail. One celebrates the Eucharist, after all, not because Christ is present but precisely because he is absent: because the Kingdom of God is not yet come, because the gap between resurrection and *parousia* has not yet been closed. For Christian thought, then, the Eucharist exists in what Denys Turner has called the "between-times," wherein it both makes Christ "really present" while also pointing to a fuller manifestation of that presence in the kingdom. This, I hasten to add, is no critique of the Eucharist. It is simply to say that there is a certain negative potentiality already latent in the sacrament itself—an acknowledgement, in other words, that if every instance of the Eucharist is a celebration of Christ's real, sacramental presence in the consecrated elements, it is also and simultaneously a recognition that the sacrament itself always fails to deliver the full reality of the presence it signifies.

And this means, in turn, that for all the talk of *praesentia realis*, the Eucharist nonetheless has at its heart a deep and abiding absence. If, in one sense, the Eucharist is a celebration of communion and *koinonia*, it is also the memorialization of a loss, simply because the Eucharist functions *as* Eucharist only to the extent that the *fruitio Dei* has not yet been realized. This, again, is no critique of the Eucharist; it is simply part of what it means to call something a sacrament. Construed in this fashion, moreover, it might be possible to understand Vallejo's own treatment of the Eucharist not as

³⁰ Turner, "The Darkness of God," p. 157.

³¹ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 3a, q. 61, a. 4, ad 1.

distortion or perversion, but instead as accessing the sense of absence and loss, of failure and delay inherent in the sacrament itself. Just as the Eucharist signals the advent of Christ's absence on earth, and just as the Eucharist cannot, in itself, bring about the future presence (the *parousia*) that that absence promises, so the Eucharist is also the sacramental embodiment of an impossibility: it points to but cannot produce, signifies but cannot *plasmate*, the full presence—the “kingdom-presence,” so to speak—of the Christ it nonetheless really contains. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that in a poem entitled “For the Impossible Soul of My Beloved” Vallejo should draw on the Eucharist to symbolize the “impossibility” of his beloved's presence. In both cases, after all, the failure in question is precisely a poetic failure, a failure of *poiēsis*. If, as I noted earlier, part of the *modernistas'* fascination with the Eucharist lay in the power of words (the poet's, the priest's) not only to describe reality but to create (*poiein*) and transform it, here Vallejo suggests that in both cases this power ultimately fails: just as the priest cannot call Christ to presence as he will be present in the kingdom, so likewise the poet cannot call to presence his beloved through the power of the poetic word. Taken in this sense, moreover, we can perhaps also hear Vallejo's admonition to his beloved to “stay in the host/blind and untouchable” not as a deliberate distortion or perversion of the Eucharist, but instead as an attempt to access an aspect of the Eucharist that other poetic appropriations systematically overlooked. More importantly still, we can perhaps also hear in these lines a muffled articulation of part of the meaning of sacramentality itself.

“Comunión,” another poem published in *The Black Heralds*, makes a similar point from a slightly different angle. Written between 1916 and 1917, “Comunión” is in one sense a straightforwardly *modernista* rendition of the Eucharist as an emblem of erotic desire filtered through the Petrarchan motif of singling out various parts of the female body for metaphorical description and praise. In Vallejo's hands, however, this trope undergoes a series of radical alterations. The poet begins, for instance, by describing not the beloved's eyes or hair but her “veins,” which are figured as the “ferment/of my ancient nonbeing and the black/champagne of my life” (28, lines 1-3). The reference to “veins” and “ferment”—together, of course, with the title—clearly establish the poem's eucharistic frame, but, in a telling transformation, the Eucharist here brings not life but “nonbeing,” while the substitution of champagne for wine further distorts the sacrament's ordinary symbolic valences. In subsequent stanzas, the poet returns to more traditional aspects of the female body, but the accompanying metaphorical elaborations retain the same daring inventiveness and the same sense of loss that characterize the opening stanza. In the second stanza, for instance, Vallejo describes the beloved's hair as a “strand from the miter/of a fantasy that I

lost” (lines 6-7). The “miter” is the official headdress of bishops and hence a symbol of ecclesial and spiritual authority, but here it is first transformed into an ineffectual “fantasy” and then “lost” entirely. The third stanza makes a version of the same point as the beloved’s body is likened to “the bubbly skirmish/of a pink Jordan” (lines 8-9). The River Jordan is, of course, a key biblical symbol, both as the place where the Israelites crossed into the promised land and as the site of Jesus’ baptism. In Vallejo’s poem, however, the image’s traditionally salvific or regenerative connotations are disturbed by a “bubbly skirmish” that leaves the water stained pink (with blood, one presumes).

The poem’s final stanza is more explicit still:

Your feet are the two tears
I choked back, descending from the Spirit,
one Palm Sunday when I entered the World,
already forever distant from Bethlehem! (28, lines 20–23)

Here the baptismal images of the third stanza give way to what is finally a eucharistic image. The reference in line 20 to the beloved’s “feet,” for instance, completes the Petrarchan circuit of female body parts, but, as before, the metaphorical description of the feet as “tears” immediately destabilizes the traditional connotations of the motif. The tears themselves, in turn, are said to “descend from the Spirit,” an image loaded with biblical resonance. In one sense, the “descent of the Spirit” recalls the biblical account of Jesus’s baptism—where the gospel writer describes the “Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him [Jesus]” (Matthew 3:16)—and thus links the closing lines to the “pink Jordan” of stanza three. In another sense, the same image recalls the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13). Finally, and perhaps most importantly given the context of the poem, the image of the Spirit’s descent evokes the so-called *epiclesis* or *invocatio*, that point in the Mass at which the priest calls upon the Spirit to bless the gifts of bread and wine. The traditional Tridentine Mass with which Vallejo would have been familiar does not contain an explicit *epiclesis*, though it is certainly implicit in the *Quam oblationem*, as well as in the *Veni Sanctus Spiritus* of the Pentecost Mass. And, in any event, Vallejo’s subsequent reference to Palm Sunday makes it clear that he is thinking in liturgical terms. In each case, however, what “descends” is neither God nor his Spirit but instead “tears.” In the poem’s opening stanza, as we saw a moment ago, Vallejo substitutes for eucharistic wine the “ferment/of my ancient nonbeing” and “the black/champagne of my life” (lines 1-3). Similarly, in the final stanza the descent of the Spirit—which, in the context of the Mass, would portend the “transubstantiation” of the bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood—is transformed into a symbol of mourning and lamentation.

The reference to Palm Sunday has a similar effect. Despite the suggestion in line 22, the poet was in fact not born on Palm Sunday. (In 1892, the year of his birth, Palm Sunday fell on April 10, while Vallejo was born a month earlier on March 16.) The biographical imprecision is significant, however. Palm Sunday is the celebration of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but, falling as it does a week before Easter, it also foreshadows his impending arrest, crucifixion, and death. By imaginatively transferring his own birth date to Palm Sunday, the poet establishes an analogy between himself and Christ: just as Jesus entered Jerusalem to suffer and die, so the poet also "entered the world" to suffer and die. This analogy, however, depends for its power upon a more fundamental disanalogy. Jesus's entry into Jerusalem is "triumphal," after all, because it presages not only his crucifixion and death but also his resurrection. In Vallejo's poem, by contrast, there is no hint of resurrection. Quite the opposite in fact. The concluding line's reference to "Bethlehem," for instance, evokes the Nativity (and hence the Incarnation), but the accompanying phrase "already forever distant" suggests that Vallejo has been definitively cut off from their power.³² Perhaps even more importantly, Bethlehem itself is a term loaded with eucharistic resonances. In one of his homilies on Luke, for example, Gregory the Great reads Bethlehem as *bayth leh'-khem* and interprets Christ's birthplace as a *domus panis*—a "house of bread."³³ Here, then, Vallejo's poem at last comes full circle as the "communion" of the title finally shows itself to be no communion at all. More importantly still, this failure of communion is at once a eucharistic and an erotic failure. In one sense, the poet's impossible distance from Bethlehem signals the inability of the eucharistic bread (the *leh'-khem*) to produce the sort of spiritual presence it promises (i.e., the eschatological presence of Christ in the kingdom). In another sense, however, the failure of the Eucharist to produce spiritual communion is a symbol of its attendant inability to generate erotic communion. As in "For the Impossible Soul of My Beloved," so here Vallejo likewise makes the Eucharist a symbol not of communion but of its opposite: because the Eucharist fails to function for the poet as a figure of spiritual communion, it is

³² In the poem's concluding lines, there may also be an allusion to Darío's "Paschal Sonnet" (1916), where the Nicaraguan poet imagines himself riding along with Mary and Joseph in their flight to Egypt: "and I, on my poor donkey, walking toward Egypt, / and without the star now, very distant from Bethlehem." Darío, "Soneto pascual," in Álvaro Salvador, ed., *Rudén Darío: Poesía completa* (Madrid: Verbum, 2016), p. 755.

³³ Gregory the Great, *Homiliarium in evangelia*, 1.8 (*Patrologia Latina* 76: 1104). A later writer, St. Aelred (1109-1167), Abbot of Rievaulx, draws out the connection in considerably more detail, reading the "house of bread" as the "holy Church," the "manger in Bethlehem" as an "altar in the church," and the "swaddling clothes" enwrapping the Christ child as the bread and wine enveloping Christ's sacramental Body. See St. Aelred, *Sermo 2* (*Patrologia Latina* 195: 227).

likewise incapable of serving, as it once did for the *modernistas*, as an engine of erotic communion.

Unlike Darío's "Ite, missa est" or Reissig's "Plenilunio," then, Vallejo's is not a poem of love but of love lost; nor, despite the title, is it a poem of "communion." And yet in spite of these negative valences, the text nonetheless harbors profoundly eucharistic connotations. Those connotations depend in their turn upon a point I made earlier: if, on the one hand, the Eucharist itself is a placing-together of the church in the presence of Christ, it is also a constant reminder that those who are celebrate the Eucharist are still in exile, still displaced from the fullness of presence the sacrament promises. In fact, to borrow a phrase directly from Vallejo's poem, we who celebrate the Eucharist do so precisely because we too are "distant from Bethlehem"—that is, because we are caught in the eschatological *medius* between Incarnation and *Parousia* and hence alienated both from Christ's erstwhile presence on earth and his future presence in the kingdom. In this sense, moreover, Vallejo's poem can be read not as a critique of the Eucharist, nor certainly as a distortion or perversion, but instead as an articulation of the condition of sacramentality itself. By selecting the Eucharist as one of the governing images of a series of poems whose central theme is precisely the impossibility of communion, Vallejo implicitly draws our attention to this aspect of sacramentality and hence opens up a poetic space for thinking about the sense of absence, delay, and failure that necessarily inheres in even the highest, most "realistic" accounts of Christ's presence in the wine and the loaf.

Conclusion: Eucharist and Eschatology

My central argument in this essay has been that Vallejo's ostensibly distorted, even blasphemous, representations of the Eucharist can be read as offering insights into the nature of the sacrament itself. I do not know, nor do I wish to assert, that Vallejo intended that his texts be read in this fashion. Nor, manifestly, does his deployment of such motifs amount to a tacit endorsement of the eucharistic traditions from which he borrowed them. Even with these caveats, however, my argument cannot be accepted as stated. For even if Vallejo's poems can be read in the manner I have suggested—and even if they were intended to be so read—there is nonetheless an aspect of his poetic appropriation of the Eucharist that is finally and importantly incompatible with a properly theological understanding of the sacrament. It is true, on the one hand, that the Eucharist, precisely because it is a sacrament, fails to make Christ present as he will be present in the kingdom. And yet whatever sense of absence, delay, and failure inheres in the Eucharist is not destiny but detour, a

temporary displacement that finds its true meaning as part of a larger narrative governed by the eschatological horizon of the Kingdom of God. Put another way, if the eucharistic Christ is indeed “really absent” in some important sense, that absence is unintelligible unless contextualized by the hope of the eschaton in which it will have been shown to be not an aimless wandering but a journey, however indirect and circuitous, to a destination that the Eucharist itself promises but cannot deliver. Vallejo’s poetry, by contrast, lacks this eschatological horizon, this sense of a future hope that contextualizes and lends meaning and significance to present suffering.³⁴ To state the point in Hegelian terms not alien to the Peruvian poet’s intellectual universe, Vallejo’s is a decidedly anti-eschatological Eucharist, one in which the moment of negativity is extended indefinitely, without any expectation of *Aufhebung* and hence without any sense that the “impossibility” of communion is itself but a moment in a larger story which, given world enough and time, will restore the broken shards of reality to their original and primal unity.³⁵

Adam Glover
Winthrop University

glovera@winthrop.edu

³⁴ Here I refer specifically to Vallejo’s attitude in *The Black Heralds* and *Trilce*, and to “meaning” and “hope” in straightforwardly religious senses. In later works, there is indeed a sense that social and political solidarity might provide the sort of redemption that religion is no longer capable of supplying. One thinks, for instance, of Vallejo’s Marxist-inspired novel *Tungsteno* (Madrid: Editorial Cenit, 1931), or the poem “Masa,” published in *Spain, Take this Cup from Me* (1938), in which universal human brotherhood replaces Christianity as the mechanism of resurrection and immortality (610).

³⁵ On Vallejo and Hegel, see Luis Xavier Lopez Farjeat, “La muerte de Dios y la vida del hombre: César Vallejo y *Los heraldos negros*,” *Topics* 13 (1997): pp. 219-236.