



---

## Laughter and Tears: The Dual Edge of Nicanor Parra's 'Antipoetry'

**Kasturi Mondal**

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Kabi Joydeb Mahavidyalaya

---

### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

---

**Keywords:**

*Antipoetry, colloquialism, existentialism, humour, iconoclasm, irony, satire, social inequality.*

---

---

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the revolutionary poetic vision of Nicanor Parra, the Chilean anti-poet who redefined the essence of poetry in Latin America. In 1954, with the publication of *Poemas y Antipoemas*, Parra places himself as a poet of mankind, for mankind. He introduces the concept of 'antipoetry,' a literary style subversive to the traditional poetic conventions by employing irony, humour, and colloquial language to critique socio-political structures. Parra's anti-poems dismantle lyrical romanticism and expose the absurdities of modern life. Through a close reading of Parra's works, including "USA," "There's No Way Out," "Warnings," and "Manifest," this paper examines how his antipoetry critiques capitalistic stance of every state, dictatorship, and social inequality. Parra's rejection of both leftist and rightist ideologies positioned him as a literary rebel who spoke for common people rather than political elites. His use of satire, paradox, and prosaic discourse in poems such as "The Pensioners" and "Chronos" reveals his deep engagement with existential despair, economic struggles, the marginalization of the elderly and the brevity of time. This paper also highlights Parra's influence on contemporary Latin American poetics and his contribution to the deconstruction of established literary paradigms. Parra's anti-establishment approach resonates with existentialist and postmodernist sensibilities, making his work a vital point of reference in the study of political and social critique through poetry. Despite multiple nominations, Parra never received the Nobel Prize, yet his legacy as the father of antipoetry

remains unparalleled. His iconoclasm, his deliberate rejection of poetic solemnity and his embracing of the grotesque, the mundane, and the paradoxical aspects make him one of the most significant literary figures of the 20th century.

---

**DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14848212>**

---

In 1954, Latin American poetry experienced a seismic shift. Nicanor Parra, a Chilean poet and mathematician, published *Poemas y Antipoemas*, a groundbreaking volume that defied literary norms and established the concept of antipoetry. This was no mere collection of poems—it was a manifesto, a shot fired across the bow of traditional poetry of Latin American literature, dismantling its solemnity with irony, humour, and raw, everyday language. According to Edith Grossman:

Nicanor Parra is probably the best-known member of the poetic vanguard in Latin America today .... his antipoetry occupies a central position in the great literary effort of our century to create art where it did not exist before... (Grossman, 1971, p. 72)

The impact was immediate. A new poetic wave spread across Latin America, marked by a collision of contrasting tones—laughter and lament, satire and sincerity, absurdity and profundity. Parra’s work resonated with a generation that sought to challenge conventions and expose uncomfortable truths. Twelve years later, in 1966, the Chilean writer Fernando Alegría translated *Poemas y Antipoemas* into English, igniting a global response. In his seminal essay, George Melnykovich wrote:

Since the publication of *Poems and Antipoems* (1957), Nicanor Parra has become one of the most controversial, if not influential, representatives of Latin American poetry. While some have denounced his antipoetry as non-poetry, recent criticism has been favorable. (Melnikovich, 1975,)

The world, accustomed to the high lyricism of figures like Pablo Neruda, found itself unsettled by Parra’s irreverent, unfiltered voice. His antipoetry not only embellished reality—it stripped it bare, leaving behind the bitter aftertaste of truth. By 2004, the movement’s legacy was reaffirmed with the



publication of *Antipoems: How It Look Better*, translated by Liz Werner. The collection continued Parra's signature defiance, reinforcing his critique of political and social structures with stark, uncompromising verse. Among his most striking anti-poems was a six-word bombshell:

USA

Where

Liberty is a statue. (Parra, 2004)

—is a classic example of Nicanor Parra's antipoetry, where he employs irony, minimalism, and subversion of conventional poetic expectations. This three-line statement, seemingly simple, carries deep political and philosophical context. This brief but cutting statement encapsulated Parra's cynical view of American exceptionalism. By reducing liberty to a mere monument, he implied that the United States' foundational ideals were not lived realities but static symbols—grand in form yet hollow in essence. His words, much like the Statue of Liberty itself, stood unmoving, demanding reflection from those willing to confront their meaning. Parra's antipoetry was not just a literary experiment; it was a weapon against pretence, a means to expose the absurd contradictions of modern life. And in doing so, he changed the landscape of poetry forever.

Nicanor Parra hits American Democracy by using such lucid, absurd language that evoke humour and pathos at the same time. This poem, an echo of Parra's spite against America, was flashed across billboards in Manhattan and forced the nation to take a pause. This poem is the inevitable answer to America's uncivil treatment towards Latin America. Edith Grossman aptly says "If you expect the staid reflections of an older poet, you've come to the wrong book. Parra is as vital, and funny, and confounding as ever." (Grossman, 1971, pp. 72-83)

Parra in the book, *Antipoems: New and Selected*, satirizes the present political system of Chile though in an indirect way and convey a sense of pessimism and hopelessness regarding this scenario. Here Parra, the physicist and mathematician, hypothetically engages in iconoclasm as he wrote a poem and Santiago is shaken:

IF i WERE PRESIDENT OF CHILE

I'd really make head roll

I'd start by declaring war on Bolivia

And then I'd blow my brains out. (Parra, 1985)

The anti-establishment stance of Nicanor Parra, the professor at the University of Chile, rejects traditional forms of authority and power structures here. He exhibits his desire for radical change to



wipe out deep-rooted problems within the country. Declaring war on neighbouring country is nonsensical. It's a trivial trick to divert attention from internal issues of the nation. Parra critiques the corrupting nature of power and the potential for violence inherent in political systems. The poet's actions as a hypothetical president reflect the destructive impulses that can arise when individuals are granted authority. Hence his belief that there is a smile between the deceiver and the deceived may be realized in its true spirit.

Parra advocates for mankind, for common human rights. He opposes the hugely acclaimed Latin American poet, Pablo Neruda's high political lyricism. He never was a supporter of the Leftist, nor he blew for the Rightist. In his tiny country, named Chile, two things are profuse, poetry and dictatorship. Parra knew very well that the price of bread rises in accordance with the value of dictatorship. He never casts his foot in the corridor of power-hunger. That's why he writes about inflation in "There's No Way Out":

Bread goes up so bread goes up again

Rents go up

This brings an instant doubling of all rents

The cost of clothing goes up

So the cost of clothing goes up again.

There's no way out

We're caught in a vicious circle.

In the cage there is food.

Not much, but there is food.

Outside are only great sketches of freedom. (Parra, 1967, p. 89)

This poem prevent humankind from transcending their own tragic history. The poem conveys a sense of despair and resignation. By employing everyday prosaic language and simple structure, Parra focuses on the hard realities of human life rather than glorifying romanticism. Parra establishes the fact that the cycle of poverty and economic hardship is inescapable. This poem is a critique of the infinite truth of economic inequality and the exploitation of the working class. This poem reflects the ill-will of capitalistic states that always perpetuates poverty and denies the struggles of those who are trapped in such system to access their basic needs. He acknowledges that the rich lives on the backs of the poor.

As a pioneer of antipoetry, Parra intentionally avoids traditional poetic conventions. The interdependence between humans and nature, even in urban ambit, is explored in "The Pensioners" that



appeared in *Poems and Antipoems*, translated by Miller Williams. (Parra, 1967) His faith in the proverb ‘aging like fine wine’ is salient here and at the same time he expresses empathy towards the aged folk. (Parra passed away at the very anti-climactic age of 103. TV and newspapers dedicated front page space to a sort of pre-obituary in his honour.) This poem is a critique of the marginalization of the elderly in society:

At the first hint of spring  
The pensioners come  
Into the Plaza de Armas in Santiago Chile  
To sit on the iron benches  
With one leg crossed over the other  
To enjoy the transparent air  
Under a deluge of grey pigeons.

The pensioners live in symbiosis  
With these birds of trembling colors:  
The old men make an offering of peanuts-  
The birds with friendly pecks  
Pick the old men’s teeth.

The pensioners are to the pigeons  
What crocodiles are to the angels. (Parra, 1967)

The effectiveness of Parra’s poems is rooted in knowing how to manage images in a way that is lively and agile while at the same time applying a radical disharmony. This variability is a principal characteristic of his poems which are composed of images that destabilize reading, visions that are surrealistic and practice of irony that makes fun of the reader and the world at the same time. These poems are written with the purpose of recreating chaos and transparency. The critic Guillermo Sucre affirms that Parra introduces chaos in the form of humour. Parra’s chaos, says Sucre, can provoke laughter and even hilarity, but the reader who laughs knows that a more secret anguish is in awaiting. His poetry continually surprises us, making us laugh at our own misfortune. Such is the case in “Warnings.”

We have nothing to loose [sic]but our life Glory



to the Father  
& to the Son & to the Holy Ghost  
Unless otherwise instructed  
By the way  
We also hold these truths to be  
self evident  
That all man [sic] are created  
That they have been endowed  
by their Creator  
With certain inalienable rights  
That among these are: Life  
Liberty & the pursuit of happiness  
& last but not least  
that 2+2 makes 4  
unless otherwise instructed. (Grossman, 1975)

Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare, a poem of love, is considered to be one of the most beautiful sonnets of all times. Yet Nicanor Parra chose to deviate from this type of poetry. He rejected this style of writing and the notion of love. Parra committed every possible poetic sin and broke every pattern of traditional form of writing poetry. He is, as if, a cook who invented a new dish and he himself relished it. The days are gone by when P. B. Shelley sang out “our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought”. (Shelley, 1820) Parra renounced this idea. He believed poetry is not an ivory tower rather, it is a common person’s heart where a lot of tears are hidden. The appropriate subject matter of poetry is not truth and beauty, but the vulgar surprises of life. Parra’s antipoems serve to muddy our conception of poetic cosmos. To present his work entitled, *Hojas de Parra (Leaves of Parra)*, he chose the most unusual place of circus, a setting that was more appropriate for carnivalesque performances and not for a literary reading. The new verses that he created expressed the irony found in everyday life and the life of the simple person. Here in the poem below the lyric voice describes the classroom in a grotesque manner:

I am a teacher in an obscure school,  
I have lost my voice with all the classes I’ve given.  
(After all or after nothing



I do forty hours a week.)  
What does my buffeted face tell you?  
Doesn't it inspire pity just to look at me!  
And what do these priest's shoes suggest to you  
That have become dilapidated through no fault of their own? (Parra, 2019, p. 124)

Here the reader can see the scars that are left on the face of the professor as time passes. The professor who is a human too can hardly hide his helplessness here. Readers can feel in these lines the ooze of mordancy and cynicism in harmony with the lyricism.

In 1968 in an interview Parra told The New York Times, "When there is humor, irony, sarcasm, when the author is making fun of himself and so of humanity, then the author is not singing but telling a story- that is an anti-poem." (Parra, 2004) He smiled and told The Times "I do physics in order to earn my living, and I do poetry in order to keep alive." To him anti-poetry is a masque that saves one from vicious gas. He believed poetry must have prosaic language and colloquial expressions. Poetry should stand beside the road of a factory in such a way that the workers can understand it. Poetry is not intended for the elite only, rather it must be for common folk. People will notice that poetry is making fun of the power-mongers. Such kind of thrust in wrist and faith in bosom is needed. Antipoetry must speak against hypocrisy. Parra portrayed the images that are not of tender love or a muse in a paradise, on the contrary we see a 'delinquent child' who is caught doing mischievous acts and is using mordancy and incongruity in favour of his deviant actions:

For half a century  
Poetry was the paradise  
of the solemn fool.  
Until I came  
And built my roller coaster.  
Go up, if you feel like it.  
I'm not responsible if you come down  
Bleeding from your mouth and nose. (Parra, 2019)

In fact, Parra brought us to a secluded pondside where Truth has gone to take a bathe leaving her clothes there. Falsehood, her sister, wore them and slipped away. Parra aims to disrobe this Falsehood who resembles Truth, her sister. His antipoems culminate at that point where parody and devotion



coincide. He states himself “I [am] a complete fanatic/ believe me, I identify with nothing” in his *Declaration of Principles*. (Parra, 2019) The aesthetics of this kind of metaphysical rebellion are easy enough to recognize in the relative vacuum of poetry. Edith Grossman has analysed the different elements that Parra used in his antipoems. She asserts that Parra is a genius who can create antipoetry from ordinary artifacts of modern urban life, such as telephones, his shoes, classroom objects, park benches etc. In “Rompecabezas” (“Puzzle”) Parra says:

I give no one the right  
I worship a piece of rag.  
I transport coffins.  
I transport coffins.  
I give no one the right.  
I look ridiculous  
In the sunlight,  
Scourge of the soda fountains  
I am dying of fury. (Parra, 2019)

The inhabitants of the antipoetic world, the personae of the poems, suffer, on the deepest level, the agonizing puzzles of aging, the passage of time and love, the inevitable confrontation with death. They have this perplexed realization when they become conscious of beauty and youth and potentiality, only when one is losing them. The phrases are full of caricatures to make fun of pain, to create an ironic effect and to puzzle the readers. Parra himself termed the technique as an explosion of the antipoem. Parra has composed twenty books of poetry and employed distinguished poetic elements in each of them. Purposely he maintained the same tone of voice that is different from the rest. He has one particular goal in mind, creation of a genre of poetry by which he would be known to the literary world. Nick Hill notes that *Poemas y Antipoemas*, *Versos de Salon* and *Canciones Rusas y Otros Poemas* are the three volumes that are core of Parra’s antipoetry. Nick Hill again points out that the poems for which Parra was awarded with the Juan Rulfo Literary Prize were outstanding samples of the antipoetry movement. To Parra, sarcasm was one of the most powerful weapons to create an antagonistic setting and to dig a dagger into the hearts of his enemies. He boldly stated that those who receive prize are the friends of the judges.

In literature, Parra chose the road to apply techniques that were causing great commotion in the creative world. His poems, as one Chilean critique remarked: “returned us ... once again! [To the fact





that] everything could be said in poetry”. (Parra, 2004) Camus made a similar claim that his works are rebellion against reality. Here is following sample from the poem “Manifest”:

We repudiate  
The poetry of dark glasses  
The poetry of the cape and sword  
The poetry of the plumed hat  
We propose instead  
The poetry of the naked eye  
The poetry of the hairy chest  
The poetry of the bare head.  
We don't believe in nymphs or tritons.  
Poetry has to be this:  
A girl in a wheat field-  
Or it's absolutely nothing. (Parra, 2019)

Here his readers can clearly see the intent of the poet is to break away from traditional paradigms of poetry and to make fun of the incongruity of this world. He uses colloquial language to express an image that is antagonistic, that is ugly through the usage of his black humour. Parra laughs at the triviality of human life in “Chronos”:

In Santiago, Chile  
The days are interminably long:  
Several eternities in a day.  
  
Like the vendors of seaweed  
Travelling on the backs of mules:  
You yawn- you yawn again.  
  
Yet the weeks are short  
The months go racing by  
And the years have wings. (Parra, 2019)



Pablo de Rokha once said that he feels ‘pity and nausea’ at reading the poems of Nicanor Parra. After Rokha’s comment Parra got more fame as people read Parra more and more. The great antipoet was not mindful of the fuss over his work. What Parra achieved is not a matter of luck by chance, it is not fluke at all. The works of Nicanor Parra and his antipoetry movement did not take solid root until the 1970s when his writings began to be translated for English speaking audiences. Edith Grossman turned her Ph.D. dissertation into a well-known book, *The Antipoetry of Nicanor Parra*. Melanie Nicholson wrote *Surrealism in Latin American Literature: Searching for Breton’s Ghost*, in which she dedicated an entire chapter on Nicanor Parra and his influence. The newspaper *El Universal* pointed out that this professor who taught Physics and Mathematics for 51 years won no major awards in his field of speciality, but he won fame for his poetry. The whole South America stirred at his creation and for his dedication to his nation. Chile was not a place to write freely during the regime of Pinochet as persecution from the government was widespread. Anyone who dared to voice opposition, would simply be disappeared. Nicanor Parra did not delve deep into political issues, yet he wrote everything. Here lies his artifact. He never became an ‘outsider’ in Chile. He chose to stay in his native country and to flourish his satirical poetry as well.

It’s true that in Parra’s poems there is a conflict between poetry and lyric. But it does not mean that we have lost Iambic Pentameter; it does not mean his poetry is devoid of rhythm. Parra has his own rhythm, and the name of his rhythm is Latin America. Parra loves football and he knows very well that there is a net, when the football falls there in the net the rhythm of his poetry is created. He believes ‘real seriousness’ rests in ‘the comic’. He cuts out one thing from his poetry- Melancholy. He is the first poet who omitted ‘melancholic joy.’ Austere, discursive, droll, fragmentary and conspicuously lacking in sentiment, Parra’s anti-poems have had a strong and liberating effect on Poetics in Latin America. In his later years, Parra moves to a form of neo-Symbolism reflecting the fragmented state of modern society. Partly in response to the oppressive Pinochet regime, Parra devises a satirical character, the “Christ of Elqui,” in “Sermons and Homilies of the Christ of Elqui” who speaks obliquely but clearly against human rights abuses. His poetry becomes a lighthouse to the young poets:

Write as you will  
In whatever style you like  
Too much blood has run under the bridge  
To go on believing  
That only one road is right.

In poetry everything is permitted.

With only this condition of course,  
You have to improve the blank page. (Parra, 1984)

Not all of Parra's creations are consisted of his constant fight for new creativity. He wrote a book of poems entitled *Cueca larga* which is a type of dance in his native Chile. In this book Parra simply upholds his culture and his upbringing in accordance with rhythm and melody. He came from a family of musicians as both his father and sister Violeta Parra (folk singer) were well-known musicians in Chile. Music was always a part of his creative spirit which caters the hybrid mode of his antipoems. In 2012, Nicanor Parra was bestowed with the Cervantes Prize, the Spanish-speaking world's highest literary honour. On this occasion, the Royal Highness of Prince of Austria acclaimed him by saying "Don Quixote de Chile...Nicanor Parra is Cervantes's twin..." Parra has been nominated twice for the Nobel Prize in Literature, but the Swedish Academy failed to award this accomplished poet. And he was included in the glorious list which began with Leo Tolstoy. Nicanor Parra is the poet who ventures to say what everyone is thinking and says what no one else will dare to say. When Chile was jubilant for this centenarian, this Cervantes Prize winner became pensive at the end as Spring becomes at sudden drizzle and said:

Forgive me, reader, good reader  
If I cannot leave you  
With a warm embrace, I leave you  
With a forced and sad smile.  
May be that's all I am  
But listen to my last word:  
I take back everything I've said.  
With the greatest bitterness in the world  
I take back everything I've said. (Parra, 1985)

The term 'Antipoetry' is not Parra's coinage. Miroslav Holub, the European immunologist, had fuelled antipoetry before. Now Nicanor Parra, the physicist, does so. Therefore, we may assume antipoets had a deep connection with science. The concept will forever be etched alongside Parra's name in whatever circle of the literary pantheon he comes to occupy. The colloquial language, emotively



incongruous with the subject matter, is the basic component of the structure of antipoetry. The ironic effect of prosaic language emphasizes the disparities between the tone of the work and its intentions; thereby highlights the tensions between connotative and denotative statements as Parra says:

It isn't easy for me to feel  
sad  
To be honest  
Even skulls make me laugh.  
The poet asleep on the cross  
Greets you with tears of  
blood. (Parra, 1985)

Nicanor Parra critiques not only the political and economic systems of his time but also the elitism entrenched within the literary world, making his work both a socio-political commentary and a poetic revolution. His engagement with themes such as existential disillusionment, economic inequality, and the cyclical nature of poverty underscores the enduring relevance of his antipoetry, which continues to resonate with readers today. Parra's rejection of the traditional poetic canon, in favour of a more accessible, unadorned, and ironic mode of expression, creates a space for poetry to be a vehicle for social critique and a voice for the marginalized. By blending the grotesque with the mundane, the tragic with the comic, Parra forces the reader to confront the absurdities and contradictions of the world in a way that is both unsettling and profound.

As the progenitor of 'antipoetry,' Parra's influence extends far beyond his native Chile, leaving a lasting mark on Latin American literature and modern poetics. His works, while often dismissed by critics for their irreverence, have reshaped our understanding of what poetry can achieve — reminding us that art is not merely an aesthetic pursuit, but a powerful tool for social critique and political engagement. Ultimately, Parra's 'antipoetry' offers a poignant reflection on the complexities of modern existence, urging readers to confront the tensions between ideology and reality, beauty and despair, power and powerlessness. His innovative approach to poetry, characterized by its iconoclasm and its focus on the lived experiences of ordinary people, positions him as one of the most influential poets of the 20th century. As such, Nicanor Parra's legacy is not only that of a literary innovator but also a figure who reshaped the relationship between art, politics, and society in a manner that continues to challenge, provoke, and inspire.

**Works Cited:**

- Grossman, E. (1971). The Technique of Antipoetry. *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, 4(4-5), 72-83.
- Grossman, E. (1975). *The Antipoetry of Nicanor Parra*. New York: New York University Press.
- Melnykovich, G. (1975,). Nicanor Parra: Antipoetry, Retraction and Silence. *Latin American Literary Review*, 3(6), 65.
- Parra, N. (1967). *Poems and Antipoems*. (M. Williams, Trans.) New York City: New Directions.
- Parra, N. (1984). *Sermons and Homilies of the Christ of Elqui*. (S. Reyes, Trans.) Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Parra, N. (1985). Letters from a Poet Who Sleeps in a Chair. In N. Parra, & D. Unger (Ed.), *Antipoems: New and Selected*. New York City: New Directions.
- Parra, N. (2004). *Antipoems: How To Look Better & Feel Great*. (L. Werner, Trans.) New Directions.
- Parra, N. (2004). Nicanor Parra: The Anti-Poet. (D. A. D'Avignon, Editor) University of California Press.
- Parra, N. (2019). Chronos. In N. Parra, *The Leaves of Parra* (A. Reid, Trans.). New York: New York Review Books.
- Parra, N. (2019). Self-Portrait. (C. Cosgrove, Ed.) *Poetry Ireland Review*(18), 124.
- Shelley, P. B. (1820). To a Skylark. In P. B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*,. London: C. and J. Ollier.

G