

*The Valley Loses  
Its Atmosphere*

SAMPLER

Winétt de Rokha

El valle pierde  
su atmósfera

1943-1946

SAMPLE

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*El valle pierde su atmósfera* was first published as part of *Arenga sobre el arte*  
by the author's husband, Pablo de Rokha (Santiago: Multitud, 1949), and was reprinted in  
Winétt de Rokha's posthumous Collected Poems, *Suma y destino* (Santiago, Multitud, 1951).

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translation of Winétt de Rokha's work.

## Winétt de Rokha and Her Canto Americano

*The Valley Loses Its Atmosphere* by the Chilean poet Winétt de Rokha (1894–1951) is a book of 48 poems written primarily during her journey across Latin America. Winétt's husband Pablo had been named Cultural Ambassador of Chile in the Americas by President Juan Antonio Ríos, and together the couple visited nineteen countries, getting to know cities and villages, meeting people, giving talks, attending dinners, and writing lots of poetry as they went along. According to the Chilean writer Álvaro Bisama: “The trip, previously unthinkable, takes place thanks to the effect of [a translated anthology called] *12 Spanish American Poets* on the Chilean cultural scene, which was impressed by De Rokha's inclusion. Mario Ferrero says that as a result, President Juan Antonio Ríos called to the poet and proposed ‘a secret mission of a cultural nature, to be developed across the different countries of América.’” De Rokha accepted this mission, and his travels with Winétt, from 1944 to 1946, took them through South America and Central America – including Peru, Uruguay, Bolivia, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Guatemala, Cuba and Mexico – before reaching the U.S.A. On 27 November 1945 the couple read their poetry at the Library of Congress in the United States, and a recording exists of this moment in which one marvels at their remarkably similar rhythms and cadences. For an anecdotal and picaresque account of the couple's time in these places, I recommend Pablo de Rokha's autobiography *El amigo piedra*.

Begun just before the journey, Winétt de Rokha's *The Valley Loses Its Atmosphere* contains the full richness of her impressions transformed into language, with an abundant layering of phrase upon phrase to create a lush and hypnotic effect. Winétt's introductory poem announces the intention to create a “song of gold dust” and a “strophe of the day's necessity”. “*The Valley Loses Its Atmosphere* is incorruptibly American,” she proclaims. The poems make reference to different parts of “América”, with an attention to the land and social conditions, mentioning the “banana plantations, rubber plantations, farmlands that produce bloodsuckers”, the indigenous peoples such as the *jivaro* of Peru and Ecuador, local fauna like wolves and wasps, local flora like the *clavel del aire* or *copihue*, and popular protests like the Baltimore Workers' Congress. Given the context, the special attention afforded to communism is unsurprising, from the naming of leaders like Lenin and Stalin to the evocation of inequalities that need to be changed. There are also digs at bourgeois women writers such as Angélica Arenal. At one level, this is the wondrous *costumbrismo* of a woman actively recording what she sees as she makes her way across territories new to her. But the deliberate density of references and heaping up of phrases makes this far more than just a log, to the point that signifier is often hard to connect signified – this book of poems is engaged in a different kind of labour.

For me, it's astonishing that Winétt de Rokha's work has not been taken seriously until now as a *canto americano*, an epic poem that sings of a united América through its land and peoples, replicating through its prose the very processes of contradiction and transformation that have been undergone by history itself. The *canto americano* is a fascinating form taken up in different ways by figures during this period, in the attempt to craft a fluid identity for an América which tended to be defined through ties of brother- and sisterhood and connections with nature, against what we might now call the extractivist practices of foreign corporations, particularly the United States. Such ties tend to seek forms of belonging and togetherness that go beyond both capitalism and nationhood, even if the individual authors feel loyalty to specific regions in both their physical landscape and evoked imaginaries. Winétt de Rokha's *The Valley Loses Its Atmosphere* (1949) takes up different places in their lived detail, and is not interested in the major monuments of the tourist guides but in incredibly specific and surprising details, whose quasi-surreality is amplified by the way she describes them; it puts her in a tradition with Pablo Neruda (*Canto General*, 1950) and Gabriela Mistral (*Poema de Chile*, 1967), among others. Neruda speaks in passionate monologues and dedications to friends and historical figures about a land that contains the dead and history but is forever capable of resurrection, while Mistral speaks in a tender conversation between a ghost, an indigenous boy and a deer. But there is a shared interest in linking geographic, social and psychological landscapes, and their project of creating a *canto americano* is also the project of creating an América.

It is notable that the de Rokha couple, husband and wife, adopted the *canto americano* before Neruda and Mistral, and developed their works near simultaneously. Their writing is so united it is almost impossible to speak about them separately, as they influenced one another, travelling and living together, with a significant overlap in both political and domestic material. They also share many stylistic similarities, including the lengthy line bordering on prose and the preference for specific words like "symphony". Yet taking the two together has tended to obscure the perhaps more interesting differences. Pablo de Rokha's works most explicitly about América (*Canto al Ejército Rojo*, 1944; *Los poemas continentales*, 1944–1945; *Interpretación dialéctica de América y los cinco estilos del Pacífico*, 1947; *Carta Magna del continente*, 1949; *Arenga sobre el arte*, 1949; and the prose work *El amigo piedra*) speak in a tragic, rage-filled, frequently aggressive howl of denouncement, punctuated by phrases of incredibly lyrical beauty and ethical content; he frequently takes on the position of a wounded bull, capricious and unpredictable, but full of moral convictions.

Winétt speaks in measured, lyrical, melancholy tones, but her patient and sensual formulations are no less intense. Although her register often remains cryptic, without elucidation or epiphany, her writing seems not so much one of denouncement as of creation, proposing a new kind of language and a new kind of person, within new economic structures. And the way that Winétt's work creates this new form of agency is through her performance of neobaroque rhetoric. The Latin American neobaroque is often associated,

and is theoretically worked by the Cuban writer José Lezama Lima, who linked it in philosophical essays, particularly in his masterpiece *La expresión americana*, to a potential that was at once liberatory, revolutionary and spiritual. Winétt's work precedes and shares affinities with Lezama Lima's ideas of a "gnostic space" and incarnates a new world through the creation of language, as well as with common with the baroque lyricism and historical atmospheres of Alejo Carpentier.

This is a world in which the human wanders through the landscape as a nomad, specifically the geographies of Latin America, gathering them up, formulating them in language, and returning them to the world as she continues to move. Chaos and clarity, dissonance and harmony, meaning and non-meaning are in a relationship here, with their eroticisms and complications. This is not recollection in tranquility; rather, the baroque stylings and patterns resist what is static, with a hungry capacity to include and speak of everything it comes across, not necessarily giving it the artificial order of the encyclopaedia or natural history tract, but marvelling at all that can exist or be imagined. Winétt and Pablo, outside of their country of origin, Chile, experience the internationalism of the Communist Party not as utopia but as lived experience, the vivid fullness of time recounted. Their language is anything but the bureaucratic legalese of the nation-state or Politburo, and seems to reject all too rigid allegiances. Indeed, in *El amigo piedra* Pablo de Rokha notes their detachment from Chile as they left, looking down from the airplane window: "The flag of Chile is a handkerchief the size of the world as we reach the border, cross over it and do not cry".

What is the América that Winétt finds? There is a mottled variety to it, "jumbled qualities". It is a "convulsive labyrinth, uneven, baroque, communicating". The multiplicity of América resists order, yet is not quite chaos. One feels her pleasure in making her way across an América whose territories had already been given a hundred names by indigenous peoples before Columbus arrived, and have taken on thousands since, as she makes visits on behalf of a Party that in theory stands for the friendship of peoples and the pursuit of economic and social justice. Winétt and Pablo both write positively of Stalin and his project of collectivisation, the darker aspects of which had not fully come to public light at that time; when they travelled, the Gulags were operating in full force, processing millions of people, but these facts were not yet acknowledged by the Communist Party or by the majority of intellectuals. Now this might change our subsequent reading of the text, which make Winétt's mentions in this regard seem innocent or naïve, but they are part of the grain of the time.

Winétt's focus, however, remains on América, in which wonders and disparities alike were in plain view. The question is how to write about them during such a whirlwind tour, doing justice to what she saw but at the same time molding them into something different. Winétt's repeated discoveries of mental images in writing are nothing like what a conquistador's discovery would have been. Her discoveries as a traveller take place, in contrast, in a poetic nonlinear time, in which there isn't a pioneer mentality of singular

discovery, but constant revelation. She and Pablo travel without the desire to dominate, without everything parceled out and separated as text. The notion of text itself can be used for many purposes. Parchments and manuscripts appear throughout *The Valley Loses Its Atmosphere*, linked to legal histories and colonial and constitutional realities, but Winétt's own book presents another kind of manuscript, with its voices of jobless people and animals and geographies, "voices resurrected from a past hammered into rustic prose".

And this prose style itself, this cobbling and hammering and heaping up, is *doing* something. It is a "lineage of the popular avant-garde", as Winétt puts it, one that is lovingly glued together from the abundance of found elements and nature, "dark vegetations of awe". The prose itself becomes a force that bursts out of the static perfection of the blank page, and out of the expectations of the perfectly crafted verse of her period, to make things happen. Its excess resists the gelling and consolidation of experience at multiple levels, to create a shifting and liquid fluidity open to change. The imagery of a phrase itself is unexpected, and this unexpectedness is then juxtaposed in surprising ways with other startling images. In this not-totally comprehensible, not-totally mapped out reality, the reader feels slightly bewildered. Yet for one who is not a cartographer or explorer, who is not looking for a guidebook or tourist manual, this can be an exciting feeling. You can arrive at not just new places but also a new idea of time, with a feeling of comprehension ever on the brink: "destiny without resolve", "insurgent sepias", or "the firewood of what's past and the emblem of defined uncertainty" as Winétt puts it, a piling up of stuff technique to set it alight.

Here is where Winétt's idea of a non-individualist subject with a different agency comes in, one that is porous and entwined with the elements of reality, the opposite of a single identity and "I". She repeatedly criticises the idea of the "hero", the "suffering woman", the atom, the "allegorical membranous mob", the "disjointed, Jesuit" approach to thinking, and anything else that favors abstraction and singularity over concrete and interconnected projects. The form of subjectivity she presents, what she calls an "open self", remains uncertain and fluid, not fixed within its own boundaries but connected to the places, animals, plants and other people around it. Notably, Winétt mentions "Whitman, de Rokha, Mayakovsky, the whole social foliage flowering, bearing fruit". Awareness of a historical situation forms a large role in producing artistic and literary creation, and while it is true that certain poets have made poems that are especially beautiful or that achieve special success, both "beauty" and "success" inevitably exist within their circumstances. The same critique of the Great Poet can be made of the Great Revolution. It is the build-up of context that produces an event; it does not make sense to only romanticise the writer or event in itself.

So how to think about change? This is a delicate matter, requiring an attention to concrete individual things, but not at the expense of their interweaving with the rest. Winétt's interest is in the relational, the way that the single and the many are related. Each phrase of hers is unique and surprising, but each of these phrases also forms part of a much larger network of other phrases. All the little things matter, everything



forms part of an evolving system. And Winétt's phrases, individually light yet building into a powerful density, are a patient yet insistent remaking of both Latin America and Winétt as a subject, in concrete relation to what is around her.

Here Winétt's style embodies a deep philosophy that questions the validity of the reified and fully formed idea, including the idea of self. Contradiction and jumble are required for movement. Clots of impressions push actions into being. No small thing is negligible, and the sum of all the stuff and thoughts together creates a force larger than each thing. Something uniform and clearly defined as a single identity does not move. It is accumulation, a departure from the approach of progressive narrative and linear time, a "heaped-up transcendental insistence" that mobilises the unstoppable, powerful, oceanic force that can sweep away old ideas and sweep in new ones. This style of a dialectic in movement is coherent with Winétt's communist and revolutionary beliefs, but they also express her own sensibility, in which the intuition she mentions in her introductory poem combines with a certain will in order to create – not on one's own but, inseparably, in conversation with others.

And the rhetoric of movement maps onto an idea of growth. América is described as "luscious fruits on the path to becoming fruits", and there is a poem dedicated to Pablo that mentions the "childhood" of América. "América" refers primarily to Latin America, yet given that Winétt and Pablo reached the United States, met comrades and gave a reading there, perhaps they also entertained a unified vision of South, Central and North despite their suspicions of that region's economic practices. The world, shaken by recent and ongoing civil and world wars as Winétt and Pablo travelled, seemed to vibrate with imminent catastrophe and change. Pablo's notes on their time in this América reflect this, as for instance when he speaks of Winétt's and his talk at the Universidad Interamericana: "We are giving a talk here, shaking from the heat and pain of the vast south, in a town where everything in the world is confusion."

These ideas of systemic and evolutionary change also, perhaps, inform Winétt's relationship with Pablo, a "melodic marriage that contradicts itself, in belief, a system". She also writes: "To be pregnant, have something develop, the sensuality of ideas bearing fruit". Winétt knew something about this, as she had nine children by Pablo. Indeed, in many ways the categories of personal relationships and the development of América map onto one another in Winétt's work as forms of love and development. Winétt co-ran the magazine and publishing project *Multitud* with Pablo for many years, and herself contributed to it. Born to a slightly higher social class than him, she resisted the role of a bourgeois wife and threw herself into a life of immense creativity, including opinionated arguments and critiques. Things were not always easy. Pablo de Rokha inhabited the world of the *huaso*, a Chilean type associated with the provincial and with living close to the earth, as opposed to the elegant, dandyish, European-admiring bohemians of Santiago of which he counted Neruda as one, a notion behind some of his most untrammelled attacks. Winétt and Pablo shared

*Todo un canto nacido de polvo de oro, hilvanando  
ordenación de arco-iris en fusa marina ex-divina  
en la síntesis de la niñez ubérrima y triste, de cristal con lluvia.*

*Pergaminos no escritos, sonetos y vicisitudes,  
adolescencia por el sueño determinada y sub-real.*

*Aguja y candente esplendor por cobijas de Invierno.*

*Cuando el medio siglo inicia su nocturno  
de roedor imperturbable por mis venas de intermitente música,  
canto mi tonada regular de horqueta para levantar océanos.*

*Stalin, en el balcón de los mundos futuros,  
el león familiar del presente  
cruza el espacio cargado de fulgores.*

*Por lo cual, “El Valle Pierde su Atmósfera”  
es incorruptiblemente americano.*

*Flora como fauna y pájaros-árboles, aguas-vientos-soles,  
mitos-símbolos, hombres tan civilizados cuanto salvajes,  
ruinas, rascacielos, mares e inútiles espumas,  
todo fundido en una aurora impresionante  
renovaron los últimos saldos de mi personalidad de ojos celestes que dan mirada en negro.*

*Sin antepasados, crudo como cuero de sol,  
canté-lloré mi libro todo para Pablo, mi compañero,  
diciéndole cómo, paralela a su enorme acometida,  
intuí y compuse la estrofa de la necesidad de la jornada.*

WINETT

*All of it a song of gold dust, threading the rainbow  
into the order of a demisemiquaver, ex-divine, of the sea,  
into the synthesis of an abundant sad childhood, glass bespattered by rain.*

*Unwritten parchments, sonnets and vicissitudes,  
adolescence in a particular sub-real dream.*

*Needle and white-hot splendour through blankets of Winter.*

*Whenever the half-century strikes up its nocturne  
of a persistent rodent in my veins of intermittent music,  
I sing my steady pitchfork melody to raise oceans.*

*Stalin, on the balcony of future worlds,  
the familiar lion of the present,  
can move through space, laden with brilliance.*

*And so "The Valley Loses Its Atmosphere"  
is incorruptibly American.*

*Flora like fauna and bird-trees, water-wind-suns,  
myth-symbols, man as civilised as he is savage,  
ruins, skyscrapers, seas and useless foams,  
everything melted into an astonishing dawn  
revitalised what was left of my personality  
with its light blue eyes that observe in black.*

*Without ancestors, raw as leather in the sun,  
I sang-cried my book, everything for Pablo, my companion,  
to tell him how in parallel with his huge assault,  
here I am to intuit and compose the strophe of the day's necessity.*

WINETT

\*

Un esquivo lucero favorito lustraba y enfocaba su farol,  
lloraba la niebla intacta en sandalia caminante en escala mayor,  
me invadía una vaga muselina opalescente, húmeda,  
apretándome las formas disminuidas por cansancio.

Un dedo cortado dividiame los pétalos-labios,  
catálogos de palabras surgían inarmónicos, reclutas,  
cometa repleto, escudero alucinado, solo, erudito lobo,  
clamaba en sinfonía de fuerte espectáculo mendigo.

Castañuelas líricas del alba y sus bellotas perezosas  
ungían el tumultuoso despertar de los pueblos acrecentados por abajo, ayudantes, líderes.  
Nieves densas, sin tiempo, emplumadas, envolturas claras que formulan  
desde el rosa fingido, ululante, plañidero, de ensjambre,  
al cromo anaranjado depositario del abismo y la espuela.  
Más tarde su lunar cronológico se torno gris.

\*

A favourite elusive star polished and focused its light  
and an unbroken fog cried, wandering sandals on a major scale.  
It filled me with a vague opalescent muslin, damp,  
as it pressed shapes against me that slumped with fatigue.

When a cut finger divided my petal-lips,  
catalogues of words streamed forth, atonal, summoned.  
Brimming comet, delusional squire, lonely and erudite wolf,  
I clamoured in the symphony of a loud beggar's performance.

Lyrical castanets of dawn and their idle acorns  
anointed the tumultuous awakening of the peoples  
who swelled from below, helpers, leaders.  
Dense, timeless, feather-strewn snows, white sheath that forms  
from the false and mournful shuddering of the pink hive  
to become orange chrome, trove of abyss and spur.  
In time its chronological beauty mark went grey.

\*

Cielos, oleografías, escaramuzas, alaridos de corcho, teatro diáfano,  
cofre de girasoles entrelazados, tejedor actual, parapeto,  
rotundo pomo de alabastro pastoril, antología, técnica,  
trébol pardo y ardiente en la concavidad dispersa de la pampa.  
El desierto huidizo de botas que huyen, busca solución derivando en pañales  
hacia las constelaciones del Pacífico en sermones de cartel,  
monótono, monopolio, concierto de lejanías de sol tahúr  
al paso de armas nómades en carrera alborotada de alhelíes.  
Es el verde grande entre bastidores de yodo.  
Inmensas contiendas en suspenso, Antofagasta<sup>1</sup>, sonrisa de corsarios,  
moho marítimo de minúsculas bahías sugerentes, universales,  
con pasado de velas y ancianidad de jaguar paisano.  
Un muñón industrial de trabajadores pulsa la círcula de sus pobladas pestañas humanas,  
al encontrar recíproco el sistema de una nota alta, sepultada,  
de cara sobre las rocas de mi niñez de estirpe de cuartel,  
bóveda sin clérigos y el recuerdo frecuente de un muelle sumergido.

\*

Heavens, oleographs, skirmishes, howls of cork, diaphanous theatre,  
coffer of interlaced sunflowers, weaver of the moment, parapet,  
round knob of pastoral alabaster, anthology, technique,  
burning grey-brown clover in the pampa's scattered hollow.  
The elusive desert of fleeing boots seeks a solution that ends in nappies,  
towards the Pacific's constellations in signboard homilies,  
monotonous, monopoly, the concert of distances of a gambler sun  
at the pace of nomadic arms in a noisy race of wallflowers.  
It's the vast green between frames of iodine.  
Immense disputes in suspense, Antofagasta, smile of corsairs,  
maritime mildew of tiny suggestive universal bays,  
with a past of sails and the old age of a jaguar from your land.  
An industrial trunnion of workers plucks at its zither of thick human eyelashes,  
upon finding the reciprocal system of a high, concealed note,  
face against the rocks of my childhood with a lineage of barracks,  
crypt without priests and the frequent memory of a submerged dock.

\*

Arica y su castaño tricolor se aureola en llamas y lanceta.  
Muro y reloj de lo vivido forjado en pretérito con higos enterrado.

El boceto del árbol en exclamación piramidal de altar,  
rompe la copla silvestre de lo estacionario y caduco por astucia,  
abolengo de vanguardia popular.

El párpado cerrado sin modorra y carretera  
ataca junto a su ancla, sin huella, en bancarrota de hiel,  
enrostrando lo sedentario, generando con su estampa de ajedrez  
un soplo de sopor abismal de la retina en derrotero, intervalo  
sobre esas tierras sagradas, ásperas, de goma, de linterna,  
soltando su girasol accidentado de o s c u r a s<sup>1</sup> vegetaciones de asombro.

Bienvenido, Lenin, bienvenido, tú, vencedor  
con tu puño y quijada segura, aboliendo miseria, argumento,  
ya conduces y niquelas con tu radiación deslumbrante, de plan,  
el vocablo flotante, enarbolado en disciplina, maniobra  
donde me estrangulo, absurda de angustia provinciana.



\*

Arica, tricolour brown, haloes itself in flames and a lancet.  
The wall and clock of the living forged in the past with buried figs.

The sketch of a tree on the pyramidal exclamation of the altar  
breaks the rustic song of what's stationary and antiquated, from cunning,  
the lineage of the popular avant-garde.

The closed eyelid without drowsiness and route  
attacks, joined to its anchor, without trace, in a bankruptcy of gall,  
reproaching the sedentary, generating with its picture card of chess,  
with the sigh of the enormous torpor of a retina on course, an interval  
over those sacred, harsh lands of rubber, of lantern,  
that release their troubled sunflower from dark vegetations of awe.

Welcome, Lenin, welcome, you victor,  
with your fist and sure jawbone abolishing squalor, reason,  
now you conduct and nickel-plate with your dazzling irradiance, with a plan,  
the floating word, hoisted with discipline, a manoeuvre  
in which I strangle myself, absurd woman with provincial anguish.

\*

Anulo las cuerdas en el quitasol altisonante de la charla temprana  
entre la música seria, de tambores y brindis federales, remos de Caronte,  
de aquella y esta bárbara campana y su cuerno montañez.

Prisionera hojarasca de mi aspecto y su filo cerebral  
cuando todos los sucesos-destinos en sacrificio de osamentas  
se suicidan en el andamiaje forestal de los huesos...

Tanto “infierno blanco” tanto anuncio colérico, inofensivo,  
agrietan, celosos, un motivo de humo, leche o cardo tibio.

Volcanes captan ardor en sorbos dramáticos, zarpazos  
geológicamente de catástrofe, acumulando el huracán en vuelo,  
dardo efímero, sellando un pacto con los cataclismos.

Ingenuamente me sonrío la “estrella solitaria” de índole republicana, sureña,  
emparentada con vientos-pañuelos desplegados y lágrima.

\*

I void strings in the high flown parasol of early chatter,  
amidst serious music of drums and federal toasts, oars of Charon,  
of that and this barbarous bell and its mountain horn.

Fallen-leaf prisoner to my appearance and its cerebral blade  
when all events-fates in a sacrifice of skeleton  
kill themselves, in the forest scaffolding of bones...

So much "white hell", so much furious, inoffensive announcement  
crack open, jealous, a reason for smoke, milk or warm thistle.

Volcanoes capture ardour in dramatic gulps, blows,  
geological catastrophe, the hurricane accumulating in flight,  
ephemeral dart sealing a pact with the cataclysms.  
Naïvely the "solitary star" of a republican, southern type smiles at me,  
related to winds-kerchiefs, unfolded, a teardrop.