

WALEIS, Raúl, *Clemencia*  
 Edición y notas de  
 Román Setton. Adriana  
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The publisher Adriana Hidalgo bravely insists on the recovery of the founding texts of Argentinean detective fiction. In 2009 we were pleasantly surprised with the release of *La huella del crimen*, and now in 2012 even more surprised and still more pleased with a new edition of *Clemencia*. Both texts are signed by Raúl Waleis but were written by Luis V. Varela (1845-1911) – the former is an anagram of the latter –, the son of Justa Cané (the aunt of the author of *Juvenilia*) and Florencio Varela. They were first published in 1877 –i.e. ten years before the adventures of Sherlock Holmes began to be published– and had not been published again until these recent reissues (more than 130 years after their first and only publication), by Román Setton. *La huella del crimen* is the first detective novel written in Spanish and in that sense its recovery was a necessary, almost inexorable, event. This edition was accompanied by a red sash which declared that it was “the first detective novel in Spanish” and was destined to be a success, at least among the relatively few readers interested in this kind of rarities. (Currently the 2009 edition has sold out.) The reissue of *Clemencia* certainly implies a riskier bet by the publishers, to the extent that *La huella del crimen* counted beforehand on the literary-historical value of being the first detective novel in the language and, consequently, in Argentinean literature, while *Clemencia*, which is the second detective novel in Spanish and

a follow-up of the first, has in that sense a historical and literary value which is both less striking and less suitable to be advertised with a red sash or in any other way. In addition, *La huella del crimen* had a lavish para-text – a letter written by the author to the editor and two critical introductory letters – which somehow made up the first Argentinean poetics of the detective novel and the first discussion of the genre. *Clemencia* enters the world without letters of theoretical or critical nature, divested like the eponymous protagonist of the novel, who is presented to her adoptive parents entirely dispossessed and asking only *clemency*.

Unlike *La huella del crimen*, which falls more definitely within the detective fiction genre, *Clemencia* presents a hybrid character which makes it perhaps more interesting. The text has a greater variety of subplots, intimate stories and biographies which are close both to melodramatic serials and *Bildungsroman*. Considered as a detective story, the plot is simple: the detective L'Archiduc, whom we had first met in *La huella del crimen*, solves the murder of Elena Latouret. But this crime mystery does not unfold until the beginning of the second part of the novel, “Elena”. As Hugo Salas aptly puts it, “*Clemencia* begins with a love affair between a young Argentine in Paris and a mysterious *cocotte*, *Clemencia*, whose conversation serves as the framework for a short tale of passions and crime located in the pampas, eventually giving way to the Paris-based crime investigation which serves as the centre” of the novel (“Los misterios de la pampa”, in *Página 12*, 1/7/2012). As Matías Máximo has indicated, one of the most significant differences with *La huella del crimen* is that for the first time in the history of detective fiction, Argentinean characters and settings make their appearance in *Clemencia* (“Vuelve Raúl Waleis, el escritor del primer policial en castellano” in *Cosecha Roja*, 21/6/2012). In the novel, the Argentinean doctor Rafael Meris carries his past and his Pampean ghosts with him in his travels around the world and, most importantly, during his stay in Paris, where he gets to know *Clemencia*, her story and the story of her forebears. As Silvia Hopenhayn rightly points out, “*Clemencia* (title, name

and destiny), has all the seasonings of a melodramatic serial, with the philosophical *naiveté* of an Argentinean dazzled by French *glamour*, problems of paternity and, above all, the influence of the law on the passions; and to what extent jealousy can be taken into account in the marriage contract” (“Antiguo policial argentino”, in *La Nación*, 20/06/2012). Within this tangle of subplots, the novel offers a short *Bildungsroman* of L’Archiduc, basically covering his education in prison and his inquiries into the criminal procedures and motivations. He is able to carry out them thanks to his acquaintance with the convicts. As *Waleis* himself announces in *La huella del crimen*, he follows the model of the detective fiction of Émile Gaboriau, and *Clemencia* is therefore “a hybrid of a whodunit and a melodramatic serial”, as the back cover of the book proclaims. And the melodramatic features can be seen in the symbolic name of the protagonist –and at the same time of the novel– which tries to conjure the primary passions and violence (murder, suicide, rape, incest) of her origins. At the same time, the novel also includes a second mystery, the disappearance of the toys of L’Archiduc’s son. He therefore not only solves the first mystery as a public functionary, he also solves this other case as a private man, as a father and husband. But the greatest virtue of the publication is perhaps that it enables us to read anew a founding text of Argentinean literature, one which had largely fallen into oblivion, because there are almost no critical texts on *Clemencia*, with the following exceptions: the short passage Sabine Schlickers devotes to it in the section entitled “El furor sexual” of his book *El lado oscuro de la modernización: Estudios sobre la novela naturalista hispanoamericana* (Madrid / Frankfurt: Iberoamericana / Vervuert, 2003), the brief allusions which appear in some of the works of Nestor Ponce, in Setton’s comments in *La huella del crimen* or an early critical text

by Pedro Luis Barcia about Raúl *Waleis*: “Los orígenes de la narrativa argentina: la obra de Luis V. Varela” (in *Cuadernos del Sur*, nnº 21-22, 1988-1989, pp. 13-24).

In this sense, Setton’s insightful afterword –in which the novel is dealt with in the context of the detective fiction of nineteenth-century Argentina– provides an interesting starting point for a broader discussion on the text. The publication of this crime novel is, from this perspective, enormously promising, as it promotes the diffusion and investigation of a text which until now had been neglected almost entirely by academic criticism. A catalogue on the website of the publisher Adriana Hidalgo announces the future publication of another recovery of early Argentine crime fiction: Román Setton (ed.), *El candado de oro: doce cuentos policiales argentinos (1860-1910)*. We hope this collection will become available without having to wait three years, as we had to wait between the two texts of *Waleis*. Let us also hope that this compilation –following the tradition of the publisher– will include new materials and will make new stories available to the public, contrary to what was the case in the recent edition of *Primeros cuentos policiales argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Biblioteca Nacional, 2012), which sadly reprints many texts already included in numerous anthologies.

As the journalistic reviews, which seem to be ahead in the game with respect to the tardy reviews of the academic journals, already indicate, the publication of this text has two great virtues. These are: 1. “its historical value” (Máximo: *loc. cit.*) and 2. “the delight which its reading causes today” (Salas, *loc. cit.*). In addition, the use of multiple language variants is one of the strengths of the novel: in the words of the editor, “a certain degree of contamination which constitutes one of the peculiarities and treasures of the text” (*Clemencia*: 8).

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