

Nicanor Parra and the Chaos of Postmodernity

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It would be risky to claim that the work of a Latin American poet falls squarely within a given literary movement. Contemporary Latin American poetry is split along various semantic lines, and tends toward a progressive deterritorialization.¹ However, criticism of Latin American poetry tends to fall into the dangerous habit of gratuitous classifications, which vary according to the terminology of a particular literary theory or according to personal invention. Usually there are some anthologies that try to delimit the territory of poetry, categorizing it according to the apparent tendencies and styles of each group of poets. The most important contemporary Latin American poets understand that the fundamental aim of their craft is to write poetry that makes sense and that at the same time demonstrates vitality and a renewal of the language.

Defying Classification While Revitalizing Language

One example of this understanding is the work of the Colombian poet Álvaro Mutis (b. 1923). In his poetry we observe different tendencies, but no single one takes precedence. In some of his poems we see a hermetic poetry (a poetry that is difficult to read and understand, such as that of Góngora and Quevedo, two of the most rigorous Spanish poets of all times), a surrealistic

mode, with a tendency toward verse, and in others we see the complete domination of the prose poem. But there is also a luminosity that cannot be easily identified, and the reason is that the poem's interior light multiplies and acquires different meanings on the page. It cannot be said that the poetry of Mutis is surrealistic or transparent or that it tends only toward the practice of the prose poem; we can say, rather, that his poetry revitalizes language by means of its sonorous multiplicity. Mutis does not struggle to make his poems unintelligible (for that would be the death of him); his poems show, in contrast, a coherence and a gentle obscurity. In stanza 3 of his poem "Caravansary" we read:

¡Alto los enfebrecidos y alterados que con voces chillonas demandan lo que no se les debe! ¡Alto los necios! Terminó la hora de las disputas entre rijosos, ajenos al orden de estas salas. Toca ahora el turno a las mujeres, las egipcias reinas de Bohemia y de Hungría, las trajinadoras de todos los caminos; de sus ojos saltones, de sus altas caderas, destilará el olvido sus mejores alcoholes, sus más eficaces territorios. Afinquemos nuestras leyes, digamos nuestro canto y, por última vez, engañemos la especiosa llamada de la vieja urdidora de batallas, nuestra hermana y señora erguida ya delante de nuestra tumba. Silencio,



Nicanor Parra, 2005. Photo by Miguel-Angel Zapata.

pues, y que vengan las hembras de la pusta, las damas de Moravia, las egipcias a sueldo de los condenados.

Enough of the feverish and agitated men demanding in shrill voices what is now owed to them! Enough of fools! The hour of disputes between the quarrelsome, foreign to the order of these places, is over. Now it is the turn of the women, the Egyptian queens of Bohemia and Hungary, the travelers of all roads; from their goggling eyes, from their high hips, oblivion will distill its best liquors, its most effective territories. Let us settle our laws, say our chant and, once and for all, let us outwit the misleading call of the old battle schemer, our sister and lady standing over our tombs. Silence, then; let the females of Puzsta come, the dames of Moravia, the Egyptian women in the pay of the criminals.

– From "Caravansary" (1981)
Translation by RoseMary McGee
and Cristobal Gnecco

Other examples of this simultaneity and revitalization of poetic language are within the poetry of Carlos Germán

Belli (b. 1927, Perú) and Oscar Hahn (b. 1938, Chile). Their poems witness the search for a transcendent colloquy that explores itself in the meaning and form of the poem. They achieve this through both permanence and variability. The best Latin American poetry tends toward this variability, which is also seen in the younger poets of the '70s and '80s.

Variability and Chaos in the Poetry of Nicanor Parra

This variability is also a principal characteristic of the poetry of Nicanor Parra (b. 1914) of Chile. It is a variability that is composed of images that destabilize reading, visions that are surrealistic and that practice irony, making fun of the reader and above all making fun of the world. They are poems that are written with the purpose of re-creating chaos and transparency. Perhaps this chaos and transparency are characteristics of postmodernity as seen from the point of view of that hybrid zone of poetic language.

The poetry of Nicanor Parra does not resist making sense, quite the contrary. If we are able, through the mist of its chaos, to laugh at its ironic tone, then each time we read it we are admitting that difficulty is not a virtue. In his poetry there is a chancy chaos and a transparency, as in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. The critic Guillermo Sucre affirms that Parra introduces *chaos* in the form of *humor*. Parra's chaos, says Sucre, can provoke laughter and even hilarity, but the reader who laughs knows that later a more secret anguish awaits (266). The rediscovery of the world (filled with light or darkness) is always a new occasion, so that his poetry continually surprises us, making us laugh at our own misfortune. Parra's speaker observes the most available elements of daily life (an overcoat, a tree, a plaza, a dove, retired people) as well as the vast world and its laws. Such is the case in "Warnings" (301)

Dog's Life

The professor and the dog's life.

Frustration on all planes.

The sense of trouble inside the teeth

When chalk scrapes.

The professor and the exact woman.

The professor and the precise woman.

Where do you find the precise woman?!

A woman who is what she is

A woman who doesn't look like a man.

The pain obscures the vision,

The wrinkles that keep coming,

The age of your own students,

The repeated signals of disrespect.

The way of walking down the hall.

You can take the insults

But not the artificial smile,

The talk that leaves you nauseated.

The school is the temple of knowledge.

The master of the establishment

And his mustache

Like an old movie lover

The nakedness of the professor's wife

(The look breaks on an owl,

The hair is too plain)

Leaving out the kiss on the cheek

(More difficult to stop than to begin)

The home is a field of battle.

The woman defends herself with her legs.

The sexual problems of the old

To appear in an anthology,

To bring on artificial spasms.

As yet the professor has no remedy:

The professor is observing ants.

– Nicanor Parra [M.W.]

below, written originally in English, in which the poet ironizes the world of signs and warnings in the cultures of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

In case of fire
Do not use elevators
Use stairways
unless otherwise instructed

No smoking
No littering
No shitting
No radio playing
unless otherwise instructed
Please Flush Toilet

After Each Use
Except When Train
Is Standing At Station
Be thoughtful
Of The Next Passenger
Onward Christian Soldiers
Workers of the World unite
We have nothing to loose [sic]
but our life Glory to the Father

& to the Son & to the Holy Ghost
unless otherwise instructed
By the way
We also hold these truths to be
self evident
That all man [sic] are created
That they have been endowed
by their creator
With certain inalienable rights
That among these are: Life
Liberty & the pursuit of happiness
& last but not least
that 2 + 2 makes 4
unless otherwise instructed

The text has been constructed of fragments of public discourse welded together in order to find, ironically, an internal coherence in the poem. They are "ready-made" phrases that follow in the footsteps of Marcel Duchamp. Instead of great poetic showcasing, the Chilean poet, always observant, writes the poem using the "warnings" of airports, public restrooms, restaurants

and supermarkets. The world is full of artifacts that are true works of art; in this case, the artifacts are words that, when placed in another context, give new meaning to the poem. These artifacts, in the form of warnings, shift in importance throughout the poem from a lesser degree to a greater degree, according to the priorities and duties demanded of every citizen or of every helpless person who wanders through the great developed cities. The streets in cities such as New York and London are packed full of “warnings” for the common pedestrian, just as in the train stations or in Protestant churches – in any church, for that matter. Postmodern cities, in this respect, are transformed into gilded jailhouses, since if one decides to live in one such “paradise,” one must obey the rules or pay the corresponding fines for breaking them. Regarding these rules, the ironic tone of the expression “unless otherwise instructed” produces the premonition of both chaos and humor in the same context. Thus the poem becomes a game and a mockery of the apparent order in the postmodern developed world.

On the other hand, it behooves us to ask whether this practice of progressive dislocation is a product of postmodernity, and of the world that changes every instant, or whether it has always existed (in which case there will be transgressions in every era coincident with its inevitable ruptures). I would tentatively suggest that the poetry of Nicanor Parra not only belongs to postmodernity but also that it is a continuation of European aesthetic modernity, which struggled against all norms and whose most pertinent representative for this discussion is Baudelaire. Here I refer not only to the economic infrastructure of a nation or to a specific social stratum but also to language itself and its varied components. The Chilean poet uses some resources of modernity to achieve a weighty amalgamation of elements of post-1950 Chilean and Latin American society. In this way, his poetry



A view of Isla Negra from Pablo Neruda's house. Photo by Miguel-Angel Zapata.

is placed in the marketplace of postmodernity, adding humor in a literary context that privileges the absurd.

Even when critics and Parra himself define some of his texts as anti-poetic, these texts contain a dialogic tension between the poetic and the anti-poetic. The poetic aspect seeks linearity and circularity, a method derived from the ancient Greek poet and philosopher Parmenides, who in his writings catalogs “accepted” elements of poetic tradition since Virgil and Horace. The anti-poetic, then, is the opposite: abandoning all solemnity by using sarcastic and corrosive irony and humor, accompanied by a colloquial language that is enriched by Chilean idioms. This sort of combining of elements had already been practiced by César Vallejo (Perú, 1892-1938) in *Trilce* (1922). One stanza of his poem “VI” reads:

Y si supiera si ha de volver;
y si supiera qué mañana entrará
a entregarme las ropas bien lavadas, mi aquella
lavandera del alma. Qué mañana entrará
satisfecha, capulí de orfebrería, dichosa de probar
que sí sabe, que sí puede
¡COMO NO VA A PODER!
azular y planchar todos los caos.

And if only I know she'd come back;
and if only I know what morning she'd come in
to hand me my laundered clothes, my own that
laundress of the soul. What morning she'd come in
satisfied, tawny berry of handiwork, happy to
prove that yes she does know, that yes she can
HOW COULD SHE NOT!
bleach and iron all the chaoses.

– From “VI”

Translation by Clayton Eshelman

Parra's contribution consists of universalizing the practice of the quotidian, basing his discourse on a polyphony that revitalizes and preserves popular Chilean speech. In addition, the titles of his poems present a new tone within Latin American poetry, which began in the 1950s, for example: "Viva la cordillera de los Andes," "El galán imperfecto," "La poesía terminó conmigo," "Lo que el difunto dijo de sí mismo," among others. In contrast to Baudelaire's disenchantment with the progress of Paris, which is witnessed in many of his poems, Parra's speaker occasionally distances himself from the crowds of cities in order to return to his "village," representing family members such as mother and grandmother in a precise setting. Parra does not write poems about the solitude of crowds. Benedetto Croce points out that Baudelaire approached certain aesthetic conceptions with sarcasm and disdain, such as the religion of love; love as the highest, most noble expression; and passionate love and the erotic adoration that consecrates its object (316-17). We need only examine some of Parra's poems, such as "Mujeres" ("Women") and "El hombre imaginario" ("The Imaginary Man"), to understand this influence.

Rereading the Modern World

When we read Parra, we also encounter the globalizing project that the modernists initiated. Critic Ivan Shulman points out that the Hispanic literary movement *Modernismo* functions as a process of reading the modern world from the individual perspective of the subject. And this process, he adds, was begun in the second half of the 19th century and continues to the present with cultural and literary adjustments and transformations (5). Parra's texts start from the individual perspective of a poetic subject who mocks the contemporary and at the same time disdains both the earthly and the divine. The sources of his poems, consequently, are



A partial view of Parra's house. Photo by Miguel-Angel Zapata.

Parra's work often travels between poetry and prose, between narrative and image. For this reason, it is not unusual to find in his poems a combination of poetry and anti-poetry.

multiple and cannot be categorized within a single movement. Parra's work often travels between poetry and prose, between narrative and image. For this reason, it is not unusual to find in his poems a combination of poetry and anti-poetry. Everything is arranged

according to the circumstance of the poem and its aim. Each text has its own construction: in some cases we see Chilean idioms combined with cultured speech, and in others the poems are apparently traditional and without any syntactic dislocation.

One of the distinctive traits of Parra's poetry is the dissonance created by the variation in tone. His texts are evidence of a radical experience that responds to the hybrid and nutritious *bricolage* within the tunnels of language, history and society. The contextualization of his poetry within so-called postmodernity can be understood within what García Canclini has called *postmodern hybridity*. He points out that postmodernism is not a style but rather the simultaneous presence of all styles, the point where the chapters of art history (and the history of poetry) and of folklore interlace with each other and with new cultural technologies (307). Parra cuts across the territory of various literary currents, traces of which are clearly evident in his poems through the practice of collage. His work is a tumultuous presence in that it is almost impossible not to recognize these multiple currents, though certain critical readings tend to speak only of his renowned

“anti-poetry.” The effectiveness of his poems is rooted in knowing how to manage images in a way that is lively and agile while at the same time applying a radical disharmony.

On his immense slate we can trace the dividing lines between earth, air, water and the abyss. He is the poet of the *hybrid caricature* and the European collage, the meeting ground of the English ballad and the *Chilean cueca*.

The poet disorients the reader, seeming to be a poet of circularity in some circumstances and a poet of fragments or of a rigorous metric in others. And in yet other instances he remains faithful to free verse, endowing it with an internal tension that can be compared only to baroque music. For example, in “Defensa del árbol” the poet personifies some elements of nature, with the central figure being the image of the tree. Here he combines colloquial and straightforward expressions — “creo que no hay en todo Chile/ niño tan mal intencionado” (“I don’t believe that in all Chile there is a boy with such bad intentions”) — with



Nicanor Parra's typewriter. Photo by Miguel-Angel Zapata.

more lyrical ones — “El da la fruta deleitosa/ más que la leche, más que el nardo/ leña de oro en el invierno,/ sombra de plata en el verano ... crea los vientos y los pájaros” (“He (the tree) offers the delicious fruit/ better than milk/ better than the nard/ golden kindling in the winter/ silver shade in the summer ... He creates breezes and birds”) (19). (Translated by author). The combination of colors suggests a special

intensity. The gold and the fire that give warmth in the winter denote a sign of protection together with the heat of the silver sun in summer. The landscape combines an idyllic scene, where peace reigns over a natural world that privileges the image of the tree, with a reprimand:

Seguramente que tu madre
no sabe el cuervo que ha criado,
te cree un hombre verdadero,
yo pienso todo lo contrario:
creo que no hay en todo Chile
niño tan mal intencionado ... (19)

Surely your mother
does not realize what a crow she has raised,
she believes you to be a true man,
I believe the opposite is true:
I think that in all of Chile
there's not a boy with worse
intentions than you

— Translation by Janice Kincaid

Child's Play

I.

A child lands on the cathedral tower
starts playing with the hands on the clock
leans against them to make them stop moving
as if by magic the people passing are frozen
in the following position:
one foot in the air
looking backward like the pillar of Lot
lighting a cigarette, etc., etc.
Then he grabs the hands and spins them full speed
stops them dead—spins them the other way
and the people passing are jolted—brake abruptly
go backward lickety-split
like the images in a silent movie
they trot north to south
or move solemnly
against the hands of the clock.
A couple get married—have children and get divorced
in fractions of a second
the children get married too—die.

Meanwhile the child
God or whatever you want to call him
Destiny or just plain Chronos bored to death
takes off again flying toward the Public Cemetery.

II.

As indicated in the preceding poem
the playful child takes off for the cemetery
breaks open sepulchers
the dead rise from their graves
noises are heard in the distance
there is total confusion.

The dead seem tired
their feet are covered with dirt
without even leaving their graves
they talk excitedly among themselves
like athletes in the shower.

They exchange impressions about the Land Beyond
some look for things they had lost

others buried to their knees in the earth
move toward the cemetery gate.

III.

Laughing like crazy
the child goes back to the city
gives birth to monsters
creates earthquakes
hairy women run naked
old folks who look like fetuses laugh and smoke.

An electric storm strikes
coming to a climax in the shape of a crucified woman.

—Nicanor Parra [M.W.]

The poet's tree is a daily companion ("no hay amigo como el árbol") ("There is no friend like a tree"), someone whom he can count on. The tree is not raised up to a shining home in the heavens but rather to the solid presence of the earth. On the other hand, the presence of the stone ("Por qué te entregas a esa piedra/ como puñal envenenado") ("Why do you give yourself to that stone/ like a poisoned dagger") is a symbol that represents the void and destruction of the natural world. The poem is expressing a desire for permanence in the face of the possible destruction of a fundamental resource for the air and for dreams. The tree is present as a symbol of salvation; yet its presence goes beyond that of a decorative symbol: all human beings need the tree, for it is the water and wind of all our days.

For Parra, as for many other Latin American poets, nature is clearly present, but it acquires a distinctive tonality. For example, in Vallejo's poetry we find a multilayered relationship with various elements of the natural world. Yet it is also clear that Vallejo did not feel an empathy with nature as did the Romantic poets, such as Victor Hugo and José María Heredia (Hart, 263). In Vallejo's "El libro de la naturaleza" ("The Book of Nature"), which Hart studies in his article "Vallejo's 'King of Swords': The Portrayal of Nature in 'El Libro de la Naturaleza'" ("The Book of Nature"), the tree is figured in a different way:

*Profesor del sollozo - he dicho a un árbol -
palo de azogue, tilo
rumoreante, a la orilla del Marne, un buen alumno
leyendo va en tu naipe, en tu hojarasca,
entre el agua evidente y su sol falso ...*

*Professor of sobs - I've said to a tree-
stick of quicksilver, murmuring
lime, to the shore of the Marne, a good student
reading goes in your card, in your fallen leaves,
between the evident water and the false sun ...*

If for Parra the stone is a symbol of that which is trying to destroy the tree, the shade, the rose of life, the tree in Vallejo is one among ruined trees, alluding to a false sun. Parra, on the other hand, addresses the tree indirectly. He does not wish to speak to it in any other way; its form adheres to the archetype of his poetics: chaos emerges systematically, with the stone as the projectile that arises from death and destruction. He transmits his message through his reprimanding of an almond-eyed boy. Neither does he delight in dreams as in Rilke, in an "almost unconscious contemplation" (Bachelard, 256).

The Chilean poet, rather, says to the reader and to the world that the tree

**It is the language
of public speech,
and it sounds
so familiar that it
seems as though
anyone could have
spoken it.**

(the word, the sign) should be protected by means of a complex framework that is both literary and living. The tree is the central character in this survival plot. The poet begins his lyrical journey in an exhortation to the child to recognize that the tree is his father or his brother. We see that Parra's use of colloquial language is crucial for conveying his intent. It is the language of public speech, and it sounds so familiar that it seems as though anyone could have spoken it. The poem seems almost too accessible to the reader. This is one of the many strategies Parra uses to give the impression that "any-

one" could write the poem, making fun of the speaker. Like Góngora (rigorous, lucid), Parra creates a distinct language, not a school to be followed.

Parra's poetry possesses a multiplicity of valences. It continually reconstructs itself, making new alliances and new meanings. Each poem sets up an internal communication and a new meaning that changes and grows with each reading (Guiraud, 87-94). His poems respond to a lack of consistent paradigms; they are hyperrealist, impressionistic, and pop game. The poet tells us that he will "retract everything he has said" ("se retracta de todo lo dicho"). He says to the reader, "burn this book ... it does not represent what I wanted to say ... words have avenged themselves on me" ("quema este libro ... no representa lo que quise decir ... las palabras se vengaron de mí") (163). This segment can be connected to the poetic nothingness of Mallarmé, whose poetic nothingness is presented in the form of a doubt that always obsessed him: "¿Hay algún motivo específico para escribir?" ("Is there a reason to write?") (De Man, 101). Parra has the same doubt in the face of language and the world. The poet therefore once more takes up his task to write the poem, again and again. At the same time he retracts what he has written in order to regenerate chaos and humor, making fun of the reader and, indeed, of the world:

*Perdóname lector
Amistoso lector
Que no me pueda despedir de ti
Con un abrazo fiel:
Me despido de ti
Con una triste sonrisa forzada.
(Poemas para combatir la calvicie, 163)*

*Forgive me, reader, good reader
If I can not leave you
With a faithful gesture. I leave you
With a forced and sad smile.
(Poems and Antipoems, 149)*

– Translation by Miller Williams

Footnote

¹*Deterritorialization may mean to take the control and order away from a land or place (territory) that is already established. It is to undo what has been done. For example, when the Spanish conquered the Aztecs, the Spanish eliminated many symbols of Aztec beliefs and rituals. Reterritorialization usually follows. The same happens in Latin American poetry.*

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Miguel-Angel Zapata was introduced to the arts in his hometown of Lima, Peru, where, as a young boy, he attended a private school for painting. Frustrated with the medium, and his inability to depict what was in his mind's eye, he realized he would never be a successful painter and turned away from the arts for a brief period of time. By the time he entered high school though, he had found his true calling in poetry and literature, a passion that has never abandoned him, and that he hopes never will.

Realizing that a university setting would be beneficial for a poet, Professor Zapata was led to his current profession, which enables him to teach others while writing books of poetry and literary criticism, as well as books about other subjects that interest him. Ironically perhaps, his forthcoming book ponders the relationship between poetry and the visual arts, and painting in particular. When comparing writing poems to creating textiles, and in this case the intricate textiles of Matisse, he says, they both require "the same concentration, the same peace, and the same patience."

Professor Zapata is an associate professor of Latin American literature in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, and has been teaching at Hofstra University since 2001. Prior to his position at Hofstra, he taught at universities worldwide, including universities in Chile, Peru, Mexico and the United States. He has studied at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in Lima, Peru, and earned a Ph.D. in philosophy at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. To date, he has written eight books of poetry in Spanish, one of which, titled *A Sparrow in the House of Seven Patios*, was translated into English last year.

He is also the author of several books of essays, critical editions, interviews and anthologies. Professor Zapata received the Latino Literature Prize and the Hostos Essay Award in 2003. His poetry has been lauded by many, including Alvaro Mutis and Mario Vargas Llosa, recipients of the Miguel de Cervantes Literature Prize; Billy Collins, America's 2002-03 poet laureate; and Carlos G. Belli, Peruvian poet laureate.

The subjects of his poetry are often two that tend to be conflicting: the spiritual and animals (or bestiary). Dogs, cats, birds, the deserts and jogging over the dead* are some of his subjects, he says. He lives on Long Island and owns many of his own animals, including a snake that he claims belongs to his daughter. And although he likes to play tennis if the weather is right for it, at any time of year you can find him bike riding or taking long walks, where he continues to commune with nature and conjure more ideas and more poems. —WB

*See "Thighs Upon the Grass" from *A Sparrow in the House of Seven Patios* (2005).