

Nicanor Parra

CHILE

1914-

Nicanor Parra's most influential contribution to Latin American poetics has been the theory of "antipoetry." Combining the critical materialism of Brecht with a resolutely colloquial diction, the absurdist fever of Kafka with ironic insights derived from contemporary psychology, Parra's "antipoems" speak personally but stringently, without the intervention of a "sincere" lyrical narrator. For all their critical antecedents, Parra's poems begin from his assumption that "the function of the artist consists in the rigorous expression of his experiences, without commentary of any kind."

Nicanor Parra was trained as a mathematician and physicist at Brown University and at Oxford, where he came to embrace principles of relativity in a physical mode, principles that carry over into the epistemological concerns of his poems. Later he was a professor of physics at the University of Santiago. In an important sense, his poems resemble mathematical theorems of physics: "economy of language, no metaphors, no literary figures." Parra's theories have sometimes been used to counter the dominance of the image-based personalism of Neruda. (Neruda, in fact, was instrumental in finding a publisher for Parra's *Poemas y antipoemas* [*Poems and Antipoems*, 1954]; in his *Extra-vagario* [1958], Neruda himself seems to imitate some of Parra's strategies.) Even more generally, however, Parra's example has served as an astringent against the florid rhetoric of several generations of Latin American and Spanish lyric poems. Parra's work represents a revolutionary mode of poetic authenticity. Austere, discursive, droll, mercurial, fragmentary, accessible, and conspicuously lacking in sentiment, Parra's "antipoems" have had a strong and liberating effect on poetics in Latin America and elsewhere. In his later years, Parra moved to a form of neo-Symbolism. Partly in response to the oppressive Pinochet regime, Parra devised a satirical character, the Christ of Elqui, whose skewed folk wisdom spoke obliquely but clearly against human rights abuses and against violations of ecological common sense.

Todo tiene que estar en sus archivos.
 Si su mujer se entusiasma con otro
 Le recomiendo los siguientes trucos:
 Afeitarse con hojas de afeitar
 Admirar las bellezas naturales
 Hacer crujir un trozo de papel
 Sostener una charla por teléfono
 Disparar con un rifle de salón
 Arreglarse las uñas con los dientes
 Y tragar cantidades de saliva.

Si desea brillar en los salones
 El pequeño burgués
 Debe saber andar en cuatro pies
 Estornudar y sonreír a un tiempo
 Bailar un vals al borde del abismo
 Endiosar a los órganos sexuales
 Desnudarse delante del espejo
 Deshojar una rosa con un lápiz
 Y tragar toneladas de saliva.

A todo esto cabe preguntarse
 ¿Fue Jesucristo un pequeño burgués?

Como se ve, para poder llegar
 Al paraíso del pequeño burgués
 Hay que ser un acróbata completo
 Para poder llegar al paraíso
 Hay que ser un acróbata completo:

¡Con razón el artista verdadero
 Se entretiene matando matapijos.

Para salir del círculo vicioso
 Recomiendan el acto gratuito:
 Aparecer y desaparecer
 Caminar en estado cataleptico
 Bailar un vals en un montón de escombros
 Acunar un anciano entre los brazos
 Sin despegar la vista de su vista
 Preguntarle la hora al moribundo
 Escupir en el hueco de la mano
 Presentarse de frac en los incendios
 Arremeter con el cortejo fúnebre
 Ir más allá del sexo femenino
 Levantar esa losa funeraria
 Ver si cultivan árboles adentro
 Y atravesar de una vereda a otra
 Sin referencias ni al porqué ni al cuándo
 Por la sola virtud de la palabra
 Con su bigote de galán de cine
 A la velocidad del pensamiento.

Best to have everything in your kit.
 If the wife falls for somebody else
 We recommend the following:
 Shave with razor blades
 Admire the Beauties of Nature
 Crumple a sheet of paper
 Have a long talk on the phone
 Shoot darts with a popgun
 Clean your nails with your teeth
 And swallow a lot of saliva.

If he wants to shine at social gatherings
 The little bourgeois
 Must know how to walk on all fours
 How to smile and sneeze at the same time
 Waltz on the edge of the abyss
 Deify the organs of sex
 Undress in front of a mirror
 Rape a rose with a pencil
 And swallow tons of saliva.

And after all that we might well ask:
 Was Jesus Christ a little bourgeois?

As we have seen, if you want to reach
 The heaven of the little bourgeois,
 You must be an accomplished acrobat
 To be able to get to heaven,
 You must be a wonderful acrobat.

And how right the authentic artist is
 To amuse himself killing bedbugs!

To escape from the vicious circle
 We suggest the *acte gratuite*:
 Appear and disappear
 Walk in a cataleptic trance
 Waltz on a pile of debris
 Rock an old man in your arms
 With your eyes fixed on his
 Ask a dying man what time it is
 Spit in the palm of your hand
 Go to fires in a morning coat
 Break into a funeral procession
 Go beyond the female sex
 Lift the top from that tomb to see
 If they're growing trees in there
 And cross from one sidewalk to the other
 Without regard for when or why
 ...For the sake of the word alone...
 ...With his movie-star mustache...
 ...With the speed of thought...

Una momia conversa por teléfono
Otra momia se mira en un espejo.

Una momia dispara su revólver.

Todas las momias cambian de lugar
Casi todas las momias se retiran.

Varias momias se sientan a la mesa
Unas momias ofrecen cigarrillos
Una momia parece que bailara.

Una momia más vieja que las otras
Da de mamar a su niño de pecho.

One mummy talks on the phone
Another mummy views herself in the mirror.

One mummy fires her revolver.

All the mummies change places
Almost all the mummies withdraw.

A few mummies sit down at the table
Some mummies offer cigarettes
One mummy seems to be dancing.

One mummy older than the others
Puts her baby to her breast.

trans. Thomas Merton

La montaña rusa

Durante medio siglo
La poesía fue
El paraíso del tonto solemne.
Hasta que vine yo
Y me instalé con mí montaña rusa.

Suban, si les parece.
Claro que yo no respondo si bajan
Echando sangre por boca y narices.

Roller Coaster

For half a century
Poetry was the paradise
Of the solemn fool.
Until I came
And built my roller coaster.

Go up, if you feel like it.
I'm not responsible if you come down
Bleeding from your mouth and nose.

trans. Miller Williams

El pequeño burgués

El que quiera llegar al paraíso
Del pequeño burgués tiene que andar
El camino del arte por el arte
Y tragar cantidades de saliva:
El noviciado es casi interminable.

Lista de lo que tiene que saber.

Anudarse con arte la corbata
Deslizar la tarjeta de visita
Sacudirse por lujo los zapatos
Consultar el espejo veneciano
Estudiarse de frente y de perfil
Ingerir una dosis de cognac
Distinguir una viola de un violín
Recibir en pijama a las visitas
Impedir la caída del cabello
Y tragar cantidades de saliva.

Litany of the Little Bourgeois

If you want to get to the heaven
Of the little bourgeois, you must go
By the road of Art for Art's sake
And swallow a lot of saliva:
The apprenticeship is almost interminable.

A list of what you must learn how to do:

Tie your necktie artistically
Slip your card to the right people
Polish shoes that are already shined
Consult the Venetian mirror
(Head-on and in profile)
Toss down a shot of brandy
Tell a viola from a violin
Receive guests in your pajamas
Keep your hair from falling
And swallow a lot of saliva.