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INTRODUCTION

Anti-intellectual, anti-traditional, anti-personal—these are all labels which at one time or another have been affixed to the poetry of Nicanor Parra. They suggest an absence of poetic design, a rejection of traditional norms, and even a drastic diminishing of sentiment. Readers who have not properly understood the Chilean poet's works have often considered them trivial and even ludicrously banal. Yet Parra's antipoems appear to be carefully planned this way, for as the philosopher-poet Luis Oyarzún has remarked in discussing the genesis of the antipoetry, "Parra no hace, sino excepcionalmente, una poesía espontánea y repentista. Sus poemas son, en gran medida elaborados."¹ This poetic consciousness is perhaps most self-evident when we find Parra mimicking his detractors while he forewarns his readers in the antipoem, "Advertencia al lector":

Mi poesía puede perfectamente no conducir a ninguna parte:
"¡Las risas de este libro son falsas!", argumentarán mis detractores
"Sus lágrimas, ¡artificiales!"
"En vez de suspirar, en estas páginas se bosteza"
"Se patalea como un niño de pecho"
"El autor se da entender a estornudos"
Conforme os invito a quemar vuestras naves,
Como los fenicios pretendo formarme mi propio alfabeto.²

¹
²
And the truth is that many readers "have burnt their ships" in order to appreciate Parra's distinct poetic manner of presenting the reality that he feels truly surrounds him. For the antipoet's world is one that is at times best described in a negative fashion: one of ironic contrasts where absurd happenings are found to be comically serious and, as such, lend themselves to an anti-lyrical presentation. This I hope to show more clearly as we proceed with this essay.

When we first come to read Parra he tells us quite explicitly that,

Según los doctores de la ley este libro no debiera publicarse:
La palabra arco iris no aparece en él en ninguna parte,
Menos aún la palabra dolor,
La palabra torcuato.
Sillas y mesas sí que figuran a granel,
¡Ataúdes!, ¡utiles de escritorio!
Lo que me llena de orgullo
Porque, a mi modo de ver, el cielo se está cayendo a pedazos.

Yet, it is Parra's peculiar "modo de ver" that interests us here. And we find that as he looks around he discovers that all the erstwhile poetic heavens have indeed fallen apart. They no longer inspire or give us much solace. His anti-poetry is one without rainbows, because Parra does not harbor much faith in the anthropocentric illusions of man's grandeur and immortality. "El mundo moderno es una gran cloaca," he howls and then somewhat later on he tells us in a more somber manner that, "Sólo una cosa es clara / Que la carne se llena de gusanos."
In this study we should like to examine the dynamics of that particular literary response which allows some readers to appreciate the antipoetry. How is it that a poetry so enigmatically prosaic and chaotic to some, can be an experience of aesthetic pleasure to others? Needless to say Coleridge\(^6\) has been here before us as the question we are asking is: How is it that the antipoems elicit a willing suspension of disbelief?

But before proceeding with an internal study of the "antipoesía" in pursuit of some possible answers to the above question, it would be well to make a few preliminary remarks about the situation of Chilean poetry at the time of Parra's appearance. Indeed, Parra makes not one but two rather dramatic entries into Chilean letters, and both times he takes on the role of the contrarian opposed as he is to the two respective towering poetic figures of the times. In 1937, when he publishes Cancionero sin nombre, it is Lorca that he gently parodies\(^7\); in 1954, date of Poemas y antipoemas, it is Neruda's turn to be challenged.\(^8\) This, in essence, is also the contention of the young poet-critic Pedro Lastra who in a round table discussion of Parra's works says,

En cuanto a nuestra generación. Cuando conocimos a Parra, alrededor de 1950, lo que pesaba en el ámbito chileno era la presencia de la poesía nerudiana. Esta ejercía una atracción, incluso despersonalizante, en la medida en que su lenguaje no correspondía a la necesidad de expresión de una generación que se estaba enfrentando al mundo con otra
Luis Oyarzún, a close friend of Parra's and himself a member of the generation of 1938, appears to be in close agreement with Lastra. However, he broadens even further Parra's importance as an antipoetic contrarian for he states that already in 1937 it was a question of sheer artistic survival to escape not only Lorca but also Neruda's and Valéry's overpowering shadows. First referring to Neruda, Oyarzún tells us, "Sus adjetivos, sus gerundios, y hasta el tono de voz de sus lecturas fueron asimilados con pasión, hasta el punto que caímos en una especie de sonambulismo poético, del que sólo vino a sacarnos, bajo la influencia severa de Jorge Millas, la lucidez extrema de Valéry."

"Corríamos el riesgo de cristalizarnos, de mirar el mundo desde el interior de un diamante. Pero nos salvaron—provisionalmente, ¡nunca se salva uno en definitiva!—Nicanor Parra, que solía venir de Chillán, donde era profesor de matemáticas, y que nos miraba con cierto arrobamiento de provincia contrapesado por su inteligencia crítica, y
Gonzalo Rojas, . . . Nicanor nos trajo en ese entonces el Cancionero sin nombre—dedicado a Millas, Omar Cerda, Carlos Pedraza, Victoriano Cáceres, Carlos Guzmán y yo—y Gonzalo todos los esplendores y todo el humor negro y libre del surrealismo.11

We cannot help but note in passing that Gonzalo Rojas’s opting for the surrealist mode does not appear, from our vantage point, to be too daringly adventuresome for his times. Rojas joined the surrealist group Mandrágora headed by Braulio Arenas12 somewhat after 1938 so as to "alcanzar una altura poética"13 different from the poetry then in vogue. But we should point out that both Parra and Rojas had begun to write in earnest when Neruda’s first two volumes of Residencia en la tierra14 (1933-1935) had already been published and were well known internationally. We recall that it was in the early Residencias that Neruda’s hermetic qualities showed themselves to be the strongest, as Amado Alonso has so eloquently shown in his famous book on Neruda.15 Parra, as opposed to Rojas, does not take the hermetic surrealistic route but rather chooses a popularist one that is eventually to lead to the antipoesía of 1954. As Jorge Elliott has observed, Parra tries to avoid "poesía 'agigantadora', o de usar una metáfora nueva. Por el contrario, se recurre a un lenguaje viviente en el cual no se rehuye, sino más bien se aprovecha, la cursilería pueblerina, que en función antitética con expresiones de naturaleza culta y otras, de carga lírica, adquieren un sabor muy peculiar."16
Though Parra goes the route of prosaic poetry, he does not fall victim to the usual rhetorical qualities associated with vernacular poetry. Nowhere have we found a better distinction made between the rhetoric of vernacular poetry and the innovative language of prosaic poetry than in Octavio Paz’s Cuadrivio. It is there that the Mexican poet contrasts the prosaic language of a López Velarde to "el llamado lenguaje popular" of a Machado or a Lorca:

El llamado lenguaje popular de la poesía española no viene del habla del pueblo sino de la canción tradicional; el prosaísmo de López Velarde y de otros poetas hispanoamericanos procede de la conversación, esto es, del lenguaje que efectivamente se habla en las ciudades. Por eso admite los términos técnicos, los cultismos y las voces locales y extranjeras. Mientras la canción a la manera tradicional es una nostalgia de otro tiempo, el prosaísmo enfrenta el idioma del pasado con el de ahora y crea así un nuevo lenguaje. Uno acentúa el lirismo; el otro tiende a romperlo: su función, dentro del poema, es la crítica de la poesía.17

In the final analysis this is what Parra’s antipoetry is all about: an anti-lyrical critique of poetic language. As I hope to show later on, in Parra’s antipoems one comes to appreciate more and more man’s severe spiritual, moral and intellectual limitations. For this reason the antipoetry is not to be a "poesía de arco iris." It does not make promises that it will inspire or provide great hopes and expectations for the human spirit.

Until the appearance of his Poemas y antipoemas in 1954, Chilean poetry was known abroad chiefly through the works of
Vicente Huidobro,18 Gabriela Mistral,19 and Pablo Neruda.20 Parra's book was a literary sensation because of the polemics that it evoked concerning its alleged antipoetic qualities. But 1954 was not the start of it all, for the controversial nature of Parra's poetry had already been in evidence since the appearance of Cancionero sin nombre (1937), his first collection of poems. Shortly after its publication Parra was caustically assailed by the critic Carlos Poblete in these terms: "Es la cabeza visible entre la falange de 'guitarreros' que ha invadido un sector de la poesía chilena. Poesía epidérmica como todo lo que no se nutre en la realidad profunda del hombre."21 Yet it was this youthful work containing such a so-called epidermic poetry that was awarded the prestigious "Premio Municipal", and with it came the assertion by Gabriela Mistral that "estamos ante un poeta cuya fama se extenderá internacionalmente."22

Diverse critical opinions such as those of Poblete and Mistral have more often than not characterized the countervailing judgments which have greeted each of Parra's succeeding works. For example, on the one hand, a Pablo Neruda writing on the inside jacket of Poemas y antipoemas declares: "Esta poesía es una delicia de oro matutino o un fruto consumado en las tinieblas." On the other, Prudencio Salvatierra, one of Parra's most severe critics, commenting on Versos de salón (1962) is quick to denounce the antipoetry: "¿Puede admitirse que se lance al público una obra como ésa, sin pies ni cabeza, que destila veneno
y podredumbre, demencia y satanismo? . . . Me han preguntado si este librito es inmoral. Un tarro de basura no es inmoral, por muchas vueltas que le demos para examinar su contenido."23

Utterly opposed as they are in their estimation of Parra’s poetry, Neruda and Salvatierra do share one point in common with many other readers of Parra, and it is a peculiar dismay which sooner or later overtakes us as we read the antipoesía. Behind the apparent informality of Parra’s diction there lurks what appears to be a distressing obscurity. The poems sound very much like everyday conversation, yet their meaning is often ensnared in ambiguity and even irrationality. Because of this the antipoems have always generated passionate interest in Latin American newspapers and literary journals. In fact, it is somewhat surprising that up to the present time not one major critical work dealing with Parra’s poetry has been published.

In this study I should like to focus on the so-called anti aspects of Parra’s poetry and will be principally concerned with those works which have most often been called antipoetic. They are Poemas y antipoemas (1954), Versos de salón (1962), "Artefactos" (unedited in book form), and to a certain extent other antipoems scattered about in newspapers and literary journals. Poetry from two other works of Parra, Cancionero sin nombre (1937) and La cueca larga (1958), will also be brought into play whenever it serves to trace Parra’s antipoetic orientation.

2. Nicanor Parra, Poemas y antipoemas (Santiago de Chile: Nascimento, 1967), p. 72. This is perhaps Parra's best known work and any future references to it in this study will be annotated as PyA. The book was first published in 1954.

3. Ibid., p. 72.


6. Biographia Literaria (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), ed. J. Shawcross, Vol II, Ch. XIV, p. 6. In his conversations with Wordsworth, Coleridge was interested in determining how the poet might transfer "a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith."

7. Whether Cancionero sin nombre (Santiago de Chile: Nascimento, 1937) is sufficiently original to take it beyond the realm of mere parody is still very much of a moot point. One thing that clearly does emerge from it is Parra's satirical "voluntad anuladora" as one can observe when he mimicks Lorca in the following fragment: "me gusta, me gusta, gusta / me gusta que no me entiendan. / Pero hablando en serio serio / que nadie me niega niega / que cuando subo a caballo / me pongo mis dos espuelas." This is from "Remolino interior," p. 17.
Perhaps because there has been little direct parody of Neruda by Parra, the former's response to the antipoetry has always been good natured. In fact, Neruda appears to be one of Parra's greatest admirers; this is attested by the rather complimentary poem "Una corbata para Nicanor" which Neruda writes in 1967 and is given in its entirety in the appendix of this dissertation. "Este es el hombre," writes Neruda, "que derrotó al suspiro y es muy capaz de encabezar la decapitación del suspirante." Obras completas, II (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1968), p. 1145.


Ibid., p. 187.


Jorge Elliott tells us that, "La poesía de Gonzalo Rojas constituye también una contra fuerza (en 1938) aunque es distinta de la de Parra debido a que aspira a lo contrario, es decir, a alcanzar una altura poética manifiesta." See Antología crítica de la nueva poesía chilena (Concepción: Publicaciones del Consejo de Investigaciones Científicas, 1957), p. 120.

The period given by Neruda himself for the actual writing of the first two Residencias is 1925-1935. See Residencia en la tierra (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1944).

Amado Alonso, Poesía y estilo de Pablo Neruda (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1951).


Huidobro's most famous book is Altazor (Madrid, 1931) wherein the reader can find his much discussed "creacionismo" at its best. According to Huidobro's poetics, the duty of the poet is to create "realidades poéticas nuevas" which then are to be independent of the poet and of external reality. See Braulio Arenas's rather informative prolog to Obras completas de Vicente Huidobro, I (Santiago de Chile: Zig-Zag, 1964).

Gabriela Mistral's best known books are the following: Desolación (New York, 1922), Tala (Buenos Aires, 1938) and Lagar (Santiago de Chile, 1954). Until now she is the only Spanish-American poet to have been awarded the Nobel Prize in literature.

Neruda's Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada (Santiago de Chile, 1924) is possibly Spanish-America's best known collection of love poems. Equally well known are his Residencias en la tierra, I and II (Madrid, 1935) and his Tercera residencia (Buenos Aires, 1947).

Carlos Poblete, Exposición de la poesía chilena (Buenos Aires, 1941), p. 319.

This quote appears in the Introduction to Parra's La cueca larga y otros poemas (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria, 1964), p. 7.

Ibid., pp. 6-7. The reference given by Margarita Aguirre and Juan Agustín Plazuelos, who wrote the Introduction, is Prudencio Salvatierra, "Poetas y antipoetas," in El diario ilustrado (Santiago de Chile, November 15, 1964).
CHAPTER I

POETIC DYNAMICS OF THE ANTIPOESIA
Antipoesía is indeed a puzzling term. This is the protean and elusive label that has been applied to Nicanor Parra's poetry by many critics and used by the poet himself. Yet it has never been adequately defined. If it be a contrary type of poetry, what might it be opposed to? What is it anti to? For instance, terms like "anti-lyrical" and "anti-metaphysical" often are carelessly tossed around when discussing it, and this occurs most often when Parra is depicted as a mere superficial buffoon who is unable to penetrate into the mysteries of the human spirit. However, we find this argument countered by the American poet, Miller Williams, who tells us that for Parra "even metaphysically the surface of things is the proper concern of poetry, because the masks and dyes and ways of walking tell more
about the heart than we can find out with a flashlight in its darkest corners."

And whatever meaning we might glean from Parra's verses, it is often found lurking between prosaic lines containing an ironic or paradoxical twist. For example, when Parra tells us in one of his *artefactos*: "Cuba sí, Yankees también," he induces the reader to reconsider a well-known jingoistic slogan of Spanish America: "Cuba sí, Yankees no." But, more important, we find that in the modified slogan the antipoet leads us to consider a basic paradox of Latin American man: his ambivalent affinity for both Ariel and Calibán. It is the modification of the slogan that interests us here, for it brings forth a hidden truth that the more jingoistic slogan does not reveal. In other words, Parra's *artefacto* suggests that the Spanish American temperment is indeed attracted by the best of two possible worlds and to both he is apt to give the "sí."

Though Parra does not often wish to go too far beyond the surface of things, this does not mean that his poetry is itself superficial, nor that he is unmoved by the inertness of the phenomena around him. Quite to the contrary, as we read more and more of the antipoems we find that Parra's work is much more than an unpoetic "ateísmo literario" as Mario Benedetti has pointed out so well. "Sería demasiado fácil," he tells us, "decir que el antipoema representa una suerte de ateísmo literario, una negación
de la poesía que en última instancia sirve para demostrar su existencia. Sin embargo negación de poesía es el mundo que ve el poeta, no su mirada. Parra inventa el antipoema para flagelar el mundo con sus propias armas, para lidiar con él en su terreno."5 To be aware that Parra elects to confront the world "en su propio terreno" is to begin to cultivate a proper understanding of the antipoetry; for ever since Cancionero sin nombre, Parra's first work, many critics have been trying to penetrate this so-called "poesía epidérmica" in the wrong manner. Yet this is no fault of Parra's for he tells us time and again---in a prosaically comical tone---that he is nothing more than a "señor de moscas" and a "descuartizador de golondrinas."6 By describing himself thus the antipoet means that he has discarded the venerable hope that a structured art of "arco iris" and "golondrinas" can give order to the irrational chaos assimilated by man's mind from the outside world. In the antipoetry man's flights of fancy have been considerably reduced. No longer can he turn to the "cisne" of a Rubén Darío or the "buho" of a González Martínez, instead the only winged creatures that mean anything to him are the "piojo" and the "mosca". For example, after Parra enumerates for us what he feels are the "vicios del mundo moderno" he concludes that,

Por todo lo cual
Cultivo un piojo en mi corbata
Y sonrío a los imbéciles que bajan de los árboles.7
We have been told by the scientists that when man came down from the trees he began to cease being a chimpanzee and started the long evolution toward rationality. For Parra, men that still place great faith in reason and its subsequent goodness are mere "imbéciles" not too far removed from the ape. The "cisne" and the "buho" were long-standing symbols of faith in the culture of the ancients. By means of the comically trivial and poetically uninspiring winged vermin of the antipoesía, namely the "piojo" and the "mosca", Parra is able to project how truly insignificant, low-flying and short-lived the fancies of modern man really are.

As we shall see, part of the antipoetry's recalcitrance to traditional literary analysis comes from its reduced possibilities for poetic symbolism because of the diminished suggestive power of its language. Because of this some critics have raised a further question: Is the antipoetry something apart from poetry? This issue has been sparked in part by the title of the author's best known book, Poemas y antipoemas, which implies two coexistent yet distinct categories. Raúl Silva Castro, the literary historian and critic, writes in his Panorama literario de Chile:

No están claras aún, ni en ese libro ni en comentarios de terceros, cuáles son las fronteras que el autor traza entre el poema y el antipoema, y acaso la indecisión haya sido buscada intencionalmente por Parra, que es todo un humorista, para que cada lector tome en el libro lo que le agrade.
We believe that to seek to establish a line of division between the poems and the antipoems would be a futile task because this implies that some of Parra's works are something other than poetry. In other words, by taking this approach one might be led to believe that there are some works that are somewhat less fictive or more "real" than others. But one seriously wonders, especially nowadays, if this be a valid question to ask. For it is today, as the reflective critic Barbara Herrnstein Smith observes, that most dogmatic notions of philosophical and linguistic truth are seriously being called into question. Miss Smith reminds us that, "as we see even the rock of verifiable scientific truth pulverized into 'statements of probability' and 'operational definitions,' any simple division of the territory appears increasingly irrelevant or inadequate. Although this situation obviously complicates the relation of poetry to truth, it is also something of a boon to the literary partisan or theorist. It is evident, for example, that poetry need no longer be so much on the defensive with respect to its claims to truth, for no one else is claiming to have cornered the real thing." And a boon it is to us because we feel that the antipoetry can best be appreciated as a series of sometimes expressive, sometimes bald statements that Parra makes about the real world that he is attempting to describe. And the statements are such that at times they appear to be denotative (the usual label for nonfictive language) and at other times, connotative (the
normal tag for poetic language). But dividing them into rigorous categories of poems and antipoems, we think, would be irrelevant because they are all "a significant response to an experience." Rather than absolute truth Parra seeks more a "sense of truth."

However, we must go beyond this basic frame of reference if we are to characterize Parra's antipoetry in some differential manner. To begin with, we should point out that it imitates both bureaucratic jargon and ordinary speech. "Nosotros conversamos," writes Parra in his poem "Manifiesto," "en el lenguaje de todos los días / no creemos en signos cabalísticos." And Parra's poetic idiom is just that, bald speech which is far removed from the poetry of highly personal symbols. Trite speech that appears to be devoid of subjective meaning has an important function in the antipoetry, for by its use Parra tries to avoid ascribing private absolute meaning to a world he feels has none. He goes on to say in the same poem:

Este es nuestro mensaje
Nosotros denunciamos al poeta demiurgo
al poeta Barata
al poeta Ratón de Biblioteca
Todos estos señores
---y esto lo digo con mucho respeto---
deben ser procesados y juzgados
por construir castillos en el aire
por malgastar el espacio y el tiempo
redactando sonetos a la luna.

This is a key passage because it will help us situate Parra as a poet. He denounces the poets of deliberate obscurity,
of the Ivory Tower and also of those who would offer cheap sentimentality. For him they all negate what he should like his poetry to be: clear, down-to-earth, and fiercely candid.

Ortega y Gasset in his Meditaciones del Quijote, though in a slightly different vein, stresses the importance of this particular "anti-alchemist" approach to poetry. In speaking of the poetry that is capable of coping with what he calls present reality, he underlines the insufficiency of a "pure" framework for poetry, because it ignores "inert reality." He suggests that the Quijote by bringing in so-called non-poetic reality to the world of art has heralded the decline of the myth, and poetry henceforth will be realistic. "La insuficiencia," Ortega states, "en una palabra, de la cultura, de cuanto es noble, claro aspirante---éste es el sentido del realismo poético. Cervantes reconoce que la cultura es todo eso pero, ¡ay!, es una ficción. Envolviendo a la cultura---como la venta el retablo de la fantasía---yace la bárbara, brutal, muda, insignificante realidad de las cosas." And it is this brutal and mute reality of things that Parra turns our attention to. But he will not try to remake and restructure the "insignificante realidad de las cosas" as might a "poeta alquimista." Rather there is what we might call a more modest poetic
posture on Parra's part whereby he will not endeavor to compete with reality, that is, he will not attempt to transform it into something "noble, claro, aspirante."

The building blocks of Parra's antipoems are the colloquial idiom, the commonplace image and prosaic content. They are given a verse form which, of course, differentiates them from literary prose. These are two points we should like to keep in mind: the antipoems are not prose nor are they ordinary speech per se.

Although Parra's works sound like common discourse, the reader ultimately must bring to them a willingness to believe quite different from the one which he brings to a newspaper. Unlike discursive speech, the truth or falsehood of the antipoems cannot be tested in an objective manner. Therefore, in order to study the antipoesfa as poetry we shall have to consider its imaginative consistency. One of the basic assumptions underlying this discussion is that the so-called antipoems, no matter how prosaic, are fictive poetic utterances. That is, faithful as they might be in their mimesis of fragmented reality, they are still inventions of the imagination, and it is the as if that will be of interest to us. In her penetrating analysis of poetic closure Barbara Herrnstein Smith says this about the poem in general:

It is an imitation in the same sense that a play is the imitation or representation of an action. Everything the poet "says" may
be true, but his saying of it is not. It is as an utterance that the poem is a fiction, a pretense.¹⁴

Though the antipoetry comes uncomfortably close to non-literary speech, it is still the language of as if even though it is expressed in a prosaic way. It skirts disaster by depicting a world that is familiar yet poetically distinct. "Ponchartrain Causeway," one of Parra's shorter antipoems, may serve to exemplify what we are trying to say.

Perdón
lo siento muchísimo
No tengo nada que hacer con estos puentes inolvidables
Reconozco que son largos
¿Infinitos?
O.K.: Infinitos
Pero no es mucho lo que tengo que hacer yo con estos crepúsculos maravillosos
Gracias por los sándwiches y las cocacolas
Gracias por las buenas intenciones
Y también por las malas
Mi estómago está de fiesta
¿Oyen la sonajera de tripas?
Mientras no se demuestre lo contrario
Seguiré llamándome como me llamo.¹⁵

In essence, the antipoem makes a relatively simple statement which on face value is indeed prosaic: "Seguiré llamándome como me llamo." That is, so long as the poet is not proven wrong in what he has said he will continue "to call a spade a spade." And at this particular moment what possesses the persona of the antipoem is not the wonder of the causeway but the hunger of his stomach. Taking the antipoem as a whole, we can see that Parra goes beyond the context of ordinary discourse in which expressions like "puente infinito" and "crepúsculos maravillosos" would be much more likely.
The irony, in fact, is that the *as if* aspect of the poem is its very unemotional stance and impassive tone, for the poet is representing what might happen and not what ordinarily does happen when one beholds an engineering marvel. In this poem about the Ponchartrain Causeway in New Orleans, Parra mocks the predictable figurative language that might be used to extol the features of the causeway. His response to the bridge *per se* appears to be unemotional, but Parra is at great pains to portray some other realities which at that moment are of greater importance to him, the sandwiches and the cokes. These are the priorities of the tourist; the antipoet depicts them, and he tells us that so long as he is not proven wrong, "Seguiré llamándome como me llamo."

Because of his refusal to be taken in by what other poets might call the grandeur and majesty of the surrounding universe, we find that some critics are apt to call the antipoetry "unpoetic." However, we shall attempt to demonstrate that Ignacio Valente is more correct when he states, "Un antipoema no es, por supuesto, otra cosa que un poema; debe eliminarse cualquier mitología al respecto." Antipoems, he continues, have always existed in the history of poetry and its very vitality depends on the appearance of the antipoet:

Marcial es antipoeta de Ovidio; Quevedo lo es de Garcilaso; Heine, de Goethe, Michaux, de Valéry; Pound, de Tennyson... Así se trenzan en la historia poética lo dionisiaco y lo apolíneo, lo romántico y lo clásico, la ironía y el lirismo, el evento existencial y la perfección esencial.
Behind Valente's observation about the interplay of the poetic and the antipoetic stands an important concept to bear in mind when we consider Parra's poetry. As an antipoet, Parra necessarily redefines the poetic attitudes and standards of his age. Since his poetry is automatically judged by reference to the consecrated forms, it appears to lack form. But the thrust of the antipoems resides in their countervailing force, for they are generated in opposition to the rhetoric of private symbols, dazzling metaphors and personal expressiveness. By the latter term we mean that particular poetic orientation which places the author as the prime generator of the values and the subject matter of the poem. "Hacer un poema como la naturaleza hace un árbol," advises Vicente Huidobro, and in the same poem "Arte poética" he adds, "Por qué cantáis la rosa ¡oh, poetas! / Hacedla florecer en el poema... El poeta es un pequeño Dios." Thus, in this tradition the poet sits as a god presiding over his artistic creation. Quite to the contrary, Parra considers himself an observer that merely documents a fragmented external reality as he states in "Mil novecientos treinta":

Yo no ofrezco nada especial, yo no formulo hipótesis
Yo sólo soy una cámara fotográfica que se pasea por el desierto
Soy una alfombra que vuela
Un registro de fechas y de hechos dispersos
Una máquina que produce tantos o cuantos botones por minuto.

Parra is, in fact, telling us that he will not speculate
as to the essence of things. The antipoetry will be visually descriptive, and the task of the antipoet here will be to scan creation in the manner of a "cámara fotográfica." He refuses to form a hypothesis of the latent qualities of things, just as the eye of a camera will not pick up spiritual depth in the objects it photographs. Yet another segment of the poem contains an ironic passage wherein the antipoet, in spite of himself, transcends the mere camera effect:

Enseguida me remonto a uno de los picos más altos del Himalaya
Al Kanchentunga, y miro con escepticismo la brigada internacional
Que intenta escalarlo y descifrar sus misterios.
Veo como el viento los rechaza varias veces al punto de partida
Hasta sembrar en ellos la desesperación y la locura.
Veo a algunos de ellos resbalar y caer al abismo
Y a otros veo luchar entre sí por unas latas de conserva.

Parra comes as a skeptic to witness the scaling of Mount Kanchentunga and attempts to record the happening in a very matter-of-fact and unemotional manner. Yet the ill-fated attempt has a certain heroic projection. Parra like a camera tries to take in only what appears before him. However, the aspirations of the human spirit are also evident here as man attempts to "escalarlo y descifrar sus misterios." Nevertheless, Parra does endeavor to portray things as they appear on the surface. The mountain peak is unscalable and this leads to the mountain climbers's becoming deranged. Thus the survivors are no longer moved by the spirit, but rather by the impulse of "luchar entre sí por unas latas de conserva."
As we have seen above, Parra is not usually involved in a search for essences that might lurk behind the surface. Essence, depth and interiority all are terms which relate to the beyond—a spiritual world not seen by the eyes. The traditional poet reaches out for this beyond through the objects which he uses in his poetry to symbolize this other world. For the antipoet, reality is just what he sees, and therefore things cannot be keys to a world of essence, nor do they serve as a mask for it. The French novelist Robbe-Grillet, though his subject matter and his style are quite different from Parra's, has imposed upon himself somewhat similar surface limitations. He states:

non seulemente nous ne considérons plus le monde comme notre bien, notre propriété privée, calquée sur nos besoins et domesticable, mais par surcroît nous ne croyons plus à cette profondeur. Tandis que les conceptions essentialistes de l'homme voyaient leur ruine, l'idée de "condition" remplaçant désormais celle de "nature", la surface des choses a cessé d'être pour nous le masque de leur cœur, sentiment qui préalait à tous les "au-delà" de la métaphysique.20

These are the same tough-minded limitations that Parra sets on his antipoetry. He treats reality as a jumble of objects that are opaque, hard and unalterably without a deeper spiritual meaning. More specifically stated, if we return to the poem "1930" we find the following important declaration:

Concedo la misma atención a un crimen que a un acto de piedad

Vibro de la misma manera frente a un paisaje idílico
Que ante los rayos espasmódicos de una tempestad eléctrica.
Yo no disminuyo ni exalto nada
Me limito a narrar lo que veo.21

Adherence to the condition imposed above does not often permit Parra to show his inner torments or desires. He leaves this for those poets who write more in the romantic or surrealistic tradition. His antipoetry embodies a literary rebellion against the hermetic poetry of private and obscure meanings. "Nosotros repudiamos," he writes in "Manifiesto," "la poesía de gafas obscuras."22 Yet his own antipoetry, which he calls "poesía de claridad,"23 is not itself an easy one. As we well know, simple colloquial-like poetry is not always nonproblematic, and Parra in his plain and objective poetry abstains from providing clear-cut answers to the enigmatic reality he depicts. He is reluctant to use a poetic expression that imposes a subjective order on the outside world.

Nada más, compañeros
nosotros condenamos
--y esto sí que lo digo con respeto--
la poesía del pequeño dios
la poesía de vaca sagrada
la poesía de toro furioso.24

Parra's poetry is not, of course, like the type he condemns above. If his antipoetry were a "poesía del pequeño dios" it would require a metaphysical composure in which Parra would suggest or seek personal answers to the riddles of the universe. His modifications of the poetic tradition,
rather, are in the direction of an antipersonal view of reality in which the poet's lyrical voice is dissolved in a stream of atomized and disparate experiences. His anti-poetry focuses on parts of existence—not the whole—because a generalization concerning reality is to be avoided. And this is because he no longer has much faith in absolute truths. For example, in "El galán imperfecto" an isolated event at the cemetery is dealt with in terms of what seems to be rigorous objectivity:

Una pareja de recién casados
Se detiene delante de una tumba.
Ella viste de blanco riguroso.

Para ver sin ser visto
Yo me escondo detrás de una columna.

Mientras la novia triste
Desmaleza la tumba de su padre
El galán imperfecto
Se dedica a leer una revista.

This poem is a good example of Parra's naked poetic utterance. But if the short work is a barren observation of a modern scene at the cemetery, it is more than a simple photograph. It is an account of the dual presence of antithetical aspects of reality: life and death. For this particular antipoem recognizes that objective truth is only partial and therefore, must be qualified by its opposite. Thus the noun "novia" is qualified by the adjective "triste," and the expression "blanco riguroso" reminds us of the commonplace expression "negro riguroso" used to describe the dress of women in mourning. Although we have here an
allusion to the death-in-life motif, neither death nor life is treated here with a grandiose rhetoric. Parra’s fidelity to what the persona of the antipoem sees is matched by his choice of a subtly managed trite speech. The antipoet is insistent on seeing reality as it really is with its warts and all: "Para ver sin ser visto." Thus, the young sad bride weeds the grave of her father while the true-to-life "galán" tends to reviewing life in the magazine. The young man is imperfect but he is real. This is characteristic of the antipoems, and it explains in part why much of their so-called narrative appears to be filled with "pointless anecdotes" which do not moralize but only show what happens. As a result of this intent to "narrar lo que veo" the voice heard throughout much of the "antipoesía" is jerky, disorganized and anti-sentimental. It is this tone that renders the antipoetry impersonal and quite different from what we expect.

By not satisfying our naive expectations Parra’s antipoems create the illusion that we are feeling something real. The more skeptical and ironic the antipoem becomes, the more we feel that it respects our sense of reality. On the other hand, although in the real world we are ready to accede to the negation of certain previously held myths, in imaginative writing we are accustomed to an implied dialogue between our crumbling beliefs (the substance of poetry) and the skepticism imposed by reality. Parra’s variations on the themes of poetry, ultimately, allow us to readjust our
former beliefs and give them a different meaning which is more relevant to present day reality. The following poem may serve as an example:

ODA A UNAS PALOMAS

Qué divertidas son
Estas palomas que se burlan de todo,
Con sus pequeñas plumas de colores
Y sus enormes vientres redondos.
Pasan del comedor a la cocina
Como hojas que dispersa el otoño
Y en el jardín se instalan a comer
Moscas, de todo un poco,
Picotean las piedras amarillas
O se paran en el lomo del toro;
Más ridículas son que una escopeta
O que una rosa llena de piojos,
Sus estudiados vuelos, sin embargo,
Hipnotizan a mancos y cojos
Que creen ver en ellas
La explicación de este mundo y el otro.
Aunque no hay que confiarse porque tiene
El olfato del zorro.
La inteligencia fría del reptil
Y la experiencia larga del loro.
Más hipócritas son que el profesor
Y que el abad que se cae de gordo.
Pero al menor descuido se abalanzan
Como bomberos locos,
Entran por la ventana del edificio
Y se apoderan de la caja de fondos.

A ver si alguna vez
Nos agrupamos realmente todos
Y nos ponemos firmes
Como gallina que defiende sus pollos.

In this poem the old myth of the romanticized poetic bird (paloma, golondrina, etc.) is not discarded altogether, but rather transformed in such a way that it satisfies our modern-day skepticism. The poetry in the "antipoema" is maintained by adjusting the meaning of the myth still held by the
"mancos y cojos / que creen ver en ellas / la explicación
de este mundo y el otro." I say adjust, and not discard, because those latent poetic expectations or beliefs which render us "mancos y cojos" are still appealed to here, but in a disguised fashion. Our belief that birds can inspire the human spirit is rigid enough so that we are able to accept the ironic variation of "gallina" for "paloma."

The myth of the exemplary bird is given a new twist. In order to drive out naive expectations of the dove's inspirational abilities we find counterposed to it not an eagle, but a "gallina que defiende sus pollos." The traditional pejorative use of the word "gallina" in popular speech is given a new positive value. What is more important is that the myth of birds inspiring men is not disregarded altogether but rather transformed in such a way that it satisfies our skepticism. Doves do not really hold the answers to this world or the other; but a mother hen's courage—which we can objectively see—may serve to inspire us to drive out the hypocritical "profesor, abad, y bomberos locos" who take possession of the "caja de fondos." In "Oda a unas palomas" there are many negations of traditional poetic expectations:

los enormes vientres redondos de las palomas
las palomas que comen moscas
más ridículas son que una escopeta
las palomas sobre el lomo del toro
una rosa que se llena de piojos
estudiados vuelos etc.
This particular kind of negativity can be seen throughout the whole of Parra's antipoetry. The negative conditions imposed by Parra on his poetry are really only a readjustment of traditional expectations. We expect 'vuelos' but not 'vuelos estudiados,' 'plumaje' but not 'enormes vientres redondos' etc. The no's of Parra are in fact imaginative thrusts by which he is merely saying no to the "thou shalt nots" of traditional poetry.

We have already discussed how Nicanor Parra's anti-poetry is in certain respects the antithesis of what some critics consider a cherished poetic tradition. There is in his work a deliberate rebellion against the use of deep poetic symbolism, allegory and the suggestive use of language. Parra's inclination is for a poetic idiom imbued with the tone of colloquial speech and characterized by hard dry images. However, this experimentation with the traditional poetic models, both in form and content, should not be interpreted as a sign of non-poetic character. Rather it is Parra's way of revitalizing the power of poetry. Perhaps we can better demonstrate this by considering the antipoem "Sinfonía de cuna" which is the initial poem of Poemas y antipoemas:

Una vez andando
Por un parque inglés
Con un angelorum
Sin querer me hallé.

Buenos días, dijo,
Yo le contesté,
El en castellano,
Pero yo en francés.
Dites moi, don ángel,
Comment va monsieur.

El me dio la mano,
Yo le tomé el pie
¡Hay que ver, señores,
Como un ángel es!

Fatuo como el cisne,
Frió como un riel,
Gordo como un pavo,
Feo como usted.

Susto me dio un poco
Pero no arranque.

Le busqué las plumas,
Plumas encontré,
Duras como el duro
Cascarón de un pez.

¡Buenas con que hubiera
Sido Lucifer!

Se enojó conmigo,
Me tiró un revés
Con su espada de oro,
Yo me le agache.

Angel más absurdo
Non volveré a ver.

Muerto de la risa
Dije good bye sir,
Siga su camino,
Que le vaya bien,
Que la pise el auto,
Que la mate el tren.

Ya se acabo el cuento.
Uno, dos y tres.27

As in the previous poem we have here the apparent
destruction of a myth—in this case the myth of the angel.
Yet this antipoem presents a characteristically ambivalent
rejection and acceptance of myth, similar to that encoun-
tered in "Oda a unas palomas." On the side of acceptance,
we note that a special gesture in the direction of belief
has been made. The reader is asked to abide by the rules of a child's fantasy. We must believe that it is possible to run into an angel in an English park before we begin to reality-test the angel, that is, examine his surface qualities—as all things must be examined in Parra's poetry. The slant of the antipoem is set up by the title "Sinfonía de cuna" which implies a lullaby or a child's song is to follow. And the primitive and naive style of the poem generates the effect of frankness and simplicity characteristic of a child's world. But on the side of rejection of the myth, the skepticism of the persona in the antipoem is inescapable as he addresses himself to this "ángel más absurdo" in a taunting way. Which is it then? Acceptance or rejection of the world of angels?

The antipoem is about an angel, we would all agree. But what does it mean? Here we might get many points of view. Before continuing our analysis of "Sinfonía de cuna," we should note that behind the previous question stands a more crucial one for our whole discussion: How does any antipoem mean? What connections must be made by the reader within their texts so that they communicate something to us? We can begin to describe their aesthetic process by provisionally adopting a suggestion that Ignacio Valente has offered in his discussion of the antipoet. The mechanism of the antipoetic process, he suggests, is generated by these conditions:

las formas expresivas que llamamos clásicas, y que consagran el equilibrio entre la experiencia
y el lenguaje, por el camino de la perfección estética tienden a alejarse de la existencia, de la historia, del sentimiento, y a endurecerse en retóricas; su cansancio engendra antipoetas de fortuna varia, poetas de crisis, cuyo verbo irónico y corrosivo quisiera devolvernos el contacto con la experiencia real del hombre en situación.  

In other words, the antipoet as an "hombre en situación" is the poet weary of the whole idea of polished perfection, be it found in the concept of the angel or in the formal aspects of the poem itself. "La poesía terminó conmigo," exclaims Parra in one of his antipoems. What does he mean? The traditional concept of formal and thematic unity requires that the poet adopt certain principles of order and coherence in his work. To the antipoet this is a dishonest stance in which he must purport to know the answers to all his questions concerning existence. To condemn Parra for lack of adherence to this criterion is to miss the point of his antipoetry, which is the mimesis of a chaotic reality having no real order. William Carlos Williams, one of Parra's translators and a great American poet himself, has written a useful apostrophe in Spring and All which depicts the charges any "antipoet" of the twentieth century must face:

What do they mean when they say: "I do not like your poems; you have no faith whatever. You seem neither to have suffered nor, in fact, to have felt anything very deeply... Is this what you call poetry? It is the very antithesis of poetry. It is antipoetry. It is the annihilation of life upon which you are bent. Poetry that used to go hand in
hand with life, poetry that interpreted our deepest promptings, poetry that inspired, that led us forward to new discoveries, new depths of tolerance, new heights of exaltation. You moderns! It is the death of poetry you are accomplishing."

Williams goes on to say that he is not in search of "the beautiful illusion." Just as in the case of his fellow antipoet, none of the basic assumptions made about the poem can be taken for granted in Parra's works. A search for "deepest promptings," "new discoveries," or "new depths of tolerance and exaltation" are not to be found in the poetry of surfaces. Furthermore, unlike the poem which offers unity, order and coherence, Parra's antipoems deliberately present dilemmas which are not to be solved by the poet. His antipoetry is not one that gives answers nor does it always show cause and effect relationships.

However, Parra does skirt the charge of "having no faith whatever" by giving an ironic quality to his antipoems. This is well exemplified in "Sinfonía de cuna." As we stated earlier, there is an ambivalence of myth and anti-myth in the antipoem: a belief in the angel is assumed, yet at the same time there is a sarcastic attack on the angelic myth. To be sure, the argument of the antipoem is unsettling in that it is iconoclastic. The source of the perplexity does not lie in the diction, which is clear if not commonplace, but rather in its uncompromising attack on the mythic pattern of the encounter of the child with the angel. The latter is brought down from his mythical pedestal and examined closely by Parra's antipoetic lens. "¡Hay que ver, señores," says Parra, "como un ángel es!"
There is another disturbing element at work in the structure of "Sinfonía de cuna." This is the idea that a natural and inevitable struggle exists between the perceiving senses and the imaginative faculty. In the antipoem the angel is not so much contemplated by the imagination, as it is seen and touched through the senses. From the start, the lyrical subject is set forth as being ready to battle playfully with the angel. In fact, there is no desire to meet the mythical creature, "Con un angelorum / Sin querer me hallé," but since the meeting does occur the angel as a literary entity is the one to suffer. "Darle la mano a alguien para que le tomen el pie" in common usage means to be taken advantage of, and this is precisely what the narrator does to the angel. The imaginary figure is reality-tested within the context of the poem; the child pets the angel just as he might any animal:

Le busqué las plumas
Plumas encontré,
Duras como el duro
Cascarón de un pez.

In short, the antipoem induces us to act on the angel rather than contemplate it or in any way be passively enthralled by it. As simple as the poem is in its language, we have to read it word by word. We might be exasperated with it because in struggling with its meaning we must also join in the revision of the myth. The angel is "fatuo como el cisne" and "gordo como un pavo." The negative use of the stereotyped images of beauty, the swan and the peacock, is consistent with the total
mock representation of the angel. For the fantasy in the antipoem has to do with an angel with "plumas duras" who is "feo," "frío," "absurdo," "fatuo," and "gordo." We are asked to believe in an angel that happens to be absurd by imaginative standards. In sum, the fantasy deals with the invasion of grim reality into the realm of "the beautiful illusion"---as William Carlos Williams refers to this phenomenon.

"El mito," Ortega y Gasset has written, "es siempre el punto de partida de toda poesía, inclusive de la realista." By the term "poesía realista," Ortega here is referring to the same antipoetic phenomenon that we have been discussing for he goes on:

Sólo que en ésta acompañamos al mito en su descenso, en su caída. El tema de la poesía realista es el desmoronamiento de una poesía.30

An Parra himself asserts that his antipoetry heralds this very "desmoronamiento de una poesía" in his famous poem "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.31

The decline of symbolic and abstract poetry is ushered in by Parra's Cancionero sin nombre in 1937, about fifty years after
the appearance of Rubén Darío's *Azul* (1888). To be sure, Spanish American poetry underwent various poetic rebellions as evidenced in the literary periods of avant-garde movements such as "Ultraismo" and "Creacionismo". But all these movements still fostered a fastidious concern for the striking image and the beauty of form. Parra's insertion of the most prosaic elements of reality into his poetry gradually erodes the "poesía del tonto solemne." Whereas Ortega speaks of "el mito en su descenso," Parra uses similar language when he talks of the downward swing of his poetic roller coaster which may lead to "echar sangre por boca y narices." But behind the idea of the decline of the myth of beauty and the brilliant image lies the more important concept of the interplay of reality and poetic illusion. This leads us to ask: How does Parra bridge the gap between the imaginary world of poetry and the antipoetic world of reality? For in real life many of our experiences are fragmentary, often interrupted and haphazardly connected. Yet, in poetry we expect some frame or enclosure which will set the poem apart from the randomness and relative disorder of everyday life. How is the fusion of a formless prosaic reality with a structured world of poetry accomplished in the "antipoemas"? The skeptical twentieth century reader is after all persuaded to accept the myth of the "gallina" and of the "ángel absurdo." Somehow what is not accepted in the real world becomes acceptable in the antipoetry. The answer, as we shall try to show in the next chapter, is irony.
FOOTNOTES

1 See, for example, Miller Williams' Introduction to Poems and Antipoems where he cites Pablo de Rokha first attacking Pablo Neruda's Odes as brutish and idle. Then, Rokha adds that, "The antipoems are the second edition to the pitiful and nauseating buffoonery." Poems and Antipoems, ed. Miller Williams (New York: New Directions, 1967), p. vii.

2 Ibid., p. vii.


5 Mario Benedetti, Letras del continente mestizo (Montevideo: Editorial ARCA, 1967), p. 84.


7 PVÁ, p. 142.


Ibid., p. 72.

Ibid., p. 72.


Vicente Huidobro, "Arte Poética" in *Obras Completas* (Santiago de Chile, 1963), p. 255.

*Poems*, p. 2.


*Poems*, p. 4.

La cueca larga, p. 73.


La cueca larga, p. 75.

26  PyA, p. 9-11.

27  Ibid., p. 9-11.


29  William Carlos Williams, Spring and All (Dijon: Contact Publishing Company, 1923), p. 2.


31  Poems, p. 66.

CHAPTER II

THE IRONY OF THE ANTIPOETRY
CHAPTER II

The ironic fiction-writer, then, deprecates himself and, like Socrates, pretends to know nothing, even that he is ironic. Complete objectivity and suppression of all explicit moral judgements are essential to his method. Thus pity and fear are not raised in ironic art; they are reflected to the reader from the art.

Northrop Frye
Anatomy of Criticism

The question of irony in modern poetry has been a much debated issue of twentieth century literary criticism. Some critics consider that, more than anything else, irony as a literary device has been a great factor in counter-balancing the positive mood in poetry. And, by the expression "positive mood" they mean both the understanding of the poem in a clear-cut manner and also the feeling of certitude or elation generated by the poem itself. But, in much of modern poetry what the reader may see on the page is no longer simple and straightforward, for he often finds an ironic design in the poem together with an underpinning of doubts and self-questionings. "Progression by double mood" is what Yvor Winters calls it, and he is careful to distinguish it from the classical irony of a Voltaire or a Pope whom he
admires because he feels that they are "secure in their own feelings." That is, Winters sees these writers as quite ready to attack others with their irony, while at the same time being confident that their own point of view is quite tenable.

But Winters has little patience for the ironist who is unsure of himself—morally reprehensible he calls him. As opposed to a Voltaire or a Pope, he feels that the modern ironist is morally insecure, and thus concludes that irony in modern poetry reflects the poet's moral chaos, and even his inability to write carefully and with conviction. This critical position is, of course, somewhat dogmatic insofar as it demands a clear and unequivocable moral position of the poet writing in the twentieth century. As we shall see, the major thrust of the antipoesia denies that this is at all possible. In fact, Parra as both a scientist and a mathematician is very much aware that even science has become quite relativistic, and in this he is of similar mind as Kenneth Burke who sympathizes with the moral insecurity of modern man: "such relativistic sciences as psychology and anthropology having destroyed the underpinnings of absolute judgement."

For these reasons—and others to follow—we find that it is perhaps the poet-critic Robert Penn Warren who helps us more. He speaks of irony as a principle that is not based on a priori values, but rather as one that is derived from the complexities of experience:
The saint proves his vision by stepping cheerfully into the fires. The poet, somewhat less spectacularly, proves his vision by submitting it to the fires of irony—-to the drama of his structure---in the hope that the fires will refine it. In other words, the poet wishes to indicate that his vision has been earned, that it can survive reference to the complexities and contradictions of experience. And irony is one such device of reference.

It is in this sense that Parra's antipoetry is oftentimes ironic, for it overcomes aesthetically the "contradictions of experience." Somehow, one reading of a particular antipoem is never enough; the words present us with a drab view of reality which, at the same time, is charged with a disturbing poetic tension of incomplete meanings.

In "Epitafio" the antipoet himself claims "una luz entre irónica y perfida" and although we would be hard put to explicate all his works as ironic, the term does help us categorize many of the antipoems. Together with the objective portrayal of a prosaic reality, there is also a subtle dialectic between appearance and reality, between order and chaos, between humor and sadness---in short, a constant calling into question of one contrary by the other. Again and again we return to read the antipoems, hopeful that we might get their particular "point." If patient we are rewarded, for beneath their commonplace surface reside ironic qualities such as understatement, feigned naiveté, and even the sarcastic derision of the self. These are all factors that complicate the interpretation of the antipoems, which at first might appear to be quite simple.

It is a motion toward a point of rest, but if it is not a resisted motion, it is a motion of no consequence. For example, a poem which depends upon stock materials and stock responses is simply a toboggan slide, or a fall through space. And the good poem must, in some way, involve the resistances; it must carry something of the context of its own creation; it must come to terms with Mercutio.

In his persuasive essay "Pure and Impure Poetry" Mr. Warren argues that pure poetry, to its own detriment, is careful to exclude the "other possible case." Pure poetry is flimsy, he says, because it does not include the discordant experiences of life as does, for example, a work such as Romeo and Juliet which juxtaposes a Mercutio with his ribald jokes outside the romantic garden wall. By the same token, it is along this vein that Parra's antipoetry wants to "come to terms with Mercutio."

In an interview with the poet Miller Williams, Parra has stated: "But my intention is still more drastic than Pound's because I work with a chameleon that moves itself through all the colors of the spectrum. He's at the same time lucid and tenebrous, proletarian and bourgeois, sick and healthy. The only constant in my creation is authenticity." And, it is in fact this discordant but authentic quality which explains part of the antipoetry's attraction, although its dissonant tone might call us back to the imperfect world of reality.

To be sure, the "resistances" of a chaotic outside world appear in the antipoems in the form of irony, and when we
approach them no feature is more salient than the mental exertion required to comprehend the so-called meaning of Parra's works. Interwoven throughout the syntactical simplicity and the emotional reticence of the antipoems is the ironic attitude that the opposite belief or proposition is needed to complete the antipoem's meaning. In addition to opposing what is apparent to what is real, the antipoetry often juxtaposes one partial reality to another one. For example, take one of Parra's "artefactos" which is entitled "Endecasilabo," and consists of one line:

\[ Tm\ no\ me\ dice\ nunca\ la\ verdad \]

There are two simultaneous partial realities that we must be aware of in order to appreciate this miniature antipoem. The first one is that the "artefacto" is an "endecasilabo" according to the rules of Spanish poetry. The second is that it is not \textit{per se} an "endecasilabo" when we consider merely the numerical syllable count. On the one hand, this type of "endecasilabo" never tells the truth---as the "artefacto" itself states---but on the other hand it rings true indeed to the trained ear of the listener of Spanish poetry. As trivial as this example might appear at this point, it serves to demonstrate here that in the antipoetry one often finds irony in the presence of two equally true partial realities. Frequent twists of this nature appear in the antipoems. They involve the active participation of the reader, and it is thus that the
meaning of the "antipoesia" must be earned in the process. "Ironic, as a mode," notes Northrop Frye, "is born from the low mimetic;"

it takes life exactly as it finds it. But the ironist fables without moralizing and has no object but his subject. Irony is naturally a sophisticated mode, and the chief difference between sophisticated and naive irony is that the naive ironist calls attention to the fact that he is being ironic, whereas sophisticated irony merely states and lets the reader add the ironic tone himself.10

Nicanor Parra's irony is of the latter kind. His sophisticated irony is derived from that "low mimetic" of the everyday world which renders "life exactly as it finds it." Sometimes, the irony is found in the detached tone of the antipoet as he understates the seriousness of the subject matter. At other times, he gives the antipoetry an illusion of unfinished form designed to make it appear artless and fragmentary. Parra does not choose to win us over with stock materials that would trigger stock responses, but rather forces us to grasp for the meaning of the antipoems. As we do so, we look for the implications of what is said and thus consider the potential for irony. Because the reader is not too emotionally involved, the aesthetic distance between the antipoem and himself is greater than in the sentimental poem. The alert reader of Parra, then, finds himself simultaneously both inside and outside the antipoem. That is, although one feels the frustration and discontinuity typical of the antipoetic world, one can also step aside and view it in a detached
manner with the author. Gone is the melancholy self-pity of romantic irony as, for example, we would see in an Espronceda:

truéques en risa mi dolor profundo... ll
Que haya un cadáver más, ¿qué importa al mundo?

Rather Parra's irony is impersonal and detached:

Esto fué y esto es lo que fué el año mil novecientos treinta
Así fueron exterminados los kulaks de la Siberia
*** *** ***
Al ritmo de la máquina de coser de mi pobre madre viuda
Y al ritmo de la lluvia, al ritmo de mis propios pies descalzos
Y de mis hermanos que se rascan y hablan en sueños.12

In addition, the antipoet's ironic stance is fortified by his own self-deprecation. As in the case of Socrates who feigned more ignorance than he possessed, Parra's irony leads to a debunking of any assertive expression within the antipoems. In fact his rare self-assertions are imbedded within a framework of self-mockery, which also serves to deflate the absolute values of others. For example, in "Advertencia al lector," Parra appears to exalt his so-called limited "punto de vista":

"Si el propio autor empieza por desprestigiar sus escritos,
¡Qué podrá esperarse de ellos!"
Cuidado, yo no desprestigio nada
O, mejor dicho, yo exalto mi punto de vista,
Me vanaglorio de mis limitaciones 13
Pongo por las nubes mis creaciones.
Here, Parra uses the old saw of exalting the lowly to humble the mighty. As we have seen in Chapter one, clouds and other such stock symbols are not that highly esteemed in Parra's poetic world. His poetic vision he limits to surfaces. The antipoetry does not soar to the skies in search of profound meaning, but rather serves notice that man's ironic fate is to "vanagloriarse de sus limitaciones."

In the previous chapter we made some observations about the nature of Parra's non-symbolic antipoetry. To stop there, however, would leave some questions unanswered. We may all agree that Parra writes a "poesía epidérmica" which is far removed from a poetry of essences. We may also agree that the themes of his antipoems are not always easy to define. However, it does not follow that the works have no governing aesthetic principles—such as irony or paradox—which serve to give them a literary design. We can begin to demonstrate that they do by considering "Cambios de nombre," the opening antipoem of Versos de salón, which offers various manifestations of ironic design:

A los amantes de las bellas letras
Hago llegar mis mejores deseos
Voy a cambiar de nombre a algunas cosas.

Mi posición es esta:
El poeta no cumple su palabra
Si no cambia los nombres de las cosas.

¿Con qué razón el sol
Ha de seguir llamándose sol?
¡Pido que se le llame Micifuz
El de las botas de cuarenta leguas!
¿Mis zapatos parecen ataúdes?
Sepan que desde hoy en adelante
Los zapatos se llaman ataúdes.
Comuníquese, anótense y publíquese
Que los zapatos han cambiado de nombre:
Desde ahora se llaman ataúdes.

Bueno, la noche es larga
Todo poeta que se estime a sí mismo
Debe tener su propio diccionario
Y antes que se me olvide
Al propio dios hay que cambiarle nombre
Que cada cual lo llame como quiere:
Ese es un problema personal.

"Cambios de nombre" appears to be, at first glance, a rather shallow poem—a deeply rooted theory of poetry seems to be taken at face value. "El poeta no cumple su palabra / Si no cambia los nombres de las cosas," says the persona of the antipoem. Yet the work is basically an assault on the poetic credo which asserts that the true poet is one capable of creating new worlds by merely changing the names of things. Thus, according to the poetic theory parodied here, he must be permitted to transform the hard facts of reality by inventing fictions, or as Plato puts it by "telling lies." The sun is not to be merely a star but, for example, can be identified with the poetic fiction of Apollo. To the traditional poet, the fact of dying is not just another matter-of-fact happening occurring at a given moment, but rather it is often conceived as a death-in-life motif where life itself is depicted as a slow journey to the grave. As we have noted earlier, Parra shuns metaphor and symbolism, and therefore we must be careful not to take the first two stanzas of
the antipoem too seriously. To read them thus would be risky and almost certainly disappointing.

Then, just where does Parra stand? If this antipoem be ironic, what warnings does he actually give us to the effect? Any marked disparity between what Parra says he sets out to do and what he actually accomplishes should be a clue of a possibility for irony. Though the reader of "Cambios de nombre" might take the opening lines seriously, the deception is not intended to last long. At the beginning of the antipoem we have:

A los amantes de las bellas letras
Hago llegar mis mejores deseos
Voy a cambiar de nombre a algunas cosas.

Up to this point we can not really question the reliability of the antipoet's motives. However, by the time we reach the third stanza we do become somewhat perplexed as to Parra's intent.

¿Con qué razón el sol
Ha de seguir llamándose sol?
¡Pido que se le llame Micifuz
El de las botas de cuarenta leguas!

With this passage, whatever doubts and reservations we entertained concerning Parra's opening remarks about the "amantes de las bellas letras" are now confirmed. The implication is that if the lovers of belles-lettres cannot accept the name "Micifuz" for the sun and "ataúdes" for shoes, then they have no more legitimate reason to condone poetic names
like Apollo, or, let us say, a periphrasis such as the following:

Vivir es caminar breve jornada,
y muerte viva es, Lico, nuestra vida,
ayer al frágil cuerpo amanecida
cada instante en el cuerpo sepultada.  

The passage cited above gives Quevedo's poetic conception of life as a brief journey to our graves. It is in a sense a "cambio de nombre" or, a poetic way of putting the grim fact of death.

However, in the antipoem we are being asked implicitly to set aside the old poetic dictum of "cambiar los nombres de las cosas" and move to the implied position of Parra: leaving the names of things as they are. Shoes are called coffins not because life "es caminar breve jornada" but because in fact "mis zapatos parecen ataúdes." Ironically, they do look like coffins and there is no more poetry to it than that. By the end of the work it is difficult to believe that Parra takes seriously the dictum he announced at the beginning. The context of the antipoem makes that particular stand highly vulnerable, and the antipoem cannot be taken at face value.

What Parra, then, is saying is that the old rhetoric of metaphors and symbols is not easily transferable to the antipoetry. The sun can be of little comfort to the antipoet either as Micifuz or as Apollo, for "la noche es larga." The journey through the night---spiritual terror in terms of the
old rhetoric—is to be taken without the crutch of a fairy-tale-like "Puss in boots," as Parra facetiously suggests that we call the sun. One point is quite clear: if poets persist in changing the names of things, then we need a dictionary for each poet. On a critical level, Parra's stand receives confirmation from Barbara Herrnstein Smith who makes these comments:

Language is always making us mean more or less than what we want to mean. We look back upon our own self-betraying assertions not as the expressions of knowledge or conviction, but only as a way of putting it, and upon the assertions of the past as "bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit."17

We also should note that in "Cambios de nombre" Parra does not bother changing the name of "dios." He ends the antipoem with the ironic understatement that changing this name "es un problema personal." The unresolved ending is frequently found in Parra's antipoetry and this one in particular serves well to exemplify the open-endedness of his antipoems. In order to extract some semblance of meaning from the conclusion the reader must consider the ironic context of the whole work. Ironic shifts of names have been made from "sol" and "zapatos" to "Micifuz" and "ataúdes." The implied question now left for the reader to answer is whether a "cambio de nombre" for God is necessary. To be sure, the meaning of the word "dios" remains as one of the great imponderables no matter how much dressing up the word has recieved through the ages. The implication here is that
a "cambio de nombre" for God in this antipoem is as relativistic and meaningless as it was with "sol" and "zapatos." The personal question of God remains unanswered regardless of the name He may be given.

Parra often uses the theme of the "unanswerable question" as a motif in his fragmented antipoems. For example, this topic is the occasion for "Pido que se levante la sesión":

Señoras y señores
Yo voy a hacer una sola pregunta:
¿Somos hijos del sol o de la tierra?
Porque si somos tierra solamente
No veo para qué continuamos filmando la película;
Pido que se levante la sesión.

The occasion for the antipoem is a mere question: "¿Somos hijos del sol o de la tierra?" No answer is given directly, yet the antipoet's attitude is implied by the disposition of the context. That is, a single question is asked. The condition imposed is that if the answer is not favorable ("ser hijos del sol"), the action ("filmar la película") should not be continued. At the end of the antipoem a call is made for adjournment and the original question is therefore answered indirectly by the petition to adjourn. Little extrapolation is needed on our part to relate the filming of a "película" with the unraveling of life itself. Just as the many meetings people attend do not often yield the answers to the difficult questions, so life does not answer
the "sola pregunta." Though the final statement is conditional ("Porque si somos tierra solamente"), the direction of the antipoem points toward adjournment. The question is rhetorical because the answer is implied in the brevity of the antipoem itself. The meeting and the antipoem are both cut short, and as Frye puts it, "the reader must add the ironic tone."

Many of Parra's antipoems contain elements which often appear to be at cross purposes with each other. If we are not sensitive to their ironic mode, little of their meaning will be grasped. Let us consider "Preguntas a la hora del té" an antipoem rich in ironic tension:

Este señor desvaído parece
Una figura de un museo de cero;
Mira a través de los visillos rotos;
¿Qué vale más, ¿el oro o la belleza?,
¿Vale más el arroyo que se mueve
O la chépica fija a la ribera?
A lo lejos se oye una campana
Que abre una herida más, o que la cierra;
¿Es más real el agua de la fuente
O la muchacha que se mira en ella?
No se sabe, la gente se lo pasa
Construyendo castillos en la arena.
¿Es superior el vaso transparente
A la mano del hombre que lo crea?
Se respira una atmósfera cansada
De ceniza, de humo, de tristeza.
Lo que se vio una vez ya no se vuelve
A ver igual, dicen las hojas secas.
Hora del té, tostadas, margarina,
Todo envuelto en una especie de niebla.

There are two separate forces at work in this ambivalent antipoem: the one is a series of hesitant questions on the respective values of certain things; the other is the presence
of a stifling atmosphere of "ceniza, humo, y tristeza" which characterizes this "hora del té." The questions scattered throughout the antipoem are recognizable echoes of those pointless conversations that might be overheard at teas or cocktail parties. The tone of the antipoem is detached and ironic.

But there is something else. The questions are set up not only as an attack on those "preguntas" fashionable at tea time, but they are also parodies of that particular poetry which treats such questions seriously. Parra has advised young poets that "En poesía se permite todo. / A condición expresa / por cierto / De superar la página en blanco." It is debatable that the questions represented here are worthy of "superar la página en blanco." Without much poetic embellishment, they merely ask: which is more important, the running brook or the grama grass on the bank? The water in the fountain or the girl that sees herself in it? The hand of the artisan or "el vaso transparente?"

However, we should note the particular arrangement of trite musings and clichés. The questions posed are a result of a stream of associations evoked by the persona's response to that Prufrock-like "señor desvaído" who resembles a "figura de un museo de cera." We are asked to peer through "visillos rotos," onto the teatime tradition of asking trivial and futile questions, and thereby see how "la gente se lo pasa / Construyendo castillos en la arena." At tea time people
are apt to make the meaningless comparisons suggested in the antipoem, yet within the context of the antipoem something special does evolve. The reader will notice that although the trivial questions are not answered, the "chepica fija a la ribera" is there because of the "arroyo que se mueve." By the same token the "vaso transparente" owes its existence to the "mano creadora." We begin to realize that in the antipoem there is an ironic interplay of partial realities: things are put together side by side in order to complete each other and their juxtaposition gives the work its peculiar tension. The subtle dialectical development of the poem now pulls in the direction of what remains (oro, chepica fija, vaso transparente), now in the direction of what passes (belleza, arroyo, mano creadora).

"The ironist," suggests most persuasively Kenneth Burke, "is essentially impure, even in the chemical sense of purity, since he is divided. He must deprecate his own enthusiasms, and distrust his own resentments." We find that the argument of this antipoem divides us in the same manner, Parra would have us play down any enthusiasm we might have about the transcendence of the questions asked at tea time. But at the same time there is generated within the antipoem a distrust of this sarcasm when the permanent and the ephemeral are juxtaposed. Considered separately, neither of the parts compared appears to be of much significance. Yet, taken together they are both parts of an
existence which is made up of just such partial realities. The ironic poignancy of the antipoem resides in that the trivial comparisons bring out the futility of trying to relate the permanent and the transient; everything remains "evuelto en una especie de niebla."

In this chapter we have been striving to demonstrate how some of Parra's antipoems are ironic. Yet, we have not said too much as to how we came to decide, in the first place, that the "antipoesía" is amenable to the principles of irony. Our constant searching for ironic overtones inevitably raises the question that we might be stretching the point somewhat. How are we, then, to justify our various interpretations of ironic tone and ironic content in Parra's antipoetry? The answer, I think, can best be explained in terms of "context," and it is, perhaps, Cleanth Brooks who has studied this vital relationship most thoroughly. "The tone irony," Brooks says, "can be effected by the skillful disposition of the context . . . Moreover, I should claim also---as a corollary of the foregoing proposition---that poems never contain abstract statements. That is, any 'statement' made in the poem bears the pressure of the context and has its meaning modified by the context." Let us consider "Es olvido," one of Parra's antipoems that furnishes a good example of how the pressure of poetic context produces irony. In the first few lines of the antipoem, Parra writes:
Juro que no recuerdo ni su nombre,
Mas moriré llamándola María,
No por simple capricho de poeta,
Por su aspecto de plaza de provincia.
¡Tiempo aquellos! yo un espantapájaros,
Ella una joven pálida y sombría.
Al volver una tarde del Liceo
Supe de la su muerte inmerecida,
Nueva que me causó tal desengaño
Que derramé una lágrima al ofrío.
Una lágrima, sí, ¡quién lo creyera!
Y eso que soy persona de energía.

One observes that already in this initial part of the anti-poem there exists a dynamic system of thrusts and counter-thrusts regarding the speaker which tend to pull us in opposite directions. For instance, we note a clear divergence between the man’s inability to remember the girl’s name and his peculiar obsession with her as a person. The desire not to forget her is clear in the phrase “moriré llamándola María.” The speaker tells us that this name is not a “simple capricho de poeta,” yet we cannot help but note that there is a “cambio de nombre,” for the name “María” is apparently not her original one.

The need to characterize this paradoxical “joven pálida y sombría” results in a name both prosaic and poetic. For the word “María” carries not only the antipoetic stigma of being a hackneyed and commonly used proper name, but also it makes possible allusions to an idealized model of the people: the Virgin Mary. As we shall see, given the context of the antipoem, the prosaic name of María evolves into a poetic term that abstracts the rare qualities of
of this common girl. Furthermore, an archaic expression like "la su muerte inmerecida"---absurd as it is, for what death is deserved---will take on its own ironic meaning as the poem unfolds. At the present, it suffices to note that the speaker's "moriré" and the girl's "morir" are quite different in their colloquial meaning. Above all, he is affirming that he will not forget her; however, her "morir" is much different. It is the "pressure of the context" that will tie together his particular "morir" with "la su muerte inmerecida." But, let us finish the work so that we may better be able to comment on it.

Si he de conceder crédito a lo dicho
Por la gente que trajo la noticia
Debo creer, sin vacilar un punto
Que murió con mi nombre en las pupilas
Hecho que me sorprende, porque nunca
Fue para mí otra cosa que una amiga.
Nunca tuve con ella más que simples
Relaciones de estricta cortesía,
Nada más que palabras y palabras
Y una que otra mención de golondrinas.
La conocí en mi pueblo (de mi pueblo
Sólo queda un puñado de cenizas),
Pero jamás vi en ella otro destino
Que el de una joven triste y pensativa.
Tanto fue así que hasta llegué a tratarla
Con el celeste nombre de María,
Circunstancia que prueba claramente
La exactitud central de mi doctrina.
Puede ser que una vez la haya besado,
¡Quién es el que no besa a sus amigas!
Pero tened presente que lo hice
Sin darme cuenta bien de lo que hacía.
No negaré, eso sí, que me gustaba
Su inmaterial y vaga compañía
Que era como el espíritu sereno
Que a las flores domésticas anima.
Yo no puedo ocultar de ningún modo
La importancia que tuvo su sonrisa
Ni desvirtuar el favorable influjo
Que hasta en las mismas piedras ejercía.
Agreguemos, aún, que de la noche
Fueron sus ojos fuente fidedigna.
Mas, a pesar de todo, es necesario
Que comprendan que yo no la quería
Sino con ese vago sentimiento
Con que a un pariente enfermo se designa.
Sin embargo sucede, sin embargo,
Lo que a esta fecha aún me maravilla,
Ese inaudito y singular ejemplo
De morir con mi nombre en las pupilas,
Ella, múltiple rosa inmaculada,
Ella que era una lámpara legítima.
Tiene razón, mucha razón, la gente
Que se pasa quejando noche y día
De que el mundo traidor en que vivimos
Vale menos que rueda detenida:
Mucho más honorable es una tumba,
Vale más una hoja enmohecida.
Nada es verdad, aquí nada perdura,
Ni el color del cristal con que se mira.

Hoy es un día azul de primavera,
Creo que moriré de poesía,
De esa famosa joven melancólica
No recuerdo ni el nombre que tenía.
Sólo sé que pasó por este mundo
Como una paloma fugitiva;
La olvidé sin quererlo, lentamente,
Como todas las cosas de la vida.

The proper study of a poem, we are often told, is concerned, first and foremost, with the internal analysis of the work itself. But sometimes we find that individual poems, if they are divorced from the poet's other works, will not stand up too well by themselves. "Es olvido" is a good example of this. Its ironic overtones are a little more difficult to discern if we are unaware of Parra's ironic bent as we have seen it in, let us say, "Oda a unas palomas" or "Cambios de nombre." To begin to identify what this antipoem is about, we would do well to consider irony as a plausible key to an adequate interpretation, because this work deals more with remembrances than
with "olvido." And, as we shall see, irony here requires that we direct our attention not only to the context of the antipoem itself, but also that we keep in mind the usual ironic tone of Parra's works.

The effects that are achieved in this work require what the critic Wayne Booth, in his penetrating book The Rhetoric of Fiction, calls "a secret communion of the author and reader behind the narrator's back." That is, by causing the speaker to insist on the lack of affectionate ties between himself and the girl, Parra allows us to infer certain things about the antipoem that ultimately go beyond the written page. The speaker acknowledges that the name "María" is not derived from any poetic instinct; it is not, he says, a "simple capricho de poeta," but rather he calls her "María" because it goes with her "aspecto de plaza de provincia." She is merely his "amiga". And he adds, "¿Quién es el que no besa a sus amigas!" With the use of the word "amiga," as happened with the term "gallina" in "Oda a unas palomas," we have again a colloquial euphemism in place of mistress or prostitute. But the antipoet gives the work such an ironic twist, that the term ultimately ends up having a respectable meaning after all. That is, within the context it is the sympathetic memory of this provincial girl that is constantly held before us, because she is recalled gradually with increasing overtones of a "Virgen María" archetype. Though there was to be no "capricho de poeta" we witness the evolution within the
antipoem from Marfa to "celeste nombre de Marfa," then to "multiple rosa imaculada"—an allusion to the Immaculate Virgin Mary—then, to the litany-like expression "lámpara legítima," and finally at the end we have the hortatory: "esa famosa joven melancólica."

That the speaker not remember "ni el nombre que tenía," or that he insists on the fact that "no la quería," ironically, does not matter by the end of the antipoem. By then this vaguely remembered young lady has been rendered poetically "famosa" in the course of the ambiguous monologue; and there is one cardinal passage that is most helpful in explaining the speaker's vacillations:

Nada es verdad, aquí nada perdura,
Ni el color del cristal con que se mira.

It has been said that irony often results when there is a discrepancy between just expectations and actualities. In Spanish the proverbial expression: "Todo depende del cristal con que se mira" is used to describe the relativity of a person's point-of-view, and in human affairs there is the belief that when one's particular slant on life is known his attitudes and reactions might be more predictable. But, in "Es olvido" we find that point-of-view is always elusive because in fact "nada perdura": not one's hometown which is "hecho cenizas," not "el color del cristal" nor "la paloma fugitiva," not even---on a more abstract level---"el olvido" itself.
As has been noted already, the actuality of the speaker's forgetting the young girl comes under the ironic pressure of the context when we find her recreated within the antipoem as a "joven famosa." Her forgotten name appears transformed here into "un nombre celeste" which on a "día azul de primavera" triggers a change in the speaker's refrain from "moriré llamándola María" to "moriré de poesía." In other words, the change in name has helped us recall her in a memorable way: poetically. "María" is equated to "poesía" in the same manner that Bécquer's famous Rima XXI defined poetry:

--¿Qué es poesía? --dices mientras clavas en mi pupila tu pupila azul--.
¿Qué es poesía? ¿Y tú me lo preguntas?
Poesía . . . eres tú.28

Furthermore, the use of the word "pupila" by Bécquer makes the mention of this rima appear more pertinent when we bear in mind the speaker's frequent enigmatic referral to "murió con mi nombre en las pupilas." One is conditioned by prosaic usage to expect to hear "murió con mi nombre en los labios," but in Parra the colloquial expression undergoes a mutation with the word "pupilas." At one's death bed, the eyes are the last expressive means a person has for showing signs of emotion and it is with this affective side of man that the antipoem concerns itself.

Birute Ciplijauskaité, a sensitive critic of Spanish poetry, has observed quite correctly that Bécquer "habla
incansablemente de lo que anhela crear: la poesía." And, she goes on to add, "En Bécquer---y con él entramos en el mundo moderno---los papeles se trastruecan; la persona del profeta---más justo sería llamarle 'revelador'---se va esfumando, desmenuzando, en su continuo esfuerzo por alcanzar el gran misterio de la poesía misma." To be sure, this displacement of the poet's "yo" by a concern with the essence of the poetic act attains an ironic resolution in Parra's antipoetry. Like Bécquer, Parra is fond of making poetry (or antipoetry) the subject of many of his works. Whereas Bécquer delicately pulls back the assertive romantic "yo" in order to give play to that "Espíritu sin nombre / indefinible esencia," Parra is even more restrictive with his poetic "yo." But it is not because of any great respect for the poetic Muse. Rather his antipoetry shows an ironic stifling of the "yo" because there is little faith left in the absolute values of poetry.
FOOTNOTES


Irony as a literary device can be traced back as far as Plato's Dialogues where Socrates' self-denigration has been interpreted by some as an extrapolation of the *eiron* in Greek comedy. The latter was a witty character who locked horns with the bigger and more sluggish *alazon* and ultimately made him appear ridiculous. In Spanish literature irony is of course present with great poetic force in Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor* afterwhich it appears frequently in other works, e.g., in some of Quevedo's verses and in the *Quijote*. The works of the German romantics (Heine, Tieck, and Schlegel) are often cited as good examples of romantic irony. They are given to creating an illusion and then going on to destroy it by a change of tone or by interjecting a violently opposite sentiment. More recently, however, the term irony has come to signify a double awareness that every truth is partial and is qualified by its opposite.


3 For example, one of Parra's *Artefactos* entitled "Hasta cuando" says, "El mundo es lo que es / Y no lo que un hijo de puta llamado Einstein / Dice que es." Not only is there an implicit playing with the concept of relativity, but also we note that a simple man's conception of the universe is compared to the highly sophisticated one of Einstein. The relativism of man's mental constructs, or at least the one he believes in, is rather evident. "Los artefactos de Nicanor Parra," In Arbol de letras, Vol. 1, No. 8 (July, 1968), 3rd page---no pagination.


Parra finishes his "Epitafio" by declaring himself a mixture of commonplace contraries: "Ni muy listo ni tonto de remate / Fui lo que fui, una mezcla / De vinagre y de aceite de comer / ¡Un embutido de ángel y bestia!" in *PyA*, p. 68.

Robert Penn Warren, op. cit., p. 27.


Poems, p. 4.

*PyA*, p. 73.


Dialogues of Plato, Jowett translation (New York, 1966), p. 371. In the *Republic* Plato argues that "all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, and that the knowledge of their true nature is the only antidote to them."


18  A poem according to William Carlos Williams should not be closed, should not click like a box. "The closed poem," he says, "the poem that clicks like a box—is the type which has lately become a standard in the twentieth century." The latter quote is found in Karl Shapiro, In Defense of Ignorance (New York, 1965), p. 161.

19  Poems, p. 79.

20  In "Lo que el difunto dijo de sí mismo" which appears in Versos, p. 93, we have the use of the same expression: "Se podría filmar una película / Sobre mis aventuras en la tierra / Pero yo no me quiero confesar . . . .


22  Poems, p. 143.

23  Kenneth Burke, Counter Statement (Los Altos, California, 1953), p. 102.

24  "What indeed" continues Brooks elsewhere, "would be a statement wholly devoid of an ironic potential—a statement that did not show any qualification of the context? One is forced to offer statements like 'Two plus two equals four,' or 'The square on the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the squares on the two sides.' The meaning of these statements is unqualified by any context; if they are true, they are equally true in any possible context." Cleanth Brooks, "Irony as a Principle of Structure," Literary Opinion in America, II, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York, 1962), pp. 730-731.

25  PyA, p. 35-38.


CHAPTER III

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE ANTIPOET
AND HIS ANTIREADER
CHAPTER III

La forma, como el lenguaje mismo, es oral por esencia. Escribir—decía Goethe—es un abuso de la palabra. El habla es esencia; la letra, contingencia.

Alfonso Reyes
Apolo o de la literatura

Critics, readers, and fellow poets of Parra—everyone earnestly concerned with his antipoetry has at one time or another been confronted with statements as to the impersonal quality of Parra’s elusive poetic voice. Too often the assumption is made that the all too common language of the antipoetry leads to a lack of poetic feeling. However, this is not necessarily true for beneath the surface impersonality of the antipoetry one can often detect a reaching for a personal expression that has a subjectivity all its own. "Se me pegó la lengua al paladar," Parra tells us, "Tengo una sed ardiente de expresión / Pero no puedo construir una frase."¹ Whatever latent subjectivity there is in the antipoems, it is difficult to spot because the reader tends to confuse his familiarity with the stock phrases and clichés used with a lack of sincerity on the part of Parra. But the fact is that by alluding to trite
popular expressions or even by the direct use of them, Parra is often able to construct a prosaically distinctive poetry which he calls "bajada del Olimpo." In his "Manifesto" he affirms that

Nosotros conversamos
en el lenguaje de todos los días
no creemos en signos cabalísticos.2

It is the mechanism and the philosophy behind this anti-poetic "conversación" which we hope to study a bit further in this chapter. How do we explain the aesthetic satisfaction derived from an "antipoesía" that appears, on the surface, to be merely a prosaic poetry?

The problem that immediately arises is just how one may appraise the so-called impersonal tone of Parra's works within a framework of poetic theory. If we are to speak of Parra's antipoems as objective, and by this we mean here a literal-minded mimesis of the real world, then we should be prepared to go beyond the overworked simplification that depicts literature as a mirror held up to nature. The latter view, at times, stymies literary criticism insofar as it encourages an excessive attention to the poem as an autonomous object reflecting reality independently of the poet and his reader. In essence, it does not directly address itself to the "conversación"---to use Parra's term---that ultimately must be generated by the antipoem. For this reason, we should like to examine in this chapter how the antipoems, in addition to being
merely aesthetic objects, also render possible a sense of
dialogue between the antipoet and the literal-minded reader
for whom he writes.

To begin, we recall that Parra's prosaic diction and
his rather simple grammatical structures help to create
the impersonal illusion of the antipoetry. And by this we
mean that the curt, simple declarative statements that he
uses are such that there is little show of subjectivity
evident. To be sure, Parra often puts forth what looks
like an objective vision of the world in a rather tight-
lipped manner. But his laconic posture, as the following
quote attests, is more a direct result of a personal nausea
he feels for contingent reality:

Tengo un dolor que no me deja hablar
Puedo decir palabras aisladas:
Arbol, árabe, sombra, tinta china,
Pero no puedo construir una frase.

Apenas puedo mantenerme en pie
Estoy hecho un cadáver ambulante
No soporto ni el agua de la llave.

Se me pegó la lengua al paladar
No soporto ni el aire del jardín. 3

The reason for Parra's curtness, at least in the above pas-
sage, is that quite simply he finds it difficult to con-
struct meaningful phrases. He tells us that he can articu-
late words that could conceivably lead to exotic themes,
for example, the words "árabe" and "sombra." Though he
can articulate words, he can no longer put them together
in what might be considered a poetic manner. His language
is so fragmented and atomized that the antipoet is incapacitated with the real pain of not being able to speak at all. But we also note that the traditionally poetic words—"árboles, sombra, agua, jardín"—are too worn out for this "cadaver ambulante" to invest them with any more additional meaning. For the antipoet is merely struggling for survival and it is only this basic feeling that he articulates here.

In other antipoems we find that sometimes his antipoetic messages are not only cynical but also his manner of saying them is colloquially tough and to the point. For example, we have from "En el cementerio":

Este es el cementerio
Ve como van llegando las carrozas?
En Santiago de Chile
Nosotros tenemos dos cementerios
Este es el Cementerio General,
El otro es el cementerio Católico.
Tome nota de todo lo que ve.
Mire por esa reja;
Eras cajas se llaman ataúdes
Los ataúdes blancos
Son para cadáveres de niños
¿Reconoce esos árboles obscuros?
---Si no me equivoco se llaman cipreces.
---Perfectamente bien;
Eros árboles negros son cipreces,
---Qué le parecen los nichos perpetuos?
---Qué es un nicho perpetuo? 4
Lo contrario de nicho temporal.

The language of the above antipoem is uncomplicated—few adjectives and no subordination of ideas. The antipoet takes us by the hand to make a few matter-of-fact observations about death. But as it turns out there is a genuine liberation of poetic expression here by taking the profoundly
serious theme of death and embodying it within such simple yet meaningful language. All the glaring ironies of death, especially as it is processed in the cemeteries, come immediately to our attention: the idea of two cemeteries which segregate the dead according to beliefs, the "ataúdes blancos," as if the death of a child were really a joyful event, the irony of a "nicho perpetuo" as opposed to a "nicho temporal," and even the placing of the "cipreces oscuros" normally associated with cemeteries. The antipoem as a whole is an indirect attack on how a more sentimental and more self-conscious poet might treat death. There is little room for breast-beating or other demonstrative mannerisms in Parra's antipoetic world. And he tells us later on in the antipoem:

Esa mujer cubierta con un velo
Tiene que ser la viuda del difunto:
Mírala como llora amargamente.
Las mujeres nerviosas
No deberían ir a los entierros.

Parra's world vision might also be called antipoetic because as the antipoet writes in his "Versos sueltos" he has to write "a puntapies." And this particular way of writing has been justified by some of his sympathetic critics as Parra's way of striving for an authentic appraisal of man's world. "En el antipoema," writes Federico Schopf E., "se establece una incongruencia entre hombre y mundo, el culpable de ella no es el sujeto sino la objetividad
misma." Schopf later suggests that the so-called impersonal quality of many antipoems is a predictable result of Parra's toughminded view of reality. The *persona* of the typical antipoem is described as one who is "duro, antisentimental, irónico y cínico, incluso para consigo mismo, es decir, justamente lo contrario del hablante de un poema personal, como por ejemplo, para citar un caso chileno, el de las poesías de Magallanes Moure o, para citar un caso hispano, el de la gran mayoría de los poemas de Juan Ramón Jiménez." But after all this is said and done, it is still difficult to say precisely what is meant by the term objective or impersonal poetry.

As we struggle to better understand the concept of depersonalization in the antipoems, sooner or later one is reminded of T. S. Eliot's construct of the "objective correlative." And, this occurs to us because of the need to explain somehow Parra's detached objectification of emotion. In other words, we feel that there is frequently some emotion in the antipoetry, but that Parra endeavors to subdue it by appearing to detach himself from the work. In his 1919 essay "Hamlet and His Problems" Eliot spoke of Shakespeare's failure to provide his dramatic protagonist with the proper "objective equivalent to his feelings," and then contended that a more adequate chain of events was needed to bring out the play's particular emotion. "Hamlet," Eliot said, "is dominated by an emotion which
is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear." Thus it was argued that in failing to objectify the emotion, Shakespeare had not successfully given the play proper artistic form. Despite his later disavowal of the term as a literary catchall, the plain truth of the matter is that its ultimate impact on literature in general has been considerable. For one thing, its underwriting of the poetic work as an objectification of emotion has reflected a renewed interest in the poem as an entity emancipated from the poet's personality. In Eliot's words: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion: it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality." Like Eliot, Parra makes an attempt to escape from a misguided emotion and a distracting personality. But, he appears to do it for a different reason. Eliot was fleeing the romantic excesses of the nineteenth century. With Parra it now seems that he is, on the contrary, seeking to corner some genuine emotion even though it has to be with a language of impersonal phrases. For the language of artifice, which Eliot so eloquently defended, has been declared of little use for the antipoet. Quite simply it has failed him.

By extrapolating Eliot's notion of the "escape from emotion" to Parra's work we notice that the antipoesía is not far removed from a satiric view of man as the great architect and designer of the modern world. That is to
say, the antipoet's voice is anything but prominent, and this is accomplished by the literally prosaic description of his human condition. "Soy un profesor en un liceo oscuro," says Parra, "He perdido la voz haciendo clases."\(^{12}\)

The antipoet finds himself quite literally speechless, and teaching the young is not quite the idealistic adventure it is made out to be---not in "un liceo oscuro." Turning to the rest of the antipoem, we notice that the "Autoretrato" which Parra gives us of himself is a rather negative one wherein his "yo" is indeed quite modest. Gone are the dreams of youth; now only prosaic reality is left:

Considerad muchachos,  
Este gabán de fraile mendicante,  
Soy profesor en un liceo oscuro,  
He perdido la voz haciendo clases.  
(Después de todo o nada  
Hago cuarenta horas semanales).  
¿Qué os parece mi cara abofeteada?  
¡Verdad que inspira lastima mirarme!  
Y qué decís de estos zapatos negros  
Que envejecieron sin arte ni parte.

... ... ...

Observad estas manos  
Y estas mejillas blancas de cadáver,  
Estos escasos pelos que me quedan,  
¡Estas negras arrugas infernales!  
Sin embargo yo fuí tal como ustedes,  
Joven, lleno de bellos ideales,  
Soñé fundiendo el cobre  
Y limando las caras del diamante;  
Aquí me tienen hoy  
Detrás de este mesén inconfortable  
Embrutecido por el sonsonete  
De las quinientas horas semanales.\(^{13}\)

The antipoet's self portrait is greatly different from the more traditional one whereby the artist ordinarily delves
deeply into his character to give us what he would like to
be remembered as. For instance, Machado's "Retrato" is
a good example: "Dejar quisiera / mi verso, como deja el
capitán su espada: famosa por la mano viril que la blan-
diera". But Parra's description of himself is much more
modest and passive. Whereas Machado tells us, "A distinguir
me paro las voces de los ecos, / y escucho solamente entre
las voces, una," Parra simply tells us that he is without
even a physical voice. His "gaban de fraile mendicante,"
his "zapatos negros sin arte ni parte," and the "escasos
pelos" are all that is left of that "joven, lleno de bellos
ideales." What we have now is a mousy man who teaches "Para
ganar un pan imperdonable / Duro como la cara del burgués."
All that remains is a voiceless man with a very modest
demeanor: "Embrutecido por el sonsonete / De las quinien-
tas horas semanales."

Turning again to Federico Schopf, one of Parra's
more perceptive exegetes, we find that he stresses the
importance of interpreting the antipoetry as one of "el
ocultamiento de la personalidad." One of the absorbing
aspects of the antipoems, as Schopf sees it, is its "ag-
resión a la poesía personal." Likewise, Waldo Rojas in
commenting upon the antipoesía has remarked that "de ella
se ha retirado toda emotividad y el lenguaje es perfecta-
mente neutral. Creo que en esto radica la seducción de
la antipoesía, en esta serenidad del lenguaje." And,
at first glance, we would be inclined to agree insofar as Parra's language generally appears to be stripped of emotion. Yet, oddly enough there are times when the anti-poetry itself calls the above assumptions into question. For instance, how does one explain the final lines of "Solo de piano"?

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Yo quiero hacer un ruido con los pies} \\
\text{Y quiero que mi alma encuentre su cuerpo.}
\end{align*}
\]

To be sure, the antipoem starts out by accepting the impersonality of man's sheer existence and describing it in what appears to be a rather detached manner:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ya que la vida del hombre no es sino una acción a distancia,} \\
\text{Un poco de espuma que brilla en el interior de un vaso;} \\
\text{Ya que los árboles no son sino muebles que se agitan;} \\
\text{No son sino sillas y mesas en movimiento perpetuo;} \\
\text{Yo que nosotros mismos no somos más que seres (Como el dios mismo no es otra cosa que dios)} \\
\text{Ya que no hablamos para ser escuchados} \\
\text{Sino para que los demás hablen} \\
\text{Y el eco es anterior a las voces que lo producen;}
\end{align*}
\]

Life as something that happens at a distance, or as a little foam left over in the interior of a glass is a metaphorical presentation which portrays man's existence in a rather impersonal way. We note that the poem suggests that things have existence before they have essence, for there is an awareness that "los árboles" will become "muebles." That is, that they will be given a functional use by man. Furthermore, what Parra appears to find as the best analogies
for man's existence are the simple objects that surround man. And he has few illusions that man can be any more important than the objects around him—"no somos más que seres / (Como el mismo dios no es otra cosa que dios)."

Everything is a part of reality and the object is independent of the subject that might view it. For this reason, Parra presents himself to us in a moment of doubt where he questions whether our voices—our means of personal expression—can be anything more than just echoes or imitations. The implication is that there is little chance for originality. Yet, the words "acción" and "brillo" do evoke in us some semblance of worth. Furthermore, the closure of the poem is effected with the antipoet's expressed desire that his "alma encuentre su cuerpo." Though essence (alma) might come after existence (cuerpo), nevertheless the antipoet yearns for a complete humanity (alma en cuerpo).

Within the context of the whole antipoem the need to at least make a minimal "ruido con los pies" carries with it a latent subjective aspiration, calling into question the usual impersonality ascribed to Parra.

As we move to other antipoems there are times when we encounter some in particular which reflect an ironic self-parody of the objective "escape from emotion" we have been speaking of. For example, an antipoem like "Viva la Cordillera de los Andes" while attacking the so-called contemplative "poesía de la Costa"—a possible allusion to Neruda—nevertheless also parodies the attempted
return to a vernacular "poesía de grito." In Parra's words, "¿Oyeron lo que dije? / ¡Se terminaron las contemplaciones! / ¡Viva la Cordillera de los Andes! / ¡Muera la Cordillera de la Costa!" But then in a prosaic spirit of self-mockery he goes on to suggest that these somewhat ludicrous shouts of the antipoet can be easily silenced on a surgical basis:

Claro que no respondo
Si se me cortan las cuerdas vocales
(En un caso como éste
Es bastante probable que se corten)
Bueno si se me cortan
Quiero decir que no tengo remedio
Que se perdió la última esperanza

It is true that the particular manner by which the persona of this antipoem fears the losing of his poetic voice is somewhat comical, but in addition we should note that the loss of voice has been brought to a harsh physical level. When Parra tells us that all hope is lost "Si se me cortan las cuerdas vocales," it is somewhat difficult to go beyond a literal interpretation. Yet we should note that this rather unpoetic thought of having one's vocal cords cut out also suggests the stifling of man's last recourse to action: the use of the word itself. Without his voice man can no longer shout, plea, beseech . . . or relate to others.

Parra's diction made up of clichés and simple words at first appears to do little to dramatize the particular personality of the antipoet, for whatever the emotion, it is hard to discern a forceful poetic voice. It is this that
leads the reader to believe that Parra's poetic voice is forever eluding us because his language sounds too familiar; it appears to be too much like what we have heard in the streets. But is it truly impersonal? In the antipoem above we can at least grant that Parra projects something of a personal view by means of an impersonal mode.

Perdonadme si pierdo la razón
En el jardín de la naturaleza
Pero debo gritar hasta morir
¡Viva la Cordillera de los Andes!!
¡¡¡Muera la Cordillera de la Costa!!!

The irony of the antipoet's mode of expression is that it is trite and flat, yet for this very reason it catches our attention. We struggle to make something more out of it and thus indeed become aware of Parra's poetic voice.

As we strive to determine what this colloquial-sounding voice of the antipoems is saying, we find that we must also cope with Parra's ironic playfulness regarding meaning. In one of his antipoems he states that, "Lo mejor es hacer el indio. / Yo digo una cosa por otra."20 But, we may ask if the antipoet is bent on "hacer el indio," then, is he not breaching his contract of keeping good faith with the reader? After all when we read a poem or listen to it, we come to expect a voice which communicates a particular interiority. This may come to us by means of a certain quality of tone or diction that one associates with each individual poet. If Parra's personae are to say "una cosa por otra," and then
say it impersonally, how is it that the antipoetry ultimately communicates the quality of Parra's own personality?

In seeking to reconcile the apparent impersonal qualities of the antipoesía with the undeniable personal tone of Parra's works taken as a whole, we might first turn to some recent criticism of the so-called objectivity of poetry. Walter J. Ong, in his brilliant essay, "A Dialective of Aural and Objective Correlatives," has acutely observed that "Mr. Eliot's 'objective correlative' is deservedly famous, for it provides support for a whole state of mind fixed on a world of space and surfaces." He goes on to point out, however, that in the rush to consider poems as objects, the critic has far too often been enticed to use spatial analogies such as "structure" and "stratified systems." Though we might accept Eliot's concept that what distinguishes a poem from ordinary dialogue is its ultimate escape from personality, the question Ong poses is whether the escape has to be to a closed verbal system. In bringing to our attention the significance of the neglected poetic voice, Ong argues convincingly for an infusion of Martin Buber's I-Thou dialective which implies a process or a dialogue between poet and reader. Instead of considering poetic works merely as objects to be contemplated, we are asked to take them as the utterances of the poet to his listener. "We need," writes Ong, "the Kierkegaardian sense of dialectic, as well as an awareness of the existential implications of dialogue---that is, of all expression viewed
for what it basically is, an exchange between an "I" and a "thou." "Each work," he says elsewhere,

marks a definite advance over what has gone before and is big with promise for the future, and this precisely because it is not a mere object, but something said, a word, a moment in an age-old exchange of talk. Thinking and speaking of a literary work as a moment in a dialogue engenders an awareness of its "open" or unbounded historical potential and of its unlikeness to a discrete "object." 23

In effect, Ong is affirming that the words which make up the poem are not objects, but rather that they are existential: happenings which occur at discrete historical moments, and then cease to exist historically. What in actuality occupies the space in a book are merely the records of these words. But graphic signs are not the words themselves. Rather, according to this interpretation, words are said to exist only when they are part of a dialogue between the writer and the reader, and this is what makes for the so-called openness of the poetic work. Parra's antipoetry has many oral-like qualities which tend to diminish the possibility of its having a closed verbal structure. To begin with its prosaic qualities make it similar to speech in that there is little design or structure to it, as opposed to a more formal work of poetry; and consequently the feeling is that what is said in the antipoem is soon forgotten; just as it is in daily conversation. Merely returning to the book where the antipoem is to be found and rereading it yields very little, because the language of the antipoetry is so
plain. Rather, we must struggle with Parra's language just as we might with the inarticulate and vague words of daily social intercourse. Parra's poetry by being continuously prosaic seems not to be very memorable. It appears to lack elevated language and rigorous design. But, this is precisely the antipoet's point. He feels that that which is low-keyed and of a minor scale is the most appropriate poetry for our day and age.

Señoras y señores
Esta es nuestra última palabra.
---Nuestra primera y última palabra---
Los poetas bajaron del Olimpo.24

As a result the antipoetry gives us little that is dogmatic, inspiring, or even memorable. At least this is the reaction of the reader at first. For we must work hard to extract small amounts of meaning from it, but in this way we become more conscious of language, its limitations and its potential. The age-old exchange of talk that Ong refers to becomes here the process by which the reader of the antipoetry opens up his subjectivity (when he interprets the antipoem) to the subjectivity of the author (at the moment he wrote it). This occurs at a particular moment in time and is unique—never to be repeated in quite the same way.

William Spanos, in a recent article studying T.S. Eliot's contribution to the theater of the absurd, has quite aptly described the poetic process as being "time informed" because it deals with actions occurring in time and not with objects in
space. "The decline of T.S. Eliot's reputation in recent years," notes Spanos, "can be attributed in large part to the New Criticism's obsession to spatialize literary form: to transform, by way of regarding a linguistic as a plastic medium, an essentially temporal art, an art of motion to be met in dialogue, into a nontemporal art, an art of stasis to be perceived simultaneously in aesthetic contemplation." Spanos attributes this confusion in part to Eliot's early critical writings which encouraged the tendency to regard poems "as objects or artifacts, thus obscuring their radically existential, that is, time defined nature." At this point it would be interesting to examine some of the antipoems in light of the above mentioned temporal points of view.

Consider, for example, one of the "Cartas del poeta que duerme en una silla":

El deber del poeta
Consiste en superar la página en blanco
Dudo que eso sea posible.

On the face of it, this particular antipoem alerts us to one of Parra's fundamental antipoetic themes: poetry cannot survive unless it improves on the sheer emptiness of the blank sheet of paper. The latter, in its given condition, does not record any presence of the word; its state implies one of two things: the spoken word has gone unrecorded or else there has never been a word to speak of. In either case the "página en blanco" indicates a present lack of dialogue
in the here and the now, and therefore an existing void. It is this present hiatus in the dialogue which poetry must fill and Parra does not suggest that it is easy. In fact many of his antipoems depict the self-deception of man when he refuses to accept the responsibility of speaking with a singular authentic voice. In the very short antipoem "Coro" man is seen as one who seeks to submerge his voice in the anonymous refuge of the group, thereby seeking to avoid individual responsibility. And, he justifies this in the name of fidelity to an undefined cause:

No se nos puede condenar en bloque
La verdad es que nosotros hicimos
Todo lo humanamente posible
Por mantenernos fieles a algo
Nosotros no somos responsables de nada. 27

To be sure, it is this specific choral-like disclaimer of responsibility that results in the verbal breakdown of what Parra calls poetry. In "Coro" there is no confrontation of a man's lonely voice with that of another. Through the facile use of domesticated trite expressions such as "Hicimos todo lo humanamente posible" the individual's sense of guilt is abandoned, and thus he eliminates the anguish of having to account for his actions to another. However, the price that must be paid is the absence of a meaningful dialogue. We find that it is the voices "en bloque" which Parra calls into question because they do not improve on "la página en blanco." As seen earlier the failure to go beyond the silence of the empty page bespeaks the demise of
poetry. Parra dramatizes this fact in "La poesía terminó conmigo":

Yo no digo que ponga fin a nada  
No me hago ilusiones al respecto  
Yo quería seguir poetizando  
Peró se terminó la inspiración.  
La poesía se ha portado bien  
Yo me he portado horriblemente mal.

Que gano con decir  
Yo me he portado bien  
La poesía se ha portado mal  
Cuando saben que yo soy el culpable.

¡Está bien que me pase por imbécil!

La poesía se ha portado bien  
Yo me he portado horriblemente mal  
La poesía terminó conmigo.\(^\text{28}\)

This antipoem serves as a striking example of the existential demands that Parra's antipoetry makes on the reader. We use the word existential here in the same sense as Spanos\(^\text{29}\) does, when he speaks of the poem as being time defined, that is, involved with dialogue and motion rather than with stasis. And we proceed thus because an attempt to use a linear spatial frame of reference would lead us into an interpretative dead end, for the antipoem does not appear to have the usual structural development. Thematically it appears to go nowhere. However, from another point of view this aspect of the work is quite important because it focuses on the monotonous repetition of the dialogue. The antipoem is so barren of any cause and effect relationships that our attention is called to the fact that the words and phrases do not depend on what comes before or
after. Each part of "La poesía terminó conmigo" occurs as a verbal event in itself. Yet, our memory appears to register only the statement:

La poesía se ha portado bien
Yo me he portado horriblemente mal.

But, we must realize that each time we try to make something out of the works, we are attempting to conduct a dialogue with the antipoet. However, try as we may, there seems to be no real improvement on the silence of the printed page. With this realization we come face to face with the actuality that according to the rules set down by Parra, no poetry has been achieved. Therefore, it is indeed valid within the temporal framework of the poem to say at the end "La Poesía terminó conmigo." This line is in direct contradiction to the first one: "Yo no digo que ponga fin a nada." Yet, the truth is that between the first line and the last an antipoetic happening has occurred which justifies the conclusion, not as an effect of a cause, but rather existentially.

One thing that we cannot help but also notice in the antipoems is how Parra makes a frontal attack on the conceptual artifice of language. The fact that the words are so simple and restrictive in their meaning, forces us to grapple with the dull actuality that is reflected by them. But also as a result of this, we come to experience the emptiness of the language used in a prosaic monotonous
world. Gone is the idealistic belief in a refined art which relies on relationships invented by the mind. All this is now seen as part of a misguided youthful past which Parra recalls in a passage from "El túnel":

Un joven de escasos recursos no se da cuenta de las cosas
El vive en una campana de vidrio que se llama Arte
Que se llama Lujuria, que se llama Ciencia
Tratando de establecer contacto con un mundo de relaciones
Que sólo existen para él y para un pequeño grupo de amigos.

The "mundo de relaciones" that Parra speaks of here is a world contrived by the language of "Arte, Ciencia" and even "Lujuria." In fact it is the "pequeño grupo de amigos" together with their agreed-upon language that forms the "campana de vidrio." This, then, is what insulates the individual from the chaos and disorder of actuality. We would expect that as the antipoetry takes on more and more the portrayal of raw reality it will project increasingly the untidiness of the real world. And this is, in fact, what happens, as it deals directly with chaotic experience.

"The most obvious aspect of this field of actual experience," says Alfred North Whitehead, "is its disorderly character. It is for each person a continuum, fragmentary and with elements not clearly differentiated. The comparison of the sensible experiences of diverse people brings its own difficulties I insist on the radically untidy, from which science starts. To grasp this fundamental truth is the first step
in wisdom." The movement of the antipoetry in the direction of the spoken word is in part an attempt to grasp the untidiness of reality. As such, it is an attempt to break the hermetically sealed "campana de vidrio" called art.

"La poesía terminó conmigo," Parra tells us. However, one of the least appreciated aspects of his antipoetry is how he goes about shattering the concept that poetry need not exist in a hermetically sealed "campana de vidrio." In the preceding paragraphs we have observed how the idea of the poem seen primarily as an artistic object has begun to be seriously questioned. In the interpretation of Parra's works we can also consider the working hypothesis that many antipoems are meant to be spontaneous oral happenings. That is to say, the antipoems are variations of an existential dialogue which a more rigidly structured poem would not permit. The antipoems may be difficult at times, yet, they are not remote and abstract in the same manner that the intellectualized truths of a book-oriented culture are distant to the man in the street. Rather, the antipoetic language of Parra is confusing because it thrusts the reader into a world of verbal commonplaces where the most he can anticipate is an inane and debased poetic expression. This does not preclude, of course, Parra's jesting with his readers as to the plan or design of his antipoetry. In "Advertencia" he warns,

Yo no permito que nadie me diga
Que no comprende los antipoemas
Todos deben reír a carcajadas.
Para eso me rompo la cabeza
Para llegar al alma del lector.

Yet, as the antipoem unfolds we note that Parra's effort is not necessarily the reflective brooding that we associate with the writing of a carefully thought-out book or poem. He continues,

Déjense de preguntas.
En el lecho de muerte
Cada uno se rasca con sus uñas.

Además una cosa:
Yo no tengo ningún inconveniente
En meterme en camisa de once varas.32

To find any meaning in the above antipoem the reader must personally activate a dialogue which the written words, in themselves, fall short of providing. But it is precisely by this peculiar involvement of the reader that the subjective aspects of the antipoems are generated. What is given are trite deadpan expressions like "cada uno se rasca con sus uñas" and "meterme en camisa de once varas" which are familiar to us. There is nothing abstract or esoteric here. No inspirational statements are made. "Déjense de preguntas," says Parra, "Todos deben reír a carcajadas." And part of the reason for laughing is that the language has lost all its authority. In fact, the antipoetry is directed against what Ihab Hassan, in his essay on form and antiform in contemporary literature, calls the inseparable twins of authority and abstraction. "For authority in social life
and abstraction in language are corollaries," says Hassan, "they are commandments issued to the flesh, coercing private experience into objective order."\(^3^3\) It is these two that the antipoet is ready to challenge.

What is characteristic about much of the antipoetry is its refusal to submit to the traditional demands of linearity, structural content and thematic unity, which have been the hallmarks of the printed page.\(^3^4\) As we have seen, the antipoems are often oriented toward making a point in an oral manner. The aural qualities of spontaneity and improvisation that are possible in the antipoetry allow the reader to partake in a dialogue wherein he helps make the poem. And, he does so by breaking with the patterns of the formal language that were generated by the written word. Even an erudite and book-oriented critic like Alfonso Reyes has aptly remarked,

Eso que leemos en los libros no es el idioma, sino el retrato o reflejo de un solo momento del idioma. Es la fría ceniza que cae de la combustión de la vida. Es como la huella de los idiomas . . . Sólo el populacho tiene el valor de innovar, de pronunciar mal, de ir haciendo mudarse los giros y las expresiones. Así les da vida.\(^3^5\)

The antipoetry calls on us to struggle with the common spoken word in this same manner. From this "combustión" which occurs between the antireader and the antipoet is evolved the dialogue that we have spoken of here.
FOOTNOTES

1 Versos, p. 79.

2 La cueca larga, p. 72.

3 Versos, p. 80.

4 Poems, p. 138.

5 Ibid., p. 138.

6 Versos, p. 63.


9 See John D. Kendall, "The Objective Correlative" in The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, ed. Alex Freminger, Princeton University Press, 1965, p. 581. Eliot is quoted as referring to the term as one of those "notorious phrases which have had a truly embarrassing success in the world."


11 See Parra's "Manifiesto" in La cueca larga, pp. 72-75.
12  *PyA*, p. 55.

13  Ibid., pp. 55-56.


17  *PyA*, pp. 97-98.

18  We have already referred to Parra's implicit challenge to Neruda's supremacy of Chilean poetry. It would not be too far-fetched to relate the "poesía de la Cordillera de la Costa" with Neruda. Especially when one thinks of his famous coastal home of Isla Negra. For a good discussion of Neruda's association with the coast see Margarita Aguirre's *Vidas de Pablo Neruda* (Santiago de Chile: Zig-Zag, 1967), pp. 259-276.

19  *Versos*, p. 12.

20  *Poems*, p. 18


23  *The Barbarian Within*, p. 34.

24  *La cueca larga*, p. 72.


27  Ibid., p. 7.

28  Poems, p. 86.

29  See footnote 23.

30  Poems, p. 28.


32  Versos, p. 15.


34  For some very interesting work that has been done on the oral tradition as opposed to the written word, see Hugh Kenner, Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett, The Stoic Comedians (Boston, 1962), and Walter Ong, The Presence of the Word (New Haven, 1967).

CHAPTER IV

THE NEGATIVE QUALITY

OF THE ANTIPOETRY
CHAPTER IV

Committed to the idea that the power of art is located in its power to negate, the ultimate weapon in the artist's inconsistent war with his audience is to verge closer and closer to silence.

Susan Sontag
The Aesthetics of Silence

After having received the 1969 Premio Nacional de Literatura, Parra—who is also a professor of mathematics at the University of Chile—is recorded to have said, "Un científico puro, como un poeta puro, me parecen hombres mutilados. El lenguaje matemático ha influido decididamente en mi formación literaria. Al respecto, el principio de economía de las matemáticas se aplica perfectamente a la antipoesía: decir el máximo con el mínimo."¹ In particular, it is Parra's rejection of a pure, or as he calls it a mutilated poetry, that drives him to create an antipoetry which for the purist often appears jagged and nihilistic, given its apparent self-contradictions, its sterile thoughts, its cacophony, and its clichés. "Soy un nihilista complaciente," he tells us in one of his Endecaslabos.² Yet, Parra paradoxically is also quite right in insisting that he tells us "lo máximo en lo mínimo" for his sardonic attack on poetic

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purity is an effort to debunk the myth of the absolute autonomy of art and the artist. He gives an ironic twist to that difficult dilemma which both the critic and the poet encounter at one time or another, and which Robert Penn Warren has described so well: "Poetry wants to be pure, but poems do not." In place of the organic unity, the structural neatness and the ultimate meaning which we often hear ascribed to Art, one finds in the antipoetry a purposefully haphazard and anti-formal impulse to mock all of these usual evaluative standards. In fact, the particular "máximo" that Parra refers to seems to come about by a process of self-parody whereby Art itself is questioned as to its absoluteness. Mischievously faithful to what he says above, Parra does all this with almost a minimum of evocative expression, substituting in its place hackneyed anti-poetic patterns.

The antipoems themselves can readily be considered impure insofar as they negate Order per se by projecting us into a world of randomness and chance, but it should be noted that once we have been able to accept a specific antipoem with its own particular disorder, it is much easier to perceive an internal design. We may see this a bit more concretely if we now consider one of Parra's particularly puzzling antipoems, "Rompecabezas":

No doy a nadie el derecho.  
Adoro un trozo de trapo.  
Traslando tumbas de lugar.
Traslado tumbas de lugar.
No doy a nadie el derecho.
Yo soy un tipo ridículo
A los rayos del sol,
Azote de las fuentes de soda
Yo me muero de rabia.

Yo no tengo remedio,
Mis propios pelos me acusan
En un altar de ocasión
Las máquinas no perdonan.

Me rio detrás de una silla,
Mi cara se llena de moscas.

Yo soy quien se expresa mal
Expresa en vistas de qué.

Yo tartamudeo,
Con el pie toco una especie de feto.

¿Para qué son estos estómagos?
¿Quién hizo esta mescolanza?

Lo mejor es hacer el indio,
Yo digo una cosa por otra.

The answer to a verbal puzzle is ordinarily concealed from the reader by a paradox or a play on words, yet in "Rompecabezas" the resolution seems to be given to us rather explicitly: "Lo mejor es hacer el indio." Why, we ask, does this poem in the form of a riddle close with the idea that the most satisfactory reaction to a perplexing world is not to let people know how one feels? To begin with, we note that the persona admits to a "tartamudeo" which although disconnected is expressed as a trite sound and fury: "No doy a nadie el derecho" and "Yo me muero de rabia". But we also find that he vacillates as to the rightness of his spiritual commitment. On the one hand, the voice in the antipoem implies a right to choose a bargain basement.
religiosity ("Adoro un trozo de trapo") yet on the other
he acknowledges the lack of true value in his life ("Mis
propios pelos me acusan en un altar de ocasión"). This
ambivalent existence is a farcical one that leads but to
an empty listlessness: "Me río detrás de una silla,/ Mi cara se llena de moscas."

All this is given to us in the first half of the
antipoem in a somewhat incoherent and apparently purpose­
less manner. It is all seen through the eyes of a youth­
ful "azote de las fuentes de soda" who though inarticulate
("quien se expresa mal") is nevertheless a rebel. He at
least questions the purposes of this privative world with
his "vistas de qué". And what does he receive for an answer?
A mere exposure to an impoverished and undeveloped humanity
("una especie de feto"). In this absurd land of relentless
spiritual and physical hunger the antipoet legitimately asks,
"¿Para qué son estos estómagos?" Since one no longer can
tell what the functions of things are, then there is little
to do but catalog, itemize and transpose "tumbas de lugar."
The erstwhile rebel has found himself to be "un tipo ridi­
culo" and therefore, determines to be silent.

When "Rompecabezas" ends there is to be no more demon­
strative defiance or anger; the youthful rebel will now
merely let the trivial and the absurd aspects of this world
speak for themselves. It is thus that this antipoem "verges
close and closer to silence" by presenting us with the
empty shell of language which dramatizes the decline of
meaning. This is part of what we might call the negative experience of the antipoetry. The readers of poetry often find it puzzling because they are accustomed to going beyond the literal meaning of words. But the antipoetry is frequently much too bare for us to be able to do this. Instead of a figurative language Parra prefers the prosaic silence of worn-out language, which does not permit us to transcend this world. It best reflects his view of a world that is at best a "mescolanza."

Though it is true that Parra proclaims a poetics of brevity, he goes on to declare that the succinctness he speaks of is not one devoid of contradictions and ambiguities. He refers specifically to the need for ambivalence in poetry: "La poesía exclusivamente lírica me parece una poesía que cojea, sería la poesía del aceite; y la del vinagre la poesía del mal. Ambas monocordes y limitadas. La poesía debe corresponder, a mi juicio, al proceso mágico de la vida, que siempre es ambivalente." The latter statement is one that readers must keep in mind in any consideration of Parra's self-proclaimed "poesía de claridad," for the antipoetry is indeed lace with an air of mystery. As we hope to show below, the particular type of "proceso mágico" that Parra speaks of does not necessarily lead to an entrancing world of fanciful imagination. There is little in the antipoems pertaining to that particular type of imaginative world where one can accept even the most extraordinary happenings. When this occurs we are apt to find within the
framework of such poems a uniformity of mood that helps us concentrate on a singular experience. Quite to the contrary, one of the major characteristics of Parra's anti-poetry is the sheer multiplicity and absurdity of the commonplace.

"Mi poesía," says Parra, "nace cuando yo hablo, cuando miro hacia la tienda del frente, cuando veo todo este cúmulo de miserias y absurdos que nos rodea. Uso el absurdo como un símbolo de esta realidad y no otra . . .."7 Parra's comments appear to be quite relevant to an understanding of his work, especially when we consider that he is in essence rejecting that long standing Romantic concept that imagination "Is but another name for absolute power / And clearest insight, amplitude of mind, / And reason in her most exalted mood."8 Instead, we see that in the antipoetry the imaginative faculty is not to be assigned the central role of projecting us beyond ordinary existence. Rather, Parra endeavors to limit the scope of the antipoems to a depicting of the absurd as it happens to surface in the monotony of daily life. There is little effort to modify or reshape the world, and rarely do we find many metaphysical overtones in Parra's verses. "Los establecimientos funerarios," Fernando Alegria observes in his perceptive article on Parra, "el auto-bombo, el culto fálico, la sangre de las virgenes, el tabaco, las estrellas de cine, los capitalistas anémicos, la cera en las axilas del hombre, el barro y la paja en el sexo de la mujer, son símbolos de
una muerte sin proyección metafísica, símbolos de la traición del arte, símbolos de la agresividad sexual y del asesinato en masa de los sentimentalistas, símbolos de un individualismo sin individuos." Thus we find that rather than leading the reader into a world of evasive charm and magic, Parra casts him under a hypnotic spell whereby he discovers a world lacking spirituality and transcendence. It is a negativistic world riddled by a lack of faith in reason and even in imagination.

The negativity of the antipoetry as Parra sees it is not of his own making. Indeed, he describes the real task of the antipoet as being one of bearing witness to this world. In short, he does not have to create an absurd world for he finds it already there before his eyes. He therefore merely focuses on the commonplace because it is less contrived and more immediate. "Mi poesía," he tells us, "escapa a toda forma de extorsión, de toda mentira consciente y sistemática." Though Parra resists the temptation to work out systematic poetic worlds that as far as he is concerned falsify reality, there have been earlier parts of his work that go contrary to this position. But he now rejects them as doomed because they are an attempt to seek shelter in the shadow realities of another world. For example, when asked about the "Paráíso" which he had constructed in one of his earlier poems, "Desorden en el cielo," he answered that he now rejected its escapist qualities: "Claro, el Paráíso, es decir, la vida ingenua, con esa pureza de lo que se ha llamado
'poesía pura', sin demasiado lastre humano . . . Pero vivo este Purgatorio, este Infierno . . ." Parra's antipoetic attack on unity, coherence, and internal logic (often highly regarded poetic virtues) is posited in part on the premise that he sees in all this an evasion of the disunity, incoherence and absurdity of the real world. These negative entities are part of that "infierno" that Parra does not wish to ignore in his writing because for him it exists in a very immediate sense.

Parra suggests to us in his antipoetry that many of the values that have been highly esteemed and even revered before must now be questioned and even put to serious doubt. As we shall see below, he likens the role of the antipoet to that of a "comerciante-general-sacerdote que duda de sí mismo." Using these socially respected professions to suggest the doubt of the antipoet, Parra maintains throughout, his simple diction and yet drives home the point of man's anguish within the commonplace. In ordinary language, he questions the validity of some of the past premises proposed to explain the issues of life and death. "El cielo se está cayendo a pedazos," he tells us. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that much of the antipoetry appears to have an interrogative and contrary bent. Parra questions norms and values and then afterwards he often negates them, at least implicitly. For a convenient enumeration of the anomalous qualities that characterize the antipoet we need only go to the antipoem called "Test." "¿Qué es un antipoeta," asks Parra.
Un comerciante en urnas y ataúdes? 
Un general que duda de sí mismo? 
Un sacerdote que no cree en nada? 
Un vagabundo que se rie de todo 
Hasta de la vejez y de la muerte? 
Un interlocutor de mal carácter? 
Un bailarín al borde del abismo? 
Un narciso que ama a todo el mundo? 
Un bromista sangriento 
Deliberadamente miserable? 
Un poeta que duerme en una silla? 
Un alquimista de los tiempos modernos? 
Un revolucionario de bolsillo? 
Un pequeño burgués? 
Un charlatan? 
   un dios? 
   un inocente? 

Un aldeano de Santiago de Chile 
Subraye la frase que considere correcta.

This antipoem asks us to choose one objective answer that would tell exactly what an antipoet is. The truth of the matter is that after reading all of Parra's work we can only conclude that there is no single acceptable answer. Here in reality we have Parra presenting us with a multiple caricature of himself; that is, the multiple choices offered us coalesce so that the antipoem as a whole takes the form of a series of ironic reversals of life styles. For example, we find that the antipoet is suggested as being a burlesque variant of a self-doubting general or else possibly a nonbelieving priest. It should be mentioned here with respect to nonbelief that there are sprinkled throughout Parra's work certain antipoems that take the form of rebellious prayers. But ironically we find that in all of them the manner in which God is presented elicits from us sentiments of solidarity and compassion for Him. For instance, in "Padre Nuestro" God is
seen to suffer like "un hombre vulgar y corriente" because he has soured on the possibility of solving the world's problems.

Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo
Lleno de toda clase de problemas
Con el ceño fruncido
Como si fueras un hombre vulgar y corriente
No piense más en nosotros.

Comprendemos que sufres
Porque no puedes arreglar las cosas.

Sabemos que el Demonio no te deja tranquilo
Desconstruyendo lo que tú construyes.

El se rie de ti
Pero nosotros lloramos contigo.

Padre nuestro que estás donde estás
Rodeado de ángeles desleales
Sinceramente
no sufras más por nosotros
Tienes que darte cuenta
De que los dioses no son infalibles
Y que nosotros perdonamos todo.15

When all this is said and done we note that the usual relationship of man to God has been reversed by the antipoet. God does not forgive man, but rather man must find it in his heart to be patient with God. The mock supplicant starts out by addressing God in the polite usted form but midway in the poem there is a shift to the tú form. This sudden familiarity comes with the line "El se rie de ti" which draws our attention to the fact that the devil also mocks God, just as the person reciting this antiprayer is doing so implicitly. So we find that God, the devil and man are all brought to the same level when immersed in the same
disorder and chaos. There is little left of the old hierarchical order that existed between God, the angels and man. In fact, the contextual argument of the antipoem ("no puedes arreglar las cosas") questions the basic concept of an omnipotent God and ultimately renders it untenable within the poem. Even the angels and the devil have lost their dazzling powers. Here they appear fallibly human, that is, both disorderly and disloyal.

But the important thing is that there is generated within this whole poem a sense of solidarity between an agonizing God in his troubled heaven and man on earth who shares his frustration. We have been presented with an ambiguous God insofar as he is both God and man. A God that does not seem to be able to put things in order, and when he does Satan tears them down. In addition, we have here a God who is clearly a victim of his "angeles desleales." He frets because he has failed. Yet, in affirming a sympathy for God's dilemma while at the same time questioning his traditional divinity, Parra's ambivalence raises some fascinating problems. Can God truly have sympathy for man's humanity, be our father, and yet not be exasperated with the chaos like the rest of men?

If we now return to the antipoem "Test" we find that the whole series of possible answers is in fact a synopsis of the contrary literary roles Parra intentionally plays as an antipoet. These roles are all distinctive forms of rebellion against that which we might ordinarily consider
predictable and even conventional behavior. "Un narciso que ama a todo el mundo" as a possible answer is clearly an iconoclastic description, because he goes contrary to our expectations of his egocentric role. In the same paradoxical vein so is "un bromista deliberadamente miserable." Yet these characterizations and most of the others have one element in common, a sardonic defiance that goes against the grain of what is expected. Kingsley Widmer, in his revealing study of the rebel as a literary archetype, has traced the defiant style back to the ancients using Diogenes as his model of the literary rebel. He finds Diogenes's style to be in reality a quest for authenticity whereby he moved against the realm of the tepid by indulging in "what a cultivated society considered both buffoonish and felonious gestures, being intentionally crude and outspoken." In essence, the antipoet presented to us as a "revolucionario de bolsillo" has this same distinctive rebel quality, that of being intentionally shocking. For example, in the second half of "Test" we are asked to select an answer describing what the antipoesia might be. "¿Qué es la antipoesía," Parra asks with tongue in cheek, and the multiple choices are:

Un temporal en una taza de té?
Una mancha de nieve en una roca?
Un azafate lleno de excrementos humanos
Como lo cree el padre Salvatierra?
Un espejo que dice la verdad?
Una mujer con las piernas abiertas?
Un bofetón al rostro
Del presidente de la Sociedad de Escritores?
(Dios lo tenga en su santo reino)
Una advertencia a los poetas jóvenes?
Un atadío a chorro?
Un atadío a fuerza centrífuga?
Un atadío a gas de parafina?
Una capilla ardiente sin difunto?
Marque con una cruz
La definición que considere correcta.

This objective test is in reality quite counterproductive, because what one might call the correct answer is not accessible through reason. As a matter of fact the objective form of the test is in direct contrast to the subjectivity of each one of the multiple choices. All these when taken together project a contempt for what some might consider desirable qualities in poetry, for example delicacy, taste and the ability to endure. Instead of being alluded to as poetically permanent the antipoesía is likened to "una mancha de nieve en una roca," and in spite of all the sound and the fury in its verses it is suggested to be merely "un temporal en una taza de té." On the other hand, Parra reminds us that the antipoetry has been called "un azafate lleno de excrementos humanos" by no less a critic than a priest. It is therefore not too surprising that it be likened to a slap in the face of the "presidente de la Sociedad de Escritores." The institutionalized writer could never give the antipoetry his seal of approval, for besides its prosaic baldness there appears to be too much randomness and indeterminancy in the antipoems. And yet, the clichés and the ready-made phrases together with the randomness serve to depict well the sham and emptiness that so preoccupies Parra. The "temporal en una taza," the "excrementos humanos"
and even the "mujer con las piernas abiertas" all point to the absurd void and spiritual hollowness so often uncovered in everyday affairs.

We need not be surprised, then, that within the scheme of the antipoem the "atadades" though operating at three different speeds all must lead to the grave. However, now the "capilla ardiente" which so often in the past has served to evoke the traditional spiritual values of things past is now found to be without a body to mourn. The situation is meaningless, empty and yet comical. So it is with the antipoetry, its lack of sentimentality underlines what Parra finds to be a lack of substance in human affairs. He comments sardonically on mankind by using the guise of the burlesque, but he does speak out, and in a negative manner.

The negativity we speak of may also be seen as generated in various other manners. More than anything we frequently find it embedded in Parra's curt dismissal of many motifs and poetic credos which are fast losing their acceptance. As a case in point we might note that he questions the poet's traditional turning to the sea as a source for inspiration. "No necesito casas en la costa," he says and so makes us think of Neruda's famous house by the sea. "Donde si necesito propiedades / Es en el Cementerio General." It is along the seashore that men are said to best be able to reflect, ponder and revitalize the spirit. It is there, as Anne Morrow Lindbergh has written that
"the mind wakes, comes to life again. Not in a city sense ---no---but beach-wise . . . Patience, patience, patience, is what the sea teaches. Patience and faith." But, Parra in his antipoetic posture finds that he cannot afford the luxury of patience and faith, in part because certain questions are far too pressing. The enigma of death for instance. In this matter he is both impatient and anxious, therefore he opts for a more antipoetic residence: El Cementerio General. In "Discurso Funebre" he has said:

En resumen, señoras y señores,
Sólo yo me conduelo de los muertos.
Yo me olvido del arte y de la ciencia
Por visitar sus chozas miserables.

Sólo yo, con la punta de mi lápiz,
Hago sonar el mármol de las tumbas.

Pongo las calaveras en su sitio.

Los pequeños ratones me sonríen
Porque soy el amigo de los muertos.

Here Parra is antipoetic insofar as he refuses to engage himself in what other poets might call "arte y ciencia." He parodies and draws from common idiomatic expressions like "poner los puntos sobre las ies" (meaning to correct and make more precise) in order to bring home the idea of death as something quite concretely recognizable: "con la punta de mi lápiz / Hago sonar el mármol de las tumbas. / Pongo las calaveras en su sitio." Parra's antipoetic precision, then, is achieved here by stripping death of all its abstraction and remoteness. He remembers the dead by going
to their whited sepulchers and sounding out the tombstones physically with his pencil. Thus the question of
death is posed in resounding concrete terms understood by all, and Parra is able to put "las calaveras en su sitio."

Other references to death by Parra are just as immediate and matter of fact: "La muerte es una puta caliente," he says, in one of his Endecasílabos. Clearly, for Parra, death has few metaphysical trappings. Death's commonness and also its frigid impact on man is not lost on us when we view it as a relationship with a "puta", yet she is a very special kind of whore: a "puta caliente." The juxtaposition of two quite ordinary words serves to bring home the immediacy, relevance, and chilling aspects of death.

One of Parra's "Cartas del poeta que duerme en una silla" may serve to illustrate a few other negativistic aspects of the antipoetry.

Enfermedad
Decrepitud
Y Muerte
Danzan como doncellas inocentes
Alrededor del lago de los cisnes
Semidesnudas "ebrias"
Con sus lascivos labios de coral.

The presence of these three apocalyptic "doncellas" dancing around swan lake negates all that this lake of fantasy might stand for, namely the triumph of beauty and goodness when the ugly duckling becomes the majestic swan. In these verses, however, the swans have a very low poetic visibility, for
they appear only indirectly through the mention of the lake; it is the three "doncellas inocentes" that the poem is about. Their bawdy dance ("semidesnudas, ebrias," ) by appearing innocent, conceals the fact that they remain defiantly entrenched on the shores of life---flashing their "lascivos labios de coral."

Sickness, decrepitude and death are negative entities insofar as they point to the absence of health, vitality and life. But in addition they stand for something in their own right. In his studies on the negative in language, Kenneth Burke has written that in reality "there are no negative conditions in nature. Every situation is positively what it is . . . We may say that something "is not" in such and such a place. But so far as nature is concerned, whatever 'is not' here is positively somewhere else; or, if it does not exist, then other things actually occupy all places where it 'is not.'" Clearly within the framework of the antipoem under discussion, sickness, decrepitude and death are not to be found on swan lake itself but rather they are peripheral figures waiting on its shores. Yet all swans and ducklings must come to shore sooner or later. When they do, these three negative damsels of nullity, insufficiency and the void become something quite real.

At this point we come to a rather problematic juncture in our discussion of the so-called negative elements of the antipoetry. After considering the above passage some difficulties arise in correlating it with our proposition that the
antipoetry is in great part divorced from many of the usual assumptions ordinarily encountered in imaginative literature. To be sure, it seems rather naive to ask the reader all of a sudden to accept talk of swan lake and the three allegorical dancing damsels after we have been insisting on the barren commonplace nature of the antipoesía.

The passage of the three damsels is not one ordinarily associated with a daily prosaic occurrence; however, it is a self-sufficient mental reverie that comes about when the antipoet reflects rather flatly on the negating aspects of sickness, decrepitude and death. It is also important to observe that the formulation of Parra's conception of these limiting negative realities is bound up with his astringent choice of trite words and ideas. For instance, in the above passage he appears again as an antipoet not given to a connotative "poesía de gafas oscuras." Even when it comes to such potentially moving themes as decrepitude and death, Parra's limited vocabulary and his readymade worn-out images serve to suggest the featureless void that has callously hardened the antipoet's soul and silenced his pen.

If we consider the whole of "Cartas del poeta que duerme en una silla" one finds that the constant preoccupation with death seen as a prosaically bitter truth is inescapable throughout the poem. It appears correlative to the passing of time; however, we should note that Parra's antipoetic variation of the "momento mori" carries an irreverent comic tone. "Soy de los que saludan las carrozas," he says and then adds, "Queda
Earlier he has stated, "Yo no me pongo triste fácilmente / Para serles sincero / Hasta las calaveras me dan risa." The voice in "Cartas del poeta que duerme en una silla" expresses humor, but it is a black humor insofar as it depicts man's existence as one of triviality, repetition and irrelevance. "Arrugas" Parra reminds us are not the poetic "cicatrices" that some poets would have us imagine, but rather they are quite simply signs of old age. In addition, when the antipoet is presented with the "calaveras" of the momento mori tradition he can but fall asleep or else laugh it off. This type of moral myth together with its promise of an afterlife is no longer convincing to Parra. It appears that for the antipoet there is no way to protect man from the ravishes of time, and if poetry itself attempts to provide a fabricated refuge, then it should not be taken seriously.

This negativistic attitude on the part of Parra is reminiscent of Nietzsche's nay-saying which the German philosopher considered a passionate affirmation of life, that is, he considered it a negative yea-saying involving an acceptance of the basic purposelessness of life per se. As Erica Sherover points out, "Nietzsche's concept of becoming precludes by definition any notion of an end or a purpose. Becoming is 'innocent' of ends and purposes. Life spills out over itself into prankish, needless, purposelessness multiplicity." Along this same line, we find that Parra, too, develops a pattern of nay-saying within the antipoetry that may
be taken to affirm life as is. That is, he gives us life in its absurdity without moralizing about it; and in a nietzschean manner he depicts life's purposelessness and its multiplicity. This attitude appears even more straightforward when we look at the closing lines of "Cartas del poeta que duerme en una silla":

Un nacimiento no resuelve nada  
Sólo la muerte dice la verdad  
La poesía misma no convence.  

Se nos enseña que el tiempo no existe  
Pero de todos modos  
La vejez es un hecho consumado.  

Sea lo que la ciencia determine.  

Me da sueño leer mis poesías  
Y sin embargo fueron escritas con sangre.

The painful realization that "Un nacimiento no resuelve nada" is very much in line with one of Parra's qualities: the penchant for demystification. In this case he states indirectly that the euphoria generated in others by the birth of a child is in truth unwarranted, for at birth nothing has yet been weighed and considered. In other words, being born is recognized as the passive act it is—merely something that happens to us. Passivity in the antipoetry rarely leads to the discovery of anything vital and, in fact, in another related antipoem "Aclaración" Parra tells us that even death must not be allowed to merely happen to us:

Fallecer es un hecho denigrante  
Suicidarse es actuar  
Es estar vivo.
We say that the poems are related because in both the meaning of death is realized when man acts, becomes aware of, or anticipates death. This consciousness of death in life is all-important. Anxiety about death necessarily occurs between the moment of birth and the moment of death and thus this awareness transpires in time. In "Cartas . . ." Parra tells us, "Sólo la muerte dice la verdad" because it is at the moment of death that we may cope in a meaningful manner with the anxieties generated by one's existence. Death presupposes existence, just as birth presupposes nonexistence; and it is with existence, and therefore death, that Parra is concerned.

In spite of what science may decree about the reality of time ("Se nos enseña que el tiempo no existe") man through his consciousness is acutely aware that "La vejez es un hecho consumado." That is, old age is something anticipated by man when he becomes aware of the passing of time; at that moment time becomes agonizingly real. It comes as no surprise then that in another brief antipoem called "Hasta cuando" Parra playfully mocks the einsteinian ideas of the world's relativity with respect to time as the fourth dimension:

El mundo es lo que es
Y no lo que un hijo de puta llamado Einstein
Dice que es.27

In the antipoesfa, as in life, death presupposes birth and therefore existence in the world. "La muerte dice la verdad" when the time comes to consider the significance of the latter two, and yet poetry according to Parra "no convence."
Why? Perhaps Susan Sontag when she eloquently speaks about anti-art allows us to glean a partial answer when she states, "As the activity of the mystic must end in a via negativa, a theology of God's absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowing beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the "subject" (the "object," the "image") the substitution of chance for intention and the pursuit of silence." Parra speaks to us as a literary rebel when he tells us "Me da sueño leer mis poesías" for in truth he is determined to overthrow his own verses as befits Sontag's idea of the anti-artist. He strives to eliminate himself as an omnipotent lyrical subject and thus tones down the illusion of the poetic work as self-sufficient and autonomous. And he does it prosaically.

There is much in all of "Cartas del poeta que duerme en una silla" that is basic to Parra's work. The use of death, boredom and irrationality as antipoetic vehicles to portray a mordant and prosaic reality is a common recourse for Parra the antipoet. The long antipoem we have been discussing serves Parra well for passing some stinging judgements on absolutes values and on the conventional wisdom. "Los gusanos son dioses," he exclaims, and then again "Analizar es renunciar a sí mismo / Sólo se puede razonar en círculo / Sólo se ve lo que se quiere ver." If we stop to consider these lines, we see that they suggest two contrary positions. The first hinges on our capacity to observe the obvious and literal
consequences of death. However, it does take an act of the intellect to postulate even such a prosaic statement as "los gusanos son dioses." Yet simplistic reason itself does not guarantee truth, and Parra rejects reasoning as a circular betrayal of the intuitive self. This particular ambivalence is often found in Parra, and these lines now provide us with a springboard for pursuing another aspect of the negative in the antipoetry.

There have been times when surprisingly enough Parra's antipoetry has been characterized as cartesian in nature. Yet, as we have seen above, the cartesian elements of reasoned argument and rational inquiry are not easily discernible in many of the antipoems. As a matter of fact it appears that Parra shares with Pascal, another mathematician and thinker, the penchant for "reconciling those things which are in appearance contrary to each other." Parra does not hesitate to deal in paradox or to blend reason with intuition, as he strives to understand the zigzag meanderings of man's heart. Although his mathematical interests seldom crop up explicitly in his antipoetry, there is one poem entitled "Pensamientos" with a paradoxical twist achieved through the imagery of numbers. Parra addresses himself to the same existential preoccupations that so intensely concerned Pascal, and once again like the French mathematician he depicts man's nature as torn between two great infinities:

 Qué es el hombre
 se pregunta Pascal.
Una potencia de exponente cero
Nada
si se compara con el todo:
Todo
si se compara con la nada.
Nacimiento más muerte:
Ruido multiplicado por silencio;
Medio aritmético entre el todo y la nada.

This little known antipoem permits us to examine Parra's work in light of the pascalian tradition whereby artists have delved into the significance of man's conscious tension between the infinite and nothingness. Furthermore, it allows us to question any facile association of Parra's work with what is ordinarily understood as lucidity. The above poem, in spite of all its mathematical overtones, suggests that man is a being not measureable by exponents or statistics. The term "potencia" means number, but to the nonmathematical mind it also connotes the idea of potency or capacity to act. It is at first suggested in the antipoem that man's capacity to act is nil "si se compara con el todo." But, lest we forget that there is another side to Pascal's proportion, we have Parra interjecting "Todo si se compara con la nada." Man's life ultimately consists of birth plus death. His existence is described as a multiplication of noise by silence. That is, the anguish, the agonized shouting, and the other ways by which he feels conscious of his existence ultimately all have the silent multiplier of zero which is death. Thus we find that the attempt to raise to a power or to multiply his consciousness leads to zero all the same. "Pensamientos" closes with a modest mathematical analogy of man: "Medio
Man is found once again to be between the all and the nothing. So close and yet so far away. In the banality of the commonplace Parra recognizes the terror of nonbeing, and defiantly he opposes it.

As we have noted previously, Parra often renounces any claim to a poetic vision arrived at by ascribing a mental or rational scheme to surrounding reality. We recall that in "Rompecabezas" he alludes to his antipoetry as a sort of "tartamudeo" expressed in "vistas de qué". The many questions that Parra asks in the antipoems often go unanswered while his face "se llena de moscas." There is no reply from a yawning world that appears to be impervious to any sort of socratic questioning. If we carry a bit further our comparison of Pascal and Parra we can note that both men as scientists would certainly have a clear mathematical explanation of the physical void that the layman calls a vacuum. To them the Ancients' remark that "nature abhors a vacuum" is nothing more than loose talk when it comes to Science. But the poet in Pascal and Parra senses that there is also a non-physical void ---one that has never been clearly explained. This void is what the poet and the philosopher would call absolute non-being, and unlike a physical vacuum it is independent of those scientifically measurable quantities: time and space. In short, it is beyond the intellectual reach of a rationalistic science. It is not surprising then that one finds in the antipoems what Nathan Scott has called the modern artist's "protest
against mentalism." This is a poetic posture which is more apt "to accept the possibility that the mind might occasionally need to abandon its imperialist ambitions, might need even for a while to consent to be dumb and stupid before reality in order once again to win access to "the dearest freshness deep down (in) things."

It is within this framework that the antipoetry is a negative indictment laid against the "poetas del Olimpo" who would pontificate from the mythical vantage points traditionally entrusted to the gods. Parra does not purport to have any divine-like intimate knowledge of man's cosmos. Quite to the contrary he writes about human events in a manner that might be called by some sacrilegious: "Los saluda con lágrimas de sangre / El poeta que duerme en una cruz." These lines taken from "Cartas del poeta que duerme en una silla" connote, on the one hand an agonizing Christ-like suffering (lágrimas de sangre), and on the other the passivity of the antipoet who sleeps on a cross. Thus there is an awareness that man's grief, agony, and hope have little redemptive value in a world where "los gusanos son dioses" as he has said in another part of the poem.

To be sure, Parra implicitly renounces Vicente Huidobro's famous statement that "el poeta es un dios." Rather, the antipoet sees himself more as a deflated and modest "poeta que duerme en una silla." There is in all this an intentional purging of the more ambitious poetic "soñar" usually associated with poets, and this in favor of a more prosaic "dormir." We find that the poet in Parra is no longer a self-righteous dreamer
but rather he sleeps and then, perhaps, he dreams. His dreams are not high-spirited flights into a rarefied Olympus, but rather they often consist of a descent into an antipoetic world where all previous values appeared to be devalued.

By the use of uninhibitive language the antipoetry frequently projects a sense of outrage that confronts the reader with the open wounds of reality. The more shocking the antipoems are, the better they seem to demonstrate the incongruities and immorality of humanity and the world. "Alimentar abejas con hiel," Parra tells us,

Inocular el semen por la boca
Arrodillarse en un charco de sangre
Estornudar en la capilla ardiente
Ordeñar una vaca
Y lanzarle su propia leche por la cabeza.

This particular world that Parra presents us is one of inversion, and the images are different from those that we are accustomed to in the antipoems. But it serves to suggest an upside down world where bees, the traditional symbols of vitality, are to be fed "hiel." We can no longer expect sweet honey from mere vitality. Here is a world that induces us to acts of love and prayer that are patently grotesque. What is more repugnant than "Arrodillarse en un charco de sangre?" Yet this is what men must do when they pray in times of war. We recall that Parra's "capillas ardientes" are always found to be deprived of a hero to mourn. The body seems to be always missing. Finally we should note that in the typical comedy situation the cow is the one to spill the milk
and thus man’s labor goes for naught. The antipoet inverts all this to bring out the farcical absurdity that he finds in the world. Through the use of the shocking image Parra injects into some of his antipoems an iconoclastic force which only a violently caustic language can carry with it. He draws from contingent reality to forge his limited dreams, yet he finds nothing but decadence and chaos. Is it possible then to condemn the antipoet for preferring to sleep and not dream?

In “Cartas del poeta que duerme en una silla” Parra points out that

Digo las cosas tales como son  
O lo sabemos todo de antemano  
O no sabremos nunca absolutamente nada.

Lo único que nos está permitido  
Es aprender a hablar correctamente.

The dialectical choice above appears rather clear-cut. Either the poet truly knows omnisciently or else he must desist from making claims to any sort of certainty whatsoever. The question of "hablar correctamente", one that Parra so often jests about, is an aspect that we have examined in the previous chapter from the point of view of the oral aspects of language. Here within this poem it has ironic implications for the term "hablar correctamente" connotes a superficiality of form and behavior such as one might learn at a finishing school. It may be interpreted within the cynical context of this antipoem as a semi-mocking taunt by Parra
that one concentrate on form and style, and forget content or depth. And that is precisely Parra's point, when nothing is known for certain then one of the things we must live with is an exasperating and surprising depthlessness.

The antipoetry then serves to underline the difficulty of meaningful expression in a world that is rapidly losing its faith in what was thought to be the deep meaning of things. There is little left of that so-called artistic rage for order. Parra, for instance, points out that rhythm in the world does not lead necessarily to harmony for the world goes on "Al ritmo de la máquina de coser de mi pobre madre viuda / Y al ritmo de la lluvia, al ritmo de mis propios pies descalzos / Y de mis hermanos que se rascan y hablan en sueños." The strangely rhythmic and monotonous sounding sewing machine stands there in stark contrast to the less discernible but equally stupifying rhythm of the antipoet's "pies descalzos" and that of his "hermanos que se rascan." The lack of harmony between these two contrary and dissonant rhythms of man and machine leads to a cacophony not readily captured poetically, for in truth it is quite opaque spiritually. So it is that man finds himself exercising some control over the world by means of machines, and yet ironically he is not able to discern any meaning in the world he has helped to order. The depiction of this opaqueness through Parra's use of a negative idiom has been of particular interest to us in this chapter.
The negative quality that informs much of Parra's antipoetry is inescapable as we read through all his works. Yet, it is a complex negativity that ultimately points in the direction of a positive poetic experience. It is a possible insofar as it addresses itself directly to the chaos, terror and opportunities inherent in prosaic reality, and strives to synthesize a low-keyed and hopeful vision of the human spirit. The antipoetry is not, we should remind our reader, a structured unidirectional poetic attempt at defining a simple reality, but rather it is multidimensional and fragmentary. That is to say, it often goes off in various non-logical directions because Parra has no illusions that he can give life a simplicity devoid of contradictions and mysteries. Keats had a good term for describing this ability, he called it negative capability. "That is," wrote Keats, "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Parra the poet is a man quite capable of subduing his mathematician's "rage for order" in order to artistically confront the uncertainties of the chaos. And, he does this by the use of the prosaic negative.
FOOTNOTES


4 Poems, p. 18.

5 "Un poeta contra..." p. 40.


10 "Diálogo apócrifo ...", p. 80.

11 ibid., p. 79.

13 Poems, p. 144.

14 See, for example, "Agnus Dei" and "Yo pecador" both of which appear in Imagen, Supplement No. 13 (Caracas, 15/30 November, 1967).

15 Poems, p. 146.


17 Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Gift from the Sea (New York, 1955), pp. 16-17.

18 Poems, p. 106 and p. 108. One cannot help but notice that Parra's colloquial portrayal of death stands out in direct contrast with Neruda's metaphysical poetic meditations on death, as seen for example in the first two volumes of Residencia en la tierra.

19 Nicanor Parra, "Endecasilabo," Imagen, Supplement No. 13 (Caracas, 15/30 November, 1967), 5th page. (No pagination given.)

20 Ibid., 2nd page.


26 Susan Sontag, Styles of Radical Will (New York, 1970), pp. 4-5.


28 Poems, p. 136.

29 See Robert Martin Adams, Nil (New York, 1963), especially the first chapter.

31 "Cartas del poeta que duerme . . .," p. 2.

32 Ibid., p. 2.

33 Ibid., p. 1.

34 Poems, p. 4.

35 Susan Sontag's description of the term spirituality is particularly helpful here to help us get some bearings on the word. She states that it circumscribes "plans, terminologies, ideas of deportment aimed at resolving the painful structural contradictions inherent in the human situation, at the completion of human consciousness, at transcendence." In *Styles of Radical Will* (New York, 1970), p. 4.

CHAPTER V

THE COMIC SERIOUSNESS
OF PARRA'S ANTIPOETRY
CHAPTER V

No hay que tomar nada muy en serio, ni siquiera las ideas. O mejor dicho, precisamente porque somos muy serios y apasionados, debemos reírnos un poco. Desconfíe de los que no saben reír.

---Robert Frost to Octavio Paz
Las peras del olmo

Acojo ... la responsabilidad de hablar en serio tal como suele entenderse la seriedad en estos tiempos que corren, aunque para mi la seriedad sea exactamente lo contrario y corra el riesgo de salirme de personaje; mi postulado fundamental proclama que la verdadera seriedad es cómica.

---Nicanor Parra
Discur sos

Laughter motivated by much of modern poetry and fiction, observes Ellen Douglas Leyburn, is "often wild and hilarious; but it is used to wring the heart with pity for mankind rather than to stimulate judgement of fools or knaves."\(^1\) Professor Leyburn laments the decline in modern literature of the classical satiric mode whose basic assumption was that man was worth correcting. This it did by the very fact that it poked fun at what were considered to be deviations from conventional social or moral norms. Yet,
the chief difficulty in labeling the antipoesia as traditional satire is that there is little in it of that "implicit moral standard" that Northrup Frye and other critics of similar mind interpret to be a prerequisite for the satiric mode. "The satirist has to select his absurdities," says Frye, "and the act of selection is a moral act." As such, a satirical poet in mocking the foibles of his fellow men must assume that there is a superior state wherein man does not appear to be ridiculous. Such a poet must embrace beforehand certain values or standards, and thus he is not apt to be much disturbed about the actual arbitrariness of the sanctioned point of view. But, as we have tried to show earlier, the negative quality of the antipoetry is generated by the antipoet's uncertainty concerning the validity of any values whatsoever. In fact, it is probably more correct to say that Parra's antipoetic world reflects serious doubts about moral hierarchies and, if anything at all, it calls into question traditional standards per se.

For this reason it is not surprising at all that it is the less orthodox students of satire who help us shed more light on the caustic humor found in the antipoetry. In particular, we note that Leonard Feinberg emphatically rejects the idea that today it is possible for anyone to impose moral norms on others. "In the middle of the twentieth century," he states, "no one has the right to set up his own preferences as absolute moral norms." And we
find that the latter thought rings even truer as we proceed to delve into the strangely serious humor of Parra's antipoesía. Though it sometimes does evoke laughter, it is laughter mingled with pity for the antipoetry is often besieged by hopelessness and cynicism. And this is so, in part, because it does not presume to shape and give poetic form to an existence less absurd than the one it depicts. As we read the antipoetry we are impressed with one fact: Parra is ready to thrust aside most norms, be they moral or aesthetic. And by so doing he expresses a relish for the incongruous and the iconclastic, especially when it mocks that sacrosanct artistic "rage for order" which has been so brilliantly studied by modern critics. It is precisely this underplaying of normative values in Parra's works that activates such a hauntingly hollow comical effect on the reader.

Some years back, right after World War II, Robert Frost confided to Octavio Paz that it was precisely because moderns are so serious and impassioned that they should be able to permit themselves the joy of laughter. He then went on to warn the Mexican poet, "Y sobre todo, desconfie de los que no saben reírse de sí mismos. Poetas solemnes, profesores sin humor, profetas que sólo saben aullar y discursar. Todos esos hombres son peligrosos." Frost's indictment of the much too serious and much too somber men is of interest to us here because it coincides in its orientation with what Parra believes to be the essence of his
antipoetry. For the antipoet is given to speaking of his work as one not "con el ceño fruncido" but rather, one which he would hope possesses a "seriedad cómica."

La seriedad con el ceño fruncido
(Se lee en uno de los antipoemas)
Es una seriedad de solterona
La seriedad con el ceño fruncido
Es una seriedad de juez de letras
La seriedad con el ceño fruncido
Es una seriedad de cura párroco
La verdadera seriedad es otra;
La seriedad de Kafka,
La seriedad de Carlitos Chaplín
La seriedad del autor del Quijote
La seriedad del hombre de gafas
(Erase un hombre a una nariz pegado
Erase una nariz superlativa)

The artists who exemplify Parra's so-called "seriedad cómica"---Kafka, Charles Chaplin, Chekhov, Cervantes, Quevedo---are artists whose sense of humor has often been observed to be both ironically reflective and sardonically intellectual. Furthermore, all projected in one way or another the happy gift of self-laughter that Frost considers so important. Parra does not go very far in the imitation of these authors but he does question with a smile, as they did, the closed systems that man often chooses to live by. Though it is true that most of these artists belong to different times, the one thread that appears to bind them to Parra is their disenchantment with the misguided "castle-seeking" values of their contemporaries---to use Kafka's metaphor. Through their humor, benign in the case of Cervantes and malignant in the case of Chekhov and Quevedo, they seriously question
what passes as the conventional value system of their respec-
tive societies. But somehow most of them seem able to in-
corporate some moral or aesthetic values into a great part
of their artistic worlds. At first, this is something that
one hesitates to affirm about Parra's antiworld.

To be sure, this does not mean that the desire and the
need for a spiritual center of gravity is nowhere to be
found in Parra. In fact there is an uncomfortable mixture
of sadness and hilarity which is evident in the antipoet's
oftentimes ill-fated search for spiritual bearings on life.
But we discover that this search is rarely apt to be fruit-
ful because the antipoet finds himself entrapped in a vexing
irrational existence. "Lo cierto es que yo iba de un lado
a otro," a youthful voice tells us in the antipoem "Recuerdos
de juventud":

A veces chocaba con los árboles,
Chocaba con los mendigos,
Me abría paso a través de un bosque de sillas y
mesas,
Con el alma en un hilo veía caer las grandes hojas,
Pero todo era inútil,
Cada vez me hundía más y más en una especie de
jalea;
La gente se reía de mis arrebatos,
Los individuos se agitaban en sus butacas como
algas movidas por las olas
Y las mujeres me dirigían miradas de odio
Haciéndome subir, haciéndome bajar,
Haciéndome llorar y reír en contra de mi voluntad.

Upon examining this the first part of the antipoem, we note
that there is something both theatrically humorous and sad
about this young persona's "vida arrebatada." His
meanderings provoke laughter and even hate in the others, seated as they are out there in their comfortable "butacas"; yet, there is no evidence that these observers are deeply touched by him. The only real confrontations appear to occur on a physical level, for the barrenness of expression implies clashes with mere objects: "árboles, mendigos, sillas y mesas." We note that this going through life "de un lado a otro" is entirely fortuitous and furthermore the "choques" themselves, stripped as they are of any evaluative modifiers, do not in any way help us rank the objects encountered. The antipoetic persona himself is tossed about facetiously on life's stormy sea---and Parra indirectly mocks the latter poetic cliché with the phrase: "Haciéndome subir, haciéndome bajar." These upheavals do not seem to reflect any discernible sense of order in the antipoet's youthful existence and we find that he wanders about aimlessly and without a purpose. For him "abrirse paso" in a life cluttered with the usual prosaic artefacts of "sillas y mesas" is tantamount to a gradual submersion in "una especie de jalea." The amorphous quality of this inert existence comes to the fore even more when we note that the vaguely defined individuals that share this reality are relegated to a rudimentary vegetative life: "algas movidas por las olas." Whatever the humor elicited here, it does not leave us with a sense of moral edification. That is, no implied frames of reference are given us that point to a possible existence which might be substantially better than the one presented here.
In fact, further along in the antipoem the persona confesses that his meanderings were such that

Yo iba de un lado a otro, es verdad,
Mi alma flotaba en las calles
Pidiendo socorro, pidiendo un poco de ternura;
Con una hoja de papel y un lápiz yo entraba en los cementerios
Dispuesto a no dejarme engañar.
Daba vueltas y vueltas en torno al mismo asunto,
Observaba de cerca las cosas
0 en un ataque de ira me arrancaba los cabellos.

So we may ask now what does it mean to learn that the anti-poet would be objective with death? First, we are told that amongst the living he sought "ternura," but then that he is not to be put off by moralizations concerning death. He goes into the cemeteries "con una hoja de papel y lapiz," and then, "Daba vueltas y vueltas en torno al mismo asunto, / Observaba de cerca las cosas." Yet this spirit of objectivity is farcically out of place when we consider the irrational aspects of death. What could have been a serious and concerned attitude--"Dar vueltas y vueltas"---turns out being a laughable circular objectivity which ends up going nowhere. That is, the antipoet's consideration of death in an objective fashion leads at best to an "ataque de ira" or "una tempestad de frases incoherentes," as Parra says later on. In fact death is so objectified that the others (as spectators) appear to be entirely unmoved by the antipoet's discursiveness concerning life and death:

Con el filo de la lengua traté de comunicarme con los espectadores:
Ellos leían el periódico
0 desaparecían detrás de un taxi.
¡Adónde ir entonces!
A esas horas el comercio estaba cerrado;
Yo pensaba en un trozo de cebolla visto durante la cena
Y en el abismo que nos separa de los otros abismos.

The curious linking of a "trozo de cebolla" with the potentially more serious topic of "el abismo que nos separa de los otros abismos" serves to give us some insight into how Parra's humor is generated. It exemplifies the antipoet's frequent use of a comic automatism that freely associates the trivial and the profound, for they intermingle with each other as the antipoet says, "en contra de mi voluntad."

Rigid poetic conventions and structure are no more a part of Parra's antipoetic world than they were a part of surrealism. In the antipoesía the jerky transitions, abrupt and awkward as they are, force the so-called rational reader to abandon his logical make-up. But more important still, we note that "Recuerdos de juventud" embodies a jocular travesty of the surrealistic mode. Parra, here, appears to be mocking the idea of psychic automatism espoused by the surrealists of yesteryear. André Breton, we recall, in his Manifesto of 1924 proclaimed that the surrealist revolution was designed to free man's mind from the shackles of rationalistic control. This in part was to be accomplished by an automatic writing that followed the dictates of the subconscious, where the true nature of man laid in a pristine state.
But the type of writing that Parra gives us in some antipoems is not an automatic writing that fulfills the surrealistic promise of a marvelous liberation. Instead we are presented with a subconscious world that appears just as prosaic and limited as the external one. The antipoet is telling us in part that he is unable to communicate with the reader because poetic language, both conscious and subconscious, has worn thin. Its prosaism does not even permit him the surrealist luxury of "the systematic illumination of hidden places." "Recuerdos de juventud" is thus an antipoem about a youth that "a esas horas" of his life found that "el comercio estaba cerrado." There was little chance to effect a verbal interaction of any kind. And so we find that he is condemned to turning over his diverse ideas about onions and the abyss solely to himself. The silence that we spoke of in the last chapter begins to take on a peculiar humorous tinge.

As we have seen above, in the antipoetry the other is frequently presented to us as an uninvolved spectator who is busy, taken up as he is with a mechanical existence. Herein lies another element of the strange humor of the antipoetry. That is, it is a sad humor that emanates from the sheer prosaic facts of daily existence where men are somber, detached and, yes, even isolated. But they are also absurdly funny. For example, in "El peregrino" Parra addresses the others in this fashion:
Parra lampoons—but not self-righteously—the polite society that has spawned these placid "hombres peinados."
With their studied and conditioned uninvolvement they move robot-like in and out of nondescriptive gardens. They are quite content with the neutral gray gardens of this prosaic world, willing as they are to cultivate the thick skin of social noncommitment. But Parra's "peregrino" is an individual who protests:

Necesito un poco de luz, el jardín se cubre de moscas
He finds these evasive escapes into safe orderly gardens to be only false illusions that in fact prevent men from being true wanderers. The antipoet is unwilling to take on the social artificiality of an "hombre peinado." So he withdraws to hide amongst the "rocas" of his more chaotic but nevertheless much more personal garden. There he can shout and plead:

Pero yo soy un niño que llama a su madre detrás de las rocas
Soy un peregrino que hace saltar las piedras a la altura de su nariz.

It has been said that the power of Orpheus's song was such that even the stones were moved. Parra's "peregrino", too,
has an effect on a petrified nature; but in this case it is more on the humorous side. We find that the rocks jump, and not because of his melodic song. The rocks are moved in a more prosaically literal sense, for they leap "a la altura de mi nariz." Thus we discover that our modern "peregrino" is more likely to be stoned for his inquisitive behavior when he follows his nose.

In addition, it is distressing for a travel-bound "peregrino" to scan his surroundings and find that there are only means of transportation, but no fellow travelers around:

Mientras digo estas cosas veo una bicicleta apoyada en un muro,
Veo un puente
Y un automóvil que desaparece entre los edificios.

Nowhere in the antipoem are there to be found pilgrims with a mission or a goal as in the days of old. And it comes as no surprise that the persona of the antipoem is truly a frustrated pilgrim.

Me encuentro en un desastreoso estado mental,
Razono a mi manera;

Enrique González Martínez, in his Romero alucinado, admonished the young misguided poets of his day to seek out "los senderos ocultos" by being thoughtful spiritual pilgrims who keep "los ojos abiertos a la lejanía, / atento el oído y el paso ligero." Parra's pilgrim takes this advice to heart.
as he strives to go beyond a superficial existence which he aptly likens to life in a bottle:

Un alma que ha estado embotellada durante años
En una especie de abismo sexual e intelectual
Alimentándose escasamente por la nariz

The antipoet tells us, then, that in his antiworld it is difficult to transcend the given sexual and intellectual morass. In the passage above he goes as far as to facetiously signal out man's nose as long having been his sole source of survival. Yet, this is the very sort of primitive existence that the "peregrino" is bent on breaking away from. He would endeavor to go on to something better than the vegetative state of "la vida embotellada." And finally as the antipoem closes the "peregrino" discovers that he is

Un árbol que pide a gritos se le cubra de hojas

The image of the barren tree metaphorically shouting for someone to invest it with foliage is particularly appropriate here because it suggests the pilgrim's desire to cover himself adequately with a revitalized language. That is, a language that is not one of clichés. One that will allow him to be more precise in asking those questions that so perplex him. Yet, though he is rebellious, there is little in his speech that suggests an improvement on that of the "hombres peinados." Therefore, since his way of saying things is just as empty he must shout to be heard.
And he asks for the green leaves of a fresh language that could possibly cover his prosaically barren existence. But they are not soon in coming.

Harold Pinter has used strikingly similar language to describe man's compulsive need to cover the nakedness of his soul with a stream of bewildering empty talk.

One way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness . . . I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves.13

And truly it is because of what is left unsaid and undone That Parra's "peregrino" feels like "un árbol sin hojas". As M. L. Rosenthal contends, the tendency of modern poets to cultivate impersonality suggests a vulnerability of the psyche.14 And, while reading some antipoems we do carry away the impression that Parra at times would like to be more personal but that language defeats him. For the anti-poet tells us himself in no uncertain terms:

Antes de despedirme
Tengo derecho a un último deseo:
Generoso lector
quema este libro
No representa lo que quise decir
A pesar de que fue escrito con sangre
No representa lo que quise decir.

Mi situación no puede ser más triste
Fui derrotado por mi propia sombra:
Las palabras se vengaron de mí.15
Even a denuded poetry devoid as it is of verbal artifice turns out at the end to be disappointing to the antipoet. How is this so? Because Parra discovers that it fails to convey "lo que quise decir." He found it necessary to use unpretentious colloquial diction and commonplace topics to represent a world where idealistic rhetoric appears to be hypocritical. But, his uncomplicated language betrays him also. We are not surprised to find that the antipoet who has paid the high price of poetic "sangre"—understood to be a refusal to indulge in poetic rhetoric—now becomes afraid of his own shadow. His impersonal approach has separated out somewhat that personal "yo" that he knew could easily lead to a dogmatic poetic subjectivity. The antipoet is no longer an accomplice to false rhetorical language, but nevertheless he confesses that "las palabras se vengaron de mí." He comes to feel betrayed by even his "lenguaje de claridad." He is distrustful of the very language that would help him cover up that modern naked and puny poetic "yo" that so much tries "to keep to itself," to use Pinter's words. Parra continues,

Perdóname lector
Amistoso lector
Que no me pueda despedir de ti
Con un abrazo fiel:
Me despido de ti
Con una triste sonrisa forzada.

We are told now that the antipoet must put on a "triste sonrisa forzada" when he bids us farewell. This Emmett
Kelly type of sad smile is most appropriate because it conveys the bittersweet bewilderment that comes from a realization that one is unable to laugh outright at prosaic man for he is too much like us. The antipoet, too, is no better. He succumbs to artificial smiles and disowns what he has said.

Puede que yo no sea más que eso
Pero oye mi última palabra:
Me retracto de todo lo dicho.
Con la mayor amargura del mundo
Me retracto de todo lo que he dicho.

Why the retraction? Why the vacillation? Why, in fact, does the antipoet not keep his word? The answer is that language has failed him. However, what is of more significance here is that once again he casts doubt on the validity of language by questioning the authenticity of his own. He asks that we burn his book even though he has claimed "que fue escrito con sangre." It is suggested thus that the plain speech Parra propounded has led to inarticulateness and now ends in silence. In this instance, Parra the rebel parades before us as a strangely different type of laughing stock, for we do not feel superior to him—-as normally one does when laughing at someone else. The anti-poet's rebellion occurs within a context quite familiarly akin to our own limited existence. The laughter we may indulge in is turned against ourselves, since for so long a time we have believed that articulate speech has made man master of the universe.
"That articulate speech should be," George Steiner writes, "the line dividing man from the myriad forms of animate being, that speech should define man's singular eminence above the silence of the plant and the grunt of the beast ---stronger, more cunning, longer of life than he---is classic doctrine well before Aristotle."16 This implied superiority appears now to be well extinguished in Parra's antipoetry.

The silence ensuing from the failure of language can be interpreted as something quite serious in nature. And evidently many of Parra's exegetes have been too much engrossed with the serious side of his work to pay much attention to the laughable aspects lurking throughout. Parra himself has proclaimed that "la verdadera seriedad es cómica."17 In fact, a basic premise underlying his work is that in his antipoetic world true seriousness comes in the wrappings of comedy. "Yo sostengo y defiendo," he says,

La seriedad del Cuerpo de Bomberos  
La seriedad de la Iglesia Católica  
La seriedad de las Fuerzas Armadas  
(Erase un hombre a una nariz pegado  
  Erase una nariz superlativa)  
La seriedad de la Bomba de Hidrógeno  
La seriedad del presidente Kennedy.  
La seriedad de frac  
Es una seriedad de panteonero;  
La verdadera seriedad es cómica. 18

Intertwined together with Parra's colloquial irony is a certain nakedness of style that makes us laugh because it is so familiar and yet so difficult to make much out of it.
The antipoet refuses to develop for us what might be considered an adequately complete poetic statement. It is as if he were saying that poetic unity is incompatible with a world where putting out fires, going to church, idolizing an American president, and dropping hydrogen bombs all are deeds integrated in the same matter-of-fact way. This historical situation, Parra implies, is incongruous morally and it is permeated with a sense of the ridiculous. That is, it betrays a lack of moral priorities altogether. In part what Parra tells us through his apparently simplistic poetry is that poetic language can do very little to move or inspire us any more. As long as half-truths and prosaic simplifications corrupt and diminish the force of rhetorically idealistic language, the antipoet must seize these ready-made phrases and self-parody them with his prosaic mirror. In the world that he presents to us man's threadbare existence consists in being led by the nose with worn-out slogans. Quevedo's caricature of a man appended to a nose begins to take on a new meaning.

To clarify the above point a bit further, we might recall here that ever since Plato's time, rarely has the supremacy of vision over the rest of the senses been questioned much by literate cultures. Plato in the Republic banished the poets in part because they were rhetorically oriented and thus they merely memorized and recited what Homer had formulated before them. As such they could not ask abstract
questions which an alphabetized visually-oriented culture was now ready to do. The oral culture, of course, had accepted the spoken word as simply an actual event taking place in time rather than considering the word as something written down permanently to be looked at and manipulated as an object. That is, a person in an aural-oral culture could not manipulate words in the same way that an author today revises his manuscript in a typographic culture. And so it is that the introduction of the written word leads to the idealistic illusion that most verbal artifices may serve as imperfect copies of an ideal linguistic perfection. Walter Ong, from whom we have drawn here, observes that, "the Greek word *idea* means the look of a thing. It comes from the same root as the Latin *video* (I see), which yields the English 'vision' and its cognates. The ideas (in Plato) were thus in a covert sense like abstract pictures, even though other things were only pictures or 'shadows' of them."19 The sense of sight has long been associated with the idealistic envisioning of the perfect circle, seeing God in the Beatific Vision and so on. Parra sardonically questions the validity of this tradition in his antipoetry, for he finds that at this point in history man has exhausted the possibilities for visually-oriented idealism. Furthermore, a return to an idyllic oral culture is equally untenable. For example, his long antipoem "Soliloquio del individuo"
is a mock heroic narration which caricatures man's struggle to express himself both graphically and orally. "Yo soy el Individuo," he announces.

Primero viví en una roca
(Allí grabé algunas figuras).
Luego busqué un lugar más apropiado.
Yo soy el Individuo.20

Yet, as we learn later in the antipoem, when it comes to asking questions, el Individuo merely encounters "un abismo lleno de aire," which answers him with, at most, an echo:

Yo soy el Individuo.
Al mismo tiempo me pregunté,
Fui a un abismo lleno de aire;
Me respondió una voz;
Yo soy el Individuo.

Después traté de cambiarme a otra roca,
Allí también grabé figuras,
Grabé un río, búfalos,
Grabé una serpiente
Yo soy el Individuo.
Pero no. Me aburrí de las cosas que hacía,

El fuego me molestaba,
Quería ver más,
Yo soy el Individuo.

We find that the antipoem builds on two alternating actions of el Individuo: "grabar" and "preguntar." The etching away on a rock is clearly visually-oriented, while the "preguntar" in the context of this poem appears to be orally effected. However, both recurring interests are found to give man little permanent satisfaction. For no matter how much he draws on the wall of the cave, he ultimately lands up being bored with this mode of pictorial expression. Fire
and the serpent, both so often associated poetically with man's conflict with the gods, here in the antipoem become monotonous topics. By the same token his oral questions remain unanswered; the only reply given him by that abstract "abismo de aire" is the monotonous refrain: "Yo soy el Individuo." This frustrating experience of boredom continues to run throughout the antipoem as man progresses in the course of history until at the end we are told that

Se construyeron también ciudades,
Rutas,
Instituciones religiosas pasaron de moda,
Buscaban dicha, buscaban felicidad,
Yo soy el Individuo,
Después me dediqué mejor a viajar,
A practicar, a practicar idiomas,
Idiomas,
Yo soy el Individuo,
Miré por una cerradura,
Sí miré, qué digo, miré,
Detrás de unas cortinas,
Yo soy el Individuo,
Bien.
Mejor es tal vez que vuelva a ese valle,
A esa roca que me sirvió de hogar,
Y empiece a grabar de nuevo,
De atrás para adelante grabar
El mundo al revés.
Pero no: la vida no tiene sentido.

Throughout this lengthy antipoem, Parra has described man's pursuit of the idealized happiness he had come to expect from his supposedly civilizing oral and visual efforts. Man is seen as a sort of pilgrim pursuing those elusive cultural ideals of "dicha y felicidad" through the labyrinthic paths of "ciudades, rutas, e instituciones." And he reaches out for them, on the one hand, through oral mechanical drilling---
"A practicar, practicar idiomas / Idiomas"—and on the other, through a comical peering—"Miré por una cerradura." But in spite of man's compromising his dignity with a burlesque stooping over and then with a standing "detrás de las cortinas," his tenacious questioning leads nowhere. The questions that he started out with on that rock at the dawn of civilization still remain unanswered. His disappointed conclusion is that "la vida no tiene sentido."

Kierkegaard was right—"wherever there is life there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction the comical is present." In part the humor in "El soliloquio del individuo" derives from the contradictory blending of a flat ordinary language and a demeaning behavior with the rather serious questionings of the individual. Man's ambitious program is dragged down to a prosaic level by his ridiculous actions. That is, he appears to seek eternal truths while stooped over, peering through the keyhole—"Sí miré, qué digo, miré." But what we see is his ignoble existence as he talks to himself in flat ordinary words rather than in the previous grand style of a tragic soliloquy.

In the antipoetry the recurring image of a persona's peering through the keyhole is often associated with Parra's direct exposure of what he feels to be sham and hypocrisy. For example, we note that Parra by questioning and doubting the validity of the inherited artistic tradition is able to expose the fact that the "campana de vidrio que se llama Arte" is a mere diversionary fabrication of reality. "Se
escribe contra uno mismo / Por culpa de los demás / ¿Qué
inmundo es escribir versos," he tells us in the antipoem
"Composiciones." And he goes on to close the poem in this
fashion:

Imágenes inconexas.
Sólo podemos vivir
De pensamientos prestados.
El arte me degenera
La ciencia me degenera
El sexo me degenera.

Convénzanse que no hay dios.

The antipoet—like the Absurdists of the theater—refuses
to discuss the world's irrationality within traditional
frameworks of "arte y ciencia", and at least in this respect
Parra may be differentiated from relatively more traditional
artists like Camus, Kafka, and Unamuno who still endeavored
to present their metaphysical anguish in somewhat formal ways.
For Parra any attempt to seek refuge in "arte, ciencia, y
sexo" degenerates man because it distracts him from what is
in essence already an absurd world. And we use the word
"absurd" here in the "sense of metaphysical anguish at the
absurdity of the human condition" as Martin Esslin has de­

We might recall that Parra attacks not only "el arte de
buen gusto," but as we saw previously, he is also inclined to mock the surrealistic mode in a rather devastating manner. For instance, in the antipoem "El túnel" the youthful persona tells us about a visit to a pair of sexually frustrated "tías" who, much to his dismay, forced him to stay for four years: "Pasé una época de mi juventud en casa de unas tías / A raíz de la muerte de un señor íntimamente ligado a ellas / Cuyo fantasma las molestaba sin piedad." Given this setting with its Freudian overtones (sexually deprived matrons and all) the youth decides to consecrate himself to an artistic life of automatic writing, and the resultant antipoetic description of the situation is both prosaic and humorous:

Bajo los efectos de una especie de vapor de agua
Que se filtraba por el piso de la habitación
Inundando la atmósfera hasta hacerlo todo invisible
Yo pasaba las noches ante mi mesa de trabajo
Absorbido en la práctica de la escritura automática.

Although all the necessary conditions for the proper fruition of surrealistic art appear to be on hand—"Yo lo veía todo a través de un prisma / En el fondo del cual las imágenes de mis tías se entrelazaban como hilos vivientes / Formando una especie de malla impenetrable"—the results are neither psychically liberating nor artistically satisfying. The young man's forays into the realm of the subconscious turn out to be at best diversionary, and in effect they prevent him from seeing the world for what it really is: a place where people are apt to be false and self-seeking:
Pero para qué profundizar en estas materias desagradables
Aquellas matronas se burlaron miserablemente de mí
Con sus falsas promesas, con sus extrañas fantasías
Con sus dolores sabiamente simulados
Lograron retenerme entre sus redes durante años

At this point the young man decides to come out of his surre­
realistic insulation and look boldly through the prosaic
keyhole. Much to his dismay he is astonished to see his
"la tía paralítica" moving about the room quite well:

Hasta que una noche, mirando por la cerradura
Me impuse que una de ellas
¡Mi tía paralítica!
Caminaba perfectamente sobre la punta de sus piernas
Y volví a la realidad con un sentimiento de los demonios

One might have expected from this antipoem something a bit
more Freudian than what is ultimately given us; but all that
we have at the end of the antipoem is the letdown of having
been deceived by "extrañas fantasías y dolores sabiamente
simulados." We note that "la tía" is found to move about
not "sobre las puntas de los pies" as we might have antici­
pated but rather "sobre la punta de las piernas" which gives
the phrase a comic twist. It suggests to us that her knees
have helped deceive the young man, and the interpretative idea
of a calculating "beata" taking advantage of the boy is not
too farfetched. All in all, in "El túnel" the antipoet dis­
covers that man's inner self, repressed as in the case of the
aunt, or unpressed as with the young aspiring surrealist,
is nevertheless equally prosaic in both instances. Sexual overtones were certainly evident from the very beginning, for even the title seems to be setting us up for a more exotic surrealistic experience—something akin perhaps to Sábat's novel of the same title. But no, looking through the keyhole revealed a world that was prosaic yet also deceitful, and one where sexual drives seem almost to be irrelevant.

We have examined how some of Parra's humor is achieved by presenting incidents where language fails, or by giving us episodes with sexual overtones which turn out to be surprisingly blasé. Let us take a look at "Conversación galante" in which both of these elements appear to be combined.

---Hace una hora que estamos aquí
Pero siempre contestas con lo mismo;
Quieres volverme loca con tus chistes
Pero tus chistes me los sé de memoria.
¿No te gusta la boca ni los ojos?
---Claro que sí que me gustan los ojos.
---¿Pero por qué no los besas, entonces?
---Claro que sí que los voy a besar.
---¿No te gustan los senos ni los muslos?
---¿Cómo no van a gustarme los senos?
---Pero entonces, ¿por qué no reacciones?
Tócalos, aprovecha la ocasión.
---No me gusta tocarlos a la fuerza.
---¿Y para qué me hiciste desnudarme?
---Yo no te dije que te desnudaras.
Fuiste tú misma quien se desnudó;
Vístase, antes que llegue su marido.
En vez de discutir
Vístase, antes que llegue su marido.

This antipoem is a good example of what happens when the purple passages of literature are put to the acid test of Parra's antipoetic vision. The inescapable humor of this work derives partly from the fact that our modern "burlador"
is an ineffectual talker rather than a man of action of the Don Juan type. He is at best a defensive lover who says little on his own. His poverty of romantic language is evident, as he echoes only whatever the woman says. The vagueness of his person is accentuated by the fact that we are not told the "chistes" he has been inflicting on his lover. What we do learn is that the jokes are trite and worn-out. So we find that this antipoetic lover's "burlas" are quite different from the traditional jilting of women; the "burla" here appears to be inverted somewhat for though it does consist in the disappointing of a woman, now it occurs by not violating her honor. It is she who must feed him erotic lines, must undress herself, and even urge him on: "aprovecha la ocasión."

Leonard Feinberg, commenting on Freud's *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, has observed that, "Society represses the basic desires, and the strongest desires it represses are sex and aggression. Man gets around this censorship by talking instead of doing---and by talking indirectly enough and wittily enough so he can be safe and entertaining at the same time." Parra's "galán" is neither witty nor entertaining. The most striking aspect of the antipoem "Conversación galante" is that it is a non-conversation. The anti-lover that appears in this prosaic context is not threatened by the traditional sexual repression of society. Rather, the repression appears to be inverted. He finds himself in a "situación forzada" where it is the woman who takes
the initiative and in fact by so doing explodes the aggressive nature of the don Juan myth. For Parra's "galán" is absurdly passive when it comes to romancing the woman. He lives in a world where sexual adventure has become just as boring as the socially permitted experiences. So it is that our antipoetic lover is no longer entranced by the idea of possessing a woman. In his prosaic existence the only real semblance of a strong emotion turns out to be the real fear that the jilted husband will barge in. This is the one feeling that moves him to action, and comic action at that.

In much of modern humor, as Elder Olson writes in discussing avant-garde comedy, there is the use of suspense of form that "implies a systematic attack upon all the conventional—that is, habitual—emotional and moral responses of the audience, a breaking-up of established emotional and moral associations to replace them with new ones." The shock and bewilderment resulting from reading Parra's antipoetry is predictable insofar as it does demand that we reject our previous moral presuppositions in order to share in the antipoet's peculiar alienation. But it is not an alienation in the romantic tradition. His "seriedad cómica" reflects a mock-heroic seriousness which no longer pays indirect homage to the basic heroism of the social outcast. In the antipoetry man is found to be alienated but this in itself does not confer any special type of heroism upon our prosaic creature. Gone is the romantic grandeur of the rebel's alienation. Parra's antipoems are serious in that
they point out that most conventional myths are but empty illusions. And the prosaic self-mockery and self-caricature that he indulges in reflects the fact that the modern poet in Parra no longer takes the world nor himself seriously. Whereas many previous artists have mocked themselves, all along there has been the implication that by recognizing their own frailties they were superior men. With Parra it appears that there is no longer this consolation. This is the inherent paradox of Parra's comic seriousness.
FOOTNOTES


See, for example, "Momias" and "Sueños" found in Poems, p. 78 and p. 82 respectively.

PyA, p. 99.


Loc. cit.

Poems, p. 148.


PyA, pp. 151-156.


PyA, p. 119.

Versos, p. 48.


PyA, p. 119.

Versos, pp. 45-46.


APPENDIX

The following are two very different poems written about Parra and his antipoetry by two of his fellow Chilean poets. Gonzalo Rojas is of Parra's literary generation (1938) and his parody of the antipoetry reflects, in part, a certain bitterness at the notariety that Parra has begun to exercise over the young. Neruda, the more established poet, appears to feel much less threatened by Parra and therefore he is much kinder. First, we reproduce the poem of Gonzalo Rojas together with the brief introduction given it in Punto Final, a Santiago de Chile publication, in the edition of September 10, 1968. Then follows Neruda's poem published in 1967 in Portal, No. 5, July, 1967.

GRACIAS Y DESGRACIA DEL ANTIPOETA

"Difícil es saber como comenzó esta querella entre dos poetas de igual talla. Gonzalo Rojas y Nicanor Parra, que por encima de lo personal---si lo hubiera---dividen dos concepciones del intelectual latinoamericano. Los viajes de Parra a los E.E.U.U., sus colaboraciones en revistas financiadas por fundaciones yanquis, le valieron acerbas críticas de la izquierda chilena, y en ella, de Rojas.
Su réplica no se hizo esperar y fue irónica: "Es una lástima porque quiero mucho a Gonzalo, pero para mí es una ventaja; ya tengo mi propio Pablo de Rokha," declaró Parra en julio de este año."

Antiparriendo, remolineando,
que Kafka sí, que Kafka no,
buena cosa, roba-robando,
se va Cervantes y entro Yo.

Me llamo Nick, me llamo Nack,
me pudro y pudre lo que toco,
Díganme loca, díganme loco,
pero más grande me gusta más.

Publiquen grande lo que escribo,
que se oiga en USA y en Moscú
Sabes que más, Rimbaud: ni tú.
Me arrastro, claro, pero arriba.

Me arrastro y subo y tengo precio.
Yo sí que soy la gloria. A ver
qué vale más: ser o tener.
Me abanico con tu desprecio.

Me pregunto de donde vengo
con tanta gracia, violín violán,
si de New York o de Chillán,
o si apenas vengo de Rengo.

Pero lo cierto es que no hay quién,
no hay quién, no hay quién, no hay
quién, no hay quién,
no hay en ninguna parte quién, absolutamente no hay quién.

Pues antiyendo y antiviniendo,
antitumadre y antimateria,
aquí me tienen en la feria antiescribiendo y antisiendo.

Me dieron orden de envenenar,
de envenenar la poesía.
Maldita tu tía y la mía
y me la tengo de viciar.
Venid lesbianas y maricos,
lisérgicos todos, venid.
Sacad el quod, meted el quidi:
que gusto ser gusto de ricos.

Bailemos la antipoësis,
la antipoë con la antipoë:
mi tío se mea en tu tía
y Baudelaire se te acabó.

Dicen que dicen que soy el único
con mi artefacto original,
que soy el sol, que soy la sal,
patan, patudo, patatúnico.

Yo soy, yo soy el Individuo
y el dólar me dió la razón;
arreglón, que más, arreglón,
individuo color residuo.

Las cosas pasan porque pasan
y pasa este mundo al revés,
cuando escribo pienso en inglés,
todas mis gringas se me casan.

Antiparriendo, remolineando,
que Kafka sí, que Kafka no,
buena cosa, roba-robando,
se va Cervantes y entro Yo.

Y que me acusen al Che Guevara
que escribo versos de salón;
nadie me dice maricón;
que tanto Che, prefiero mi cara.

Si pudiera poder y pudiera
Cuba sí con yanquis también
pero lo cierto es que no hay quien
aunque diera la vuelta entera.

Ahora mismo no se que hacer
con tanta pinta pero me agaché,
aprende a morir como macho
me dijo un día mi mujer.

Que estoy afónico, que Neruda;
que de una vez termine la farra;
que quien me paso la guitarra;
que Dios le ayuda al que suela.
Que no haga el loco ni la loca
que uno más no es ningún portento,
que a partir de cierto momento,
que el peje muere por la boca.

Y que tanta bulla de inglés
si aquí termina el zafarrancho,
y la chancha le dijo al chacho
antiacabemos de una vez.

Por último déjenme suelto,
total ni Whitman ni Picasso
y al mismo Dante por si acaso
¡juntos sí pero no revueltos!

Digan que sí, digan que no,
digan que soy un comemierdas
que aquí se me acaba la cuerda
que si Cervantes, que si Yo.

Pero lo cierto es que no hay quién,
no hay quién, no hay quién, no hay quién,
no hay quién,
no hay en ninguna parte quién,
absolutamente no hay quien.

Rima pobre, métete el miedo:
rima rica con disimulo:
¡gracias y desgracias del culo
como ya lo dijo Quevedo!

Gonzalo Rojas
Concepción 18 de agosto de 1968
(In Punto Final, Sept. 10, 1968)

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UNA CORBATA PARA NICANOR

No sólo
tiene
uvas
esta parra
de Parra,
sino
frutos mentales:
higos
rugosos
como
reflexiones,
espigas
espinudas
o nueces
encefálicas:
así es la parra
del poeta
Parra.

El
hace
vino
de
estos
frutos
brutales
que
brotan
de
su
propia
parra,
o de
la burla
que
se hace
racimo
o
de
la bofetada
que
es
un
súbito
fruto
del
parrón
o parral.

Y si por azar puro
o por predilección
queda algún ojo
en tinta
Nicanor
Parra
escribe
con tinta
de ojo en tinta.

Este es el hombre
que derrotó
al suspiro
y es muy capaz
de encabezar
la decapitación
del suspirante.
Criminal tentativa!

Pero
luego
y sin remordimiento
con gran cuidado
pega
la cabeza
caida
al cuerpo
separado,
y se dirige
al río
con un saco
de sus
propios
suspiros
que tira
suspirando
a la
corriente.

Este es el caso
del poeta
Parra
y de
la
misteriosa
fórmula
de
su
parra
secreta.

Pablo Neruda
19 de septiembre de 1966

(The above poem was taken from Pablo Neruda’s Obras Completas, Buenos Aires: Losada, 1968, Vol. II, pp. 1144-1146.)
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*The starred entries are taken from the bibliography given by Jorge Teiller in his article "Los artefactos de Parra" in Arbol de letras, Vol. 1, No. 8, July 1968, 4th page.


III. Studies on Nicanor Parra


