

# César Moro: Exile and the Poetic Imagination

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De trop t'avoir fixé ô pierre  
Me voilà dans l'exil  
Parlant un langage de pierre  
Aux oreilles du vent.  
—*César Moro*, “Pierre mère”

## Introduction: The City of Their Discontent

During his relatively short life (1903–56), the Peruvian César Moro distinguished himself as a painter, a writer of poetry and prose, an editor, and a translator, although the scope of his contributions to Latin American art and literature has only recently begun to be appreciated.<sup>1</sup> As many critics have noted, Moro inhabited a space of multiple marginalities, not least of which was his situation as a homosexual whose “scandalous” life was at odds with the rigid society of Lima in which he came of age.<sup>2</sup> In the words of Ricardo Silva-Santisteban, Moro was “[u]n poeta peruano pero un poeta exiliado, no sólo de su idioma materno o por haber permanecido una larga temporada en Europa y luego en México . . . sino, sobre todo, por haberse sentido aislado y disconforme en su propia tierra, a la que siempre vio como hosca y salvaje” (27–28).

In order to understand the various marginalities Moro inhabited, and the *sui generis* poetic work that emerged from them, it is helpful to locate Moro within a constellation of Peruvian writers and intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century who evinced a shared set of attitudes with respect to their place of origin—their version of what Alberto Escobar has aptly termed the “imaginario

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<sup>1</sup> Two respected Peruvian critics attest to Moro’s importance for Hispanic letters. Américo Ferrari declares unreservedly that “César Moro es un gran poeta, para mí uno de los mejores del mundo de habla castellana en este siglo” (229), and José Miguel Oviedo places Moro “en el centro de la poesía contemporánea, desde el que su impacto recién empieza a ser sentido y asimilado” (102). In spite of such testimonials, Moro’s work has received relatively little critical attention until recently. In what may signal a positive shift, a colloquium titled *César Moro y el surrealismo en América Latina*, held in Lima in 2003, and a symposium on international surrealism at the Getty Institute in Los Angeles in 2010 prominently featured Moro’s work.

<sup>2</sup> The term “scandalous” is Moro’s own: a poem from *La tortuga ecuestre* is titled “La vida escandalosa de César Moro.”

nacional” of the era.<sup>3</sup> These attitudes held the city of Lima to be hopelessly bourgeois, stagnant, and closed to innovative energies. Against this presumably backwards locale, in which artistic creation could not flourish, stood Europe—and in particular Paris—as the great incubator of creative minds. The sense of frustration with the contemporary culture of the *patria*—the common response to which was an exodus for months, years, or an entire lifetime—had already been modeled for Moro by such Peruvian luminaries as Abraham Valdelomar and José Carlos Mariátegui.<sup>4</sup> Moro’s own journeys also find echoes in those of his contemporaries César Vallejo, who traveled to Paris in 1923 at the age of thirty-one, never to return, and the lesser-known but important writer and critic Xavier Abril, who spent most of the decade between 1926 and 1936 in Europe. Even Moro’s close friend and collaborator Emilio Adolfo Westphalen, who had remained in Lima throughout his formative period as a poet, critic, editor, and translator, eventually took up long periods of residency abroad.<sup>5</sup>

The important point here is that Moro’s “exile” in France and later in Mexico should not be considered an anomaly but rather a part of a pattern that marked the intellectual life of Lima (and many other Latin American capitals) in the period from the early 1920s through the 1940s. My goal in this essay is first to situate Moro within this milieu of discontent and desire, and then to examine the peculiarities of his own exilic situation. Finally, I will examine in detail certain key passages in Moro’s poetry and poetic prose that reveal his aesthetic solution to the problem of geographical and existential displacement. By doing so, I hope to map out the unique place that Moro’s work occupies within the global category of the “literature of exile.”

What were the parameters of the intellectual debate regarding Peru in the first half of the twentieth century? Taking this debate into account, what can we learn from the testimony of the writers of this period about their motivations for spending extensive time abroad? It is generally accepted that the Peruvian intelligentsia in the 1920s and 1930s was primarily concerned with bringing the nation into the modern world, and that the debate over the terms of this shift often took shape within a dichotomy that pitted Lima and the coastal area (with its *criollo* inhabitants) against the less developed (and racially indigenous) Andean interior. A related dichotomy within the world of cultural production opposed

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<sup>3</sup> Escobar’s study focuses on the “imaginario nacional” in the work of Moro and two of his famous contemporaries, Emilio Adolfo Westphalen and José María Arguedas. Notwithstanding the vast differences in literary genre and style, several identifiable elements constitute their shared imaginary: a marginalized perspective with respect to the historical situation, a subversive ideology bent upon challenging the prevailing literary and intellectual modes, an ethical position conceiving of artistic activity as fully integrated into life, a view of literature as a problematizing of “natural” or inherited language, and finally, an insistence on the interplay or integration of the arts in the face of academic compartmentalization (122).

<sup>4</sup> While Valdelomar lived for only a brief period in Italy, Mariátegui spent four years in Europe, eventually realizing his goal of transporting back to Peru a well-informed revolutionary consciousness.

<sup>5</sup> Westphalen worked in New York as a translator for the United Nations between 1949 and 1956; he then spent six years in Italy (1957–63), followed by several more years of diplomatic work in Portugal and Mexico.

the Eurocentric and experimental *vanguardismo* to the regional and social-realistic *indigenismo*.

Rafael Ramírez Mendoza points out that recent considerations of these debates “desbordan y subvierten esa oposición binaria.” After Mariátegui, he cites Westphalen and the novelist José María Arguedas as important proponents of the notion that the Andean world “podría convivir armoniosamente con las novedades europeas” (255).<sup>6</sup> But the crucial point for our present purposes is that the writers in whose path César Moro would follow, whether or not they placed their hopes in a reevaluation of contemporary indigenous cultures, found backwardness and stagnation even in the supposedly modernized, Europeanized, and forward-looking capital. Their critiques of the capital and its ruling class were incisive. At the same time, they took inspiration from certain elements within the “national imaginary” that they perceived as less problematically authentic. As Escobar observes, Moro, Westphalen, and Arguedas “habían sido tocados . . . por la magia que atraviesa el paisaje y la fulgurante atracción de los espacios míticos en la geografía, el arte popular, y la historia del arte prehispánico” (13). To cite one brief example of this attitude, Moro’s response to a questionnaire devised by André Breton about the magical qualities of art encapsulates his turn away from modern Peru and toward its pre-Conquest past: “Huacos funerarios del Perú, petroglifos de Canta, que cubren literalmente los cerros, cuyo origen y época desconocemos, me son tan próximos como el Ojo Real, mucho más próximo que la sórdida expresión que me rodea” (*La tortuga* 161).

Further evidence of these writers’ discontent with Lima and its environs is plentiful. In 1930, in a piece called “Manifiesto breve, sintético,” Xavier Abril registered numerous rather acerbic commentaries about the society that he had left behind in 1926.<sup>7</sup> Here Abril declares himself “completamente en contra de toda la mierda, la mierda seca que está haciéndose histórica en el Perú. En contra de la tiranía y de la desdentada boca sucia, puerca, sífilítica del Perú” (qtd. in Ramírez Mendoza 260). In his essay “Poetas en la Lima de los años

<sup>6</sup> Ramírez Mendoza observes that in the debates over Peruvian modernism, “debido a la prédica de Mariátegui, la autenticidad se ligaba al diálogo del indigenismo, la vanguardia y el socialismo, categorías que se veían como revolucionarias en tanto innovadoras, y partes conformantes de un nuevo tipo de nacionalismo” (255). Within the world of Peruvian letters of this period, José María Arguedas was particularly well suited for the task of unifying the “Western” and the Andean cultural strata of Peru, given that he was a fluent speaker of Quechua who had spent much of his childhood in indigenous communities. Moro’s own response to the *indigenista* movement, particularly in painting, was uncompromisingly negative. In an essay titled “A propósito de la pintura en el Perú,” Moro accuses the adepts of this school of promoting an inauthentic response to the plight of the contemporary indigenous community: “Hay quien pretende ayudar la gran miseria que el indio sufre en el Perú, su ostracismo total, llevándolo con verdadera saña al lienzo infamante o al cacharrillo destinado al turismo y adjudicándole todos los estigmas con que las reblandecidas clases dominantes de Occidente gratifican a las admirables razas de color” (*Los anteojos de azufre* 17).

<sup>7</sup> Although Abril’s “Manifiesto” (which is found among the writer’s papers at the Getty Research Institute) is undated, Mendoza Martínez deduces the date of 1930 from comparative evidence.

treinta,” Westphalen speaks in more measured terms but registers the same distaste, claiming that life in the capital was characterized by “un ambiente que en mi adolescencia se convirtió ya en enervante y neurotizante” (134). Westphalen remarks on his own condition in the society of Lima as the son of immigrants, in which “me sentía como en cuarentena permanente, reo de no estar integrado y no compartir las tradiciones, mejor dicho, los prejuicios o intereses de las clases dominantes” (133). Alluding to the above-cited dichotomy between the coastal and the Andean cultures, Westphalen considers that “[l]a hostilidad que al parecer se me oponía podría quizás equipararse a aquélla de la cual se quejó José María Arguedas dentro de un plano muy enconado de rivalidad entre serranos y costeños. En mi caso, las manifestaciones las sentí más solapadamente” (134). Apart from what might be considered mere bureaucratic obstacles, Westphalen cites a concrete case in his personal life: “con visos de castigo y ensañamiento[,] se me acusó al menos de dos crímenes mayúsculos: el primero ser poeta, el segundo ser comunista.” His presumed political affiliation, says Westphalen, “sólo podía entenderse en la acepción de una disconformidad total con el régimen establecido, pero también de un desconocimiento completo de los medios para volcar la situación” (133). In these brief testimonies by Abril and Westphalen, we find evidence of the factors that made creative life difficult in Lima during the period in question: a rigidly structured society manifesting sharp differences between social strata (including a hostile attitude toward immigrants), a conservative political regime (in particular, the rule of Augusto B. Leguía, from 1919 to 1930), and, finally, a general intolerance for artistic expression. Of particular interest is Westphalen’s comment that he felt completely at a loss to redress the situation in which he found himself, a sentiment that could logically be extended to other young writers of the era.

In contrast to Valdelomar, Mariátegui, and Westphalen, who engaged actively in the national literary and civic dialogue, and more in line with the fundamentally alienated figures of Vallejo and Abril, César Moro never managed to find a productive way to integrate himself into contemporary Peruvian society. André Coyné, the French writer who became Moro’s close friend and literary executor, insists that Moro’s sense of isolation was in fact so fierce and so idiosyncratic that it obviates any attempt to contextualize him within this milieu. “La soledad de Moro—su solidaridad—nunca tuvieron nada que ver—ni tendrán—con la ‘situación’ que se les puede hacer a los escritores en el Perú o en los demás países,” claims Coyné. He goes on to say, “A nadie cabe interrogarse sobre lo que fue—y será—su exilio” (“César Moro” 12). From a critical-historical distance, however, the need for such contextualization becomes imperative. In fact, Moro’s own account of the Lima he felt compelled to leave aligns remarkably well with the above-cited comments by Abril and Westphalen. In the years of his adolescence, he claims, the social environment in Lima was “pueblerino, desolado y pretencioso” (*Los anteojos* 62). “Hacia 1925 y en el Perú,” he recalls in a later essay, “las ideas sobre la vida, el arte, al amor, la Poesía, eran cuantiosamente fáciles, improvisadas, bucólico-líricas y apresuradas; continúan siendo el triste patrimonio de la mayoría gris y espesa de los intelectuales del Perú y de los que sin profesar de intelectuales tienen una opinión” (6). This, then, was the perceived

*patria* that Moro, like so many of his predecessors and contemporaries, felt compelled to leave behind.

## A Bio-Poetics of Exile

Relatively little is known about César Moro's early life,<sup>8</sup> but his dismissal from a Jesuit school in Lima may point to a disposition that Westphalen later characterized as "disconforme, exigente y quejoso de una realidad que no concordaba en absoluto con el esplendor de su imaginación o el rigor de sus principios morales o estéticos" (111). Another sign of the young writer's "disconformidad" may have been the decision to change his birth name, Alfredo Quíspes Asín, to the more resonant—and decidedly less Peruvian—"César Moro." In August of 1925, at the age of 22, he boarded a ship for Paris.<sup>9</sup> There, according to his own account, he found the intellectual and creative environment he had longed for in Lima:

El extranjero que llega a París sufre la transformación y se adapta a un ambiente secular, el más viejo y el más moderno, vivo y perennemente presente. Todas sus reivindicaciones, sus nostalgias, sus ambiciones tienen cabida en París, donde encontrará amigos con idénticas preocupaciones, amigos que alentarán y apreciarán su esfuerzo, colaborarán con él y lo aprovecharán al mismo tiempo, estableciéndose así un cabal sistema circulatorio. (*Los anteojos* 105)

It was in 1928, three years after his arrival in Paris, that Moro began to write his poetry and prose almost exclusively in French, enacting what Roberto Paoli calls "la opción por un exilio lingüístico" (131). At first glance, this might be seen as a harsh rejection of his native culture and its literary tradition. But Westphalen cautions against any such facile conclusions, pointing out that "[e]s un misterio para nosotros las circunstancias por las cuales Moro llegó a adoptar el francés como lenguaje preferido para su experiencia poética. Los que le conocimos íntimamente conjeturamos que no fue proceso fácil ni deliberado" (109). Contradicting the image of Moro as a mere cultural tourist in France, Westphalen suggests that Moro's shift toward French as a literary language was in fact a response to the anguish of displacement, to the loss of affective ties:

Pudo racionalmente aceptar, al alejarse de Lima, la necesidad de esa evasión para el desarrollo y formación plena de su personalidad y

<sup>8</sup> We owe most of what we know of Moro's biography to his longstanding literary friendship with Emilio Adolfo Westphalen, who wrote several essays on Moro, and the French writer André Coyné, who was the first to edit and publish Moro's work posthumously.

<sup>9</sup> André Coyné clarifies that Moro's first excursion abroad was carried out with the blessing of the Peruvian government: "gracias a una solicitud de su madre al presidente Leguía, Moro se embarca, en agosto de 1925, rumbo a Francia" ("Testimonio" 281). Westphalen emphasizes Moro's difficult economic situation in Peru preceding his journey: "No sé cómo se las agenciaría César Moro para viajar a Francia" (195).

tomar la decisión irrevocable del viaje, pero esos lazos —imaginarios o reales— fueron difíciles de desatar, sólo podrían borrarse con la adaptación al nuevo ambiente, con el reemplazo por otra serie de ligámenes afectivos igualmente absorbentes e imperativos. (109)

Whatever else one might say about the choice to write in French, it was one that severely limited Moro's readership in the Spanish-speaking world and that problematized for many years his incorporation into the corpus of Spanish American literature.<sup>10</sup>

The political and economic crisis that Europe was experiencing in the interwar period compelled Moro to return to Peru, along with many of his compatriots, in 1933.<sup>11</sup> But he did so, suggests Iván Ruiz Ayala, "dispuesto a asumir lo que él entendía que era su responsabilidad moral" (237). This moral responsibility was directly connected to his sustained contact with André Breton and the original surrealist group in Paris: Moro was determined to revitalize the society of his birth, to bring about a cultural awakening by means of access to the unconscious, dream states, "objective chance," and even the perceived magical vision of South America's indigenous peoples. The Lima to which Moro returned, however, continued to embody for him the same "ambiente de convento y páramo cultural" from which he had fled almost a decade earlier (Ruiz Ayala 237). Significantly, Moro alludes directly to the tropes of exile and imprisonment in his own land as he presents his translations of Pierre Reverdy's poetry: "Si el soplo vivificante de Reverdy logra atravesar el follaje de la lengua torpe de mi traducción," he states, "quedaré ampliamente satisfecho y juzgaré tal acción como parte compensatoria del destierro que vivimos *en esta prisión mortal del Perú*" (*Versiones del surrealismo* 134; emphasis added). It is clear from this statement that Moro viewed the state of exile as a metaphor not only for his individual condition, but also for that of the Peruvian people as a whole, whom he considered "exiled" from their own past and (in surrealist terms) from a freer and more authentic existence.

During this period of renewed residence in Peru (between 1933 and 1938), Moro produced poetry and paintings, organized art expositions, and published small literary journals and pamphlets. Eventually, his cultural activities assumed a straightforwardly political character. In 1936, Moro and Westphalen formed a group called CADRE—Comité de Amigos de la República Española—that spoke out in support of the Republican forces in the early days of the Spanish Civil War. CADRE's platform was international; with time, however, as Kent Dickson has observed, "los artículos evolucionaron cada vez más hacia la política interna del Perú —cambio que Moro pagó caro en 1938 cuando tuvo que exiliarse" (250). According to Coyné, when several copies of the purportedly subversive CADRE pamphlets were discovered in Moro's apartment by then president Óscar Benavides's henchmen, Moro accelerated his plans to leave for Mexico ("Testimonio" 287).

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, most of Moro's French poems were not available in Spanish translation until 1976, when Julio Ortega edited *La tortuga ecuestre y otros textos*.

<sup>11</sup> According to Westphalen, "[e]l transporte de la Armada Nacional en que hizo Moro el viaje de vuelta estaba repleto de repatriados" (200).

Given these circumstances, the decade Moro spent in Mexico between 1938 and 1948 can rightfully be considered within the framework of coerced exile, with many of its attendant difficulties, including underemployment and exclusion from the civic life of the adoptive country.<sup>12</sup> Edward Said asserts that exile in all its forms is a fundamentally subjective state of being. Thus he speaks of “the essential sadness” of exile, of “the crippling sorrow of estrangement,” and of “the loss of something left behind forever” (173). We have Moro’s own account of the subjective sense of exile he experienced in his early years in Mexico, as well as his eventual adaptation to that country:

Recién llegado a México, arrancado, una vez más, a lo familiar, a lo entrañable, trataba de establecer contactos, mejor que establecer, prolongar realidades ya conocidas antes de adentrarme en la realidad de ese país, que tanto amo ahora y cuya aceptación me iba a ser tan dolorosa, hasta adquirir en mí los caracteres que hoy tiene de tierra de elección, de amor intenso y de comunicación perfecta de clima, de reflejos, de intimidades. Ahora puedo vivir plenamente las mañanas pródigas de México, su sabor escondido, el que no se encuentra en ninguna guía de turistas, aquel sentido inefable que tan pocos viajeros conocen si no es a fuerza de vivir en un país y si ese país al cabo de los años se descubre justificar la residencia y la espera. (*Los anteojos* 61).

This passage is invaluable as a testimonial to Moro’s own reflections on the experience of exile. The adjective *arrancado* suggests that while his movement from country to country may have been due in part to personal choice, it resulted in a feeling of being torn away from the comfortable, the familiar, and the beloved, with the consequent need to reestablish a sense of intimacy and belonging in his new surroundings. In this passage, Moro clearly recognizes the adaptation to the new *tierra de elección* as a process, one that is *doloroso* and that is achieved only by a prolonged residence in that place.<sup>13</sup>

In 1948 Moro returned once again to Lima, where he would succumb to illness eight years later. As he contemplated this return in a series of letters exchanged with Westphalen, the latter tried to discourage him from leaving Mexico, where he had found some modicum of happiness and productivity. Moro responded with an ambivalent but poignantly hopeful attitude toward his native country:

No sé qué decirte ni hasta qué punto aceptar tu pesimismo. . . . ¿Es en la realidad tan horrible, tan abrumadora Lima? Sé que es un

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<sup>12</sup> Coyné claims that Moro lived in poverty in Mexico until 1940, when he found employment as the personal secretary of the director of the Liceo Franco-Americano. From 1941 to 1948 (the year of his return to Lima), he made a modest living working at the French bookstore Quetzal.

<sup>13</sup> Amy Kaminsky notes that “[w]hen familiarity is finally achieved [in the adoptive land], it can be a source of intense pleasure, even of rebirth” (11). This seems particularly applicable to Moro’s allusion to the “prodigious Mexican mornings” that eventually brought him joy and a sense of intimacy with his surroundings.

páramo, que lo cursi, lo mediocre, lo falso imperan sin recurso. Pero, ¿y los seres humanos? ¿O no hay un solo ser humano, no existe un solo rostro que valga el exilio? (Qtd. in Westphalen 200)

As he recalled this exchange in 1990, Westphalen commented pointedly: “Es curioso que en la justificación de su anhelo de regreso Moro reconozca explícitamente que era en Lima donde lo esperaba el exilio. En su tierra se sintió siempre excluido y puesto de lado” (201).

It is crucial to note that although his periods of living abroad came to an end with his return to Lima in 1948, Moro continued to position himself consciously as an outsider. Recalling these last years of Moro’s life, Mario Vargas Llosa writes poignantly of the French instructor in his private school who was rumored to be “homosexual y poeta” and who was for those reasons “acosado por una lluvia de invectivas, carcajadas insolentes, bromas monstruosas” (185). Formal and diligent to a fault, Moro disconcerted his students by not responding to their insults. “Aunque nada sabíamos de él,” Vargas Llosa reflects, “mis compañeros y yo debimos preguntarnos qué hacía Moro en ese recinto húmedo e inhóspito, desempeñando un oficio oscuro y doloroso, en el que parecía absolutamente fuera de lugar” (185). In 1949, Moro, the perennial outsider, would refer to his native city—in what would become an iconic phrase—as “Lima la horrible” (*La tortuga* 66). In a letter to the Mexican poet Xavier Villaurrutia in that same year, Moro asks, “¿[c]ómo no seguir en los sitios de peligro, donde no caben ni salvación ni regreso?” (133). This brief but powerful rhetorical question underscores the fact that whether at home or abroad, both ethically and aesthetically, Moro repeatedly chose to “continue in places of danger.” That is, he perceived that no geographical or political space, whether native or foreign, could provide him with a permanent sense of belonging or with an identity rooted in a meaningful community.

## The Imagination as *Patria*: A Close Reading

In the following pages, I will consider Moro’s work from one angle that proved fundamental to his aesthetic choices, that is, the positing of the poetic imagination as a spiritual home for the outcast. My argument is that Moro’s response to the situation of displacement was to create and inhabit a “kingdom” (to borrow Camus’s term) of the unfettered imagination.<sup>14</sup> Within this kingdom, Moro continually created and re-created a sense of self that dissolved all conventional boundaries. It is possible to argue, of course, that the imagination provides a “homeland” for any poet or artist who finds himself estranged from his surroundings. Yet with Moro, the determination to conceive and inhabit alternative

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<sup>14</sup> In Albert Camus’s collection of stories *Exile and the Kingdom*, the sense of the term “kingdom” is a fluid one, referring alternately to the Algeria of Camus’s childhood and to France, the country that had colonized it. Similarly, the concept of *exile* in this collection is rhetorically slippery, perhaps reflecting Camus’s sense of exile as part of a French colonial family living in Algeria, and later, as an Algerian living in France.

subjectivities is carried to an extreme rarely seen, even within his own *vanguardista* generation. In Moro's work we see not only an attitude of estrangement resulting from a consciousness that was ill fitted to its surroundings (an attitude, as we saw previously, that marked numerous Peruvian writers of the period), but also, and more significantly, the deliberate cultivation of the poetic imagination as an effective *response* to that estrangement, the creation of a "home" within language. Said points out that "[m]uch of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorientating loss by creating a new world to rule," and that "[t]he exile's new world, logically enough, is unnatural and its reality resembles fiction" (181). Moro's created world is not fictional but poetic, and he stakes out his own position within that world not as an omnipotent author-creator, but rather as a fluid, hybrid, and ultimately undefined lyric self.

Perhaps it is in the realm of the erotic that Moro's poetry most strikingly reveals a subjective sense of exile. In her article "César Moro: escritura y exilio," Elena Altuna examines poems from Moro's *La tortuga ecuestre*, a collection written in response to a love affair with a young Mexican official named Antonio (who is directly named in the collection, as is "Moro"). Altuna claims that in his desire to overcome a painful reality (the lover's absence), the poet "[se busca] como sujeto que se re-crea y define en el ámbito de un exilio poético en que se revela 'la vida maravillosa'" (109). Employing literary devices such as metonymy and *geminatio* (repetition with variations), these poems create a surrealist version of the poetics of courtly love, in which the absent or perpetually fleeing object of desire assumes a corporal substance within the poem itself. As Altuna observes of *La tortuga*, "[e]l cuerpo del poema es imagen del cuerpo del amado, como éste lo es del mundo . . . ; pero el cuerpo del poema está *en lugar del* cuerpo amado, y opera por lo tanto como sustituto de lo que no está. En César Moro el erotismo asumirá la forma del exilio, y la mirada, su vehículo, expresa esa distancia" (118). The result of this approach is a poetic experience "concebida como una práctica que permite el acceso a una realidad más plena, acceso cuya vía se encuentra en la palabra como repetición y transformación" (115).

Altuna's argument regarding the textual substantiation of both the lover and the beloved in *La tortuga ecuestre* points toward my broader argument, which is that out of his situation of exile (geographical, social, or existential), Moro employs the poetic imagination to create a world he can inhabit. We see further evidence of this in Moro's French poetry. In "Lettre d'Amour," for instance, Moro's speaker defines his situation in the absence of the beloved as both prison and *destierro*:

No olvidaré nunca  
 Pero quien habla de olvido  
 en la prisión en que tu ausencia me deja  
 en la soledad en que este poema me abandona  
 en el destierro en que cada hora me encuentra (*La tortuga* 76–77)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> "Lettre d'Amour" was translated by E.A. Westphalen and bears the Spanish title "Carta de amor."

The lyric speaker's response to this anguished predicament, however, is to avail himself of memory not as passive nostalgia but as creative action. This approach allows him to re-present the beloved in hyperbolic and otherworldly terms: "Pienso en tu cuerpo que hacía del lecho el cielo y las montañas supremas / de la única realidad" (76). Here the beloved's body in the remembered scene of love not only enhances reality, as it does in the ordinary lover's perception, but actually *produces* that reality. Beyond this act of generative memory, the speaker channels all of his energies into naming the absent one—"pongo toda mi destreza en deletrear / aquel nombre adorado / siguiendo sus transformaciones alucinantes"—in a process that restores movement and dynamism to what might otherwise have remained a "dead letter." In sum, by structuring his poetic vision as a dialectics of presence and absence to which the speaker responds actively and productively, Moro replaces what is lost by verbally creating figures that are reified within the space of the imagination. And in doing so, he frees himself at least partially from the "prison" of absence.

In the situation of exile or extreme estrangement, the subject loses not only his affective ties to others, but also the very sense of identity that once grounded the self in relation to that community. It is not uncommon, then, for the process of adaptation in the new surroundings to involve an attempted reconstruction of the self, one that permits the "huérfano nefasto" to find a new sense of belonging (*La tortuga* 82). In Moro's poetry, the reconfiguration of the self occurs within a continual exploration of the limits of the imagination, sometimes rendered through the surrealist topos of the dream. There is no poem better suited to examine this method than "Sueño de un dependiente de barbería a las tres de la tarde," written in Spanish and published posthumously.<sup>16</sup> The title of this long and often hermetic poem situates it within a quotidian urban setting ruled by clock time, a setting that recalls Neruda's famous anti-bourgeois poem "Walking Around." Like Neruda's poem, "Sueño" reflects the tension between the ennui of working-class existence and the barely suppressed desire to leap beyond that existence. The leap that is impossible in reality is rendered possible in the imagination of Moro's speaker, who enumerates a series of alternative identities. The poem, a tour de force of surrealist imagery, is divided into three sections. The exploration of identities is carried out anaphorically, first by means of elaborations on the first-person verb ([yo] *era*), and subsequently by the hypothetical (*si fuera*). Taken as a whole, the poem presents a view of these imagined identities as entirely interchangeable, arbitrary, and, ultimately, absurd. Accordingly, the tone of the poem is playful and ironic, often darkly humorous, inviting the reader to share the speaker's wild imaginings and to laugh at their incongruities.

The poem's first stanza is framed by the words "Nada / . . . es incomprendible," a statement that serves as a verbal gauntlet thrown down to the reader, a challenge to entertain previously unthinkable notions of reality (*La tortuga* 53). The second and third verses of this stanza—"Ni las plumas que al carecer de

<sup>16</sup> "Sueño de un dependiente de barbería a las tres de la tarde" was first published in a section titled "Otros poemas en español, 1927-1949" in Julio Ortega's 1976 edition of Moro's works, *La tortuga ecuestre y otros textos*. I cite from this edition.

norte / producen coaliciones estelares”—allude to the total lack of direction (“norte”) that appears to characterize the dreams of the barbershop employee. By extension, the lack of direction also applies to the poem’s own meanderings. These “aimless feathers,” however, eventually come together to produce “stellar coalitions,” that is, a convergence of separate points that might form a coherent image, a constellation. These potential “coalitions” suggest a way of reading an otherwise largely inscrutable poem. Given the particular content of the speaker’s imaginings, which I will examine in the following pages, they also suggest a way of considering individual identities as arbitrarily constructed, but nonetheless meaningful.

The speaker begins his imaginative litany of identities in the fourth stanza of the poem’s first section:

Era otomí  
 Con un coche de verano  
 Y una piel extensible para guardar relojes  
 Un caballo de heno  
 Para un invierno mediano  
 Destinado a castañetear los dientes entre semana  
 Pendiendo de un clavo herrumbroso  
 Vetusto (53)

Here, Moro overturns all conventions of cultural identity. Readers will probably not associate the Otomí, an indigenous group from the Mexican central highlands, with cars—much less summer vacation cars—or with watches. The phrase “piel extensible” may serve as a metaphor for the expandability of a given identity, although the fact that it is the skin that expands, and not the body as a whole, suggests a superficial definition of the self.

It remains unclear whether the lines that follow the phrase “Un caballo de heno” constitute a further elaboration of the Otomí identity or a separate possibility. If we assume the “horse made of hay” to be a distinct identity, it points in the direction of the ordinary rather than the exotic: this horse is nothing more than the common matter it ingests (hay) in an “average” or “medium-sized” winter. Like the barbershop employee, its destiny is reduced to a weekday existence (“entre semana”) with its teeth chattering—from cold? (Or perhaps anxiety or boredom?) Again, there are clear echoes here of Neruda’s “Walking Around,” whose speaker describes himself as “vacilante, extendido, tiritando de sueño . . . absorbiendo y pensando, comiendo cada día” (80). The workaday horse is imagined in the last lines of this stanza as a mere piece of flesh, very old (“vetusto”) and perhaps even dead, hanging from a rusty nail. To the extent that the speaker identifies with this horse, we can surmise that he sees himself as an alienated being in the everyday world, a creature that will be discarded once he is no longer useful.

The following stanza elaborates another of the speaker’s imagined pasts—“Era japonés y tenía / Un pez de alambre y pluma”—followed by a fantasized present: “Soy más rico que un cargador / Más rico que un aspirante a canónigo / Soy un amigo íntimo del Obispo de X” (53–54). The irony captured

by these lines is that since neither a dock loader nor an aspirant to the priesthood are rich (at least in material terms), the speaker's fantasies are pointless; likewise, the name-dropping accomplished by claiming to be the friend of an unnamed bishop is entirely without consequence. Several lines later, the speaker confirms this pointless fantasizing by claiming "Tengo una peluquería / Y unas coronas de papel dorado fino" (54). If he is a lowly worker in a barbershop, perhaps the dream of owning that shop represents a valid, though obviously limited, ambition. But this possibility is immediately subverted by the image of paper crowns, whose gilding is a straightforward allusion to the artificial nature of any "royal" destiny the barber (or the reader) might imagine for himself.

In the remaining thirteen stanzas of the first section of "Sueño," the speaker tries out several more hypothetical identities, each signaled grammatically by the imperfect subjunctive phrase "Si fuera," followed by one or more verbs in the conditional. Here the poem truly finds its voice, as the startling surrealist juxtapositions are allowed to flourish within the confines of this fixed verbal formula:

Si fuera caballo de carrera  
 Tendría un sombrero de copa  
 Un traje de etiqueta  
 Y algunos frascos vacíos de aspirina  
 Coleccionaría botones para cuando me volviera tortuga  
 Tendría zapatos de triple suela de fieltro  
 Comería estopa y bebería petróleo (55)

As with other images in this poem ("un coche de verano," "coronas de papel dorado fino"), Moro is concerned here with the superficial trimmings of existence, the conventional signs of status or wealth, which are emblemized by the top hat, the dress suit, and the soft-soled shoes. Even the racehorse itself, when compared to the "horse made of hay" of the fourth stanza, stands as a cipher for social status and luxury. And when the accoutrements of bourgeois life are ascribed to a horse, rather than to the humans who might own it, the effect is to render the entire scene farcical.

If the superficial markers of identity (clothing and accoutrements) are represented in this poem as infinitely interchangeable or even dispensable, so too are the purportedly more stable ways of claiming a place in the world, including gender. Although the vast majority of the speaker's imagined identities are marked as masculine in Spanish (*chino*, *sirio-libanés*, *farmacéutico*, etc.), in one instance the speaker imagines himself as a woman: "Si fuera una cantante de ópera tendría ocho cines privados / Sonoros y caldeados donde se diera eternamente mi fá sobreagudo" (55). The female singer here is presented as yet another object of derision, as she is concerned not with her craft or the spiritual elements of song, but rather with the accumulation of property and fame. In a similar way, the poem presents the birthright of any particular culture as a questionable basis for identity construction. Although in much of his writing Moro's chosen targets are the European or Latin American bourgeoisie, in this poem he pokes fun at non-Western cultures as well, alternately highlighting stereotypical images and imaginatively dissolving them. A clownish Chinese figure, for example, appears within the speaker's litany of hypothetical identities:

Si fuera chino volaría con alas de cuerda  
 Y con zapatos de tenis  
 Tendría mi borla de Mandarín para domingos  
 Me preguntaría la gente dónde queda China  
 Y no sabría decirle si está en este mundo o salió  
 Tendría varias hojas de papel de China  
 Y escribiría con pincel asuntos chinos  
 Sobre el cultivo de arroz (54)

Moro packs into this passage various stereotypical images of Chinese culture—Mandarin tassels, the cultivation of rice, brush-writing on fine paper, and so forth. But into these images he also weaves the unexpected and the frankly inane, such as wings fashioned of string and tennis shoes. In a stanza devoted to debunking Chinese cultural icons, Moro's coup de grâce is the allusion to the ignorance of the non-Chinese, who cannot even locate the country on a map. Even the lyric speaker, in his role as a hypothetical Chinese citizen, is so steeped in this ignorance that he cannot say if China exists in the modern world.

A similar stanza mocks the idea of indigenous or pre-Hispanic cultures as providing a particular access to a meaningful identity:

Si fuera tolteca dirían  
 Éste es un tolteca de primera  
 Debió de haber nacido a mediados de mayo  
 O en algún otro mes  
 Según el calendario más o menos antiguo (54)

Here Moro alludes to the belief, widespread among traditional cultures, that the date of a person's birth determines his or her character and destiny. The absurdity of the notion that a "first-class Toltec" must have been born in mid-May is signaled by the immediate rhetorical swerve to the phrase "or any other month." The false ground of such beliefs is further emphasized by the fact that the calendar representing the source of birth-related information is "más o menos antiguo"—that is, of doubtful antiquity and authority.

In each of the previously cited stanzas, Moro presents cultural markers as arbitrary determinants of an individual's personhood. In other parts of the poem he explores other conventional identity markers, such as vocation or profession. In one instance the speaker ventures: "Si fuera carbonero / Tendría un palacio de diamantes en una playa de cartón" (55). Here the juxtaposition of diamonds—a product associated with coal, though a highly unlikely find for a coal merchant—with the fantastical "playa de cartón" points once again to the artificial or superficial character of many human aspirations. (In a typically surrealist leap, the word "carbón"—implicit in "carbonero—is transformed into "cartón," from which a new image is generated.) The rather obvious point here is that the coalman will never have his diamond palace, and the cardboard beach on which he imagines it would be as impermanent as any other image arising from a *siesta* dream. At this juncture, the reader is led into darker territory by yet another hypothetical situation relating to profession: "Si fuera farmacéutico / Bebería

cianuro en vasos de astrakhan y de piel de sapo / Y no saldría sino en las noches cubierto de obleas eléctricas” (55). Although the toad skins and the Astrakhan cloth add a decidedly exotic flavor to this image, the principal action envisioned by the speaker-as-pharmacist is that of drinking cyanide. The poem may be suggesting with this enigmatic passage that the limits of the imagination are bounded by the inevitable death of the self.

In the panoply of identities considered throughout “Sueño de un dependiente de barbería,” the possibility of non-human selfhood is not overlooked. As we saw earlier, the speaker places himself within the comically aristocratic scene of the horse in a tailored suit and top hat. In one hermetic line inserted into the middle of this stanza, the speaker plays out a meta-shift of identity, imagining himself as a racehorse that imagines becoming a turtle (55). The suggestion here is that any given construct of identity opens itself to immediate reconstruction. While the racehorse that fancies itself a turtle may be the stuff of fables, Moro also creates less conventional characterizations, surrealist in their juxtaposition of unrelated entities. To cite one prime example, the final stanza of the first section of “Sueño” reads:

Si fuera un tigre querría ser un Kiosko de periódicos  
 O un anuncio de teatros  
 O una botella de limonada  
 O el duque de Saint-Simon  
 O la peluca nueva de la señora de Montespán (55)

Elsewhere in Moro’s poetry, the *tigre* represents a fierce lover or a mythical beast who ushers in the dawn. But in this poem there is an ironic subversion as the tiger wishes away his strength, his savagery, and his beauty, diminishing himself into a series of commonplace objects or ludicrous human figures.

Following the extensive first section of “Sueño,” parts of which we have examined in the preceding paragraphs, the poem concludes rather quickly with two additional sections, each quite brief. The second section continues to build on the litany of imagined identities, with the speaker recalling a past life as a hot air balloon capable of turning into “un brioso alazán” (55). Section III, however, moves in a markedly different direction, one that points directly to the motif of exile:

Cuando la mañana salió era un pedrusco  
 En un país al salir de una guerra  
 Los árboles tenían formas de árbol conocido  
 Cubiertos de billetes de lotería  
 Los loros hacían el destino  
 Según grimorios descubiertos hace milenios  
 En una lengua intraducible (56)

Upon awaking from his dream, the speaker experiences a sense of geographic, psychic, and even linguistic displacement. He himself has become a lump of stone in barely recognizable surroundings. Like the Toltec calendar mentioned

earlier in the poem, the unearthed books of magical formulas (*grimorios*) written in an “untranslatable” language make a parody of human wisdom, providing him with no clue as to who he is or what his environs might offer him.

The poem shifts noticeably at this point, moving toward its conclusion with these lines: “Volvió entonces el recuerdo / De un columpio caldeado / Que pretendía ahorcar a un niño” (56). This enigmatic statement is followed by a series of disconnected memories, ranging from a popular tango to the sand dunes where the speaker (or an unidentified third person) buries the head of a child. The next and final stanza opens with the lines “Todos los recuerdos amargos de la infancia / Se agolparon como en un ventisquero” (56). The reader realizes at this point that among the numerous instances of displacement evoked by the poem, the emotionally foundational one is the “exile” experienced by the child or adolescent as he moves into adulthood. Yet there is no real nostalgia here, as might be expected within the theme of lost innocence, since the images relating to childhood evoke violence and pain, such as “[el] punzón que hiere la mano de un joven,” along with allusions to more tangible lost objects. The return of these bitter memories signals a potential trauma—“El buque amenazaba hundirse”—whose seriousness is immediately undermined by the poem’s final darkly comic line: “Y el coro de focas se puso a cantar el Ave” (56). Moro’s anti-religious attitudes are well documented, and thus this allusion to the “Ave Maria” should probably be read parodically. And yet, if the Catholic Virgin is taken as an emblem for the universal mother whose child was “banished, outcast, and reviled,”<sup>17</sup> then this seemingly absurd ending suggests a meaningful link to the rest of the poem, whose obsessive concern is childless mothers or motherless children or, in short, the total unmooring of identity.

## Moro the Peruvian Exile

I have provided a reading of “Sueño de un dependiente de barbería a la tres de la tarde” that examines César Moro’s poetics of exile primarily from a universalizing perspective—that of the radically displaced subject. As we have seen, the poem plays out the dynamics of identity loss and imaginative reconstruction in terms that range across various semantic fields, even arriving at the conception of the self as animal or inanimate object. Although Moro’s surrealist imagination led his poetry into these far reaches, in life he experienced exile not from an abstract, universal, or archetypal perspective, but rather concretely, as a Peruvian in the early to mid-twentieth century. Américo Ferrari has called Moro “un extranjero nato,” insisting that the poet’s sense of displacement transcended all geographical boundaries (238). But from that sense of *extrañamiento*, says Ferrari, “el lugar natal emite señales” (238). By approaching Moro as a writer writing *from* and *about* his place of origin—a place that continues to “emit signals” even from great geographical and emotional distances—we may gain a final insight

<sup>17</sup> In the first stanza of the traditional “Ave Maria” hymn, originally written in Latin, the singer pleads for protection by the Virgin: “Safe may we sleep beneath thy care / Though banished, outcast, and reviled.”

into the pervasiveness and complexity of his preoccupation with the topos of exile. Moro's "Biografía peruana: un viaje de sueño sobre los Andes" was written in French and later translated into Spanish by the author himself.<sup>18</sup> In this poetic prose text, which is both a melancholy ode to Peru and a vindication of poetry, Moro's perpetual sense of estrangement takes on a historical, temporal character: he presents his native country as a place exiled from its own past. "Biografía peruana" as José Miguel Oviedo remarks, "es un texto que testimonia de modo muy encendido la contradictoria relación del poeta con su país y su tiempo" (105).

Looking out to sea from the Pacific Coast, the speaker envisions a "[m]ar inundado de la historia donde sobreviven vestigios inapreciables de todo un pasado deslumbrante que nos da todavía el gusto de vivir en esta continuidad peligrosa de la que la poesía es el eje diamantino e imantado" (*La tortuga* 9). Two points stand out clearly from this rather baroque sentence. First, Moro sees Peru's past as dazzling (*deslumbrante*), although the "inestimable" vestiges of that past have been swallowed up by the sea. Second, Moro sees poetry as a diamond-hard, magnetic axis along which to fix an otherwise unstable world; it is the bright core of the "dangerous continuity" that connects the present to the past.

Following in a long line of writers descending from Pedro Cieza de León and El Inca Garcilaso, in this piece Moro presents pre-Hispanic Peru (Tahuantinsuyo) as an architectural and horticultural jewel. Echoing Prescott, he then presents the Spanish conquest as an unmitigated tragedy that descended upon the land and its people: "La prisión de Atahualpa produjo el estupor; la gran decadencia que debía abatirse sobre el Perú era inaugurada y la sangre corre durante siglos oscureciendo la piedra angular de luna de esta cultura cuya luz nos llega todavía como aquella de las estrellas apagadas" (10). The image of light, meant to be read both literally and metaphorically, pervades this poetic essay from beginning to end. Of all its pre-Hispanic marvels, Moro claims, "el Perú no conserva sino ruinas y esta luz de la que he hablado y que no dirá nunca, sin duda, eso que ella cubría" (12). Thus Peru's true history, though overspread by a veil of light ("la luz más punzante, más cargada de inmanencia que conozco"), can never be fully illuminated. The excision from a glorious past brought about by the Spanish conquest is further exacerbated by the turn toward commercialization and mediocrity that characterizes the Peru of Moro's time, which has entered into "la gran vida estandarizada" (13).<sup>19</sup> From this perspective, Peru's colonial past also contained a grace and a beauty that have been lost as the

<sup>18</sup> A portion of this piece, which is thought to have been written in 1937, was translated into English by Wolfgang Paalen and published in the surrealist-influenced arts journal *Dyn* in 1942 under the title "Coricancha: The Golden Quarter of the City." It appeared in Spanish for the first time in Ortega's 1976 edition *La tortuga ecuestre y otros textos*, from which I cite here.

<sup>19</sup> In the words of Yolanda Westphalen, "[e]n el Perú de los años 20 la República Aristocrática ha dejado de gobernar, pero la oligarquía mantiene intacto su poder económico y social. La 'Patria Nueva' leguista implica la apertura hacia el capital norteamericano y la tecnología —que llega sólo como objeto de consumo, como producto terminado— pero que altera, sin embargo, el modo de vida y la propia sensibilidad de amplios sectores en las ciudades" (*La poética del ritual* 116).

country sacrifices its particular character to the attractions of Western modernization.

Significantly, Moro's response to the tragedy of historical exile is, once again, to evoke the powers of the imagination. Perhaps the most striking and original passage of the entire "Biografía peruana" occurs as Moro recalls a legend told of the last Inca emperor, Atahualpa:

Se habla de un manto de Atahualpa, de alas de murciélago. Ese manto color de humo a los reflejos de herrumbre y venado de sangre aérea yo lo veo sobre las terrazas inmensas del palacio imperial absorbiendo bajo la luna todo el color incendiario de las piedras y del oro que flameaba bajo el Imperio. Manto alado, pensante, manto de hechicero sublime, aislado, manto para recibir el más próximo mensaje nocturno y solamente imaginable en el silencio absoluto que debía hacerse apenas el Inca lo ponía sobre sus hombros. (12)

The key phrase in this richly descriptive passage is "yo lo veo," a version of the *yo lo vi* that marked so many of the sixteenth-century chronicles of the Spanish conquest. With this suggestion of eyewitness testimony, Moro signals to the reader that the bat-wing mantle of Atahualpa is largely a figure of his own writerly and painterly imagination. But a powerful figure it is. Through Moro's verbal recreation of this mysterious vestment, the Incan imperial culture comes dynamically to life. As an emblem of the empire in its dying moments, the "winged" and "thinking" royal robe belonging to a "sublime sorcerer" rescues the figure of Atahualpa from any historical ignominy into which he may have fallen. It is worth noting, finally, that Moro depicts the robed Atahualpa as "aislado," suggesting a three-way identification between the isolated writer, the figure of Atahualpa, and the culture they both embodied, though in vastly different periods.

In the final section of this poem-essay, Moro addresses the moon as he looks out from a window in the palace of Huayna Capac in Urubamba: "Inmensa perla que ruedas mutilada y sangrante sobre un país sordo y ciego, tú continúas siendo el punto de mira, el tesoro aéreo de los poetas exilados en sus tierras de tesoros" (14). Moro's language here could not be more explicit: he is a poet exiled in his own land, a land that is blind and deaf, ignorant of its own treasures. The rhetoric of exile is repeated a few sentences later, in the final paragraph of the text: "Yo te saludo fuerza desaparecida, de la que tomo la sombra por la realidad. . . . Yo no saludo sino a ti, gran sombra extranjera al país que me vio nacer" (14). The shadow cast by the moon over the Incan ruins represents the half-light of the conquered civilization, a force or source of strength that Moro chooses to accept as reality. This shadowy past is "extranjera," a stranger to modern-day Peru, as is the poet himself.

In sum, "Biografía peruana" attests to the fact that César Moro conceived of himself as an exile long before he left Lima to take up residence in Paris, and long after he returned from Mexico. In this context, his status as an outsider assumes a profoundly (and ironically) national character, given that he saw all of contemporary Peru as residing in a place far removed from its past, whose treasures were "definitively lost" (14). Yet as a poet within that land estranged

from itself, he occupies the privileged and solitary place of one who can see with “the fierce eyelids of the imagination” (14). Like the “mutilated and bloody” moon that he apostrophizes, the poet floats above his native country and sheds a shadowy light on its darkened spaces.

## Conclusion

In 1958, recalling Moro’s social isolation as a schoolteacher in Lima, Mario Vargas Llosa posed the question of how to situate Moro within the parameters of Peruvian poetry, “a la que parece, también, sustancialmente extraño” (185). Vargas Llosa’s question is no less valid today, more than half a century later. As we have seen, Moro characterized himself as a stranger in a strange land while still living in his native Peru. Although not unique among his contemporaries in his desire to leave Lima behind, Moro distinguished himself both in the ferocity of his repudiation and in the vigor of his responses. By residing for nearly two decades abroad, and by writing and publishing the majority of his work in another language, Moro consciously exacerbated his alienation from his own culture. It could also be argued that the difficult, even hermetic nature of his poetry further distanced Moro from a potential community of readers. He responded to this complex situation of estrangement by a defiant insistence on the powers of the poetic imagination, by means of which his work interrogates not only questions of gender, nationality, and cultural authenticity, but also the very notion of selfhood. The only concept of self that Moro is willing to accept—and even exalt—is that of the poet. The poet, removed in privileged moments from the particularities of historical circumstance, floats above those circumstances and is able to perceive the reality of those “strange forces” that others may not even recognize.

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