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Tribute to *Trilce* from the United States on the Centenary of its Publication: A Revolution that Lasts

1

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Abstract: Peruvian poet César Vallejo's second collection of poems, entitled *Trilce*, appeared off the presses of the Typographic Workshop of the Lima Penitentiary in October 1922. The book's centenary is therefore a good occasion to reflect on one of the most revolutionary and transcendent works in the history of Spanish language poetry, and –it must be said– of poetry worldwide. This issue of the *Observatorio Studies*, therefore, pays tribute to *Trilce* by reviewing some of the most interesting points of its genesis, providing a new hypothesis about its title and demonstrating the formal complexity of this collection of poems as well as its literary richness. At the same time, this study also locates Vallejo's important work within his life experiences and in the context of the international avant-garde, thus further exposing the continued relevance of Vallejo's *Trilce* in the panorama of contemporary poetry, including in the English-speaking world. Indeed, this study ends with a compilation of the translations that have been made of this work into English.

Keywords: *Trilce*, César Vallejo, Peruvian poetry, avant-garde, Latin American literature, language revolution, translation.

* Editors' note: This text is an English translation, offered by the *Observatorio*, of the Spanish original submitted by the author. See study 081-11/2022SP.

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1. The Avant-gardes of 1922

Peruvian poet César Vallejo's second collection of poems, entitled *Trilce*, appeared off the presses of the Typographic Workshop of the Lima Penitentiary in October 1922. The book's centenary is therefore a good occasion to reflect on one of the most revolutionary and transcendent works in the history of Spanish language poetry, and –it must be said–of poetry worldwide. To do so, it would seem important to first place the work within the context of the international avant-garde and then point out those characteristics of the work that make it so unique and special. Finally, it would be important to trace *Trilce*'s influence on the English-speaking world, and specifically his place in American poetry.

The appearance of *Trilce* was one of many important literary and cultural events occurring throughout the world in 1922. In Latin America, two of the most well-known events were the publication in Mexico of Nicaraguan poet Salomón de la Selva's seminal collection of poems entitled *El soldado desconocido* (*The Unknown Soldier*) and in Sao Paulo, Brazil, the cultural exposition known as Modern Art Week. In the English-speaking world, the year 1922 saw the publication, in February, of the novel *Ulysses* by the Irishman James Joyce, and in October, of *The Waste Land*, the collection of poems by US-born Englishman T. S. Eliot. Also published that year was *Jacob's Room*, the novel by British writer Virginia Woolf which, like *Ulysses*, experimented with stream of consciousness. Other notable works from 1922, although not strictly avant-garde, marked important milestones in the development of English language literature, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned* along with his collection of short stories called *Tales of the Jazz Age*, and Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, a novel that savagely satirized middle-class America. Given the quality of these books, and many others left unmentioned, it is little wonder that 1922 is known as an *annus mirabilis*, a year of literary wonder. Vallejo's *Trilce* is no less important than any of these other masterpieces.

The question is: what do all these books and artistic occurrences have in common, apart from chronological coincidence? Clearly it is their spirit of innovation and a radical experimentation with language that reflected a vitalist creed in favor of social transformation. In all cases, these works represent the highest peaks of their respective literary traditions.

As subsequent paragraphs will demonstrate, the complexity and importance of *Trilce* was undoubtedly nourished by some currents of the continental European avant-garde, including elements of Dadaism, fundamentally, and some Ultraism, while also anticipating some features of Surrealism. Recognizing these influences in no way negates Vallejo's radical originality; for *Trilce* cannot be understood in reference solely to these mediated or partial influences. That said, both in its use of language and particular concepts, Vallejo's work—like most other works of the Latin American avant-garde—does share certain features with its continental European counterpart, particularly the cultivation of the metaphor of absurd origin, the rupture of morphological structures and the use of the space of the printed page as an expressive tool. Critical to note, however, and to its great credit, *Trilce* also offers a fundamentally personal poetics; a poetics that can only be fully understood by taking into account Vallejo's Peruvian origins and his own life experiences.

As to external influences on the Latin American avant-garde, also important to recognize is the Anglo-Saxon literary current of Imagism, the movement founded in England in 1912 by a group of brilliant American and British poets, including the young Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell and Carl Sandburgh. These Imagists advocated the use of everyday speech and the poetic visualization of commonplace images. They positioned themselves against what they called “the cosmic poet”; that is, the dark poet, isolated and solemn and far removed from everyday language and reality. With this critique, the Imagists represented an avant-garde in many ways opposed to the continental European movements of the time.

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Anglo-Saxon Imagism clearly nurtured many of the characteristics of the aforementioned *Unknown Soldier* by Salomón de la Selva. In this collection of poems, de la Selva experimented with a writing style that was both visual and extremely graphic in his poetization of the horrors of the First World War; horrors he experienced firsthand as a soldier in the war. His poems are voiced in a quotidian language, alien to the complex metaphorical elaborations of the continental avant-garde. This more accessible style and approach to poetry would later become known in the Spanish-speaking world as “conversational poetry,” a style which only began to gain currency in the 1950s with Nicanor Parra’s “Antipoesía” (“Anti-poetry”) and Ernesto Cardenal’s “Exteriorismo” (“Exteriorism”). Decades later, when conversationalism was well-established in 20th century poetry, Cardenal would write in “A Few Rules for Writing Poetry” that “poetry, more than based on ideas, must be based on things that enter through the senses” and that “we must write as one speaks... with the naturalness and plainness of spoken language, not written language” (Cardenal, 1980, n. p.). The Mexican poet José Emilio Pacheco deftly explored this genre in his “Note on the Other Vanguard” (1979), for the first time recognizing in this vein the work of Mexican poet Salvador Novo and the Dominican writer Pedro Henríquez Ureña, who shared his translations of North American poetry in Spanish-language poetry anthologies and literary magazines in the 1930s. To Pacheco's list, one should also add the Peruvian Enrique Bustamante y Ballivián’s book *Antipoemas*, published in 1927. In short, the influence of that “other avant-garde” of Anglo-Saxon origin is clearly discernible in Latin American poetry, and that influence can be traced to *The Unknown Soldier*, the seminal book by Salomón de la Selva published—like *Trilce*—in 1922.

Another critical 1922 moment in terms of the Latin American avant-garde was the aforementioned Modern Art Week, held from February 13th to 17th at the Municipal Theater of the city of São Paulo. Here there were art exhibitions with nearly one hundred works of painting, architecture and sculpture, as well as readings of poetry, lectures and music recitals—all in a style that destabilized the bourgeois taste of the time. Modern Art Week promoted the renewal of Brazilian artistic and literary

expression, seeking to find a national, uniquely Brazilian, interpretation of the cosmopolitanism of the European avant-gardes. The event included such great writers as Oswald de Andrade (who would create the Anthropophagic Movement in 1928), Manuel Bandeira and Mário de Andrade, the renowned musician Heitor Villa-Lobos and the artist Tarsila do Amaral. Unlike the more conservative Art and Architecture Festival also held in São Paulo in September of 1922 (to celebrate the centennial of Brazilian Independence), the Modern Art Week held earlier that year was largely a showcase for the Brazilian avant-garde.

Elsewhere in Latin America, and specifically referring to literature, there were other important works that appeared in 1922 that, like *Trilce*, were influenced by the European avant-garde. Among the important are *Los gemidos (The Moans)* by the Chilean Pablo de Rokha, *Veinte poemas para ser leídos en el tranvía (Twenty Poems to be Read on the Tram)* by the Argentine Oliverio Girondo, *Paulicea Desvairada* by the Brazilian Mário de Andrade, *Andamios interiores: Poemas radiográficos (Interior scaffolding: Radiographic poems)* by the Mexican Manuel Maples Arce, the now lost *Zaguán de aluminio (Aluminum Hallway)* by the Ecuadorian Hugo Mayo, the “Euphoristic Manifesto” by the Puerto Ricans Vicente Palés Matos and Tomás L. Batista, and the writing of *Tergiversaciones (Misrepresentations)* by the Colombian León de Greiff. Also important to mention would be *Polirritmos (Polyrhythms)* by Juan Parra del Riego, a Peruvian avant-garde poet based in Uruguay and one with undeniable virtuosity in handling verse and its sonority. And though not avant-garde in style, other important works from this year include *Desolación (Desolation)*, by Chilean Gabriela Mistral, and *Raíz Salvaje (Wild Root)*, by Uruguayan Juana de Ibarbourou.

Amidst all this literary ferment however, three events continue to stand out due to their transcendence in 20th century poetry: Vallejo’s *Trilce*, de la Selva’s *The Unknown Soldier* and Brazil’s Modern Art Week.

6

In terms of the two poetry books just mentioned and any stylistic or other analogies with poetry in the English language in particular, it is definitely the case that *Trilce*'s revolutionary character in terms of its morphological ruptures, its word games and phonemes, its fragmented vision of time, and its dislocation of the poetic voice bears similarities to Joyce's use of language and narrative technique in *Ulysses* and the later *Finnegans Wake*. Bear in mind, however, that it is almost impossible for Vallejo to have read *Ulysses*, which appeared in Paris in February 1922, while the Peruvian author (who did not read English) first began writing *Trilce*'s poems in 1918.

In the case of de la Selva's *Unknown Soldier*, it is very likely that the author read the manifestos of Imagism and adapted some of their principles to his own writing. As mentioned before, the Anglo-Saxon avant-garde had a discreet but discernible influence on one sector of the Latin American avant-garde. That influence would become more predominant decades later, from the 1950s to the 1980s, most apparent in the Anti-poetry of Nicanor Parra, the Exteriorism of Ernesto Cardenal and the general phenomenon of conversational poetry.

7

2. Origins and Interpretations of *Trilce*

2.1 *The Birth of Trilce*

Who exactly was César Vallejo and why are we now commemorating the centenary of one of his books? A review of some aspects of his personal biography will offer the first clues to understanding the compositional process of *Trilce*.

César Vallejo was born in 1892 in the almost inaccessible town of Santiago de Chuco, located at an altitude of some 3,100 meters above sea level in the Department of La Libertad in the northern Peruvian Andes. This biographical fact may appear anecdotal, but it actually suggests important aspects of Vallejo's formative years, his

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mestizo origins, and his intimate familiarity with the Andean world. Vallejo spent the first eighteen years of life in Santiago de Chuco, and even after relocating to the coastal city of Trujillo to attend university, he made repeated visits to his hometown until 1923, when he left Peru for Europe, never to return. It was during these first decades of life that Vallejo forged a deep and lasting connection to his homeland, or what critics have called an “Andean sensibility.” Although it would be problematic to identify this concept as something univocal in Vallejo, there is no doubt that permeating all of his poetry until the end of his life was a nostalgia for the homeland, for first loves, for the familial community, for the language of childhood, and as he writes in his verses, for the “tahona estuosa de aquellos mis bizcochos” [stuffy bakery of those biscuits of mine] and for the “burro peruano del Perú (perdonen la tristeza)” [Peruvian donkey from Peru (pardon the sadness)].

8

Vallejo was the youngest of twelve children in a modest but highly respected family, since his father had once served as governor of the town. César Abraham Vallejo Mendoza would undoubtedly become the darling of his siblings and parents. Both his mother and father were pure mestizos, the children of indigenous women and Spanish priests. Vallejo thus inherited the blood of two worlds, but his worldview would be influenced culturally by the various places he lived over the course of his life. In Santiago de Chuco, he would run with the other children along muddy paths, listen to the *huaynos* or popular songs of local celebrations, and smell the fresh bread from the *watias* (clay ovens) and the smoke from burning dung. These are images that appear sporadically in Vallejo’s most radically avant-garde poems, like those found in *Trilce*. In Santiago, he would also experience romantic love for the first time, presumably in the now legendary “Andean and sweet Rita / of reed and capulí,” from the poem “Idilio muerto” (“Dead Idyll”) included in his first book of poetry, *Los heraldos negros* (*The Black Heralds*, 1918-1919).

But not everything was joyful during Vallejo's youth. In 1911, while working for a few months as an assistant to the treasurer on the Roma hacienda in the Department of Libertad in order to finance his studies, Vallejo personally witnessed the inhumane exploitation suffered by the estate's nearly 4,000 laborers. Even before this, and from a very young age, he had become familiar with the system of worker exploitation that characterized the Quiruvilca mining complex. Witnessing such suffering firsthand awakened in him an early awareness of his commitment to the poor of Peru and throughout the world.

Vallejo completed a major in literary studies at the University of Trujillo in 1915 and then worked as a schoolteacher in Trujillo until deciding, in 1917, to move to Lima to develop his own literary career. He managed to publish his first book of poetry in July 1919 (although the work is dated 1918). Entitled *Los heraldos negros* (*The Black Heralds*), this collection of poems is one of profound existential reflection, imbued as yet with elements of a modernist poetic style but at once very sensual. Perhaps for this very reason, and undoubtedly due to the mastery of several of his poems, the book enjoyed considerable critical success.

In spite of this literary success, however, the year signaled a difficult period of personal loss for the poet. To begin with, he suffered the death of his mother on August 8, 1918, which was an irreparable blow for him, especially since he was unable to travel to Santiago de Chuco for her burial. In a letter to his brother Manuel Natividad written from Lima on October 16, 1918, he confesses: "I am deranged and don't know what to do, nor what to live for. This is how I spend my orphan days away from everything and crazy with pain" (Vallejo, 2002, p. 27). In the months that followed, Vallejo also suffered the death of his mentors: the great writers Manuel González Prada, Ricardo Palma and Abraham Valdelomar, the latter a pre-avant-garde poet and narrator with whom Vallejo had established a close friendship. To make matters worse, Vallejo was deeply affected by a breakup with Otilia Villanueva Gonzales, a young woman with whom he had fallen madly in love and with whom he had shared a torrid

romance. According to Miguel Pachas Almeyda, one of the best-known biographers of the poet, “When César worked at the Barrós school [...] he met and fell in love with this beautiful woman of approximately 22 years of age, with whom he almost had a child [...]. It was June 1918, and in various settings in Lima at the time they were seen together, completely in love” (Pachas Almeyda, 2022). Pachas Almeyda then adds:

However, very soon [Vallejo's] fears came true: the beautiful Otilia became pregnant [...]. Under these circumstances, the Villanueva family demanded that he marry Otilia. The poet flatly refused. The family opted for something fatal: Otilia eliminated the child she was carrying in her womb, and then was sent to San Mateo, a town in the province of Huarochirí. Vallejo was never able to see his beloved again, nor did he get to know anything about the son or daughter he might have had (2018, pp. 215-216).

The romance ended definitively in July 1919. At least 30 of *Trilce*'s 77 poems are dedicated to Otilia, which he began to write in those months of intense idyll and desolation.¹

10 The female figure in general acquires universal dimensions in Vallejo's work, combining together all the different positions that a woman conventionally represents in a man's life. For example, in the story “Muro antártico,” from *Escalas*, a book of twelve short stories that Vallejo wrote at the same time as *Trilce* and that would appear in Lima in 1923, a woman is transformed into a multiple whole with different protective functions: “O Sovereign! [...] Be every woman, the entire cord! O flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones! Oh my sister, my wife, my mother!” (Vallejo, 1923a, p. 28). The

¹ It bears mention that there could actually be another Otilia in Vallejo's poetry. Apparently, some years prior to 1918, he had felt a very strong attraction towards his niece Otilia Vallejo Gamboa (c. 1896-1981), a daughter of his older brother Víctor Clemente Vallejo Mendoza (see Larrea, 1973, p. 71; Pachas Almeyda, 2018, pp. 42-44; and Hart, 2014, pp. 95-100). According to Fernández and Gianuzzi, “critics have also argued that Vallejo may have fused the images of the two Otilias 'in a single poem as in the characters of dreams'. This is what Américo Ferrari claims in his edition of Vallejo's poetry for the Archivos Collection (Madrid: Allca XX, 1997 [1988], p. 264)” (Fernández and Gianuzzi, 2021a, [p. 3], n. 6). See also Hart (2014, pp. 98-99) for the theme of the fusion of the two Otilias. Regarding the possibility of Otilia Villanueva having had an abortion, Fernández and Gianuzzi point out that “as far as we have been able to discern, the student A. Paiva was the first to raise the question of possible allusions to abortion in *Trilce* at the first symposium in Córdoba (vid. Juan Larrea ed. *Aula Vallejo II*, 1962, p. 126)” (Fernández and Gianuzzi, 2021a, [p. 7], n. 14). Poem X of *Trilce* mentions three months of pregnancy, and Poems XXVI and LXVI of *Trilce* speak of an unborn child.

thrice-orphaned subject also appears in Vallejo's short novel from 1923 entitled *Fabla salvaje* (Vallejo, 1923b). Here a character named Balta Espinar misses the presence of his mother, his sister (who lives far away and so has not been seen for a long time) and his wife, whom he increasingly alienates as his own state of madness progresses. This triple orphanhood leads to the death of the character in the novel.

A year after his breakup with Otilia Villanueva, while on a visit to his home in Santiago de Chuco, a political incident would result in Vallejo's being persecuted and imprisoned. The town had just experienced a heated electoral dispute, and during the annual celebration of the local patron saint, the Apostle Santiago el Mayor, the Santa María family, one of the most powerful in the town, accused Vallejo of having instigated the burning of their warehouse. After a complaint to the authorities and several months in hiding, Vallejo was arrested in Trujillo on November 6, 1920 on charges that were ultimately unproven. He was released on parole in March 1921, after spending 112 days of anguish and humiliation within the walls of the Trujillo prison, whose "boring bomb from the barracks shrinks / time time time time," as he writes in Poem II of *Trilce*. The prison experience underpinned the attitude of absolute disruption that is expressed in *Trilce*. "[A]h the four bleaching walls," he would write, "that irredeemably add up to the same number" (*Trilce*, XVIII), formulating an image of stagnated time and questioning the parameters of logic and morality that imprison all human beings.

Upon his release from jail, Vallejo received tributes demanding redress from his friends from the El Norte group and other intellectuals in Trujillo; however, with the publication of *Trilce* in October 1922, Vallejo would definitively part ways with the Peruvian cultural establishment. His friend Luis Alberto Sánchez, for example, who tried to be impartial in his review of the work, could not help repeating the question "Why would Vallejo have written *Trilce*?" The modernist poet laureate José Santos Chocano would refer to Vallejo as "the poet without poems" and Alberto Ureta, author of *Rumor de almas*, read fragments of *Trilce* in his classes at the Guadalupe school only to openly mock Vallejo (Espejo Asturrizaga, 1965, pp. 109-110). In a letter to

Antenor Orrego, his great friend and protector, Vallejo made mention of all this arrogance directed at him from the capital of Peru's literary establishment, calling it "limeña giggle," a phrase that endures as one of many characterizations of the Creole inhabitants of the city founded by Pizarro.

In effect, Vallejo, like so many millions of other Peruvians, suffered discrimination and misunderstanding from the powers that be because of his Andean origins, because of his love for the Andean countryside, and above all, because of his posture of questioning imposed tastes and fashions. In *Trilce*, in one of the most beautiful poems written to the universal mother, he mentions his hometown as a source of indispensable love: "Mother, I am going to Santiago tomorrow, to soak myself in your blessing and in your tears" (*Trilce* LXV). Vallejo would never stop going back home in his imagination, as can be seen in various poems, narrative texts and essays written during the remaining fifteen years of his life, in Paris, where he lived after leaving Peru in June 1923 and where he died, on Good Friday, April 15, 1938.

2.2. Different Hypotheses about the Name *Trilce*

A study dedicated to *Trilce* cannot fail to dwell on the origins and possible meaning of the enigmatic name that the poet chose for his collection of poems. Although the question has been discussed before, this essay will offer a new hypothesis that will require further exploration, but which attempts a reading of the name that takes into account an interpretation of the book in its entirety.

Before presenting this new interpretation, it makes sense to recognize the existing explanations of the book's name. Some of Vallejo's biographers, including his friend Juan Espejo Asturrizaga, claim that the poet originally toyed with calling his second work *Cráneos de Bronce* (*Bronze Skulls*) and publishing it under the pseudonym César Perú, but after hearing all the jokes and doubts raised by his friends,

Vallejo decided against those names (Espejo Asturrizaga, 1965, pp. 108-109). Fernández and Gianuzzi [2021b] question this account, since apart from testimonies produced years later by friends such as Espejo, there is no documentary evidence regarding the aforementioned title and pseudonym. What we know for sure is that Vallejo decided on the neologism *Trilce* and that is the name under which this collection of poems, whose texts are no less enigmatic, saw the light of day.

As for the origin and meanings of the name *Trilce*, there are many hypotheses. The most common one claims that the word is a merger of the words “triste y dulce” [sad and sweet]. As literary critic Federico Bravo points out: “the interpretation that derives the neologism *Trilce* from the adjectives sad and sweet has already been proposed, among other authors, by José Manuel Castañón (1963, p. 58), by Hellen Ferro (1964, p. 256), by Jean Franco (p. 138) and by Eduardo Neale-Silva (pp. 609-611)” (Bravo, 2000, p. 337). The studies by Ferro (of Argentine origin), Jean Franco (British) and Neale-Silva (Chilean) were all published in the United States, boosting interest in and research on Vallejo in North American academia since the 1960s.

There are several other theories regarding the name *Trilce*. One hypothesis claims that it is an ironic allusion to “tres libras” or “three pounds” (30 soles in Peruvian currency of the time), the added cost to Vallejo of having to reprint the first few pages of the volume. Another hypothesis claims that *Trilce* is an acronym of “Trujillo y Lima cárcel estuve” [In Trujillo and Lima I was imprisoned], alluding to the violent confinement suffered by the author. Yet other theories involve anagrammatic, numerological and kabbalistic interpretations. The truth is that, beginning with its very title, Vallejo’s *Trilce* is one of the most difficult, cosmopolitan, and complex books in the Spanish language.

An explanation for the name *Trilce* that relies solely on the word’s sonority was the only one allowed by his widow, Georgette Philippart de Vallejo. In her *Biographical Notes on César Vallejo* (1983, pp. 106-107), Philippart offers this explanation based

on her memory of her conversations with Vallejo. César González Ruano also conducted an interview with Vallejo in Madrid in 1931; an interview in which Vallejo purportedly stated that “trilce” meant nothing and that the name only existed because of its sonority. However, simply reproducing the words of the poet would seem insufficient as evidence, especially keeping in mind that, according to Philippart herself, Vallejo was not above “a secret malice” (1983, p. 106) and that he could well have been “laughing inside” (1983, p. 106) as he offered an explanation for “trilce.” One has to wonder: might Vallejo also have been “laughing inside” at his wife and interviewer? And ultimately, even if Vallejo's laugh was sincere and he really did think that “trilce” made sense only as a sound and not as a reference, then critics would be in the familiar position of having to question the credibility of the author. It would be analogous to accepting at face value Cervantes's claim that *Don Quixote* was simply a mockery of chivalric novels.

14

Many critics have noted the importance of the number three to the title *Trilce*. Spanish poet Juan Larrea, a close friend of Vallejo's, suggested that *Trilce* involved the radical derivation of *dulce* (sweet) from the Latin *dúo*; and that since *dulce* indirectly refers to *dúo*, then *trilce* signified *trío* (1958, p. 33). As I will explain below, Larrea's claim parallels my own hypothesis: that the title insinuates the passage from the loving couple to a trinity. Italian critic Roberto Paoli has also underscored the capital importance of the number three throughout the book and as a central element in Vallejo's poetry (Paoli, 1964, p. xxxii). And Colombian poet and critic Dasso Saldívar supports the argument about the fundamental importance of the number three as a synthesizing axis in *Trilce* (1988, p. 309).

Another interesting hypothesis comes from Argentine critic Gerardo Mario Goloboff, whose illuminatingly anagrammatic reading of the word “trilce” involves the name César itself:

The unconscious in poetic language [...] could justify the title [of *Trilce*] by psycholinguistic mechanisms that would have led the poet to produce that term by constructing it with the first two letters of the name of the city where he spent such a traumatic prison experience (Trujillo) along with the fragment IL, to which he added the first two letters of his first name CEsar. This is, quote obviously, a hypothesis like many others, although the anagrammatic coincidences are telling (1988, pp. 279-280).

Of course, a major problem with Goloboff's proposal is that it fails to account for the letters U, J, and O in the name Trujillo.

Federico Bravo has proposed yet another reading of Vallejo's title. "[W]ithout questioning the validity of the existing theses," writes Bravo, "I suggest we begin with a kabbalistic and numerological reading of the title, one that in no way contradicts what has been argued to date. It seems to me that all the effort that has been put into deciphering the *meaning* of the word *Trilce*, has perhaps led critics to forget about its *signifier*, negating thereby the possibility that the *deciphering* of its meaning could go through the *encryption* of its sounds" (2000, p. 339; italics in the original). Bravo goes on to point out that the sum of the numerical values (in terms of their placement in the alphabet) of the letters of the word *Trilce* would total 77, which is the exact number of poems in the book. According to Bravo, this kabbalistic character would grant the text the status of being a "sacred writing" (Bravo, 2000, p. 340). Counting the numbers and letters, both in the title of the book and in the Roman numeral headings that precede each poem, one comes up with 77 or LXXVII, which is the duplication of the sacred number 7, "used 77 times in the Old Testament" (p. 340).

15

Bravo also suggests the possibility of a philological interpretation of *Trilce*. From a Latin root, he argues, one Spanish form could have resulted in the word *terliz*, meaning a fabric made up of three threads: "the phonetic configuration of the neologism empowers us to recognize the adjective *trilicem* as a possible etymology of the title, since the hypothetical evolution resulting in the word *trilce* (including the omitted "m" of the accusative and the dropping of the posttonic vowel "i") rigorously parallels that of *salce* (< *salicem*) or *calce* (< *calicem*), to cite only these two examples"

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(2020, page 341). Through numerous analyses of examples from the poems themselves, Bravo convincingly argues for a correspondence between weaving and writing in Vallejo's *Trilce*, and even suggests a relationship with the Andean *quipu*.²

I would now like to contribute a new hypothesis about the name *Trilce*, inspired in part by Bravo's kabbalistic proposal and above all by Goloboff's anagrammatic intuition. From Goloboff, I continue to recognize the presence of the name "César" in the title, but I substitute the name "Otilia" in place of "Trujillo." By combining some elements of the names "Otilia" and "César," it is possible to arrive at the neologism *Trilce*, and in this case, I argue, the title could allegorically be the name of the couple's aborted son or daughter, transfigured into a verbal 'creature.' This hypothesis relies on seeing the complex conjunction of Otilia (T-I-L) with César (R-C-E): that is, *Trilce*. Like the child who was not a complete person, the name is incomplete; and its deformity of the name reflects the deformity of the new being, the unborn. It could be that Vallejo chose two consonants and one vowel from each of the names of the father and mother to forge a word of six letters, one less than seven—the number of perfection and divinity. The neologism is made up of fragments of two complete and socially recognizable units, but its final configuration is one name, neither complete nor recognizable. The first syllabus is composed of the first consonant of Otilia (T) and the

16

² In Bravo's words: "Let us now return to the title of the collection of poems. As we have seen, the Latin adjective *trilicem*, here proposed as a possible etymological matrix of the title, explains and configures the *trilicic* discourse. At the same time, it associates writing with the autochthonous and maternal image of the quipu and thus points to an archaeological foundation of Vallejo's speech. If, in line with Jean Paulhan's very apt phrase in the title of his essay *La preuve par l'étymologie*, one were to ask what "proof" there is of the proposed etymology, we would state that we can now offer not one, but two different and complementary kinds of relevant evidence: the etymological evidence, since, as we have shown, the evolution *trilicem* > **trilce*, although virtual, conforms with rigorous accuracy to the evolutionary laws of Castilian phonetics; and the anagrammatic evidence, since the 'natural' result of *trilix*, the Castilian adjective *terliz*, makes it possible, by rearranging its six phonemes, to obtain the very word *Trilce* that gives the book its title. Whether one opts for the etymological proof or the anagrammatic, the two paths lead, one would have to say inexorably, to the same signifier: *Trilce*: name, compendium and cipher of Vallejo's poetic writing" (2020, p. 358).

last of César (R) followed by the two next two letters in Otilia (IL), and the second syllabus is formed by the first two letters of César (CE), resulting in a perfect balance of two trinities or a double trinity:

O T I L I A → T I L (3 letters)

→ T R I L C E (6 letters, double trinity)

C E S A R → R C E (3 letters)

In Vallejo's title then, we are faced with a kind of "linguistic fetus, or golem"; a creature, however, that does acquire its own identity because of its conformity with the rules of Castilian morphology. As Bravo notes, "the neologism awakens in the reader the linguistic illusion of its being a 'possible' term in Spanish, although not resolutely familiar or known" (2000, p. 333).

17

The obvious question concerns the omission of the "O" of Otilia. In the way of an explanation, one could point in the first place to its similarity with zero, which has no concrete value. One could also suggest that the capital O refers figuratively to a vagina at the moment of its maximum expansion, during childbirth, or to a mouth when it is wide open; what emerges is either the child (aborted in reality, but on paper, very concrete and with its own personality) or the unintelligible word (the encrypted and hermetic language of the book). Furthermore, the poet himself in poem V of *Trilce* uses the 0 to point to the state of nothingness to which an individual is reduced when they are without a partner, who is designed as the 1: "Let the lovers be lovers in eternity./ Then don't strike 1, which will resonate to infinity./ And don't strike 0, which will be so silent,/ it'll wake 1 up and make it stand." In this poem, the zero symbol (or the absent 0 of *Trilce*) appears as an impossibility that can only be made possible in the 2, which occurs within the poem as Vallejo converts the "dicotyledon group" that opens the poem into the "bicardiac group" that closes it, that is, the loving couple of *Trilce* V. And this 2 would potentially become a trinity, a *trilce*, through the erotic conjunction of the

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names. Another point to consider is that in poem XLII of *Trilce*, Otilia appears as “Tilia,” as the poet invokes her in the verse: “Tilia, lie down.”³ From Tilia to *Trilce*, there is only one short step, involving the interweaving of three letters from his own name, César.

As for the final “a” of Otilia and the penultimate “a” of César, their elimination again suggests a frustrated outcome, the evocation of whose name required a deformation of existing models, adapting them to the sonorous and conceptual needs of this new verbal offspring. Additionally, if one were to follow Bravo’s hypothesis (2000), then the letter “a” would have the numerical value of 1; that is, would symbolize the human person made incomplete by solitude. This could be another reason the “a” is excluded from both OtiliA and CésAr.

As for the “s” in César, perhaps its absence is due to the fact that phonetically the “s” is equivalent to the soft “c” (at least in Latin America), and that the letter thus lost identity and relevance in Vallejo’s selection of sounds from the names of Otilia and César. It would simply have been redundant.

Important to keep in mind as well is that complete or incomplete anagrammatic neologisms are frequent in *Trilce*. Examples include: “herízanos” (in poem II, for bristling and wounding), “hifalto” (in poem VIII, for childless), “el hijar” (in poem XIII, for “lijar” or to sand, or “hijar” as a set of children, or “ijar” as the lateral areas of the stomach and belly), “oxidante” (in poem LXIII, for “oxidar,” to rust, and “occidente” or

³ A Tilia also appears in the poem “Ascuas” from *The Black Heralds*: “I will shine for Tilia, in tragedy/ my stanzas in excellent clusters;/ each melodious fruit will bleed,/ like a funeral sun, gloomy wines,/ Tilia will bear the cross / that in the final hour will be of light!// I will turn on for Tilia, in tragedy,/ the drop of roar that is on my lips;/ and the lip curling for the kiss,/ will break into a hundred sacred petals./ Tilia will have the dagger,/ the floridical and auroral dagger! [...]” (Vallejo, 1918, pp. 17-18). It is possible that this Tilia was his niece Otilia Vallejo Gamboa, but in any case, the two Otilias may well merge into a single character later on, as noted previously by several critics. See also Hart (2014, pp. 51-67) for an analysis of Tilia’s role in Vallejo’s poems.

western). The word “trilce” would fall into this category, another compositional mechanism typical of the book as a whole, synthesizing components of two words into a single, completely new one.⁴

Vallejo, in this sense, is a great “ripper” of words, a language re-composer who is not afraid to break phonological and morphological norms in order to achieve new meanings and referents not contemplated by conventional language. In his prologue to the book, Vallejo’s friend Antenor Orrego clearly alerted readers to this, comparing the poet to a child who disassembles his doll to understand the profound mechanisms of its operation: that is, he simply “disembowels it.”⁵ And by doing so, the poet creates what Arroyo Paredes (2011, p. 8) has called “a Vallejo idiolect in reference to a frustrated birth.”

In fact, Antenor Orrego later claimed to have a letter from Vallejo in which the poet himself referred to *Trilce* as a “creature in the process of being born” (Vallejo, 2002, p. 46). The full passage of said letter purportedly reads: “The magnificent words of your prologue have been the only understanding, penetrating and generous words among all those who have cradled *Trilce*. With them and because of their quality, we have more than enough. The wails and vital yearnings of the creature in the process of its delivery have bounced off the vegetating crust, off the parched, tinderbox skin of Lima’s literary sensibility. They have not understood a thing” (2002, p. 46). *Trilce* was

⁴ For the multiple variants of neologisms in *Trilce*, see Fernández Ortega and Fernández Salgado, 2008, and Huaranga Flores, 2022.

⁵ The complete passage reads as follows: “One golden morning the child is filled with stupor at the subtle dynamic game, at the inarticulate cries of his doll. His astonished childishness knocks for the first time on the doors of mystery. He hopes that the miracle that occurs in himself, the miracle of life, can be revealed to him by this mechanical creature that he holds in his hands. The future man wields his nerves, his heart, his brain and his courage to embark on his first adventure of knowledge. Why? His entrails scream from the highest of his being. And this first “why” breaks, with painful anguish, the innumerable parade of “whys” that mark the vital steps of man, until the last one, that of death. The boy decides to disembowel his doll. He guts it” (in Vallejo, 1922, pp. III-IV). Also “remember that Orrego, Espejo and other friends of Vallejo highlight his habit of gutting words, delving into their phonic, morphological and semantic nooks and crannies” (González Vigil, 2022, pp. 37-38).

born wailing, in a cradle provided only by one friend, and in a completely hostile environment (the Lima intelligentsia), incapable of understanding the profound revolution embodied in Vallejo's book.⁶

Although Fernández and Gianuzzi have questioned the existence of this letter (2021c), both because of the lack of an original and because of Orrego's tendency to flaunt his own position as a confidant and mentor of Vallejo—a Vallejo who was isolated from the prevailing avant-garde with a fundamentally Americanist impulse—Orrego's insistence on viewing the concept of the book as an offspring and as a biological creature remains of crucial importance. That is, even if the letter was paraphrasing something Vallejo's said or even if it was pure invention, Orrego's idea is nonetheless rooted in a detached reading of *Trilce* that took note of the semantic field of gestation and birth in which the collection of poems operates.

20

The importance of deciphering Vallejo's semantic field in *Trilce* is further supported by a comment made by British critic Stephen Hart about the tendency in Vallejo's writing to offer only fragments of reality, while hiding or encrypting many others. Hart refers specifically to an enigmatic letter from August 2, 1928 that Vallejo sent to his friend Oscar Imaña in Trujillo. According to Hart, "*Trilce's* Vallejo-style poems are written in a similar way; like Oscar, we are fed crumbs of information—glimpses into the phenomenal world, snatches of conversation, insights into his thoughts—and then we have to guess what it is" (2014, p. 88).

⁶ Alejandra Josiowicz also points this out: "Vallejo refers to *Trilce* through the image of the newborn child, who bursts onto the poetic scene as the progeny of a new literary sensibility—a sign of unprecedented fluidity and a type of literary flesh—and finds an infertile atmosphere: the indifference and rejection of the Lima culture of the time. The poet also appears associated with the image of the child who, like a jester or a clown, gesticulates hysterically and transgresses social conventions—the customs at the table—, revealing the general ridicule in his coarse performance ('clumsily sticking the spoon in his nose')" (2019, p. 5).

We find samples of this cryptic style throughout *Trilce*. In poem LVI, for example, the poet refers to a child who “would grow up satiated by happiness/ [...] in light of the parents’ grief at not being able to let us/ tear the world off from their dreams of love;/ before them who, like God, from so much love/ comprehended each other up to creators/ and loved us until doing us harm.” And yet, despite the love of the parents, the child ends up damaged and its happiness remains only a possibility. From here the poem continues, in a somewhat more hermetic way: “Fringes of invisible weft,/ teeth that ferret out from a neutral emotion,/ pillars/ free from base and crowning,/ in the great mouth that has lost speech.// Matchstick by matchstick in the dark./ Teardrop by teardrop in the dust storm” (Vallejo, 1922, pp. 87-88). In other words, Vallejo is referring to invisible flesh, teeth without base or crown, and a silent mouth. Despite the passionate fire of the parents “in the dark,” both mourn the loss “in the dust”; and “dust” here would resonate with a colloquial use of the term (“polvo”), common in Peru and other countries, to refer to act of sexual intercourse.

21

Certainly, my hypothesis about *Trilce* being an incomplete anagrammatic neologism does not invalidate other interpretations of the word “trilce,” but it does offer new insight into the complexity of the title and the book it represents; a complexity whose fundamental core consists of a radical embrace of liberation, novelty, and absolute creation, along with an exaltation of the body and erotic love in all its manifestations, privileging enjoyment over the risk of pregnancy (González Vigil, 2022, p. 32). However, in taking account of biographical elements in my interpretation of the title (especially Vallejo’s Catholic upbringing and the continued signs of that influence even during his European Marxist stage), it could also be that the title served as a mechanism of psychological compensation for the lost son or daughter. Added to his previous losses (his mother, his friends, his teachers, his lover), Vallejo’s loss of the human “creature” could only be formulated through a language of pain; a language beyond logic, norms, and social conventions. Deep pain is, by definition, ineffable. There is no language that can fully express it, which is why we have to invent that language.

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In a poem actually entitled “Trilce,” which did not appear in either the 1922 book or its second edition in 1930, but was published separately in 1923 in the Spanish magazines *Alfar* and *Spain* when Vallejo was already living in Paris, the poet speaks from the perspective of distance from the real world, longing for another dimension, one impossible to materialize. If, as González Vigil has pointed out (in Vallejo, 2019, vol. I, p. 598), the poem was written before the publication of the book *Trilce*, that is, before leaving for Europe in June 1923, then it is possible that Vallejo was poetizing in the first person in this poem. González Vigil agrees with Juan Larrea, who in a 1978 edition of Vallejo's complete poetry maintained that this poem gave the book its title and not the other way around. Both critics also underscore the utopian dimension of the poem's allusion to “the place that I know.” The full poem reads as follows:

TRILCE

There is a place that I know
in this world, no less,
where we will never get

Where, even if our foot
came to step for an instant
It will be, in truth, like not being there.

That a site that is seen
every time in this life,
walking, walking in a row.

Closer to myself and
my pair of fingertips, I have glimpsed
it always far from destinations.

You can go on foot now
or on pure feeling in hair,
that not even the stamps arrive to it.

The tea colored horizon
is dying to colonize it
for its own great Anywhere.

But the place that I know,
in this world, no less,
shouldered goes with the reverses.

—Close that door that
is ajar in the entrails
of that mirror. —This one? —Nope; its sister.

—It cannot be closed. One can't
never get to that place
—do the latches go on branch.

This is the place that I know.

One has to wonder whether the perspective of the self that speaks in the poem would not also be that of the “creature in the process of being born” yet knowing that this birth would never happen. Some critics have already taken note of this discourse of the unborn in poem XXXIII (or XXXIV in the princeps edition) of *Trilce* (Noel Altamirano, 1999, p. 6; and Daniel Arroyo Paredes, 2014, pp. 54-55). For his part, Pablo Guevara identified the theme of abortion in at least poems V, VIII, X, XVI, XXXI, XXXIII, XL and XLI, while Daniel Arroyo Paredes (2014, pp. 55 and 76) has found “more than forty poems in *Trilce* related to abortion.” These observations are certainly relevant to my hypothesis, as they reinforce my interpretation of the name *Trilce* and of the entire collection of poems as the discourse and/or configuration of an unborn child. Paradoxically, the poem entitled “Trilce” is extremely clear and harmonious in its

form of triplets in nine-syllable verses. Unlike the collection of poems, then, this would be the materialization of the utopian discourse of perfection in impossibility. Here I agree with the Irish scholar Michelle Clayton, who, when explaining *Trilce's* secrecy, points out that “[Vallejo] speaks to us directly, but from a position that we do not share” (2011, p. 75). My hypothesis precisely strives to discover that position and that perspective in order to elucidate some of the meanings of the book.

Yet I insist: this interpretation is just one among many possible explanations for the title of the Vallejo’s book. Rather than reduce that title to a single meaning, my purpose is to enrich its polysemy and its capacity for suggestion, which is, finally, one of its great merits.

3. Migrant Vallejo⁷

24

César Vallejo's personal experience as a migrant is evident beginning with the departure from his hometown of Santiago de Chuco, then to Huamachuco, where he attended high school, then on to Trujillo and Lima in the 1910s, and finally and lastly, on to Paris in June of 1923, where he definitively become a transatlantic migrant (and for all intents and purposes, an exile). The point here is not to reduce Vallejo’s poetry to a biographical reading, but to recognize the movements of the poetic self and his language displacements, which are present in his poetry from the early *Black Heralds* to the posthumous poetry collection published in 1939 under the general title of *Human Poems*. Throughout his work, deterritorialization or migrancy and its psychic effects occupy a central place in Vallejo's criticism of modernity and in his commitment to a socialist uchronia that would bring about the reconstruction of the original community of all living beings, and not just humans. In a broad sense, one could argue

⁷ This section summarizes and modifies a fragment of Mazzotti, 2017.

that Vallejo's poetic work revolves around migrancy and its search for expression based on—and against—the limitations of conventional language. This is no less true in *Trilce* than in his other books. Given this characteristic, Vallejo's writing would seem to acquire special relevance and timeliness in the North American context, especially in the United States where most of the population is composed of migrants and their descendants. Paradoxically, Vallejo was never interested in the United States nor did he ever visit that country. Once installed in Paris, however, he did make three trips to the Soviet Union, seeking to study a contrasting model of modernity in socialism.

Exploring the relationship between migration, migrancy and language provides fruitful keys to understanding, not only the importance of Vallejo's personal experience to his writing, but also the role his writing played in the formulation of a subjectivity contrary to certain aspects of capitalist modernity. Migrancy is the cultural, ideological, sentimental and even linguistic reconfiguration of the migrant subject when he is forced to negotiate with a new space, a new language (or new linguistic norms within the same language) and a new series of human relationships. It presupposes a psychic schism that produces a feeling of estrangement, not only towards the new place of residence, but also towards the place of origin, which, as psychoanalysts Leon and Rebeca Grinberg have noted, is no longer felt to be the same after a prolonged absence (1989 [1984], pp. 129-145). Naturally, not every migrant experiences migration in the same way; in fact, many people adapt so well to their new surroundings that they conform to the well-known image of immigrants who become assimilated or acculturated simply as a strategy of survival. In many other cases, however, the uneasiness, the trans-territoriality, the nostalgia and the constant need to switch between different cultural codes, all work to forge a new type of migrant subject that internalizes the divisions and schisms that separate the two or more societies he has experienced. In other words, finding oneself between two worlds can produce the perception of not being completely in either, and at the same time, of living through a completely new experience. In the case of a creative thinker like Vallejo, this situation

assumed a positional multiplicity that was not necessarily integrative. It was Cornejo Polar (1995) who first conceptualized the category of the migrant subject as a feature of Peru's cultural heterogeneity, born of the cultural opposition between the coast and the highlands.

Throughout the peripheral regions of Western capitalism in the early 20th century, displacement and migration was common; and this was particularly the case in Peru. César Vallejo's displacement is emblematic of the experience shared by thousands of other highland provincials who migrated to the coast, victims of Lima's entrenched centralism. A torrential flow of migrants from the interior of the country moved to Lima in the first decades of the century, so much so that in 1913, 58% of the city's population were provincial migrants (Salazar Mejía, 2013, p. 15). Although Vallejo came from a relatively privileged sector (as mentioned earlier, his father had been a local judge in Santiago de Chuco and Vallejo himself managed to obtain a university degree in Trujillo), his community of Santiago de Chuco was like many other humble, mestizo communities in the Andean highlands. From these communities and from poor highland indigenous villages, migrants flocked to the coast in search of employment and to escape the harsh working conditions on highland latifundia and mines.

During what is known as the Peruvian Aristocratic Republic (1895-1919), characterized by the hegemony of the land-owning elite, not only did social and ethnic conflict in the provinces lead to substantial migration to the cities of the coast, a prelude to the so-called 'popular overflow' beginning in the 1950s (see Matos Mar, 1984); that conflict also generated an awareness throughout the country of the profound inequalities and injustices suffered by the poor and marginalized sectors of Peruvian society.

Vallejo's physical displacement runs parallel in his poetic imagery to a distancing and reconstruction of the past, a past to which he tries over and over again to return. This symbolic return to the primordial community is manifested through a struggle with language that acquires different modalities depending on the moment and place of enunciation. The drama suffered by thousands and thousands of workers and peasants, seen firsthand by Vallejo during his administrative work at the Quiruvilca mine in 1910 and at the Roma hacienda in 1911, turned him into an intellectual acutely aware of the deep social, economic and ethnic disparities within the Peruvian population. This social disintegration left an indelible mark upon his efforts to write a type of poetry that not only expressed the country's social and cultural heterogeneity, but also attempted to bridge that divide by creating a uniquely-Peruvian literary language.

As will be shown in the following section, Vallejo's use of numerous colloquial expressions, Quechuan phrases and popular Peruvianisms is just the most visible feature of the poet's search, which tried and failed to overcome the decentering between the here and now of life experience and the there and then of memory that restores what was lost. In poem number III of *Trilce*, for example, Vallejo reproduces the games of childhood, but does so only to then locate his perspective as that of a lonely orphan in the desolation of adulthood. The poem reads:

III

The grown-ups
what time will they be back?
Blind Santiago strikes six o'clock,
and it is rather dark already.

Mother said she wouldn't delay.

Aguedita, Nativa, Miguel,
 beware of going around there, where
 bell-toll sorrows just passed by
 snuffling their memories,
 toward the noiseless corral, and where
 the hens that are still going to bed,
 have gotten so frightened.
 Let's rather just stay here.
 Mother said she wouldn't delay.

Let's not feel sorry. Let's watch
 the boats, mine is the nicest of them all!
 with which we play all the livelong day,
 without fighting, as it should be:
 they've remained in the water well, ready,
 chartered with candy for tomorrow.

Let's wait like this, obedient and without
 any choice, for the return, for the atonement
 of the grown-ups always foremost
 leaving us little ones at home,
 as if we couldn't also
 be able to depart.

Aguedita, Nativa, Miguel?
 I call out, I fumble around in the dark.
 Don't you dare to have left me alone,
 and the only secluded one be me.

(Vallejo, 1922, p. 8-9).

It is clear that the community portrayed is that of the poet's immediate family, that is, his older siblings closest in age, including his brother Miguel Ambrosio, who died of fatal pneumonia on August 22, 1915, at the age of 26. This loss left an indelible mark on César, as can be seen in the poem "To my brother Miguel," from *The Black*

Heralds, in which Vallejo strikes a similar tone to the one he would later voice in poem III of *Trilce*, specifically the recreation of childhood games that the Vallejo Mendoza siblings enjoyed during their years in Santiago de Chuco. Miguel's active presence in Vallejo's poetry symbolizes a crossing over from death to life through the reconstruction of happy moments, in community and, literally, fraternity. In the case of poem III, the sisters María Águeda and Natividad enrich the company in a context of total darkness, as participants in the game but at the same time, like many older sisters, responsible for the care of the younger ones in the absence of parents. The absent/present maternal figure, referred to with the respectful and almost martial appellation of "Mother," without any article or possessive, symbolizes ultimate protection, a state of returning in time and space, and by analogy, one could say, a return to the womb, the place of protection and primordial connection par excellence. But "Mother" does not return, despite her promise not to delay. "The atonement / of the grown-ups always forward" is long in coming, embedding a fracture in the psyche of the child character that diminishes his condition of being whole. And that is the point in the poem when the perspective of the poetic voice takes an unexpected turn: the passage to the present time, in can be inferred, evokes a dark and gloomy prison cell ("I call out, I fumble around in the dark. [...] and the only secluded one be me"). The poem reproduces the feelings of terror and abandonment (the loss of all human contact or, worse still, of the primordial community) anticipated in a moment in childhood. Although the word *recluso* (translated above as "secluded one") can be understood as a reference to prison, it can also evoke the seclusion in the womb, as if the poetic self identifies with the unborn one who imagines childhood games with other children, only to find out at the end that it is an impossibility. The diminished condition of the human being is universalized as orphanhood in Vallejo's poem; as separation from the body and from the presence of the mother and older siblings. The poet, paradoxically, is left as the "only inmate" in a space other than the womb/home; a space in which the sense of sight has been annulled, and touch is the way only to perceive the world, but no response is received from the community.

The language used in *Trilce*, as numerous studies have pointed out, easily crosses the borders between the logical and the absurd, between life and death, birth and abortion, intelligibility and isolation, in short, between polar opposites that limit the possibility of a community united through the use of one, socially-sanctioned language. *Trilce*, in this sense, transcribes migration as leading to psychological states little studied in the Western literary tradition. At the same time, *Trilce* transcribes the migration of the poetic subject towards the semantic and morphological anarchy of language, to its roots as a system of signs and sounds in full formation (or deformation).

The tendency to cross borders can be seen in many of *Trilce*'s poems. In poem XLII, for example, one crosses from sleep to wakefulness and from illness to health; and in poem LII, Vallejo again seeks a return to childhood and children's games, only to end once more with the crude awareness of a defective and incomplete present.

4. The Verbal Revolution in *Trilce*

4.1. *The Recovery of Popular Speech*⁸

Beginning with his first book, *The Black Heralds*, Vallejo had expressed a clear awareness of the emotional crisis brought on by his having left the small Andean town of Santiago de Chuco for the large coastal cities of Trujillo and Lima. His poetry is imbued with a tone of nostalgia for the countryside, the Andes, the nuclear family and first love, evidenced very clearly in the emblematic poem "Idilio muerto" ("Dead Idyll"). That nostalgia is often voiced through words that belong to the colloquial language of that region, and even through the speech of its children.

⁸ This section summarizes and modifies a fragment from Mazzotti, 1990.

Vallejo's foregoing of the 'cultured' or formal linguistic standards in favor of a 'popular' linguistic norm caused surprise and rejection among the country's literary establishment. César Ángeles Caballero, in a study from 1958 (*Los peruanismos en César Vallejo*), identified a total of seventy *peruanismos* or Peruvian expressions in Vallejo's poetry and eighty-three in his prose, including proper names, place names, and colloquial terms. Other scholars who have examined this linguistic rebellion include Julio Ortega (1972, p. 48), in regard to its presence in *Los heraldos negros*, and Alberto Escobar (1973, p. 121), whose study of poem LXXIV in *Trilce* found that Vallejo's use of the word "travesura" [mischief] had sexual connotations, and in particular was a reference to a sexual affair. In another important study, Jorge Díaz Herrera (2020 [1988]) interviewed some of Vallejo's surviving relatives in his hometown, and they were able to locate numerous examples in Vallejo's poetry where he made use of the familiar language of Santiago de Chuco. A study by Marco Martos and Elsa Villanueva called *Las palabras de Trilce (The Words of Trilce, 1989)* is also important in this regard, although their book deal with much more than just Vallejo's use of Peruvianisms.

31

In my own BA thesis from 1984, *The Popular Character of Peruvian Poetry in the 1970s*, I identified a total of twenty-three appearances of colloquial and popular terms in *The Black Heralds*, thirty-nine in *Trilce*, seven in *Human Poems*, and six in *España, aparta de mí este cáliz* [Spain, Take from Me This Chalice]. Through this revolutionary use of poetic language, Vallejo founded a 'national' literature within the context of a literary establishment whose ideological, stylistic and linguistic tastes, up to that point, had only represented those of the dominant sectors.

Post-modernist style throughout Spanish America included a return to the cultural sources of provincial life and popular languages. In his work on this post-modernist moment, Octavio Paz recognizes the importance of rural landscapes and

“the secret powers of colloquial language” (1985 [1974], p. 84) in a poetry that moved decidedly away from the tinsels of sad princesses and the exotic courts that had populated early modernism (see *Prosas profanas* [1896] by Rubén Darío).

It will be only with *Trilce* that Vallejo fully develops the multiplicity of verbal sources that make the book a veritable showcase of verbal strategies, including neologizing, archaization, morphological rupture and various forms of colloquialism. He even resorts to the kind of grammatical dismemberment typical of both schizoid speech (with its own internal logic) and the utterances of infants prior to the growth stage in language acquisition, which as contemporary psycholinguists have shown, is an important moment in the process of becoming competent speakers of a language. And of course, there is the recurrence to Quechua expressions and even expressions from Culle (a now-extinct Andean language), giving Vallejo’s poetry an unmistakable local flavor, as Íbico Rojas (2013 and 2016) has clearly demonstrated. The plurality of sources, that is, the broad range of registers inserted into *Trilce*, constitutes a set of verbal strategies that testify, not only to Vallejo’s break from an institutionalized literary tradition incapable of providing a modern and popular perspective, but also to the kind of “new sensibility” that Vallejo himself so desired.

By this “new sensibility,” I mean that Vallejo’s insertion, into the poetic text, of verbal elements that were foreign to the official literary discourse of the Peruvian Aristocratic Republic (as mentioned above, the 1884-1919 heyday of the landed oligarchy) stemmed not just from his posture as a one of Peru’s first modern writers, but also, given Vallejo’s anti-colonial sensitivity as a Peruvian and as a mestizo, from his recognition of the power imbalance between different discursive formations at the level of linguistic forms and ethnic identity. José María Arguedas, a Quechua-speaking writer, younger than Vallejo but no less trapped in the social and cultural conflicts implied in the incipient modernization of Peruvian society, described Vallejo's case in eloquent words: “Vallejo marks the beginning of the differentiation of the poetry of the

coast and the highlands of Peru. Because with Vallejo begins the tremendous stage when the man of the Andes assumes as his language the conflict between his inner world and the Castilian world” (Arguedas, 1939, p. 187).

Although Vallejo did not speak Quechua, he did speak Andean Spanish, which was essential for the writing in all his works, but particularly for *Trilce*. On this point the testimony of Ciro Alegría, author of the great *indigenista* novel *El mundo es ancho y ajeno* (*The World is Wide and Alien*) and a former elementary school student of Vallejo’s in Trujillo in 1917, is very revealing. According to Alegría, Vallejo used to say “Niñosh... la Tierra esh redonda como una naranja... Eshta mishma Tierra en que vivimos y vemos como shi fuera plana, esh redonda” [Kldsh... the Earth ish round like an orange... Thish shame Earth in which we live and that appearsh as if it were flat, ish round]. Alegría goes on to explain: “Vallejo spoke slowly, whistling his esses in a peculiar way, which is how the natives of Santiago de Chuco usually pronounce them, to the point where they are recognized by the inhabitants of the other cities and provinces of the region because of this characteristic” (Alegría, 1944).

The profound interweaving of Vallejo’s personal life and some aspects of *Trilce* presupposes a mode of expression that uses terms and forms of speech that were extremely familiar to the poet. These terms corresponded to Vallejo's own experience in a Peru going through the painful processes of social change, and where an emerging frustrated modernity had at its disposal only a collection of writing practices from another era; practices which Vallejo found completely outdated. By exploring some of the hidden meanings within the text, it is convincingly possible to interpret some of *Trilce's* poems in accordance with the biographical circumstances and idiomatic peculiarities of its author. It should be added, moreover, that during the years of *Trilce's* composition, Vallejo identified closely with anarchist movements in Peru and

elsewhere (inspired by his mentor Manuel González Prada), an affiliation which, aside from any traces of Dadaist influence in the book, itself encouraged a posture of rupture vis-à-vis the established order.⁹

As noted, I myself found at least thirty-nine appearances of colloquial speech in *Trilce* (including “guano” in poem I, “chirota” in poem XX, “concha,” meaning vagina, in poem XLII, “cabe,” in its archaic prepositional form still common in Andean Castilian of the time, in poem XLII, and many others); which together work to delineate a Vallejo who refuses to forego his affiliation with his native verbal terrain.

Given the aspects of *Trilce* analyzed so far (the title, the use of popular speech, references to specific cultural forms, like his allusion to childhood games), the difficulty of translating the book into English, or into any language, is obvious. At times *Trilce* even requires translation from Vallejo's language into standard Spanish, in order to give the reader access to its meanings. In terms of aids to the reader, we have the classic study by Eduardo Neale-Silva *Vallejo en su fase tríllica (Vallejo in his Trilicic Phase, 1975)* and the recent work by Víctor Vich and Alexandra Hibbett entitled *Trilce poema por poema (Trilce poem by poem, 2022)*. For readers of Vallejo in English, the glosses and notes that accompany the translations by Clayton Eshleman (in *The Complete Poetry of César Vallejo, 2007*), William Rowe and Helen Dimos (2022), and Michael Smith and Valentino Gianuzzi (2022) are all helpful. See the final section of this essay for a list of Vallejo translations into English.

⁹ In another of his letters to his friend Antenor Orrego, Vallejo explicitly sides with the working class, even before his conversion to Marxism, which will only take place in France around 1927: “And our continent, from top to bottom, still needs the light of a workers’ sun, in all its brilliance, capable of roasting parasites and shielding nakedness” (January 1922, in Vallejo, 2002, p. 42; emphasis added). Earlier, in 1918, he had participated “actively in the eight-hour labor day. He attended the meetings of the workers and the performances of the Teatro Obrero, in Vitarte, where he met Julio Portocarrero Raymundo, leader of the Vitarte textile factory and, over the years, founder, together with José Carlos Mariátegui, of the Peruvian Socialist Party” (Pachas Almeyda, 2018, p. 214).

Naturally, there are many other aspects of Vallejo's writing style that are not covered in this essay, but for now let me turn to the important task of locating *Trilce* within the broader context of literary production so as not to lose sight of some of its most interesting meanings.

4.2. *The Verbal Revolution Reaches New Heights*

Despite being permeated by techniques and references, both direct and indirect, to the emerging avant-garde style of writing that was coming out of Europe and other parts of the Americas, *Trilce*, with its seventy-seven poems, constituted a revolution in language, not only vis-à-vis Vallejo's earlier work *The Black Heralds*, but in relation to all Peruvian poetry and all poetry in the Spanish language. Up until that moment, no poetry as consequential or original had been written in Spanish, except perhaps for the *Fábula de Polifemo y Galatea* (*Fable of Polifemo and Galatea*) and the *Soledades* (*Solitudes*), both written by Luis de Góngora y Argote at the beginning of the 17th century.

For many, myself included, Góngora and Vallejo are the two greatest poets of the Spanish language. Both were revolutionary poets, each in his own time, although comparative studies of the two have not received much attention. Each of these poets is himself a universe; a voice that articulates a keen awareness of the crisis of its time. Each one decomposes language in order to then recompose it into a radically new poetics. Of course, there were enormous differences between the two, not surprisingly, given the three centuries that separate them and their almost opposing geographical, social, ethnic, and cultural origins. However, in terms of their approach to poetry, there are undoubtedly some similarities.

Trilce presents a constant transgression of the rational and communicative conventions of language. In a 1922 letter to his friend Antenor Orrego, Vallejo himself purportedly said:

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The book was born from the greatest emptiness. I am responsible for it. I take full responsibility for its aesthetics. Today, and perhaps more than ever, I feel weighing down on me a hitherto unknown most sacred obligation, as a man and as an artist: that of being free! If I am not to be free today, I will never be. I feel that the arch of my forehead triumphs with this most imperative curve of heroism. I give myself in the freest way I can and this is my greatest artistic harvest. God knows how certain and true my freedom is! God knows how much I have suffered so that the rhythm does not trespass that freedom and fall into debauchery! God knows what creepy edges I have leaned over, full of fear, afraid that everything would die thoroughly so that my poor soul could live! (Vallejo, 2002, pp. 46-47).

In *Trilce*, the poems are constructions that start from an apparently identifiable reference—the Peruvian coast, the mountain countryside, the room where lovers meet, the prison—but all these references are converted into interior landscapes that transcend a precise location. Likewise, the orphanhood of the poetic subject, discernable already in *The Black Heralds* with its “sick God” (from “Espergesia”) and the “Marys who leave” (from “Los dados eternos”), produces in *Trilce* a desolation that manifests itself eloquently in poems to the absent mother. Poem XXIII, for example, begins with the aforementioned “Tahona estuosa de aquellos mis bizcochos/ pura yema infantil innumerable, madre” [stuffy bakery of those my biscuits/ pure innumerable infant yolk, mother], and another example comes from poem XXVIII, which reads: “He almorzado solo ahora, y no he tenido/ madre, ni súplica, ni sírvete, ni agua [I have had lunch alone now, and I have had/ no mother, no plea, no help yourself, no water]. Such loneliness also occurs in metaphysical seclusion (as in the earlier example of poem III). Lastly, poetic solitude as an exclusive and excluding language is also fully present in *Trilce*, since, like Góngora, Vallejo had to invent a language to express a new vision of the world, full of uncertainty and restlessness, and yet, a world without sufficient words.

Trilce's relevance in the United States and the modern world is largely due to his questioning of the conventional parameters of time, logic and aesthetics. Vallejo managed to unseat certainties and the confidence in a stable present and future,

offering a vision of a moment very close to the one we live in a century later, in which uncertainty, restlessness and isolation tend to be more frequent than before. In this sense, Vallejo prefigures in *Trilce* what could be defined as a postmodern sensibility.

Despite its difficulty, various translations since the 1960s in the United States attest to the growing interest of writers and academics in *Trilce* and in Vallejo's poetry in general. For example, Jamaican-born poet Claudia Rankine (b. 1963) paraphrases Vallejo's verses in various texts, adapting them to her controversial view of today's society, especially in her book *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014). Rankine was named the 2013 Chancellor of the Society of American Poets and is an author of notable importance in the landscape of poetry in the United States. She also makes use of Vallejo's verses in her condemnation of resurgent racism in the United States after Donald Trump's electoral victory, as can be seen in her article "Was Charlottesville the Exception or the Rule?," published in the *New York Times Magazine* on September 2017.

37

Similarly, Jonah Mixon-Webster, an African-American poet born in Michigan in 1988, draws from Vallejo's posthumous poem "Black Stone on a White Stone" to criticize racism in his poem "Black-on-Black Stone, on a White Stone." Mixon-Webster assimilates to Vallejo's vision as a marginal subject and deftly adapts it to the experience of the African-American community.¹⁰

Clearly, Vallejo's presence in the poetry of the United States is becoming more widespread, especially among poets exploring the roots of marginalization, pain and uneasiness in the face of social and racial injustice.

¹⁰ I thank Michelle Clayton for these references to Rankine and Mixon-Webster. A Vallejo specialist and professor at Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island, Clayton shared these references during the Fifth International "Vallejo Siempre" Congress, held at University College London and University of Oxford, England, from October 12 to 14, 2022.

5. Vallejo in English and in the United States

Vallejo began to be translated into English in the early 1960s, when the then young American poets John Knoepfle, James Wright, and Robert Bly published their version of twenty poems by Vallejo, in Madison, Minnesota in 1962. Vallejo's style evidently left its mark on these three writers, who then proceeded to disseminate Vallejo's work both through their translations and in their own personal interactions and social activism. In time they would become important names in the American poetic canon.

As for the source that the American poets relied upon for their twenty-poem translation, it is possible that they used the first compilation of Vallejo's poetry in Spanish, *Poesías completas* (1918-1938), published in Buenos Aires in 1949 by the Losada publishing house with a prologue by César Miró. By the beginning of the 1960s, this volume was already circulating in the United States, along with copies of the princeps editions and several partial editions of Vallejo's poetry.

Another partial Vallejo translation appeared in 1964 in the anthology by fellow poets Nan Braymer and Lillian Lowenfels entitled *Modern Poetry from Spain and Latin America [by] Vallejo [and others]*. Lowenfels was the wife of Walter Lowenfels, a poet himself and member of the Communist Party of the United States, imprisoned like many other progressive intellectuals under the "Smith Act," a McCarthyite law that justified the repression of social consciousness for reasons of "national security." As Vallejo too had been a member of the French and Spanish Communist Parties, the translators not surprisingly shared an ideological affinity with the poet.

Motivated by the great quality of Vallejo's poetry and his radical vision of life, the young poet Clayton Eshleman (1935-2021) also began his first translations of Vallejo in the mid-1960's. Eshleman actually traveled through Peru between 1965 and

1966 to get to know Vallejo's homeland and search for new materials, such as first editions and the manuscripts which Vallejo's widow, Georgette Philippart, jealously guarded in Lima. In my article written in Spanish "Vallejo vivió en los 60s"/ "Vallejo lived in the 60's" (Mazzotti, 2014), I translated Eshleman's testimony recounting his ups and downs in Peru, and also translated and examined several other documents from that period that provide a convincing portrayal of how Vallejo, the communist, was being turned into a kind of aseptic fetish by young Peruvian intellectuals, with the exception perhaps of the guerrilla poet Javier Heraud.

Over time, Eshleman would become the most important translator of Vallejo into English, and one definitely feels the influence of the poet from Santiago de Chuco on Eshleman's own poetry, its verbal experimentation and dissatisfied view of the world. Eshleman published the first complete version of *Poemas humanos* (*Human Poems*) in 1968 and, in subsequent years, produced translations of the rest of Vallejo's posthumous poetry, leading up to 2007 and the completion of the impressive volume *The Complete Poetry: A Bilingual Edition*, which includes *Trilce*. Eshleman's translations have received critical acclaim for their creativity, due no doubt to the fact that Eshleman was an excellent American poet himself with extensive translation experience, including texts by Francophone authors such as Aimé Césaire and Antonin Artaud. Some critics, however, have found an unusual crudeness in his versions of Vallejo's poetry. In my opinion, the accusation is consistent with the deliberately obscene and explicitly carnal language of some of *Trilce's* verses.

Eshleman's was not the first attempt at English translations from what many consider to be Vallejo's most difficult book of poetry. In the U.S. in 1970, British poet Charles Tomlinson and literary critic Henry Gifford published *Ten Versions from Trilce*, the first partial English translation of the revolutionary book from 1922. It could be that this collection of ten poems reached them through the aforementioned compilation in Spanish of the complete poetry of Vallejo published in 1949 or their source may have been the consecrated edition of the *Obra poética completa* (*Complete Poetic Work*),

published by Francisco Moncloa in Lima in 1968 based on manuscripts that Vallejo's widow Georgette Philippart shared with him. Also in 1970, in Oxford, England, British critic James Higgins published *César Vallejo: An Anthology of His Poetry*, which contains translations of some of *Trilce*'s poems.

Various translations of Vallejo's posthumous poetry appeared in the early 1970's, but it was not until 1976 that American poet Ed Dorn and the British critic Gordon Brotherston together published *Selected Poems [of] César Vallejo* in Baltimore, which included twenty poems from *Trilce*. This was followed by H. R. Hays and Louis Hammer with *Selected Poems*, published in New York in 1981 and Magda Bogin's translation of ten poems from *Trilce* in *The Massachusetts Review* in 1993.

The first two complete translations of *Trilce* into English finally appeared in New York in 1992, the first by Clayton Eshleman and the second by poet Rebecca Seiferle, whose own writing displays some of the same tensions and social criticism that characterized Vallejo's poetry. Finally, in the year 2000, Clayton Eshleman published a modified version of his translation of *Trilce*, with an introduction by Américo Ferrari. This reworking of the translation was motivated by Julio Ortega's interpretation of the original Spanish text. Indeed, the complexity of the Vallejo's text helps to explain why it took seventy years from 1922 for the complete *Trilce* to reach the English-speaking public.

On the occasion of *Trilce*'s centenary, two new translations have appeared in England. The first is by renowned English Vallejo scholar William Rowe and American poet Helen Dimos; the second is by Irish poet Michael Smith and Peruvian Vallejo scholar Valentino Gianuzzi, based on an earlier version published in 2005. Both of these 2022 contributions offer plausible new readings, reinforcing anew the understanding of *Trilce* as a polysemic book and one that has, over the years, inspired original forms of expression in the language of Shakespeare.

Let me conclude this section, and this homage to *Trilce* within the North American context, with a list of the existing translations of Vallejo's poetic work published in the United States and England, for those who wish to consult them:

1962: *Twenty Poems*. Selection and translation by John Knoepfle, James Right and Robert Bly. Madison, Minnesota: Sixties Press.

1964: *Modern Poetry from Spain and Latin America [by] Vallejo [and others]*. Translation by Nan Braymer y Lillian Lowenfels. New York: Corinth Books. This translation previously appeared in the June 1964 issue of *Literary Review*, published by Fairleigh Dickinson University.

1968a: *Human Poems/ Poemas humanos*. Translation by Clayton Eshleman. New York: Grove Press.

1970a: *Ten Versions from Trilce*. Translation by Charles Tomlinson and Henry Gifford. Cerrillos, New Mexico: San Marcos Press.

1970b: *César Vallejo: An Anthology of His Poetry*. Introduction and notes by James Higgins. Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press.

1972: *Spain, Let this Cup Pass from Me*. Translation by Álvaro Cardona-Hine. Fairfax, California: Red Hill Press.

1974: *Spain, Take This Cup from Me*. Translation by Clayton Eshleman and José Rubia Barcia. New York: Grove Press.

1976: *Selected Poems [of] César Vallejo*. Selection and translation by Ed Dorn y Gordon Brotherston; with a critical study by the latter. Harmondsworth, Baltimore: Penguin.

1978a: *Battles in Spain: Five Unpublished Poems by César Vallejo*. Translation by Clayton Eshleman and José Rubia Barcia. Santa Barbara, California: Black Sparrow Press.

1978b: *César Vallejo: The Complete Posthumous Poetry*. Translation by Clayton Eshleman and José Rubia Barcia. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

1981: *Selected Poems*. Translation and essay by H.R. Hays; edition and introduction by Louis Hammer. Old Chatham, NY: Sachem Press.

1990: *The Black Heralds*. Translation by Kathleen Ross and Mark Schaaf. Pittsburgh: Latin American Literary Review Press.

1992: *Trilce*. By César Vallejo. Translated by Clayton Eshleman. New York: Marsilio, 1992.

1992: *Trilce*. By César Vallejo. Translated by Rebecca Seiferle. New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1993.

1993: "Translating Vallejo's "Trilce". César Vallejo and Magda Bogin. *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Summer, 1993): 183-192.

1995: *The Black Heralds*. Translated by Barry Fogden. East Sussex, England: Allardyce, Barnett.

2000a: *Selected Poems*. Edited and with an introduction, notes and bibliography by Stephen Hart, annotation by Martha Ojeda. Bristol: Bristol Classical.

2000b: *Trilce*. Translated by Clayton Eshleman upon the Spanish text established by Julio Ortega and with an introduction by Américo Ferrari. Hanover: University Press of New England.

2003: *The Black Heralds*. Translation by Rebecca Seiferle. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press.

2005a: *Complete Later Poems, 1923-1938*. Edited and translated by Michael Smith and Valentino Gianuzzi. Exeter, UK: Shearsman Books.

2005b: *César Vallejo, Trilce*. Edited and translated by Michael Smith and Valentino Gianuzzi. Exeter, UK: Shearsman Books.

2005c: *Telluric & Magnetic. A Sift of Thirteen Poems from the Complete Poetry of César Vallejo*. Translated by Clayton Eshleman. Toronto: Letters Bookshop.

2006: *Selected Poems*. Edited and translated by Michael Smith and Valentino Gianuzzi. Exeter, UK: Shearsman Books.

2007a: *The Complete Poetry: A Bilingual Edition*. Edited and translated by Clayton Eshleman; with a preface by Mario Vargas Llosa; introduction by Efraín Kristal; and a chronology by Stephen Hart. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

2007b: *The Black Heralds & Other Early Poems*. Edited and translated by Michael Smith and Valentino Gianuzzi. Exeter, UK: Shearsman Books.

2008: *"Spain, Take this Chalice from me" and Other Poems*. Translated by Margaret Sayers Penden. Edited and with an introduction by Ilán Stavans. New York: Penguin Books.

2012: *The Complete Poems*. Edited and translated by Michael Smith and Valentino Gianuzzi. Bristol, UK: Shearsman Books.

2015: *Selected Writings of César Vallejo*, edited by Joseph Mulligan. Includes poetry and prose by Vallejo with translations from the editor, Clayton Eshleman, Pierre Joris, Suzanne Jill Levine, Nicole Peyrafitte, Michael Lee Rattigan, William Rowe, Eliot Weinberger, and Jason Weiss. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

2022: *Trilce*, by César Vallejo. Translated and with comments by William Rowe y Helen Dimos. Santiago de Chile, London & Mataró: Crater Press.

2022: *César Vallejo, Trilce. A Centennial Edition of the 1922 Masterpiece*. Edited and translated by Michael Smith and Valentino Gianuzzi, an updated versión of their translation from 2012 in *The Complete Poems* that modifies their original translation of *Trilce* from 2005. This centenary edition includes, for the first time in English, the original foreword by Antenor Orrego. Bristol, UK: Shearsman Books.

I hope that the above lines encourage those who still do not know Vallejo's poetry to look for it and enjoy it.

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