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 *Extravagario* [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
Descollar una rosa con un lápiz
Y tragar toneladas de saliva.

A todo esto cabe preguntarse
¿Fue Jesús Cristo 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 matapiojos

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
Eacupir en el hueso 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
Defy 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:
Appearing and disappearing
Walking in a cataleptic trance
Waltzing on a pile of debris
Rocking an old man in your arms
With your eyes fixed on his
Ask a dying man what time it is
Spitting in the palm of your hand
Going to fires in a morning coat
Breaking into a funeral procession
Going beyond the female sex
Lifting the top from that tomb to see
If they’re growing trees in there
And crossing 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...

1962

trans. James Laughlin
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.


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La montaña rusa

Durante medio siglo
La poesía fue
El paraíso del tonto solemne.
Hasta que vine yo
Y me instalé con mi 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. Thomas Merton

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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 violin
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.