

Chilean Poetry in Canada: Avant-garde, Nostalgia and Commitment

BACKGROUND

Most of Chilean poetry in Canada has its origins in the wave of refugees and immigrants that came to the country in the seventies following the military coup in Chile. One exception is Renato Trujillo, who came to Montréal from the United States in 1968, and who published *Behind The Orchestra* with Fiddlehead in Fredericton (1979). The other is Ludwig Zeller, a poet with surrealist allegiance and a visual artist who has lived in Toronto since 1970, and who had a well-established name in Chilean and Latin American poetry before he settled in Canada. One of several books he published in Canada is *In the Country of the Antipodes* (1979).

Most of the poets of this 'new wave' who came to Canada after 1973 were already writing poetry in the middle to late sixties and early seventies as a part of what has been named afterwards as "promociones poéticas emergentes."¹ This group is or was represented in Canada by Gonzalo Millán and the School of Santiago to which belong Naín Nómez, Erik Martínez, and Jorge Etcheverry. To the work of these poets and that of numerous others, more has been added during the different stages of the development of Chilean literature in Canada by Claudio Durán, Manuel Aránguiz, Manuel Jofré, Luis Lama, Francisco Viñuela, Nelly Davis, Tito Alvarado, Alberto Kurapel, Jorge Cancino, Elías Letelier and Alfredo Lavergne. This poetry has passed through several stages. For these poets, poetry implies reading and performance, as forms of expression and ways of developing. Since it has had a relatively important role in Chilean culture, starting around 1977-78 a series of events and collective readings were held in the Chilean community, heavily marked then by the proximity of the Coup, solidarity work, and the sense of isolation in the Canadian

environment. The events staged within the framework of solidarity were well attended and sometimes emotionally received. The main part of the spectacle was usually poetry and it dealt with themes according to the setting, but there was also space for more complex texts that were surprisingly well received in spite of their complexity. One of the first events of this nature was the "First Congress on Literature and Political Reality," held in Montréal at a facility of the CSN in 1978. A symposium held in Toronto in 1985, "Encuentro de Escritores Chilenos," which featured poets, writers, and academics living in Canada and other countries including Chile, marked the end of this stage, although this kind of activity, i.e., readings related to solidarity with the Chilean or Latin American peoples, has continued at the local level. The plebsite in Chile may have an impact on the committed aspect of the Chilean literature in Canada, including the poetry, since at least, theoretically, the hardest forms of the Chilean exile are over.

A second stage with respect to readings and performances of poetry, either 'pure' or mixed with other cultural forms such as cinema, folklore, occasionally prose and papers, was the inclusion of Chilean poets in events with an institutional link.² A third stage is marked by individual participation in readings in the space open for poets in general. In this context, the poet is still seen as a Chilean poet and the expectations of the public are still focused more or less on the 'committed' themes, or the 'exotic' (minority, ethnic) ones, but the poet, nevertheless, participates also as a member of the literary ambience of the city or region.

In a parallel way there has been an evolution in diffusion through the printed media (we deal here with the Chilean one). Apart from the operation of the publishing house of Ludwig Zeller, Oasis, and the one-issue enterprises like Manuel Jofré's *Aguita Fresca* and short term initiatives like Les Éditions de la Maison Culturelle Québec-Amérique Latine that published two books of poetry, one of them important in Chilean poetry as a whole (*La Ciudad* by Gonzalo Millán), there is a publishing house, Ediciones Cordillera, which has had a more permanent role to play. In a parallel way with other publishing houses of the Chilean diaspora,³ Cordillera was born out of the dual need to develop and preserve Chilean culture in a new environment and to promote solidarity within a cultural framework. These needs were responded to between 1981 and 1985 with the publication of four bilingual books, among other publications. This

2 This would be like Harbour Front, Le Salon du Livre de L'Outaouais, and the North-South encounter in Toronto.

3 Examples are L.A.R. first in Spain, now back in Chile; El Maiten, operating in the U.S.; and Libros del Meridion in Spain.

1 A term coined by the Chilean poet Waldo Rojas and used by Gonzalo Millán for the poets writing between the mid-sixties and now.

accomplished the purpose of bringing Chilean-Canadian poets to the attention of a Canadian readership. At the same time, this aided the maintenance of Chilean culture in Canada. These books have been the source of material for anthologies published in Chile and abroad. As Chilean poets in Canada and elsewhere started to publish again in Chile, Cordillera began the publication in Chile of a general magazine of poetry and poetic theory and criticism: *El Espíritu del Valle*.

TRAITS AND TENDENCIES

In spite of the fact that there have not been many studies of Chilean poetry in Canada because few literary critics or intellectuals came here from Chile, some work has been done, mainly by the writers, some of whom have an academic background.⁴ In the Chilean environment as a whole, the poets have been regrouped either as members of the generation of the sixties (Santiago del Campo), the new generation or the young Chilean poetry (Soledad Bianchi), or the emergent promotion (Gonzalo Millán). Literary criticism has been limited to Chilean critics, to Gonzalo Millán, and to the School of Santiago (Etcheverry, Nómez, Martínez).

In general, three tendencies can be distinguished in the abundant production of texts by Chilean poets in Canada. These traits are seldom present in a pure state. A given text is usually a composite of common (usual, expected) poetic features. In general terms, there is a 'committed text,' the form of which tends to be one of traditional verse, usually devoid of ambiguities and imprecision, since the most important element of this poetry is the delivery of a message. The theme of these poems is generally the state of things in Chile, and it tends to focus on former times and spaces. Its axiological framework will be *manicheist* (a term used by the official Chilean critics in Chile to describe this kind of production that flourished widely because of the Coup, having nevertheless a permanent representation in contemporary Chilean poetry as a whole since the *Canto General*). Here, the poet is a vehicle of the people in their yearning for justice and freedom:

Platform of the verse

The workers
awaken the poet
they topple him from his branch
with a soft whistle
or with a bullet of blood
shot through the core of his soul
Then the poet
bird on a stage of sun
now without a branch
and falling
opens his eyes like two thunderbolts
and flies.
Bearing the full weight of creation,
the poet
over the earth,
flies.⁵

Humanism is also present in this kind of text: the axiological 'good' of the poetic speaker encompasses the whole of humanity, a trait present in all committed poetry. There is a tendency to have a 'lyric voice,' but also to address men as a universal, or more or less generic entity, either as a positive or a negative subject:

Man

A man writes
and the sun smiles
A man thinks
and the hangman trembles
A man looks straight
and hate draws back
A man sings
and the path is made singing
A man speaks
and the future is with all⁶

The axiological scheme is valid beyond the original space, spreading (or existing) everywhere:

4 The work of Nafn Nómez should be mentioned, i.e., his introduction to his anthology *Chilean Literature in Canada* (Ottawa: Cordillera 1982); *Identidad y Exilio: Escritores Chilenos en Canada* (Santiago de Chile: Cenecca 1986); my own note on "Chilean Poetry in Canada," *Vice/Versa* (Dec/Jan 1985); the interviews by Gonzalo Millán of Jorge Etcheverry and Nafn Nómez, "La Escuela de Santiago: Jorge Etcheverry—Nafn Nómez," *Contemporary Poetry* IV.4 (1982), updated and in Spanish in *El Espíritu del Valle* II-III (Santiago: 1988).

5 Elías Letelier, *Symphony*, trans. Ken Norris (Montréal: Muses 1988) 56.

6 Tito Avarado, *Ausencias* (Winnipeg: El siglo 1984) 23. Translation mine.

The Multinational

In this place
insecurity is earthly
without monastic complications

In this place
the chaos is general
even if some are in control

In this place
depression is routine
huddled up in the temples

In this place
crisis has its graphic
in our pockets and consciousness

In this place
the capitalist doesn't improvise
neither does he call a truce⁷

This kind of poetry has been mainly produced as an appeal to two kinds of public: one, the committed Chilean exile or refugee, interested and aware of the political circumstances in Chile and abroad, and with a more or less socialist ideology, and two, members of the Canadian public who are sensitive to this problem. Given the expectations of the Canadian public, this kind of poetry could easily be identified (as the testimony in narration, quite abundant in Chilean post-Coup literature) with Chilean literature.

The poetry of nostalgia is the one which focuses on reminiscences about former space and time, and which states the present ones as degraded with respect to the former ones in a typical manifestation of 'ilmo tempore.' This is also a poetry of comparison. The degree of acceptance of the new world and its accommodation with the former one vary as does the combination of its basic subjects with elements of the committed text and the avant-garde characteristics at the level of expression. This text is thus more lyrical, the 'personal' feelings and anecdotes predominating since it is basically a matter of the position of the 'self,' explicitly and intentionally:

7 Alfredo Laverge, *Cada Fruto* (Montréal: Éditions d'Orphée, 1985) 15; poem translated by J. Etcheverry.

Introduction

How much, my ex and post-city
almost mine now in this part of yourself
when the guttural silence plunges
in your very entrails

I go for your silence, then
I miss the voices, the faces are dark
In the day the rain falls by the corridor
of my memory. and a heavy dread.

City, tell me that
you still have ground for me
that my cells are still lying
in my forefathers' grounds.

Santiago,
I carry your monuments on my skin
nevertheless, the old corners are gone
from me like birds in winter.

The yellow flowers of the hills are there
but, I don't see them as an enclosure.
Where are you hiding, Santiago?

Where are you really
in which boulevards,
or streets or mountains
are you hiding from me?

Santiago
when the fog rolls
over the snow and then my eyes remember
What does not exist⁸

In this kind of poetry there is an implicit or explicit confrontation of spaces, the space of the 'here' and 'there.' It can be assumed that it is the second stage of the development of this poetry in which the poet focuses on the theme of the 'there' as the place where the main conflicts and events were played, and that acquires the dimensions of the 'committed' because of the (socio-political) circumstances. Nevertheless, as previously pointed out, there is not necessarily a progression (from one stage to another), but rather a focus on a definite trend. In the poem quoted above, the images of the new environment appear. The same is true of poems by Gonzalo Millán:

8 Claudio Durán, *Santiago* (Santiago: Tamarcos 1986) 3.

Wheel of Summer

I've been here for years, he says
almost resigned
like a wheel (of summer)
turning on the spot,
skating on the ice⁹

But the term of comparison, as it was mentioned, can be implicit, as in "Portable Typewriter":

So, on a typewriter
carved out of a cake
of toilet soap
he writes with
recalcitrant fingers:
"There are beautiful butterflies
in Costa Rica
and in Canada, snow,
immense forests and lakes." (*Chilean Literature in Canada*, 69)

The 'ground' from which the poetic speaker utters his statements is his being from somewhere else, even if there is no indication at the level of language or explicit meaning. What remains is the 'marginal' and always productive, view of reality, or the confrontation of it and the situation of being in the middle of two different spaces, no longer being among the meanings and values of the former, original space, but not living allegiance to the new one.

The result may be the folding of the 'I' upon itself, where the finite character of the individual and the menace of alienation appear, as in this poem by Manuel Aránguiz:

Poem 4

He who writes
is not up to date in anything
He has tired of searching for his face
in the newspapers.
At times
He recognizes himself in the hand
that approaches

and he closes his eyes. (*Chilean Literature in Canada*, 7)

The guidelines of form and content of this kind of poetry originated in Chilean poetry written around the sixties and called 'the Poetry of the Lares' (Roman household deity, also home). Another way of dealing with the situation of origin of the texts — namely being in a middle land that can turn into a no-man's land — is by the incorporation, or the attempt to do it, of the different discursive segments that refer or iconize or represent or go with different aspects of the subjective/objective reality. The group of texts and authors that represent what I call the 'avant-garde' have chosen that way. To state this does not imply a conscious or coherent choice, since it appears that only the School of Santiago and Gonzalo Millán have stated a certain methodological conception of their writing. There is a programmatic side to the first book of Gonzalo Millán published in Canada that makes it partially a meta-poetic text. In 1979 Millán wrote and published a book-poem in Spanish called *La Ciudad* (The City), in which this tendency of the Chilean avant-garde towards the meta-poetic or meta-fictional, is present. The poem relates the story of the dissolution and destruction of the city of Santiago in the days of the Coup and its final mythological reversal. But at the same time, this book represents research in language that parodically uses the structure of the language textbooks used in Canadian or American universities:

Were the streets damp?	No, they were dry
It was cold?	No, it was hot
Was it winter?	No, it was summer
What time was it?	It was late
Was the house dark?	No. It was lighted
What was the color of the car?	Grey ¹⁰
How many cars were there?	Two. ¹⁰

Another element of the writing of the avant-garde, programmatic or not, can be summarized as the indetermination of genres, mainly of prose and poetry, while some texts contain elements of theatre as well. That is the case in *Teatro en Pie de Guerra* by Alberto Kurapel, that combines graphic elements, i.e., a return ticket to Managua on Delta Airlines. The book originated in a trip to Nicaragua and the graphic description effectively functions as a prologue. There are dialogues and quotations from news items and song lyrics, and from Joyce, Kandinsky, Tomás Borge, Sartre, Cardenal: the usual poetic language, all of this creating a universe out of fragments

9 From *Chilean Literature in Canada*, ed. Naín Nómez, trans. Christine Shantz (Ottawa: Ediciones Cordillera 1981) 71.

10 Gonzalo Millán, *La Ciudad* (Montréal: Les Éditions Maison Culturelle Québec-Amérique Latine 1979) 115. Translation mine.

linked by a sort of thematic thread, at times implicit or given by the context, at times conducted by the lyric voice(s).

The fragmentation, the inclusion of different discursive segments, together with the multiplicity of voices, the linguistic incrustations of other languages and the meta-poetic elements, are also present in the writing of the School of Santiago, written by Naim Nómez, Erik Martínez and myself. This group structured a program before institutional sanction at least in Chile. This type of poetry sometimes appears in Chile, written by the new poets, as Naim Nómez describes:

The kind of poetry we used to do was all of a sudden too hermetic, with lots of surrealistic influence, with few anecdotal elements and scarce satirical ones. What it was there in that sense was a coming back to the avant-garde, but evolved. We feed a continuity with a tendency that never disappeared, but submerged itself... to come back under new shapes with others, Gonzalo Rojas, Raúl Zurita and many others we could name, Etcheverry, Barrientos, Tomás Harris etc.¹¹

He states the difference from the most recent Chilean avant-garde in the following terms:

... one of the basic differences in our group consists in our being aware of where we came from, of the tradition to which we belong. On the other hand, the younger poets prefer to believe that they depart from zero and they deny their affiliation with a poetic tradition... Despite our use of different languages and forms, that confound the frontiers of prose and poetry, lyrics and epic, we appear as more traditional... The younger poets are more interested in experimentation. (Millán, 59. Translation mine.)

This kind of analysis sometimes confounds the critic. I describe my own writing in the following way, and it seems that it can be applied to the two other writers as well, even if Martínez shows a tendency to a more traditional poetic form:

I recall, for instance, a poem entitled "A Caucus of Quail." First, there is a conversation between friends, then a girl appears, this is followed by an imprecation against poets who write poems with well defined themes, a mention of the proletariat of the Third World, a dinner at my home, the distinction between Ethnic groups and allusions to the luxury of the developed countries, a voice which praises poverty as an authentic way of life, an allusion to the customs of immigrants, a mention of Chileans and what is happening to them in their countries of exile, of multitudes who attack Parliament Buildings and that all these things concern us, but we are walking in a

street, and finally there is an attempt to lay the foundations for this type of poetry together with an allusion to the need of hiding the self of the speaker.¹²

The poetry of Erik Martínez in *Tequila Sunrise* plays with the traditional shape of the poem and the 'detachment' or collusion with its content, creating an iconic object that refers to a reality in which the permanent features are isolation and alienation, even the physical possibility of encounter being denied for an amplification ad absurdum of the anecdote:

A Man's Apparent Calm Before Going to a Party

I go along looking in mirrors as I walk towards the subway behind a fat lady dressed in an overcoat and hat
half lizard (below), half bird (above).

My body is like a sealed box
a strongbox I must drag along
balancing on crutches,

I feel I need to take a downer immediately.

I would like to know what motivates people,
but I am trapped in that transparency
that hides behind the mirror of my gaze:

I spy on myself, watch myself,

I see myself walking but I hear nothing

Around me the characters are not coherent.

During the party I ask a woman to dance.

She scratches my face.

Take your hands off me, you ass! she screams.¹³

The poetry of Luis Lama includes prosaic narrative elements in paragraphs of poetic prose in which the mythical, pop culture and contemporary concerns of industrial society are often present. His work, as in the case of some of the Chilean poets in Canada that belong in general to the avant-garde, goes beyond the accepted format and thematics of lyric poetry:

The Galaxy Man

The Galaxy Man walked among us and found his light. Of the night, the morning made an eve of marvels for everyone and none among them wanted to oppose to

12 Gonzalo Millán, "Jorge Etcheverry, Gonzalo Millán: Two Poems and an Interview," trans. Ana Henríquez, *Contemporary Poetry IV.4* (1982): 60-61.

13 Erik Martínez, *Tequila Sunrise*, trans. Christina Shantz (Ottawa: Ediciones Cordillera 1985) 16.

11 Gonzalo Millán, "La Escuela de Santiago: Jorge Etcheverry—Naim Nómez" *El Espíritu del Valle* 2-3 (1987): 58. Translation mine.

that destiny his own. The suns hounded her, burning her back; that green and coffeed spring, and there were whole wind mists that surrendered to her swaying and the moons greeted her all and a sun shut itself to coal and stone, to milk and to sea, and in the wind they married with her burnt skin.

I didn't say no in that twilight, marked by rifle bullets. No, I didn't say yes, in that twilight marked by rings of silence and surrenders. I asked if the Galaxy Man had arrived, they told me yes. Beings without hands or heads brought him to my presence to ask him what we could do with the world at this time and he said, "leave it abandoned to its space." In this canyon more messages did not appear. A child, cut jugular wide open and bloodless, came closer, struck dumb to talk to him and sparks and fire penetrated the universe of gold and stone and wallowed in burning lava, a moan diluted the silence. "The children of the suicides are born dead." I didn't want to look further or listen. It was too much for my young heart.¹⁴

Since some of this text production does not meet the expectations and conventions of the Canadian cultural environment, which mainly lacks an avant-garde, the outlet for this tendency will continue to be mainly through publication by the authors or groups interested, generally outside the commercial circuit. This has been the case of Ediciones Cordillera (to a certain point, since its publications are usually reviewed in the USA, Chile and in general the Hispanic world), Split/Quotation, Oasis Publications, Aguita Fresca and Poésie Postale. Nevertheless this production eventually finds a place in magazines like *Anthos*, *Carleton Literary Review*, and *Vice/Versa*, for example. It also finds a place, for the moment limited to Gonzalo Millán and the School of Santiago, in the poetry of Chile, although mostly the more avant-garde writings.

There is another factor that may reinforce this connection between Chilean poets in Canada and the ones in Chile: One of the most important Chilean magazines of poetry is a joint enterprise between poets living in Chile and in Canada and published in Chile by Ediciones Cordillera.

In conclusion, in view of the fact that Chilean exile/immigration was fortuitous and will not increase, linked as it is with the political situation in Chile that has changed after the plebiscite; that the Chilean community is small and cannot constitute an ethnoculturally and linguistically differentiated market, and that by the second generation there will not be

14 Luis Lama, *The History Teacher in Ecstasy*, trans. Edward Smith (Ottawa: Split/Quotation 1989) 13.

Chilean-Canadian text production in Spanish, I think Chilean literature in Canada will not consolidate its characteristics long enough to be considered an ethno-cultural literature of Canada.

Ottawa

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