

**“The walls add up to four o’clock” and Other Instances of Time
Applied to Space in César Vallejo’s Trilce Poems.**

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Trilce, a word that means nothing, a word that says less, instead of more, just like every poem in this collection. In his introduction to the Catedra edition of Trilce, Julio Ortega writes that Trilce (Lima, Peru, 1922) is the most radical collection of poetry written in the Spanish language. Ortega then goes on to explain that it is not only its impenetrability that makes it radical, but also its erasure of all referents, clues or evidence, its tendency to make language say everything all over again, as if nothing had ever been said (Ortega 9). These are, indeed, Vallejo’s most hermetic poems, but not hermetic in the symbolic or baroque sense, hermetic precisely because they are radical insofar as they tend to fracture the very codes of language (9). The poet refuses to give anything away and seems to proceed by elimination. The end product is a poem that has shed all wordiness, everything it could do without, leaving only time-space, stripped of everything else.

Trilce, the collection, contains seventy-seven “Trilce” poems. They are numbered with Roman numerals, Trilce I, Trilce II, and so on. The word could very well be a poetic fusion of triste and dulce, sad and sweet, a melody of sorts, what comes in through the ear, music, in the form of time. In his article concerning the notion of time in Trilce, William Rowe writes, “Como premisa para una discusión del tiempo en Vallejo se suele distinguir entre el tiempo cósmico y el tiempo fenomenológico [...] Mi intención aquí es mostrar que la poesía de Vallejo pide una lectura más radical que la que ofrece esta distinción” (297). So a distinction between cosmic time, the a priori necessity, or the pure form of the sensuous intuition, and phenomenological time, or time in its denotative meaning, the non-spatial continuum in which events occur, is insufficient when approaching time in Vallejo’s poetry. Now the question is whether or not this “more radical reading” that Rowe calls for is that of time applied to space.

By using the word applied, I am making reference to different shades of the substantive: attribution, application, relevance, and relation. Time attributed to space, relevant to space, related to space, in space, with space, confused with space, just like the mystery of the word being in God and with God in the beginning of Genesis. And also, the laws of time, and its essence, applied to space. Here, Kant happens to be timely, for he distinguishes those two forms of knowledge and defines one in relation to the other. But why even attempt to apply Kantian formalism to Vallejo’s hysterical time? The answer is straightforward. Because of its clarity and formality, Kant’s definition of time can serve as a solid point of departure. Furthermore, time for Kant is a form of knowing the world, and that, at the very least, remains inalterable.

As to space, it is the representation a priori, pure intuition, all that space suggests, as well as space in all its explicit meanings, those four walls, empty space, occupied space, the thing itself. In other words, space and everything in it, which is also space taking up

space, the poetic voice, the poet himself, and even his time, his body, his emotions bursting out of the seams of space, or being imprisoned by it.

For the sake of beginning with the chosen first principles, a quick overview of Kant's Transcendental Aesthetics. "There are two pure forms of sensuous intuition, as principles of knowledge a priori, namely, space and time," Kant writes in the introduction to his Transcendental Aesthetics (22-23). The philosopher then proceeds to explain that it is by means of the external sense that we represent to ourselves objects as without us, and these all in space. The internal sense, in turn, is the means by which the mind contemplates itself or its internal state, and Kant then states that all that relates to the inward determinations of the mind is represented in relation to time.

What deserves particular notice here is the sense of the in and the out, the within and the without, the inner and the outer, quite reminiscent of the Trilce poems most obviously concerning the prison experience. "Of time we cannot have any external intuition, any more than we can have an internal intuition of space," Kant concludes (23). This is where the philosopher and the poet begin to diverge. Oftentimes Vallejo's aim could very well be to acquire an external intuition of time, and an internal one of space, as in "The walls add up to four o'clock."

Michael Bakhtin sensed this particular need or aspiration in poetics when he wrote, "We will give the name chronotope [from chronos and topos, literally "timespace"] to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). Bakhtin then goes on to explain that the term chronotope was used in mathematics and introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The reason Bakhtin gives for borrowing or appropriating the term is that it expresses the inseparability of time and space. "In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully throughout, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time [...]" (Ibid).

Instances of the chronotope can be found in just about every one of Vallejo's Trilce poems, but I am not going down that road. What I wish to do instead is to go from Kant's formalism, to Bakhtin's mathematical notion, through Vallejo's space-time. In the first tercet of poem I there is an enjambment where Vallejo writes, "[...] seis de la tarde/DE LOS MAS SOBERBIOS BEMOLES" (43). Translated word for word, this verse reads like, "Six o'clock of the most hubridic flats" (as opposed to sharps), or "of the most presumptuous hurdles or obstacles." Since a flat note on a sheet of music suddenly makes the playing more complicated, a bemol or flat often suggests an obstacle. Now the question is what the "DE" means. Is it a genitive? Does the time belong to the hurdles? In this sense time would belong to something spatial. Interpreted as musical notes, however, the bemoles would then proceed from the realm of time, since music is time, and tempo. This instance, in turn, seems to make the six o'clock thicken and take on flesh, as Bakhtin would say. Rowe sheds light on time in its rhythmical acceptation. In his article he quotes J.E. Orme who writes that, "el oído es la principal modalidad

sensorial para la percepción del cambio y del tiempo. El oído solo sitúa vagamente los estímulos en el espacio, pero los sitúa con admirable precisión en el tiempo” (Rowe 298).

Kant, in turn, writes, “[...] we never can imagine or make a representation to ourselves of the non-existence of space, though we may easily think that no objects are found in it” (26). In Vallejo’s poem, it is as if the object found in space were time itself. However, further ahead, Kant writes, “[...] space contains all which can appear to us externally. Time is not an empirical conception, but a necessary representation lying at the foundation of all our intuitions. We cannot think time away from phenomena, but we can represent a time void of phenomena” (28). And suddenly it is as if Vallejo had opened the Critique of Pure Reason and decided to “un-say” everything that it says. In all his Trilce poems, space contains all that can appear to us internally, not externally. As to time, Vallejo strives to make it become an empirical conception and, precisely, to think time away from phenomena.

Poem I is reminiscent of a passage where Bakhtin mentions the Rabelaisian chronotope. “What is at issue here is that special connection between a man and all his actions, between every event of his life and the spatial-temporal world [...] Rabelais’ task is to purge the spatial and temporal world of those remnants of a transcendent world view still present in it” (Bakhtin 167-168). Bakhtin then explains that this polemical task is fused with an affirmative one, that of providing a new chronotope for a new, whole, and harmonious man. In fact, poem I is Rabelaisian in many ways. For one, it begins with human corporeality, and strangely resembles Gargantua’s birth that is portrayed with such precise physiological details. Bakhtin refers to the extraordinary spatial and temporal expanses that leap at us from the pages of Rabelais’ novel (Bakhtin 167). I already alluded to the issue of the connection between man and all his actions, and as it turns out man and all his actions included the corporeality. Bakhtin writes, “The process of digestion, curative machinations, [...] are here united in one dynamic, living, grotesque image. A new and unexpected matrix of objects and phenomena is created [...] the body series, intersects with the defecation series, the food series, and the death series [...]” (Bakhtin 175).

These “SOBERBIOS BEMOLES” that Jean Franco translates as “THE PROUDEST B FLATS” are interpreted by this critic as a crescendo that “[...] is played on a single, monotonous note – the B flat – so that the secret monotony of life thrusts itself to the surface” (Franco 119). However, Vallejo doesn’t seem to have written about B flats, simply flats.

The second line of poem II reads as follows: “Mediodía estancado entre relentes” (Vallejo 48). Here, noon appears to be stuck and stagnating. What we have is time imprisoned in space, and particularly in the four walls of the prison. According to Larrea, the four short verses that precede each tercet suggest these prison walls. (“Tiempo. Tiempo//Era. Era//Mañana. Mañana//Nombre. Nombre.”) (Time.Time//Was. Was//Tomorrow. Tomorrow//Name. Name.) (Larrea 228).

Now back to Kant who writes, “Different times are not coexistent but successive, as different spaces are not successive but coexistent” (Kant 30) . Indeed, it is as if Vallejo were attempting to turn this premise into its exact opposite. Rowe cites one of Vallejo’s poems entitled “Absoluta.” Three lines read as follows: “¡Amor contra el espacio y contra el tiempo!//¡Un latido único de corazón://un solo ritmo: Dios!” Then Rowe concludes that: “Lo que Vallejo todavía no comprende es que el ritmo único es una cárcel, una idea que sí se expresa en Trilce II” (Rowe 298).

Both Rowe and Franco coincide with the idea of monotonous time, for Rowe writes that, “[...] lo aparentemente infinito resulta monótono, vacío. El ritmo en este caso es trocaico, ritmo que suele utilizar Vallejo para encarnar la repetición vacía y monótona, como en el verso de Trilce II, Tiempo. Tiempo” (Rowe 303). It is six o’clock again in poem III, and it is a blind man, Santiago, who is not so much announcing the hour, as offering it. “Da les seis el Viejo Santiago” (Vallejo 51). It was six o’clock in poem I, now it is so in poem III, the two separated by the four walls of time in poem II. In reference to this line Jean Franco writes, “The hour that Santiago calls marks the transition between the daylight hours and night time. We would expect the conscious adult stage to be likened to daytime, as against the child’s preconscious night but everything in the poem suggests the reverse for it is a blind man who presides like a minor deity over the transition from day to night” (Franco 65).

Suddenly in poem IV, time, in this case the afternoon, is seemingly perforating the poet’s head. It reads thus, “mas la tarde – que la bamos a hazer--//se anilla en mi cabeza, furiosamente” (Vallejo 56). The reflexive “se anilla” contains the word “anillo,” ring, but “anillo” as opposed to “sortija,” which are analogous to home opposed to house. An “anillo” is more like the word band in wedding band. However, the word band is devoid of circularity, which anillo certainly has. The poetic voice is transforming the circular object, the ring, into a verb, something that perforates in a circular fashion. Time is boring into space.

Once again, Vallejo negates Kant’s notions of time and space. “Time cannot be any determination of outward phenomena. It has to do neither with shape or position; on the contrary, it determines the relation of representations in our internal state” (Kant 33). Yet, in poem IV time seems to be puncturing the internal state. In the third line of poem V Vallejo writes, “finales que comienzan.” This is definitely a circular as opposed to linear image of time. The gaze is Nietzschean, for it sees time as a circle, an eternal return of the same. Kant’s notions couldn’t be more diametrically opposed, “Since it presents to us no shape or form, we tend to represent the course of time by a line progressing to infinity” (Kant 33).

Time is all the more exacerbated in poem VI when Vallejo writes, “El traje que vestí mañana” (63). Here he catapults time out of its tense and refers to an outfit that he wore tomorrow.

According to Ortega, poem VII is an exploration of time (Ortega 67). Ortega writes that time appears to be something intuited from a street. One could add that the intuition itself begins with a linear image of time, such as the street, and that Vallejo is applying time to space “street,” and then slowly proceeding to annihilate the linearity of time. Instead of

progressing, time turns back to itself, and back again, as if it were not only circular in one direction, but also in the other, both ways. Better yet, there can be absolutely no direction to time. Franco finds that in this same poem:

“[...] there is an illusion of process in space and time [...] But perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the poem is the way that new areas are opened up within the space of the given [...] he is almost trapped within the given, on the well-known street where there is no novelty. And it is at this point in the poem that the subject disappears leaving the street insomniac [...] In other words, time itself does its work, emptying experience [...]” (Franco 130). Ortega explains that the verb *trasmañanar* goes beyond and behind the morning, thus trespassing time itself (67). Concerning Vallejo’s reflections on time in poem VIII Ortega writes that, “[...] se hace aquí gesto exploratorio, hiperbole y paradoja [...]” (71). So time suddenly becomes an exploratory gesture, a hyperbole and a paradox before, as Ortega mentions further on, being deprived of its temporality.

The first eight *Trilce* poems set the pace and, taken as a whole, or as the first eight parts of a whole, they offer a particular notion, image, and even definition of time. Time suddenly ceases to be an internal intuition and becomes something concrete. Six o’clock is not simply a social nicety, it is real, for it can be touched and felt and heard, so much so that it can even hurt. A tangible time, a time that punctures and wounds. The paradox is acceptable. These images resemble a square circle, indeed, an impossibility that cannot be imagined or pictured in the mind, just as fifteen elephants cannot be pictured in the mind, when two elephants can. Perhaps it is just a matter of space, for only the concepts “fit” in there, the concept of eternity, not eternity itself, as well as the concept of fifteen elephants.

Other examples of time applied to space can be found throughout the *Trilce* poems. In poem XI, for example, the very opaque first line of the last verse reads, “tardes años latitudinales” (Vallejo 78) *Tardes* and *años* are side by side, so that literally this reads, “latitudinal afternoons years.” Besides extent, range, and freedom, the word *latitude* also denotes the angular distance north or south of the equator. Here again there could be an attempt to place the time, afternoons years, on the latitudinal globe, space, time as a coordinate, time as a place.

The verse “These walls add up to four o’clock” can be found in poem XVIII that Vallejo wrote while in prison (1920 -1921) and that he read to his friends on the very same day that he was released from prison, according to Espejo Azturizaga (Espejo Asturizaga 103). In the beginning of poem XVIII the poetic voice invokes the four walls of the prison cell, four walls that “irremediably” add up to the same number: “que sin remedio dan al mismo número” (Vallejo 107).

Jean Franco points out that Vallejo was both fascinated and repelled by numbers because they seem to take a life of their own. “For Vallejo what significance they have [numbers] derives from the fundamental patterns of nature. Indeed the numbers one to nine are known as the natural numbers and the first four of them correspond to most elementary patterns [...] and the four points of the compass.” (Franco 133)

To this John Caviglia adds that, “La atormentada meditación sobre el pasado sólo se alivia por breves treguas de animalidad. Pero recíprocamente, la conciencia está encadenada a una inescapable naturaleza corpórea. El símbolo tradicional para el cuerpo en tales casos, una cárcel, también se asocia a la existencia corpórea en Vallejo. El número cuatro, el número de paredes precisas para encarcelar el cuerpo humano en las tres dimensiones del espacio, recurre en Trilce [...] el poema XVIII es el ejemplo más notable” (Caviglia 412).

It is in the third stanza of poem XVIII that the poetic voice says, “si estuvieras aquí, si vieras hasta/que hora son cuatro estas paredes” (Vallejo 107). It is interesting that Vallejo uses the verb to see, not to feel, or to know. To see relates precisely to the external sense, but in this case the poet is alluding to the act of seeing time. He is applying space to time in this instance, then turning around and applying time to space when he says, “until what time these walls are four.” Time and space are being weaved into each other and beginning to form one unit, one utterly comprehensible unit. Jean Franco writes that Vallejo employs a device similar to the Freudian slip in which a cliché does not quite come out correctly. “Instead of que hora son in poem 18, he applies time to space [...] there is a subliminal cliché behind the estranged phrase so that we are led, as it were, to apprehend both the automatic usage and a quite different order of significance” (126). But then Franco quickly draws the following conclusion, “The fact, for instance, that the walls add up to four o’clock in poem 18 illuminates the fact that time is our prison” (Ibid).

Caviglia believes that the poem begins with the physical limitations, the four walls, then immediately proceeds to the sphere of consciousness in the third stanza when the poetic voice alludes to these walls hurting. What are the walls? Caviglia then wonders, “Suponemos que todavía representan el encierro, como en la primera estrofa. Pero ahora los confines deben ser más simbólicos que concretos; dos paredes no pueden encarcelar a un hombre. ¿Y por qué duelen más?” (413). What Caviglia is referring to here are the lines that read, “Ah, las paredes de la celda/De ellas me duele entretanto más/las dos largas que tienen esta noche” (Vallejo 107). Caviglia then comes to the conclusion that four walls imprison a man in space, but two are enough to trap him in time (414). In line four of the last stanza of poem XVIII Vallejo writes: “[...]entre mi donde y mi cuando.” “El dónde y el cuándo definen las limitaciones de Vallejo en en el espacio y en el tiempo. [...] su ‘donde’ no puede salir de las cuatro paredes de la celda, y su ‘cuando’ está atrapado entre las dos paredes del tiempo” (Caviglia 415).

There are many other instances of time applied to space in Trilce. Below are just a few more examples: in poem XXI there is, “Quien le viera:/diciembre con sus 31 pieles rotas” (121). I am surmising that the 31 refers to the 31 days in December. Once again, time, the days, December, applied to something in space, in this case, broken skins. In poem XXIII there are, “las hostias de tiempo” (129). Here, hosts, as in the body of Christ, the wafers meted to communicants. Thus, the body of Christ multiplied, the physicality, the bread of time. In poem XXX a moral judgment is applied to time when the poet speaks of “las dos de la tarde immoral” (157). How can two in the afternoon be immoral? How can time be immoral? But suddenly, and easily, it can. In this same sonnet there is also,

“la dura vida, la dura vida eternal” (Ibid. Is it eternal life that is hard? Or is it life that is eternally hard? In poem XXXI the poet asks, “¿Se luden seis de sol?” (160). This is reminiscent of the Freudian slips to which Jean Franco made reference earlier, for one would expect to read seis de la tarde (six in the afternoon), not six in the sun/of the sun. Time, six, as in o’clock, is being applied to the sun. In fact, one reads and keeps on reading seis de la tarde into the poem. But it is always seis de sol. In poem XXXIII the poet speaks of, “dos badajos inacordes de tiempo/en una misma campana” (167). The clappers are the ones that make the sound. Without them, the bell would be empty. In this case, they are clappers of time, discordant, time has split itself in two, and is prisoner of that one space, inside the bell. In poem LIII there are the obscure and beautiful lines, “Quién clama las once no son doce/Como si las hubiesen pujado, se afrotan/de dos en dos las once veces” (250). According to Neale-Silva the central idea of this poem is that the human mind is an instrument with limited possibilities, and its insufficiencies are indicative of man’s imperfections (223).

However limited, however imperfect, the mind imprisoned in the four walls of the body can give that spatial category a little push, and shifts its zero so that it slightly overlaps with time. Rowe concludes, “Una vez que el tiempo está dividido desaparece la separación entre el tiempo fenomenológico y el tiempo externo o cronométrico, porque el tiempo siempre está fuera de si mismo: los espacios que constituyen las series del tiempo cronométrico, o simplemente las series de los números, llegan a ser equivalentes a los vacíos o divisiones dentro del tiempo del yo” (Rowe 302). The more radical reading of time in Vallejo’s poetry that Rowe suggested earlier can definitely be seen as the time-space union or juxtaposition that Bakhtin puts forth and that Vallejo uses with bolero-like saturation.

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