

# AMERICAN CONTACT



OBJECTS  
OF INTERCULTURAL  
ENCOUNTERS AND  
THE BOUNDARIES  
OF BOOK HISTORY

Edited by Rhae Lynn Barnes and Glenda Goodman

## Making Books at the Penitentiary

### César Vallejo's *Trilce*

*Carlos Aguirre*

**O**n November 8, 1920, a young Peruvian poet named César Vallejo (1892–1938), already well known in literary and journalistic circles, was incarcerated in the northern city of Trujillo on accusations of instigating public disturbance in his hometown of Santiago de Chuco, about one hundred miles to the east. The confusing events had taken place on August 1, 1920, while Vallejo, who had been living and studying in Lima since 1916, was visiting Santiago de Chuco to take part in the annual celebrations of the town's patron saint Santiago Apóstol (St. James the Apostle). Due in part to pressure from writers and some politicians, he was released on February 26, 1921, but the trial against him continued. He would leave Peru for Europe in 1923, largely to escape legal prosecution. At the time of his death in Paris in 1938, the case against him was still open.

Vallejo's first book, *Los heraldos negros* (*The Black Heralds*), had been published in 1919 and praised in Lima's literary circles. He continued writing poetry and, during the time he spent in jail, penned several new poems and revised others he had already written. Back in Lima after his release, he assembled those poems for publication. In those years, there were no commercial publishers in Peru, so authors had to use their own financial resources and personal connections to have their books printed. When the time came to choose a printing press to produce his new book, Vallejo opted for the printing and binding workshop that functioned inside the Lima penitentiary, also known as "el panóptico" (the panopticon). Released late in 1922, the book, titled *Trilce*, today a true bibliographical treasure,<sup>1</sup> was manufactured by inmate-workers at the Lima penitentiary, a

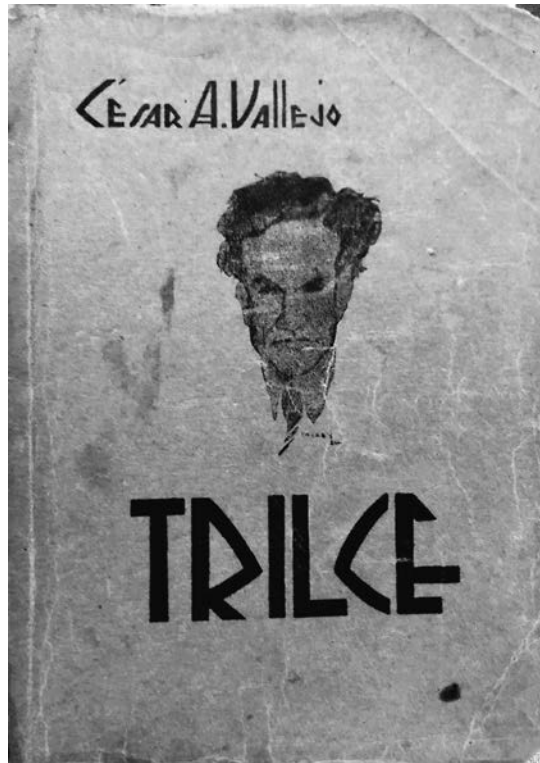


Figure 43.1. Cover of the first edition of *Trilce*. Photo courtesy of Jorge Kishimoto.

penal institution inaugurated in 1862. Although initially received with indifference and even hostility, *Trilce* is now considered one of the most innovative and important books of avant-garde poetry in any language.<sup>2</sup>

How did a book that, with time, became so influential and propelled its author to worldwide fame and prestige, happen to be printed inside an institution of confinement? The answer to this question must start with the way in which penitentiaries were conceived of and operated. The penitentiary system, invented in the late 1700s and consolidated in the early decades of the nineteenth century, included a new architectural design (namely, the panopticon, in both its original, circular version designed by Jeremy Bentham and the modified, radial model used in prisons like Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia) and a new disciplinary regime that emphasized obedience, religious instruction, routine-following training, and the acquisition of working habits and skills. In most penitentiaries, a series of workshops were set up with the dual purpose of training (and exploiting) inmates and generating income for the penal institutions. Activities such as shoemaking, carpentry, tailoring, blacksmithing, and others became a part of daily life inside prisons, resulting in a variety of labor,

financial, logistical, and disciplinary arrangements that, quite often, contradicted the bylaws and the alleged goals of “reforming” the criminals.

Several Latin American penitentiaries opened workshops devoted to printing and bookbinding.<sup>3</sup> They began to operate in the late 1870s, as demand for print materials grew considerably, especially from the state. They were used to produce government documents (annual reports by different authorities and institutions, for instance), letterhead materials, and legal publications, such as criminological treatises and civil and penal codes. Inmates worked in all phases of book production, including typesetting, operating the printing press, and bookbinding.<sup>4</sup>

Over the years, these printshops also produced historical, sociological, scientific, and literary books. Authors were inclined to use them because of the quality of the work and their competitive cost, resulting from the very low wages paid to the inmate-workers. The role of prison printshops, however, has not been emphasized enough in studies about print culture in Latin American countries: they were part of both the system of exploitation of inmate labor and the networks of cultural and intellectual production. As such, they connected two seemingly separate worlds, that of intellectuals, writers, scholars, and scientists and that of the so-called criminal underworld.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1910s and early 1920s, the printshop at the Lima penitentiary manufactured a series of books by writers that, over time, would become classics of Peruvian literature. Among them are *La canción de las figuras* (1916) by poet José María Eguren (1874–1942); *La mariscala* (1915), *Belmonte el trágico* (1918), and *El caballero Carmelo* (1918) by novelist and short-story writer Abraham Valdelomar (1888–1919); and *Trilce* (1922) and *Escalas* (1923) by César Vallejo.<sup>6</sup> Some of them, like *El caballero Carmelo*, were beautifully designed, typeset, and printed, which reveals the possibilities that existed for the production of well-crafted books at the penitentiary workshop. The book’s colophon reads: “The printing of this book was completed on March 31, 1918, at the Lima penitentiary workshop, thanks to the intelligent zeal of its director, Don Ramón Yrigoyen, who encouraged its author with his understanding and disinterested enthusiasm.”<sup>7</sup> The language used is revealing of the relations of clientelism that were typical of early twentieth-century Peruvian society: the young Valdelomar felt the need to publicly acknowledge the role he wanted to attribute to the prison director. More details about the book production appear in the prologue, authored by lawyer and diplomat Alberto Ulloa Sotomayor:

The day before his departure, Abraham Valdelomar stopped me on the street, we jumped onto a carriage, and he took me to the Lima panopticon. The black fence opened before us and, after we crossed the gate, it closed with an oppressive creak. We crossed dark galleries, went down the

stairs, new gates were opened and closed by the hardened hands of guards, until we finally reached the sunshine of the workshop where this book was being printed. . . . The poor inmates . . . , carrying on their backs the number that, at once, fixes and anonymizes their personas . . . , were operating the printing machines, setting the type, arranging the pages, and correcting the proofs; they were, in short, carrying on the humble gestation of books that will project light over a society that has gathered in prisons all the darkness of opprobrium and desolation.<sup>8</sup>

The contrast between the value attributed to books and literary culture and the miserable conditions in which the inmates who produced some of those books lived could not be more dramatic. For Ulloa Sotomayor, the books produced inside the penitentiary projected “light” over a society that, in turn, was responsible for the horrible conditions in which inmates were held. The printshop is described as casting “sunlight” in darkness. What is truly exceptional in this passage is that Ulloa Sotomayor did acknowledge the contribution that those inmates living in “opprobrium and desolation” made to the “gestation” of valuable cultural artifacts.

Why did Vallejo choose the penitentiary printshop to produce his second book? There were certainly other printing shops in Lima, some of them very prestigious and offering high-quality service.<sup>9</sup> He decided, however, to walk to the penitentiary building—an institution infamous for the oppression and suffering it inflicted on inmates—signed a contract, left his manuscript in the hands of inmates, supervised the composition and printing of the book, and eventually left the prison with copies of *Trilce*. The most obvious explanations include the cheaper cost and his familiarity with the books by friends and fellow writers such as Eguren and Valdelomar printed in the penitentiary workshop. Given his admiration for those authors, the prospect of having his book printed in the same shop was probably a source of intellectual gratification for Vallejo. But there is more to it than that. Vallejo, I suggest, chose the penitentiary printshop as symbolic vindication for the time he had spent behind bars and to make a statement about his condition as a free individual and a poet. Having suffered detention just a few months before, he could now go in and out of a prison at his discretion.

Stylistically, this was not a conventional book: *Trilce* is universally acclaimed as a pathbreaking exercise in freedom, one that departs from grammatical, poetic, and typographic normativity and is full of invented words and expressions, beginning with its very title.<sup>10</sup> This book, in fact, required fastidious attention to typographic detail, as Luis Alberto Castillo has emphasized.<sup>11</sup>

If an institution of confinement had earlier caused him to endure “the gravest moment of my life,”<sup>12</sup> now another prison would help him produce a book that



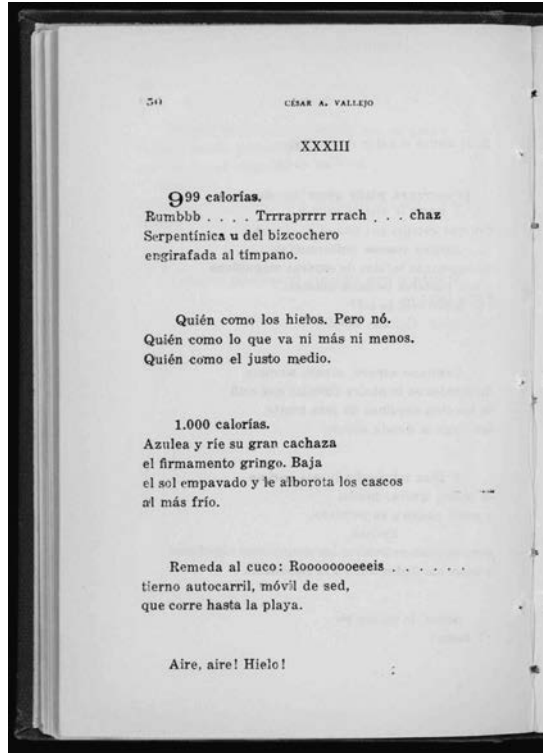


Figure 43.2. César Vallejo, poem XXXIII from *Trilce*. Reproduced from the Library of Congress Public Domain Archive.

was much more than a collection of poems: it was an affirmation of his freedom, both as a human being and as a creator. In a letter to his friend Antenor Orrego, who wrote the prologue to *Trilce*, Vallejo would later complain about the silence that had surrounded his book, and added: “I assume full responsibility for its aesthetics. Now, and maybe more than ever, I feel over me a hitherto unknown sacred obligation, as a man and an artist: to be free! If I’m not free today, I will never be.”<sup>13</sup>

But *Trilce* was not just a book physically produced inside a prison; as stated earlier, it was also partially written and revised while Vallejo was incarcerated, and several poems speak directly to the experience of imprisonment. As most biographers and scholars of Vallejo have noted, the time he spent in the Trujillo jail left indelible marks in him. For Américo Ferrari, for instance, it was a “decisive experience” behind the writing of *Trilce*.<sup>14</sup> According to Stephen Hart, “one of the most haunting themes of *Trilce* is that of imprisonment, which is used as a metaphor of the ways in which we human beings are imprisoned within our world.”<sup>15</sup> In a letter written from prison to his friend Oscar Imaña, Vallejo shared his tribulations: “Sometimes I lack patience and everything becomes dark; very

rarely do I feel good. I've been in prison for almost four months, and my hardest strengths are weakening."<sup>16</sup> Three activities helped him overcome his weaknesses: reading, writing, and exercising his memory. According to Orrego, the best verses of this book were written in jail, "with blood of his blood."<sup>17</sup>

Literary critic Armando Zubizarreta has suggested that the prison experience was inserted into a matrix already present in Vallejo's first book, *Los heraldos negros*, wherein themes of "human and cosmic abandonment" prevailed. His time in prison allowed him to identify in the inmate, as a category of person, "a precise symbol for his afflicted vision."<sup>18</sup> *Trilce's* poem XVIII clearly reflects the existential dimensions of imprisonment, as experienced by Vallejo:

Oh the four walls of the cell  
 Ah the four whitening walls  
 that inevitably add up to the same number.  
 Breeding place for nerves, foul breach,  
 through its four corners how it snatches at  
 the daily shackled extremities.  
 Loving keeper of innumerable keys,  
 if only you were here, if you could only see unto  
 what hour these walls remain four.  
 Against them we would be with you, the two of us,  
 more than ever. And you wouldn't even cry,  
 no, liberator?  
 Ah the walls of the cell.  
 Meanwhile of those that hurt me, most  
 the two long ones that tonight are  
 somehow like mothers now dead  
 leading a child through  
 bromidic inclined by the hand.  
 And only I hang on,  
 with my right, serving for both hands,  
 raised, in search of a tertiary arm  
 to pupilize, between my where and my when,  
 this invalid coming of age.<sup>19</sup>

Several other poems contain references to classic tropes of prison accounts: oppression, tedium, solitude, despair, and injustice. Material conditions were poor, as they were in every Peruvian prison or jail, but the loss of his freedom and the perceived injustice of his situation produced in the poet feelings of abandonment and desolation. Furthermore, the prison experience reinforced Valle-

jo's commitment to social justice and the denunciation of structures of oppression. A visible new sensibility toward the suffering of inmates appears in verses like these:

I'll no longer laugh when my mother prays  
 in childhood and on Sunday, at four o'clock  
 in the morning, for travelers,  
 the imprisoned,  
 the sick,  
 and the poor.<sup>20</sup>

The justice system also became the target of his criticism. In poem XX, for instance, he called it a "juridical sewage," while in "Northwestern Wall," one of the stories included in *Escalas*,<sup>21</sup> he offered an implacable critique of its functioning:

Justice is not a human function. Nor can it be. Justice operates tacitly, deeper inside than all insides, in the courts and the prisoners. Justice—hear me out, men of all latitudes!—is served in subterranean harmony, on the flipside of the senses and in the cerebral swings of street fairs. . . . Only in this way is justice infallible: when it's not seen through the tinted enticements of the judges, when it's not written in the codes, when there's no longer a need for jails or guards. Therefore, justice is not, cannot be, carried out by men, not even before the eyes of men.<sup>22</sup>

Vallejo concludes with a blunt statement that summarizes his thoughts about the relationship between citizens and the law and the enormous injustices committed by the legal, police, and prison structures: "No one is ever a criminal. Or we all are always criminals."

Vallejo's return to prison as a free man to oversee the production of his book offered him an opportunity to witness again the conditions of incarceration, reiterate his critique of the judiciary system, and make explicit his solidarity with inmates. In "The Release," one of the stories included in *Escalas*, Vallejo offered a fictionalized account of the narrator's visit to the penitentiary to review page proofs of his book. The supervisor of the workshop, named Solís, "is a convict, a good guy, like all the criminals of the world."<sup>23</sup> Solís told the narrator that he was innocent and that only about one-third of the penitentiary inmates deserved to be there. The rest, he believed, had the same or greater morality than the judges who condemned them, something that the narrator agreed with. Solís told the narrator in painful detail the story of Palomino, an inmate from Trujillo, who



received a twelve-year sentence for murder. While in prison, Palomino was threatened by the family of the victim, and his life became a constant and paranoid flight from danger.<sup>24</sup>

The story of Palomino could be read as an allegory of Vallejo's own fate: his case was never closed, and he spent the rest of his life worried that he could be sent back to prison, one of the reasons why he never returned to Peru. While Palomino lived in a sort of prison inside the prison, trying to hide and escape from the dangers that, in one way or another, threatened him, Vallejo lived inside his own prison, even if he was a "free" individual. In *Trilce's* poem XXII he wrote:

Possible up to four magistrates  
pursue me returned. Possibly they'll judge me Peter.  
Four joined just humanities!<sup>25</sup>

For Vallejo, then, justice was a farce, and most individuals who populated Peruvian prisons were innocent. His empathy and solidarity with the victims of an unjust system were real and were reflected in his writing.

The narrator's depiction of inmates, however, reveals at times the distance, paternalism, and prejudices that colored representations of criminals by intellectuals and other members of "decent" Peruvian society. In "The Release," the narrator writes, "I turn my eyes and in the distance notice the chubby face of a prisoner who smiles kindly among the black steel bits in movement. He's my peon, the one who's collating my book. This poor bastard won't stop smiling. It's as though he's lost the true feeling of his misfortune or has become an idiot."<sup>26</sup> Whether these were Vallejo's own feelings is hard to tell, but this depiction is not completely out of line with how other intellectuals of his time (and not only in Peru) perceived individuals belonging to the "criminal underworld." It was not uncommon to have expressions of solidarity toward them mixed with repulsion and disgust.

In its conception, content, and material production, *Trilce* offers the rare opportunity to bring together the world of letters and print culture with the violence, injustice, and dehumanization that prisons embody. Many books have been written, in part or in whole, while their authors were serving prison time, but very few of them have been physically produced in prison and by inmates. *Trilce* stands as a powerful reminder that prisons and prisoners are closely and inevitably connected to the larger societies to which they belong, but also that prisons need to be recognized as spaces where culture, art, thought, and knowledge are produced, both intellectually and materially. On the other hand, the story of *Trilce* encapsulates the tensions, contradictions, and conflicts that separate these two worlds: Vallejo was fully aware of the essentially unjust nature of the legal sys-

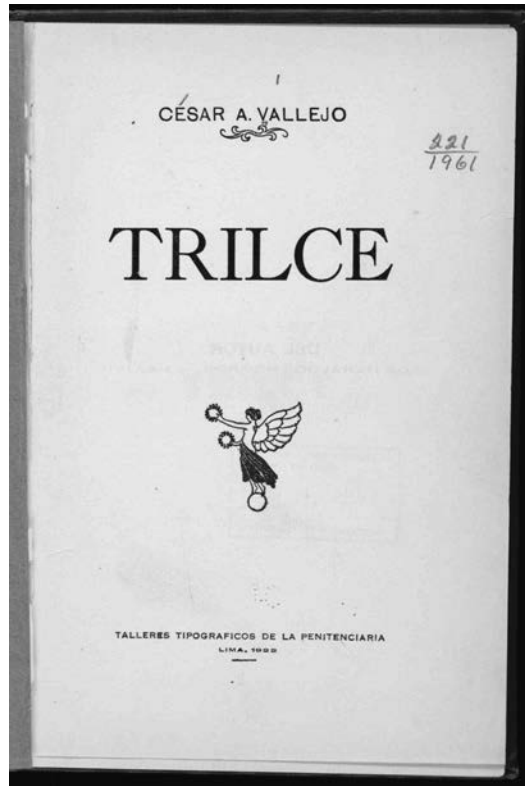


Figure 43.3. *Trilce*'s title page. Reproduced from the Library of Congress Public Domain Archive.

tem, including prisons—after all, he had been its victim—but, as the voice of the narrator of “The Release” suggests, it was difficult for intellectuals like him to fully overcome the prejudices and social distancing that separated them from the prison population. The narrator’s visits to the penitentiary printshop to supervise the production of his book placed him in a position of social superiority vis-à-vis those inmates in charge of typesetting, printing, and assembling his book (not to mention the rest of the prison population). The answer to the Brechtian question one may ask (“Who made the books that would give fame and glory to the likes of Vallejo?”) is there for everyone to find, at the bottom of the title page or the back cover of the first edition of *Trilce*: “Talleres Tipográficos de la Penitenciaría. Lima, 1922.”<sup>27</sup>

#### Notes

I would like to thank Glenda Goodman, Rhae Lynn Barnes, and Bill Fisher for their careful reading of the first draft of this essay and the very helpful comments and suggestions they

made. My conversations with Luis Alberto Castillo were also very stimulating in thinking through the issues discussed here.

1. The book had 146 pages in total, including the front matter, a 16-page prologue by Antenor Orrego, and 121 pages containing 77 poems numbered with roman numerals. It is generally assumed that 200 copies of the book were printed, but there is no documentary evidence of that.

2. See website Figure 43.1 at <https://americancontact.princeton.edu/2021/05/trilce/>.

3. For the Buenos Aires penitentiary, see Damián Bil and Lucas Poy Piñeiro, “Trabajo no libre en la Penitenciaría Nacional de Buenos Aires: El caso de los talleres gráficos, 1877–1917,” *Razón y Revolución* 10 (2002), <http://repositorio.filo.uba.ar/handle/filodigital/4421>; for the Lima penitentiary, see Carlos Aguirre, “La cárcel y la ciudad letrada: Hacia una historia cultural de la prisión en el Perú del siglo veinte,” in *Delincuentes, policías y justicias: América Latina, siglos XIX y XX*, ed. Daniel Palma (Santiago de Chile: Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2016), 144–92.

4. See website Figure 43.2 at <https://americancontact.princeton.edu/2021/05/trilce/>.

5. There are other cases of unfree labor in the printing industry. Several scholars, for instance, have been recently highlighting the experiences of enslaved pressmen in the United States. See, for example, Jonathan Senchyne, “Under Pressure: Reading Material Textuality in the Recovery of Early African American Print Work,” *Arizona Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2019): 109–32; and Jordan Wingate, “Enslaved Pressmen in the Southern Press,” *American Periodicals* 32, no. 1 (2022): 34–52. According to Wingate, the recovery of these stories “enhances scholarly narratives about nineteenth-century Black print culture and the intimacies between print and slavery in the United States” (36).

6. José María Eguren, *La canción de las figuras* (Lima: Tipografía y encuadernación de la penitenciaría, 1916); Abraham Valdelomar, *La mariscala* (Lima: Talleres tipográficos de la penitenciaría, 1915); Valdelomar, *Belmonte el trágico* (Lima: Tipografía y encuadernación de la penitenciaría, 1918); Valdelomar, *El caballero Carmelo* (Lima: Talleres de la penitenciaría de Lima, 1918); César Vallejo, *Trilce* (Lima: Talleres tipográficos de la penitenciaría, 1922); Vallejo, *Escalas: Melografiadas* (Lima: Talleres tipográficos de la penitenciaría, 1923).

7. Valdelomar, *El caballero Carmelo*, n.p. All translations are mine except when noted otherwise.

8. Alberto Ulloa Sotomayor, “Prólogo,” in *ibid.*, i.

9. Among them were Imprenta Gil, Imprenta Torres Aguirre, and Imprenta y Librería Carlos Prince, to name but a few.

10. The word “trilce” does not exist in Spanish; Vallejo invented it. Biographers and scholars of Vallejo have offered various possible explanations of its meaning, too many and complicated to summarize here.

11. Luis Alberto Castillo, *La máquina de hacer poesía: Imprenta, producción y reproducción de poesía en el Perú del siglo XX* (Lima: Meier Ramírez, 2019), 40–41; see, for example, the first page of poem XXXIII in website Figure 43.3 at <https://americancontact.princeton.edu/2021/05/trilce/>.

12. César Vallejo, *Obra poética*, ed. Américo Ferrari (Madrid: ALLCA, 1996), 311.

13. César Vallejo, *Epistolario general* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1982), 44.

14. Vallejo, *Obra poética*, 162.

15. Stephen Hart, “Was César Vallejo Guilty as Charged?,” *Latin American Literary Review* 26, no. 51 (1998): 79–89, at 79.

16. Vallejo, *Epistolario general*, 38.

17. Antenor Orrego, “Prólogo,” in Vallejo, *Trilce*, xv.

18. Armando Zubizarreta, "La cárcel en la poesía de César Vallejo (experiencia, concepción de la vida y poesía)," *Sphinx: Anuario del Instituto de Filología de Lima* 13 (1960): 214–21, at 216.

19. César Vallejo, *The Complete Poetry*, ed. and trans. Clayton Eshleman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 201.

20. *Ibid.*, 283.

21. Vallejo, *Escalas*. This volume of short stories, also printed in the penitentiary shop, is commonly cited as *Escalas melografiadas*, but the actual title is just *Escalas*, as is clear from the book's half-title page. The word "Melografiadas" appears as a subtitle on the book's cover.

22. César Vallejo, *Scales: Melographed*, trans. Joseph Mulligan (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 124.

23. *Ibid.*, 23.

24. *Ibid.*, 24–26.

25. Vallejo, *The Complete Poetry*, 209.

26. Vallejo, *Scales*, 24; I have slightly modified the translation.

27. See website Figure 43.4 at <https://americancontact.princeton.edu/2021/05/trilce/>.