

Gardens, Cemeteries, and the Abyss: Symbolic Spaces in a Selection of Nicanor Parra's Anti-Poetry

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En este ensayo examino la poesía compilada por Nicanor Parra en *Obra gruesa* (1969) con el fin de ilustrar la forma en que el poeta utiliza de una manera sistemática el espacio simbólico. Ofrezco varias categorías, entre ellas espacios de la naturaleza, la muerte, o de lo existente, que ejemplifican una visión poética parecida a la idea de *heterotopia* propuesta por Michel Foucault. A través de una lectura de estos espacios en una selección de poemas, arguyo que los espacios categorizados reproducen un mundo poético que refleja la realidad vivida como algo torcido para enfatizar la desesperanza existencial del ser humano.

Palabras clave: Nicanor Parra, antipoesía, heterotopia.

In this essay I examine the poetry published in *Obra gruesa* (1969) in order to illustrate Nicanor Parra's systemic use of symbolic space. I offer several different categories, among them spaces of nature, death, or the real, which exemplify a poetic version of Michel Foucault's heterotopias. Through detailed examination of these spaces in selection of poems, I argue that the spaces I have categorized reproduce a poetic world which reflects lived reality as twisted thus emphasizing the existential despair of the modern human condition.

Keywords: Nicanor Parra, heterotopia, antipoetry.

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The work of Chilean poet Nicanor Parra has popularized the use of colloquial language in poetry, legitimized humor, and upon closer examination has generally confused its readers. While critics have written a great deal about Parra, none have yet examined his uses of symbolic spaces. There are excellent close readings of particular poems from different theoretical perspectives¹, as well as much discussion that works towards describing a theory of anti-poetry². This criticism helps elucidate Parra's poetry in terms of its relationship to non-anti-poetry and identifies salient particular techniques. Parra's poetry, particularly the collections gathered in *Obra gruesa* (1969), is filled with symbolic spaces that function to distort reality and draw attention to the deformation of the human condition, a theme that underlies his work. Given the large number of references to symbolic spaces in the various books collected in *Obra gruesa*, I propose to identify and categorize these spaces, offering interpretations of the functions of each category throughout the volume. I will also examine several specific poems in order to explain the function of the spaces present within each of them: "Moai" from *Versos de Salón*, "Hora del té" from *Poemas y antipoemas*, and "Los límites de Chile" from *Otros poemas*.

One might consider spaces in poetry and ask what importance they might have in interpreting Parra's anti-poetry. When one considers poetry as a form, oftentimes one notices figurative language and the creation of a specialized diction within a body of poetic work. However, the creation and use of spaces, be they gardens, cemeteries, or soccer fields, produces a symbolic system and lends a distorted poeticism to the anti-poem. As critics like Donald Shaw have noted, much anti-poetry is in fact a deformation of the poetic world, a somewhat cynical look at the banalities of daily life. In this understanding of anti-poetry, such spaces contribute to deformation, at times through their banality, as well as lending a sense of familiarity to the reader; these spaces are often known, common, and quotidian. The poems in *Obra gruesa* teem with symbolic spaces; in order to conceptualize their functions within the collection, I offer this series of categorizations: Nature; Death; Religion or Metaphysics; Real, that is Existing Spaces; City; and Created Spaces. There are also categories that I will not examine within the scope of this essay, which include Things and Open and Closed Structures. The same spaces may fall into more than one category; in that sense, they are not mutually exclusive. The usage of these spaces varies, yet, the similarities and differences illuminate Parra's poetics of space³, a symbolic system by which the poet gives meaning to the set of relationships that give life to the places in which we live. Michel Foucault calls that which "desiccate[s] speech, stop[s] words in their tracks, contest[s] the very possibility of grammar at its source... dissolve[s] our myths and sterilize[s] the lyricism of our sentences" (xix) a

¹ Karen Van Hooff offers a feminist reading of selected poems; Leonidas Morales examines the flâneur; Niall Binns uses ecological criticism to read Parra's poetry.

² See, among others, the work of Edith Grossman, Federico Schopf, Marlene Gottlieb, and Ricardo Yamal.

³ My use of the term "poetics of space" calls to mind Gaston Bachelard's work that engages in philosophical inquiry related to memory, architecture, and the intimate, domestic space of the home, but to use this term in Parra's context, it has more in common with Michel Foucault's heterotopias than with Bachelard's oneiric space.

heterotopia; this label can be applied to a challenging and disruptive space that is not dissimilar from the effects of Parra's anti-poetry.

Fresh Air: Spaces of Nature

Parra's poems as well as his antipoems often utilize direct references to spaces that can be categorized as spaces of nature. The most common references in this category include mountains (6), forests (4), parks (4), and gardens (15). Mountains are not always referred to as *montañas*, but also as the various *Cordilleras* in Chile's Central Valley and *cerros*. However, gardens are always *jardines*, though in one case they are specified as "jardines de monasterio." The poems also periodically feature other spaces of nature, such as deserts, valleys, rivers, and islands. Interestingly, Parra also utilizes astronomical phenomena, such as planets and planetary systems, that expand nature beyond botany and geography. Given their preponderance in the category, the different incidents of the use of the word *jardín* elucidate similarities and differences of the use of nature imagery, in this case, nature manipulated by humanity. In "Hay un día feliz," the garden appears as one in a series of spaces evoked in remembrance at twilight by the poetic voice; in "Fiesta de amanecida," from the collection *Versos de salón*, the garden appears as an afterthought, that is, a small detail to place the narrative of the poem. The utilization of garden space in many poems entails a degradation of that space; what one normally considers natural, life-giving, and beautiful, becomes adulterated, associated with death, and disgustingly deformed. In "El peregrino," "el jardín se cubre de moscas" (44). The healthy space of the garden is overwhelmed by disease-ridden flies; disorder corrupts utopia. The image of the garden as a restorative space is again undermined in "Se me pegó la lengua al paladar," in which the pathetic poetic voice suspects any and everything. The space of the garden contributes to that characterization: "no soporto ni el aire del jardín" (123). While not degrading the actual space as seen in "El peregrino," the mockery of the poetic voice in "Se me pegó la lengua" is emphasized in his rejection of fresh, garden air, that is, nature. The garden's role in emphasizing the pathetic nature of the poetic voice resurfaces in the collection *La camisa de fuerza*, and particularly in the poem "¡Socorro!" This poem narrates the story of a poetic voice happily chasing a butterfly, falling, and dramatically despairing, in which the garden is a place of action and narration, though the overreaction of the poetic voice to his fall in the garden again corrupts the idyllic stereotype of this space, and alludes to the Biblical Fall in the Garden of Eden. In an earlier poem, "Mariposa," the image of a butterfly and the garden links explicitly to a sense of enclosure and the abyss. References to the garden include "en el jardín que parece un abismo" and "más allá de la reja del jardín / porque el jardín es chico," (109) both references that allude to actions of the butterfly while at the same time portraying the stereotypically tranquil space as enclosed with a fence, both literally and metaphorically, as well as comparing it to an abyss, that is, a profoundly dark and hopeless space.

There are several other poems that link the space of the garden to the space of an unfathomable void; in "Los vicios del mundo moderno" the garden again sets the scene for an action. The delinquents "están autorizados para concurrir diariamente a parques y jardines" (56), a spatial combination

repeated in "Lo que el difunto dijo de sí mismo." The chaotic enumeration of the bad habits of the modern world that follows this *mise-en-scène* creates a world full of decadence, violence, and anarchy. The garden, here invaded by criminals, loses its idyllic quality and plunges into chaos, creating a disordered and desperate world that mirrors the pessimistic vision of humanity that can be read in Parra's poetic oeuvre. In the same collection, "Solo de piano" laments the lack of an escape from disorder: "ya que ni siquiera tenemos el consuelo de un caos / en el jardín que bosteza y que se llena de aire" (43). Not only does the garden lack any solace from turmoil, but it also becomes a space characterized by boredom and inutility. Where is the beauty and tranquility associated with a well-tended garden? In the world of the poet, that well-tended garden no longer exists, as the individual cannot understand himself nor the world around him. In "Viva la Cordillera de los Andes," the poetic voice somewhat ridiculously denigrates one mountain range in favor of another, similar one; in fact, the two mountain ranges are geographically proximate, with the Cordillera de los Andes directly to the East of Santiago, and the Cordillera de la Costa directly to the West. The last stanza of the poem again places the poetic voice in a garden, proclaiming his absurd claim of superiority for one mountain range.

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!! (Parra 86)

The statements imply that nature provokes the poetic voice to this proclamation. The garden, described as nature's garden, that is, wild and not controlled by humanity, triggers madness; the garden here functions as an anti-Eden, corrupting humanity and inducing insanity. Deformed gardens abound in Parra's poetry; in "La trampa," the garden is a retreat that the poetic voice uses to study spider reproduction. "Atención," from the collection *Canciones rusas*, presents the reader with the image of the monastery garden. The poetic voice characterizes this garden as a common place of courtship, while this characterization deforms the garden, as the concept of initiating a romantic relationship within a monastic community provokes laughter. The garden is also a place of binaries, light and shadow, smiles and tears, truth and lies. "Atención" portrays a garden as a subversion of stereotypical sentimental romantic space while at the same time harkening back to the possibility of the ideal of the garden, in light, smiles, and truth. The doubt induced by the binary comparisons as well as the ridiculous nature of courtship in a monastery produce another corrupted garden. Therefore, Parra's anti-poetry warps many of its gardens and subverts reader expectations with odd situations, pathetic characters, and a general disregard for the traditional symbolic resonances of the garden.

Violating the Sacrosanct: Spaces of Death and Despair

Parra's anti-poetry also inhabits a variety of symbolic spaces that the reader associates with death; these spaces include a deathbed (*lecho de la muerte*), coffin (*ataúd*), mausoleum (*mausoleo*), and hell (*infierno*). However, the

two most common symbolic spaces that Parra utilizes are the tomb and the cemetery. At times the tomb and the cemetery work together in one poem, whereas at other times they function individually. Therefore, to amplify our understanding of these symbolic spaces, I will first examine instances where these spaces occur separately. There are several poems throughout *Obra gruesa* that focus on not just any tomb but rather, on the tomb of a father. In "El galán imperfecto," the poetic voice covertly observes a newly married couple that visits the tomb of the bride's father. While the bride grieves, her groom shows indifference to the situation. The poem sets up a contradiction between the new life that the couple has begun together and the life of the father that has ended and is being grieved. The tomb offers a space within the poem for deformity and despair; interestingly, the tomb in "Hombre al agua" also connotes despair, but tempers it with a sense of escape. The poem involves a list of elaborate excuses to elude the banal rhythm of everyday life, one of which is "Digan que fui a Chillán / A visitar la tumba de mi padre" (97). In this case, the tomb and particularly the proposed fictional visit to its space fulfill a socially acceptable obligation. Nevertheless, the cowardice of escaping from daily life distorts this sacred obligation, yet again converting the tomb into a space that allows for joking. The chaotic enumeration of "Noticiero 1957" also features a tomb, which is given its own stanza: "profanación de la tumba del padre" (134). The poem reads as if it were a radio or television broadcast⁴ and the profanation of a father's tomb is but one of many terrible events publicized in a day or a year. The poetic voice does not offer hope for the future, but rather, prefers the past:

Pero, de todos modos, nos quedamos
 Con el año que está por terminar
 (A pesar de las notas discordantes)
 Porque el año que está por empezar
 Sólo puede traernos más arrugas. (135)

With the climax of the poem, the poetic voice makes clear feelings of despair with regards to the future, which adds to the image of the profaned tomb in that the poetic voice accepts that the events of the concluding year, which includes the space of the tomb as mentioned, will bring fewer wrinkles than those to come. A profoundly pessimistic view of the future, the tomb of "Noticiero 1957" lacks the comedy that permeates the other tomb spaces of the collection.

The use of humor as linked to a space of death, in this case a tomb, characterizes many of the incidences of tombs in Parra's selected poetry. Humor and irreverence typify the verses from "Lo que el difunto dijo de sí mismo," "no se rían delante de mi tumba / porque puedo romper el ataúd / y salir disparado por el cielo" (131). At the climax of the poem, the admonition to not laugh in front of the poetic voice's tomb jars the readers' generally respectful attitude towards the dead. Yet the image that follows of a cadaver shooting out of its casket like a cannonball does not belong to the symbolic universe

⁴ See the work of Niall Binns for a study emphasizing the role of mass communication in the poetry of Nicanor Parra.

in which tombs, caskets, and dead bodies are respected and any violation of their rest should be severely punished; rather, the symbolic world of the tomb of the poetic voice encourages ridicule and laughter, and subverts the reader's expected symbolic framework. This distorted symbolic framework also informs the tomb in "Yo pecador," which entails the poetic voice admitting to violating a tomb, asking for forgiveness but denying any guilt. The breaking of the taboo questions yet again the sacred nature of the tomb. Parra's antipoems develop this de-sanctification of the tomb to the point where it becomes a place for a child's play, as seen in "Juegos infantiles," where the tomb and the cemetery remain ghastly, but a source of joy for a child. "Discurso fúnebre" features two uses of the symbolic space of the tomb, to similar effect. The first incidence provokes dissonance for the reader in that it addresses *tumbas* using the *vosotros* conjugation of the verb, a form that in Latin America implies formality and pomposity, at the same time saying that said tombs are like soda fountains. The linkage of formal language and banal urban space deforms the space of the tomb, relegating it to an even more trivial space than the soda fountain, yet again degrading the traditional Western symbolism and respect for the tomb.

A tomb is nearly always, but not necessarily, located in a cemetery, a space that Parra at times links explicitly to tombs in his anti-poetry, particularly in *Versos de salón's* "En el cementerio" and "Viaje por el infierno." In the first poem the tomb functions as a space for the event described in the poem, namely, that an old man faints before the tomb. A trope commonly found in literary Romanticism, fainting, that is, a loss of consciousness, can be read as a symbolic death. Therefore, the poem presents a dignified old man who symbolically dies, and the reactions of those around him are quotidian: take his pulse, give him air. The cemetery, and particularly a tomb within the cemetery, implies a solemnity that is belied by the irony of a dignified old man fainting at its feet. In "Viaje por el infierno," the tomb again exists within the explicitly named cemetery, which is the fifth circle of Hell that the poetic voice visits. As with any reference to a journey through Hell, the poem resonates with Dante; this Hell differs from many conceptions of Hell according to Judeo-Christian tradition in that it is described as very cold. Interestingly, the cemetery itself, threatening and cold to the poetic voice, provides shelter to the poetic voice in the form of the tomb. Though not as blatantly deformative as the uses of the tomb of the father in Parra's anti-poetry, its use in conjunction with the larger graveyard space points out contradictions within our culturally-coded expectations regarding death, mourning, the after-life, and solemnity.

Characterizations of cemeteries in anti-poetry tend towards the ridiculous; the juxtapositions of the aforementioned space with unusual situations, or curious uses of it, effectively mock the sacred nature of the cemetery. In "Recuerdos de juventud" the poetic voice engages in an odd activity in a cemetery: "Con una hoja de papel y un lápiz yo entraba en los cementerios / Dispuesto a no dejarme engañar" (48). The presence of an individual with pen and paper in a cemetery, prepared to find out the truth demystifies death in that it shows an attempt to explain it; also, Parra's profession as a physicist and teacher influences a reading of the corruption of the ritual of death and mourning by study and intellectual inquiry. At the same time, the attitude

of the poetic voice verges on pathetic, in that the closing, climactic line of the poem focuses on the abyss that separates us from the other abysses, not dissimilar from the frustrating aimless wandering of the poetic voice that includes the visit to the cemetery. The futility of that wandering reflects a pessimism towards the human condition that is ever present in the usage of the symbolic system represented by the cemetery, though Parra tends to write that space with more humor than is the case in "Recuerdos de juventud." "Noticiero 1957" mentions a strike of cemetery workers; "Sigmund Freud" [sic] proposes that a cemetery is in fact a phallic symbol. "Canto del forastero" features language use with many deliberate errors in spelling and grammar in a parody of the representation of non-hegemonic speech patterns. The poetic voice speaks of a visit to the cemetery and a burial:

Moi ir a la cementerio
 moi llorar el muerte de mi señoro legítimo
 moi poner el urno en la nicho
 no bermitir que gente toque el urne.
 yo lo besar –yo lo abrazar– yo todo. (245)

Leaving aside questions of the poem's painfully incorrect grammar, the servile attitude of the poetic voice fills a space of action defined by traditional social divisions, which in modernity are ridiculous stereotypes of interpersonal relations, though not necessarily unknown. Therefore, the symbolic space of the cemetery is here sullied by extremely colloquial speech and the slavish posture of the poetic voice. In "La víbora," the cemetery is the degrading symbolic space, rather than the degraded; the poetic voice and his lover live in an apartment in a luxurious neighborhood close to the cemetery. The poem might in fact be relating to an actual place, the *Cementerio General* in Recoleta, which in the 1940s was not far away from the luxurious areas of the central downtown area of the city⁵; therefore, the poem harkens to a real possibility of geographic proximity of the cemetery and luxury, which ironically degrades both reality and the poetic construction of space.

The poetic voice and the individual under his tutelage inhabit real cemeteries, that is, cemeteries that correspond to a geographic reality in Chile, in the second poem "En el cementerio," belonging to the *Otros poemas* section. The poem describes an urban funereal physicality in a style much like that of a catechism: questions and answers. The poetic voice, in the form of the catechist, instructs his student that there are in fact two cemeteries in Santiago, and that in Chile, Spanish is pronounced in a particular way, a moment that provokes laughter. The cemetery created in the poem features *rejas* (fences), *ataúdes* (coffins), *árboles* (trees), *nichos* (niches), *gente* (people), and *mausoleos* (mausoleums). It is therefore a very physical space; however, its symbolic power is emphasized in the question and answer form of the poem, and the solemnity and matter-of-fact manner of the questions and answers lend weight to its symbolic strength. The climax of the poem temporally restricts the space of the cemetery: "El cementerio

⁵ For more detailed information on urban growth and its social implications in Santiago, see Richard Walter's study.

lo cierran temprano" (234). The closure of the cemetery implies that either there is no place in the cemetery for the poetic voice, or that, by virtue of the closure of even the cemetery, there is no future for the poetic voice. This profoundly negative view of future possibility emphasizes futility. The cemetery stands explained in this poem as an ordinary space with identifiable traits, but with its closing it converts into a menacing yet attractively unattainable symbolic place. One might also read the closing of the cemetery by unknown agents as representative of the efforts of the secular world to restrict access to the divine, if it even exists. This doubt and the malleability of the structures that govern where we rest, so to speak, are indicative of the modern cultural crisis, lending itself to despair, the alienation of the individual, and questioning of an individual's very being. Given this context, the many allusions to abysses and chaos do not appear to be out of place in the symbolic world Parra creates.

Categorizing the abyss as a symbolic space upon first glance appears to be a contradiction worthy of Parra. An abyss is nothingness; how can nothingness also be a space? Nothingness becomes a space when it is imbued with culturally significant symbolic meaning, for example, as it is when linked to the aforementioned cultural crisis of being. As a religious or metaphysical space, the abyss figures prominently in various antipoems. Interestingly, the most common usage of the space of the abyss links it to the action of dancing, a joyous exercise. The poetic voice of "El pequeño burgués," "Test," and "Yo pecador" refers to dancing at the side of the abyss, whereas "Consejo británico" refers to a crazy dance that leads to the abyss; either way, all four poems relate a merry physical activity to the precipice of nothingness. The poetic voice sees itself reflected in a dangerous frenetic activity; the abyss of nothingness gains meaning through the modern cultural crisis, and all four poems express a consciousness of various parts of society to the proximity of the abyss. Though these examples explicitly mention the abyss, the dancers do not plunge into oblivion; in that respect, this symbolic space quietly threatens existence, performing not a deformative function but rather a contrapuntal one. By a contrapuntal function, I mean to say that two or more aspects form different "melodies" that together form a coherent "harmony." In this case, the abyss is not existence, but when taken as a symbolically resonant place in the context of the modern cultural crisis, it complements the representation of existence in such a way that the reader is presented with joy alongside nothingness, feeling alongside sensory deprivation. This range allows for a harmonious representation of human experience, or at least said experience as postulated by the poetic voices of these poems.

Though the space of the abyss necessarily functions in counterpoint to existing spaces, other poems that feature this symbolic space utilize it in different ways that do not involve dancing. In "Tres poesías," the poetic voice posits that

es absolutamente necesario
que el abismo responda de una vez
porque ya va quedando poco tiempo
sólo una cosa es clara: que la carne se llena de gusanos.
(108)

The poetic voice demands a response from nothingness, that which is empty. In fact, the poetic subject relies upon the abyss, a ridiculous concept that nevertheless fits into the framework of questioning and alienation of the modern cultural crisis. This alienation, particularly of an individual with respect to him or herself, becomes evident in "Versos sueltos;" the poetic voice conceives of the space between his chest and back as an abyss, in other words, that he suffers from a physical emptiness precisely where one's heart is. However, said abyss does not only refer to the poet's body, but rather to artistic production as well, as the poetic voice refers to itself as a creator that produces nothing and who dedicates himself to the art of yawning. Therefore, "Versos sueltos" internalizes the symbolic space of abyss in a way not made explicit in the dancing usage. Despite its profound negative metaphysical connotations, the collection of poetry and anti-poetry in *Obra gruesa* does not neglect the physical aspect of the abyss itself; rather than placing it within another physical being, the abyss appears in its physical form in "Mil novecientos treinta." Literally a description of an expedition to the Himalayas, the poetic voice recounts that "veo a algunos de ellos resbalar y caer al abismo / y a otros veo luchar entre sí por unas latas de conserva" (197). The abyss in this reference physically exists, rather than representing a conception of nullity. The void here symbolically represents more than a physical drop, but also hopelessness for the poetic voice, for a generic individual, and for history. The poem encloses a pessimistic view of the future, where those who survive the gauntlet and avoid the physical abyss give themselves over to a spiritual abyss, illustrated by petty conflict over prosaic objects.

Contrary to the treatment of other symbolic spaces that I have examined to this point, the abyss suffers no warp in anti-poetry, though that exception is unique. Other symbols related to religion permeate the collection and tend towards deformation. As a particular example of a deformed religious symbolic space in Parra's work, I propose to examine spaces that are parts of a church. Chapels, cathedrals, altars, church towers, and temples occupy space that through the antipoem becomes corrupt and sacrilegious. In "San Antonio" the poem degrades the holy space of a chapel by inhabiting it with a deformed saint and defining it as non-sacred ground with reference to the seven capital sins. In fact, the poem appears to be an exercise in the corruption of the supposedly holy space. "Versos sueltos" performs the same function in one line: "mi catedral es la sala de baño," (113) desymbolizing the cathedral and re-signing it as equal to a bathroom, that is, a House of God is a place of defecation. Other poems feature the profanation of altars ("Lo que el difunto dijo de sí mismo"), and the placement of a temple underground ("Noticiero 1957"). The poem "Telegramas" features both cathedrals and chapels in odd positions; according to the poetic voice cathedrals hit below the belt, so to speak. This vulgarity, combined with a later reference to a chapel where "no moriré de muerte natural" fills the symbolic space of the chapel with distrust, confusion, and intrigue. It contaminates a holy space yet again, much in the way the earlier vulgar reference to testicles does. Chapels are not only suspicious places in anti-poetry, but also described with the adjective "burning" on two separate occasions; the Spanish term "capilla ardiente" refers to the space where a funeral wake occurs. In the poem "Cartas del poeta que duerme en una silla," this image appears linked

to the action of sneezing. A ridiculous combination of spaces and actions, sneezing in this place disrespects the commonly accepted symbolism of the chapel; this deformation is linked to physical bodily functions that call to mind certain Christian group's insistence that the body and physicality are inherently sinful. The second use of the image occurs in the poem "Test;" the burning chapel is a space that has been deprived of its normal symbolic structure in that it lacks any bodies inhabiting it, including the corpse that would give the space its particular funereal significance. Also, as the poem posits the phrase as a possible response to the question of what is anti-poetry, the pessimism concerning a poet's work is linked to the destruction of a religiously resonant symbolic space, pointless in that no one is inside to convert the flames to a funeral pyre.

Spaces that are part of a church also resonate in terms of concepts of time; two antipoems in particular explore relationships between a symbolic, religious space and representations of time. In "Juegos infantiles," the child in question lands on a church tower, plays with the clock he finds there, loses interest and moves on. The child, "playing with time" as a god-like action, lends additional symbolic power to a traditionally phallic church tower. The ability to accelerate, rewind, and stop time, as controlled by the tower, also implies an ability to change memory and experience. A child, through the force of imagination and play, becomes conflated with God, eternity, and memory. Given Parra's use of the non-space of the abyss, one might also read the stoppage of time in the poem as a reference to the end of time. Nevertheless, boredom lurks and the play progresses, in turn diverting the poetic voice as well as the reader's gaze from the anarchy of our own reality. Avoidance also features prominently in the aforementioned "Hombre al agua;" however, the generic sacred spaces referred to in the exclamatory climactic line of the poem are a place of pilgrimage, which shocks the reader of Parra's poetry in that the world-view of the poem allows for some sort of future for the poetic voice not explicitly linked to despair. Oddly, the escape wished for by the poetic voice throughout the poem is not totally reduced to suffering his banal existence nor are his hopes for the future diminished. One might read the poem as equally pessimistic with regards to the cultural crisis of modern humanity in that all of the exclamations of the poem are but exclamations, not concrete acts. Yet the possibility for a changing future distinguishes "Hombre al agua" from the general direction of deformation and ridicule that characterize sacred religious spaces in Parra's anti-poetry.

Eternally Imperfect Santiago: Urban Spaces

As we have already seen, not all of the symbolic spaces in *Obra gruesa* are generic, that is, various symbolic spaces are geographically identifiable places. While not all referenced places are necessarily redolent with symbolism, many avail themselves of a wide applicability that includes symbolism related to their specific space. These spaces can be classified as urban, as specific cities, and as foreign, that is, outside of Chile. The selection I propose to highlight are Chilean spaces, particularly spaces in Santiago, the capital city, though there are various non-Metropolitan Region spaces referenced throughout the collection of anti-poetry, such as Chillán, Linares, Cartagena, and San Antonio. There are five direct references to the city of Santiago,

though not all function as symbolic spaces⁶. "Cronos," from the collection *Canciones rusas* plays with time and with the structure of the poem that is set within the frame of the city of Santiago. It is presented in a somewhat contradictory light that is shared with the different aspects of time that are described. For example, Santiago is a capital city, but within its boundaries and that of the poem, an individual gets around the space on a mule. The contradiction of a modern city and a pre-modern form of transportation distorts the symbolism of progress and improvement that urban development implies. A similar process, though with different specificities, surrounds the use of "Santiago de Chile" in the poem "Test." Given as an option for a definition of an antipoet, the poetic voice posits "un aldeano de Santiago de Chile?" (184) The categorization of Santiago as provincial and rural through the word used to describe its inhabitants again contradicts the reality of Santiago as a growing metropolitan area during the mid-twentieth century. Making the metropolitan rural also occurs in a reference to Santiago in the poem "Chile" in the collection *Tres poemas*, though the word *campesino* is substituted for *aldeano*, and it is a source of humor within the poem. In that same poem Santiago figures in a piece of Parra's rare use of figurative language: "y Santiago de Chile es un desierto" (247). The equivalence of the city and a barren landscape of nature⁷ also resonate with the modern cultural crisis of the West in that for all of the external progress and development of the past few centuries, the individual does not share in that progress. In fact, the climactic lines of the poem: "creemos ser país / y la verdad es que somos apenas paisaje" (247) emphasize a feeling of alienation and lack of purpose that extends from the individual to the entire country. Therefore, Chile's capital city as a symbol of modernity and progress in the text becomes contradictory given the characterizations of its inhabitants, and its metaphorical comparison to a wasteland.

As the large entity of Santiago symbolically degrades through its use in Parra's poetry, so do particular spaces within Santiago. The Plaza de Armas, that is, the central square of the Santiago municipality, sets the stage for "Jubilación." As we will see with reference to the Parque Forestal, public gathering places tend to gain cultural significance as places of youthful courtship away from the prying eyes of families. Retired individuals go to the Plaza de Armas, surrounded by stores, museums, and the Cathedral, to enjoy the springtime as described in the first stanza of the poem. Though it is a real, identifiable place, the scene described in the poem could occur in any other public space. It provides a place for oddness in a juxtaposition of spring and new birth with retirement, which yet again contradicts traditional symbolic systems. The *Feria del Libro*, a bookstore and actual place of consumption in Santiago, figures prominently in "Palabras a Tomás Lago."

⁶ Though earlier studies of Parra's anti-poetry do not emphasize the function of symbolic spaces, the role of urban spaces have been underlined as characteristic of anti-poetry (Schopf "La ciudad" 126), while Leonidas Morales argues that the spaces that Parra's *flâneur* inhabits differ from those of European writers: "no son ni "bulevares" ni "pasajes techados". Pero sí plazas, jardines públicos, fuentes de soda, cementerios, parques. Lugares éstos a los que concurren miembros de las clases medias y sectores populares" (38).

⁷ The desertification of Santiago finds resonance with the air pollution of the city that Niall Binns identifies as "el gran símbolo del deterioro ecológico en Chile" ("Puro Chile" 51).

The bookseller appears in a line associated with “ese polvo mortal” (46). In fact, the bookstore is the origin of said fatal dust, which refers to physical material in the bookshop, whereas the adjective *mortal* links the very contents of a bookshop –paper does, over time, degrade to dust– to the modern cultural crisis and despair. Also, one might read it as an affirmation of the danger of knowledge. The danger of knowledge also appears in the reference to Valladolid 106, a street address in “Total cero.” This location, a residential area in an upscale area of the city, relates the act of writing to death in that the poetic voice relates his own writing to the news of the suicide of Pablo de Rokha (1894-1968), as read in the newspaper. In this case, the location is quite important in that it emphasizes the links between writing, death, and existential angst represented by the suicide of the well-known poet. The symbolic space of Parque Forestal is not dissimilar to that of Plaza de Armas, that is, a deformed public space known for courtship. In “Se me ocurren ideas luminosas” the poem opens by setting the action it narrates in Parque Forestal, an urban park near the Mapocho river replete with symbolic meaning for lovers. Typically, the courtship described in the poem fails utterly, ridiculing the relationship that never was and the space in which it occurred.

The spaces we have seen related to Santiago are, by definition, urban spaces. However, Parra’s symbolic universe also focuses on many, more generic urban spaces. They can be public space (*calles, veredas, plazas*), spaces of movement and transit (*taxi, vías, tranvías, ferrocarriles*), consumption (*tiendas, restaurant de lujo*), social life (*bar, patio*), and residences (*departamento, casas, pensión*). Given their large number, it would be impossible to examine all of them in the scope of this essay. Therefore, I will look at selected banal urban spaces in an effort to include generic city spaces in the symbolic framework of space in the antipoem as degraded and corrupt. In terms of the real city behind the symbolic one created in the poem: “building a city depends on how people combine the traditional economic factors of land, labor, and capital. But it also depends on how they manipulate symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement” (Zukin 133). Consequently, symbolism in the construction of the city finds its equivalent in the poetic construction of symbolic space, which in the cosmos that Parra’s pathetic poetic voice inhabits, depends upon his exclusion from the expected modes of societal success. “Yo pecador” features the identification of the sinning poetic voice as the prodigal child of the trash dump. The irony evident in the space of trash and uselessness producing a Biblically-resonant consumer taps into a contemporary social discourse that calls to mind other cultural productions such as the play “Los papeleros” by Chilean playwright Isidora Aguirre (1919-2011), whose heroine hails from the lower class residents of a trash dump. The soda fountains in the eponymous poem have less social importance; the poem describes the lunch hour of the poetic voice in that place. An unremarkable and banal space, the poem features a radio playing, someone sneezing, someone smoking, and someone reading a tabloid newspaper. This environment becomes the frame for the ruminations of the poetic voice, who considers astrophysics and the reality of a supernova, that is, the final flash of burning hydrogen before a star dies, destroying an already lost paradise. The consideration of destruction through natural forces (the supernova) while surrounded by a banal space of urban consumption degrades not the urban

space, which through its banality has little left to degrade, but rather corrupts the purity of the considerations of the poetic voice. Nonetheless, in this case the result of the reflection is profoundly in step with Parra's already noted despair with respect to the human condition. A less problematic deformity occurs with the "bomba de bencina" (gas station) in the poem "Sueños." The space emerges as the subject of a dream, though the quotidian space of the gas station does not correspond to the stuff of dreams, nor of nightmares. The poem itself, an enumeration of dream subjects, contains not degradation of the gas station but rather of the concept of dreams as ideal. One might generalize that spaces such as the gas station function much in the same way as the flies in the garden; it draws attention to a corruption within the symbolic system the readers construct around these spaces.

One of the most common urban spaces in anti-poetry is the "kiosko" –a kiosk or a news stand. The kiosk appears in an arguably "normal" poem, "Se canta al mar," where the poetic voice refers to "el olvidado kiosko de una plaza" (25). The kiosk in this case is an abandoned, despairing, empty space; though in one of Parra's standard poems, the kiosk does not noticeably change its symbolism as shown in more explicit antipoems. The kiosks of "Los vicios del mundo moderno" are ransacked by the ubiquitous delinquents. The kiosk exists with the modifier "favored by death," which adds a note of despair to the commonplace, indeed uneventful, robbery of a small business. The *Otros poemas* version of "En el cementerio" notes that some mausoleums are like kiosks. This poem emphasizes the banality of the space, and as we have seen with other urban spaces; rather than be deformed, it performs a corrupting, belittling function with regards to the majesty of a mausoleum. All three uses of the kiosk in Parra's symbolic universe relate it to a concept of alienation, degradation, and despair that, as I have previously mentioned, links Parra's poetic world to general attitudes prevalent in literary currents since Romanticism.

Heterotopias: "Moai," "Hora del té," and "Los límites de Chile"

In addition to symbolically resonant spaces alluded to in Parra's anti-poetry, three specific poems make those spaces their explicit subject: "Moai" from *Versos de Salón*, "Hora del té" from *Poemas y antipoemas*, and "Los límites de Chile" from *Otros poemas*. "Moai" describes the giant stone statues found on Easter Island and speculates on their origin only to conclude that it would be best for them to retain their mysterious nature. The poem itself does not name them, maintaining their mystery, with the exception of the title of the poem. The space that this poem creates is therefore one of enigma, redolent with historical significance, mythical, but unknowable. Assigning this symbolism –mystery, myth, and exoticism– to a Chilean possession in the Pacific Ocean best known for its towering statues and devastated ecology fits into the symbolic discourse established in other symbolic spaces we have seen to this point. That is to say, the reader is presented with a symbolically degraded space that acquires that association by virtue of a relationship with a real, knowable, but still mysterious and exotic space. Easter Island intrigues the imagination of the poet, whose desire to maintain that interest is emphasized in the aforementioned final line. Yet given references to science and carbon dating, the maintenance of the most attractive features of the moai remains

doubtful; science will corrupt mystery in this sense, effectively explaining away the symbolism that the poetic voice cherishes.

"Hora del té," from *Poemas y antipoemas*, occurs in the first section of the collection. A series of questions to which obfuscated answers are given, this didactic form is framed again by a symbolic space, residential, decrepit, and banal. The man at the opening of the poem, who is like a wax figure, looks through broken blinds. These window dressings suggest decay that emphasizes that the poetic voice's metaphysical meditation occurs within the socially sanctioned "hora del té," complete with toast and margarine. This combination suggests a lonely and run-down space that halfheartedly follows the conventions of domestic life without maintaining it. Despair permeates the space of the room where tea is served, and corresponds neatly to the questioning of the poetic voice, as well as to Parra's tendency to utilize symbolic space as either a deforming subject or agent, or as a confirmation of the overall degradation evident in the poem.

As a final example, I would like to examine a poem from the "Other Poems" section of *Obra gruesa*, "Los límites de Chile." A fourteen line poem with no discernable versification, various critics have seen it as an example of Parra's brand of political poetry; indeed, Roberto Valero refers to it as a poem that rails against civic or patriotic discourse. However, our focus of interest is the symbolism of that created space, imbued with a national reference given the title of the poem. It reads:

No es Chile el que limita con la Cordillera de los Andes, con el Desierto del Salitre, con el Océano Pacífico, con la unión de los dos océanos: la cosa es al revés. Es la Cordillera de los Andes la que limita con Chile, el Océano Pacífico es el que llega hasta la cumbre del Aconcagua. Son los 2 Océanos los que rompen en mil pedazos la monotonía del paisaje sureño. El río Valdivia es el lago más largo de Chile. Chile limita al Norte con el Cuerpo de Bomberos, al Sur con el Ministerio de Educación, al Este con la Cordillera de Nahuelbuta y al Oeste con el vacío que producen las olas del Océano que se nombró más arriba, al Sur con González Videla. En el medio hay una gran plasta rodeada de militares, curas y normalistas que suecan a través de cañerías de cobre. (244)

The poem is replete with references to actual geography as well as tergiversations of them. With the title alone, the reader conjures up an image of a symbolic space bounded by accepted political boundaries, with a particular geography and history. The first line of the poem tears down any pretense the reader might have of familiarity with the actual, or indeed any resulting symbolic space. In fact, the geographic conceptions of the poem explicitly reverse the idea of a country bordering an ocean, and rather argue that the ocean borders a country. This poem does not limit itself to playing with the reader's traditional understanding of geography, but rather continues to destabilize socially conditioned expectations for thought and behavior. The closing of the poem corrupts the newly refigured space that has been

arbitrarily labeled "Chile;" the final image of the poem, detailing a limited group of military men, priests, and rule-keepers sucking frantically through copper straws, is quite grotesque. Though criticizing the development of Chile's most monetarily valuable natural resource, this poem, when taken in concert with Parra's tendency to take spaces redolent with significance and twist them, therefore does not comment only upon the degradation of the military, Church and social hierarchy, but also on the state of the space we know as "Chile," and particularly the middle of it, the capital Santiago, also degraded and stripped of any positive symbolism by virtue of the last two and a half lines of the poem.

Nicanor Parra uses many different categories of symbolic spaces throughout his poetry and anti-poetry, among them Nature, Death, Religion, and the Extant. However varied their general symbolic contexts might be, they all function as heterotopias – disruptive lyric spaces that link to Parra's larger ideological view of a poetically twisted world. This perspective looks to the future with terror, emphasizing that feelings of despair, frustration, and alienation from the self reflect the modern human condition as expressed through poetry.

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