
E. Fowler

**PERU, POETRY OF.** Peru can claim one of the richest and most complex poetic trads. of any Sp. Am. nation. With César Vallejo (1892–1938), it can also take pride in a major 20th-c. poet. Even though there are many splendid anthols. of Peruvian poetry, the sheer volume of Peruvian poetry makes its synthesis a daunting task. Most monographs, like Higgins’s *The Poet in Peru*, limit themselves to a handful of poets. In 1964, when the Argentine literary jour. *Sur*, whose editorial board included Victoria Ocampo and Jorge Luis Borges, asked José Miguel Oviedo to prepare a representative anthol. of contemp. Peruvian poetry, the distinguished literary critic found himself in a challenging situation. He regretted the exclusion of many poets, even as he limited his selection to those whose ages ranged from 25 to 40 and who were active as poets in the 1950s and the 1960s. Since the 1960s, it has been customary in Peru to discuss and organize the poetic production of national poets with the convenient and yet anachronistic criterion of generations; and since the late 19th c., a significant share of critical discussion of Peruvian poetry has focused on the tensions between aesthetic and political imperatives informed by the social and historical dilemmas of the moment.

After the seminal *Antología General de la Poesía Peruana* (General Anthology of Peruvian Poetry, 1957) by Alejandro Romualdo (1926–2008) and Sebastián Salazar Bondy (1924–65)—major Peruvian poets in their own right—comprehensive accounts of Peruvian poetry cannot neglect the poetic trads. of the indigenous peoples of Peru. Aboriginal Peruvian peoples did not have a written lang., and their rich and variegated oral trads. came to the attention of most literary critics through transcriptions and trans. Some of the most important sources of the old lits. were unearthed in the 20th c., such as the poetry transcribed from the Quechua by Felipe Guáman Poma de Ayala (ca. 1535–1616) in *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (*The First New Chronicle and Good Government*, ca. 1615), a fundamental book of Andean culture. These poems include love poetry of seduction and of parental obstacles to the union of star-crossed lovers, which resonate with the concerns of early mod. Eur. lit.

The recognition of indigenous poetry as lit., as opposed to folklore, was made possible by the pioneering work of 20th-c. anthropologists and writers, in particular by José María Arguedas (1911–69), who argued that the belated acknowledgment of this literary corpus was due to the willful repression of indigenous cultures by the descendants of Eur. colonizers. Arguedas was also the ed. and translator of influential anthols. of ancient Peruvian poetry and one of the first Peruvians whose own Quechua poetry was drafted in writing. One of the high points of Arguedas’s literary career, his trans. of the anonymous 18th-c. “elegy” *Apu Inca Atahuallpa* (To the Inca Atahuallpa), expresses the “collective vulnerability of a people suddenly stripped of a destiny,” as Ortega has underscored.

The interest in indigenous Quechua poetry also sparked curiosity about the poetry of indigenous peoples from the Andes who spoke Aymara and of the peoples of the Peruvian Amazonian region. It emboldened some to celebrate popular and refined trads. by other neglected groups. Nicomedes Santa Cruz (1925–92) wrote poetry evoking the Af. rhythms of his own Peruvian speech and made considerable eff orts to disseminate Afro-Peruvian trads., showing how some of them had synthesized popular improvisation and venerable Sp. forms. No literary critic made a more ardent plea in favor of inclusiveness than Cornejo Polar, yet he painfully acknowledged, in his own hist. of Peruvian lit., that he could not “offer an alternative to the traditional typologies of our literary hists., because we lack the critical and historical groundwork to introduce Indigenous and popular contributions into an overview of this kind.”

The acknowledgment of Andean pre-Columbian langs. in Peru’s literary heritage would have felt extraneous to Peruvian poets in the first few decades following the independence of 1821. Not even the Sp.-lang. poetry written during the times of the conquistadors and the Sp. viceroyalty was considered germane to Peruvian lit. until the second half of the 19th c., in a process Cornejo Polar aptly labeled the “nationalization” of the colonial past. Today, no one would exclude the satirical poetry of Juan del Valle y Caviedes (1652–97), who invented a first-person poetic *persona* to expose the shortcomings of Peruvian colonial society; the *epic poetry of Pedro de Peralta Barnuevo* (*El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (1664–1743)); or the *baroque poetry of Juan de Espinosa Medrano* (1632–88) from the *canon of Peruvian lit.;* and acute scholarship in the first decade of the 21st c., by Lasarte and others, has shown the extent to which these writers are central to understanding the gestation of a distinctly Peruvian ethos that precedes the creation of
of written lang. are often in confl ict, but his distor-
tions, silences, and paradoxes. His poetry cannot be analyzed within a single register because he writes in multiple ones and can shift from one to another or operate simultaneously within several in the same poem. In Vallejo, oral expression and the conventions of written lang. are often in confl ict, but his distortions can be moving, and his visual conﬁgurations are often emotionally arresting, as are his auditory effects. His ambiguities and ambivalences, made up of embers and auras of meaning, constitute an affront to reduc-
tive paraphrase. He managed to reinscribe the local and cosmopolitan literary trads. on which he drew. His po-
etry is imbued with feelings of guilt, uncertainty, and intimations that the satisfaction of one's own needs can feel shameful when confronted with the suffering of others. In Los heraldos negros (The Black Heralds, 1919), his first book of poems, Vallejo faces his theological demons, expressing a tragic vision in which sexuality and sin are one and the same. With Trieste (1922), he still longs for attachment and is nostalgic for family bonds but no longer relies on the rhet. of religion to address his angst, reaching his most persuasive experimental heights. In his posthumous books España, aparta de mí este cáliz (Spain, Take This Cup from Me, 1937), and Poemas humanos (Human Poems, 1939), his poetry of collective anguish and compassion is expressed with a keener historical awareness and a nettled attentiveness to cosmopolitan concerns. While some have branded Vallejo’s most difficult poetry as densely hermetic or as a challenge to the logos of Western culture, others have argued that his difficulties are an aperture into the indigenous soul of the Andean peoples. Vallejo’s complete poetry exists in a trans. that the Am. poet Clayton Eshleman took five decades to complete.

As with the poetry of Vallejo, the Peruvian avant-garde made serious attempts to engage with the indigenous. The tensions and contradictions between modernity and trad. informed urgent intellectual discussions of the time. In addition to Amauta, the most influential jour. in Peruvian lit. hist., it is important to cite the Boletín Titikaka (1926–30), ed. by the brothers Arturo (1897–1969) and Alejandro Peralta (1899–1973). Both jour. made efforts to engage the integration of popular culture and avant-garde cosmopolitanism, giving way to the poetic impulses that were to follow in authors such as César A. Rodríguez (1889–1972), Alberto Hidalgo (1897–1967), Guillermo Mercado (1906–83), Xavier Abril (1905–90), Alejandro Peralta, and most notably Águedas. There was also an avant-garde current oriented to the populist Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana or APRA, the most enduring of all political parties in 20th-c. Peru, which produced important poets such as Magda Portal (1900–89).

In a period concerned with the impact of new information technologies, the star of Carlos Quendo de Amar (1905–36) has been rising. His 5 metros de poetas (5 Meters of Poetry, 1927) is considered the first Peruvian multimedia poem in which the written word plays with the conventions of x-ray photography, cinema, and advertising. Its 28 pages unfold into a single continuous sheet over four meters long, and some of its pointed effects depend on the visual disposition of the type (see concrete poetry, typography, visual poetry). Two major poets brought *surrealism to Peru, César Moro (1903–55) and Emilio Adolfo Westphalen (1911–2001). Moro, who signed one of the surrealists’ manifestos, wrote poetry of unbound desire, unrestrained transgression, and pain. La tortuga ecuestre (The Equestrian Turtle, 1938–39) is his most important book in Sp. He also wrote poetry in Fr. now included in Eur. anthols. of surrealistic poetry. Westphalen has summarized the gist of his poetic appeal: “After reading Moro one feels trampled under foot and crushed by the beasts of love—inconsolable from the infernal breath that spews out of love and beauty. These demented extremes unleash the lightning that unites, destroys and regenerates.” Westphalen’s best known books are Las islas extranas (Strange Islands, 1933) and Abolición de la muerte (Abolition of Death, 1935). More measured than Moro’s, his poetry is concerned with death as it delves into the painful obscurities of love, silence, and the unconscious. Another major figure, Martín Adán (1908–85), was a master of traditional poetic forms as well as *free verse. A hermetic poet with mystical urges (see hermeticism), he was skeptical that lang. could give relief to the quiet anguish of an introverted poetic persona who struggles with mundane desires against the deterioration of the body and the fragility of the mind.

In the second half of the 20th c., one of the great figures of Peruvian poetry is Carlos Germán Belli (b. 1927), best known for his remarkable mastery of the traditional forms of Sp. and Fr. poetry, as he addresses the anguish and alienation of contemp. urban life. Jorge Eduardo Eielson (1924–2006) began his career as a poet deconstructing Western myths and Christian images, but he purified his poetry, divesting it of its engagements with trad., in a dialogue with his activities as a visual artist. In the 1960s, Eielson became intrigued with the quipu, a pre-Columbian object made of strings and knots whose purpose is the stuff of speculation. Eielson reduced the quipu to a single knot, which became the central object of his most important paintings, installations, and final poems. As Padilla has pointed out, Eielson aimed to deconstruct lang. in order to reconnect with matter, and the knot suggests his lingering attachments to Peru.

Blanca Varela (1926–2009) was a major literary figure. In meticulous poems, her secure lyrical voice explores intense emotions without a hint of sentimentality but with a tone that can sometimes be playful and even parodic. Her poetry conveys with sights and sounds, music and the visual arts, and is often set in a nondescript urban context; but she has also created a lyrical geography that loosely evokes the coast of Lima as it is situated between the sky and the sand, near the sea. Her lyrical word abounds with homes and gardens populated by flowers, animals, insects, and ghosts. Varela transgresses the semantic conventions of the lang., and to some commentators, these transgressions have suggested the disjointedness of surrealism. Her images, however, are neither surrealistic nor impenetrable. Her poetry is not hermetic. She fashioned distinct patterns of signification. Images like “hacer la luz aunque cueste la noche” (to make light even if it costs the night) are paradoxes that reflect one of the central themes of her poetry: the relationship between the light of perception and the dark force of memory. Among Varela’s contemporaries one could cite Javier Sologuren (1921–2004), Raúl Destua (1921–2005), José Ruiz Rosas (b. 1928), Pablo Guevara (1930–2006), Juan Gonzalo Rose (1928–85), and Washington Delgado (1927–2003). Javier Heraud (1942–63) is the legendary poet killed as a guerrilla fighter before he could fulfill the prom-
ise of his flowing, seductive lyrical style. With a post-Whitmanesque ease, the poetry of Antonio Cisneros (b. 1942) addresses social concerns and hist, and brings a sense of presence through the sensual evocation of taste and smells. With the publication of his El libro de Dios y de los húngaros (The Book of God and the Hungarians, 1978), Cisneros surprised some readers by his conversion to Catholicism, without renouncing his socialist convictions. Rodolfo Hinostroza (b. 1941) captures the esoteric and occultist bent of Peruvian poetry of the 1960s with a New Age embrace of Eastern cultures and of Sigmund Freud. César Calvo (1940–2000) was admired for his love of beauty, compassion for the bereft, exploration of intense experiences, and idealization of the Amazon region. Other significant poets of this period are Luis Hernández (1941–77), Julio Ortega (b. 1942), Mirko Lauer (b. 1947), and Marco Martos (b. 1941).

Toro Montalvo’s anthol. Poesía Peruana del 70 (Peruvian Poetry of the 70s, 1991) underscores the impact for poetry of the 1968 military coup by General Juan Velasco Alvarado and of a new cultural sensibility informed by pop music, chicha (a fusion of the indigenous huayno and the cumbia), and salsa. An influential group in the 1970s was the Hora Zero movement, which brought together Enrique Verástegui (b. 1950), Jorge Pimentel (b. 1944), Jorge Nájar (b. 1946), Carmen Ollé (b. 1947), and Túlio Mora (b. 1948). Other significant poets of that moment are Abelardo Sánchez León (b. 1947), Elqui Burgos (b. 1946), José Watanabe (1946–2007), and Mario Montalbetti (b. 1953).

In the 1980s, the belated feminist movement of Peru made decisive inroads in poetry. Giovanna Pollaro (b. 1952) and Mariela Dreyfius (b. 1960) confronted Peruvian machismo with a sense of freshness and irony. Patricia Alba (b. 1960), Rosella de Paollo (b. 1960), and Rocío Silva-Santisteban (b. 1963) explored dimensions of female sensuality that Peruvian poetry had previously shunned. It was also a period marked by the impact of the Shining Path terrorist movement and by the dirty war that ensued. Among the most notable poets of this time, one could cite Oswaldo Chanove (b. 1953), Carlos López Degregori (b. 1952), Alonso Ruiz Rosas (b. 1959), Eduardo Chirinos (b. 1960), José Antonio Mazzotti (b. 1961), Roger Santiváñez (b. 1956), and Magdalena Chocano (b. 1957).

The anthol. of Peruvian poetry Los relojes se han roto (The Clocks Are Broken, 2005) includes poets who grew up in a climate of terrorist follow and the corruption of President Alberto Fujimori’s regime. These poets include José Carlos Yrigoyen (b. 1976), Montserrat Álvarez (b. 1969), and Christyan Zegarra (b. 1971), who stands out for his renewal of Vallejo’s jogged undertones to express the despair of a society unable to process psychological and physical trauma in the uncertain cosmopolitanism of the mod. world.

See INDIGENOUS AMERICANS, POETRY OF THE; SPANISH AMERICA, POETRY OF.
