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# Review of After-Dinner Declarations by Nicanor Parra (Trans. Dave Oliphant)

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*After-Dinner Declarations*. By Nicanor Parra. Trans. Dave Oliphant. Austin, TX: Host Publications, 2009, p. 513, \$60.00.

Dave Oliphant's translation of Nicanor Parra's *After-Dinner Declarations* skillfully conveys the Chilean poet's ironic voice in a series of five *discursos*, or verse speeches/declarations/statements. In keeping with Parra's ethic that "poetry should be written in the language of the street" (i), Oliphant's choice of "declarations" captures the underlying character of the five long poetic texts included in this volume, which commemorate events such as Parra's receipt of the Juan Rulfo Prize (awarded by the Mexican government), William Shakespeare's birthday (at the Congress of the Theater of Nations), fellow Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro's centenary (at his precursor's home in Cartagena, Chile), the conferral of an honorary degree upon Parra by the Universidad de Concepción, and a celebration of renowned writer and educator (and childhood friend of the poet) Luis Oyarzún at the Universidad Austral in Valdivia. This bilingual edition of Parra's *Discursos de sobremesa* (2006) represents the most recent addition to the sizable body of work of the internally-acclaimed 95 year-old poet.

As Oliphant suggests in his brief, yet extremely well-crafted introduction, the new genre of the "antispeech"—evoking Parra's 1954 publication of *Poems and Antipoems* and subsequent self-proclaimed role as Chile's patron saint of antipoetry—finds its origins in these five occasional pieces, which deeply engage varied intellectual and personal currents running through Parra's multifarious intra- and intertextualities. Ever the ostensibly reluctant, (falsely) modest, self-effacing puppet-master, the Chilean writer parades a national and international pantheon of philosophers, historical and political figures through carefully measured movements, fits, and starts, all in the service of playfully and humbly accepting or rendering (anti-)homage while at the same time ironizing the very possibility of such discourse.

Oliphant's translation succeeds on a number of different, but inextricably related levels: first, in its treatment of Parra's idiosyncratic inventiveness and localisms (textually and as explained by occasional footnotes); second, he manages to capture the unique voice of this irreverent poet that claims to "love to make people sneeze" (93); and third, he easily convinces the reader of Parra's constant relevance as the poet nears his own centenary. Oliphant's careful rendering of *After-Dinner Declarations*' puns, paronomasia, and portmanteaux reveals just how practiced the translator's hand is in the context of Parra's writing.

To give some specific examples from the text, in the Rulfo address, titled "MAI MAI PEÑI," we find a clear expression of the kind of reluctant acceptance of a purportedly undeserved honor. In the thirteenth poem, "I WOULD BE LYING IF I SAID I'M TOUCHED," Parra declares: "The precise word is traumatized / News of the prize / left me with my mouth wide open / I doubt that I can ever close it again" (33). Parra's modest remarks are rife with his trademark twists, often operating on the level of the signifier to poke fun at the insider nature of said prizes, literary history, genre, and other purportedly sacred topics, as he suggests in the title of the fourth speech—"THOUGH I HAVEN'T COME PREPARRAED [AUNQUE NO VENGO PREPARRADO]"—thereby inscribing autobiographical modesty into the genre of the

(anti)discourse about to be read. In his “W.C. PrObLEM” in the “HAPPY BIRTHDAY” declaration, Parra asks, in an explicitly Shakespearean vein, “To P or not to P / That is the question / Association of Prostate Patients” (the first two lines are in English in the original), thus gently poking fun at the Bard’s age via a jab at his urinary health.

Quite strikingly, Parra’s deft wordplay in the *After-Dinner Declarations* often turns to global ecological issues. While in the Rulfo section, he asks, “What view do you take / Of the planet’s ecological collapse? / I don’t see what all the fuss is about / We know the world ended long ago” (95), Parra isn’t one to offer a concrete course of action; rather, he suggests that since “[t]he planet can’t take it any more” (97), we must eschew political ideologies: “Neither socialist nor capitalist / Totally the opposite: / Ecologist” (99). Nevertheless, his assertion that “[w]e know the world ended long ago” does not mask nostalgia for an Edenic or even an idealized existence—he calls for “harmony / Between the human species and its environment” (99), in which we might recognize that

The error consisted  
In believing the earth was ours  
When the truth of the matter is  
That we  
                  belong  
                          to  
                                  the  
  earth

Perhaps Parra’s most poignant and significant *discurso*—in terms of his relationship with the larger Latin American poetic and critical traditions—can be found in his “ALSO SPRACH ALTAZOR,” whose original English (sub)title already inscribes the project in the essentially antipoetic vein of the antispeech: “WE HAVE TO CRAP ON HUIDOBRO.” This amusing title, certainly “appropriate” for a roast marking Huidobro’s centenary, recalls Parra’s reference in “HAPPY BIRTHDAY” to “la Sociedad de Excritores de Chile” (150), whose scatological pun Oliphant skillfully renders as “the Society of Writurds of Chile” (151). It serves as the jumping-off point for Parra’s roast of the “French” poet’s noisy irruption into the Chilean poetic canon, thereby saving the future of Chilean writing from weepy and mournful sonnets and odes (Pablo Neruda) and guttural moans (Pablo de Rokha; 171). Parra here blames his “master” for some bad habits (175), replays and satirizes the famous *guerilla literaria* (literary war; 215) between “TOO MANY STARS” in Chilean poetry (“The Creator overdid it / Half as many would have been more than enough;” 213), and riffs on some of Huidobro’s most famous works and days in light of the poetic tradition in Spanish (“Antipoetry are you,” for example, evoking Spanish Romantic poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s love poetry; 243).

In sum, Dave Oliphant’s excellent translation of this major work by one of the Americas’ greatest living poets represents a valuable contribution to American studies and the growing

canon of Spanish-language poetry in translation. *After-Dinner Declarations* shows just how fresh and contemporary Parra's voice is as we approach the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, and it's a constant pleasure to explore and laugh with (and occasionally at) the accessible, yet highly nuanced poetic speeches presented in this volume.

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