



Vol. 10, No. 3, Spring 2013, 471-478

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Clayton, Michelle. *Poetry in Pieces: César Vallejo and Lyric Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 2011.

The Shifting Locations of Poetry

Sarah Ann Wells

University of Notre Dame

Poetry in Pieces: César Vallejo and Lyric Modernity, Michelle Clayton's exhilarating new book, intervenes simultaneously in two fields until recently mutually exclusive: modernist studies in the Anglophone academy and the Latin American *vanguardias*. Vallejo requires us to inhabit both contexts, Clayton argues. Engaging non-Latin Americanist modernists, she asks them to tune in to Vallejo's writings as a neglected site of wrestling with the lyric and modernity. But she also wants to bring Latin Americanists to the table, working against the idea of Vallejo as either

aesthetic exception or (per earlier critics) the voice of an ethnic or national collective. While the book is an exhaustive study of Vallejo's poetry and journalism, it also positions the canonical author as an occasion to explore a prismatic relationship to the avant-gardes.

The result is one of the best examples of the kind of theoretically-informed, descriptive works of "other" modernisms that Euro-Americanists have been—a bit belatedly, from the perspective of many Latin Americanists—calling for. New work—for example, *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, published a year after Clayton's book—suggests that there are increasing opportunities to compare our field to additional sites beyond the Latin America/Paris trajectory. In this sense, one could imagine this book equally at home in graduate courses on the Latin American *vanguardias* and on transnational modernisms. As academic departments continue to insist upon the national or regional to circumscribe scholarly identities, *Poetry in Pieces* traces the contours of alternative routes within the academy; routes that scholars of the *vanguardias* can find already sketched out within our objects of study, Clayton suggests, if we read closely—that is to say, historically—enough.

Movement is the key trope that traverses Vallejo's biographical and poetic experience and thus the book itself. *Poetry in Pieces* pivots between two contexts, Peru and Paris, where Vallejo wrote the poems and *crónicas* analyzed in the book. It proceeds in chronological fashion, but continues to shuttle back and forth as it traces Vallejo's production from the late teens through late thirties, capturing the juxtapositions, circulations, and (by no means equal) dialogue between the two sites. In this sense, Vallejo's *transeúnte*, which Clayton analyzes in the last two chapters of the book, becomes a figure for both a poet and reader in constant motion, contextually grounded yet relentlessly mobile. Clayton's Vallejo emerges in the context of the multiple European and Latin American movements with which he enacted a tentative, fraught dialogue throughout the interwar period.

The first three chapters of *Poetry in Pieces* focus on Peruvian works, while the last three treat the journalistic and poetic production of the Parisian years beginning in 1923—although, as Clayton is careful to

underscore, Peru never really disappears. In the first half of the book, she traces the shifts and convergences between *Los heraldos negros* (1919) and *Trilce* (1922) in the context of debates on the status of both the nation and poetry in early twentieth-century Peru. Shuttling between large theoretical problems and close readings of the poems, Clayton shows us a Vallejo who is neither exceptional nor easily aligned with his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. On the one hand, she shows how his poetry resists the ascription, often attributed to it, as a voice of the nation, *raza*, or working classes. Rather than a speaking *for*, the lyric constitutes for Vallejo a restless staging or essaying of different and at times cacophonous conversations and arguments. She contrasts these “multiple and shifting,” “full-bodied” attachments and voices with the neo-romantic thrust towards an apparently seamless identification between regional or national body and poetic voice that we find in many of his contemporaries, both critics and poets (epitomized by Neruda). What emerges is an alternative mode for thinking about voice, a poetic category inextricably enmeshed with the political in the Peruvian context and, later, in the leftist struggles of 1930s Europe.

Of particular note is Chapter 3, which explores how guano, which in Peru bears the traces of colonial and neo-colonial economies, becomes a material and metaphoric site for Vallejo’s strategic redemption of the unproductive in *Trilce*. While his contemporaries in Latin America may have emphasized eating (a postcolonial digestion of the center), Clayton shows, Vallejo considers the politics and poetics of shitting. The lyric subject here emerges less as a master of material than as the site for the transmutation of waste into something else: poetry. Here and elsewhere, while paying homage to Jean Franco’s seminal study of Vallejo (*The Dialectics of Poetry and Silence*), Clayton argues convincingly that his poetics, especially in *Trilce* and the *Poemas humanos*, represents less an aesthetics of disillusionment and despair than a carving out of a new possibility for poetry with and through the experiences of pleasure and pain.

Chapter 4 functions as a hinge of sorts between Paris and Peru, exploring the dialogue between Vallejo and Mariátegui in the context of

international avant-garde debates on the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Both writers were particularly interested in the medium of film, in its ability to traverse global spaces and to engage with different audiences/reading publics; in its operation of montage, film also emerges as a formal model. In addition, both writers shared with many of their contemporaries a fascination with Chaplin, who pops up at different moments in *Poetry in Pieces* as a figure who melds humor, spontaneity, solidarity, and bodily suffering. Here, Clayton joins a burgeoning group of Latin Americanist scholars (including Jason Borge and John Kraniasukas) of transnational Chaplins; in a compelling twist, she suggests that for Vallejo, Chaplin's universalized proletarian body also provided a means of questioning the racialization of his own body by Mariátegui and others.

Also of note is her close attention to Vallejo's *crónicas* as a way of understanding the shifts that his poetry undergoes from *Trilce* to the posthumously published *Los poemas humanos*. In Chapter 5, she analyzes his journalistic sketches, written for Peruvian and Parisian publications throughout the 1920s, on a dizzying array of topics. Providing an alternative "to utopian narratives of Paris as cultural capital in the interwar years," Vallejo's own experiences with poverty and exclusion become the central object. As a result, the body, rather than language, becomes the center of his poetry, increasingly linked to economic structures that produce and condition it. Speech is still present here, as the body was in the chapters on *Trilce*, but what shifts is a question of emphasis. As a hinge or pivot between two quite different periods of his poetic production, she argues, this ephemeral collection of writings and the experience it encrypts are more fundamental in shaping the changes we find in his 1930s poetry than the exclusive focus on his discovery of Marxism would allow. Vallejo's poetry, she argues, "recognizes that it writes of and to the other who cannot read it" (213). Anchored in the body and in personhood—as opposed to the individual—his work points to the impossibility of containing the heterogeneous figure of the masses or collective, while also eschewing the sovereignty of bourgeois individualism.

Throughout, Clayton shows how the body emerges in a poetics that refuses to consider poetry a monadic, rarified space and instead functions

as an interface, a permeable membrane for history. This, in turn, productively contaminates the reader: in a nod to Brecht, she cranes her neck, stops up short, scratches her head over Vallejo's contortions, is forced to reflect upon her own position and that of the poet's in the poem's multiple interruptions. Indeed, in addition to the compelling readings of the poems, the book is striking for Clayton's subtle foregrounding of her own labor as a reader/critic, a labor with which we must all take on, she insists, when reading Vallejo.

Clayton's interventions into the fields of Vallejo studies, the *vanguardias*, and global modernisms, are multiple. In its emphasis on loops, relays, and modes of relation, *Poetry in Pieces* clearly recalls the work of Vicky Unruh (who asked us to think of the Latin American avant-gardes in terms of encounters, rather than textual objects), and Fernando Rosenberg (who brought the circuits of globalization theory to bear upon a similar corpus). But Clayton's readings are at once closer and more intertextual. On the one hand, as a single author study anchored in close readings of notoriously difficult poems—among them, “Telúrica y magnética,” “Un hombre pasa con un pan al hombro,” “Considerando en frío, imparcialmente”—it excels in detailed analyses of Vallejo's corporeal worlds, where the micrological processes of bodies (human and otherwise) are listened to and felt. Given the difficulty of his poetry, Vallejo might appear to court a fetishistic approach to textual analysis. Instead, writing with Adorno (and with contemporary Adornian scholars like Rob Kaufman), Clayton finds history in Vallejo's lyric precisely where we don't expect it, where it does not seem to insist upon clear-cut referents but operates instead through “historical indirection” (24).

Yet Clayton also wants to challenge the idea that we find a radical shift in Vallejo's production only once he began to discover Marxism. While there are shifts that take place—namely, from the aforementioned stress on the bodily ruptures over linguistic ones—it is more productive to read the *Poemas humanos* as part of a larger project, already glimpsed in *Los heraldos negros* and especially in *Trilce*. Thus, she mines the experimental procedures of the later poems as a constitutive part of Vallejo's movement towards a conflicted solidarity, rather than their opposite. In a similar

fashion, in Chapter 2 she works against the tendency to divorce *Los heraldos negros* from *Trilce*'s more striking experimentation. Rather than reading the earlier text as simply a last gasp of late *modernismo*, she probes *Los heraldos negros*' emphasis on the local as a grounded experience (rather than transparent referent), on decay and the ever-evolving processes of a fetid nature that invades the lyric subject, and as the first inklings of "a politics of the voice in Vallejo's poetry," anticipating *Trilce*'s more radical thrust. Taken as a whole, then, *Poetry in Pieces* reads against the grain of both periods of Vallejo's poetry, revealing both a surprisingly hopeful *Trilce* and an unexpectedly tentative and ambivalent *Poemas humanos*. While constantly shifting, Vallejo's corpus is thus granted a precarious coherence, as it continually returns to the same tropes while inflecting these through new experiences.

Clayton's book engages with classic and recent studies of Latin American poetry, including, but not limited to, Vallejo criticism. In addition to the critics of the Latin American avant-gardes such as Gonzalo Aguilar, Jorge Schwarz, and the aforementioned Rosenberg and Unruh, scholars of Vallejo and Mariátegui, including Jean Franco, Stephen Hart, William Rowe, Nicola Miller, and Julio Ortega, are given their due. (An appendix features Clyde Eschelmann's translations of the poems analyzed in detail in the monograph, with Clayton's subtle adjustments included in brackets.)

Poetry in Pieces is also fluent in a striking number of contemporary lines of inquiry, from sound studies to theories of everyday life, from rereadings of the lyric to the intersection between modernism and media studies. A privileged term is the noun "welter," which renders Vallejo a reading machine for a striking number of objects, discourses, and positions. Clayton moves among writers well known to our field, if not in this particular context (Bataille, Benjamin, Joyce) along with more surprising connections (black theater in Paris, the films of Abel Gance). Along the way, Dada, Eisensteinian montage, and Neruda's Spanish Civil War poetry also make appearances, to greater and lesser degrees. It thus provides a much more "networked" view of the well-worn *topos* of the Latin American writer in Paris. At times, Vallejo appears to either participate in or anticipate

nearly every discourse that structures twentieth-century modernity: an effect of Clayton's careful, even loving, attention to the proliferating readings that his poetry and *crónicas* afford, but these multiple flight lines can occasionally be a bit overwhelming. The challenge for the critic, of course, is to render this accumulation legible, without succumbing to the illusion of total mastery. In this sense, she follows closely the subject of her study, who eschewed programmatic statements for a submersion into experience.

Clayton's take on what happens to the lyric (in Latin America or globally) after Vallejo would surely have provided us with even more points of reflection. Through a reading of Saer's *La pesquisa* and Bolaño's *Monsieur Pain*, the conclusion to *Poetry in Pieces* provides a potential answer: in both novels, Vallejo's enigmatic figure positions the lyric as a remainder of the violence of history. Does the novel form then subsume the lyric in the late twentieth-century Latin American literature (when Saer and Bolaño published their works)? Does the late twentieth century afford us the critical distance necessary to undertake a recasting of the avant-garde lyric? A book this dynamic inevitably leads us to more questions and associations.

In the opening pages of her study, Clayton invokes the 1967-1969 polemic between Julio Cortázar and José María Arguedas in terms of the two opposing modes of transmitting experience Walter Benjamin ascribed to the storyteller. On one hand, the bounded, local world of the Peruvian writer; on the other, the itinerant cosmopolitanism of the Argentinian. This opposition has a long pedigree in Latin American literary studies—during the late '60s, for example, Ángel Rama's "Las dos vanguardias" also put forth a similar dichotomy with respect to the historical avant-gardes. At home or abroad, the national or the global: these dichotomies are simultaneously culled and broken down, *Poetry in Pieces* argues, in the work of Vallejo. Clayton makes this part of her wager, not only for her object of study but also, implicitly, for her own methodology. It is only through site-specific, embodied experiences—from a prison in Peru to the impoverished, peripheral figure of his "anti-*flâneur*" in Paris—that can we understand Vallejo's radical language and complex take on solidarity.

While challenging reductionist interpretations, her book foregrounds, at every step, the strategic and corporeal experiences that inflect how one reads and writes. This book is admirable not only for its brilliant, multiple readings of Vallejo, but also for its implicit mapping out of a terrain of scholarship, a mode of reading, a strategically shifting location in academia.