

Nicanor Parra (1914-2018)

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Chilean poet Nicanor Parra, a contemporary of Pablo Neruda, inherited a poetic tradition that ensconced lofty themes in grandiose language. "Parra," declared *New York Times Book Review* contributor Alexander Coleman, "is an antipoet. Antipoets ... dread the very idea of Poetry and its attendant metaphors, inflated diction, romantic yearning, obscurity and empty nobility." Poetry is not an elite pastime, but belongs to the less-privileged majority, he believes. Its proper subject matter is not truth and beauty, but the vulgar surprises of life that more often than not amount to a bad joke. His antipoems relate the ironies of life in ordinary speech made colorful by witty insights into the unpretentious characters he presents. Coleman describes Parra's tools as "irony, burlesque, an astringent barrage of clichés and found phrases, all juxtaposed in a welter of dictions that come out in a wholly original way, laying open everybody's despair." With these methods, said a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, "Parra bids to break the barrier between the poem and the public." As a champion of accessible poetry, Parra has exerted a major influence on Hispanic literature.

Parra was born in southern Chile near the small town of Chillan in 1914. Having an interest in science and an aptitude for mathematics, he studied mathematics and physics at the University of Chile, advanced mechanics at Brown University in Rhode Island, and, with the aid of a British Council grant, cosmology at Oxford. Since 1948, he has been a professor of theoretical physics at the University of Chile. In addition to his professional activities, he has maintained an interest in American and British poetry, both of which have influenced his work. The factor which perhaps shaped his personal aesthetic the most, however, was having to write in the shadow of the Nobel Prize winner Neruda. Parra became an antipoet, said Emir Rodriguez Monegal in *The Borzoi Anthology of Latin American Literature*, "in order to negate the exalted conception of the poet that Neruda represented so grandly. The fact that he finally succeeded in creating a viable alternative confirms his unique gifts." Parra's antipoetry "is a prime example of a generational reaction to the styles and concerns of earlier poets: it negates the highly metaphorical, surrealistic style of the 1930s," Edith Grossman suggested in *Contemporary Foreign Language Writers*.

Though Parra's early books contain some surreal imagery, later books rely on manipulation of narrative structure to achieve their effects. "Using narrative devices but deflecting the normal expectations of the reader by interrupting and even cutting short the anecdotal flow, Parra 'deconstructs' the poem and finally achieves an almost epigrammatic structure that moves from one

intense fragment of verbal reality to the next," Rodriguez Monegal suggested. In addition, the antipoet feels that poetry need not be musical to be good. He maintains that since man talks more than he sings, man should leave the singing to the birds. Another feature the antipoems borrow from prose is the presence of characters found in contemporary urban settings. Mobsters and nymphomaniacs, ragged and rough-talking bag ladies, pugilistic youth and frustrated office workers alike have their say in Parra's antipoems.

Another character that caught Parra's sustained attention was Domingo Zarate Vega, a construction worker who became a self-styled prophet in the 1920s. Parra borrows the folk legend's voice for all the poems in *Sermons and Homilies of the Christ of Elqui*. The result, said a *Georgia Review* contributor, "makes for a powerful, entertaining, and often quirky reading experience." Doing for the figure of Christ what he has always done for Hispanic poetry, Parra demythologizes the Chilean prophet (and, by implication, other religious figures) by describing the profane conditions of their lives. Parra's Christ matter-of-factly jokes about his sackcloth robe and his breakfast of hot water. Later, he chides followers for giving the pages of the Bible and the Chilean flag a reverence that is inappropriate and impractical. Here, as in his other books, Parra shows the humor (and fury) to be gained from recognizing that people or objects traditionally considered sacred are not.

Parra's iconoclasm is so thoroughgoing that after poetry readings, he says "Me retracto de todo lo dicho" ("I take back everything I told you"). He also refuses to formulate a firm definition of antipoetry. He turns interviews into anti-interviews, frustrating most inquiries into his personal life and writing process, which he calls "a professional secret," Grossman reports. He has written that the thanks he gets for his freedom from tradition is to be declared *persona non grata* in literary circles. Yet many critics offer generally favorable impressions of Parra's work. In his *New York Times Book Review* piece about *Poems and Antipoems*, Mark Strand commented: "Parra's poems are hallucinatory and violent, and at the same time factual. The well-timed disclosure of events-- personal or political-- gives his poems a cumulative, mounting energy and power that we have come to expect from only the best fiction." In a *Poetry* review, Hayden Carruth remarked: "Free, witty, satirical, intelligent, often unexpected (without quite being surrealistic), mordant and comic by turns, always rebellious, always irreverent-- it is all these and an ingratiating poetry too."

Partisan Review contributor G.S. Fraser observed that among Hispanic writers, Parra possesses the liveliest wit. "I think that being a professor of mathematics may have given him the logical quickness which lies at the essence of wit," Fraser suggested. Grossman concurred that Parra "has brought to Hispanic literature a new vision of the expressive possibilities of colloquial Spanish." Strand points out, "It is the difference between Parra's antipoems and anybody else's that is significant. ... To many readers Parra will be a new poet, but a poet with all the authority of a master."

Parra's reputation as the premier author in the genre of anti-poetry continues even today, decades after his debut. "Anti-poetry," explained a *Fox News* contributor, "is the poetry of the commonplace in both form and content, a quality Parra perhaps summed up best with the famous line-- 'For half a century poetry was the paradise of the solemn fool'-- from his famed 'Poems and Antipoems' collection, which was rejected by traditionalists and admirers of lyrical poetry." "Antipoetry often appropriates a genre from which poetry is normally excluded: here the after-dinner speech is taken up by this resolutely idiosyncratic poet," wrote John Taylor in an *Antioch Review* essay on Parra's *After-dinner Declarations*, "sometimes with an atmosphere of off-the-cuff remarks (especially when he 'has not come prepared'-- or rather 'preparraed,' as he quips-- to make a speech); at other times, in the form of an acceptance speech for literary awards," like the Juan Rulfo Prize the poet and physicist

received from the Mexican government in 1991. "The antipoetic attitude goes back much further in literary history," Taylor continued, "but Parra rightly spots its kinship with radical skepticism, not to mention slapstick, bad jokes, ribald humor, and dross. An antipoet is almost always predominantly intellectual in spirit (Parra is also a mathematician and theoretical physicist), as opposed to being a celebratory lyrical poet. Moreover, an antipoet is as playful as he is eccentric. Besides puns and erudite oddments, Parra sometimes inserts strange typographical symbols and mathematical signs into his poems, which are otherwise scarcely punctuated." In 2011, the Spanish-speaking literary world honored Parra with the Cervantes Prize-- its highest honor-- largely for his creation of "anti-poetry."