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INTRODUCTION

César Vallejo was born 120 years ago in Santiago de Chuco, an Andean town in northern Peru. Although his date of birth has been set traditionally as 16 March 1892, only a Baptism certificate is extant (dated 9 May 1892), and the exact date has been a matter of conjecture and controversy. Vallejo’s literary life is, also traditionally, divided into two clear phases: his years in Peru (where he lived in the town of Huamachuco, and the cities of Trujillo and Lima); and his time in Europe (living mainly in Paris, but with an interval in Madrid, several other trips within Spain and France, and three trips to Russia). While he was living in Trujillo, the principal city in northern Peru, and where he enrolled in university, he published his first book: his bachelor’s thesis El Romanticismo en la poesía castellana (Romanticism in Hispanic Poetry, 1915). Once in Lima he published two poetry collections, The Black Heralds (1919) and Trilce (1922), and two books of fiction, Escalas and Fabla salvaje (both in 1923). Except for this last book, a short psychological novel in the manner of Poe or Hoffmann, all of his Peruvian books were self-published and had low print runs.

Once in Europe, Vallejo supported himself as a journalist (nearly 300 articles have been collected) and, more sporadically, as a language teacher and translator. In 1930, thanks to the help of his friend, the Spanish poet Juan Larrea, he produced a second edition of Trilce, in Madrid, and in 1931 he published, also in Madrid, the novel El tungsteno (Tungsten, translated into Russian in 1932) and the travel book Rusia en 1931 (Russia in 1931).

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 saw Vallejo firmly involved in the intellectual campaign in favour of the Republic and against the rising fascist forces. He attended the Second International Writer’s Congress in Defence of Culture in July of 1937, visiting Valencia, Barcelona, and Madrid. However, he was not to see the outcome of the war. Early in 1938 he was rushed into the hospital, where he died on 14 April. After his death, it was revealed that his published oeuvre amounted to only part of his complete writings: manuscripts and typescripts of nearly 100 poems, several short stories, fiction, plays, and essays were also extant and they slowly became available to the public, with the reluctant acquiescence of his widow, Georgette Vallejo.

Since his death, Vallejo’s fame has slowly grown, and he is now recognized as a Peruvian and Latin American icon. His fame is based, above all, on his poetry, whose influence has even gone beyond the reach of the
Spanish language. This bilingual edition brings to the English-speaking public the complete poetry of César Vallejo, including his juvenilia, fragments, and some alternate versions of famous poems.

1

Little is known about Vallejo’s first attempts at poetry. Anecdotes abound concerning his childhood days, pointing out his early interest in literature and poetry as well as his concern with word-play and rhyme, but these anecdotes belong rather to hagiography than to a proper biography, and they should be taken as such. The extant school-records seem to suggest that he was a gifted student, indicating that he excelled not only in literature, but also in mathematics and geography. Not much can be deduced from these accounts, and the inner and poetical life of the young Vallejo can therefore only be the subject of speculation.

Vallejo published his first poems at the age of nineteen. Only recently rediscovered by Hugo Arias Hidalgo, they appeared in a little-known magazine in the Andean city of Cerro de Pasco, where Vallejo stayed for some months in 1911. These first two compositions are youthful, post-Romantic imitations, and although both are rhetorically careless, the first, simply titled ‘Sonnet’, already reveals an early disposition to the pastoral, intimations of which would persist even in his first collection. Their publication, although only in a local paper, reveals the poet’s first search for a wider audience. But more evident proof that Vallejo was already striving for some literary glory is the sonnet quartet (allegedly published by Clemente Palma, one of the most respected and feared literary critics of the time) in the fancy magazine Variedades, which also appeared in 1911. Vallejo had sent this sonnet, dedicated to a girl named Pilar, in the hope that it would be published; and eventually it was, albeit in fragmentary form and accompanied by a malignant commentary, attributed to Palma. His comment was not lacking in sarcasm: “Do you really believe, dear Romeo, that we have not noticed that your sonnet is an acrostic—one of the greatest poetic affectations—aimed at some lady named Pilar, whose last name we won’t print so as not to embarrass the girl? And in fact the sonnet is so bad that it would embarrass not only a pilar, but a whole column of the Senate”. Yet, instead of being disheartened, Vallejo seems to have continued firmly with his poetic apprenticeship.

Some years later, when the poet was already living and studying in Trujillo, new poems would be put before the public. This time they would appear in the school magazine Cultura Infantil, where he would
publish mostly didactic compositions, aimed at his elementary-school students. Ten poems appeared between 1913 and 1917, including only a couple with a more personal tone—such as that written on his brother’s death, which precedes a similar poem included in *The Black Heralds*. The fact that the final one, titled ‘Babel’, was later included in Vallejo’s first collection, and also that he never refrained from publishing in the magazine despite having other outlets for his writing, confirms that the poet had no low opinion of these compositions, even though they were mainly written for a juvenile audience. To read them is to witness an aspect of the poet very seldom revealed in his later work: they remind us that Vallejo spent most of his adult life in Peru working as a teacher, and that part of his poetic output was to be devoted to this pedagogical endeavour.

On the other hand, it was not long before a new opening for Vallejo’s more personal pieces appeared, in the shape of two local newspapers: *La Reforma* and *La Industria*. Both publications chart Vallejo’s ascent from skilled rhymer to competent poet, since it is here that the first versions of a score of poems later collected in *The Black Heralds* would be printed. The poet’s appearance in these publications must also be linked to his involvement with the literary group of young intellectuals, most of them university students, who would eventually be known as *la Bohemia de Trujillo* (‘Trujillo’s Bohemia’), and later as the *Grupo Norte* (‘North Group’). It included, among others, the essayist Antenor Orrego, José Eulogio Garrido, Federico Esquerre, Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre (later founder of the APRA party), Juan Espejo Asturriaga, and the poets Alcides Spelucín and Óscar Imaña. Vallejo’s relations with these writers are the key to understanding his early literary life. Members of this group would become the first champions of his verse; Óscar Imaña would publish poems alongside Vallejo’s, while Antenor Orrego would thoroughly review his first book, and would later write the introduction to *Trilce*.

It is not easy to imagine the poet’s contrasting stances at this time: both university bohemian and school teacher. The image of the poet-teacher was evoked later by one of Vallejo’s former students, the novelist Ciro Alegría (1909–1967). Though highly idealised and embellished with the patina of benign remembrance, Alegría’s description of Vallejo is one of the few first-hand accounts of his life at school, and also of his local fame. As he writes, the poet was at this time already noted for his bohemian pose, his long hair, and his poetry: “In Trujillo, Vallejo had fierce detractors as well as enthusiastic sympathizers. At home, as in all homes in town, opinions were divided. The majority attacked him”.

Further adverse reactions are attested elsewhere, and, as his biographer Juan Espejo Asturriaga suggests, this would be one of the reasons for
Vallejo leaving Trujillo. Thus, after much hardship, including sentimental deception and harsh criticism of his poetry, Vallejo abandoned his Law studies at the University of La Libertad in Trujillo and, as so many provincial young writers of his generation had done before, he left for the capital at the end of 1917.

It must not be forgotten that another, perhaps more important reason why Vallejo travelled to Lima was his desire to become involved in the city’s literary circles, and to publish his first poetry collection. His plans were clear from the start, and it is surprising to see just how rapidly he became immersed in the city’s cultural life. The title poem to his first book was placed in the magazine Mundo Limeño in January, and he interviewed Abraham Valdelomar (perhaps the most talked-about writer of the time), as well as the cult poet José María Eguren, a few weeks later. His journalistic connections, which would later garner positive reviews for his first book, were enhanced to the extent that he was selected to appear in a much-publicised but never published anthology of contemporary Peruvian poetry, edited by the critic and journalist Carlos Pérez Cánepa. But although he was starting to leave a mark on Lima’s literary mainstream, Vallejo, with no book to represent his work, was far from being recognised as a leading poet.

Although its imminent appearance had been announced at least a year before, The Black Heralds began to circulate in Lima only in July 1919. According to Juan Espejo Asturriçaga, Vallejo had already written more than 50 of the 69 poems in the book by the time he had left Trujillo for the capital, but this statement must be treated with caution. His life in the capital should not be underestimated, as this was a crucial period in his poetic apprenticeship. We know from the score of early versions published before 1917 that some of the poems from the book were already being written, yet it is important to note that Vallejo seems to have assembled them while already living in Lima.

The first known reference to the collection as such appears in a letter written by the poet to his friends back in Trujillo, dated in Lima on 27 February 1918, although as yet there is no mention of a title, nor of the contents. The next reference is in an article by Abraham Valdelomar, “The genesis of a great poet: César A. Vallejo, the poet of tenderness”, which appeared in March. It was perhaps the first praise for Vallejo to be published in the capital and therefore had wider resonance. The article included a sample of his poems, and the title of the collection is mentioned for the first time. Valdelomar would then go on to refer to the book again in an interview a few weeks later, saying that he would be writing a prologue for it. After this, there is silence concerning the collec-
tion until its publication almost a year later. Theories for the delay in its appearance have been manifold. The most widespread one (proposed by Espejo Asturriaga) maintains that the book remained with the printer, pending Valdelomar’s prologue, but it is hard to imagine someone as determined as Vallejo waiting almost a year for a prologue that never came. Whatever the motives, it is not unreasonable to believe that the writer, as some critics have held, took advantage of this setback and corrected his poems, perhaps even restructuring the book and including newly-written pieces.

*The Black Heralds* was well received by the critics. It must be said, however, that all the reviewers knew Vallejo personally and, unlike the malignent commentators back in Trujillo, they respected his work. Despite this warm welcome, Vallejo seems to have wandered away from Lima’s literary circles. Again working as a teacher, and later as a substitute principal at an elementary school, the poet was intent on making a living and perhaps this is the reason why he had no time to worry about literary fame. It would not be long, however, before he started work on his second, ground-breaking collection.

2

It is interesting to note that, at the time of its publication, *The Black Heralds* was hailed as a Peruvian example of symbolist poetry. From the epigraph, Vallejo’s book dares the reader to go beyond appearances and to decipher its hidden meaning. The apocalyptic title of the collection, underlined by the title poem standing at its gateway, must not only be read as an example of Vallejo’s sombre view of life but also as meaning that—as the apocalypse—the book is a revelation of truths that may only be reached through symbols and allegories. One is invited to take part in the poet’s experience, and to solve the enigmas encrypted therein.

A risky reading of Vallejo’s first collection, but one that can be attempted, is to take it as a learning journey, as a book that charts the author’s own poetic and expressive apprenticeship. Each section is a stage that the learning poet must undergo before reaching poetic maturity. Of course, this is not to say that there is a linear or chronological development from the first poem to the last, since, as in every journey, there are twists and turns. But nevertheless, one can see Vallejo’s poetic mutation and maturation clearly embedded in the book’s architecture.

The initial section contains some of the most dated compositions—if not chronologically, then at least aesthetically. It is not unreasonable to
assert that Vallejo was aware of the heavy debt these poems owed to the dominant style of the time. The section’s title, ‘Swift soffits’, so often taken as an example of his insistence on aestheticism, can also be read ironically, as describing a section that includes a handful of compositions the poet consciously considered pretty but, in the end, merely decorative and written almost in a hurry. The poems are rife with extravagant metaphors and images of exotic landscapes. They are also full of the biblical images that were so dominant in, for example, the fin-de-siècle fiction of Clemente Palma, and which showed a disposition to a blasphemous pose, inherited from the French poètes maudits.

The next section, ‘Divers’, marks, after the superficial ‘soffits’, the first submergence into the depths of lyrical expression. Its threshold could not have been better chosen, as ‘The Spider’ is a piece that shatters the style of the previous poems. Devoid of wild images, it is a clear and calculated description of a spider’s agony, completely bereft of sentimentality but not of sentiment. Its economy of words is surprising if compared to the poems that precede it:

It is a spider that trembled fixed
in a blade of stone;
its abdomen on one side,
its head on the other.

With so many feet the poor thing, and it cannot
even sort itself. And, seeing it
astounded in such a moment,
today that traveller has given me such sorrow.

The poem also shows one of Vallejo’s constant poetic themes: the conflict between the material and spiritual, between body and soul, or between instinct and reason, symbolised here by the spider’s abdomen and head, and which resonates throughout the poem.

‘Of the Earth’, the third section, is permeated by the theme of love, mostly a tortured one because of the absence of the beloved. It includes compositions from different periods, some of them still replete with wild imagery, although others are written with a more limpid, though no less intense style. Such is the case of the famous ‘Dregs’, whose starting lines reveal Vallejo at his lyrical best:
This evening it’s raining, as never before; and I don’t want to go on living, heart.

This evening is sweet. Why shouldn’t it be?
It is dressed in grace and suffering; it is dressed as a woman.

The fourth section records a nostalgic vision of the past, one that contrasts with most of the nativistic poetry of the time, usually set in a golden age of unreachable and now-lost glory. Even though the modernista stereotypes and the love for affected images are present, what is somewhat original about Vallejo’s poems in this section is that they are set not in illo tempore, but in an Andean hic et nunc, where what is most important (despite the title) is not so much the glorious past of the Incan empire, but the hardships and joys of present day Andean life. This section also chronicles the slow destruction of the rural world brought about by modern life; in the closing poem, one of the best in the book, the speaker, living now in a Byzantium-like city, expresses his nostalgia for the much remembered countryside:

What will you be doing at this very hour, my sweet, Andean Rita of the wild reed and the dusk berry;
now that Byzantium smothers me, and that blood dozes, like insipid brandy, inside me.
[…]
She must be at the door staring at the cloud-lined sky,
and then trembling she will say: “Jesus, how cold it is!”
And on the roof-tiles a savage bird will cry.

The poem’s Rita, for which most critics find some real-life counterpart or other, must also be taken as a symbol of Andean life, of the poet’s origins, or of domestic happiness and warmth. In any case, the savage bird’s final song is a sign of fatality, a presage that this ideal longed-for world will ultimately be dead forever.

An ascent is achieved in ‘Thunders’. This is the longest section, and the heart of the book. The poet’s social worries appear here among other pieces of existential angst and further love poems. Vallejo’s concerns for social issues are evident even in his earliest poems. Some pieces written for children, such as ‘Summertime’ and ‘Dark’ were meant to teach a certain compassion for the poor and the working classes; the poem’s speaker, however, was distant. But in his first book, in poems like ‘This Bread of Ours’ and ‘The Wretched Supper’, Vallejo takes his place among
the hungry, and the speaker himself is one of the poor. His later political poetry has its roots in these pieces.

Finally, home is the place where the poet finally arrives, for it is with the peacefulness and sadness of domestic life (‘Songs of Hearth’) that the book ends. Vallejo saves the best poems for last and the aesthetics of these last compositions reveal him at his most personal. The ornamental language is lost, the decorative ‘soffits’ are replaced by a striking simplicity of language. Thus, the road from ‘Sacred Unleafing’ to ‘Exergasia’ is the road back home, the road to Vallejo’s origins.

At the time of its publication in 1922, Trilce was championed and ridiculed in equal measures, and even garnered a lengthy debate in the press in the northern city of Chiclayo. Trilce’s newness is surprising if one surveys the kind of poetry that was written in Peru, indeed in most of Latin America, at the time. Modernismo, the poetry of aestheticism, had dominated the early years of the century, and its echoes could still be heard even in the 1920s. The movement’s leader (and paradoxically Vallejo’s favourite poet), Rubén Darío, had given new life to the language, adapting French forms to Spanish poetry and creating a work of musical charm and shiny images. Modernista poetry included a diversity of work, like that of José Asunción Silva, Julio Herrera y Reissig and Amado Nervo. Its aesthetics had become almost obligatory, so much so that the year Trilce was first published, Peru’s foremost modernista poet, José Santos Chocano, was crowned in Lima as “The Poet of Latin America”.

Yet Trilce’s newness can be ascribed to Vallejo’s very personal reading of the historical avant-gardes, which during the early 1920 had started to be promoted in the Peruvian press. Although Vallejo’s direct acquaintance with the modern literary trends is still to be thoroughly explained—one of the modern sources usually mentioned is the Spanish magazine Cervantes, which carried information about Dada and ultraismo—, the truth is that by 1921 he was described as the first Dadaist in Latin America, in an article which presented early versions of three Trilce poems. Vallejo seems to have inherited from the avant-gardes a typographical playfulness, a very expressive use of sound, the evasion of traditional metrical patterns, and the erasure of direct referents in the text, something which can be seen when contrasting the early and later versions. With these modern techniques, Vallejo was able to convert into
poetry the many tragic events in his life which, since the publication of *The Black Heralds*, had befallen him.

One of the most relevant events during this time was his relationship with Otilia Villanueva, which becomes a steady, if mysterious, presence in Vallejo’s second book of poems. Otilia was a relative of one of the directors of the school where Vallejo worked, and at her family’s insistence on marriage, which Vallejo did not agree with, their relationship soon became a secret, hidden affair. Hermetic episodes of this relationship are everywhere in *Trilce*:

As I was doing admirably on certain business,
they surrounded me with an air of wealthy dynast.
The girlfriend became water,
and how well she cried to me
her love so badly learned.

I liked her bashful *marinera*
of humble finery when swirling around,
and how her handkerchief traced points,
accents, to the music-writing of her sedge-dance.

And when we both eluded the parish priest,
my business was broken and hers
and the swept-away sphere.

(XXXVI)

The relation turned dramatic when Vallejo broke with her and left his work in 1919. According to Juan Espejo Asturriaga, Otilia was pregnant and was taken by her family to another town, where she, most probably, had an abortion.

If Espejo’s account of the abortion is true, a new mourning had entered the poet’s life, which had been marked from the beginning with death. His brother Miguel, his closest childhood friend, had passed away in 1915, and then his mother died in 1918. All of them were unbearable blows in his life and, inevitably, death is present in *Trilce* as one of its main topics, but the way it is presented is new. The poems are not simple elegies of mourning, but complex compositions in which present and past, memory and desire, the dead and the living cohabit. The remembered dead haunt the speaker:
You, the dead, with shining knees
pure by virtue of your own surrender,
how you serrate the other heart
with your white crowns, sparse
with cordiality. Yes. You, the dead.

(LXVI)

At the same time, the tedium of life can make the living seem dead:

While the wave goes, while the wave comes, with what impunity is one dead. Only when the waters crash on the opposing borders and they fold and refold themselves, then you are transformed and, thinking you are dead, perceive the sixth string no longer yours.

(LXXV)

The death of the mother is often identified with the end of childhood and with erotic rupture, which becomes another main theme in the book. Vallejo kept working as a teacher until mid-1920, when he decided to go back to his hometown for the celebrations of the Apóstol Santiago (Saint James), his town’s patron saint. During his stay there, he found himself embroiled in a local feud in the course of which a store was burnt and a deputy killed. Vallejo was somehow implicated, arrested, charged, and subsequently spent 112 days in Trujillo’s prison.

The experience in jail present in the prison poems of Trilce is linked with the notion of orphanhood, the sense of the passing of time, and the absence of a sheltering entity. Walls, locks, latches, fences and other symbols of restriction are ever present. Even some poems about family are burdened with a feeling of entrapment, as poem III’s enigmatic final line: “and I’d be the sole prisoner here”. The notion of temporal and spatial constriction becomes in Vallejo’s poetry a link with the inevitability of death, but also with the confinement imposed on the poet by consciousness and language.

The whole jail experience had a deeply disturbing and long-lasting effect on Vallejo, and, as he says in one of his later poems, it was the “most serious moment” of his life. Afraid that his trial might be reopened, he left for Paris suddenly (a letter to his older brother Víctor was all he wrote as a farewell to his family) in 1923, never to return to his country.
César Vallejo left his home country for Paris in June 1923. Had he stopped writing after this voyage, at the age of thirty-one, he would have been remembered for his two books of poems. He would also have been hailed as the author of one innovative book of stories, Escalas (1923), and of the short novel Fabla salvaje (1923). Undoubtedly his poetry would still be read, translated and studied today, and its importance would be unquestioned. However, it is after his trip to Europe that Vallejo’s work takes a leap forward into territories previously untrodden. The completed fourteen-volume edition (1997–2003) of his complete works shows that the last fifteen years of his life, the time he spent in Europe, were his most prolific. Plays, short-stories, hundreds of newspaper articles, two travelogues, two books of essays and aphorisms, a few translations, some letters and even the draft of a screenplay were all part of this maelstrom of creativity.

But most importantly for poetry readers, it is after 1923 that Vallejo writes what is considered, along with Trilce, his greatest literary achievement. The nearly hundred poems he wrote in Europe include some of his best: ‘I’m Going to Speak of Hope’, ‘Considering coldly . . .’, ‘Sermon on Death’, ‘Masses’, none of which was published in his lifetime. His poem-sequence on the Spanish Civil War is also one of the most poignant (and perhaps most underrated) war poems of the twentieth century.

The poet’s sudden and early death left us with a work that was still in the process of completion, although one that is all the more powerful for this same reason. Dying at the height of his creative drive, César Vallejo leaves us with an anticipatory desire for the poems we feel he would have written had he not died. Yet the poems we have, the artistic rigour with which they are written, and the human message they convey, are enough to justify his work.

When reading Vallejo’s first handful of verse poems written in Europe, one cannot help but recall some of the poems of Trilce; they share with them the jagged lines, the cryptic language, the neologisms and the hermetic images, even the numerological references and typographical playfulness. These poems have all these characteristics in common, even if none of them attains the quality of the best poems written in Peru. It seems that Vallejo, as he had foreseen in the final poem of Trilce, was losing his creative powers and new ways of expression were needed to satisfy his yearning for creation.

Back in Peru he had already ventured into the field of short fiction, and when he arrived in Paris he had to devote himself to journalism in
order to make a living. Prose was, therefore, becoming one of the ways with which to convey his most immediate thoughts and feelings. Thus, at the same time that he was writing verse poems such as ‘And so today I greet . . .’ and ‘I’m laughing’, Vallejo engaged in a new kind of writing. The results of it were several prose poems, most of which, in comparison to his previous work, appeared as straightforward—linguistically and semantically, even if they were still unconventional. It is interesting to note that in Paris, and during the apogee of the avant-garde movement, he would refrain from the extremely experimental writing he had used in Peru, and attempt a writing of formal limpidity. The prose poems gave Vallejo a new way of dealing with reality and guided him on his way to his later poetry, which is as formally complex as Trilce’s, but also carries the emotional clarity of good prose.

But just as Vallejo was looking for new ways of expression, he was also searching for his own identity as a writer within a Parisian context. This identity came together with his political commitment, since it fitted well with his sensibility, his search for justice, and his rejection of social differences. Stephen M. Hart has classified Vallejo’s political thought into four periods: sporadic political commitment (before 1927), Marxist political commitment (1927-1931), political disillusionment (1932-1936), and Marxist thought fused with Christianity (1936-1938), this last caused by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. This map can be useful as one goes through the pages of the later poetry. It is also true that, although Vallejo’s articles and essays, from 1928 onwards, are those of a convinced Marxist, some of his poetry is full of self-doubt and ambivalence. He often makes reference to his swaying between action and inaction (the “quality of softness”, as he would call it). As he states in a late essay, ‘Las grandes lecciones culturales de la guerra española’ (The great cultural lesson of the Spanish War), Vallejo knew that to be a full “man of thought” he not only had to translate in his work the feelings of the common people, but also create a work that was formally revolutionary. That is why even the most clearly political poems, such as ‘And don’t say anything to me . . .’ (whose early title was “The greatness of common jobs”), are marked by a reference to his own identity as a writer:

And don’t say anything to me,  
because one can kill perfectly,  
since, sweating ink,  
one does what’s possible, so don’t say . . .
Here the expression “sweating ink” must be read as both an idiom (meaning “working extremely hard”) and a literal expression that comments on his status as a poet. Just as the poem seems to be chiding the one who accuses him of believing in revolutionary violence, it also seems to be chiding the committed man who accuses him of being only a poet. Vallejo insists that poetry writing can be revolutionary in itself, and can also “perfectly kill”. In a letter to the younger poet Juan Luis Velázquez (dated 31 May 1937, almost a year before his death) he kept expressing this idea: “Regarding yourself, I seem to remember clearly a thing I told you, years ago, in Paris and frequently repeated: ‘You are a writer, above all; so then, write; work, act, but with your pen.’ . . . I perceive that, at last, you are starting to believe that I was right”. Vallejo, then, follows the old Renaissance and Baroque topic of *las armas y las letras* (arms and letters), viewing writing as an active task and not as hiding out from reality in an ivory tower. His poems, full of human self-doubt and also of utopian excitement, were meant to trigger the reader into a similar self-questioning and a similar excitement; to engage him, even unwillingly, in something that would provoke a critical, emotional and even intellectual reaction.

It would not be wrong to assert that during the thirties Vallejo underwent a deeper process of self-questioning in how he saw himself as a Peruvian poet living in Paris, and also how he considered his poetry as compared to that of his Spanish and Latin American contemporaries. Some of his writings of this period make this evident. A notebook entry written in 1936 or 1937 reads:

Spain’s incomprehension about South American writers that, out of fear, did not dare to be Indo-American, but almost completely Spanish (Rubén Darío and others).

Lorca is an Andalusian. Why can’t I have the right to be Peruvian? So they can tell me that I’m not understood in Spain? And I, an Austrian or an Englishman, can’t we understand Lorca & Co’s Castilian turn of a phrase?

This quoted fragment shows just how critical the poet could be when it came to the views others had of his work. The lack of understanding of his work was certainly something that distressed him. And yet he would not yield to the temptation of becoming a conventional poet; he would not cease to use Peruvianisms and to write poems that recalled his native land, such as ‘Telluric and Magnetic’ or ‘It was Sunday on the bright ears of my donkey . . .’ The contrast between an indigenous (Indo-American)
and Spanish literary tradition, is also an issue that can be seen in the quoted fragment. Did Vallejo see himself as an Indo-American writer, devoid of a Spanish tradition? Indeed at this point of his life he knew that an artist’s identity could not be complete unless he acknowledged his origins, and he started to read more about his country’s past, just as he had never ceased worrying about the situation, whether political, social or literary, of his home country. But he also recognized that from this original, indigenous stance, he could reach out for the universal: “Peru of the world, Peru at the foot of the world, I join you!” Otherwise, he could not have written the poems on the Spanish Civil War.

However, Vallejo also tended to see himself as an outsider and as an outcast. Spain and Europe’s misunderstanding of his poetry (and also his plays, which never reached the stage), as we have seen, was something that worried him. This idea would enter his poetry in different ways. He would refer to this feeling of rejection ironically, as in his poem “The fact is that the place . . .’ where he exclaims, after writing a typically Peruvian expression “that’s how we say it in Peru—excuse me”. At other times, he could be more complex and shape the idea into the poem itself. One of his dated poems of the later period deals with the alienation felt as a foreigner. The earliest drafts were apparently random and disconnected lines:

Retrocede, extranjero.
Retrocede. Sopla, tamaño colorante . . .
Bruma fuera del colorante rastro
Colorante sudor el de su cruel tamaño a costa abierta

[Stand back, foreigner.
Stand back, blow colouring size . . .
Fog outside the colouring trail
Colouring sweat that of its cruel size at open side]

The main theme of the poem, alienation, was made explicit by the first line written. The shameful colouring—one could see it as a stain, a stigma—was also one of the first elements mentioned. The foreign poet living in Paris, or perhaps the foreign poet who is trying to write about Republican Spain (as there is, later on, some oblique reference to the Civil War) seems to be speaking here. But then the poem lost all allusion to the war and took on a more personal tone:
Colorante, cruelísimo desinterés, tamaño de su nuevo acento, duerme tras de su lobo personal detrás y desde y junto a su alma!
Ardor propio y labial, en que suenan nuestros labios!

[Colouring, cruellest indifference, size of his new accent, it sleeps after his personal wolf, behind and since and near its soul!
Intimate and labial ardour, in which our lips are sounding!]

The poem was later restructured, and Vallejo, as he often did, erased the overtly explicit reference to this alienation; he took as a symbol “the accent” to represent this feeling, and in doing so, his foreignness now came to be identified with language itself. The disconnected sketch became the poem ‘The accent hangs down from my shoe . . .’:

The accent hangs down from my shoe;
I hear it perfectly
yield, blaze, bend to the shape of amber
and hang down, colouring, a bad shade.
Thus, I have outgrown my size,
judges watch me from a tree
with their backs they watch me walk ahead,
go inside my hammer,
stand to look at a girl
and, at the foot of a urinal, raise my shoulders.

Surely there’s no one at my side,
it matters little, I don’t need them;
surely they have dismissed me:
I feel it distinctly.

Praying is the cruellest size!
Humiliation, brilliance, deep jungle!
I’ve size to spare, extendable fog,
speed above and from and close up.
Imperturbable! Imperturbable! Afterwards,
fatidic telephones are ringing.
It’s the accent itself.

This poem also manifestly shows the circular, dialectical structure of Vallejo’s argument. It starts with the acknowledgement of a stigma that the speaker cannot get rid of. It hangs from his shoe, is stuck to it like its own shadow. Others, believing themselves superior, judge him because of
this bad shade that is his own. The second stanza constitutes a reaction to the speaker: he accepts his own fate as an outcast, and realises that he does not need the other judges. The final lines of the poem have the speaker almost proudly accepting his difference, though it may mean humiliation and death, because the accent, the “fatidic telephones” (where “telephones” must be read etymologically: “sounds from afar”, that is, sounds from his own home and from his origins) are innate to him. Thus, Vallejo would never abandon his roots and never tries to be cosmopolitan. At the same time he would be the universal man.

At the root of Vallejo’s work is the feeling of displacement. Outside the intimacy of his family, he seems to have felt himself an outsider, notwithstanding his friendships. That sense of displacement was greatly aggravated by his time abroad. There, socially, linguistically and even racially, he felt himself different. But this sense of difference, however burdensome, did not turn Vallejo into a cynic. Rather, it drove him in all his efforts to integrate himself into society; not, needless to say, into conventional bourgeois society, which he despised, and which would have demanded the amputation of his deep-rooted humanity, but into a society revolutionarily renovated in its humanity. It is no wonder that Vallejo seems to have never abandoned his Christian feelings, however anticlerical he may have felt. The primitive Christian sense of brotherhood, the sense of sharing in a common humanity, he was to find practically in Marxism. The common man, the man of the masses, is the figure with which Vallejo most frequently identifies himself. This is Vallejo’s universal man: it is the basic human condition, with its pains, longings, frustrations, hope.

It would be wrong to deny the importance that the Spanish Civil War had on Vallejo. A recently discovered notebook of early drafts shows that the poem-sequence on the war was written alongside the last of his dated poems. Intellectually and emotionally, Vallejo’s personal poems and his war poems were part of the same creative process.

This final period of Vallejo’s poetry is marked by the realisation that the Spanish War was not only a local, inner feud of the Spanish people, but also a universal battle against the forces of rising Fascism. In this conflict he identifies himself, as a Peruvian writer, with the Spanish people, and he seems to equate his own “peruvianness” with “spanishness”. Thus, just as his work is full of Peruvianisms and allusions to his home country’s landscape, so his final poems are replete with images and references to Spanish
culture, whether high or popular, from Picasso’s *Guernica* to bullfighting. When, in the last of his dated poems, he replaces the word *papa* for its peninsular Spanish variant, *patata*, he is clearly thinking of the readers of Spain. Peninsular Spanish pronunciation is also foregrounded in a few of his poems: in a cancelled fragment he writes that the men of Brunete are “crying zeds of pain”, in an obvious allusion to the sibilant sound present in Peninsular phonetics. He also seems to write *Estremadura*, with an “s” rather than an “x”, in order to emphasise the aspirated sound of Peninsular pronunciation. On the other hand, Spanish literary tradition is also present in the poems: just as the names of Cervantes and Quevedo are mentioned in the first section of ‘Spain, Let This Cup Pass from Me’, so too are echoes of Fray Luis de León, Lope de Vega, Lupercio Leonardo de Argensola, San Juan de la Cruz and Jorge Manrique heard here and there throughout the final poems and the Spain sequence. In short, both oral and written expressions of Spanish culture come together in his final poetry, and it is not a surprise that the deified Cervantes shares the same status with the half-illiterate Pedro Rojas.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why ‘Spain, Let This Cup Pass from Me’ was such a complex sequence to write, as the drafts show. His own hardships are expressed at the beginning of the poem, where the speaker claims “I don’t know what to do, where to place myself”. Yet these hardships also involve an artistic rigour, probably only paralleled by that of his *Trilce* phase; and thus, in this final sequence, Vallejo is at his most eloquent and memorable. Take one of his most famous poems:

At the end of the battle,
and the combatant dead, a man came unto him
and said: “Do not die, I love you so much!”
But the corpse, alas, kept on dying.

Two men approached and repeated:
“Do not leave us! Be brave! Come back to life!”
But the corpse, alas, kept on dying.

Twenty, a hundred, a thousand, half a million came toward him,
shouting: “So much love, and nothing can be done against death!”
But the corpse, alas, kept on dying.

Millions of people surrounded him,
with one common plea: “Stay here, brother!”
But the corpse, alas, kept on dying.
Then, all the men of the earth
surrounded him; moved, the sad corpse looked at them;
he rose up slowly,
embraced the first man; started to walk...

Just how much irony is intended in this poem is hard to discern. Is Vallejo being a visionary of the ultimate new world, one in which death itself is defeated, or is he being an ironist willing to underline the power of death and the impossibility of all the populations of the world to come together as one? Reading his other writings and knowing of his Marxist faith in a future Utopia, one would be obliged to argue for the former. Yet, authorial intention aside, for today’s reader the poem acquires a new light, and that is why the poem is so contemporaneously poignant today as during the time of the Spanish Civil War. Finally, at yet another level of meaning, the poem can be read as a self-elegy to the poet himself, who no doubt sensed that his own death was near, and who, though his body might be lying under the earth (the verb “echóse” in the final line means also, literally, “he lay down”), could rise and walk, Lazarus-like, by means of his surviving poetry.

Of all the languages in which Vallejo’s poetry has been translated, one can safely say that English is the one which has better served his work. A look at our bibliography can give a fair view of the many volumes that have been published in English, which largely outnumber translations into French, Italian or German. Perhaps for this same reason, Vallejo’s presence in Anglophone poetry is palpable, both thematically and formally. Furthermore it is interesting to note that his name is mentioned by poets with completely different literary styles, from the more traditional to the most experimental.

The earliest translations into English that we know of appeared in 1939, by the American poet Edna W. Underwood, who published some of Vallejo’s poems in the *West Indian Review*. Since her initial endeavour, Vallejo has been cast into English by a myriad of poets and translators: H. R. Hays, James Wright, Ed Dorn, Gordon Brotherston, Robert Bly, Clayton Eshleman, Rebecca Seiferle, Margaret Sayers-Peden, and Peter Boyle, among others. James Wagner’s homophonic translation of *Trilce* is perhaps the latest homage to Vallejo’s most difficult book.
And yet, César Vallejo did not believe in the art of translation. Though he himself translated two novels, he did it as a job and not as an act of creation (or recreation). In an article from 1929 on American poetry, but speaking most probably of his own poems, he seems to agree with Frost in that poetry resided on what is lost in translation:

The best poets are, consequently, less suited for translation. What is translated from Walt Whitman, from Goethe, are philosophical qualities and accents, and very little of their strictly poetic qualities. Of them, in foreign languages, one only knows the great ideas, the great animalistic movements, but one does not perceive the great ciphers of the soul, the dark nebulae of life that dwell on a turn of a sentence . . . on the imponderability of the word.

This statement will surely dishearten any of Vallejo’s translators, especially those who want to convey not only his “great ideas” but some of his “poetic qualities” as well. But perhaps Vallejo was over-exaggerating. It is difficult to think of any poetry in Spanish, of any period, that presents the translator with a challenge comparable to that of Vallejo’s, since it offers a bewildering multiplicity of levels of meaning—the translator has to make definite choices in interpreting material which the reader of the Spanish originals can leave unresolved or continually reinterpret. In truth, it can be confidently asserted that any “translation” of a Vallejo poem is at best a version. And that is what the reader of the present work is here offered.

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