

VICENTE ALEIXANDRE AND THE SOLIDARITY OF THE COSMOS

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As the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1977, Vicente Aleixandre (1898) joins, among others, the select company of the great Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez (1956) and the internationally known Pablo Neruda from Chile (1971). Jiménez was a strong initial influence on Aleixandre's whole Generation of 1927; Neruda was a contemporary poet comparable to Aleixandre in their chronological development of theme. Even for Hispanists, Aleixandre's selection came as a surprise, since (unlike Lorca, for example) he has not been a public figure even in his native Spain. For the reader of English, Aleixandre can be meaningfully compared with Walt Whitman. Like Whitman, Aleixandre is a poet of telluric and cosmic sweep, of mystic pantheism, of erotic body imagery, of revolutionary theme, of massive free verse. The two are different in that Whitman seems a great optimist, while Aleixandre extols the tragic vision of love equated with destruction. Like Jiménez a poet's poet, Aleixandre is the creator of a convincing poetic universe in his major books of poetry.¹

The Nobel Prize has confirmed Vicente Aleixandre as one of the major Spanish poets of this century. As the critic and poet Dámaso Alonso has emphasized, Spanish poetry has enjoyed a kind of second Golden Age in this period, and the major poets as a group compare favorably with those of any other country in Western culture. The generation preceding Aleixandre's, called the Generation of 98' (the year of Aleixandre's birth), is dominated in poetry by Unamuno, Antonio Machado, and Jiménez, with the additional influence of the Nicaraguan poet, Rubén Darío. In his synthetic fashion, Jiménez later declared that "two great revolutionaries from within and without, Unamuno and Darío,"² were responsible

for the change in content and form of Spanish poetry. For Unamuno and this group, it is of essential importance that they suffered a crisis of conscience, especially in regard to their traditional Catholic faith. For Jiménez, to take one example, poetry *replaces* religion; his poetry becomes the system of life he creates for himself. Naturally the freedom of conscience which this generation suddenly achieved produced severe tensions between the individual and his traditional Spanish culture.

The generation of poets to which Aleixandre belongs, usually called the Generation of 1927 (the approximate year when they reached maturity as poets), inherited this freedom of conscience, and their various reaction to it leads critics to divide them into two possible groups. In our book on modern Spanish poetry,³ we have called the group including Pedro Salinas, Gerardo Diego, and the most important, Jorge Guillén, "Poets of Affirmation"; the group including Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Luis Cernuda, and Vicente Aleixandre we have called "Poets Uprooted and Rebellious." *How* this group is uprooted and rebellious is of course a complex question. Aleixandre himself formulated and defended this grouping: in 1968, organizing what he contemplated as his *Complete Works*, Aleixandre surprisingly chose to place as the final poem one called "Funeral." It begins with the laconic remark: "Someone says to me: André Breton has died." The fact that Breton, known as the father of surrealism, has just died evokes in the poet a connection with his own generation:

Oh waywardness: earth, you in your voice.
Poets. Yes, *Poet in New York*.
Also, running faithfully, *A River, a Love*.
There *Concerning the Angels* sounded
The thunder. No; light. *Destruction* . . .

A real Andalusian chorus that has no end.
That sounds in life or death, in its terror . . .

The "Andalusian Chorus" mentioned are Lorca, Luis Cernuda, and Rafael Alberti, associated with Granada, Seville, and Cádiz, respectively, as Aleixandre is attached to Málaga. The titles of the four books of poetry listed (including Aleixandre's *Destruction, or Love*) all show elements of Breton's surrealism, a movement generally revolutionary, and certainly one in which individualism and irra-

tionalism are paramount. In fact, Carlos Bousoño, the excellent critic of Aleixandre's poetry, has made much of the point that Aleixandre reached maturity during the years 1925-1940, a period of intense individualism and irrationalism, both of which favor the development of a great poet.⁴

Of all the poets of the Generation of 1927, Aleixandre's life is the poorest in outward events.⁵ Already Unamuno and Machado had bitterly realized that although the man passes, the literary creation endures, and Jiménez lived the principle that inner resources must be hoarded for the sake of poetry, the *Obra* which was his essence transformed. Although born in Seville, Aleixandre, the son of an engineer, spent his childhood in Málaga. In 1909, Aleixandre's family moved to Madrid where at university age he matriculated in the School of Commerce, studying business and law. Upon graduation in 1920 he became briefly a professor of commercial law, then worked for and published articles on the railroads. In 1925 and again in 1932 he suffered grave illnesses, becoming almost an invalid at times. In 1924 he began to devote himself totally to poetry, and his major books have appeared at frequent though lengthening intervals. In 1949 he was inducted into the Royal Spanish Academy. Since the Civil War he has become a consecrated figure to the younger poets. For the last fifty years or more, Aleixandre has lived quietly on the outskirts of Madrid, first with his family, then with his sister. Except for his "Encuentros" or "Meetings" with fellow writers, Aleixandre, like Jiménez before him, has preferred to live for and in his poetry.

Aleixandre's first published effort is *Ambito* (Ambient), a book of apprenticeship, influenced by Jiménez and perhaps Jorge Guillén. These brief poems are in the manner of "pure poetry" of the period; that is, the poet shuns the episodic and strings together images which yield a very general meaning. In this book, the poet's consciousness reaches out into the outside world, a world whose "contours" are specifically limited. For example, this opening stanza from "Closed Night" is typical.

Naked fields. Alone
The night unarmed. The wind
Insinuates mute throbs
Against its canvases.

This wind, both fecund and disturbing, evokes in the poet in the stanza following "Now flesh, now light of flesh." For a long time, this book was considered utterly different from Aleixandre's major books; now, with the perspective of distance, we can pick out germs of later major themes, especially his idea of matter as the essence of the universe and the complex symbol of the sea as life by day and destruction by night.

Aleixandre thus began as a poet in the elegant "cool" fashion of the early Twenties in Spain. Sometime around 1928, however, he suffered a tremendous crisis of conscience, and from that time his poetry begins to assume telluric and cosmic proportions. Around this time he began to read Freud, seriously, and in him he discovered a meaningful discussion of the elements of sexuality and frustration that he could apply to his own personality. The fruit of this period is a very turgid and difficult book of prose poems ultimately called *Passion of the Earth*, written in 1928-29 and printed much later in Mexico. Aleixandre first called it *Evasion toward the Depths*, an indication of the surprising and often disturbing content.

For the reader who is a non-specialist, these prose poems are almost completely opaque. They concern the primary, the instinctual forces of the libido or the unconscious; the passions are usually pansexual and uncontrolled. Generally the widely varying lines convey raging desire, extreme frustration, or terrible fears all presented without order. The poet's outpouring of libido desperately seeks the love object, which assumes multiple forms both attractive and repulsive. At times the attraction is vaguely feminine: "I remember that one day a green mermaid the color of the moon took out her wounded breast, parted in two like a mouth and wanted me to kiss the dead shadow." This mermaid has only one breast shaped like a mouth, which suggests the libido turning back upon itself. As Kessel Schwartz has analyzed it, Aleixandre's insistent breast symbolism suggests psychologically a return to the mother's breast, and thus a retreat from the anxieties and frustrations of the world. At times the fantasies are Oedipal and phallic: "I prefer that muscular wing, made of firmness, which does not fear to wound with its extremities the jail of heaven..." The image of the "muscular wing" is both phallic and elevating, and indeed a bit ingenious. This book, as Aleixandre admitted, reveals the

poet in the darkest pits of the instinctual. However, toward the end of it his usual dejection changes to a faint hope of triumph, as he wants to fuse with the sea, the sun, and finally light.

In 1929 Aleixandre was suddenly inspired to return to verse form, and ultimately published his first important book of poetry in 1932. It is called saliently *Espadas como labios*, that is, *Swords like Lips*. This is a biting title: The sword is typically phallic and/or aggressive; here in conjunction with the lips or mouth imagery the impact is fiercely erotic. The poems are generally in the avant-garde manner, with staccato phrases, surprising shifts of images, and strange uses of connectors and relatives. The themes are developed in the Freudian-surrealist manner; by the Freudian we mean the projection of undifferentiated sexuality, frustration, and anxiety, by surrealist we mean the attempt to create a deeper reality through the total exploration of the human body. Pure surrealism of course means the projection of the deepest desires of the unconscious through words flowing in total freedom.

As Dámaso Alonso has written, the poems of *Swords like Lips* do not have "common sense," but certain ones indicate Aleixandre's progress in freeing his libidinal and poetic impulses. In the poem "Final Birth," the poet celebrates the attainment of that freedom:

For final act this alert attitude.
 Alert, alert, alert,
 I'm awake or beautiful. I'm the sun or the reply.
 I am that happy earth that doesn't haggle over reflections.
 Along my way I've sung because I've dominated the horizon...
 I've seen the masculine sea, the feminine sea,⁶
 the seas, the no-limits.
 I'm lifted up like youth that has no end.

Here, "final birth" is essentially birth into total freedom. For Aleixandre "final birth" later became death.

In order to achieve this freedom of "no-limits," the poet must reject the normal social and domestic traditions which are always threatening to ensnare him. In the brilliant poem "The Waltz" he presents a surrealistic caricature of the scene in the salon in which proper ladies and gentlemen whirl hypocritically toward matrimony.

The ladies await their moment seated upon a tear,
dissimulating the humidity with force of insistent fan.
And the gentlemen abandoned by their behinds
Want to attract all the glances by force toward their mustaches.
Exuberant breasts on a tray in embraces . . .
It's the moment, the moment of saying the word that explodes,
the windows in shouts,
the lights in "help!",
and the kiss (in the corner) between two mouths
will convert into a thorn
that will dispense death, saying:
I love you all.

For Alexandre's generation the waltz was antique, symbolizing dead tradition; jazz was the avant-garde form of music. In this poem, then, the poet is attacking normal tradition as hypocrisy. In short, for these poets, marriage and family become a "death" for the individual. Much later Alexandre softens this philosophy of the individual consciousness as everything and accepts the normal structure of society and family.

As a final example of the evasive imagery of libido, frustration and anxiety in Alexandre we shall mention the lyric "Toro," or "Bull." Somewhat traditionally (in meaning at least), the poet depicts the bull in rapid oscillation from a cosmic to a libidinal force, down to the intimacy of his own body; in short the poet sweeps from the stars down to the auto-erotic. The bull is soft quivering flesh "like a sea within"; the poet leaves us with a final evasive line: "Immense hand that covers celestial bull on earth." This phase of Alexandre's poetry, the intense and at times ambiguous eroticism, is rushed over in silence, but for him it is a primary complement to his poetry of the human equation.

After he recovered from his grave illness of 1932, Alexandre retired to his summer home in the tiny mountain village of Miraflores de la Sierra and in a short time created a major book, *Destruction, or Love*. Apparently dissatisfied with certain limitations of the surrealist manner, he merely assimilated this manner into an expanded vision which some have called neo-Romantic, for in his mystic pantheism the poet embraces the world itself in all-consuming love. The poet moves grandly in this cosmos, without God and civilized man, fulfilling his tragic destiny through love as destruction. A trustworthy critic of his own work, Alexandre says

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of *Destruction, or Love*: "I believe that the poet's vision of the world achieves a first plenitude with this work, conceived under the central thought of the amorous unity of the universe."⁷ The poet indeed achieves a visionary transfiguration of the world in flux, a world at times luminous, at times foreboding, whose very essence is erotic love. Excluding soul or any form of religious salvation, Aleixandre focuses upon matter itself, in the form of the human body. Thus fleeting human love is transformed through destruction into a unity; thus Aleixandre's ambiguous title means clearly that *Destruction equals Love*.

The world of *Destruction, or Love* is a vast telluric or cosmic domain in which the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms are pulsating with primordial forces. Significantly, Aleixandre often reverses the normal hierarchy of these kingdoms — civilized man is placed last among the animals. While others were lashing out openly at the oppression of the "effete civilization" around them, Aleixandre chose to concentrate his rage and frustration in the wild animals. At the extremes, the normal aggressions of these wild animals are projected as acts of "love." The opening poem of the book; "The Jungle and the Sea," begins with these aggressive animals.

Off there among the remote
lights or metals yet unused,
tigers the size of hate,
lions like a hairy heart,
blood like a sadness mollified,
are struggling with the yellow hyena
that takes the form of an insatiable sunset.

To look at those eyes that only at night gleam,
where still a little fawn already devoured illuminates
this tiny image of nocturnal gold, a goodbye that
glimmers with posthumous tenderness.

Psychologically, these animals can be read as symbols of masculine virility, and thus both fascinating and fearful. In Aleixandre's tragic vision, they express the dark joy of destruction as love. The masterful image of the fawn imprinted upon the eyes of the tiger which has destroyed him indicates the love-hate polarity in Aleixandre. And, although this love rages in the forest, in the poem the forest (the temporal) and the sea (the eternal) can never fuse.

A surprising number of the poems of *Destruction, or Love* sound the negative side of cosmic unity, that is, the lack of love. One of the most powerful is "Without Light," in which the poet projects the swordfish in the abyssal seas:

The swordfish, whose weariness is attributed above all
to the impossibility of piercing the shadow,
of feeling in its flesh the coldness of the depth of the
seas where the blackness does not love,
where grow no fresh yellow algae which the sun gilds
in the shallow waters.

The swordfish is a perfect symbol of both aggression-destruction and the phallic; the fish's sword is visually and materially an essential part of the animal. But even this engine of love-destruction is frustrated where there is no light.

Aleixandre's amorous unity is expressed through the symbol of the human body in the poem specifically entitled "Unity in Her" — or in "It," the "It" being more or less the feminine earth. The presentation of the human body, typically naked and vaguely feminine and dripping with the dews of dawn is constant in Aleixandre's first period.

Joyful body which flows between my hands,
beloved face where I contemplate the world,
where graceful birds fugitively copy one another
flying off to the region where nothing is forgotten.

Despite many expressions of incurable solitude, veiled aggression, and threatening despair, the book *Destruction, or Love* contains an impressive number of great love poems. Perhaps the most personal and moving one is called "Triumph of Love," from which we are quoting a central stanza:

The pure heart adored, the truth of life,
the present certainty of a radiant love,
its light above rivers, its nude dripping water,
everything lives, persists, survives, and ascends
like a glowing coal of desire toward the heavens.

But the poet makes it absolutely clear that in his tragic vision the amorous fusion is exactly equal to death. Aleixandre expresses

this vision (which came to him from the Romantic poets) in one of the final stanzas of "Unity in Her."

I want love or death, I want to die utterly,
I want to be you, your blood, the raging lava,
which, confined, irrigating lovely limbs,
feels thus the beautiful limits of life.

Therefore the poet's pursuit of love is a kind of raging self-destruction. Yet he chooses this course deliberately, since to him passivity is a form of death even worse.

In *Destruction, or Love* Aleixandre achieves total maturity of poetic style, a style both complex and original.⁸ While the few quotes we have chosen to illustrate his themes are relatively lucid, the average reader will find his imagery largely opaque. Since Aleixandre fuses the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms indiscriminately, naturally his imagery may flit from one kingdom to another with dizzying speed. When the poet compares a "yellow hyena" with an "insatiable sunset," he is implying, not an intrinsic comparison between the things, but their somehow similar effect upon him. The poet also manipulates syntactical devices. His use of *or* (as in *Destruction, or Love*) in a sense of *equals* is a salient example. When he says "Kisses or birds" the latter becomes a metaphor for "Kisses." Aleixandre also uses repeated negatives with a positive force — a technique learned from the 17th century Spanish poet Luis de Góngora. Many of his poems reveal a complex development from a single outstanding image — for example, the swordfish in the deep. Although in his second period he developed a simple, narrative style so as to "communicate" with all his fellow men, Aleixandre has generally preferred the complex theme and style of *Destruction, or Love*.

After the expenditure of passion in *Destruction, or Love*, Aleixandre falls into a deep depression of spirit, producing his most desolate book, *World Alone*, on the eve of the Spanish Civil War. Finally recovering from his depression, but still unable to face the world of man in his historical reality (this reality being congruent with the years of World War II), Aleixandre refocused his vision of amorous solidarity by creating his second essential book, *Sombra del paraíso* (*Shadow of Paradise*). This indeed is a return to Paradise, especially that of the innocence of youth and the time

before historical man, but we are aware from the beginning that a "shadow" hangs over it, the shadow of civilized man in his malice and unresponsiveness to love. This nostalgia for Paradise seems typical of the Andalusian; in fact Ortega y Gasset analyzes the Andalusian as a paradisaical type in his particular "garden," or town.⁹ Among the modern poets, Jiménez has his Moguer, Lorca his Vega of Granada, Alberti his Cádiz, Cernuda the Andalusian seacoast, and Aleixandre himself, Málaga.

In the opening poem of the book, "Creatures of Dawn," Aleixandre's vision is one of the perfect harmony of the elements before the appearance of strife-torn man. All creatures enjoyed the "light of innocence"; the birds were born anew each morning, birds of "initial happiness," still capable of flight though bathed in sensuous dew. And very importantly, pleasure still did not have the "fearful name" of pleasure.

In this world of dawn the poet evolves a vision of the world of his childhood. In memory his river is the Guadalhorce, which in his childhood flowed so gently that it seemed not to flow; in fact it seemed "miraculous dew" that the child could contain in his hand, rather than the usual symbol of life passing. His poem "City of Paradise" is a visionary description of his Málaga, which hangs almost suspended from the mountains overlooking the bay. It was a magic place which "flew with open wings" in the translucent atmosphere of the seashore. His "Sea of Paradise" is of course the Mediterranean, which the poet chooses to approach in the present. In Aleixandre the sea is not feminine refuge; it is a masculine symbol of the eternal, including life, death and love:

Behold me still here before you, sea . . .
With the dust of the earth upon my shoulders,
impregnated still with the ephemeral,
faded desire of man,
behold me here, eternal light,
vast sea without weariness,
final expression of a love that has no end,
rose of the ardent world.

Still sustained by his amorous vision, Aleixandre returns to the theme (though not the form) of his earlier love poems. Perhaps the most innocent is "To a Nude Lass," she being a "fresh image of spring." The intensity of the imagery increases in "Body of Love."

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Surely the most beautiful and powerful love poem in this book is "Plenitude of Love," in which the poet as usual interweaves his nature imagery with the nude body of the beloved:

Oh lucid marvel of your body singing,
flashing kisses upon your awakened flesh;
sparkling firmament nocturnally beautiful,
that moistens my breast with seafoam of the stars!

In other poems the poet's eroticism assumes a ferocity beyond the "limits." In "Serpent of Love" the poet himself becomes a serpent pursuing the body of the "goddess," the goal of man's infinite yearning:

Between your live breasts lightly my form
Would slither its endless kiss, like a tongue . . .

In "Like a Serpent" the "goddess" herself becomes the serpent, now both attractive and repulsive to the poet. This attraction-repulsion is of course the love-equals-destruction theme of Aleixandre; in "The Nude" the erotic theme gradually reaches its normal conclusion: "Suddenly I plunge myself into your mouth / and there I drink the ultimate death rattle of the night." The "shadow" is always heavy upon Aleixandre's paradise.

Toward the end of *Shadow of Paradise*, however, the shadows upon his paradise lengthen and threaten to engulf it completely. In "My Father" the poet speaks ambiguously perhaps both to God and his real father at the same time; the point is that he has lost both. In the final poem, "Not enough," the poet reaches the nadir of existence:

Upon the earth my bulk fell. The heavens were only
my own consciousness, absolute aloneness.
An emptiness of God I felt upon my flesh . . .
and I kissed only the earth, the dark, solitary,
despairing earth which gave me refuge.

From this point, the poet retreats into the lap of the mother, again an ambiguous figure, which can be both the earth and his real mother. It is not surprising that he ultimately begins that return, typical of modern man, to suffering humanity, to man in time. His

poem "Sons of the Soil" prefigures the theme of the second period of his poetry.

Those of us who have struggled with the powerful but bafflingly difficult poetry of Aleixandre's first period always turn to that of his second period with a feeling of relief. By 1945, Aleixandre has sensed the current which will prevail in poetry for the next two decades; his major theme becomes human solidarity. As he later expresses it: "I have seen the poet as an expression of difficult human life, of its courageous and painful daily task."¹⁰ Moreover, he discovers (a bit belatedly perhaps) that "Poetry is communication." His first book in the new manner is *Historia del Corazón* (*History of the Heart*), written during the years 1945-53. For his generation "history" means man in his temporal, daily existence; the "heart" is of course the collective heart, the joys and sorrows of the poet and all men.

As Aleixandre has confessed, he began the book as an expression of love in its simpler human aspects. Indeed, the initial poem of the book is a subtle lyric upon one of the oldest of themes, the evanescence of human love. The poet calls it "Como el vilano" ("Like the thistledown"). The thistledown is the fragile little ball of fuzz, the flower now dead of the thistle, which collapses and floats away at a tiny puff of breath. For the first time the poet utilizes a simple and direct form of expression.

Beautiful is the kingdom of love,
but sad it is also.
For the lover in his heart
is sad in the hours of loneliness,
when at his side the beloved's eyes
inaccessible rest upon the fleeting clouds

And the lover looks at her,
he infinitely sorrowful — glorious and burdened —
while she drifts lightly off,
golden and adored,
and gently murmurs.
And she passes, and remains. And ascends, and returns.
Always light, always here, always there; always.
Like the thistledown.

There follows a series of poems of human love between man and woman — generally sad ones, because for the poet human love

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is always incomplete, at times perhaps even impossible. In one movingly simple poem entitled "Name," he debates for thirty lines whether to say, to proclaim the name of the beloved. He finally decides not to, and thus keeps the name for himself alone. Subtly then the poet descends toward the poem "The Final Love." It is indeed his final personal love, and Aleixandre almost always a free-verse poet, terminates this section with an impeccable sonnet. The last tercet of the sonnet could not be more final:

Oh darkest night. I nothing now await.
Aloneness to my senses does not lie.
Shadow pure and calmed begins its reign.

The phrase "noche oscura," of course the "dark night" of the mystic St. John of the Cross, does not mean that the scene is religious as such, but that the moment is of critical importance to the poet's existence.

At this point, the poet as individual, as self-contained and self-concerned ego, dies. Or, in Aleixandre's terms, this is another "final birth." And this birth is into collective humanity. In the section of poems which follows, "Extended Look," the poet by an effort of will goes outside himself. Consider these simple lines from "In the plaza," the town square being the center of collective life in Spain:

Beautiful it is, beautifully humble and trusting,
life-giving and profound,
to feel oneself beneath the sun, among others, impelled,
borne along, conducted, mixed among, noisily
carried along
It was a great open plaza, and there was
a smell of existence.

Then the poet goes out onto the highways and byways; he becomes a vagabond of all hours of the day and night among the people; he even becomes "The Visitor" and in his imagination goes into a humble house and empathizes with the simple presence of a family performing its daily tasks.

An impressive poem which reiterates and develops Aleixandre's theme of the importance of human matter (relating to the body and its fusion with the universe) is "The Old Man and the Sun."

Initially, the old man is presented realistically; then before our eyes he is gradually *transfigured* from matter into light. As is typical in Aleixandre, this reduction (or destruction) of matter is an act of love.

He was leaning on the tree trunk, and the sun first made approach,
nibbled softly at his feet,
and there remained a few moments squatting.
Afterward it ascended and began to submerge
him, flooding him,
pulling softly at him, unifying him in its
sweet light.
And I saw the powerful sun slowly gnaw at him with much love
and put him to sleep,
And thus little by little take him, little by little
dissolve him in its light,
like a mother who brings her baby softly,
softly back to her breast.

History of the Heart concludes with a series of hard, tough, even bitter poems, but as a modern figure Aleixandre insists upon the indomitability of the spirit of man. "We eat shadow," he says in a poem with this title; like a dog hanging onto a bone tossed to him, we hang onto what God throws us. "We eat shadow, and devour the dream or its shadow, and we are silent. / And we even wonder: We sing." The poet can conclude that there is an "Ascension of Living."

And everything has been climbing, slowly ascending,
very slowly achieving,
almost without our realizing it.
And here we are at the top of the mountain,
with hair white and pure like the snow.
All is serenity at the crest
And all the landscape is illuminated by
the permanent sun that lights our heads.

Aleixandre's final major book to date is *En un vasto dominio* (*In a Vast Dominion*), written during the years 1958-62. The book has six "Chapters," a term which suggests the novel with its lives existing in time. Moreover, in a subdivision of "Incorporations" the poet begins with a return to "Human Matter" as the primary substance, and in a series of specific poems on the belly, arm, foot,

blood, leg, sex, head, hair, eye, ear, inner arm, hand, and the hand of an old man he traces the struggle of these parts toward form from the original matter. Whereas previously Aleixandre had focused upon the nude body in its beauty and erotic attraction, here the body is a kind of culmination of an ethical struggle toward perfection.

Having created from human matter a body with its articulated parts, the poet moves outward into the surrounding world, and somewhat in the manner of Unamuno or Azorín, he dwells with moving compassion upon the timeless life of the Spanish village. Now he is in the village square, with its great poplar tree; now he visits the white-walled cemetery, where the headstones reveal, he insists, a continuity of family, but nothing else of eternal life; now he exalts the new young mother, whose baby is still part of her; now he looks down upon a young lad sleeping innocently in the hayloft after a brutal day's work. The poet's compassion extends even to the village idiot, whose meager life begins each day as he is placed outside in the sun and activity. Perhaps surprisingly Aleixandre's compassionate awareness extends to everyone except the middle-aged father. Surely the father is a bit conservative, a bit hypocritical, a bit smug—but does he merit Aleixandre's total contempt? Aleixandre and his fellow poets—Lorca, Alberti, and Cernuda—seem to blame the father of middle age (the Establishment, later) for all the failures of our civilization.

Undoubtedly the most important single poem of this book is called "The Couple," which stands alone as an "Intermezzo." After his prolonged excursions into solipsism and pansexuality and cosmic sweep, Aleixandre ultimately accepts the couple of man and woman as the symbol of the continuity of life. In this tender and sad lyric, he focuses upon the young couple, together in laughter behind their window ledge. In the final stanza, with subtle touches, the poet makes them seem to exist both in time and forever.

The couple in the shadow laughs and laughs. The window ledge.
Crystalline is heard their laughter out of time.
Upon a purest background of silence absolute,
the couple in the night
is here or was here, will be here or was here once.

Even into old age Aleixandre has continued to face life courageously though still tragically in *Poems of Consummation* (1968) and *Dialogues of Knowledge* (1974). The final consummation is of course death, a kind of beloved for Aleixandre from the beginning. For him, youth (and thus the capacity to love) is synonymous with life, therefore the old man exists in an "opaque crystal," already separated from life. In the bonechilling poems of *Dialogues of Knowledge*, which offer a continuing definition of loneliness, isolation, aloneness, the poet speaks bleakly through various *personae* such as the soldier, the bullfighter, the dandy, and the dancer. Without ever whimpering, Aleixandre's final words exalt his life as creator-in-rebellion, seen in the equation of gold and dagger:

With the rose in my hand I push my life forward
and what I offer is gold or is a dagger,
or a dead man.

This is his "absolute hope": what he calls his "loving destruction beneath a sun thickening."

Vicente Aleixandre, one of the most original Spanish poets of this century, has created in his two major periods a coherent vision of the universe based upon what he calls "amorous solidarity." In his first period, his original books *Destruction, or Love* and *Shadow of Paradise* express the amorous solidarity of the cosmos, in which the poet through erotic imagery attempts to merge with the universe itself in an act of love which becomes destruction (death), or final liberation. This vision is often expressed with joyful vitalism, but at times lurk anxiety and frustration behind it. In his frenzy of creation the poet achieves a vision of man in paradise; yet threatening this vision is civilized man's selfishness, hypocrisy and lovelessness. Even in old age, Aleixandre preferred this vision of love as destruction, allying himself especially with Lorca and Cernuda. In his second period, Aleixandre saw himself as expressing the solidarity of "difficult human life, in its painful and valiant daily task." The major books of this period are *History of the Heart* and *In a Vast Dominion*. In his first period the poet as rebel achieved a total freedom against a backdrop of the frustrations of the world; in his second, somewhat like Unamuno, he extended his love toward humanity as a moral act, in a way justifying the ways of man to God. As a major poet, naturally Aleixandre

has achieved an original poetic style based upon a controlled free verse and the creation of what Bousoño has called the visionary image, a type which expands the technical resources of poetic expression. Finally, despite a sense of vastness and cosmic sweep, Aleixandre's total work fits the pattern of the Rebirth Archetype: in his first period he struggles fiercely with a personal love of telluric and cosmic proportions, beyond humanity, until finally his personal love dies—somewhat strangely in the early pages of *History of the Heart*. But his love is reborn and extended almost by an act of will toward his fellow men in their daily lives, so that by the end of *In a Vast Dominion* the poet has almost dissolved into his people and the land. Yet he remains a battler, un-resigned, dominating the contradictions of life, as evidenced by one of his aphorisms: "The sadness, the desperation, the anger, the death that the poem transmits to us wound us in our heart's core. But they don't kill us. Poetry, whatever may be its sign, is always life." ¹¹

NOTES

¹ Thus far the only book on Aleixandre in English is Kessel Schwartz's *Vicente Aleixandre* (New York, 1970) in the Twayne series. In Spanish, Carlos Bousoño's *La poesía de Vicente Aleixandre* (Madrid, 1968) has been the outstanding book on Aleixandre's poetry. See also the excellent articles of Dámaso Alonso in *Ensayos de poesía española* (Buenos Aires, 1946), and Concha Zardoya in *Poesía española contemporánea* (Madrid, 1961). Surely his receiving the Nobel Prize will stimulate articles, books, and translations of his poetry into other languages.

² Quoted in Ángel del Río, *Historia de la literatura española*, vol. II (New York, 1963), p. 244.

³ Carl W. Cobb, *Contemporary Spanish Poetry (1898-1963)* (Boston, 1976), pp. 65-138.

⁴ Bousoño discusses this individualism and irrationalism in the Prologue to Vicente Aleixandre, *Obras completas* (Madrid, 1968).

⁵ The meager details on Aleixandre's life have been summarized in an early chapter of Bousoño's *La poesía de Vicente Aleixandre*.

⁶ In Spanish the word *mar* for sea can be either masculine or feminine, indicated by the use of the articles *el* or *la*.

⁷ Vicente Aleixandre, *Obras completas*, p. 1469.

⁸ Carlos Bousoño in his *La poesía de Vicente Aleixandre* discusses this style with great technical skill.

⁹ José Ortega y Gasset, "Teoría de Andalucía," in *Obras completas*, vol. VI (Madrid, 1958), pp. 111-120.

¹⁰ Vicente Aleixandre, *op. cit.*, p. 1459.

¹¹ Vicente Aleixandre, *op. cit.*, p. 1579.