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Valente's Lectura de Paul Celan
Translation and the Heideggerian Tradition in Spain
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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 barroscuros donde las figuras de los sueños fermentan. Escribir no es hacer, sino aposentarse, estar [Writing is like the secretion of resins; it is not an act, but a slow natural formation. Moss, humidity, clays, mire, phenomena of the depths, and not of sleep or of dreams, but of the dark soils where the figure of dreams ferment. To write is not to act, but to settle, to be].

—José Angel Valente, *Material memoria*

The career of José Angel Valente (1929–2000) took shape slowly and organically over the course of several decades. As he himself suggests in this prose poem from *Mandorla*, his writing is an unhurried process of development analogous to the formation of natural substances. Ultimately, the process by which his work assumed its definitive identity, especially in the final two decades of his life, was both prolonged and coherent, yielding a poetic work of enormous seriousness and depth.

Valente emerged in the 1950s as one of several poets subsequently included by literary historians in the so-called "generation of the 1950s," one of whose trademark gestures was the use of an ironic, often self-deprecating speaker intent on subtly denouncing the moral mediocrity of Francoist society in general and coopted intellectuals in particular. In the 1980s, however, during Spain's transition to democracy, he increasingly distanced himself from his generational contemporaries. At the time of his death on July 18, 2000, he was identified primarily as the standard bearer of a belated though still powerful "high modernist" tradition in Spanish poetry.¹ The shift from the socially oriented poetry of his first books to the "essentialist" modernism of the 1980s and 1990s took place gradually, in a series of books published in the 1960s and 1970s, so that it is impossible to establish a clear line of demarcation between the early and the late Valente. It is clear, however, that Valente's unique role within recent Spanish poetry was to be the intellectual leader of those poets championing the belated avant-garde/modernist tradition in contemporary Spain.

In this role, Valente became a fierce and intransigent critic of the so-called "poesía de la experiencia" of the 1980s—a movement purporting to revive the "realist" poetics of Valente's own generation, and even, as its alternate name "nueva sentimentalidad" suggests, those of the towering figure of middle-of-the-road Spanish modernism: Antonio Machado. According to poet

Juan Bonilla, "Se distinguió Valente, el último Valente, por una desabrida y violenta denuncia de la perezosamente denominada poesía de la experiencia, acusando a los poetas principales de esta tendencia de ser representantes del Poder y la Oficialidad, caricaturizando sus versos y rebajándoles la calidad con opiniones contundentes que parecían proceder más del rencor que de un examen ajustado de sus obras [Valente, the late Valente, was notable for a harsh and violent denunciation of what is lazily called the poetry of experience, accusing the main poets of this tendency of being representatives of Power and Officialdom, caricaturing their poetry, and denigrating their quality with extreme opinions that seemed to stem more from rancor than from a judicious examination of their works]" [5].² While Valente's later poetry is genuinely powerful, I would contend that his public role as defender of high modernist standards is at least as significant as his actual poetic works in establishing his preeminent position. Claudio Rodríguez is arguably a more gifted poet than Valente; yet Rodríguez was not inclined (or able) to become an influential literary critic or public intellectual. Valente, in contrast, developed a coherent (almost single-minded) and intransigent poetic philosophy that won him a small but unified group of adherents, along with a host of enemies. The same intransigence decried by Bonilla and other supporters of poetic "realism" was a quality to be admired by poets and intellectuals like Jaime Siles and Juan Goytisolo. Goytisolo and Valente, in fact, tend to employ an almost identical "take-no-prisoners" tone in their public pronouncements. Valente's career is closely parallel to that of Goytisolo. Both men came to see themselves as intellectual lone wolves on the margins of literary and political institutions.³ Both lived large portions of their adult lives outside of Spain, and identified completely with the Spanish traditions of exile and dissent, which go as far back as to José María Blanco White (self-banished in England in 1810 and soon converted to Anglicanism) and the circle of liberal intellectuals (for example, Antonio Alcalá Galiano, Ángel de Saavedra [Duke of Rivas], José de Espronceda) who followed him shortly afterwards, during the so-called Ominous Decade of Spanish absolutism (1823–33). It is difficult to evaluate the positions adopted by such figures without taking into account the rhetorical vehemence at work in their writings, which is at the same time *necessary* and *contradictory*: the prophetic tone is inherent in the message; yet intransigence implies a dogmatism that is at odds with the antidogmatic spirit these writers claim to represent.

What exactly, then, is the poetic tradition with which Valente identified himself? It would be easy to establish the connections between Valente and European writers like Paul Celan, Samuel Beckett, Edmond Jabès, and René Char, or fellow Spaniards like María Zambrano, Juan Goytisolo, and Antonio Gamoneda. Valente also admired Cuban poet José Lezama Lima, and enjoyed a close friendship with Catalan painter Antoni Tàpies.⁴ The writers in Valente's pantheon reflect a particular understanding of the poetic tradition, one that has its roots in German Romanticism and that conceives of poetry in philosophical terms, as a form of thinking, rather than as a genre of mere "literature." One key to understanding this tradition is Maurice Blanchot, who, beginning in the 1940s, synthesized German and French versions of poetic modernity. Blanchot was introduced to the works of Martin Heidegger before the Second World War by his friend the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Blanchot's enormously influential essays on key figures such as Mallarmé, Rilke, and Char employ distinctively Heideggerian concepts: "One of the greatneses of René Char, one that is unequalled in our time, is that his poetry is a revelation of poetry, poetry of poetry, and, as Heidegger almost says of Hölderlin, poem of the essence of the poem" [Blanchot 100].⁵

In the Spanish context, María Zambrano's essays are an indisputable point of reference for Valente as well. Zambrano's theory of "la razón poética" (poetic reason), not coincidentally, is heavily indebted to Heidegger, as Chantal Maillard explains:

Al poeta le corresponde abrir, desentrañar aquel fondo de donde surge el ser: el lugar de lo sagrado. Por ello afirma Heidegger que el poeta habita cerca del origen. Los poetas señalan la apertura, "consagran el suelo," abren en la tierra el lugar común de lo sagrado, esto es, permiten la extrañeza y el asombro ante lo inexistente; y, por ello, su penetración: su acceso al ser.

[51]

[The poet's task is to open, bring out into the open, those depths from which being arises: the place of the sacred. That is why Heidegger affirms that the poet dwells close to the origin. Poets signal the opening, they "consecrate the ground," they open in the earth the common place of the sacred, that is, they allow for strangeness and astonishment in the face of the in-existent; and, therefore, its penetration: its access to being.]

It was not only her Heideggerianism, but also her interpretation of Spanish mysticism, that influenced Valente. Zambrano does not herself reveal the full extent of her debt to Heidegger. In an article entitled "Apuntes sobre el lenguaje sagrado y las artes" ("Notes on Sacred Language and the Arts"), for example, she explains the concept of *aletheia* as unveiling (or unconcealment) but fails to mention the German philosopher by name: she even concludes this essay by evoking Hölderlin [Zambrano 221–36]. Such omissions obscure the lines of transmission: Heideggerian ideas have permeated European thought, from the 1920s to the present day, to such a degree that a writer like Valente could have absorbed them from many sources, from Heidegger himself as well as from Spanish thinkers like José Ortega y Gasset and Zambrano.

Valente, like Blanchot, is primarily a *synthesizer*, bringing together Zambrano's "razón poética" with the conception of poetry and the canon of writers that took shape in Blanchot's essays. His poetic achievement resides in a kind of distillation, or *translation*, of a Heideggerian tradition of poetic modernity, in a specifically Spanish context. This is not to minimize in any way the value of his poetry and essays: his reading of the mystical tradition is distinctive, and his later poetry—on which most of his stature depends—has already achieved canonical status. I am not totally convinced, however, that a European reader already familiar with the writers in Valente's pantheon would see Valente's own work as equally indispensable to the modern tradition of which he forms a part. Valente is not an originator of the modern tradition: he is, rather, the quintessential *late* modernist, putting the pieces together in brilliant but belated fashion.

Valente's connection to the German-language poet Paul Celan (1920–70), while acknowledged in the critical literature, has yet to be explored in any depth or detail, despite the publication of his *Lectura de Celan: Fragmentos*, in 1993, and Claudio Rodríguez Fer's recent edition of Valente's complete translations.⁶ This neglect is surprising in the light of Valente's open acknowledgment of his most significant literary affiliations: Paul Celan is undoubtedly one of the postwar European poets who best exemplifies Valente's own literary ideals.⁷ Valente's translations of Celan, along with his essays on the Jewish poet, provide the perfect test case for

an examination of the way in which Valente attempts to assimilate the major texts of Heideggerian modernism into his own poetics, using them to bolster his own defense of poetry. More specifically, Valente uses his readings of Celan to work out an intellectual justification for his move away from the Sartrean *engagement* of the 1950s toward the poetic "essentialism" of his later work, grounded both in Spanish mysticism and the works of Heidegger.

Valente's inward turn in the 1980s, his seeming abandonment of sociopolitical commentary, poses a problem for critics of his poetry. Does his development of a poetics of the sacred simply supplant his earlier social engagement, or does his historical meditation take a different, less recognizable shape? What is the relation between the emphasis on the poet's usefulness, in Valente's earlier poetry, and his subsequent rejection of instrumental uses of language? *Lectura de Celan* provides some possible answers to these questions. Celan is a notoriously difficult poet whose work often challenges the very possibility of poetic communication. Valente's reading of the poet, however, demonstrates that this apparent denial of communication points to a different model of dialogue, one that attempts to bridge the real gaps among radically different subjects. This acknowledgment of difference, then, provides an ethical and historical justification for conceptions of poetic language that are often characterized as simply "intransitive" or "hermetic."

According to Rodríguez Fer, Valente's first translations of Celan appeared in 1978 in the magazine *Poesía*: "El impacto de Celan en la poesía de Valente fue simultáneo al período de sus primeras versiones tal como evidencia, desde el título y desde el primer poema, su libro *Mandorla*, iniciado con una cita del autor rumano tomada precisamente de su poema 'Mandorla' [The impact of Celan on Valente's poetry was simultaneous with the period of his first translations, as is evident in the title and first poem of his book *Mandorla*, which begins with a quote from the Romanian author taken precisely from his poem "Mandorla"]" [*Cuaderno de versiones* 21–22]. Valente's translation of Celan thus coincides with his inward turn of the 1970s, evident in books like *Material memoria* (1979), *Tres lecciones de tinieblas* (1980), *La piedra y el centro* (1982), and *Mandorla* itself. This is an especially rich period in Valente's career. While his interest in mysticism is already evident in earlier works, like his edition of Miguel de Molinos (1974), it is in the late 1970s and early 1980s that he publishes the works that redefine him as a poet.⁸

The hermeneutic model that Valente finds in Celan brings him into the orbit of Heideggerian hermeneutics. In some sense, however, Valente was already under the influence of this body of thought before he read and translated Celan. Hölderlin's question "Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?" ("What are poets for in a destitute time?") frames an important group of poems in *La memoria y los signos* (1966). Heidegger had asked himself the same question in an essay on Hölderlin entitled "What Are Poets For?" [*Poetry, Language, Thought* 91–142]. Valente, in the 1960s, contextualized this question in utilitarian terms, irreconcilable, perhaps, with the German philosopher's meditation on the essence of poetry. It is Celan who rehistoricizes the Heideggerian ontological conception of poetry. In Celan's rebuttal to Adorno's notorious pronouncement that poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, Valente finds confirmation for his own continued effort to justify the poet's "usefulness."

It is possible, of course, that Valente would have become a "Heideggerian" without Celan. His engagement with the hermeneutic tradition and with María Zambrano predates his translations of Celan, since his landmark essay "La hermenéutica y la cortedad del decir" ("Hermeneutics and the Shortness of Speech") and his first essay on Zambrano were published in *Las palabras de la tribu* (1971). Valente had also read Blanchot and other writers influenced by Heidegger. I don't mean to imply that Celan provides Valente with the only possible route back to Heidegger, only that Valente himself uses Celan—along with Zambrano—as one of his points of entry. Heideggerian terms and concepts are ubiquitous in the critical discourse of Spanish poets and critics who champion Valente as the alternative to the realist discourse of "la poesía de la experiencia." José Manuel Cuesta Abad's *Poesía y enigma*, for example, contains studies of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Borges, Celan, and Valente, along with theoretical reflections on the hermeneutic tradition. The journal *La alegría de los naufragios*, edited by Amalia Iglesias and Galician poet César Antonio Molina, is devoted to the work of Valente and Gamoneda, and often includes Heideggerian essays by Cuesta Abad and like-minded critics and poets.

It is clear, then, that Valente is *affiliated* with other poets and critics within the Heideggerian orbit. More concretely, his work can be called Heideggerian in its insistence on the role of the *sacred*. In a well-known exegesis to which I cannot do justice here, the German philosopher responds to Hölderlin's famous question—"Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?"—in terms of the poet's responsibility to forge a poetic language that will be the dwelling place of the sacred, in the wake of the gods' disappearance: "To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods" [Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 94]. This is the idea that underlies Valente's 1989 *Al dios del lugar*. After the death of the gods, the only sacred presence is an absence, the *deus absconditus* ("hidden God") of Isaiah 45: 15. In the opening poem of this book, Valente evokes a communion rite in which the sacred presence has difficulty making itself known: "El vino tenía el vago color de la ceniza. // El insidioso fondo de la copa esconde a un dios incógnito [The wine was the vague color of ash. // The insidious bottom of the cup / hides an unknown god] [*Al dios del lugar* 14]. This is the task of a poet in a destitute time: to create a dwelling place, in language, for this divine presence/absence, and thus reveal the truth of humanity's existence on the earth.⁹ The word *morada* ("dwelling"), which occurs frequently in Valente's poetry and is a master trope in Teresa de Ávila's mystical writings, resonates strongly with Heidegger's concept of "dwelling" (*Wohnen*) in "Building Dwelling Thinking" and ". . . Poetically Man Dwells" [*Poetry Language Thought* 143–62; 211–29].

While Valente's poetry is suffused with identifiable Heideggerian *themes*, I would argue that the presence of such leitmotifs is less significant than Valente's Heideggerian conception of the *hermeneutics* of poetry. The issue that Valente chooses to emphasize in the theoretical texts that accompany his versions of Celan's poems is the related issue of *communicability*. This is not communication, or the transmission of information, but rather the possibility of creating a true *communion* (intersubjective understanding) between human beings.¹⁰ Valente's point of departure is Celan's notorious difficulty: how could so hermetic a poet conceive poetry as a form of communication?

La materia de la poesía es materia obscura [sic]. El hermetismo contemporáneo poco o nada tiene que ver con el hermetismo barroco. Celan con Góngora.

La palabra obscura [sic] del poeta contemporáneo no hace concesiones a lo formal; por el contrario, entra más adentro en la espesura, en la propia obscuridad de la experiencia, acaso vivida, pero no conocida.

El poema es para Celan botella echada al mar que, algún día, en algún lugar, va a ser recogida por un tú invocable. Como la mano tendida puede encontrar otra mano y engendrar la salutación.

Negarse a esa palabra obscura es cerrar los oídos—y los ojos—a la voz que canta, a la palabra poética.

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. [Lectura de Paul Celan 21]

[The material of poetry is "materia obscura." Contemporary hermeticism has little or nothing to do with the Baroque, Celan (has little to do) with Góngora. // The obscure word of the contemporary poet makes no concessions to formality; on the contrary, it enters deeper into the thickness, into the obscurity proper to experience itself, perhaps lived, but not yet known. // The poem is for Celan a bottle thrown into the sea which, some day, somewhere, will be picked up by an invocable you. Just as an extended hand can find another hand and engender salutation. // To deny this word is to close one's ears—and eyes—to the voice that sings, to the poetic word. // A hand, a bottle without destination and at the same time charged with a destination as a possibility infinitely multiplied. There is another hand that waits on a beach, at the mobile limit of the waters, whose act of finding perfects the hieroglyphic act of writing. The root of communicability, but not mere communication, as some have so trivially insisted.]

This text, given here in its entirety, aims to disambiguate "comunicabilidad" from the more commonplace notion of "comunicación." Communication was the watchword for postwar poets who adopted Vicente Aleixandre's slogan "poesía es comunicación" (poetry is communication). It was Valente's own generation, in fact, that called this shibboleth into question, vindicating the role of poetic *conocimiento*. Valente's disparaging of mere communication, then, is consistent with a long-standing position that predates his deep engagement with Celan's poetry. Valente contrasts communication to a seemingly synonymous but more abstract concept: "communicability" is a paradoxical concept, in that it entails the negation of "communication" itself, as the latter concept is commonly understood. An admittedly superficial view of some of Celan's (and Valente's) poetry regards it as a solipsistic discourse that looks inward to the poet's own psyche rather than reaching out to its potential readers. Miguel García-Posada, for example, describes Valente's later development in the following terms: "Apareció así un poeta hermético, intransitivo, fragmentario, que alumbraba versos de tan incandescente como misteriosa belleza, abismado en su propio ensimismamiento, que hacía de la palabra poética un absoluto [Thus an hermetic, fragmentary, intransitive poet appeared, who illuminated poetry with a beauty so incandescent and mysterious, deep within his own self-absorption, that he made the poetic word into an absolute]" [7].

Valente's "communicability," however, cannot be understood as a negation of communication or as a turn toward poetic "hermeticism." The shipwreck on a desert island consigns his message to the sea in a hopeful attempt to establish communication with other human beings. The obvious question, then, is why the poet would aspire to so chancy a mode of communication. Stated another way, why must communication—the poet's ultimate aim—be both affirmed and problematized? The image of the message in the bottle (*Flaschenpost*) is taken from Celan's address at Bremen, which Valente also translates in his *Lectura de Paul Celan*:

El poema, en la medida en que es, en efecto, una forma de aparición del lenguaje, y por lo tanto de esencia dialógica, puede ser una botella arrojada al mar, abandonada a la esperanza—tantas veces frágil, por supuesto—de que cualquier día, en alguna parte, pueda ser recogida en una playa, en la playa del corazón tal vez. Los poemas, en ese sentido, están en camino: se dirigen hacia algo. ¿Hacia qué? Hacia algún lugar abierto que invocar, que ocupar, hacia un tú invocable, hacia una realidad que invocar.

[18]

[The poem, to the extent that it is, in effect, a form of the apparition of language, and thus essentially dialogistic, can be a bottle thrown into the sea, abandoned to the hope—so often fragile, of course—that some day, somewhere, it can be picked up on a beach, on the beach of the heart perhaps. Poems, in this sense, are on the road: they address themselves to something. Toward what? Toward some open place which they can invoke, occupy, toward an invocable you, toward a reality that they can invoke.]

On one level, the metaphor of the message in the bottle, which Celan in turn borrowed from the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam [Felstiner 116], reflects the very real situation in which the poet, or any other writer for that matter, must work. Unlike a face-to-face dialogue, the communication from poet to reader depends on several contingencies. The poet does not know who his or her potential readers are; these readers may come across the poet's book by sheer chance, picking it up in a friend's house or stumbling across it in a secondhand bookstore. Furthermore, even such a chance encounter is not sufficient, since the potential reader may not be prepared to attend to the poet's words.

Why, then, does the poet problematize communication even further by cultivating a deliberately difficult mode of writing? Valente conceives the difficulty of modern poetry as essential rather than accidental, distinguishing Celan from the baroque poet Góngora. Arguing, implicitly, against widespread but superficial understandings of "la poesía de la experiencia," he stresses "la propia obscuridad de la experiencia, acaso vivida, pero no conocida [the obscurity proper to experience itself, perhaps lived, but not yet known]." If experience itself is inherently mysterious, *unknown even if lived*, there can be no appeal to the unproblematical communication of such an experience. As Valente explained in a much earlier essay, "Conocimiento y comunicación," "Precisamente sobre ese inmenso campo de realidad *experimentada pero no conocida* opera la poesía [It is precisely on this immense field of reality *experienced but not known* that poetry operates]" [*Las palabras de la tribu* 6; emphasis added].

Communication, then, is under threat on several fronts at once: by the tenuous connection between the poet and the reader, by the inherent difficulty of the message, and by the enigmatic nature of experience itself. Yet communication remains the stated goal for both Valente and Celan. The "hermeticism" of their poetry is counterbalanced by its efforts to reach "el tú invocable" (the invocable "you"). The more profound mode of communication it proposes depends, paradoxically, on an initial thwarting of ordinary channels of communication. In yet another text prefatory to his translations of Celan, Valente warns against a certain overconfidence in the subject's apprehension of other subjects:

Dar por cierto el conocimiento del otro es ignorar que este presunto conocimiento es una mera proyección de nuestro yo. Suprimida esa proyección ocultante, el otro sólo puede ser percibido como esencialmente desconocido: la faz misteriosa del otro. Y también, sólo en la medida en que es percibido como un misterio, puede el otro ofrecérsenos como fuente posible del conocer y del amar. Con el yo así percibo como otro y con el que así como otro a mí mismo me percibe puedo construir un mundo, una relación o un espacio de fluido intercambio de la diferencia con la diferencia. El misterio está en la diferencia misma; y, en ella, la raíz del conocimiento y del amor. Pensamiento, éste, que no traiciona su estirpe: la del pensar, la de la radical heterogeneidad del ser. Su naturaleza esencialmente dialógica. [Lectura de Paul Celan 14]

[To take as a truth the knowledge of another is to be unaware that this presumed knowledge is a mere projection of our self. When this concealing projection is suppressed, the other can only be perceived as essentially unknown: the mysterious face of the other. And also, only to the extent that the other is perceived as a mystery, can this other be offered to us as a possible source of knowing and loving. With the self I can thus perceive as other, and with the other who likewise sees me as other, I can construct a world, a relation or a space of fluid interchange of difference with difference. The mystery lies in difference itself, and in it, the root of knowledge and love. A thought (this last) that does not betray its category: that of thinking, of the radical heterogeneity of being. Its essentially dialogic nature.]

Interestingly enough, it is the presumption that we *already* understand the other that leads to egotistical or solipsistic projections. Valente's line of argument (indebted to Levinas's ethical theory) turns the accusation of solipsism, made so often against certain forms of contemporary poetry, back upon the accuser. True dialogue only becomes possible once true difference, "la radical heterogeneidad del ser," has been fully acknowledged.

A prefatory "Antecomenzo," added to the 1995 edition of *Lectura de Paul Celan*, makes it clear that Valente conceives of his own relation to Celan as a "demorado diálogo" (deferred dialogue):

Las presentes versiones son resultado breve—fecundamente frustrado—de un largo periodo de frecuentación de un lenguaje nuevo, de una paralela desfrecuentación de lenguajes gastados o vacíos, de un demorado diálogo, de un movimiento de irremediable aproximación o filia.

En la medida en que alguna parte de estos textos corresponde a momentos en que mi propia relación con el existir era una leve línea débil, su estructura es fragmentaria. Son sólo apuntes de una conversación titubeante, apenas ya posible. En ese sentido, me parecen ahora señal o signo de mi no extinción. Salvíficas señales. O milagrosos restos de un naufragio feliz.

Se ha tendido una mano. La tensión de la mano tendida marca una dirección: la realidad. "La poesía no es mimesis, no es simple representación, se convierte en realidad. Realidad poética, texto que ya no sigue a la realidad, sino que se configura y funda como realidad", escribe a propósito de Celan Peter Szondi.

El lenguaje ha descendido a las zonas infernales de la historia y ha vuelto, ha reaparecido para hablar, para ir hacia algún lugar nunca hallado, hacia el otro, hacia ti, hacia un tú invocable.

[9]

[The present versions are the brief result—fertilely frustrated—of a long period of frequenting a new language, along with a corresponding lack of frequenting of worn-out and empty languages, [the result] of a prolonged dialogue, of a movement of irremediable approximation or philia. // To the extent that a part of these texts corresponds to periods of my life when my own relation to existence was a weak, faint line, their structure is fragmentary. They are but notes to a faltering conversation, now barely possible. In this respect, they seem to me now as a signal or sign of my nonextinction. Salvational signs. Or miraculous remains of a fortunate shipwreck. // A hand has been extended. The tension of the extended hand marks a direction: reality. "Poetry is not mimesis, it is not simple representation, but is transformed into reality. Poetic reality, a text that no longer follows reality, but is configured and founded as reality," writes Peter Szondi à propos of Celan. // Language has descended to the infernal areas of history, and has returned, has reappeared to speak, to go toward a place not yet found, toward the other, toward you, toward an invocable "you."]

This text works through the key concepts and images of Celan's Bremen address. Once again, the possibility of communication is at once problematized and affirmed: Valente's dialogue with his precursor is fragmentary, interrupted, hesitant, "apenas ya posible" (now barely possible), but at the same time profound, inevitable, and redemptive.

Quoting from Szondi, a close friend of Celan as well as an important hermeneutic theorist in his own right, Valente also makes his own Heidegger's ontological conception of poetic language as foundational rather than mimetic of reality. Many of the elements of Celan's poetics that Valente emphasizes have, in fact, a Heideggerian source. While the pairing of Heidegger and Celan, the former Nazi and the Holocaust survivor, may seem counterintuitive, this kinship is in fact well established in the critical literature. Felstiner recounts Celan's visit to Heidegger in the Black Forest in 1967 [244–47] and points out that "Patent Heideggerianisms marked Celan's Bremen address" [149]. Celan was reading Heidegger as early as 1953: "He underscored the philosopher's remarks on Hölderlin's elegy 'Bread and Wine,' especially that poem's question, 'what use are poets in a destitute time?' (*wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit*)" [Felstiner 72].

The number of "Heideggerians" (in the broadest sense of the term) who have also been drawn to Celan's poetry is striking: Gadamer, Szondi, Lacoue-Labarthe, Derrida, Steiner, Levinas, and Bruns come to mind.¹¹ Perhaps Valente belongs to this category as well. It should not be surprising that the most influential twentieth-century "continental" philosopher and the most significant poet of postwar Europe, both writing in German, should attract the attention of the same writers and theorists. More to the point, the problem of "communicability," or

intersubjective understanding, lies at the heart of contemporary hermeneutics in the Heideggerian tradition. Celan's poetry poses a crucial challenge to this tradition. Hans-Georg Gadamer's approach to some of Celan's late, cryptic poems is instructive. The author of *Truth and Method* proposes a deliberately nonspecialized approach to this poetry: "Generally, I think it is a sound principle not to view poetry as an arcane cryptogram for scholars, but rather as a something intended for the members of a shared language community" [192]. This position does not entail a total rejection of the specialized scholarly apparatus needed to decipher some of Celan's more difficult work. Gadamer himself makes use of scholarly material to correct and modify his readings in subsequent revisions of his essay on Celan. It would be more accurate to affirm that Celan's work constitutes a limit case for Gadamerian hermeneutics, given Celan's extremely problematic relation to the "shared language community" of German speakers. Even with a poet as difficult as Celan, Gadamer insists on the value of slow, attentive, but dictionary-free reading: "I had no lexicon at hand. I lay in a sand-pit in the Dutch dunes and mulled the verses over, 'listening earnestly in the wind,' until I thought I understood them" [149–50].

This method of reading Celan, while philologically "naïve," exemplifies the optimism characteristic of Gadamer's hermeneutics. For Gadamer, understanding and interpretation are linguistic acts; a corollary is that linguistic messages are ultimately comprehensible. A slow and attentive reader, then, will succeed in understanding even the most difficult poetic text. The title of Gadamer's essay on Celan, "Who Am I and Who Are You?," refers to "In den Flüssen, nördlich der Zukunft [In rivers north of the future]," a Celan poem also translated by Valente.¹²

The question raised in this poem is, as Gadamer suggests, the relation between the *I* and the *you* [Gadamer 83–86]. In Gadamer's nuanced reading of this poem, the *I* of the poem is the poet in his search for words. If the *I* is a poet, however, the *you* could also be the reader, whose enigmatic response to the poet's hopeful gesture is to load this net with shadowy words, weighted down like stones. Alternatively, the *I* could be a reader casting a net into the water in the hope of retrieving a *Flaschenpost* from the enigmatic poet: the interpreter of Celan's poetry is placed in the position of casting a net into the water and being rewarded with cryptic "stone-written shadows." In any case, the dialogue between the first and second persons of the verb is both prolonged and *titubeante*, as Valente characterizes his own dialogue with Celan.

In "Al Norte," a poem from his 1997 collection *Nadie*, Valente takes up once again some key images from his *Lectura de Paul Celan*. The first two lines — "Al norte / de la línea de sombras [To the north / of a line of shadows]" [*Nadie* 17] — evoke "En los ríos, al norte del futuro," with its stone-written shadows, while the parenthetical title "SOS" and the reference to an imminent shipwreck define the poem's communicative situation as a cry for help, perhaps a message in a bottle. The poem is addressed to a "tú invocable," a female addressee whose name, "Coral" (Valente's wife), is suggestive of fertile underwater riches.

The hermeneutic model of communication that emerges from this reading of *Lectura de Celan* is already implicit in Valente's poetry of the 1960s, as indicated by the degree to which the poems of the 1950s lend themselves to "reader-response" criticism [Debicki, "José Angel Valente: Reading and Re-reading," *Poetry of Discovery* 102–22].¹³ Valente's essay "La hermenéutica y la cortedad del decir," in his book *Las palabras de la tribu*, is a classic statement of the relation between text and reader. Still, quite a few of his poems from the 1950s and 1960s put forward

"utilitarian" views of poetic language, leading many critics to insist on the distinction between the later, "mystical" Valente and the historically minded Valente of the earlier period [García-Posada]. The hermeneutic model, already present in his poetry, comes into view rather gradually, becoming fully explicit only in later books such as *Mandorla* and *El fulgor*.

Valente's early calls for poetic usefulness echo the Sartrean concept of *engagement*, which was enormously influential in Spain in the 1950s. Sartre, however, had posited a notorious division between poetry and prose, transitive and intransitive writing: "Poets are men who refuse to *utilize* language" [Sartre 29; original emphasis].¹⁴ This definition reflects Sartre's acquaintance with the modern French tradition that includes Mallarmé as well as the Surrealists. A young Spanish poet of Valente's generation, then, inherited a potentially disabling opposition between political commitment and poetry itself. Instead of accepting the terms of this dichotomy, however, Valente, from a fairly early date, attempted to formulate a pragmatic justification for poetic autonomy. In the 1971 essay "La hermenéutica y la cortedad del decir," he associates Hölderlin's question "wozu Dichter?" with Mallarmé's struggle with language [*Las palabras de la tribu* 61]. The title of the collection where this essay can be read puts an unusual spin on a line from Mallarmé's homage to Poe: "donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu." Valente associates poetic purity with its apparent opposite, usefulness, since he believes that the purification of language is something useful in and of itself.

The "later Valente," however, moves from Sartrean *engagement* toward a Heideggerian distrust of instrumental language. The conviction that poetic language is foundational rather than mimetic, which Valente shares with Heidegger, can lead to a sort of mystification of poetic language, so that the poet (or the philosopher) remains disengaged from the Hölderlinian "dürftiger Zeit," from historical reality in any literal sense. Heidegger remains vulnerable to the charge of mystification on (at least) two levels. The fact that he placed his own philosophy at the service of Hitler's Third Reich, as Rector of Freiburg, is horrific in itself. A second problem is that Heidegger's characteristic mode of argumentation does not lend itself to paraphrase, except on its own terms. The result can be the problematic notion of philosophy (or poetry) as a truer, "ontological" language—superior to other forms of discourse, but in an ultimately mystified and inexplicable way.

Valente, however, derives his Heideggerian poetics from Celan, and perhaps other post-Heideggerians such as Blanchot, Levinas, and Zambrano, rather than directly from Heidegger.¹⁵ He is thus able to preserve the link between poetic autonomy and ethical commitment, effectively making his own Celan's solution to the apparent dichotomy between pragmatic and ontological conceptions of poetic language. Since Celan's poetry bears witness to the Holocaust, but only in a poetic language that refuses any reduction to facile communication, he becomes a natural model for a poet, like Valente, who has been struggling for decades to reconcile historicity with poetic immanence. In one of his longer, more discursive poems [*Al dios del lugar* 97], Valente echoes Celan's answer to Adorno's statement that poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric:

In a briefer poem from the same collection, Valente glosses Celan's phrase "Singbarer Rest" ("singable remnant") [Celan 100–01], the first line of a poem from *Atemwende* (*Breathturn*). The residue that remains in the wake of the destructive event becomes, paradoxically or not, the only

true source for poetry: "sola / raíz de lo cantable." As in the myth of the Phoenix, negation leads to affirmation [López Castro 124–25]. It is precisely after the disaster that poetic language, in all of its hermetic complexity, becomes most necessary.

To read Valente alongside of Celan is, in some sense, to bring to light the former's own characteristic concerns, which are revealed in even more explicit form in his intertextual dialogue with the German-language poet. The proper context for accounting for Valente's interest in hermeneutics, poetic autonomy, and historical engagement is the wider European tradition with which he has consciously affiliated himself: Heidegger, Sartre, Blanchot, and Celan provide more clues to his work than, say, Blas de Otero, José Hierro, or Gloria Fuertes. While Valente clearly deserves to be read in this "European" context, he also tends to resist overt stylistic echoes of other poets, making the question of influence difficult to determine.

What of Valente's actual versions of Celan? He translates fewer than twenty poems, including only five from Celan's late period. The fact that he does not translate more of Celan is consistent with his approach to other authors in his personal pantheon: when synthesizing the work of other poets, he is usually concerned with a few essential concepts that confirm his own obsessions. In this respect, the theoretical apparatus in *Lectura de Paul Celan*, the translation of the Bremen address and Valente's commentaries on Celan, are as significant as the translations themselves. Valente is often attracted to writers, like Celan or Lezama Lima, who push language to the limits of comprehensibility. Yet he himself favors a more contained, austere style, writing extremely short poems in a restricted and almost transparent lexicon. In comparison to Celan, with his complex *logopeia*, his trademark knots of compound words and his violent distortions of the German language, Valente is an almost transparent writer. His writing is difficult for some readers, it is true, but this difficulty tends to be more conceptual than linguistic. In this Valente follows modern French poets like René Char and Yves Bonnefoy, who favor flatter, less complex linguistic surfaces, much more than he resembles Celan.

When translating Celan, Valente tends to be fairly *literal*, closely following word order and line-breaks as well as semantic sense. His translation of "Erblinde schon heut" exemplifies his method:

Erblinde schon heut:

auch sie Ewigkeit steht voller Augen—
darin
Ciégate para siempre:
también la eternidad está llena de ojos—
allí

[*Cuaderno de versiones* 281]

[Blind yourself for all time: / eternity too is full of eyes— / there]

The word *allí* echoes the sound of the German *darin*. (Pierre Joris achieves a similar effect with the English word *wherein*; my own translation, more modestly, aims to give the literal sense of

Valente's translation, rather than to reproduce the effect of Celan's poem.) Given Valente's commitment to literality, however, the translation of *Weg* as *término* ("über den Weg, den sie kamen / al término en que han aparecido [to the limit where they have appeared]") is surprising. *Weg* (way) is, of course, a quintessentially Heideggerian word. The word *término*, on the other hand, is evocative of Valente's predilection for limits, boundaries, and thresholds. This subtle shift shows that Valente is making the text his own, even when he appears to be following Celan quite closely.

Since Valente drew on multiple, overlapping sources to develop his mature poetics, it becomes extremely difficult to gauge the exact degree to which his poetry is indebted to Celan, except when he cites Celan directly. Even a poem like "Mandorla," which takes its title from Celan, is—to my mind—more evocative of María Zambrano than of Celan himself. Like many of Valente's other poems from this period, it contains contrasting images of darkness and light and "concave" interior spaces identified with the female body [*Material memoria* 81]. This is not to say that Valente's poetry would have been the same without Celan: clearly Celan meant a great deal to the Spanish poet, and constituted a central point of reference during the crucial years in which he was formulating his mature poetics. Valente's pared-down, essential language resembles that of Celan on the less frequent occasions when the latter avoids the extreme density for which he is best known. The translation of "Erblinde . . ." analyzed above, for example, could almost pass as an original poem by Valente. The translation presents no lexical problem, no obstacle to the reader at the level of vocabulary, although the conceptual difficulty remains high.

The significance of Valente's translation of Celan is best understood in the total context of the Spanish poet's Heideggerian roots: a critic looking only at the translations [**End Page 86**] themselves, comparing Valente's Spanish with Celan's German, would come up with a useful but much more limited analysis. Translation, then, is best understood as a process of cultural transmission, in which the linguistic process of recasting a message in another language is only a part. 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. In this respect, *Lectura de Paul Celan: Fragmentos* is a key work for understanding Valente's place in recent Spanish poetry as well as his deep engagement with the Heideggerian tradition.

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All translations are mine unless otherwise cited.

Footnotes

1. I hesitate to associate this movement with any concept of "postmodernism," since it unproblematically evokes the authority of "Great Moderns" like Mallarmé, Rilke, and Juan Ramón Jiménez.

2. Some readers might find Valente's particular version of literary modernity to be too "generic," too self-contained and homogeneous. While there is much to admire in Valente's later work, his influence has not been entirely benign, since his alternative to the facile revival of the "poesía de la experiencia" is a narrowly conceived poetic essentialism in which poetry all too easily claims for itself the status of an arcane knowledge meant only for an elite interested in recapturing the spiritual horizon lost with the secularization of modern societies.

3. Goytisolo has acknowledged Valente's help in the researching of *Las virtudes del pájaro solitario*, a novel inspired by San Juan de la Cruz, one of Valente's key influences.

4. There are other writers, like Octavio Paz, whose positions closely parallel Valente's, but who do not explicitly form part of the Spanish poet's pantheon. Despite Paz's defense of High

Modernism and his shared interest in Asian mysticism, Valente maintained a distance from him, especially in later years when personal relations between the two writers became strained. I am indebted to Claudio Rodríguez Fer for providing background information on Valente's problematic relation to Paz, and to José María Rodríguez García for suggesting the comparison between Valente and Paz. Rodríguez García also offered many helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this article.

5. See also "The 'Sacred' Speech of Hölderlin" [*Work of Fire* 111–31]. According to Claudio Rodríguez Fer, Valente was an assiduous reader both of Heidegger and of the secondary literature on the German philosopher [personal correspondence]. Van Kelly, my colleague at the University of Kansas and a specialist on René Char, helped me to sort out the connections among Char, Heidegger, and Blanchot.

6. Valente's translations have never attracted the attention of his exegetes. One factor contributing to this neglect is the inaccessibility of many of these texts. The two editions of his *Lectura de Paul Celan* are both difficult to find. All citations, unless otherwise noted, are from the 1995 volume: I wanted to preserve the sense that this work is a coherent *book*. Rodríguez Fer's meticulous edition of *Cuaderno de versiones* contains all of Valente's translations, including *Lectura de Paul Celan* (although the work loses its title in this edition). I should mention, for the benefit of readers not familiar with modern Spanish poetry, that the Galician poet and Valente scholar Claudio Rodríguez Fer is *not* the late Spanish poet Claudio Rodríguez, to whom I also allude in this essay.

7. Benjamin argues that "*Les fleurs du mal* was the last lyric work that had a European repercussion; no later work penetrated beyond a more or less limited linguistic area" [192]. Updating this affirmation, a similar case could be made for Celan, although the scope of his influence is obviously not confined to the European continent.

8. According to Claudio Rodríguez Fer, a letter written by Valente in 1974 reveals that he had already translated a few Celan poems by this date, although Celan's name doesn't begin to appear in published work until 1978 [personal correspondence].

9. I analyze this poem along somewhat similar lines in my chapter on Valente in *The Poetics of Self-Consciousness*, although I neglect to bring Heidegger into the picture.

10. The concept of *community* has been at the center of a theoretical discussion involving Georges Bataille, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Maurice Blanchot, among others. Nancy's *La communauté désœuvrée* consists of a reading of Bataille's thought in light of Blanchot's concept of *désœuvrement*. (Blanchot's *La communauté inavouable* is also relevant to this discussion.) What all three authors have in common is their questioning of teleological models of community (from communism and fascism to nationalism and liberal democracy) in which the feelings of belonging to a communal whole and communing with others are essentialized as historical destinies, thus precluding the possibility of a more fluid negotiation of identities, and even the ethical renunciation of identity.

11. Bruns's *Maurice Blanchot* contains a revealing comparison between Celan and Blanchot, another theorist deeply influenced by Heidegger [81–101, 145–72]. See also Lacoue-Labarthe's Heideggerian reading of Celan in *La poésie comme expérience*.

12. Valente's translation is fairly literal ["*En los ríos, al norte del futuro,*" *Cuaderno de versiones* 278–79]. He has, however, chosen to place "sombras" in apposition to "escritura de piedras," rather than attempting to reproduce the characteristically German syntax of "mit von Steinem geschriebenen / Schatten," "with stone-written shadows." Joris translates "with shadows stones / wrote" [Celan, *Breathturn* 61]. My own translation here is of Valente's translation, not of Celan's original poem.

13. To associate Valente with continental hermeneutics, as I have attempted to do here, confirms and extends Debicki's approach. My approach also underscores the importance of Hart's emphasis on *dialogue* in her articles on *El fulgor* and *Al dios del lugar*.

14. In *Writing Degree Zero* Barthes questions Sartre's *engagement* while retaining the Sartrean view of modern poetry as an intransitive language that cannot be reconciled with ethical or historical *écriture*. The question of Heidegger's influence on Sartre is a relevant one. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to explore it here.

15. Valente was strongly drawn to the Jewish tradition represented by figures like Buber, Levinas, Celan, and Jabès. Levinas, himself heavily influenced by Heidegger, raises the question of whether Celan's idea of the other draws him closer to Martin Buber than to Heidegger: "The poem 'becomes dialogue, is often an impassioned dialogue, . . . meetings, paths of a voice toward a vigilant Thou'—Buber's categories! Would they, then, be preferred to so much brilliant exegesis majestically descending from the *Schwarzwald* upon Hölderlin, Trakl, and Rilke, portraying poetry as opening the world, the place between earth and sky?" [42].