# “You Are Hurtful”: Seymour Mayne’s Post-War Elegy to the Spanish Civil War

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Seymour Mayne’s poem “Spain, You Hurt Me” was first published 1995 in Nicola Vulpe’s collection of Canadian poetry on the Spanish Civil War, *Sealed in Struggle*, where it appeared alongside two other Spanish Civil War poems from the contemporary Canadian poet, “Madrid Evening” and “Parrots, Generals.” It was republished in Mayne’s 1997 collection *Dragon Trees*. It is an elegy to the Spanish Civil War, particularly to the defeat of the Republican forces by Francisco Franco’s fascist coalition. Upon performing a close reading of this poem, I will argue that the poem illustrates the international experience of mourning for Spain, and that this grief is situated in the Second World War. My argument will work through the temporal and geographic cues in the poem, and what Spain represents in the cries of the poem’s speaker. I will analyze how the poem relates to the Peruvian poet César Vallejo, author of the poem’s epigraph, and how it exceeds his biography to become a more general poem of mourning for a lost cause.

Mayne’s poem starts with an epigraph that reads like a warning: “Beware of those who love you! / Beware of your heroes! / Beware of your dead!” cries the translated voice of César Vallejo. This epigraph appears in both publications of the poem. Mayne quotes from a poem in Vallejo’s collection “Spain, Take This Cup From Me.” I will discuss Vallejo’s biography and significance later in the piece. For now, I want to remark that Vallejo’s words give Mayne’s poem an uneasy tone, in the sense that the ominous meaning of “beware” seems to contrast with the encouraging and cooperative language of solidarity employed in most Spanish Civil War literature, propaganda and slogans. Vallejo’s use of

anaphora–the repetition of beware–makes his warnings even more insistent. When read alongside Mayne's poem as a whole, the epigraph speaks to a persistent threat: even our dead and our loved ones are sources of risk and causes for caution. Given this threat, what kind of community can be built or–in the aftermath of the Republican defeat–recovered? The epigraph sets the scene for the poem's tone of pervasive loss.

Following up on the heightened sense of tension Vallejo's anaphora builds, the poet speaks up: "Spain, you hurt me— / said the poet—" (1-2). The words are said by the poet, not written; later in the poem, "Spain, you are hurtful" is "uttered" rather than written (8-9). The poet's death echoes the deaths of Federico García Lorca and John Cornford, who were both killed early in the Spanish Civil War. Their deaths were doubly tragic: they lost their lives to fascism, and we lost their words. Their unwritten poetry died with them, just as this poet's words remain unwritten. The loss of poetry occurs simultaneously with the loss of life, and this loss is tripled when we account for the Republican loss of the Spanish Civil War. This poem asserts a sense of grief by emphasizing these multiple levels of loss.

In contrast to Lorca and Cornford, this poet dies in France, not Spain. I read this geographical shift as a temporal one as well: a shift from the Spanish Civil War to the Second World War. For Canada and other Western nations, the Second World War began on the heels of the Spanish Civil War. Canadian attention, energy, money, and manpower were redirected to combating Hitler. The anti-fascist networks were either exhausted by the Spanish defeat or redirected to fighting fascism across Europe. A poet who wrote for, fought for, or supported the Republicans in Spain could easily find himself fighting and dying in France soon after.

The poet's death has some resonances with the death of César Vallejo. Vallejo himself was a Peruvian poet who worked in Spain and France during the Spanish Civil War. He died of natural causes in Paris, France, in April of 1938. In fact, Mayne writes to Vulpe that "Spain, You Hurt Me" "was written with Vallejo in mind" (Vulpe 220). But the difference between Vallejo's final moments and the poet's final moments troubles this biographical reading, and offers the opportunity to read the poem beyond Vallejo's story. Reportedly, Vallejo's final words were "I am going to Spain! I want to go to Spain!" (Eshleman xxvii). Compare this to the poet's final words: "Spain, you hurt me…Spain, you are hurtful" (1, 8). This difference is a significant one. Vallejo's last call to Spain was one of support and hope; the poet's last call to Spain is one of accusation and perhaps even betrayal. The different affective registers with which they call to Spain speak to who and what Spain is at the moment the word is uttered: in the moment of Vallejo's death, the war was still ongoing. Spain was a community that needed support and a site of resistance. His desire for Spain is a desire to be in a place and to fight with a people. In contrast, Mayne's poet addresses Spain as a source or enactor of harm. While Vallejo wanted to go to Spain, Spain is something that the poet flees from. The Spain of Vallejo is not the Spain of the poet, and so the poet and Vallejo are not easily equated.

This difference lends itself to my temporal reading of "Spain, You Hurt Me" as situated after the Spanish war's end. The Spain of the poem, which causes hurt, is the event of the Spanish Civil War. More specifically, it is the event of Republican defeat. Vulpe argues that for Canadian poets, Spain "became practically synonymous with the war, or more accurately, with the issues being decided there: its ideological and international significance"

(21). In the case of "Spain, You Hurt Me," a Canadian poet (Mayne) is inspired by a Peruvian poet (Vallejo) to write about an unnamed, nationless poet dying in France. This international context obscures Spain itself–that is, the national community of cultural and political groups that changed so radically within the decade of the 1930s. When the poet utters, "Spain, you are hurtful," he is not laying this accusation on the citizens of Spain, whose lives and communities are in upheaval (8). The poet is hurt by the failure *in* Spain, and by all the ideological and international loss that Spain stands for.

This painful sense of loss is a persistent one. The poet invokes Spain in the present: "Spain, you are hurtful, / he uttered" (8-9). The assertion that Spain is, in the poet's present moment, hurtful, pushes the reader to reread the poem's first line. The declaration "Spain, you hurt me" does not clearly locate the injury in the past or the present, but the second address to Spain is decidedly present tense (1). Pain and grief persist beyond the initial moment of defeat and into the present moment. Furthermore, this loss extends beyond the borders of Spain and is felt internationally, "in the compromised // republican soil / of France" (12-14). The description of "legs / that flee from the killing / grounds" suggests that the poet has put Spain behind him, geographically and temporally (4-6), and been driven by the Spanish Civil War into new territory. Like Spain's designation as hurtful, the act of fleeing is ongoing–the legs are still fleeing, though they are located in the space of France. This indicates the ongoing threat of Fascist aggression, which carried forward from Spain into France at the conclusion of the Spanish Civil War. The source of hurt–fascist victory and aggression–transgresses the borders of Spain's temporal and geographical space

The poem works as elegy because it embraces this transgression. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, Karen Weisman argues that the elegy "in the more contemporary sense as the framing of loss" falls "[b]etween the extremes of life and death, joy and sorrow, the receding past and the swiftly moving present" (1). In this sense, "Spain, You Hurt Me" works as elegy. The poet carries the loss of the war into his present moment, into a different geo-political time and space. The poem sits at the intersection of life and death and grapples with the pain of living with loss. Death carries forward, and the poet's death speaks to the significance of Spain's loss–it is too much, it is unbearable, it is overwhelming.

The final lines of the poem gesture to international politics during and after the Spanish Civil War: "the compromised // republican soil / of France" (12-14). France is a republic, but it is not Republican in the sense that Spain was Republican–its status as republic did not mean it supported the Republican cause. Mayne's use of a small-r republican speaks to this shift in meaning. The term "compromised" is more ambiguous. France's republican soil, founded in the republican sense on revolutionary slogans of freedom, equality and brotherhood, is compromised by France's non-interventionist stance that left Republican Spain unsupported during the war. Post-war, France's soil became further compromised by Nazi occupation. Recalling my argument that Spain, in the poem, signifies the loss in Spain, it also signifies Fascist victory. The loss of Spain carries forward in the form of Fascist aggression. Spain is hurtful in that it results in further violence perpetrated by Fascism, and further death in France and around the world. The poem's invocation of France–a central battlefield in the Second World War–as a site of death and burial resonates with the Second World War.

"Spain, You Hurt Me" is a heavy poem. From Vallejo's epigraph to the poet's death, it attends to the irreconcilable grief over the end of the Spanish Civil War. Historically, there was little space for the world to grieve for Spain, as the Second World War further consumed the attention and the lives of international citizens. Mayne's poet invokes Spain with simple, angry words as he dies in France, and as such he stands in for this grief, carried forward beyond borders and into the next conflict.

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