The Black Heralds Study Guide

The Black Heralds by César Vallejo

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Introduction

In the early 2000s, César Vallejo was considered Peru's greatest poet, and the first line of "The Black Heralds" was said to be known by every Peruvian. Written after his move to Lima from a country village in 1916, the poem was included in a collection to be published in 1918, but Vallejo waited to issue the book until Abraham Valdelomar, an avant-garde writer, could add an introduction. However, Valdelomar died suddenly, so Vallejo released the book in 1919. There has been a confusion about the date of publication ever since. The collection was praised by Vallejo's own artistic community; however, there were few sales and few reviews. The public was accustomed to *modernismo* and symbolism in verse, not Vallejo's emotional and social outcry.

As time would show, *The Black Heralds* was actually the most traditional of Vallejo's works, a blend of modernistic influences and the unique style of structure and language that he developed even more in later works. Nonetheless, the basic themes addressed in *The Black Heralds* remained important elements in all of his poetry: suffering, compassion, and the various components of existential anguish. All of these elements find expression in the title poem. "The Black Heralds" opens the collection and sets a tone for the rest of the book of bitter sentiments and blasphemous rebellion, as well as a compassionate understanding of suffering. Although his first book of poetry, *The Black Heralds* was the last of Vallejo's works to be translated into English. Two later publications of the title poem can be found: in the 1990 English edition of *Los Heraldos Negros*, the translation by Kathleen Ross and Richard Schaaf; and in the 2006 collection *The Complete Poetry of Cesar Vallejo*, the translation by Clayton Eshleman.

Author Biography

César Abraham Vallejo was born on March 16, 1892, in Santiago de Chuco, Peru, the youngest of eleven children in a family of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage. After graduating from high school in 1908, Vallejo attempted to attend college but had to withdraw because of a lack of funds. So he went to work as a clerk in his father's notary public office, then in the office of a mining company. He worked as a tutor to the children of a wealthy mine owner and as a cashier in the accounting office of a sugar plantation. Added to his rural upbringing, these experiences furthered his concern about the social injustices in Peru. In 1913, he formally enrolled at the University of Trujillo, where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1915 and later earned both a master's degree in Spanish literature and a law degree.

During his college years, Vallejo joined a progressive circle of writers and intellectuals. Within this group, he discovered Latin American modernism and French symbolism, as well as political radicalism. After a few tumultuous romantic involvements, Vallejo moved to Lima in 1917. He took a job as a teacher and later principal of a prestigious private school but was fired after he refused to marry the woman with whom he was having an affair. This event, coupled with the death of his mother, prompted him to visit his home. Once there, Vallejo found himself unintentionally involved in a violent uprising. Although innocent, Vallejo was charged as an instigator and spent three months in jail. He was released on parole, but the experience embittered him for the rest of his life.

Vallejo won the Peruvian National Short Story Contest in 1921. However, his first two books of poetry, *The Black Heralds* (1919) (which contains the title poem) and *Trilce* (1922), were ill-received, so Vallejo moved to Paris in 1923. He worked for a press agency and continued with his own writing, but for the rest of his life he barely made enough money to support himself. In the late 1920s, he participated in communist activities and visited the Soviet Union three times. After an arrest in Paris, Vallejo moved to Madrid and was allowed back in Paris only when he promised to refrain from all political activities. He did so until the outbreak in 1936 of the Spanish Civil War whose republican cause reinvigorated his political involvement. Consequently, he visited Spain twice and saw for himself the horrors of war, which inspired the acclaimed poetic collection, *Spain, Take This Cup from Me* (1937).

Besides poetry, Vallejo wrote a novel, *Tungsten* (1931), as well as numerous articles and essays, and five plays that were never published or produced in his lifetime. He married Georgette Philipart in 1934, and after he died of a lingering fever in Paris on April 15, 1938, she published his final collection of poetry, *Human Poems*, in 1939.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

The first line of “The Black Heralds” is one of the most memorable in Spanish poetry: “There are blows in life so powerful . . . I just don’t know!” The intensity of the poem is immediately established with the subject of the painful blows and the questioning they engender, although a question is not asked but is left to the reader’s imagination by the ellipsis before the answer, “I just don’t know!” The line is the cry of the oppressed as they struggle to understand why life is so hard.

In the second through fourth lines, Vallejo says that these blows are as terrible as if they were from “God’s hatred.” These blows are so strong that they are capable of causing all the memories of one’s suffering to well up, capable of causing the pain to rise up from the depths of the soul to the surface. However, the author repeats the use of the ellipsis to create a pause that makes the “I just don’t know” phrase that follows into an outcry of exasperation and frustration, as if to question his own analogy or to emphasize the impossibility of knowing why terrible things happen.

Stanza 2

Here the narrator says that even when there are only a few hard blows in one’s life, any of them can cause deep wounds, “dark furrows,” in even the “fiercest face and in the strongest back.” The word “dark” may simply be a reference to the usually darker, redder skin color of scars, but it may also mean “dark” as in the black depths of the soul that the furrows represent or as in the dark recesses of the mind that are repressed after trauma.

In the third line, Vallejo compares the blows to “the steeds of barbarian Attilas.” This phrase is a reference to the notorious historical figure, Attila the Hun, ruler of a tribe of warrior nomads who terrorized the Roman Empire for a number of years in the middle of the fifth century. Attila was known as the Scourge of God, so an allusion to this barbaric invader is fitting in a poem that in the previous stanza talked about “God’s hatred.”

Another comparison of the blows is made in the fourth line to “the black heralds Death sends us.” The word “angel” is from the Greek word “angelos” meaning messenger, and another word for messenger is herald (in some translations of this poem the word messenger is used instead of herald), although herald carries the connotation of one who makes an announcement. Vallejo is probably making a reference to the concept of an Angel of Death that is sent by God to guide the dead on their journey to heaven or hell. Whether the murderous barbarian or those who pronounce death, the idea is that the blows of life bring terror and devastation.

Stanza 3

Continuing to make comparisons, in this stanza Vallejo does not say that the blows cause falls to the ground, but that they are falls, “deep falls of the Christs of the soul.” It is an odd phrase that combines the cause and effect. The image that is evoked is that of Christ as he fell three times carrying his cross on the road to Calvary. Therefore, the falls are those of “some worshipping faith” that teaches hope and salvation, a faith that “Destiny blasphemes” because it is a useless faith to those who live and die in such misery.

In one last comparison, Vallejo writes the “bloodstained” blows are like the “crackling / of some bread burning up on us at the oven door.” Perhaps the blows are described as bloodstained to make a connection to the red color of the fire that is burning the bread. Bread is often called the “staff of life” because it has been for millennia a staple in the diet of humans, so the burning bread represents the life that is being consumed by the blows of tragedy. The bread does not even get out of the oven, does not make it past the door to perform its life-affirming purpose before it is destroyed by forces that do not allow individual fulfillment.

Stanza 4

In the last of the four-line stanzas, Vallejo turns to describing the recipient of the blows: “And man . . . Poor . . . poor man!” Here, the speaker pauses in his complaint about the blows to express sympathy for the plight of the poor human and to emphasize the depth of the tragedy of the laborer through the pauses inserted by the ellipses. Vallejo then paints an image of the worker who, when summoned to further labor, looks over his shoulder with eyes as wild as those of a caged animal, eyes crazed by the madness of it all. In those eyes is a reflection of the experiences of life, the “backwash of everything suffered” mentioned in the third line of the first stanza. It is as if it these experiences of hardship were deserved for some unknowable sin.

Stanza 5

The last stanza repeats the first line of the first stanza. The effect is to emphasize the depth of the desolation and despair felt by the speaker about human limitations, the harshness of life, and life’s mysteries.

Themes

Suffering

The indigenous Peruvians, descendents of the great Incans, were subjected to centuries of abuse and exploitation by Spanish colonial rule. Half Indian and a speaker of Quechua, Vallejo shared this heritage and observed its effects in his provincial village and on the plantation where he worked for a time. The suffering he witnessed is reflected in “The Black Heralds,” in which the speaker’s life is characterized as filled with agony that cannot find expression in words but leaves the speaker frustrated and despairing. Typical of all oppressed peoples, the subject of the poem cries out for relief from the brutality of existence yet quells desperation with a fatalistic sadness about the condition which seems his destiny. Nonetheless, there is a hint of the pride of a mighty people who hunger for their rightful place, so long lost. The suffering described is both physical and emotional: blows that leave wounds in the flesh, damage faith, and drive a person to crazed desperation and confusion.

Life, Death, and God

Vallejo was greatly disturbed by questions concerning the reason for life. The specter of the grave tormented him because of his view that life is a steady march toward death. In “The Black Heralds,” the title is a reference to the “black heralds sent to us by Death,” and the “deep falls of the Christs of the soul” alludes to the final walk that Christ made going to his crucifixion. Perhaps Vallejo does not believe that Christ ever reached Calvary or enacted a resurrection to save humankind because in this poem the blows that cause the soul to fall are ongoing. The argument here is that a merciful God who gave the world a savior would not behave as does the hateful God that Vallejo depicts. These sentiments provide the reason that the message in “The Black Heralds” is described as questioning and challenging God, if not being outright blasphemous. Definitely, the message is one of acute, painful frustration at being unable to determine why life is so hard.

Existential Anguish

“The Black Heralds” is an excellent example of existential anguish. The poem contains classic descriptions of the existentialist experience: trying to create meaning from a world that has no meaning but is empty and confusing; trying to understand the purpose of an existence that makes no sense; trying to establish the freedom and responsibility of the individual in relation to established ethics and morality; trying to endure the hardships of life when there seems to be no valid reason or reward to do so. Angst is often associated with existentialism because there is so much anxiety, guilt, and isolation that comes with individual responsibility and that stems from unanswered questions about causation and human suffering. A possible conclusion is that there is no

meaning to life because there is only a path to nothingness, but Vallejo tells readers that he just does not know what to conclude.

Style

Repetition

Repetition is a signature device that Vallejo used throughout his career as a poet. The opening line of “The Black Heralds” is repeated as the last line for emphasis and to create an enclosed structure or circle. This enclosure may represent the prison of life that constrains humanity with time limits and physical limitations or the freedoms taken away by government and social status. The phrase, “I just don’t know,” not only ends the first and last lines of the poem but also the first and last lines of the first stanza in order to underline the frustration of the inexplicable.

In the seventeen lines of “The Black Heralds,” Vallejo uses the word “blows” four times: in the first and second lines to establish blows as the subject, in the eleventh line, to remind the reader of the topic, and then in the last line to emphasize the importance of the blows. In addition, Vallejo uses the ellipsis before each of the “I just don’t know” phrases as if the speaker runs out of words and sighs or cries out, “I just don’t know.” The ellipsis is also used in line 5 to create a change of thought, and in line thirteen (“And man . . . Poor . . . poor!”) to stretch out and emphasize the pathetic nature of humans. Vallejo also uses the similar phrases “welled up” and “wells up” in lines four and twelve as another way to provide a connection between the first and the last sections of the poem. Thus repetition serves to tie the poem together and as a type of rhythmic device like a metronome keeping the beat.

Ellipses

Ellipsis points are not only used to indicate omissions from a quotation but also are used by writers to give the reader the impression that the narrator is experiencing faltering speech. The ellipsis, which consists of three spaced periods, indicates a long pause, or a thought that has trailed off and will not be completed, or will be left for the reader to complete. Sometimes a writer will use an ellipsis rather than a dash or a colon just to catch the reader’s attention.

In the case of Vallejo and “The Black Heralds,” the ellipsis is used six times in seventeen lines with great dramatic effect. In the famous opening line, Vallejo starts with an attention-grabbing statement about the hardships of life, but instead of reaching some profound conclusion about the bad times people all encounter, he cuts off the speaker with an ellipsis, who then says “I just don’t know!” The reader immediately knows that this is a poem of frustration. The poet wants to talk about the tragedy of life, but the speaker lets the reader know right away that he does not have any answers to the mysteries of life. Twice more in the poem, Vallejo uses the ellipsis and the speaker’s exasperated “I just don’t know” to express the sense of being at a loss for an explanation.

In the first line of the second stanza, Vallejo trails off with an ellipsis after the speaker says, “They are few; but they are” before saying what the blows are. It is as if the speaker changes his mind about discussing what the blows are because he then starts a new sentence talking about what the blows do. The ellipsis after “but they are” also gives the impression that “are” means “exist” as in “They are few, but they still exist.”

In the first line of the fourth stanza, Vallejo inserts ellipses for emphasis and to slow down the reading. “And man . . . Poor . . . poor!” highlights the pathetic nature of “poor” and once again gives the impression of an incomplete thought as if it is too painful to go into detail about the wretchedness of the human condition.

Beyond Modernismo

Much is made of the influence on Vallejo of the modernismo (modernista) movement. There were a number of famous Latin American writers who were writing in this style in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, but the first of note was the Cuban poet Jose Marti, and eventually Chilean Ruben Dario became the master of the movement. Vallejo was well aware of these other poets and their works because they created a frenzy of interest in literature that carried over into politics and economics and caught the attention of the world, even affecting literary ideas in Spain. The characteristics of modernismo included beautiful landscapes, a crafted verse that sometimes became an artifice of mannerisms, colorful imagery, and elegant, musical language. Modernistas Leopoldo Lugones and Julio Herrary y Reissig added surprising images that were admired and imitated by Vallejo. Although these elements can be seen in *The Black Heralds*, Vallejo was already departing from the movement in his first work by moving into darker, more realistic subjects and themes of social protest as well as dropping the typical rhetoric and ornamentation of the style. It is difficult to judge a translation for the patterns and rhythms of modernismo that may have been present in the original Spanish version, so English readers must rely on the expertise of scholars to verify that the influence is there, especially when the subject, tone, and concentrated phrases of *The Black Heralds* are so different from what a reader would expect from modernismo.

Surrealism

Native Americans use symbols and images to express themselves and their mystic fatalism, so it was natural for Vallejo, with his indigenous heritage, to embrace surrealism, a style that uses dreamlike images and suggests the unconscious or subconscious in a psychological way. Surrealism liberates the poet from literary conventions such that language can be ambiguous and ironic as it breaks the rules of logic and reason in its multiple images and irregular rhythms. In “The Black Heralds,” the irregular rhythms come from the pauses inserted by the use of ellipses to change the course of the thought. The language of Vallejo’s images in this poem is not as ambiguous as one would expect from a surrealist. Rather, they are created with common language and objects, but there is the surrealistic multiplicity of images, and

they lead to careful thought and interpretation about the psychological as well as physical torture endured by the abused person Vallejo depicts.

There is no difficult language in “the backwash of everything suffered,” “open dark furrows in the fiercest face and in the strongest back,” “bloodstained blows,” “crackling bread burning up at the oven door,” or “like a pool of guilt, in his look.” Backwash, furrows, bloodstained, pool and guilt are all terms that are understandable, but combined as they are in the phrases that create the image, they are beautifully crafted to readily conjure a vivid picture in the mind of the reader. The images created from literary and religious allusions—“steeds of barbaric Attilas,” “black heralds Death sends us,” “deep falls of the Christs of the soul,”—are more difficult at first but are not beyond the average reader’s ability to grasp. Images are intended to appeal to the senses, and the images in “The Black Heralds” manage to cover four of the five: sight, hearing, touch, and smell. Coming one upon another in rapid succession in a relatively short poem, they bombard the reader in a powerfully effective way.

Historical Context

History of Peru

Peru had been inhabited for thousands of years when, in the twelfth century, the Quechua-speaking Incas established an empire that lasted until the Spanish conquest in 1533. Peru remained a colony until 1821, then went through a number of upheavals before a period of stability started in 1844. A republican constitution was in effect from 1860 until 1920, but Peru did not have its first civilian president until 1872. Foreign debts for a costly program of public works, followed by a war with Chile, caused the Peruvian government to allow foreign capitalists in 1889 to form the Peruvian Corporation, headquartered in London, to mine up to three million tons of the country's valuable guano deposits, control the railroads for sixty-six years, and receive annual payments of eighty thousand British pounds. The arrangement averted economic disaster for Peru, but the Peruvian people hated the loss of national control and prestige.

There followed a power struggle between the Creole upper class and liberals who urged social and economic reform. The Democratic Party was formed and won the presidency in 1895 with promises of direct suffrage, increased local self-determination, and public schools. This effort, which resulted in positive economic development, was followed by the rule of Augusto Leguia y Salcedo from the Civilian Party from 1908 to 1912 and 1919 to 1930. Although a dictator, Leguia expanded sugar and cotton production and settled a boundary dispute with Chile. In 1920, he supported a new constitution that provided for the protection of Indian lands from sale or seizure. However, the provision was not enforced, leading indigenous Peruvians to organize and attracting members to the Communist Party.

During this time César Vallejo received his college education and wrote his first book of poetry, *The Black Heralds*. Both of Vallejo's grandmothers were natives, and he grew up with knowledge of the Indian language Quechua, which he used occasionally in his poems. While working on a plantation to earn money for college, Vallejo saw the harsh living conditions of the exploited workers. Given his background and the mood of the times, it is no surprise then that the opening poem of his first collection should deal with the oppression of the masses.

Post–World War I Artistic Movements

From the late 1800s to 1918, the modernist movement existed as a corollary to the Industrial Revolution and mechanization. Modernists advocated adaptation of society in all its aspects to rapid technological changes; traditional forms of art, literature, and social organization simply would not suffice. Therefore, a period of worldwide revolution in all the arts ensued with the belief that anything new and unrelated to the past is better than what is old and traditional.

The writings of Charles Darwin and Karl Marx helped to establish modernism since they challenged established worldviews, both religious and social, and questioned various romantic notions, for example about the innate superiority and decency of humans. At the same time, the impressionist painters took art outdoors and argued that people do not see objects so much as they see light itself as it shines on objects and transforms them. Symbolist writers expressed a theory that since language is itself symbolic in nature, writers should seek words for their sound and texture. Adding to these breaks with traditional thought was Sigmund Freud, the so-called father of psychology, who said that people perceived the world through a filter of their own basic drives and instincts, thus making reality subjective. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche advocated that vision is more important than facts or things. Consequently, impressionism, symbolism, along with the work of Freud and Nietzsche, influenced the progression toward abstraction in art and literature. Freedom of expression, experimentation, radicalism, and primitivism, the belief that nature provides truer and more healthful models than culture, were stressed.

Following such catastrophic upheavals in the social order as the Russian Revolution and World War I, modernism changed from a movement that recognized its link with the past even while questioning tradition to a movement that encouraged overturning the status quo. It was obvious that humanity was not morally progressive and reality was questionable, so surrealism, the movement that uses illogical, dreamlike images and events to suggest the unconscious, was born in an age that also fostered cubism and jazz.

In South America, modernism or modernismo replaced nationalism as the predominant trend in literature and followed the symbolist and Parnassian schools in espousing that art should be for art's sake. The modernistas wrote about exotic matters and experimented with language. Leading this movement were Jose Asuncion Silva of Colombia and Julian del Casal and Jose Marti of Cuba. The movement reached its height with Nicaraguan Ruben Dario (1867–1916) whose fundamental collection, *Azul* (Blue), was published in 1888. These writers influenced the up-and-coming poet, César Vallejo, who quickly moved beyond them to embrace surrealism and create his own unique style. His experimentation with language is an indication that he, too, rejected the traditional and the familiar. In the process, he joined many other Latin American writers who chose social protest for their themes. From the late nineteenth century on, Peruvian writers stressed analyzing society and exposing the conditions of the poor, especially Peruvian natives.

Critical Overview

Many early works of writers are amateurish and only hint of the talent that later blossoms as the skills mature. In the case of Vallejo, however, the first line of the first poem, “The Black Heralds,” has become a super star in the world of poetry, and the collection of the same name in which this poem appears, Vallejo’s first published collection, continued into the early 2000s to rate serious academic study among literary scholars.

Efrain Kristal, writing for the *American Poetry Review*, suggests that the palpable intensity of the first line is what makes it one of the most well-known lines in Latin American poetry. Kristal says that the strong pathos is “not in the words that can be recited but in the silence of the ellipsis. One feels the breath knocked out of the poetic voice” as he expresses the “impotence of a suffering humanity.”

In her article on Vallejo for *Hispania*, Phyllis White Rodríguez points out that the “strong notes” that open the poem set the tone of the piece, and the poem itself contains the themes that pervade the rest of the collection. She adds that *The Black Heralds* “is a tremendous shout of sadness and grief, of contradiction and protest.”

Similarly, Ivan Arguelles, writing a review for the *Library Journal* about *The Black Heralds* states: “From the very first line . . . , the discerning reader is convinced that what follows will be a profound literary experience, a life perceived from a harrowingly surrealistic perspective.” Arguelles also comments on Vallejo’s rare ability to express the human condition and notes that this first book of poetry “already reveals the complex intellectual, emotional, and spiritual qualities that characterize his later work.”

Speaking of the collection as a whole, Kristal adds that *The Black Heralds* “marks the turn, in Hispanic poetry, from the symbolist aesthetic . . . to an unprecedented level of emotional rawness which eventually stretched the Spanish language beyond it grammatical possibilities.” David Biespiel, writing for the Poetry Foundation about Vallejo’s language in his first work, states: “Sometimes blasphemous, other times merely irreverent, *The Black Heralds* surrealistic imagery, tone, diction, and themes confront pastoral traditions, colonialism, and religious conformity.”

The publishers of the Kathleen Ross and Richard Schaaf 1990 translation of *The Black Heralds* write on the inside flap of the cover of the book a summation of the critical judgment of Vallejo’s first collection, saying that it “shows a mystical and social vision that penetrates the deepest recesses of the human spirit and consciousness. . . . [and] ushers in the dawn of a new poetry in Perú.” Concerning the famous initial lines of the title poem, the publishers add that they “probably mark the beginning of Peruvian, in the sense of indigenous, poetry.” However, just as the narrator in “The Black Heralds” represents all humanity, Vallejo’s opening line and first collection of poetry contain universal themes that appeal to all readers.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kerschen is an educator and freelance writer. In this essay, she compares the differences found in various translations of the Vallejo poem "The Black Heralds" and comments on the possible changes in tone and meaning that these differences can make.

It is said that every Peruvian knows the opening line of "Los Heraldos Negros," the title poem to César Vallejo's first book, published in 1919 in Lima: "Hay golpes en la vida tan fuertes . . . Yono sé!" Translated into English, this line from "The Black Heralds" is: "There are blows in life so hard . . . I just don't know!" Or is it? The book was, of course, written and published in Spanish, so English readers have to rely upon the quality of the translation to be able to discern the tone and meaning of Vallejo's poetry. Depending on the interpretation of the translator, any given word could appear in two, three, or more variations, and some of the variations could convey quite different connotations.

The point is that translators come into the job with different agendas as well as knowledge, and critics are likely to find fault with their efforts one way or another.

Poetry is very subjective, intentionally so. The poet may have one thing in mind when writing the poem, but the reader gets something else out of it—and that is okay. Everyone does some interpreting while reading prose or poetry, according to each person's own schema, that is, the individual's own world view based on that person's individual knowledge and experience. Within reason, and following certain basic rules of language, the poem nonetheless means whatever it means to each person, including the translator. The definition of a word, its literal meaning, is the first consideration, but then the connotations come into play and can change the entire meaning of a line. "No act shows the provisional nature of reading and writing as does translation, a series of decisions and revisions themselves subject to infinite questioning and revising," states Alfred J. MacAdam in a 1980 review of Clayton Eshleman's translation of *Cesar Vallejo: The Complete Posthumous Poetry*.

Critics often comment on the difficulties of the translator's job. Julio Ortega, writing for *Latin American Writers*, states: "Vallejo is perhaps the most complicated poet of the Spanish language. . . . the hermetic [airtight] work of Vallejo is nearly impossible to translate." However, Efrain Kristal, writing a critique of Eshleman's 2006 book, *The Complete Poetry of Cesar Vallejo*, for *American Poetry Review* says that Eshleman has shown that "impossible to translate" is not the same as "impossible to paraphrase," and he "renders Vallejo's paradoxes with ease, and his linguistic unconventionalities with instinctual acumen."

In the introduction to her translation of *The Black Heralds*, Rebecca Seiferle asserts: "Reading and translating Vallejo has been a long process of trying to meet him on his

own terms, to discover what those terms were within the contexts of his particular time and, finally, taking his word for it." How well Seiferle succeeds is questioned by Christopher Maurer in an article for *New Republic* about her translation of Vallejo's *Trilce*, and one can assume that these remarks could apply to *The Black Heralds* as well. Maurer complains that Seiferle has only a "tenuous hold on the Spanish language." In addition, Seiferle appears to be trying to excise from Vallejo the colonization that she sees in other translations. Despite the many critics who find evidence of Vallejo's indigenous background in his poetry, which is fairly evident from his use of some native language terms, Seiferle finds these allusions to be parodies of Indian culture rather than romantic nostalgia about rural and native life. In the same article, Maurer reviews Eshleman's translation of *Trilce* and finds it to be a high risk for accuracy, calling Eshleman a "verbal stunt man." The point is that translators come into the job with different agendas as well as knowledge, and critics are likely to find fault with their efforts one way or another.

The translation provided by Kathleen Ross and Richard Schaaf in their 1990 publication of *The Black Heralds* was reviewed by Asunción Horno-Delgado for *American Book Review*. Her comments touch on several of the issues involved in translation that could apply to any work:

The Spanish-speaking reader will feel compelled to quibble with some of the translations . . . for the English translations sometimes render a Romantic overtone totally absent in Vallejo's poetry. Several other subtleties of the original Spanish are lost, as inevitably happens in translations of poetry. The translation loses some gender-based shades of meaning that are virtually impossible to translate from Spanish into English, and also those wonderful diminutive forms of Spanish that do not exist in English. Still, the magic of this poetry does survive in English, despite such absences. In general, this translation is well done and an invitation to enjoy the pleasure of the text.

For example, regarding the first line of "The Black Heralds," is it that the "blows in life" are hard, powerful, strong, violent, or heavy? In the 1990 translation of the book by Kathleen Ross and Richard Schaaf, the choice is "hard." In the 2006 edition of Clayton Eshleman's *The Complete Poetry of Cesar Vallejo*, it is "powerful." In Eshleman's 1979 book, *Cesar Vallejo: The Complete Posthumous Poetry*, the choice is "strong." In a 1995 article by Vallejo scholar Edward Hirsch, it is "violent." In *Cesar Vallejo: Selected Poems* translated by H. R. Hays in 1989, it is "heavy."

From this list, it is obvious that Eshleman changed his mind between 1979 and 2006 from "strong" to "powerful." Since Eshleman has spent four decades studying Vallejo and won the National Book Award for his 1979 translation of *The Complete Posthumous Poetry* (in partnership with Jose Rubio Barcia), it would seem that he has the expertise in Spanish and on Vallejo to make an accurate choice. So, is the 2006 version more correct simply because more years of study have passed since the first translation and Eshleman has a better understanding of Vallejo's intent? Does the mood of the translator have an effect on the interpretation just as the mood of the reader does?

Complicating matters for the translator of poetry is the difficulty of choosing a word that not only conveys the original meaning but also the rhythm and meter of the poem. Perhaps the three-syllable word “powerful” was considered too long for the line by one of the translators who chose the one-syllable “hard” or “strong” or the two-syllable “heavy.” Line two presents another issues of interpretation: Hays uses “Blows like God’s hatred,” while Eshleman uses “Blows as from the hatred of God.” The latter is less of a comparison of the blows to God’s hatred and more of a connection between the blows and God’s hatred—the blows are not “like” God’s hatred, they actually come from God’s hatred. Eshleman’s translation seems more powerful and sinister.

There are some translations that even an English-only reader or an amateur reader of poetry may question. For example, an essay for *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, by Linda S. Maier, cites a translation of “Yo no sé!” as “I can’t answer!” instead of “I don’t know!” or “I just don’t know!” Even a first-semester Spanish student knows that “No sé” is the expression for “I don’t know” because that is the reply used often by students in answer to the teacher’s questions. Although the phrase certainly could be interpreted to mean “I can’t answer,” the more common usage is simply “I don’t know.” Since “I can’t answer” is more formal, few people cry out in frustrated anguish: “I can’t answer!” Rather, they will shout “I don’t know!” to express their loss of words for an explanation of their desperate situation, or as Ross and Schaaf translated the phrase “I just don’t know” using “just” for further emphasis. Nonetheless, Edward Hirsch, a frequent writer on Vallejo, uses a translation in a 1995 article that has “I can’t answer!” This translation uses “violent” for “hard” in the first line, but calls the poem “The Black Riders,” which is totally different from all the other references. Here again, it is hard to understand how anyone could get “riders” out of “heraldos,” unless one focuses on Attila’s steeds. Some translations use “messengers” for “heralds.” At least that is closer, but “messenger” carries less the connotation of bringing an announcement than “heralds” conveys. Is Death more likely to send a message or a pronouncement?

The Maier article also translates the third and fourth lines of “The Black Heralds” as “the deep waters of everything lived through were backed up in the soul.” The better translations use “undertow” for “deep waters,” which has more of a sense of danger and being pulled down. Preferred translations also use “suffering” for “lived through,” which again carries more a sense of pain; things “lived through” could be joyous occasions, too. Eshleman in 1979 uses the stronger “undertow” but follows that with “flowed into our souls,” which seems too gentle a phrase for an undertow. A worse choice, though, is using “backed up” instead of “welled up,” which sounds more like a backed up sewer system than the rising of repressed emotions. Are the emotions backing up in the soul to places where they could hide more deeply, or are they welling up to the point of being released in an explosion of reaction? Depending on the translation, it is hard to tell if the flood of emotions is flowing forward or backward. Ross and Schaaf use the similar term “backwash,” and Hays uses “dammed up.” These two choices carry the same idea of being held or pushed back as the translation in Maier’s article, but “dammed up” carries the meaning of being forcibly held back by structures that humans tend to build around their emotions and is, therefore, more powerful than merely being “backed up,” as in a traffic jam or backwashed like water at a marina.

The questions that a critic could ask about a translator are numerous: Did the translator lean too heavily on dictionaries and literary sources? Was the translator sensitive to the everyday subtleties of the language? Did the translator take into account idiomatic usage? How well does the translator know the poet, his life, his idiosyncrasies, the emotions he would have put into his poetry? With Vallejo, was his Spanish really mixed with the Quechua language, or did his experimentation with the Spanish confuse translators about the source of his words and phrases? In addition, did he use words that were mispronounced by the rural, uneducated people of his village and thus may appear to be something different from what they are? Did Vallejo have in his language words from his indigenous, backwater upbringing that appear archaic to translators but were in popular usage where he lived? Since Vallejo experimented with language, is a word choice a neologism—a made-up word—for which there is no match in English?

With all these variables, it is no wonder that the seventh line of “The Black Heralds” might have the barbarians of Attila the Hun’s army riding ponies, colts, or steeds, although it is frankly hard to imagine warriors riding ponies or colts. Steeds are noble, spirited horses bred for war and thus would seem to be the best word choice. Even plain “horses” would be better than ponies or colts whose size and youth make them unsuited for battle. However, MacAdam quotes Jorge Luis Borges, the great Argentinean writer as saying, in a commentary on the various translations of Homer, that “No translation is, in the last analysis, better than any other. Even the worst translation may succeed in communicating to the reader some aspect of the original absent in the ‘better’ translation.” Beauty is in the eye of the beholder because beauty is subjective, poetry is subjective, and translation, besides the language skills required, is ultimately subjective, too.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on “The Black Heralds,” in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• Look for two other existential poets and compare their works to that of Vallejo. What are the common themes among these poets? List and describe these themes and note the different ways that each poet finds to express the same theme.

• Which elements of modernism can be found in “The Black Heralds”? Identify the characteristics of modernism and then discuss whether it is possible to assess meter and rhythm when working with a translation.

• Write a biographical analysis of Vallejo’s reason for leaving Peru. Did he find what he was seeking in Paris? How did living in Paris affect his life and works? Justify your answers with specifics.

• What was it about communism that attracted Vallejo? What was in his background, education, or lifestyle that led him to communism? Why did he travel to Russia and involve himself in the Spanish Civil War? Write an essay explaining the relationship of Vallejo to communism.

• Besides poetry, Vallejo wrote journalistic articles, short stories, essays, and novels. Put together a list of his other works and discuss their impact and value in the body of his life’s work.

Compare and Contrast

- **1918:** In Russia, the Bolsheviks execute the Romanov royal family, setting up a series of events that eventually lead to Russia becoming a communist country. At the same time, Vallejo lives in Lima and is acquainted with political activists to whom he is attracted because of his experience with rural poverty and plantation labor and his disillusionment with religion. Thus begins his eventual involvement in the communist movement.

- **Today:** The power of communism is diminished greatly around the world since the breakup of the Soviet Union, although China and North Korea have communist systems, and Hugo Chavez of Venezuela gains world attention as a great admirer of the last icon of Central American communism, Cuba's Fidel Castro.

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- **1918:** World War I, described as the war to end all wars, comes to a conclusion, leaving the European continent, and the colonies of European countries, in an unsettled and bitter situation. After moving to Europe, Vallejo becomes involved in these issues, earning political exile from France from 1930 to 1932 and campaigning against fascism in the Spanish Civil War from 1936 until his death in 1938. One of Vallejo's last great collections of poetry, *Spain, Take This Cup from Me*, comes from this endeavor.

- **Today:** World War I does not end all wars. Rather, the terms of the Treaty of Versailles that arrange the cessation of warfare in 1918 come to be seen as a leading cause of World War II, which is more global. The treaty terms include the creation of new countries and border divisions that contributes to present-day conflicts in Israel, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, and other parts of the Middle East.

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- **1918:** Post-war sentiments change modernism from a call for change while respecting the past to a call for a complete remake of the worldview around new technologies and philosophies. This rebellion against emotionalism typically rejects any call to copy the past or return to the classics.

- **Today:** Modernism becomes mainstream by the 1930s and remains so until the late twentieth century when media-influenced postmodernism begins mixing elements of pop culture with electronics; postmodernism is characterized by open-endedness and collage and a self-referential irony that questions the foundations of cultural and artistic forms.

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- **1918:** Vallejo prepares his first book of poetry for publication, beginning his career as a writer in several genres that is to gain him little fame and virtually no income during his lifetime.

- **Today:** Vallejo is considered the greatest of all Peruvian poets; new editions of his writings and works of criticism about him continue to be published.

What Do I Read Next?

- A complex and groundbreaking work, Vallejo's second book of poetry, *Trilce*, contains seventy-seven poems filled with creative syntax and punctuation and abstruse images. Published in 1922, the work contorts the Spanish language with Incan phrases and medical terminology to express very personal emotions.

- *Complete Later Poems: 1923–1938*, translated by Valentino Gianuzzi and Michael Smith and published in 2005, contains all of Vallejo's poetic works from the time he moved to Paris until his death, including *Poemas Humanos*, or *Human Poems*, Vallejo's last and possibly finest book of poetry.

- Vallejo wrote *Tungsten: A Novel* (translated by Robert Mezey and published by Syracuse University Press in 1988) to expose the situation of the exploited native Peruvians in the tungsten mining industry. Popular in the U.S.S.R. and Spain when first published, it is the narrative that goes along with the picture he depicted in "The Black Heralds" and one of the earliest social-realist novels from Spanish America.

- Ruben Dario's *Selected Writings* (2005) is an English translation of some of the best poetry of the modernismo leader from Nicaragua who was a notable influence on Vallejo.

- "The Black Heralds" was written in the style of Paul Verlaine's "Art Poetique," which appeared in a 1913 anthology that Vallejo read and appears again in *Selected Poems*, a 2000 publication of selected poems by Verlaine.

- Pablo Neruda of Chile is considered by many to be South America's greatest poet. *Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems* (1993) presents some of Neruda's poetry with a selection of Vallejo's poetry and is an excellent study of these two masters of the craft.

Further Study

Hart, Stephen M., and Jorge Cornejo Polar, *César Vallejo: A Critical Bibliography of Research*, Tamesis Books, 2002.

A comprehensive guide to scholarship about Vallejo, this book, produced by a well-known Vallejo scholar, lists sources of information and provides helpful evaluations of the materials that are available.

Ortega, Julio, “Cesar Vallejo,” in *Latin American Writers*, Vol. 2, 1989, pp. 727–38.

An analysis of Vallejo’s work arranged chronologically with brief biographical information, this article presents excerpts in both Spanish and English and examines their poetic characteristics in a highly readable fashion.

Starn, Orin, Ivan Degregori, and Robin Kirk, eds. *The Peru Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, Duke University Press, 1995.

This book provides a broad spectrum of in-depth information about multiple aspects of Peru, including introductions to and excerpts from several of its authors.

Tapscott, Stephen, ed., *Twentieth-Century Latin American Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, University of Texas Press, 1996.

This collection of lyrical works from seventy-five poets, including Vallejo, provides helpful introductions to and evaluations of the writers as well as a selection of some of their most notable poetry.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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