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POETRY AS A MODE OF EXISTENCE

When early youth had past, he left his cold
Fireside and alienated home to seek strange
Truths in undiscovered lands.

Shelley

Human fields

The geography of Vallejo's poetry is that of anachronism: time measured in arduous distance along mountain roads, towns nestling in the past, protected by the screen of provincialism from the rude awakening into the twentieth century, villages sunk in an even remoter time, sugar-estates and mines forming brutal links in the chain of Peru's dependency. The landscape unfolds in a series of shocks quite unlike the homogeneous contemporaneity of North America. The grandeur of the past, the commonplaces of the present, traces of religious faith and sorties into bohemia – a whole archaeology of human experience is expressed in the poet's rasping, uneven poetry.

He had first of all envisaged poetry as something else, as the eagle's-eye-view of a terrain that others trudged on foot, as some rapid transit into the utmost reaches of modernity. What ensued was different. Vallejo found that to step outside the province was, in itself, to constitute a challenge to its ideology, to become subversive; yet, of itself, this challenge did not give him a passport into the modern world. Anachronism was both his curse and his hidden weapon. It stigmatized him as a provincial, but it prevented him from accepting the contemporary world as a given or as a glory. There would be no Futurist celebration of the machine, just as there would be no sentimentalization of the past. When he began his journey in Santiago de Chuco he wanted to become a poet in the Romantic manner, to be above and beyond the reach of ordinary men. He quickly found that to become a poet in this sense, he would have to falsify poetry; that to write would take him where he had not originally wanted to go.

When Vallejo was born, on 16 March 1892, Santiago de Chuco was a *sierra* town of about 14,000 inhabitants, situated in the district of *La Libertad*. The journey to the provincial capital of Trujillo was difficult enough – four days' horse-ride to the nearest rail-head on the Menocucho estate and then a train journey to Trujillo. To get to Lima meant taking the boat at the port of Salaverry near Trujillo and a three-day voyage down the Pacific coast. The length of the journey gives a measure of the anachronism, which as Vallejo said in one of his stories made the hill town a Shangri-La, forgotten by the rest of Peru.[1] The region had, in pre-colonial times, formed part of the empire of the Chimu-Mojica desert peoples and both the coast plains and the mountains were rich in archaeology. It was, like most of the rest of Peru, a region of large estates, peon labour and feudal paternalism, where the introduction of industry had served to strengthen the landowning oligarchy. Mining, the main form of industrial production, was particularly well-served by the feudal structure since it gave the mine-owners access to forced labour.[2] The base of the pyramidal social structure was formed by an exploited labour-force of Indians and *cholos* (those of mixed Indian and Hispanic blood). In between were the lawyers, teachers and artisans who formed the middle sector of Santiago de Chuco and who, whatever standing they might have locally, could never hope to make a mark outside the province. The family was the most important social unit. As in mediaeval Europe, feast days had great ritual importance in the life of the town, and that of Santiago el Apóstol held between July 13th and early August was the highpoint of the liturgical year.[3]

A friend of Vallejo's student days was to describe him sentimentally as a 'humble mountain boy' with 'modest ambitions to graduate just like so many poor Indians pitilessly engulfed by the University'.[4] But though modest by Trujillo or Lima standards, in Santiago de Chuco the Vallejo family were certainly not considered either Indian or particularly humble. The two grandmothers of Vallejo, Justa Benites and Natividad Gurrionero were Chimu women who must have been assimilated into *mestizo* culture and had probably entered the priest's house as housekeepers or servants. When César was born, the youngest son in a family of eleven children, his father (born in 1840) was already fifty-two and his mother forty-two.[5] Vallejo's father became a local

dignitary who served as one of the governors of Santiago de Chuco, that is, as a district official directly responsible to the sub-prefect. Photographs of the family show strong faces, immense pride, a certain care – even elegance – in their manner of dress which reflects a sense of their own worth. This sense was fortified by the moral rectitude of the father and mother, the religious upbringing of the children and the daily family prayers. The structure and stability of social and private life were positive aspects of provincialism and gave a strong sense of identity. Lines were clearly drawn, duties clearly defined, behaviour governed by a generally accepted code. Because the family was a micro-model of the holy family, these structures did not appear arbitrary but constant and universal.

In the restricted environment of Santiago de Chuco, there was probably little open conflict between the public and private domains. God's book was interpreted by the Church, man's civic state by laws. Vallejo's father had, so to speak, one foot in both camps, being a deeply religious man who worked as a notary and undertook minor legal business and litigation. It was a profession of importance, since the high level of illiteracy gave the clerk a privileged position in the community. It is no exaggeration to see the notary's relation to the law as analogous to that of the priest. Both the Church and the state operated through a hierarchy of mediators who interpreted the texts for the layman; for both, the 'word' was the source of truth but also of error. So Vallejo grew up in an environment in which words had extraordinary power; the acquisition of language marked the beginning of consciousness and also of a sense of alienation. This is borne out by a vivid anecdote; as a child, he would watch the bellringer Santiago coming and going from the belfry at vespers. Though blind, Santiago was afraid of the dark, and used to walk back from the belfry muttering the magic formula, 'Don't be afraid, Santiago'.[6] Vallejo's fascination with this anecdote sprang from his sense of both the power and the inefficacy of words. In poem 20, of *Trilce*, learning to spell, letter by letter, becomes a significant part of the child's rite of passage into the confusion of adulthood:

> La niña en tanto pónese el índice
> en la lengua que empieza a deletrear
> los enredos de enredos de los enredos.

While the little girl puts her finger
On her tongue, that's beginning to spell out
The tangles of the tangles of the tangles.

In 1905, when he was thirteen, Vallejo went to secondary school in the city of Huamachuco, where he boarded throughout his studies. His stay was intermittent: in 1907, because of family financial difficulties, he was at home in Santiago, but he returned to Huamachuco to complete his secondary schooling in 1908. The novelist Ciro Alegría, who came from this region, gives a description of the dramatic landscape 'filled with solitude and silence', with its great rocks and dizzying ravines.[7] Vallejo was to remember the journey on horseback to the town he later referred to (perhaps ironically) as the 'Athens of the Andes' and speaks humorously of 'trotting away on my chestnut pony, my hair awry, like a nomadic tent lost in the desert'.[8] And the return journey to Santiago was as unforgettable, with the ride across grain fields and the town in the distance on its low table-land.

The journeys grew longer. In 1910 he registered at the Faculty of Letters at Trujillo University, and in 1911 he was in Lima, where he studied briefly as a medical student before being forced to withdraw for economic reasons. Between leaving secondary school and the short periods of university life, he also tried his hand at a series of jobs. He helped his father with his legal documents, and worked in the offices of mines in Tambores and Quiruvilca,[9] an experience he later used in his novel *El tungsteno* (1931). In 1911 he became tutor to the son of a wealthy mine-owner in the province of Pasco in Central Peru and in 1912 held a job in the accounts department of a large sugar estate, the *hacienda* 'Roma' in the Chicama valley. So, before completing a degree at the University, and before any of his poetry was published, Vallejo had tried most of the careers open to someone in his position. His brothers, Víctor, Nestor and Manuel, were to settle for what they could get. Víctor became the administrator of an estate, Nestor a judge in Huamachuco. Only the poet César escaped from the conditions of his social class.

The period 1908–13 is one of the least documented in Vallejo's life and it is only from his later writing that we can judge its significance. The mines and the sugar estates on which he worked for a short time were places of brutal repression, in which the class to which he belonged acted as willing or unwilling instru-

ments of the owners. In his depiction of Benites (the surname of his paternal grandmother) in the novel *El tungsteno,* he must have drawn on his own early experience. Benites has to work at the mine (like Vallejo) to earn money to continue his studies. He finds that the Christian morality he has brought to the job is inadequate in the brutal conditions in which he now finds himself. Christian love conflicts with the Samuel Smiles' philosophy of the petty bourgeois, and both are totally irrelevant to the cruel and naked repression inherent in the system. Vallejo's actual experience could not have been much different; on the sugar plantations and in the mines around Santiago de Chuco, the regimentation of unorganized and helpless workers and their slave-like condition threw into relief the pathetic irrelevancy of Christian teaching, which, at its simplest level, stated that it was better to give than to receive and that the rich man would not find it easy to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Vallejo's society was one in which a brash, merciless capitalism (mostly of foreign origin) co-existed with traditional Christian ideology, which supported the status quo; there was no bourgeois class prepared to challenge the oligarchy or demand elementary rights for the whole of society. Apart from isolated intellectuals, like Manuel González Prada, who derived their reputation from their polemical writings rather than from any broadly based social movement, there were few willing to combat the obvious injustices of society.

The sugar estate where Vallejo worked in 1912 was another stage of his education in the nature of Peruvian society. The 'Roma' was owned by the Larco Herreras, one of two big families (the other being the Gildemeisters) who had come to monopolize the sugar industry after the end of the war of the Pacific in 1883. The Larco Herreras and the Gildemeisters were immigrant families who had acquired vast estates in the Chicama valley between the *sierra* and the Pacific, estates which recruited an army of labourers, mainly from the surrounding rural areas, and converted them into a proletariat.[10] Life on the sugar plantations was highly regimented. Even the clerks like Vallejo, who worked in the administration building, lived lives of stark simplicity, isolated from all but their co-workers. They were forced to spend long hours in the office, especially when pay-packets were being prepared, and Larco Herrera's puritanical and paternalistic ré-

gime made life even harder for them, since they were not allowed to buy alcohol and had to go to bed early. The estates were virtually self-sufficient enclaves. Workers bought their supplies from a company store, and after the Gildemeisters' successful campaign to open their own port, which finally started functioning in 1918, the sugar plantations became independent even of the Trujillo merchants. This isolation, and the conditions under which the workers lived, encouraged the organization of labour; some of the active militants in the strikes of 1921 (at least one of whom, like Vallejo, came from Santiago de Chuco) were first introduced to the works of Lenin, Trotsky, Kropotkin and Gorky on the 'Roma' estate.[11] Even before the days of union organization, there were spontaneous riots, when machete-wielding workers shouted threats against the bosses and the administration. During the year that Vallejo worked on the 'Roma', the nearby Gildemeister estate was looted and burned by angry workers, some of whom were shot by troops brought in to quell the riot. At the very least, it must have made Vallejo aware of his perilous situation as middleman between boss and workers. Certainly in his novel and short stories written many years after, he invariably expresses repugnance for estate life. In *El tungsteno*, the protagonist recalls an estate-owner 'famous for his bloody tyranny over the workers', and in a short story 'Viaje alrededor del porvenir',[12] written towards the end of his life, a brutal owner has injected material incentives even into the private relations of his estate-manager, offering him a money reward if and when his wife conceives a son.

To be a poet in this kind of society is, unless one is content to be the local poetaster, to declare oneself dangerously nonconformist.[13] Vallejo, who was early in life labelled a poet, found that transgression of the social norm quickly turned into defiance of a society which tolerated only those who were prepared to support its ideological assumptions, and that what was tolerated as an aberration in Santiago de Chuco was considered wild eccentricity in Trujillo.

Modernism and anachronism

Vallejo's years as a student at the University really began in 1913, when he registered at Trujillo for a degree in literature. While studying, he taught first at the Centro Escolar de Varones and

later as a primary school teacher in the Colegio Nacional de San Juan.[14] The poets he had read at this time were mostly Spanish – the great poets of the Golden Age, especially Quevedo – and the Romantic poetry that was still popular in the provinces.[15] This very popularity, especially for the sentimental verse written by the Mexicans Juan de Dios Pieza and Manuel Acuña was, of course, an indication that it was 'safe', a respectable literary outlet for 'feeling'. And Trujillo, hopelessly in the wake of literary innovation, scarcely seemed a promising place in which to begin an education as a poet. It was a city that still preserved the atmosphere of colonial times with little social life outside the family. The painter, Macedonio de la Torre, has left a vivid description of its tedium:

> The children of the rich did not dirty their hands; they never dreamed of work or a profession. They were all hunters, card-players and cock-fighters. They had great packs of dogs, and guns, rifles, game-cocks and they believed themselves infallible in everything. They knew everything. The city was like a monastery. There were no meetings or parties and no days off except on the 28th July and at Christmas. When the 28th July celebrations were over, I used to feel sad, thinking that I should have to spend another year without being able to meet my fellow-men. Everybody shut themselves up inside their houses. The whole of life went on behind closed doors and behind the barred windows of the silent city. Falling in love was, of course, a problem. To meet a woman, we had to stand on guard at street-corners, day after day, and when the beauty showed herself from behind a blind or at a half-open door, we had to take advantage of this to throw her a note written on paper that had yellowed with the waiting.[16]

In this anachronistic environment, Vallejo discovered the Romantic movement as if it were newly proclaimed. Writing his dissertation on the subject of 'Romanticism in Castilian poetry', he shows himself well aware of contemporary positivist theories of literature and ideas such as those of Taine, Le Bon and Fouillée who had accounted for national characteristics in literature and intellectual life. But when he deals with a poet he really likes, such as the Spanish poet, José Espronceda, his prose becomes more fervent, imitating the lofty flights of the Cuban writer, José Martí. For Vallejo, the poet is already a hero who seizes the 'standard of rebellion and rising up with it to heights never before scaled by man, he plants it there before flying off to his Glory'.[17] These lofty claims for poetry, made among others by his compatriot, Manuel González Prada, encouraged dizzying

ambitions in the young writers of Latin America, most of whom had not yet understood that public poetry was not, however noble its tone, 'beyond ideology' and so must be either an adornment for the system or in conflict with it. Nor did anyone question the poet's authority to assume a prophetic or public tone. For Manuel González Prada, for instance, it was simply a matter of choice: 'He who speaks of himself, his family or nation,' he wrote, 'deserves a narrow public: but he who speaks for Humanity has the right to be heard by all men'.[18]

When Vallejo was writing his first poetry in Trujillo, the enormously popular essay *Ariel* by the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó was circulating in Latin America. Published in 1900, the essay influenced several generations of Latin Americans, giving a picture of the nobility of the life of the spirit: indeed, 'nobility' was a word much used at the time to refer to the 'aristocracy of the best' as against those who were possessed of mere material power and possessions. Poets like Rubén Darío, José Santos Chocano, Ricardo Jaimes Freyre considered themselves spokesmen of their race or nation precisely because they belonged to this aristocracy of the spirit and believed their motives to be 'disinterested'. Certainly there was some validity in their claims: poets were appointed consuls, became arbiters of frontier disputes, and were called upon to celebrate important civic occasions in their poetry. All this strengthened their conviction that they were 'above the battle' when in fact they sometimes found themselves under the patronage of the oligarchs. Both Darío and Santos Chocano enjoyed writing ornamental rhetorical verse which was not at all in conflict with the tastes of elegant oligarchs who knew what was fashionable in Paris. It is too simple to see these poets as the voices of a class; on the other hand their contempt for 'materialism' and the bourgeois hardly went deep enough to disturb the wealthy landowners and elegant cattle-barons who, no doubt, also felt above 'materialism'. However, the Modernists were a dazzling success at giving prestige and dignity to the practice of letters and, as a result, poetry was one clear light for someone like Vallejo who wished to find his way out of the provincialism of Trujillo.

The first poem Vallejo published under his own name belongs to the tradition of civic poetry with which the Modernists had never completely broken. He declaimed it at a student parade, reciting his verse from a balcony overlooking O'Donovan square.[19]

The poem, 'Primaveral', is a celebration of youth (hardly surprisingly). It ended in an abrupt anti-climax, as the poet appears suddenly to realize that he is in danger of becoming blasphemous:

> ¡Juventud! Patria en flor. Trueno. Armonía
> y suspiro de amor . . . La Primavera
> renovando tus ímpetus podría
> convertirte en un Dios . . . si Dios no hubiera.[20]
>
> Youth! Nation in flower. Thunder. Harmony
> And sighs of love. Spring
> Which renews your powers might
> Turn you into a God . . . if God did not exist.

Vallejo also wrote didactic poems for children, published in the magazine *Cultura Infantil*. Pedagogy through poetry was not unusual in a period when the ideal of the 'teacher' as enlightener was held by many intellectuals who believed that a better society would only be achieved through education. Two contemporaries of Vallejo, Gabriela Mistral of Chile and the Venezuelan novelist Rómulo Gallegos, were dedicated teachers who regarded their profession as a mission. Even so, there is something incongruous about Vallejo's attempts to versify the laws of condensation, exmosis and the scientific explanation of phosphorescence in churchyards.

If nothing else, these 'scientific' poems reflect his belief in the power of education and the demystifying virtues of scientific knowledge, which in turn suggests that his childhood faith must at some moment have come into shattering conflict with the theories of science. His interest in the latter is borne out by books he received as University prizes during the years 1913 and 14. Whether he chose them himself or whether they were chosen for him is not clear but they show a strong bias towards positivism and evolutionism. They included Taine's *Twentieth Century Philosophy*, Max Müller's *History of Religion*, Gumplowitz's *Sociology and Politics* and Gérard's *Attic Eloquence*. Perhaps most significant of all, he received Ernst Haeckel's *The Riddle of the Universe*.[21]

A parenthesis on Haeckel, Müller and the natural history of 'Trilce' and 'Poemas Humanos'

Haeckel was a discovery. A great popularizer of evolutionary theories, his book introduced Vallejo to a monistic, materialist

interpretation of creation and the universe, the vocabulary of which left deep impressions on his poetry. Phrases like '*ciliado* arrecife', '*arácnidas* cuestas', 'grupo *dicotiledón*', '999 calorías' stand out in the poems not merely because they belong to 'scientific language' but because they denote a scientific explanation of the creation of the universe and the descent of man from simpler forms of life. Haeckel was by no means a dull pedant; his *History of Creation* (at least in the English translation)[22] is delightful, even picturesque reading, with its graphic account of 'tangle forests of algae' and 'plant souls' and the dramatic story of the formation of mountains, lakes and oceans. *The Riddle of the Universe* (Vallejo's prize) speedily disposed of notions such as the immortality of the soul, and the dogmas which put man at the centre of the universe and created a god in man's image as an apotheosis of the human organism. Man is now given a far more modest role. As Haeckel put it: 'This boundless presumption of vainglorious man has misled him into making himself "the image of God", claiming an "eternal life" for his ephemeral personality and imagining that he possesses unlimited freedom of will'.[23]

The poetic space of *Trilce* becomes the battle-ground between the privileged individual of Christianity and this cosmic speck, who can now be considered as a complex of functions – feet, spinal column, teeth, hair, nails – each of which has its evolutionary history. To a young man brought up in the most orthodox faith, the impact of theories which dismissed the Middle Ages as 'insane' and refused to see in Christ anyone more interesting than an illegitimate child, was obviously profound. 'Los caynas', a short story that Vallejo included in his collection, *Escalas melografiadas* (published in 1923) suggests the shattering effect which evolutionist theory had on him.[24] It is the story of a young man who returns to his home in a mountain village so remote that for long periods it has no contact with the outside world, to find that his family and the entire village have turned into monkeys. It was as if his introduction to theories of the descent of man from earlier primates had suddenly made even the warmest of family relationships appear a grotesque caricature. In Vallejo's poetry, however, the impact is most of all on language; a seismological upheaval was caused by this change of status of man. The upheaval was all the more devastating in that Vallejo's religious beliefs were destroyed without his sharing the optimistic