

The square root of negative one: The influence of imaginary numbers on Nicanor Parra's poem 'El hombre imaginario'

This article presents a new and necessary explication of 'El hombre imaginario', the most well-known poem of Nicanor Parra, by connecting the repetition of the word *imaginario*, which is central to the poem, to the symbol i —the square root of negative one—used to represent imaginary numbers. In this interpretation, the poem integrates a cold, sterile element of mathematics into the artful world of antipoetry so seamlessly that this element has gone unnoticed by critics—until now. In the poem, Parra, who was well acquainted with the symbol i —something that this paper carefully proves—uses the modifiers *imaginario(s)/a(s)* to transpose the meaning of words much in the same way that the symbol i , the imaginary unit, transposes the meaning of numbers. Accordingly, this article attempts to reveal the hidden algebra of the poem, opening an avenue for further interpretation.

Keywords: Nicanor Parra; hombre imaginario; imaginary; imaginary man; imaginary number; antipoetry; poetry; literature

Este artículo presenta una nueva y necesaria explicación de 'El hombre imaginario', el poema más conocido de Nicanor Parra, que relaciona la repetición de la palabra *imaginario*, que es central al poema, con el símbolo i —la raíz cuadrada de menos uno—usada para representar los números imaginarios. Bajo esta interpretación, el poema integra un frío y estéril elemento de las matemáticas al ingenioso mundo de la antipoesía tan sutilmente que—hasta ahora—había pasado inadvertido. Se puede argumentar que Parra estaba familiarizado con el símbolo i , algo que este artículo intenta probar meticulosamente. Parra en este poema, usa palabras transpuestas en significado por los modificadores *imaginario(s)/a(s)* de un modo similar a lo que el símbolo i , la unidad imaginaria, produce sobre los números reales. Como resultado, este artículo busca revelar la secreta álgebra del poema, abriendo un espacio para una ulterior interpretación.

Palabras claves: Nicanor Parra; hombre imaginario; imaginario; número imaginario; antipoesía; poesía; literatura.

Twitter abstract: 'A new exegesis of "El hombre imaginario" by Nicanor Parra disclosing the hidden algebra of the poem: its relation to imaginary numbers.'

The square root of negative one: the influence of imaginary numbers on Nicanor Parra's poem 'El hombre imaginario'.

The story goes like this: in 1978, Nicanor Parra met Ana María Molinare Vergara, half his age, who was married with two children. It was love at first sight, real and passionate. The affair lasted only two months because Molinare was on a spiritual quest and soon left Parra to travel to the US, not returning until eight years later. Upon her return, in a deeply unstable state, Molinare made a brief visit to Parra, who recommended that she read the Tao Te Ching. Parra handed her his copy of the book. She took it but eventually returned it, unhappy and restless. She later committed suicide by throwing herself from the eighth floor of a building. Parra had already published the poem of their love. I can *imagine* that the process of writing the poem implied getting a gun, putting paper on his desk, and considering whether to shoot himself. However, after consulting the Tao Te Ching, I still *imagine*, instead of picking up the gun, he wrote 'El hombre imaginario'.¹ This story potentially explains *why* he wrote the poem. However, it tells us nothing about *how* he did it. Considering the fact that the poem has a distinct structure with the word *imaginario* repeating itself many times, I claim that the inspiration for this formal architecture is the algebra of the so-called imaginary numbers. In the poem, the love with Molinare became an imaginary love. Molinare herself became the imaginary woman, and Parra became the imaginary man. At the end of the poem's fascinating list of *imaginaries*, the pain remains as the only real, not imaginary, feeling. In a lengthy interview with Leonidas Morales Toro, Parra relates this story: Molinare refused to marry Parra, blurting out that it was not because he was old and stupid or maybe communist, but because he was a Chilean National Literature Award Winner, i.e. poor, socially an outcast and, worst of all,

¹ Cf. Nicanor Parra & David Turkeltaub, *Hojas de Parra* Colección Ganymedes de poesía: XI-XII (Santiago de Chile: Ganymedes, 1985), pp. 84-85.

a writer.² Parra frequently added that a competing rival for Molinare's love was Agustín Edwards Eastman, the owner of the Chilean journal of record *El Mercurio*.³

'El hombre imaginario' was first published in the book *Hojas de Parra* edited by David Turkeltaub.⁴ In the main body of the poem, Parra repeats the word *imaginario/a/os/as* 25 times. All the poetic tension in the poem relies on this repetition and is only furthered by the omission of *imaginario* in lines 24 and 26, which gives the finishing touch: a final, magical, and polysemous echo of the dichotomy between 'real' and 'imaginary'.

In an article on the poem, Mario Rodríguez explains that '[t]his beautiful poem is built on the morphological level by the noun "corazón" and the verb "brindar". Both lexemes are the only ones in the text that are not determined by the adjective "imaginario"'.^{5 6} Rodríguez's article almost exhausts the interpretation of the poem. He discusses the formal perfection of the poem, including its key repetition of the adjective *imaginario* extensively. He addresses the

² Leonidas Morales Toro, *Conversaciones con Nicanor Parra*, ed. N. Parra (Providencia, Santiago de Chile: Tajamar Editores, 2006), pp. 143-145.

³ Rafael Gumucio, *Nicanor Parra, rey y mendigo*, ed. L. Guerriero (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, 2018), p. 380.

⁴ Nicanor Parra & David Turkeltaub, *Hojas de Parra* Colección Ganymedes de poesía: XI-XII (Santiago de Chile: Ganymedes, 1985), pp. 102-103. In an introductory note for the volume, Turkeltaub reveals that one of the candidate titles was, among others, 'El hombre imaginario y otros poemas' ('The imaginary man and other poems').

⁵ As a matter of fact, those are not the only ones: 'orilla' (line 4), 'sol' (line 20), 'noches' (line 21), and some verbs such as 'sentir' (line 24) and 'palpitar' (line 26) are other lexemes not determined by *imaginario*.

⁶ Mario Rodríguez Fernández, 'Nicanor Parra: La Cueca Sola de 'El hombre imaginario'', *Revista Chilena de Literatura*, 91 (2015), pp. 25-34.

poem's nature as a 'mirador' (a viewpoint or overlook from which the narrator observes the events), and he delves into the poem's only past tense line 'brindó su amor', suggesting a connection between the offering of love and the making of a toast. He notes key anti-oedipal and psychoanalytical annotations as well, comparing the poem with the seminal text from Deleuze and Guattari.⁷ Rodríguez even suggests the poem's encrypted meaning as a 'Cueca Sola' – the Cueca Sola is a dance that originated as a heartrending form of protest in Chile, when women whose loved ones were among the dead or missing under Pinochet's regime danced alone, without a partner, to express their grief and loneliness. His article, in addition to possessing an enchanting voice, is founded on sound logic and strong argumentation. Thus, the present paper does not attempt to disprove any of Rodríguez's conclusions. Rather, it relies heavily on Rodríguez's article, recognising, in particular, the validity of Rodríguez's argument that the 'seguidilla' can be found in the second stanza of the poem; namely, the second stanza demonstrates 'la forma básica de la cueca, es decir, heptasílabo + pentasílabo', with the pentasyllabic being the word *imaginario*.⁸ The original author of this suggestion is the poet Leonardo Sanhueza, whom I happen to know; indeed, he divulged to me many years ago that he had been Nicanor Parra's Teaching Assistant, more or less, at the Department of Humanistic Studies of the University of Chile, a role which had included the great honour of carrying Parra's bag. Thus, Rodríguez's (and Sanhueza's) analysis almost exhausts the poem. Hence, by offering a novel explanation on what could have inspired Parra to use the repetition of the word

⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *L'Anti-Œdipe: Capitalisme and schizophrénie* (Nouv. éd. augm. ed., Collection "Critique"). (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1995).

⁸ Leonardo Sanhueza's letter in a Note in Nicanor Parra, Ignacio Echevarría & Niall Binns. *Obras completas & algo †*, Vol II, *De 'News from Nowhere' a 'Discursos de sobremesa' (1975-2006)*, Edición establecida y anotada por N. Binns e I. Echevarría, con la colaboración de Adán Méndez (Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores/Galaxia Gutenberg, 2011), p. 1055.

imaginario as a central strategy in the poem, the present article proposes only a note to Rodríguez's article. However, it is important at this point to raise the warning that there are authors who favour the influence of physics in Parra's poetry and other who emphasise against it. This is clearly stated in a review by Chris Perriam in the journal of the Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA), *The Modern Language Review*. Perriam is strikingly right on target, and his claims are reassuring for the main argumentation of this article: "it also implies (taking at face value a remark of Parra's reported at second hand (p. 9)) that Parra's professional physicist was a kind of obstacle to the poetry, perhaps here missing the chance to offer a handhold on the abrupt and slippery surface of those amalgamate high, radical abstraction, intense concentration on and behaviours, and extreme scepticism".⁹ In this article, I argue that there is a vast presence of physics in Parra's literary production. Furthermore, I put forth that the impact of the mathematical notation of imaginary numbers may have been crucial and the hidden key in the process of planning and executing the writing of 'El hombre imaginario'.

Edith Grossman's authoritative translation of the poem in Parra's *Antipoems, New and Selected*¹⁰ relies on a play-by-ear approach to the text reminiscent of jazz improvisation. However, her translation exchanges 'he imagined' for *imaginario*. Though this choice does not make the poem less effective or less dazzling, it does somewhat obscure the poem's underlying mechanism. In a recent article in *The Paris Review*, David Unger confirms that Parra was uneasy about Unger's decision to assign the translation of the poem to Grossman, 'a translator just hitting her stride'; Unger recalls that, '[b]ehind my back, Nicanor had sent this same poem to at least four other translators. I asked him why he had done that. He said translation should be

⁹ Chris Perriam, 'Poesía y Antipoesía by Nicanor Parra, Hugo Montes', *The Modern Language Review*, 91.3 (1996), pp. 771–72.

¹⁰ Nicanor Parra, *Antipoems, New and Selected*, ed. D. Unger, with an introduction by F. MacShane, trans. L. Ferlinghetti et al. (New York, N.Y: New Directions, 1985), pp. 198-201.

a horse race and he should be able to pick the winner.’¹¹ It is indisputable that Parra was dissatisfied with Grossman’s translation. And perhaps not just with Grossman’s translation, but with any (possible) one. Parra was not merely showing ‘his disappointment that [Grossman] was not Allen Ginsberg.’ I hope the present article will clarify why he was judgemental about any (possible) translation of this poem. In Grossman’s defence, her translation of ‘El hombre imaginario’ was done before this poem was actually published in *Hojas de Parra*, Grossman’s translation indeed serves as the closing work of the volume edited by Unger just before Parra’s poem was published in 1985. Thus, at the time of her translation, neither the relevance of the poem in Parra’s overall corpus nor the central place of the poem in Parra’s readings had been established yet. To translate an unpublished poem in the first place is risky, a blind and perilous effort. Moreover, Parra’s own strategy as a translator, at least two decades after, is fascinatingly described in a remembrance article by Alejandro Zambra published in the *New Yorker*. Zambra recalls as follows:

He wanted his translation of “King Lear” to be a transcription, in the musical sense of the term: the work had been written for one instrument, the English language, and it had to be transcribed for another one, the Spanish language—Chilean Spanish. [...] Elizabethan blank verse had to come together with the metric of his own poetry; they had to make each other more powerful. Shakespeare had to sound like Shakespeare but also like Parra; Parra had to sound like Shakespeare but also—above all—like Parra.¹²

¹¹ David Unger, ‘Nicanor Parra, the Alpha-Male Poet’, *The Paris Review*. 29 Jan. 2018; available at www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/01/29/nicanor-parra-alpha-male-poet/, (accessed 10 January 2020).

¹² Alejandro Zambra, ‘Remembering Nicanor Parra, the almost immortal Chilean Poet’, trans. by Megan McDowell, *The New Yorker* (on-line version), 2 February 2018.

Thus, for Parra, translating was an activity far from simple and subject to innumerable requests and demands.

In a book published in 2004 by the same New Directions Publisher, the effort of translating Parra's poems continues, but in this case with only one *antitranslator*: Liz Werner. In the introduction of the book, Werner states 'Parra, as a physicist and mathematician, frequently brings science and math – environmentalism, relativity, the "x" from algebra, among other things – into his literary word'. However, despite including twenty-three poems from *Hojas de Parra* as the starting point of this new volume of translations, Werner, unfortunately, does not offer her own translation of 'El hombre imaginario'.¹³

Leonidas Morales Toro himself, in a provocative essay, identifies 'El hombre imaginario' as the last great poem of Parra. Morales Toro situates the poem at a turning point for Parra between what Morales Toro calls an antimodernist or subversive phase and a postmodernist or spectacle phase. The antimodernist phase, Morales Toro states, spans from the first publication of *Poemas y antipoemas* in 1954 to *Sermones y prédicas del Cristo de Elqui* and *Nuevos sermones y prédicas del Cristo de Elqui* in 1977 and 1979 after which the postmodernist phase begins. Morales Toro argues that although the poem was published in 1985, a year well within the postmodernist phase, the poem 'El hombre imaginario' was written in Conchalí in 1979, as Turkeltaub reveals in the Editor's Note of *Hojas de Parra*.¹⁴, adjacent to

¹³ Nicanor Parra, *Antipoems: How to look better & feel great*, trans. by Liz Werner / Bilingual Edition (New York, NY: New Directions, 2004) pp. x, xiv.

¹⁴ Nicanor Parra & David Turkeltaub, *Hojas de Parra* Colección Ganymedes de poesía; XI-XII. (Santiago de Chile: Ganymedes, 1985), p. 8.

the antimodernist phase, and hence the poem shares the antimodernist phase's intensity.¹⁵ This essay appears in a special edition of the *Revista Chilena de Literatura*, Volume 91, composed in celebration of Parra's one-hundredth birthday the year before, alongside other contributions from renowned Parra experts such as Niall Binns, Federico Schopf, and Mario Rodríguez Fernández.¹⁶ In this edition, Pilar García notes Grossman's odd decision to translate 'El hombre imaginario' as 'The Man He Imagined', i.e. 'El hombre imaginado', 'imaginado por él' ('The imagined man', 'imagined by him'). García adds that, ironically, Grossman's intricate translation seems to echo the work of Enrique Lihn.¹⁷ In addition to writing about and commenting on Parra, Lihn was Parra's co-author, along with Alejandro Jodorowsky and others, on *Quebrantahuesos*,¹⁸ and he was Parra's colleague at the Centre of Humanist Studies in the Faculty of Physical Sciences and Mathematics, University of Chile; Lihn, however, never did translate any of Parra's poems himself.¹⁹

¹⁵ Leonidas Morales Toro, 'Subversión y espectáculo: la antipoesía de Nicanor Parra', *Revista Chilena de Literatura*, 91 (2015), pp. 33-50.

¹⁶ This edition was reviewed by Ceri Byrne in her 'Review of Miscellanies', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 94:7 (2017), pp. 1261-1268 (p. 1266).

¹⁷ Pilar García, 'Escenas de Lenguaje en la Obra de Nicanor Parra', *Revista Chilena de Literatura* 91, (2015), pp. 71-90.

¹⁸ In an interview with Pedro Lastra, Lihn explains that the suggestive word 'Quebrantahuesos' has three dictionary definitions: a bearded-vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*), a children's game, and a bore. Parra, Lihn suggests, probably lifted the term from an adventure book, 'possibly by Pierre Mac Orlan' (pp. 22-24).

¹⁹ Pedro Lastra, *Conversaciones con Enrique Lihn* (Santiago de Chile: Atelier Ediciones, 2nd ed., 1990 [1st ed. México: Universidad Veracruzana, Instituto de Investigaciones Humanísticas, Centro de Investigaciones Lingüístico-Literarias, 1980]).

Since the poem's publication, critics have generated an immense body of academic work to explain it. However, the imaginary symbol as the potential inspiration behind the poem has remained an elusive element in the poem's exegesis. Moreover, further clarification of the function of the repetition of the term *imaginario* and its variants is still needed. In his earlier poem 'Se me pegó la lengua al paladar' (Versos de salón, 1962), Parra also repeats the word *imaginario*. At the end of the ninth stanza, Parra writes: 'Puedo tocar un pito imaginario / Puedo bailar un vals imaginario / Puedo tomarme un trago imaginario / Puedo pegarme un tiro imaginario' ('I can play an imaginary whistle / I can dance an imaginary waltz / I can have an imaginary drink / I can shoot myself with an imaginary bullet.'). The repetition, in this case, lacks feminine and plural forms and is, in its incipient form, mainly a satire of a rhyme. The blatant repetition evokes the physical impairment described in the title of this poem ('I glued my tongue to the roof of my mouth') – in other words, the poem is a tongue-twister. But the repetition also nonetheless demonstrates a primitive operation of the mechanism that is the subject of the present article. 'El hombre imaginario' thus represents Parra's second, and much more elaborate, use of the modifier *imaginario* to transpose the meaning of words much in the sense that the symbol *i*, the imaginary unit, transposes the meaning of numbers. The progression of this mechanism in Parra's work and the lack of attention from critics to either of its manifestations justify intellectual curiosity and this article's exploration.

In addition to the work of Rodríguez and Morales Toro cited above, the present article builds on several other excellent previous contributions as Federico Schopf life-long literary criticism on Parra. In fact, in footnote 27 of his prologue to Parra's Complete Works (Completas I, cxviii),²⁰ relates 'El hombre imaginario' to poem XI of *Solitude* (1899–1907) by Antonio

²⁰ Nicanor Parra, Ignacio Echevarría & Niall Binns, *Obras completas & algo †*, Vol I, *De Gato en el camino a Artefactos (1935-1972)* ed. N. Parra; Edición supervisada por el autor; asesorada

Machado – ‘Yo voy soñando caminos’ (‘I go dreaming down roads’)²¹ – and to ‘Égloga del camino’ in *Misal (sic) de primavera* (1912 (sic)) (‘Road Eclogue’ in *Spring missal*, no English translation) by Jorge González Bastías (1879–1950),^{22 23} an almost unknown Chilean poet. I also found especially illuminating another text by Mario Rodríguez under the name ‘Relato de la búsqueda de un sentido imaginario: crítica situada y antropofagia imaginaria’ (‘Story of the search for an imaginary sense: situated critique and imaginary anthropophagy’).²⁴ This text presents what amounts, in essence, to the prose version of ‘El hombre imaginario’. Rodríguez provides a sensitive masterclass presenting a possible Latinoamerican literary criticism. He starts with a concept introduced by Enrique Linh, namely ‘la crítica situada’, or the situated/scene critique, by a corrosive ‘antropofagia mestiza’ (mixed-race anthropophagy) ‘que masque y se coma todos los manjares [...] para construir a partir de su deglución un acercamiento tan sincrético como lo es el corpus literario al que se enfrenta y al que pertenece.’ (‘that savours and devours every delicacy [...] in order to construct through ingestion an approach every bit as syncretic as the literary corpus that it confronts and to which it

y establecida por N. Binns; al cuidado de I. Echevarría; Prefacio de H. Bloom; Prólogo de F. Schopf (Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores/Galaxia Gutenberg, 2006), p. cxviii.

²¹ Antonio Machado. *Border of a Dream: Selected Poems*, Trans. Willis Barnstone. (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2004), pp. 24-25.

²² Note the typos in the reference: The book was published in 1911, not in 1912, and its title is *Spring masses* – in Spanish, *Misas de primavera* – not *Spring missal*.

²³ Jorge González Bastías. *Misas de Primavera*. (Santiago de Chile: Imprenta Bellavista, 1911), pp. 10-13.

²⁴ Mario Rodríguez, ‘Relato de la búsqueda de un sentido imaginario: crítica situada y antropofagia imaginaria’, in María Nieves Alonso, Mario Rodríguez, and Gilberto Triviño (Eds.), *La crítica literaria chilena* (Concepción, Chile: Editora Aníbal Pinto, 1995).

belongs'.) The beauty of the tentativeness is that it is itself the critique the author is proposing. The critique is an attempt to cannibalise Parra's work, to consume Parra by replicating in prose his foremost poem.

Another layer for the hypothesis enclosed in the present article is the argument of Eduardo Milán,²⁵ who adds that one of the main characteristics of *antipoetry* is the dimension of extrapoetic truthfulness. Milán argues that while the poem is a closed box that keeps its internal mechanisms concealed, the antipoem is open, disclosing its intimate content via the *truthfulness of elaboration*. This assertion gives hope that trying to understand and verify the methods used by Parra to write 'El hombre imaginario' is not a futile endeavour.

'El hombre imaginario' is incontestably the most-read poem of Nicanor Parra and, to many, his best. Though it has been very well received, and many valuable critical interpretations of the poem have been published, I argue that another one is needed. The additional interpretation in the present article is necessary to complete the understanding of why so many people are drawn to this poem. It is also key in understanding why the poem became Parra's preferred text for poetry readings after its first public reading in the Philharmonic Saloon of Santiago in 1980 (Completas II, xix).²⁶ Indeed, he selected the poem for the recital from one of the balconies of La Moneda presidential palace during the first international gathering of poets for Chile Poesía in 2001. As Niall Binns states, 'que se ha convertido en el texto más conocido de Parra y suele ser solicitado a gritos para un "bis" en los multitudinarios recitales del poeta' ('[the poem] has become Parra's best-known text and often elicits shouts for an "encore" in the poet's crowded recitals').²⁷ The poem was chosen to be read to the former Prince and

²⁵ Eduardo Milán, Nicanor Parra: El riesgo de antescribir in "100 años de Nicanor Parra", Estudios Públicos (Centro de Estudios Públicos) Nº 136, (2014), Primavera, pp. 195-211.

²⁶ *Obras completas & algo †*, Vol II, p. xix.

²⁷ Niall Binns in Introduction to *Obras completas & algo †*, Vol I, lxxii.

Princess of Asturias to celebrate the award of the Cervantes Prize. And in 2014, to celebrate Parra's centenary, the poem was recited throughout Chile: students attending Chilean schools recited the poem in unison on Parra's date of birth, and the president at the time, President Michelle Bachelet, brought the poem once again to La Moneda, reciting it at the Montt Varas Saloon.²⁸ Hence, I contend that 'El hombre imaginario' integrates a cold, sterile element of mathematics into the artful world of antipoetry so seamlessly that critics have so far failed to notice it.

Parra was a full-time poet, but he also had a career as a man of the physical sciences and mathematics. He studied physics at Brown University and cosmology at Oxford. As Rafael Gumucio states in his vivid recollections of those years of scholarship, it was Parra himself who asked the Chilean President Pedro Aguirre Cerda to send him abroad. Gumucio records the following reply that Parra gave to Manuel Jofré:

Fui a Brown University a estudiar mecánica, la escuela de Brown se llamaba Advanced Mechanics. Mecánica Superior. Ahí estuve dos años y pesqué alguna que otra cosa, porque la formación de la época en Chile, de los físicos teóricos, era prácticamente nula, de manera que lo que yo hice en esos años fue mucho, porque llegué allá como un analfabeto total, y logré un master. (I went to Brown University to study mechanics, Brown's school was called Advanced Mechanics. Superior Mechanics. There I was for two years and I grasped this and that, because the formation of the time in Chile, of

²⁸ See Rafael Gumucio, *Nicanor Parra, rey y mendigo*, ed. by L. Guerriero (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, 2018), p. 448.

theoretical physicists, was practically nil, so what I did in those years was a lot, because I arrived there as a total illiterate, and I earned a master.)²⁹

In 1948, Parra went to Oxford to study cosmology thanks to a scholarship from the British Council. He did not finish his degree, but he returned to Chile with a greater prize: antipoetry. When Parra arrived at Oxford, World War II had technically ended. But at that time in Oxford, butter was still rationed and replaced by margarine, and meat was rationed and replaced by potatoes and cabbage. Gumucio cites Edward Arthur Milne, Parra's Professor:

Él no es un estudiante serio de matemáticas. Ha estado asistiendo a mis clases y seminarios, pero pareciera no tomar notas. A mediados del semestre me dijo que estaba usando el tiempo para escribir poesía porque Oxford lo inspira [...], él no está tomando parte en las discusiones de mis seminarios y no creo que pretenda terminar la tesis [...] Sugiero que él haga lo pertinente para aprovechar las oportunidades de Oxford, y que no sea presionado para seguir los cursos. (He is not a serious student about mathematics. He has been attending my classes and seminars but seems not to take notes. In the middle of the semester he told me that he was using the time to write poetry because Oxford inspires him [...], he is not taking part in the discussions of my seminars and I don't think he intends to finish his thesis [...] I suggest that he do what is pertinent to take advantage of the opportunities of Oxford, and not be pressured to follow the courses.)³⁰

²⁹ Rafael Gumucio, *Nicanor Parra, rey y mendigo*, ed. L. Guerriero (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, 2018), pp. 133-137.

³⁰ Rafael Gumucio, *Nicanor Parra, rey y mendigo*, ed. L. Guerriero (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, 2018), pp. 156-162.

José Donoso describes Parra explaining how, after discarding law (because of a sordid and packed inaugural lesson), engineering (because of the *camotes* that tease the freshers with unsolvable problems to be solved in forty minutes), and English (because he *ceceaba* – he lisped – which caused his classmates to laugh at him), Parra chose to be a mathematical teacher because he was sufficiently arrogant to believe that no cultural discipline should be forbidden to him.³¹

Niall Binns, in a delicious opuscle and exquisite *semblanza*,³² adds that Parra was, according to Harold Bloom's terminology, 'a strong poet' perhaps in part because of his career in physics and mathematics. As Binns notes, 'Al fin y al cabo, las artes y las ciencias no son tan lejanas como a veces se supone' ('After all, the arts and sciences are not as far apart as sometimes supposed'). Binns also points out that Parra shared with Juan Andrés Piña his thoughts on the importance of the Relativity Principle and the Uncertainty or Indeterminacy Principle:

La Física nos enseña que es muy difícil hacer aseveraciones tajantes, que el terreno que pisamos es muy débil. Yo, entonces, he pensado que esos principios de relatividad e indeterminación hay que llevarlos al campo de la política, de la cultura, de la literatura, de la sociología. (Physics teaches us that it is very difficult to draw categorical conclusions, that the ground we tread is very slippery. I, then, have thought that these principles of relativity and indeterminacy must be integrated into the fields of politics, culture, literature, sociology.)

³¹ José Donoso, *José Donoso. El escritor intruso*, Cecilia García Huidobro (ed.) y Carlos Fuentes (prologue). (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, 2004).

³² Binns Niall, *Nicanor Parra*, Colección Semblanzas (Madrid: Ediciones Eneida, 2000), p. 22.

In the same interview with Piña, Parra then even commented on the use of what was considered non-poetic language to amplify the limits of antipoetry:

Los métodos de trabajo de los modernistas son newtonianos, y hay que ponerlos en tela de juicio a través de una actitud relativista. Por ejemplo, el caso del lenguaje; el vocabulario tradicional era muy limitado; se hablaba en un lenguaje “poético”, no tan sólo como vocabulario, sino como sintaxis, como semántica. (The working methods of the modernists are Newtonian, and they must be questioned through a relativistic attitude. For example, the case of language; traditional vocabulary [of the modernists] was very limited; what they took as a “poetic” language, not only as vocabulary, included also syntax and semantics.)

Parra concludes by saying ‘Entonces, en la antipoesía se renuncia a esta formulación y aparentemente todas las palabras tienen derecho a entrar en el discurso’ (‘Then, in antipoetry, one renounces this formulation and as such all words have the right to enter into the discourse’).³³ Moreover, in the *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, Jason Wilson reminds us – citing a work of Iván Carrasco – of the importance not to ‘waste [...] the chance to relate the poet Parra to the physicist’;³⁴ that is exactly what the present article does. Against this background, I hypothesise that Parra adopts the symbol of the imaginary number in the formal conceptualisation of the poem.

³³ In Juan Andrés Piña, “La antipoesía no es un juego de salón” in *Conversaciones con la poesía chilena*, (Santiago de Chile: Pehuén, 1990), pp. 32-33.

³⁴ Jason Wilson, ‘Reviews of Books: Para leer a Nicanor Parra (Iván Carrasco)’ *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 78:4 (2001), pp. 568-569.

i , or the square root of negative one, is a value created by man that cannot be found in nature and is therefore *imaginario*. Bombelli popularised imaginary numbers in the mid-16th century. Noteworthy are his rules of plus and minus, which constitute a proto algebra of imaginary numbers:

Più uia più di meno, fà più di meno. / Plus times plus of minus, makes plus of minus. (line 1)

Meno uia più di meno, fà meno di meno. / Minus times plus of minus, makes minus of minus. (line 2)

Più uia meno di meno, fà meno di meno. / Plus times minus of minus, makes minus of minus. (line 3)

Meno uia meno di meno, fà più di meno. / Minus times minus of minus, makes plus of minus. (line 4)

Più di meno uia più di meno, fà meno. / Plus of minus times plus of minus, makes minus. (line 5)

Più di meno uia men di meno, fà più. / Plus of minus times minus of minus, makes plus. (line 6)

Meno di meno uia più di meno, fà più. / Minus of minus times plus of minus, makes plus. (line 7)

Meno di meno uia men di meno fà meno. / Minus of minus times minus of minus makes minus.³⁵ (line 8)

In this set of rules, *più di meno/plus of minus* is i , and *meno di meno/minus of minus* is its negative, $-i$. The major argument of this paper is that Parra used his familiarity with the algebra of imaginary numbers to plan a template of the poem in which the main words were modified by i . Hence, I suggest Parra probably noticed that modifying numbers or words by

³⁵ Rafael Bombelli, *L'algebra: Opera di Rafael Bombelli da Bologna, Diuisa in tre Libri; Con la quale ciascuno da se potrà venire in perfetta cognitione della teorica dell' Aritmetica, Con vna Tauola copiosa delle materie, che in essa si contengono, Posta hora in luce à beneficio delli studiosi di detta professione* (Bologna: Per Giouanni Rossi, 1579), p. 169.

applying the symbol **i** was a poetical weapon, one amplified in Spanish due to the language's greater variation in gender and number and amplified in general due to the ambiguity of the (metaphorical) meaning of the word *imaginary*. As José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois, one of Parra's most reputed critics, poses:

Las cinco estrofas, de variable extensión, están compuestas por versos endecasílabos, con la excepción de tres heptasílabos. Y con la excepción de dos versos, todos los demás concluyen con el adjetivo *imaginario/a/os/as*. Raro adjetivo, pues la poesía, en cuanto imaginaria, apunta de tal modo a lo real (¡como ésta!) que más bien evita poner de manifiesto aquel atributo de la ficción fantástica. Por ahora no sabemos qué sentido final tiene ese adjetivo que se mueve entre el hermoso planteamiento de un mundo (hombre y mundo) imaginario, y un mero juego de palabras. (The five stanzas, of varying length, are composed of hendecasyllabic verses, with the exception of three heptasyllables. And except for two verses, all the rest conclude with the adjective *imaginario/a/os/as*. A strange adjective, since poetry, as imaginary, points in much the same way to what is real (like this!) to all the better avoid calling attention to that attribute of fantastical fiction. For now, we do not know the final meaning of this adjective that shifts between the beautiful concept of an imaginary world (man and world), and a mere play on words).

Within the above quotation from Ibáñez Langlois, I want to underline 'raro adjetivo', 'no sabemos qué sentido final tiene ese adjetivo', and 'un mero juego de palabras'. I would dare to venture that the initial oddity on which Ibáñez Langlois focuses, namely the 'raro adjetivo', attracts his attention precisely due to Parra's appropriation of the **i** symbol. Indeed, Ibáñez Langlois adds:

En cualquier caso, nos preguntamos cómo se las arreglará el poeta para repetir en cada verso el mismo adjetivo sin llegar al tedio o a la insignificancia. Así se las arregla: empujando al poema—a la manera de un verdadero torrente, y como por necesidad interna—a acumular una sucesiva y creciente carga de realidad a medida que repite el adjetivo *imaginario*, y esto a fuerza de no conservarle jamás el mismo sentido, sino de variarlo con golpes caleidoscópicos. (In any case, we wonder how the poet will manage to repeat in each verse the same adjective without coming to tedium or insignificance. This is how he manages: pushing the poem—in the manner of a true torrent, and as if by internal necessity—to accumulate a successive and growing burden of reality as he repeats the adjective *imaginario*, and in turn the power of never retaining the same meaning, but varying it with kaleidoscopic strokes.)³⁶

Finally, *still, presumably*, Parra further executes the relatively easy masterstroke of rhetorically leaving some words unmodified by *i*, thereby granting eloquence to and reverberating the semantical echoes of the symbol/word *imaginario*. In other words, Parra takes the relatively simple action of omitting one *i* symbol in verse, an action much simpler, at least than omitting the full word *imaginario*. Parra, in short, may have taken inspiration from the algebra of imaginary numbers in the writing of ‘El hombre imaginario’.

Parra was likely familiar with the concept of imaginary numbers through his career as a theoretical physics professor. There is a unique source that confirms this supposition: Parra’s translation of Lindsay and Margenau’s *Foundation of Physics*, a primary source document demonstrating that Parra was well acquainted with imaginary numbers. In *Obras completas & algo \ddagger* , Vol. I, the editors note ‘una faceta fundamental de Parra: la de su labor como físico y

³⁶ José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois, *Dos poemas de antología* in “Para leer a Parra” (Santiago de Chile: El Mercurio Aguilar, 2003), p. 94.

docente' ('a fundamental facet of Parra: that of his work as a physicist and teacher'). In the same volume in 'Notes on "Fundamentos de la Física Moderna"', the editors add arguments of real interest for this article. First, they show the profound impact on Parra's work of his professional appointment as a theoretical physicist:

Nunca se insistirá lo bastante de la importancia que, para comprender cabalmente la trayectoria de Nicanor Parra, tiene su dedicación profesional a la física teórica. El propio Parra no ha dejado de subrayar, toda vez que ha tenido ocasión, esta importancia, que sin embargo suele desatenderse, debido en buena medida a la ignorancia que la mayor parte de los estudiosos de la antipoesía – críticos literarios, investigadores y profesores de formación esencialmente humanística – tienen de materias con las que Parra – que ya a comienzo de los años treinta emprendió sus estudios de física y de matemáticas, y que en 1937 empezó a impartir clases sobre estas materias – se haya profundamente familiarizado. ('One could never overestimate, in striving to fully understand Nicanor Parra's trajectory, the importance of his professional dedication to theoretical physics. Parra himself has never failed to stress, every time that he has had occasion, this importance, which nonetheless is often neglected, due in large part to the ignorance that most of the thinkers of antipoetry – literary critics, researchers and professors of essentially humanistic training – have of subjects with which Parra – who, at the beginning of the thirties, undertook studies in physics and mathematics, and who in 1937 began teaching classes on these subjects – became deeply familiar.')

Second, the editors observe that despite the strength of the assertion above, the relation under discussion runs even deeper than described: 'la influencia de la física teórica es mayor y más

³⁷ In *Obras completas & algo †*, Vol I, pp. xiv, pp. 1039-1043, (p. 1039).

germinal que lo que sugieren estas palabras' ('the influence of theoretical physics is greater and more germinal than what these words suggest'.)³⁸ And, third and finally, the editors state:

No se trata de profundizar aquí en una cuestión tan ardua como es la de esta relación de la antipoesía con la física teórica [...] vinculación tan medular del escritor con una disciplina a la que ha dedicado buena parte de su vida, y que ha sido para él fuente de reflexión constante e inspiración. (We do not try here to delve into an issue as arduous as that of this relationship between antipoetry and theoretical physics [...] that profoundly intrinsic connection between the writer and a discipline to which he has dedicated a good part of his life, and which has been for him a source of constant reflection and inspiration'.)³⁹

This article attempts to dig deeper into this arduous relationship, as Parra's connection with this discipline represents potential evidence of not only his awareness of imaginary numbers but also his use of that concept in his most important poem. 'El hombre imaginario'. Parra translates Lindsay and Margenau's book like a *connoisseur*, like an expert in advanced, high-concept physics. Moreover, based on an analysis of the translation, one can infer the overall context of Parra's knowledge of and acquaintance with imaginary numbers.

Of immense interest for the argument in this article is 'Los Profesores' ('The Teachers'), a plaquette first published in New York by *Antiediciones Villa Miseria* in 1971 and then included in the same book as 'El hombre imaginario'. It reads 'Los profesores nos volvieron locos / a preguntas que no venían al caso / cómo se suman números complejos / hay o no hay arañas en la luna', translated by William Jay Smith as 'Our teachers drove us nuts / with

³⁸ *Obras completas & algo más*, Vol I. pp. 1039-1040.

³⁹ *Obras completas & algo más*, Vol I, p. 1042.

their irrelevant questions: / how do you add compound numbers / are there or are there not spiders on the moon'. Of course, the translation fails where it suggests 'compound numbers' (números compuestos) instead of 'complex numbers', which is the correct translation for 'números complejos'. A complex number is a number that can be expressed in the form $a + bi$, where a and b are real numbers, and i is the imaginary unit, i.e. the solution of the equation $x^2 = -1$. Thus, we have Parra mentioning 'addition of complex numbers' in the same book in which 'El hombre imaginario' was published. Of course, this mention is not proof of anything. It is hardly *probatio probatissima*. And this observation is not to imply 'a confesión de partes, relevo de pruebas' ('when there's a confession, you need no proof'). But it at least counts as some evidence of the use of complex, that is, (real and) imaginary numbers in the very book that holds 'El hombre imaginario'.

Patricio Fernández wrote a lucid editorial in the special issue of *The Clinic* dedicated to the 90th birthday of Sir Nica, his nickname for Parra.⁴⁰ In this editorial, Fernández says that Parra's philosophical method and practice is such a sceptical and nonconformist one that immediately after he convinces you of something, your task becomes to convince him of that very thing, because at that point Parra has likely already turned his scepticism towards what he convinced you of in the first place. This is indeed a classical description of methodic Cartesian doubt and sheds some light into the deep waters of Parra's creative method, which relies strongly upon this systematic doubt.

Federico Schopf's classic exegesis of 'Hay un día feliz' of *Poemas y Antipoemas*⁴¹ establishes the following relation: 'Hablante \subset Lector \subset Mundo no narrativo \subset Mundo' ('Speaker \subset Reader \subset Non-narrative world \subset World') An analogous relation could be

⁴⁰ Patricio Fernández, *Retrato* in "Especial Parra", *The Clinic*, 21 octubre 2004, pp. 8-9

⁴¹ Federico Schopf, 'La escritura de la semejanza en Nicanor Parra', *Revista Chilena de Literatura* 2-3 (1970), Primavera, pp. 43-132.

proposed for 'El hombre imaginario' by just changing *no narrativo* for *imaginario*: 'Hablante \subset Lector \subset Mundo *imaginario* \subset Mundo' ('Speaker \subset Reader \subset *Imaginary world* \subset World'). Citing Federico Schopf, the relation reflects 'el proceso de constitución, a partir del texto, de los diversos estratos' ('the process of building, starting from the text, various layers') and how 'se superpone la posibilidad de modificación de un momento de la cadena verbal (y correlativamente de lo expuesto al través de ella) por otro momento posterior' ('one can superimpose the possibility of modification of a moment in the verbal chain (and correlatively of what is exposed through it) over another later moment.') Again, in 'El hombre imaginario', we find a series of connections similar to the relationship stated above, but instead of a modification in the verbal chain, it is the modification of an adjective (by way of its disappearance in verse 24) which is the crux of the poem. This mechanism is similar to that in verse 69 of 'Hay un día feliz', as noted in Schopf's seminal analysis. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the rural world and the external world that pervades Schopf's analytical description can be extended, with the imaginary world as the rural world juxtaposed with the brutal external world as the urban and non-imaginary one. 'Hay un día feliz' thereby foreshadows and parallels 'El hombre imaginario'. Finally, Schopf's analysis also presages the poem:

El modo de ser de las imágenes propuestas por el texto poético, está *suspendido*: ellas son "puestas" sin afirmar su realidad, irrealidad, imaginareidad, etc. [...] Pero esta operación "estética" – a la que es preferible denominar tal vez imaginal – acontece como un momento de la existencia de los lectores reales. (The nature of the images proposed by the poetic text, it is *suspended*: they are "presented" without affirming their reality, unreality, *imaginarity*, etc. [...]) But this "aesthetic" operation – which is perhaps better termed *imaginous* – comes about with the arrival of real readers.)

Certainly, ‘El hombre imaginario’ is a love poem, or perhaps more accurately, a love ‘antipoem’. But Parra, whose love-lives were vertiginous, did not write or speak about love very often. His avoidance was caused most likely by the prickly, thorny nature of the subject and the fact that antipoetry was always in the antipodes of perfumed, lovey-dovey, and sticky-sweet romanticism. One exception is Parra’s acute replies to Antonio Skármeta in ‘El Show de los Libros’⁴², a TV programme. I transcribe one interaction partially here:

Antonio Skármeta: ¿Se puede insistir en el amor?

Nicanor Parra: Amor, amor, amor. Amor, amor. Pero que no se formen parejas. Estoy intentando reproducir un cierto texto [...] Pero que no se formen parejas. En la pareja hay sólo derrota. Pero aquí estaríamos poniéndonos la camiseta. Yo creo que ése es un problema personal que tiene que ser resuelto por cada uno en la cámara nupcial. No es mucho lo que podemos decir a priori. (*Antonio Skármeta:* Can you insist on love?)

Nicanor Parra: Love, love, love. Love, love. But do not form couples. I am trying to reproduce some text [...] But do not form couples. In the couple, there is only defeat. But here we would be wearing our own colours. I believe that this is a personal problem that has to be resolved on an individual basis in the bridal chamber. There’s not much we can say a priori.’)

Next Skármeta asks about the ravages of love, and Parra replies that he defines himself as a Taoist monk: ‘Yo en ese plano me defino como un monje taoísta. Si la niña está ahí. Bien. Si no está, bien también. Es ése el estado de ánimo correcto según el taoísmo.’ (‘In this regard I

⁴² Antonio Skármeta, ‘El Show de los Libros’, TVN (1994).

define myself as a Taoist monk. If the girl is there. Fine. If she isn't, just as well. This is the right state of being according to Taoism.’) Skármeta then finally asks if Parra’s interpretation of love is simply love based on freedom. Parra’s answer is a hilarious Exocet missile:

Yo no sé si esto será la pareja abierta de que se habló tanto en la década de los ¿sesenta? ¿Cómo se llama el autor de ese texto, Jerarquía de [los] cornudos? [nota: Charles Fourier] ... ¿Quién es ese autor francés del siglo XIX? Lo tengo en la yema de los dedos... Es un escritor para minorías... Según él la única manera de evitar los cuernos, es aceptándolos de antemano. (‘I don't know if this will be the open relationship discussed so much in... the sixties? What is the name of the author of that text, Hiérarchie du cocuage? [note: Charles Fourier] [...] Who is that nineteenth-century French author? It's on the tip of my tongue... It is a writer for the minorities... According to him, the only way to avoid getting cheated on is to accept it beforehand’.)

While love was seldom a conversation topic, maybe because of its honeyed and mellifluous nature, sex was a more pressing issue. In an interview with Mario Benedetti, the following exchange takes place:

Mario Benedetti: Tú mencionaste ciertas confesiones casi pornográficas. A veces en la propia antipoesía rozas esa zona, o por lo menos tratas lo erótico con un sentido muy particular. ¿Ello se integra con alguna especial visión del mundo, de la mujer, o qué?

Nicanor Parra: A mí me parece que el sexo es lo que hace marchar el mundo. (‘*Mario Benedetti:* You mentioned certain almost pornographic confessions. Sometimes in your antipoetry you touch that area, or at least you treat the erotic with a very particular sense. Does this tie into any special vision of the world, of women, or what? *Nicanor Parra:* It seems to me that sex is what makes the world turn.’)

The connection of love and sex is an unfinished business where Parra sometimes struggled. Whether some misogyny existed in Parra's creature, antipoetry, let Parra himself reply:

Alguna vez me han preguntado qué es lo único que queda en pie en esta hecatombe de la antipoesía. Realmente quedan muchas cosas en pie. Por lo menos una muchacha desnuda que se lanza de cabeza a una piscina. Eso queda realmente; eso es algo intocable; es un misterio para mí indescifrable. Lo más que yo puedo hacer es reírme de una muchacha desnuda, pero solamente cuando no hay ninguna posibilidad de tocarla. O sea un poco el cuento del zorro y las uvas. Pero el respeto por las uvas es absoluto. ('Once I was asked what is the only thing left standing after this massacre that is antipoetry. Actually there are many things left standing. At least one naked girl who throws herself headlong into a pool. That really remains; that is something untouchable; it is a mystery that for me is indecipherable. The most I can do is laugh at a naked girl, but only when there is no chance of touching her. In other words, the story of the fox and the grapes. But respect for grapes is absolute.')⁴³

This relation between love and sex and antipoetry is clearly captured in Binns' book under the title *Razones de Orden Sexual*, which I could loosely translate as *Sexual Implications*. Binns argues:

Por lo general, Parra no escribe una poesía de amor, no exalta ni idealiza a la mujer. Su mirada crítica tiende más bien a fijarse en la esterilidad y la sordidez de las relaciones sexuales en una sociedad capitalista terriblemente deshumanizadora. ('In general, Parra

⁴³ Mario Benedetti, 'Nicanor Parra, o el artefacto con laureles' *Revista Marcha*, Montevideo, 17 de octubre de 1969, pp. 13-15.

does not write love poetry, does not exalt or idealise women. His critical gaze tends rather to focus on the sterility and the sordidness of sexual relations in a terribly dehumanising capitalist society.’)⁴⁴

I can’t see a better way to describe Parra’s approximation of ‘love, sex, and poetry’ than to state mechanically and simply that it amounts to ‘antilove, antisex, and antipoetry.’ Parra was one of a kind in these subjects that remain today perilous, anfractuous, and impersonal topics. In contemporary life, the three – love, sex, and poetry – are obliterated by boredom, meaninglessness, and obviousness. So his approximation to them seems, if not fully appropriate, at least correct to deal with the uncertainties of the existence of Parra’s, in a certain sense, entrepreneurial personality.

A straightforward contribution that this article can provide departs from an interpretation of ‘El hombre imaginario’ per Iván Carrasco in his *theory of antipoetry*.⁴⁵ Carrasco defines three stages of an antipoem. The first phase consists of conjunction or apparent homologation of stereotypes, structures, systems, and established rules according to the valid aesthetic rule. The second phase is one of model inversion or ambiguation, in which the poet casts doubt on the validity of those rules. And the final third phase is disjunction or degradation, in which those rules undergo satiric deformation. Interestingly enough, Niall Binns poses the

⁴⁴ Binns Niall, *Nicanor Parra*, Colección Semblanzas (Madrid: Ediciones Eneida, 2000), p. 34.

⁴⁵ Iván Carrasco, *Nicanor Parra: la escritura antipoética* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1990), pp. 68-71. The same text appears again in Iván Carrasco, *Para leer a Nicanor Parra* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Universidad Nacional Andrés Bello, 1999), 131-134.

following question:⁴⁶ ‘Leer “El hombre imaginario”, por ejemplo, de esta manera, tendría poco sentido: ¿cuál es el modelo que distorsiona?’ The present article may provide an answer. Under my interpretation, the first phase of ‘conjunction or apparent homologation’ has been already individualised by Federico Schopf. Namely, Schopf applies the first phase to Machado’s and Bastías’s modernist and mundonovist poems, both of which Schopf mentions in the prologue to the *Obras completas & algo †*, Vol. 1.⁴⁷ Or, if you prefer, this first phase has been individualised simply by what Binns called Parra’s first years’ *popular poetry* of the ‘poets of the clarity’ (‘poetas de la claridad’). Then, the second phase of ‘model inversion or ambiguation’ is achieved through the perturbation introduced by the **i** symbol and the word *imaginario*. In simple words, the popular poem is inverted and subverted by the word *imaginario* – which I suggest comes from the **i** symbol. Finally, the third phase of ‘disjunction or satiric deformation’ is the omission or disappearance of the word *imaginario* in verses 24 and 26 of the poem. In fact, in this case, it is more a third phase of heartrending and piercing deformation than a satiric one mainly because of the overall tone and scope of the poem. Carrasco’s *theory of antipoetry* can thereby be reconciled with ‘El hombre imaginario’ in a way that unifies the exegesis of this summit of Parra’s work.

The use of the symbol **i** should not cause surprise. Federico Schopf, in his classic study of Parra’s antipoetry ‘Del vanguardismo a la antipoesía’,⁴⁸ declares that integrated into the

⁴⁶ Niall Binns, *Nicanor Parra*, Colección Semblanzas (Madrid: Ediciones Eneida, 2000), pp. 49-51.

⁴⁷ Federico Schopf in *Obras completas & algo †*, Vol I, p. cxviii note 27.

⁴⁸ Federico Schopf, *Del Vanguardismo a la Antipoesía* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1986), pp. 134, 135, 141, 278. This text relies also on the seminal Federico Schopf, ‘Estructura del antipoema’ (‘The structure of the antipoem’), *Atenea* 399 (1963), 140-153 as follows: ‘Entre los procedimientos del antipoema, se destacan en particular el símbolo sin correlato conceptual, la sustitución

antipoems are the equations or symbols of scientific parlance (p. 134). Even more, he asserts that the antipoems employ elements of the scientific style of writing (p. 135). Moreover, the antipoems incorporate vocabulary, catchphrases, syntactic schemes, oral fragments, and even other texts into their language employing a montage (p. 141). Antipoems are often comprised of disposed of, second-hand materials or debris of unexpected origins (p. 278). Schopf's assessment of antipoetry remains plausible and within reach of our working hypothesis.

There is special access to the manuscript, its holographic reproduction of 1982 by Gráfica Marginal in Valparaíso, which was signed by Nicanor Parra in Conchalí in November of 1979. This is the first appearance of the poem, and from verses 1 to 17, and again in verses 20, 25, and 27, the word *imaginario* has a special disposition, with the 'i' detached from 'maginary'. This choice is very difficult to evaluate without directly asking Parra. My personal impression – not being a calligraphic expert – is that this characteristic is typical in Parra's handwriting, so the detached 'i' should not necessarily be attributed to the symbol **i** representation. On the contrary, should the hypothesis of this paper be proved false, the fact that Parra's handwriting does so ubiquitously have this detached 'i' peculiarity almost precludes any possibility of Parra not noticing the presence of the imaginary symbol **i** in his handwriting, and thus in the initial handwritten version of 'El hombre imaginario'. So ayes or noes, Parra at the very least was aware that the **i** symbol manifested physically, if not metaphorically, in his writing.

In the poem, 'el hombre imaginario' lives in an imaginary mansion surrounded by imaginary trees near the imaginary river. If the poem is stripped of the imaginaries, it is simply

relevante, la enumeración caótica, la escritura automática y el montaje (collage, ready-made).'
('Among the antipoem procedures, in particular stands out the symbol without conceptual correlation, the relevant substitution, the chaotic enumeration, the automatic writing and the montage (collage, ready-made)') (p. 152).

a man living in a mansion surrounded by trees along the shore of a river. It seems a quiet place, a very still one, and the poem seems an utterly realistic poem. I could almost say, in line with the previous discussion, that such a poem would seem a rural, a modernist, or even a Socialist realism text. Adding the symbol **i** and then the word *imaginario* radically transmutes what one can perceive from the text. In another respect, the use of the word *imaginario* transforms the poem's allegory and creates a sophisticated atmosphere. The poem continues with the walls, the old pictures, the cracks, the facts, the worlds, and the places and times (second stanza, verses 5 'muros', 6 'cuadros', 7 'grietas', 8 'hechos', 9 'mundos', 10 'lugares y tiempos'). Again, the reader learns that all of these elements are imaginary. Hence Parra is exploiting his discovery of the subversive effect of adding the symbol **i** to a plain and dull text maximally. Then, with all the 'tardes tardes' (third stanza, verse 11), the word *evening* is repeated, either as a noun followed by the adjective, or as two nouns with a pause between. And perhaps this echo could also unveil the use of the symbol **i**. As such, it is straightforward that he can duplicate a word which was in the original template. In other words, once text has been converted into a series of mathematical equations, to 'multiply' a word like 'tardes' by itself, as in 'tardes tardes', is a mechanism fully at hand, a mechanism that Parra also probably learnt from Mapudungún (where Mari Mari is equal to 10 x 10 or 100). The poem follows with the stairs, the balcony, the landscape, the valley, the hills (third stanza, verses 12 'escaleras', 13 'balcón', 14 'paisaje', 15 'valle', 16 'cerros'). All imaginary and ungraspable. Then the shadows, the road, the songs, even the sun (fourth stanza, verses 17 'sombras', 18 'camino', 19 'canciones', 20 'sol'), everything imaginary, out of focus, or what I could locate in the *imaginary* plane or along the *imaginary* axis. Furthermore, as the original template becomes even more realistic towards the end, consequently the use of the word *imaginario* departs even more radically from reality. For instance, what could be more unreachable than an imaginary death of the sun (line 20, 'la muerte del sol imaginario')? And then the grand finale, something that could have sounded overly twee and affectedly dainty with the moon, the dream, the love, the pain, the pleasure, the heartbeat, and the heart (fifth stanza, verses 21 'luna', 22 'sueña', 23 'amor', 24 'dolor', 25

‘placer’, 26 ‘palpitar’, 27 ‘corazón’), now has been converted into a masterpiece of reverberations, echoes, and significances by the addition (and surgical omissions) of the *i* symbols expressed as the word *imaginario*.

Many examples can be found wherein Parra uses maths symbols (like the plus ‘+’, minus ‘-’, and multiplication ‘x’ signs) and arithmetic conventions to subvert customary wisdom and plain significance. The following are peculiar examples accompanied by my own translations (note that these examples were written relatively close in time to ‘El hombre imaginario’):

- ‘La ecuación fundamental de la dinámica / no es otra cosa que la ecuación general estática / vista x un observador acelerado’ (‘The fundamental equation of dynamics / is nothing other than the general equation of statics / seen by an accelerated observer’) – a postcard in *Chistes parRa desorientar a la POLICÍA poesía*.⁴⁹
- ‘Acto de fe: $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ (‘Act of faith: $2 + 2 = 4$ ’) and ‘Revolución cultural $99=100$ ’ (‘Cultural Revolution $99=100$ ’)⁵⁰ – another postcard, but this time from *Artefacts*.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Nicanor Parra, *Chistes parRa desorientar a la POLICÍA poesía* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Galería Época, 1983).

⁵⁰ Both artefacts represent a tautology and a contradiction respectively and question religion and politics also respectively. The latter was analysed by Marlene Gottlieb in *Nicanor Parra: Antes y después de Jesucristo (Antología de artículos críticos)* (Princeton: Linden Lane Press, 1993).

⁵¹ Nicanor Parra, *Artefactos* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Nueva Universidad, Vicerrectoría de Comunicaciones de la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 1972).

- ‘Cambio lola de 30 x 2 viejas de 15’ (‘I trade up a lolita of 30 for 2 oldies of 15’) – a postcard in *Chistes parRa desorientar a la POLICÍA poesía*, later republished in the poem ‘Cambios’ (‘Trade-ups’) in *Hojas de Parra* (p. 67).
- A full equation to calculate the weights of Christ (C) and the cross (c):
‘Problem 2 [sic] / Cristo con la † a cuestras / pesa 100 kilos / Cristo pesa 10 kilos + que la † / Cuánto pesan Cristo y la cruz separadamente / $C + c = 100 / C - c = 10 / C = 55 / c = 45$ ’ (‘Problem 2 / Christ with the cross on his back / weighs 100 kilos / Christ weighs 10 kilos more than the cross / How much do Christ and the cross weigh separately / $C + c = 100 / C - c = 10 / C = 55 / c = 45$ ’) – a postcard in *Chistes parRa desorientar a la POLICÍA poesía*.
- A geometric progression added to a short list of three poems that produces what Carrasco refers to as a ‘*project of absolute text*’. The progression includes all the written and to-be-written poems by ‘infinitesimal approximations to the [three] poems learned by heart, to the real value of the absolute text’. In the progression, the ellipsis accounts for the limit operation that creates the geometric progression of infinitesimal calculus, e.g. $10^1 \dots 10^2 \dots 10^3 \dots 10^{n52}$:
‘*próximamente / Yo me sé 10 Poemas de Memoria / en preparación / Yo me sé 100 Poemas de Memoria ...’ (‘*soon / I know 10 poems by heart / in preparation / I know 100 poems by heart ...’). The version given to Carrasco on the night of December 29th 1983 reported here differs from the version published in *Hojas de Parra* two years later because the latter lacks the note, thus lacks the progression.

⁵² Iván Carrasco, *Nicanor Parra: la escritura antipoética* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1990), pp. 145-151.

- ‘Economía Mapuche de Subsistencia: / Hay que cambiarlo todo de $\sqrt{\quad}$ / O nó dicen Uds...’ (‘Mapuche Subsistence Economy: / Everything must be $\sqrt{\quad}$ ly changed / Or not?’, where $\sqrt{\quad}$ ly stands for radically). This use of the square root symbol is perhaps the closest to the use of the square root of negative one symbol, i , but in the reverse direction – while here the sign replaces the word, in ‘El hombre imaginario’, the word replaces the sign and operates the antipoetic tension of the poem. This occurrence of the radical symbol appears in *Aunque no vengo preparrado* (Though I haven’t come prePARRAed, 1997) of the *Discursos de sobremesa* (After-dinner declarations).⁵³
- In ‘El Reloj de Venancio’ (Venance’s sundial), dated in 1971 in the published version, the poet uses a circle typical of sundials. This parallelism and what Parra calls ‘orthogonal projections on the vertical and horizontal diameter of the word GOD’ are mathematically, theoretically, and mentally within the conception of *imaginary* numbers. In fact, the projections of the letter of the word GOD (in Spanish, ‘D-I-O-S’) along the vertical axis are the *imaginary* components of the letters of the word GOD, while the projections in the horizontal axis are the *real* components. This use of the *unit circle* is one of the closest to the mechanism that this paper is trying to disclose. This solar/logic/geometric clock was published in *News from Nowhere*.⁵⁴

⁵³ Nicanor Parra, *Discursos de sobremesa* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, 2006) / After-dinner declarations Dave Oliphant (trans) (Austin, Texas: Host Publications, 2009) Aunque no vengo preParrado (Though I haven’t come preParraed) XXXIX (fragment). pp. 496-497.

⁵⁴ Nicanor Parra, *News from Nowhere* in *Manuscritos 1/1975* Kay Ronald (ed), Huneus Cristián (dir) (Santiago de Chile: Universidad de Chile, Sede Occidente, 1975), pp. 92-93.

- Later examples can be found in *Obras públicas*. In ‘poco ππ pero bastante KK’, Parra uses the symbol ‘π’ for its Spanish pronunciation ‘pi’ and thus creates a mathematical transliteration of the Chilean slang for wee, ‘pipí’. The whole sentence can be translated as ‘little wee but enough poo’. In ‘JEROGLÍFICO ππ l que lee’ (‘HIEROGLYPH penis for the reader’), π stands for the sound ‘pi’ and π for ‘copa’ or ‘co pa’, and so together the phrase would be pronounced ‘pico pa’l que lee’, a sentence usually found written at public toilets in Chile.⁵⁵
- Earlier examples show just a candid use of mathematical objects. Mainly, in the already mentioned *Quebrantahuesos*, numbers like simple quantities or money values are conspicuously used as qualifiers of the noun to produce hyperboles. Perhaps the most evident of these examples are ‘Arriendo / 18.500 salas de baño en / edificio central’ (‘To rent / 18,500 toilets in / central building’), ‘Cumpleaños!... / el filólogo alemán Prof. Dr. Grossmann / cumplió un año’ (‘Birthday!... / The German philologist Prof Dr Grossmann / has turned one year old’), and ‘Firma acreditada necesita / 36 / burros / para trabajo [de] oficinas y traducciones’ (‘Certified firm is looking for / 36 / donkeys / to engage in office work and translations’).⁵⁶

Hence, it is not an unsubstantiated claim that Parra uses the implements and rules of mathematics to polish mechanisms for his poetry. As Leonidas Morales Toro states, ‘A nivel de

⁵⁵ Nicanor Parra, *Obras públicas* (Santiago de Chile: Centro Cultural Palacio de la Moneda / W.R.S. Producciones, 2006).

⁵⁶ Nicanor Parra, Enrique Lihn, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Luis Oyarzún, Jorge Sanhueza, Jorge Berti, Roberto Humeres, *Quebrantahuesos* in *Manuscritos 1/1975* Kay Ronald (ed), Huneeus Cristián (dir) (Santiago de Chile: Universidad de Chile, Sede Occidente, 1975), pp. 2-24.

los signos, asistimos a la renovada apelación al recurso de intervenir el código de la lengua con signos que pertenecen a otro código. Al código de las matemáticas pertenecen los signos “+”, “-”, “%” (“At the level of the signs, we witness the renewed appeal proceedings to intervene in the code of language with signs that belong to another code. To the code of mathematics belong the signs “+”, “-”, “%”.)⁵⁷ Niall Binns intensifies this claim in his memorable and exhaustive list of reasons to read Parra.⁵⁸ Namely, Binns urges reading of Parra’s work because in it, the enquiries of science and literature become one; the analogies of science permit Parra to explain or illuminate the sense of antipoetry and his rupture with the Newtonian principles of the previous poetry. Both remarks initially appeared in the writing of Marlene Gottlieb, called the *first American critic of antipoetry* by Parra. Indeed, already in 1977, Gottlieb had observed the following of Parra’s antipoetry:

Emplea el lenguaje científico de las matemáticas; 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. (‘It uses the scientific language of
mathematics; What is man / Pascal asks / A number to the zero power / Nothing if

⁵⁷ In Morales Toro, Leonidas ‘Subversión y espectáculo: la antipoesía de Nicanor Parra’, *Revista Chilena de Literatura* 91, (2015), pp. 33-50.

⁵⁸ Niall Binns in Introduction to *Obras completas & algo †*, Vol I, p. xxxiii.

compared with the whole. / All if compared with nothing: / Birth plus death / Noise multiplied by silence / Arithmetic mean between everything and nothing'.)⁵⁹ ⁶⁰

Note that in this citation, 'Una potencia de exponente cero' is equal to one, that is, to *oneself*.⁶¹ This implies the use of mathematics not only in terms of signs and symbols but also as actual operations, exponentiation to zero alike the multiplication by *i*. The originality of the present article is to point out that also in 'El hombre imaginario', Parra most probably took inspiration in a mathematical device in the writing of the poem: in particular the *i* symbol and the algebra of imaginary numbers. Something that *ex-post*, he would have had very good reasons to disguise. Of course, the *i* symbol is of little meaning outside the specialised world of advanced mathematics and physics. But what this article aims to highlight is the purported underlying layer of this poem. Parra may have recognised the subversion of the modifying *i* and therefore chosen to smuggle it into the antipoem converted in the word *imaginario*. After all, Parra could have been toying with us, which is not out of character for Parra as a man and a poet.

Let Nicanor Parra himself answer Juan Andrés Piña's⁶² incisive *physics* question:

'Antes decías que tenías todo tu tiempo ocupado en la Física. ¿Cómo influyó esta disciplina en

⁵⁹ Nicanor Parra. *Obra gruesa*. (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1971[2^a ed., Cormorán, colección Letras de América]), p. 239.

⁶⁰ In Marlene Gottlieb, *No se termina nunca de nacer: La poesía de Nicanor Parra* (Madrid: Colección Nova Scholar Editorial Playor, 1977).

⁶¹ This reminds me of the verse of the Chilean band Los Prisioneros from the song *Sexo* published in the same year of 'El hombre imaginario', 1985, 'Gamulán que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente, tangente de cuarenta y cinco', where the tangent of 45° is also *one(self)*.

⁶² In Juan Andrés Piña, 'La antipoesía no es un juego de salón' in *Conversaciones con la poesía chilena* (Santiago de Chile: Pehuén, 1990), pp. 30-31.

la escritura de *Poemas y Antipoemas*?’ (‘You used to say that all your time was occupied by physics. How did this discipline influence the writing of *Poems and Antipoems*?’). Parra answers: ‘Creo que está presente en todo lo que escribo, desde el puro título de ese libro, es decir: más y menos, carga positiva y negativa, protón y electrón, algo y su contrario’ (‘I think it is present in everything I write, from the pure title of that book, that is: more and less, positive and negative charge, proton and electron, something and its opposite’). It is at least plausible to add here ‘real and imaginary’, or ‘without and with i’. Parra even adds ‘a mí me parece que un poema tiene que ser un teorema: economía de lenguaje y economía de recursos: obtener lo máximo con lo mínimo’ (‘it seems to me that a poem has to be a theorem: economy of language and economy of resources: to obtain the maximum with the minimum’).

A further argument in favour of the interpretation that the present article puts forward is the review published by José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois:

La simplicidad extrema es un atributo esencial de este extraño texto, que se lo juega todo a una sola carta, una sola palabra y, en vez de producir un anodino juego verbal, o siquiera un ingenioso desplazamiento de sentidos, lo que produce es una sucesión de horizontes en movimiento uniformemente acelerado: un verdadero ensanchamiento del mundo y de la experiencia a través del más elemental de todos los procedimientos: la repetición. (‘The extreme simplicity is an essential attribute of this strange text, which gambles everything on a single card, a single word and, instead of producing a bland verbal game, or even an ingenious displacement of senses, what it produces is a succession of horizons in uniformly accelerated movement: a true expansion of the world and of experience through the most elementary of all procedures: repetition.’)⁶³

⁶³ José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois, *El Mercurio*, July 7 1991.

Ibáñez Langlois's text is crucial. First, Ibáñez Langlois qualifies the text as 'strange'. Then he underlines that Parra 'gambles everything on a single card, a single word'. He continues by arguing that the poem 'produces [...] a succession of horizons in *uniformly accelerated movement*' and, he adds, 'a true expansion of the world and experience'. The words used by Ibáñez Langlois seem to support the hypothesis of this article. Just, and radically, replace Ibáñez Langlois's last word, 'repetition', with 'i the imaginary symbol', and the whole argument of Ibáñez Langlois flows now exact and consummate. It is as if his intuition of the poem now materialises in a straightforward interpretation. Furthermore, Ibáñez Langlois, in his *Para leer a Parra*, produces what can be understood as one of the definitive exegeses of the poem. In that exegesis, as he repeats the above argument, he also adds 'pero percibimos con nueva fuerza que lo más imaginario es lo más real, y lo más real es lo más imaginario, fundidos ambos atributos en una síntesis de ultrarrealidad.' ('but we perceive with new force that the most imaginary is the most real, and the most real is the most imaginary, fusing both attributes in a synthesis of ultrareality'.)⁶⁴ Ibáñez Langlois has a clear intuition of the meaning of the contraposition and juxtaposition between real and imaginary in the poem. Again, the hypothesis presented in this article aligns with and completes the thorough exegesis of Ibáñez Langlois. Nevertheless, Ibáñez Langlois pins down that the *imaginario* term has a different meaning in each of the verses of the poem (p. 96) and that the repetition is, in fact, not repetition at all. The adjective, with each verse and across stanzas, is always changing, even with its crucial omission in the fourth (and sixth) verse of the last stanza (p. 98). This is all but obvious and a true subtlety of the exegete and confirms that even if someone is given as a hint that the imaginary symbol produces a shift from real to imaginary, Parra's genius is still needed to write 'El hombre

⁶⁴ José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois, *Dos poemas de antología* in 'Para leer a Parra' (Santiago de Chile: El Mercurio Aguilar, 2003), p. 97.

imaginario'. It is Parra's finetuning of the continuously evolving semantic of the word *imaginario* which produces the masterpiece readers have savoured since its publication.

A further needed avenue of research that could shed light on Parra's use of the imaginary numbers and the role of the imaginary symbol *i* in 'El hombre imaginario' would be close and careful scrutiny of Parra's notebooks. Though famous, these notebooks have, until now, been elegantly disguised from the public examination. The only notebook excerpts I have been able to analyse are the ones published in Parra's special edition of *The Clinic*⁶⁵. Directly related to the argumentation of this paper are his notebooks at Brown University, in particular, his notebooks on the maths lessons of Paul Rosenbloom, a well-known American mathematician who had as an advisor at Stanford the reputed mathematical analyst Gábor Szegő. The four pages published of these notebooks include exercises to prove propositions with absolute values, triangular inequality, and other iterations of basic advanced calculus. This very limited material from the whole immense corpus of unpublished work and notes by Parra provides no further insights on the hypothesis sustained in this paper. However, I am convinced that further scrutiny of these notebooks will cast light on Parra's destabilising creative impulse that subverted poetry. I would suggest most worthy of exploration are perhaps the ones on maths and physics, the ones of his Oxford years (comprising the writing of *Poems and Antipoems*), and those kept during the seventies and eighties, when he was a teacher at the Department of Humanistic Studies of the University of Chile.⁶⁶ Parra's annotations are a unique opportunity to disclose his creative power and genius.

⁶⁵ *The Clinic. Especial Parra*. (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Bobby, 21 octubre 2004). pp. 1-74 (p. 64).

⁶⁶ Niall Binns confessed to Gumucio that the only notebooks of Parra's that he really wants to read are the ones Parra kept while at Oxford (*Nicanor Parra, rey y mendigo*, p. 156).

In short, there is no clear evidence, just hints, in Parra's published work of the use of the symbol *i* in the writing of 'El hombre imaginario'. This absence of evidence cannot support a cursory critical assumption that Parra did take inspiration in the imaginary numbers, even just to devise the general plan of the poem. But this hypothesis cannot be fully discarded, either. Does the absence of any published version with the *i* symbol mean any lucubration, any laborious study on the subject is doomed to fail or contain circular reasoning? Eventually, one of Parra's notebooks may well present the use of the symbol *i* in place of the word *imaginario* or, in a greater surprise, a statement by Parra claiming that he did *not* use the symbol *i*. Thus, there is still evidence to scrutinise and critical reasoning to be exercised.

Notwithstanding, Parra, in practice, produces a poem that entwines the two meanings given for the word *imaginario/imaginary* in the Oxford English Dictionary.⁶⁷

imaginary /ɪ'mædʒɪnəri/ *adj.* **1** existing only in the imagination. **2** *Math.* being the square root of a negative quantity, and plotted graphically in a direction usu. perpendicular to the axis of real quantities (see REAL¹).

Through this approach, Parra has effectively produced one of his most unforgettable poems. It is a poem that Zurita defines as 'la conmoción íntima de lo que está en el límite de lo decible' ('the intimate shock at what is at the limit of the expressible'.)⁶⁸ and one that Echevarría describes as 'de forma semejante a como [Parra] ha subvertido el [mecanismo] del verso, con vistas a hacerl[o] apt[o] como portavoz del lenguaje de la tribu' ('of a form similar to how

⁶⁷ Judy Pearsall & Bill Trumble, *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, 2nd ed., ed. J. Pearsall & B. Trumble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1st ed. 1884–1928]), p. 705.

⁶⁸ Raúl Zurita, *Voy y vuelvo Nicanor* in "100 años de Nicanor Parra", *Estudios Públicos (Centro de Estudios Públicos)* Nº 136, (2014), Primavera, pp. 79-85.

[Parra] has subverted the [mechanism] of the verse, intending to make it apt as a spokesman for the tribe's language.')⁶⁹ This article's hypothesis, like any scientific observation, needs to be communicable and falsified. The first aspect implies that the hypothesis must be written down or verbally expressed in an accessible form. This article may suffice in that area, having already achieved clear expression of the proposed hypothesis. The second implies that the hypothesis must be an empirical statement that can be refuted. Parra himself did not read this article, though an earlier version of this article started to circulate just before his death. This means that, unfortunately, we will not have his opinion, or at least his reaction, to it. Thus, I present the hypothesis to Parra scholars in the hope of sparking academic interest, whether to confirm or refute it. And, at the same time, I provide Parra's readers with new coordinates for attempting a fresh reading of the poem.

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⁶⁹ Ignacio Echevarría, *La antipoesía y el boom latinoamericano* in "100 años de Nicanor Parra", *Estudios Públicos (Centro de Estudios Públicos)* Nº 136, (2014), Primavera, pp. 7-32.