FOREWORD

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There are poets whose work can be explained, and there are inexplicable poets, like César Vallejo. But being unable to explain does not mean being unable to understand, or that his poems are incomprehensible, totally hermetic. It means that, contrary to our reading of explicable poets, even after we have studied everything about his poems that rational knowledge has to offer—his sources, his techniques, his unique vocabulary, his subjects, his influences, the historical circumstances surrounding the creation of his poems—we remain in the dark, unable to penetrate that mysterious aureole that we feel to be the secret of this poetry's originality and power.

Whether or not a poet is rationally explicable implies nothing about the depth or the excellence of his poetry. Neruda is a great and original poet, and his poetry, even the most obscure, that of *Residencia en la tierra*, is accessible through logical analysis by perceptive critics who know how to follow the text down to its roots, to its deepest core. With Vallejo the opposite happens. Even the poems of his youth—those of *The Black Heralds*, strongly marked by modernism and the avant-garde schools that came after it—have, within their seeming transparency, a nucleus irreducible to pure reason, a secret heart that eludes every effort the rational mind makes to hear it beat.

Vallejo's poetry, for all its references to familiar landscapes and a social and historical milieu, transcends those coordinates of time and space and positions the reader on a more permanent and profound plane: that of the human condition. Which is to say, the existential reality of which the lives of men and women are made: the uncertainty about our origin and our future beyond this earth; the extremes of suffering and desperation that human beings can reach; and also the intensity of our emotions when we are overcome by love, excitement, pity, or nostalgia. But the mystery in his poetry resides not in those existential subjects or states but, rather, in how they take shape in a language that communicates them to the reader directly, more through a sort of osmosis or contagion than through any intelligible discourse.

Vallejo's is a poetry that makes us feel the very fibers of existence, that strips us of all that is incidental and transitory, and confronts us with the essence we have within us: our mortality, the desperate wish to achieve transcendence and somehow to survive death, the skein of absurdities, errors, and confusions that determine our individual destinies.

Clayton Eshleman discovered Vallejo in 1957, while still in college and not yet

fluent in Spanish. As he himself recounts, he has spent a good part of his life reading, studying, and trying to render this poetry in English. He was never satisfied with the results; again and again he revised and polished his versions to achieve an elusive perfection. There is a sort of heroism in his undertaking, like that of those creators in pursuit of a work as beautiful as it is impossible. His case reveals an admirable fidelity to a poet who no doubt changed his life. His tireless loyalty and determination have made possible this edition of the complete poetry of Vallejo in English, perhaps the one that comes closest to the texts of the poet's own hand. Only the dauntless perseverance and the love with which the translator has dedicated so many years of his life to this task can explain why the English version conveys, in all its boldness and vigor, the unmistakable voice of César Vallejo.

TRANSLATED BY ROSE VEKONY