
POETRY

CÉSAR VALLEJO

Selected and introduced by Edward Hirsch

César Vallejo's poems are intensely imaginative. They have an anguished power, a rebellious lexical energy, and a wild, free-wheeling emotionalism. Sympathy for the suffering of others is a deeply political current which runs through all his work. His lyrics are suffused with what Federico García Lorca termed *duende*, a demonic inspiration that lifts the imagination to another plane in the presence of death. At times, one feels as if Vallejo has descended into the welter of the unconscious and returned bearing messages from this other world. Yet his own voice comes through as that of the most vulnerable, agonized, and compassionate of speakers—a witness urgently testifying to the experience of human pain.

Vallejo was born on March 16, 1892, in Santiago de Chuco, a small Andean mining town in northern Peru. He had Indian and Spanish blood on both sides. His poetry shows tremendous feeling for his large, affectionate family—for his mother, the emotional center of his religious childhood world, for his father, a notary who wanted him to become a Catholic priest, and for his 10 older brothers and sisters. Vallejo's life was marked by poverty at nearly every point. In 1908, he completed his secondary schooling in the city of Huamachuco, and then attended college off and on for five years, withdrawing several times for lack of money. During this time he worked as a tutor to the children of a wealthy mineowner, as a bookkeeper's assistant on a sugar plantation, and as a science teacher at a boys' school. He finally graduated from the University of Trujillo in 1915, with a thesis on romanticism in Spanish poetry.

Vallejo supported himself for several years by teaching in primary schools in Trujillo and Lima. He read widely, worked furiously at his poems, and belonged to the vanguard *Colonida* group. He also suffered several traumatic love affairs, after one of which he attempted suicide. In 1919, the year after his mother's death, he published his first collection of poems, *Los heraldos negros* (*The Black Riders*). "There are blows in life so violent . . . I can't answer!" the speaker cries out in the title poem, and, indeed, these dark heralds come with messages of destruction that leave him reeling and desolate. In these poems of alienated romanticism, Vallejo grapples with the anachronism of his past as well as the tragic incompatibilities of his divided heritage. Faced with these contradictions, he speaks of his own harsh solitude and inexplicable longings. One of his recurring subjects is the void left in the soul when the Logos has become uncertain and Christianity has lost its stable meaning. Suddenly bereft of a common spiritual vocabulary, the poet seeks to create an authentic language of his own in a fallen modern world.

In 1920, Vallejo returned home for a visit and got inadvertently mixed

up in a political feud. Though innocent, he went into hiding for three months and then was incarcerated for 105 days, one of the gravest experiences of his life. During this period he wrote many of the poems for his second book, *Trilce* (1922). Published in the same year as *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*, *Trilce* is a groundbreaking work of international modernism. Its 77 poems, which bear numbers for titles, are exceptionally hermetic; the syntax disregards the rules of conventional grammar and logical narrative. Language itself is put under intense pressure; surreal images float loose from their context and poetic forms are radically broken down and reconstituted. Neologisms abound. There is a cabalistic obsession with numbers in a world where reality is fragmented and death omnipresent. Vallejo's dire poverty, his bitter sense of orphanhood and brooding exile from his childhood, his rage over social inequities—all make their way into an astonishing and difficult work that fell, as the author declared, into a total void. He published no more collections of poetry in his lifetime.

In 1923, Vallejo left Peru for good and settled in Paris, where he eventually met his future wife, Georgette Phillipart, a woman of strong socialist convictions, and eked out the barest subsistence by writing journalistic pieces for Peruvian newspapers. Several times he nearly starved to death. In the late 1920s, he underwent a crisis of conscience. Consumed by Marxist causes and the quest for a better social order, he visited the Soviet Union three times to see communism in practice. In 1931, he published two books in Spain: *El tungsteno* (*Tungsten*), a socialist-realist novel, and *Rusia en 1931* (*Russia in 1931*), a travel book. His political activism peaked with his involvement in the doomed Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. He wrote descriptive accounts of the conflict as well as a play, *La piedra cansada* (*The Tired Stone*), and the 15 magnificent poems that became *España, aparta de mi este cáliz* (*Spain, Take This Cup from Me*). In the spring of 1938, he developed a fever that doctors could neither diagnose nor treat, and he died on April 15th of that year.

Between 1923 and 1938, Vallejo wrote the 110 posthumously published poems that are his most enduring literary achievement. The year after his death his widow published *Poemas humanos* (*Human Poems*), which brought together his undated lyric and prose poems written between 1923 and 1936, as well as dated poems from 1936 to 1938. Recent scholarship suggests that Vallejo intended three separate collections: *Nómina de huesos* (*Payroll of Bones*), *Sermón de la barbarie* (*Sermon on Barbarism*), and the Spanish Civil War verses. Human feeling is the compulsive subject of these apocalyptic books. The poems speak to the difficulty of maintaining a human face in an alienated industrial world where people wander among objects like strangers and, again, language no longer seems to represent reality. All are shot through with a terrible sadness as, disaffected and dislocated, Vallejo struggles to speak as clearly and accessibly as possible. The poems are haunted by premonitions of the poet's own death, by his sense of the torment of others, by his grief over the impending fate of Spain and the destiny of Europe. Finally, Vallejo emerges as a prophet pleading for social justice, as a grief-stricken Whitmanian singer moving through a brutal universe.

The Black Riders

There are blows in life so violent—I can't answer!
Blows as if from the hatred of God; as if before them,
the deep waters of everything lived through
were backed up in the soul . . . I can't answer!

Not many; but they exist . . . They open dark ravines
in the most ferocious face and in the most bull-like back.
Perhaps they are the horses of that heathen Attila,
or the black riders sent to us by Death.

They are the slips backward made by the Christs of the
soul,
away from some holy faith that is sneered at by Events.
These blows that are bloody are the crackling sounds
from some bread that burns at the oven door.

And man . . . poor man! . . . poor man! He swings
his eyes, as
when a man behind us calls us by clapping his hands;
swings his crazy eyes, and everything alive
is backed up, like a pool of guilt, in that glance.

There are blows in life so violent . . . I can't answer!

Translated by Robert Bly

The Anger That Breaks the Man

The anger that breaks the man into children,
that breaks the child into equal birds,
and the bird, afterward, into little eggs;
the anger of the poor
has one oil against two vinegars.

The anger that breaks the tree into leaves,
the leaf into unequal buds
and the bud, into telescopic grooves;
the anger of the poor
has two rivers against many seas.

The anger that breaks the good into doubts,
the doubt, into three similar arcs
and the arc, later on, into unforeseeable tombs;
the anger of the poor
has one steel against two daggers.

The anger that breaks the soul into bodies;
the body into dissimilar organs
and the organ, into octave thoughts;
the anger of the poor
has one central fire against two craters.

Translated by Clayton Eshleman and José Rubia Barcia

XV

In that corner, where we slept together
so many nights, I've now sat down
to wander. The deceased newlyweds' bed
was taken out, or maybe what will've
happened.

You've come early on other matters,
and now you're not around. It is the corner
where at your side, I read one night,
between your tender points,
a story by Daudet. It is the corner
we loved. Don't mistake it.

I've started to remember the days
of summer gone, your entering and leaving,
scant and burdened and pale through the
rooms.

On this rainy night,
now far from both, I suddenly start. . .
Two doors are opening closing,
two doors that come and go in the wind
shadow to shadow.

Translated by Clayton Eshleman

Black Stone Lying on a White Stone

I will die in Paris, on a rainy day,
on some day I can already remember.
I will die in Paris—and I don't step aside—
perhaps on a Thursday, as today is Thursday, in au-
tumn

It will be a Thursday, because today, Thursday, set-
ting down
these lines, I have put my upper arm bones on
wrong, and never so much as today have I found myself
with all the road ahead of me, alone.

César Vallejo is dead. Everyone beat him,
although he never does anything to them;
they beat him hard with a stick and hard also

with a rope. These are the witnesses:
the Thursdays, and the bones of my arms,
the solitude, and the rain, and the roads. . .

Translated by Robert Bly and John Knoepfle

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