

## Review / Reseña

González, Carlos Varón. *La retirada del poema: literatura hispánica e imaginación*. Madrid: Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2020.

**Michelle Clayton**

Brown University

A few years ago, when I was teaching a Comparative Literature seminar that included Roberto Bolaño's 1998 novel *Los detectives salvajes* (in Natasha Wimmer's 2007 translation), class discussion took a surprising turn. We had reached the end of the novel, and students were debating how to read the three images with which the novel infamously ends. "Aren't the dotted lines of the final box a perforation?" asked a performance studies major. "And if so, isn't that an invitation to push it through?" Before the horrified, mesmerized eyes of the entire class, the student proceeded to push bit by bit at the textual window, until the rectangle finally gave way, revealing on the page behind it the truncated phrase, "But there isn't any work."

This is an entirely accidental alignment, taking place only in the translation—in that particular material instance of the book—and relying on the polyvalence of the word "work" in English as both labor and artwork (The original reads "Pero aquí no hay trabajo," and I don't dare poke through the window of my copy in Spanish to see what lies behind it). Yet the accident gets to the heart of a question teased out over the course of Carlos Varón González's rigorous, illuminating study, *La retirada del poema: Literatura hispánica e imaginación política moderna*: what is the relation of poetry to action,

to labor, and to work, in a public realm torn apart and reconfigured under conditions of dictatorship, totalitarianism, exile, and neoliberalism? What is the relation between theories and practices of poetry? How does the poetic interlock with or mirror the political? And what is at stake in what Varón González presents, paraphrasing Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, as the “retirada del poema”? An abjuration of poetry? A withdrawal from the public? A withdrawal from production as a political gesture or statement? As Varón González signposts from the outset of his study, his aim is to probe the ways in which Spanish-language poetry, beginning with the Spanish Civil War, questions and assesses its space of operation within the public realm. In the examples he traces, this often involves a withdrawal, a *via negativa*, putting an absence in the place of an expected presence, refusing to fill in a blank (if sometimes inviting a reader or interlocutor to do just that; 148). But it might also, as his study repeatedly emphasizes, be cast in the positive sense as a retreat, a “retrait” or a re-tracing, stepping aside in order to question the present but also to make space for the emergence of a different future.

If there are numerous counter-examples of poetic abundance that likely spring to mind in the period traced, and if poets themselves would likely disagree with the political pay-off of a retreat from poetry, *La retirada del poema* is candid about its intent to trace an alternative narrative of experiment interlocking the poetic and the political across poetry, philosophy, diaries and novels from the 1930s through the 2000s. It does so within the parameters laid out by Hannah Arendt in her 1958 study *The Human Condition*—an essay that continues while critically transforming Heidegger’s thoughts on the political—and further developed by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy in a series of writings gathered in the 1983 volume *Le retrait du politique*. These four figures act as Virgilian guides through a book that is admirably lucid in its punctual conjoining of political theory and poetic analysis. Varón González’s study is as much a sounding of the former as of the latter, but it is remarkably mindful of its reader, carefully unpacking nuanced discussions in political theory to demonstrate how these impinge upon and illuminate the turns of poetry in the twentieth century. After an introduction that walks the reader through unfolding conceptual configurations of the political in the above-mentioned philosophers and their sources and commentators (from Walter Benjamin to Wendy Brown, Carl Schmitt to Jacques Rancière), the book presents case studies of writers—César Vallejo, María Zambrano, Max Aub, Gabriel Ferrater, Roberto Bolaño—who put rhetorical and practical pressure on the relation between aesthetics and politics. These figures and their works are threaded together not by way of

genealogy or telos but as a series of windows onto an evolving question, marked by the specificity of their material, sociological, and biographical contexts. Indeed, the writers discussed all connect to a variety of contexts, the result of various kinds of forced or voluntary displacement, external or internal exiles, political, economic, and ethnic injustices. All have also, to varying degrees, a tangential relationship to Spain, making the book a signal contribution to peninsular studies, actively considered from positions both inside and out. But in its range of movement, its flexible tracing of its subjects' attachments across France, Spain, Latin America, and the Caribbean, and its nimbleness in moving between French, German, Spanish, and North American philosophy and critical theory, the book's reach and import extend far beyond the peninsula, opening up onto a much broader probing of the relation between poetry and the political across the catastrophes that puncture the previous century and our own.

The first chapter of *La retirada del poema* is divided between an analysis of Vallejo's Spanish Civil War cycle, *España, aparta de mí este cáliz* (published posthumously in 1939), and Zambrano's series of writings on Antigone, written in exile between 1948 and 1967. Both writers, in Varón González's lapidary analysis, turn obsessively to the question of death and the possibility of regeneration: Vallejo in his imaginings of a collective gathered around and galvanized by a sacrificial corpse, Zambrano in her meditations on loss, which weave together questions of nationhood, politics, family, and gender. For both, poetic writing articulates a possibility—a compossibility—of community and restitution, and in both, this is filtered through a secularized Christian cosmivision which articulates a moment of transition. Varón González helpfully unpacks a concatenation of what might appear to be contradictory concepts with the assistance of Sean Kelly and Hubert Dreyfus' reading of Christ as articulatory figure, Charles Taylor's notion of a secular age, and Arendt's delineation of sovereignty.

The second chapter occupies itself with Max Aub's *Diario de Djelfa* (first published 1944; definitive edition 1970), a volume registering Aub's imprisonment in an Algerian concentration camp. As Varón González deftly shows, the poetry bears witness both to disorientation and to a countervailing charged sensorial investigation, as the subject struggles to make sense of a place whose coordinates are denied or delayed; parallels with contemporary poetry emerging from Guantánamo will leap to many readers' minds. The poetry analyzed in this chapter has an extraordinary charge in its bareness, at once documentary and lyrically generative of sense and meaning; some readers will wish more time had been spent unpacking its modes. Varón González chooses instead to follow the documentary rather than poetic thread, with an extended

consideration of the six photographs included in the volume, raising questions about the imagination of the unimaginable that are nonetheless wisely illuminated by parallel discussions of the ontological and ethical status of the photograph in novels by WG Sebald and theoretical writing by Georges Didi-Hubermann, not to mention the contrasting modes of the films *Sboah* and *Schindler's List*. The reader is given an unsettling place in this chapter, as a “ghostly” presence eavesdropping on an experience from which they are mercifully excluded.

In the book's third chapter, Catalan poet Gabriel Ferrater's “Poema inacabat” (1966/68) becomes the occasion for a meditation on poetry and incompleteness. In this calculatedly long poem (the text itself refers to reaching line 1334 before issuing itself a lightly sarcastic “Happy sailing!”), cast as a letter to a younger lover who is a student in Barcelona, Ferrater combines references to medieval romance (Chrétien de Troyes is the subject of an exam being sat by the student) with present occupations, including the writing of poetry, which garners neither laurels nor riches. As Varón González elucidates, the poem bristles with references to Spain's development of tourism in what would turn out to be the final throes of dictatorship, and the poet/lyric subject's ironic references to his own unproductiveness (in terms of anything that might be of use for or translate into capital) are carefully interwoven with commentaries on professionalism but also maturity. A sticking point of the relationship traced in the poem is the age difference between the lovers: the poet who might be expected to have learned how to turn a pursuit into a profession is set against the young student whose growing cultural capital is carving out new possibilities for female subjects. As one sinks, the other rises; and, indeed, a question that seems to emerge from this configuration is whether poetry is better left to the young.

This is the question that haunts the book's fourth and final chapter, on the novelist Roberto Bolaño, who as a young writer in the 1970s devoted himself to poetry, but by the 1990s was fully committed to narrative, albeit via novels that tended to revolve around poetry. Varón González discusses several of these, particularly *Monsieur Pain* (which narrates the enigmatic death of Vallejo in Paris), *The Savage Detectives* (which features a neo-avant-garde collective in the 1970s and their experiments with recovering the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s), and *Amulet* (the monologue of Auxilio Lacouture, assistant to now-anachronistic Spanish exiled poets and self-described “mother” or midwife to the poets emerging stuttering from the subways and cafés of the present). Like many current critics of *The Savage Detectives*, Varón González opts for a melancholy reading of its presentation of poetry, which is either absent (the poems

we never see the poets producing), displaced (the visual poems of Cesárea Tinajero, which may simply be a joke), from other times (the reproduced or cited poems of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Efrén Rebolledo), or deferred (the gaps left for yet-unwritten poetry in the magazine put together by Quim Font). Critics and creative writers inevitably read the novel in different ways: where the former perceive melancholy, nostalgia, and absence, the latter delight in the novel's performance of a present-tense, often precarious community. And, indeed, in the face of the enthusiasm expressed in the novel, any poetry reproduced would inevitably disappoint; how could any writer produce a poem to match what García Madero has just praised as "the best poem I had ever heard"? But *La retirada del poema* productively restages this question with relation to the neoliberal public sphere, in sequences taking place in publisher's offices, at book fairs, in a desultory duel on a beach where no one seems capable of either acting or discerning what is at stake. Friendships, nonetheless, emerge from these unlikely spaces and carry their actors beyond the stage of writing poetry, which for Bolaño does appear irredeemably associated with youth, less for its energy than for its hopefulness.

The question ringing in this reader's ears throughout the various chapters is one cited at the end of the introduction, Friedrich Hölderlin's "Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?" (*what are poets for in a time of lack?*, from the 1801 elegy *Bread and Wine*). Although it might seem that Varón González's answer would be a negative one, focused on the political stakes of the withdrawal of poetry, what his painstaking analyses of both poems and their poets reveal is that poetry insistently foments a mode of engagement, reaches outside itself toward a reader. The withdrawal modeled here is less Martín Adán's "Poesía se está callada, / escuchando a su propia voz" ("La piedra absoluta," 1966) than WH Auden's too-often truncated formulation "For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives, / . . . a way of happening, a mouth" ("In Memory of WB Yeats," 1939). Or, as Varón González puts it in a surprisingly candid and moving conclusion, "Y si la temporalidad del poema en retirada, cómo leemos el poema en retirada, es otra a la lectura y la escritura modernas de un poema presente, autosuficiente y total? Y si, contra Arendt, no hay tanto entre el poema y el campo de labranza? . . . El texto se dirige a un lector y dirige su lectura del poema; en cada lectura, el sujeto del poema cobra una nueva articulación" (205-206). In a disarming rearticulation of his own reading—developed and modified, like all projects of dissertation-into-book, over many years and against shifting backdrops that impinge on the activity of reading and writing in unpredictable ways—Varón González, writing his conclusion in the still pre-pandemic early 2020, insists that "los poemas que he leído en este libro necesitan ser recordados,

compartidos, diseminados, descompuestos y recompuestos una y otra vez. Solo si lo hacen, puede la poesía, la poesía como *obra*, permanecer” (206). By nature or by inclination unfinished, poetry leaves work for the reader, reminding us insistently of the work that remains—that, to paraphrase Vallejo one more time, “hay, hermanxs, muchísimo que hacer.”