

— *Monografías* —

SPANISH  
AMERICAN  
POETRY  
AFTER 1950  
BEYOND THE  
VANGUARD

Donald L. Shaw





Colección Támesis

SERIE A: MONOGRAFÍAS, 251

## SPANISH AMERICAN POETRY AFTER 1950

### BEYOND THE VANGUARD

Providing a basis for understanding the main lines of development of poetry in Spanish America after Vanguardism, this volume begins with an overview of the situation at the mid-century: the later work of Neruda and Borges, the emergence of Paz. Consideration is then given to the decisive impact of Parra and the rise of colloquial poetry, politico-social poetry [Dalton, Cardenal] and representative figures such as Orozco, Pacheco and Cisneros.

The aim is to establish a few paths through the largely unmapped jungle of Spanish American poetry in the time period. The author emphasises the persistence of a generally negative view of the human condition and the poets' exploration of different ways of responding to it. These vary from outright scepticism to the ideological, the religious or those derived from some degree of confidence in the creative imagination as cognitive. At the same time there is analysis of the evolving outlook on poetry of the writers in question, both in regard to its possible social role and in regard to diction.

DONALD L. SHAW is Brown Forman Professor of Spanish American Literature at the University of Virginia.

*Tamesis*

*Founding Editor*

J. E. Varey

*General Editor*

Stephen M. Hart

*Editorial Board*

Alan Deyermond

Julian Weiss

Charles Davis

DONALD L. SHAW

SPANISH AMERICAN POETRY  
AFTER 1950  
BEYOND THE VANGUARD

TAMESIS

© Donald L. Shaw 2008

*All Rights Reserved.* Except as permitted under current legislation no part of this work may be photocopied, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded or reproduced in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owner

The right of Donald L. Shaw to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

First published 2008 by Tamesis, Woodbridge

ISBN 978-1-85566-157-8

Tamesis is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd  
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK  
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.  
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA  
website: [www.boydellandbrewer.com](http://www.boydellandbrewer.com)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library

This publication is printed on acid-free paper

Printed in Great Britain by  
Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire

## CONTENTS

1 Preliminaries: The Vanguard and After	1
2 Neruda and Parr	22
3 Borges and Cardenal	44
4 Orozco and Dalton	74
5 Pacheco and Cisneros	116
Conclusion	159
Bibliography	165
Index	177



## Preliminaries: The Vanguard and After

### Before the mid-century

Why begin a book about modern Spanish American poetry using the mid-twentieth century as the point of departure? Because, as William Rowe has pointed out (Rowe, 2000, 17), Vanguardism as a movement had largely run out of steam by the 1940s and “In the poets who began to write in the 1950s, there is a concern with new starting points”. Other critics (cf. Salvador, 1993, 262) agree. We can now see that the clearest illustration of this concern is to be found in the *Poemas y antipoemas* (1954) of Nicanor Parra. But as we examine this collection we notice that, while it is highly innovative in terms of its approach to poetry, its diction and even some of its themes, in one important respect it is not original at all – that is, in its despairing view of the human condition. Here Parra’s outlook connects directly with that of a long line of earlier poets going back to the darker side of Romanticism and to the “Devil World” hypothesis. When Parra writes that “El poeta anda buscando la casa para el hombre actual, que está a la intemperie” (quoted in Morales, 1972, 213), he is saying nothing new. What this compels us to keep in mind is that the major poetry of Spanish America in the second half of the twentieth century, in its various forms, has to be seen, not just in the context of on-going innovation, but also in terms of an equally on-going crisis of ideals and beliefs which links it very intimately to the past. Yurkievich puts it cogently when he writes:

Una conciencia desgarrada y conflictiva será característica casi unánime de la poesía contemporánea. Denota una agudización de la crisis que comienza con el romanticismo, que penetra en Hispanoamérica a través del modernismo, encuentra su expresión más cabal en Vallejo, en Neruda, en Huidobro y se generaliza después de la segunda posguerra hasta involucrar a las promociones más recientes. (Yurkievich, 1973, 277)

To go back briefly to the beginning of the twentieth century: it used to be thought that *modernismo*, then in its heyday, was a movement preeminently, if not exclusively concerned with modernizing the “arsenal poético” of its members; that is, with purely technical innovation, as if this process were



somehow autonomous and could be kept largely separate from the evolving world-view of (for example) its leader, Rubén Darío. This view of *modernismo* has long been abandoned. Not for nothing does Olivio Jiménez, in his excellent "Introducción a la poesía modernista hispanoamericana" (Jiménez, 1985, 9–66), speak of "esa poesía de temple agónico y existencial" (11), which "prefigura espiritualmente la modernidad" (22). He quotes with approval the title of Picón Garfield and Schulman's collection of essays on *modernismo*: *Las entrañas del vacío* (1984) in which the authors lay heavy emphasis on the "desorientación social, buceo interno, pesimismo, acoso metafísico y angustia existencial" (ibid., 31) which emerge from *modernismo* to characterize modernity in Spanish American poetry. This is clearly what Cobo Borda has in mind when he writes of the *modernistas* that "Sus preguntas siguen siendo nuestras preguntas" (Cobo Borda, 1986, 54). In relation to Darío, Rivera-Rodas, perhaps more clearly than anyone else, in the last two chapters of his *La poesía hispanoamericana del siglo xix* (1988) develops the idea that *modernista* poetics was deeply concerned with the "búsqueda del significado escondido de las cosas" (321). He goes on to argue that it was the realization of the probable futility of that quest that linked *modernismo* with the Vanguard. It is interesting to observe how Octavio Paz was to take up afresh the *modernista* notion of "la poesía como recurso gnoseológico" (ibid., 326), and for similar reasons, despite its earlier collapse. In addition, as Guillermo Sucre points out in what is still one of the densest books on modern Spanish American poetry, *La máscara, la transparencia* (1975), we must not overlook the fact that it was the *modernistas* who "prepararon una actitud crítica frente a todo poder verbal" (14), prefiguring the movement of modern "critical" poetry so well studied by Thorpe Running (1996). Nor should we overlook the fact that Pacheco published an anthology of *modernismo* in 1970.

When, therefore, we speak of the sharp reaction against *modernismo* which is visible in the writings of the next generation of poets, we have to be alert to the fact that it took place at levels which did not necessarily include the deepest thematic level. Ernesto Cardenal has reminded us that when his fellow poet of an earlier generation, José Coronel Urtecho, wrote his well-known dismissive "Oda a Rubén Darío" he did not have in mind the Darío of "la tortura interior" (Bellini, 1993, 77). The profound spiritual malaise visible in several of the most memorable poems of Darío's *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905), which belie the collection's title, notably the "Nocturnos" and "Lo fatal", lived on. Schopf, like Rivera-Rodas, Picón Garfield and Schulman, and many others, insists that the heritage of the late nineteenth-century religious and cultural crisis in the West was crucial to *modernismo*. The *modernista* poet aspires at bottom to "un fundamento en que vuelvan a reunirse el yo y la realidad externa. De esta carencia, de esta búsqueda existencial y cognoscitiva, surge el símbolo modernista y otros recursos expre-

sivos" (Schopf, 1986, 14). The first major poet to break completely with *modernismo* and move deliberately towards the foundation of Vanguardism, Vicente Huidobro, picks up this heritage in his major poem *Altazor* (1931, but begun as early as 1919), where *Altazor* himself is described as an "animal metafísico cargado de congojas" (Huidobro, 1976, I, 393). Already in the preface to *Adán* (1916) Huidobro has written of his "enorme angustia filosófica" and his "gran dolor metafísico" (189). The main imagery of the poem, especially in its early part, revolves around the concept of a "fall" into solitude, "naufragio", emptiness and anguish. Initially, Huidobro seems to have had, like Darío before him and Paz after him, some degree of confidence in the redemptive power of the creative imagination. De Costa has shown that, having rejected *modernista* diction ("Basta señora arpa de las bellas imágenes", Huidobro, 1976, I, 406) Huidobro aspired to create a new pattern of *creacionista* imagery which would, like the word of God, produce a liberation from *congoja*. But the attempt failed (De Costa, 1981, 35; 1984, 161).

At the beginning of Vanguardism in the 1920s, that failure lay in the future. It is important to emphasize that there is a palpable difference of mood between early Vanguardism and the full tide of the movement in the next decade. Gustav Siebenmann perceives clearly that "Las vanguardias de los años 10 y 20 eran más bien estéticas, las de los años 30 se hicieron cada vez más ideológicas" (Siebenmann, 1977, 211). But this is not the whole story. As we read through the manifestos of the period of the "ismos" collected by Verani, Collazos, Schwartz and Osorio, we hear a tone of youthful optimism, vitality, even euphoria: a sense of liberation. Thus the *Estridentista* manifesto of Manuel Maples Arce (1923) insists on "un arte nuevo, juvenil, entusiasta y palpitante" (Verani, 1990, 94). The previous year in Puerto Rico there had appeared, characteristically, a "Manifiesto euforista" (ibid., 115–16) aimed at "la juventud americana" and calling for "gestos seguros y potentes en nuestra literatura falsificada y rala." "Cantemos a lo fuerte y lo útil", the author, Tomás Batista, proclaims "Fortalezcamos nuestras almas entumecidas" (ibid., 115). A similar spirit is discernible in Borges's *ultraísta* manifestos. It derives in large part from the notion that poetry should reflect what Jaime Torres Bodet, in "La poesía nueva" (1928 published in the Mexican Vanguardist magazine *Contemporáneos*), called "el espíritu de la vida moderna ... la intensidad del pensamiento actual" (ibid., 99). We find much the same insistence on the need for poetry to incorporate "la fisonomía peculiar del tiempo que vivimos" in Jorge Mañach's 1927 article "Vanguardismo" (ibid., 133). One of the most striking manifestos is Oliverio Girondo's "Manifiesto *Martín Fierro*" (1924; Schwartz, 2002, 142–3). After accusing the public of "impermeabilidad hipopotámica" and the younger generation of cultural paralysis, Girondo proclaims "nos hallamos en presencia de una NUEVA SENSIBILIDAD y de una NUEVA COMPRENSIÓN, que, al ponernos de acuerdo con nosotros mismos, nos descubre panoramas insospechadas y nuevos medios y

formas de expresión" (ibid., 142). Like other Vanguardists, Gironde calls for "pupilas actuales" and "un acento contemporáneo" (ibid.). Masiello (1986, 71) is right to contradict those earlier critics who were dismissive of Gironde's manifesto and to insist that "merece especial consideración". But she accepts Gironde's affirmations at their face value as offering "una forma nueva de discurso para la tradición literaria argentina" (ibid.) without really considering whether the "programa de acción" (ibid., 72) which Gironde proposes was followed through, except perhaps in parts of his own poetic work. Although he advocates modernity, novelty and *americanismo*, awareness of tradition as well as openness to European influences, Gironde signally fails to make clear what kind of world-view underlay the new sensibility whose existence he proclaims. Leland correctly points out that the world of almost ludic confidence to which Gironde's manifesto belongs collapsed in 1930. Thereafter, he asserts "The existential concerns operating fitfully within much of the work of the Generation of 1922 became central" (Leland, 1986, 153). It is hardly surprising therefore to find del Corro asserting that by 1937 Gironde had become "un hombre atormentado" (63). This underlines the fact that one of the most striking features of these early Vanguardist manifestos is the complete absence of any significant attempt to define or analyse the "modern spirit", or "new sensibility" which Vanguardist poetry was supposed to express. It seems to have been ingenuously taken for granted, by Gironde among many others, that (as, for example, Marinetti and the Futurists in Italy had proclaimed) modernity and especially modern technology were in themselves automatically exciting, positive, vital and appealing to the young. Thus Borges in "Al margen de la moderna lírica" (1920; Verani, 1990, 250) could assert that *ultraísmo* "representa el esfuerzo del poeta para expresar la milenaria juventud de la vida". The *modernista* realization that the "enigma", the mystery of things, was not going to give way, as Darío at one stage hoped, to a rebirth of the ideal, was temporarily forgotten.

Initially, the desire to have done with the past, to march ahead with the times, to abandon what seemed to be a false and outmoded poetic tradition, led young poets and writers to believe that the result would inevitably be "un arte constructivo, afirmativo, eficaz", as Martí Casanovas declared in "Arte nuevo" (1927; Verani, 1990, 137), published in Cuba's more or less Vanguardist magazine *Revista de Avance*. It took time for it to be understood that the "espíritu de la época" was to reveal itself to be neither constructive nor affirmative. What was thought to be a moment of spiritual renovation, potentially productive of new, possibly "American" values, turned out to be a further moment of crisis. Few examples are more illustrative of the misplaced optimism of the early *vanguardistas* than José Carlos Mariátegui's "Arte, revolución y decadencia" published in *Amauta* in 1926. The article begins with a fundamental affirmation. Vanguardism is not just characterized by technical innovation: "La técnica nueva debe corresponder a un espíritu

nuevo también" (Verani, 1990, 182). Out of the anarchy of the "ismos" will arise a "reconstrucción" explicitly associated with political change.

The figure who courageously attempted to prick the bubble of early Vanguardist euphoria was César Vallejo. In characteristically far-sighted articles published between 1926 and 1930 (Verani, 1990, 190–9), "Poesía nueva", "Contra el secreto profesional" and "Autopsia del superrealismo", he took up, like Mariátegui, the relationship between "poesía nueva" and "sensibilidad nueva" in order to assert categorically that in the period of the "ismos" that link had been lost. What Vallejo called the "timbre humano", the "latido vital y sincero" of true poetry, had disappeared, he declared, amid a welter of attempts simply to renovate the poetic medium, to modernize diction and symbolism (all, in his view, derivative from European models). No one in Latin America, he affirmed roundly in 1927 ("Contra el secreto profesional", *ibid.*, 194) was currently able to transmit through poetry this acute awareness of "lo humano". Like Mariátegui and Neruda, Vallejo came to believe that the key to the reintroduction of truly human content into poetry would be brought about by acceptance of "el verdadero y único espíritu revolucionario de estos tiempos: el marxismo" ("Autopsia", *ibid.*, 197). It is hardly too much to say that Vallejo's articles mark a strong reaction against the ideas of Huidobro, which are at the centre of early Vanguardism. In contrast to the latter's notion of a totally *created* poetic reality, a kind of parallel reality "independiente del mundo externo" ("El creacionismo", 1925; *ibid.*, 219) and hence independent of any value-laden, new "Spirit of the Age", Vallejo demanded a poetry which was new in technique, certainly, but which consciously expressed human, social and political insights. What neither Vallejo, nor Mariátegui nor Neruda could foresee was that the political allegiance which they assumed that the new "human" (in Neruda's term "impure") poetry would embrace, would not provide an enduring solution to the *congoja*, the spiritual malaise, as its re-emergence in the three great works of mature Vanguardism: *Altazor* (1931), *Trilce* (1922) and *Residencia en la tierra* (1935) would reveal.

In what follows, I have chosen to study poets who, I believe, best represent the mainstreams of poetry in Spanish America after 1950. If we accept Jaime Giordano's postulate of four overlapping generations of poets in Spanish America in the second half of the twentieth century (Giordano, 1989, 91–9), it will be seen that leading figures from each of the generations have been considered here. These are: Borges and Neruda from the first generation; Parra and Paz from the second; Orozco and Cardenal from the third, and Dalton, Cisneros and Pacheco from the fourth. A wide variety of choices have been made by other critics for their own reasons, as I discuss in the conclusion. For the purposes of this book, Neruda, Paz and Borges (despite the latter's lack of influence) are such towering figures in the poetry of the last half of the twentieth century that it seemed impossible to leave them out. In addition, Borges's views on poetry, and particularly on diction, are so

challenging that they surely must be taken into brief consideration. Parra's *Poemas y antipoemas* clearly mark a watershed which has to be discussed. Dalton and Cardenal best represent the current of committed poetry which played such an important role in the period. Cisneros and Pacheco are widely regarded as probably the major figures who have a more or less completed body of work at this time. Among women poets Orozco seemed to me to fit best into the broad pattern of development which I have tried to describe. I did not wish to include younger poets, partly because of the existence of Kuhnheim's (2004) excellent book on poetry at the end of the twentieth century and partly because I was unwilling to include poets who are still in mid-career. In the broadest terms, my contention is that in the second half of the twentieth century we can perceive several overlapping lines of poetic development. These include among others: *poesía pura*, poetry concerned with the metaphysics of the modern human condition; social and political poetry; humorous and colloquial poetry; "Americanist" poetry; and meta-poetry or poetry concerned with the problematics of poetry itself. If I have chosen to emphasize the second of these principal lines of development, it is because it so often underlies the others, as we can see quite clearly in poets as different as Parra and Dalton, to say nothing of poets in whose work religion plays an open role, such as Orozco, Cardenal and Cisneros. In effect, at the most basic level, we can postulate two major factors which govern the development of Spanish American poetry after 1950. One, as I have just argued, concerns the relationship of individual poets to the existential theme emphasized by Carrera Andrade (1987, 81): "La angustia existencial es el común denominador de los poemas que se escriben desde 1940 hasta nuestros días." Here we can situate Orozco and Cisneros on one side of the issue, with strong residual religious overtones in parts of their work. On the other side we have figures like Neruda and Dalton, whose response is via left-wing ideology and a non-transcendental pattern of beliefs. Borges, Parra and Pacheco represent different degrees of scepticism, while Cardenal specifically fuses Christianity and Marxism. There are, of course, many individual divergences from this basic pattern, but an underlying theme of this book is that the pattern is generally recognizable across the broad picture and useful for that reason. The other factor is diction. On the one hand we have the evolution of consciously poetic diction which descends, in the last analysis, from Huidobro's famous assertion in 1921 that "El valor del lenguaje de la poesía está en razón directa de su alejamiento de la realidad" (1976, I, 716). The result is the movement towards "poesía pura". On the other hand, we have the colloquial diction associated with Parra and accepted by Cardenal and others. Once more there are many variations. But it is contended here that these are the two chief factors.

I am aware that attempting to postulate reaction to a perceived cultural crisis as a broadly unifying factor in the work of the poets selected for

study is open to criticism as using an unduly “Westernized” or “metropolitan” approach. It is, of course, one of several possible ones. I can only plead that in fiction it is the dominant approach, as is revealed, for example by Jesús Rodero’s *La edad de la incertidumbre* (2006) among many other similar works. I hold that in literature everything goes forward more or less together – “tout se tient” – and I am unapologetic about seeking a parallel pattern in poetry. Earlier I quoted Yurkievich (himself a poet) in defence of the pattern which is here postulated. I do not think we can overlook the statement, asserted as late as 1973, of another relevant poet, Jorge Carrera Andrade (quoted above, page 6). Ten years later Ramón Xirau could write in “Del modernismo a la modernidad”: “Muchas de estas ideas y actos que caracterizan a la modernidad se engarzan en una tradición que nace con el romanticismo y son consecuencia y parte de la crisis de los valores universales” (Xirau, 1983, 67).

Similarly it could be argued that more could have been included about the reactions of poets inside Spanish America to one another’s work rather than about the reactions of many English-speaking critics. My response is two-fold. On the rare occasions where I have found such reactions relevant (as for instance in the case of Cardenal’s remark à propos of Parra, or Pacheco’s poems on Darío and Guillén) I have mentioned them. But, although, for example, Pacheco published *Descripción de Piedra de sol* (by Paz) in 1974, in many cases the real influences between poets have been between European, sometimes English-speaking, poets including some from the USA, and Spanish American ones. Parra’s first *antipoemas* were written after his contact with contemporary English poetry. Orozco’s few comments about poetry clearly reveal French influence. Following the example of Alberto Girri, Cisneros published an anthology of modern English poetry and a poem on the death of Robert Lowell. Pacheco wrote poems on Matthew Arnold and Juan Ramón Jiménez and, according to Cobo Borda was influenced by Cavafis (1986, 91). Cardenal’s poetic formation was clearly affected, not only by Darío, Coronel Urtecho, Pasos, Cortés and Cuadra, but also by Eliot, Frost and especially Pound (Mereles Olivera, 2003, 123). These are only a few instances among many others: Coronel Urtecho, for instance, published a panoramic anthology of North American poetry in his time; Carrera Andrade brought out an anthology of French poetry. The whole question of reciprocal influences among poets, and of their relations with one another, is a mine-field, and one which I have not felt capable of exploring further.

### The mid-century

What, then, was the situation of Spanish American poetry like at the mid-century, when Vanguardism had pretty well come to the end of its creative cycle? Vallejo had died in 1938, leaving *Poemas humanos* and *España aparta*



*de mí este caliz* to be published posthumously the following year. Though he was already famous among his fellow poets, his influence was still growing. In total contrast, Huidobro who had been dead for only two years, having published his *Últimos poemas* in the year of his death, 1948, was a spent force, now quite overshadowed by Neruda. Even so, since the publication in 1935 by Eduardo Anguita and Volodia Teitelboim of their important *Antología de la poesía chilena nueva*, Huidobro had been recognized as the pioneer of Vanguardism in Spanish American poetry and it has been argued that his 1932 manifesto "Total", in which he turns to some extent against his earlier poetics, marks the end of the aggressively experimental phase of the movement. We should not overlook the fact that *Lagar*, the last collection of Gabriela Mistral, who represents the backward-looking other end of the poetic spectrum, was not to be published until 1954, by which time it was all but completely anachronistic. Nonetheless, the fact that her verse continued to appear until after the middle of the century symbolizes one of the difficulties of periodizing Spanish American poetry at this time.

Borges, as a poet, had been silent since *Cuaderno San Martín* in 1929 and was not to publish a significant amount of poetry again until *El hacedor* in 1960. He had been a major figure in the renovation of the 1920s, but, as we can see from his *ultraísta* manifestos, his contribution at that time had been to all intents and purposes exclusively aesthetic. Although, like Huidobro, Neruda, Vallejo and eventually Paz, he became deeply aware of the on-going cultural crisis of his time, this awareness did not really emerge in his early poetry. When it did appear, in his essays and short stories, and in later poems, like "Ajedrez II" (*El hacedor*) where at the climax he asks:

Qué dios detrás de Dios la trama empieza  
de polvo y tiempo y sueño y agonías? (Borges, 1974, 813)

it reveals that his life-long interest in metaphysics and his suspicion that life might be best seen as a circular labyrinth, with no entrance or exit, and commonly with death at its centre, were clearly related to the cultural pessimism of later Vanguardism. However, one aspect of Borges's early poetry is highly significant in view of future developments. We have seen that a series of dichotomies were visible in the twenties and after. Tradition, especially outside the Southern Cone, continued to face radical innovation; youthful optimism faced a growing sense of spiritual crisis; emphasis on "el hecho estético" and the central role of imagery faced advocacy (especially by Vallejo) of "lo humano". But there is a fourth dichotomy: that produced by the contrast between a vision of "pure" poetry, which was universalist by definition, and the desire for a specifically American or Americanist poetry which had surfaced in late *modernismo* and can be found in the later Darío, Prada and above all Chocano. For a short time the latter produced Borges's

adhesion to a poetry which was highly Argentine in setting and deliberately laced with *argentinismos*. We can see the same trend in Vallejo's early "Nostalgias imperiales" and in much Afro-Caribbean poetry, represented by figures like Palés Matos and especially Nicolás Guillén. It fell to Neruda at the mid-century to give this consciously Americanist poetry a strong ideological colouring in *Canto general*. This collection marked a striking return to the "civic" tradition in Spanish American poetry, the notion of a patriotic, value-laden, nation-building poetry dating from the nineteenth century. It was destined in *poesía comprometida*, protest, guerrilla poetry and militantly left-wing poetry of all kinds (with a major representative in Cardenal) to have a major role in the second half of the century.

The final figure whom we have to mention briefly at this point is Octavio Paz, whose early evolution illustrates afresh the change that came over Vanguardism. Paz was a latecomer who dated the beginning of his authentic work from 1949 with the first version of *Libertad bajo palabra* (Paz, 1988a, 16). In practice he had been publishing since 1931 when he was still in his teens, but this was already more than a decade later than the first poems of Borges, Huidobro or Neruda. The interval had seen the "ismos", most of the major Vanguardist manifestos, and in Mexico, the formation of the *Contemporáneos* group at the end of the 1920s. Unlike the three poets just mentioned, Paz did not go through the kind of Vanguardist phase we see in Borges's *ultraísta* poetry, nor that of Huidobro's *creacionismo* or Neruda's *Tentativa del hombre infinito*. Santí points out that, virtually from the outset of his work, Paz rejected "pure" poetry and specifically "la posición estética de *Contemporáneos*" (*Primeras letras*; Paz, 1988b, 19), sharply criticizing it in his early essay "Ética del artista". Bowers, examining Paz's earliest poetry rightly suggests that the programmatic poem, No I of *Luna silvestre* (1933), advocates a type of poetry which is equidistant between the two extremes of thesis-poetry and "pure" poetry which Paz had discussed in the essay (Bowers, 1999, 179). Subsequently, however, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and Paz's visit to Spain the following year produced a small but significant group of ideologically motivated poems which show him aligning himself temporarily with Neruda, Vallejo and other poets from Spain and elsewhere who were in sympathy with the Republic. This did not mean that he had broken completely with the recent past. Santí correctly insists that he and other poets in Spain at the time "rechazan el arte puro, pero no el aspecto crítico, el rigor estético, de la vanguardia" (Paz, 1988a, 26). Noteworthy is the lecture "Noticia de la poesía mexicana contemporánea" (1937) given in Spain, in which Paz aligns himself completely with Vallejo, criticizing some of the *Contemporáneos* because they "olvidaron al hombre" and asserting that he and other younger Mexican poets (unnamed) "Pretenemos plantear, poéticamente, es decir humanamente, con todas sus consecuencias, el drama del hombre de hoy" (Paz, 1988b, 136). At that moment he

saw this drama in revolutionary terms, but in the same lecture he mentioned “la crisis metafísica” (135) of the times. It was this which soon prevailed, emerging prominently in “Calamidades y milagros” in the late 1930s and early 1940s. It led, as we have mentioned, to a mystique of cognitive poetry, in which a combination of fully sexualized love and the creative imagination of the poet could bring entry into “la vida más vida”.

The fundamental fact of the mid-century, sadly overlooked by Sucre because of his astonishing decision to exclude Neruda from his superb book, is the publication, precisely in 1950, of the first edition of Neruda’s *Canto general* (preceded by “Alturas de Macchu Picchu” in 1945 in which the change of direction in his outlook was already plainly chronicled). It was followed by the first set of *Odas elementales* in 1954, with its extreme shift both in content and diction from *Residencia en la tierra*. The embrace by both Vallejo and Neruda of left-wing ideology, partly as a result of events and conditions in Europe in the 1930s leading up to the Spanish Civil War and the war itself, must obviously be seen in political terms. But it also attests a reaction against their joint participation in the second phase of Vanguardism, in which, as Yurkievich has pointed out, the “exaltación optimista”, which we have noticed in some areas of the early movement, gave way increasingly to “disfórica desolación, reificación, angustioso vacío, quebranto existencial con la consiguiente carencia ontológica” (Yurkievich, 1982, 361). In the 1930s meaning had returned to poetry with a vengeance; but it was meaning often of a highly disturbing kind. It could be life-rejecting, as in Neruda’s “Walking around” or Vallejo’s *Trilce* XXXIII or even, as at the end of Huidobro’s *Altazor*, the rejection of any notion that language can convey meaning at all. The Vanguardist advocacy of strikingly novel, newly minted images, new symbols, new formal arrangements which did without some logical nexuses and challenged the reader, was adapted to express this desolate outlook and produced the masterworks of the period. But when Neruda and Vallejo turned to Marxism in search of immanent values with which to replace a lost hope of transcendence, the end-result, in Neruda’s case especially, was a return to poetry of direct communication.

This return was not initially confined to left-wing, politically committed poetry. Looking back in 1958 to the end of the 1930s, Nicanor Parra emphasized, in a talk, that he and a number of his fellow poets in Chile were “en general apolíticos”. Yet, in the face of “los poetas creacionistas, versolibristas, herméticos, oníricos, sacerdotales” (the reference is clearly to the Vanguardists and in particular to the Neruda of *Residencia en la tierra*) they declared themselves to be “tácitamente, al menos, paladines de la claridad y la naturalidad de los medios expresivos” (Parra, 1958, 47). At the start, Parra conceded, this was a step backwards. But eventually, he affirmed, it came to mark a turning-point in Chilean poetry – implicitly with his *antipoemas* as the spearhead of change. We shall see that the change in question was not to

be restricted to Chilean poetry. We can plausibly assert, therefore, that as the Vanguardist period came to an end, a split was developing between poets in the universalist “High Culture” tradition of a search for humanist values in a world where they seemed to have disintegrated, and poets who were much more interested in re-establishing direct communication with the reading public, poets with a more down-to-earth relationship with the real, with the here-and-now, with lived experience rather than abstract intellectual exploration of the human condition. It is clear that the primary difference concerned the matter of diction. We have seen that the leading figure in this area, Parra, attacked “hermeticism”, one of the buzz-words of the times among poets of the “Conversational” or “Colloquial” grouping to characterize what they were against; it serves as an instant identification sign. Alemany Bay has shown that this advocacy of clarity and naturalness found widespread acceptance. She cites as characteristic the statement by Mario Benedetti of Uruguay that in Buenos Aires he had discovered the poetry of Baldomero Fernández Moreno, “un poeta que tenía obsesión por la claridad” and had at once begun to write “poemas que pretendían ser claros” (Alemany Bay, 1997, 16). In different parts of Spanish America, and to different degrees, other poets, including Roque Dalton in El Salvador, Roberto Fernández Retamar in Cuba (who baptized the movement), Enrique Lihn in Chile, Jorge Enrique Adoum in Ecuador, Antonio Cisneros in Peru, Francisco Urondo in Argentina and, most famous of all, Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua, bought into the notion that poetry must become much less writerly, and use a much less specialized diction, one that was based on orality, everyday conversational Spanish. As time went on this new anti-rhetorical, anti- “hermetic”, more populist poetry in turn became polarized. One wing moved leftwards into committed social poetry and militant protest. The poets of the other wing remained primarily interested in exploring the everyday life they observed around them.

We can say, therefore, in broad terms that three primary figures were exerting enormous influence, in different directions, after 1950. The first was Octavio Paz, whom González and Treece (1992, 366) describe as “not only an important poet, but the dominant influence on Latin American poetry criticism for the last thirty or so years”. They describe him as setting out to “resurrect or generate new universals, new general and global truths about human experience in a world that has seen their collapse” (ibid., 200). Their third relevant assertion is that “*antipoesía* was the diametrical opposite of the poetry of Octavio Paz” (ibid., 193). Thus the second major influence, alongside that of Paz, was Parra, who set out deliberately to demythify and desacralize the “High” poetic tradition. The third towering figure, was of course, the Neruda of *Canto general*. It is time to glance at these three figures at the mid-century.

### Octavio Paz (Mexico, 1914–98)

Paz was the youngest of the five poets whom Yurkievich (1971) called the founders of the new poetry of Latin America: Vallejo (b. 1892), Huidobro (b. 1893), Borges (b. 1899), Neruda (b. 1904), Paz (b. 1914). He was thus ten years younger than Neruda, fifteen years younger than Borges and twenty-two years younger than Vallejo. When he began publishing poetry in the early 1930s, Vanguardism was already firmly established and Neruda was only a few short years away from the shift in his work after the first two *Residencias*, chronicled in “Explico algunas cosas” (*Tercera Residencia*, 1947). Although in his first collection of poems *Luna silvestre* (1933) Paz was drawn towards “pure” poetry”:

... volviste a mí, Poesía,  
tan casta en tu desnudez, vestida de pudores.  
(Paz, 1933, 9, poem no. 1 [untitled]),

it is clear that he refused to carry the notion to an extreme. The key expressions in this tiny poem are the adjective “equidistante” and the phrase “en la frontera exacta de la luz y la sombra”, both applied to his poetry. As we have seen, they suggest a kind of poetry which is balanced between expression which has been stripped down to juxtaposed images with some sort of rhythmic support, which is basically what Borges had advocated in his *ultraísta* manifestos, and expression which is strongly charged with meaning, tending towards ideology, which was the direction Neruda was soon to take. While on a visit to Spain during the Civil War, as we have mentioned, Paz went in the second direction with poems like “Oda a España” and “No pasarán”, but this was merely a brief interlude in the prehistory of his mature poetry. Once he found his true poetic voice, it was that of a man seeking a home in a hostile world, a man at odds with the human condition and at odds with himself, “sin donde asirme”, as he says already in poem no. 4 of *Luna silvestre*. Words (poetry, creativity) offer hope, but are always threatened, at this stage of his work, by ambiguity or ominous silence; fully sexual love may open a door of perception, but always there is fear of *ausencia*. Trapped between these and other cognate dualities, Paz plainly underwent some sort of long-lasting spiritual crisis in the 1930s and early 1940s, which has caught the attention of critics, notably Brenda Segall and Frances Chiles, and which his most famous poem “Piedra de sol” (1957), with its reference to:

... una vida  
ajena y no vivida, apenas nuestra (Paz, 1990, 352),

(as distinct from the longed for “vida más vida” of “Más allá del amor” a few years earlier) reveals was still casting its shadow. All of Paz’s greatest poetry

is in a sense a record of spiritual travail, a pilgrimage through words in search of something ultimate which lies beyond words. But there are stages in the pilgrimage and the mid-century marked a shift. "Alrededor de los años 50", Yurkievich affirms, "la poesía de Paz cambia de tono y de registro" (Yurkievich, 1971, 217). Insofar as this is true, it has to do with Paz's growing awareness of the limits of language, of the fact, as Jason Wilson puts it, that "being's truth-experience is *indecible*" (Wilson, 1979, 111). This awareness was to remain central to his later work.

Historically speaking, what marks Paz out after the mid-century and the emergence of colloquial poetry is his uncompromising preoccupation with abstract themes: life, being, language, time, identity, the duality of "real" / visionary reality and the like. He was not concerned with orality, but instead with evolving a specialized diction based on exploration of language's ability to express the gnoseological, truth-divining potentiality of the poetic imagination. He was less interested in communication than in creation. Not surprisingly Carlos Magis could entitle his important contribution to Paz criticism *La poesía hermética de Octavio Paz* (1978). Paz's poetry directly challenges the reader. But in contrast to the Neruda of *Canto general*, Cardenal and committed poetry in general, Paz's poetry challenges the reader not so much to be aware of the problems of Society, but rather to be willing to contemplate those of existence and the human condition. Hence in an interview with García-Huidobro in 1990 he characterized himself, along with Borges and Mallarmé as belonging to the class of poets who are primarily preoccupied with "el enigma del universo" (García-Huidobro, 1993, 120). All Paz's important poetry is predicated on a notion of crisis: the crisis of modern man, for which one of the call-signs in his poetry is the word "abismo". And as Fein explains, "all of his work is unified by a utopian wish for the fulfillment of man's wholeness in individual creativity and in the building of society, offering an ennobling vision of man to an uneasy world" (Fein, 1986, 4).

The wish generates a quest, a search for holism, for an integrating and authentic response to the modern crisis. This constitutes the universal aspect of Paz's poetry. As Erich Fromm puts it in *The Sane Society* (Fromm, 1967, 31):

Man's evolution is based on the fact that he has lost his original home, nature ... he has fallen out of nature, as it were, and is still in it; he is partly divine, partly animal; partly infinite, partly finite. The necessity to find ever-new solutions for the contradictions in his existence, to find ever-higher forms of unity with nature, his fellow men and himself, is the source of all psychic forces which motivate man ... [Man's] inner contradictions drive him to seek for an equilibrium, for a new harmony.

These words are exactly applicable to the deepest level of Paz's work. But