The *Chinsonía burguesa*: A Linguistic Manifesto of Nicaragua’s Avant-Garde

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The inter-war avant-garde movements in Latin America were often shaped by a dual agenda: to modernize literary expression and to create a viable national tradition. On the one hand, there was a confrontation with the poetics of the modern: a loosely knit set of aesthetic attitudes and polemics which emerged from the activities of European expressionists, cubists, futurists, Dada and surrealists, Hispanic *ultraïstas* and the *creacionista* Vicente Huidobro and, to some extent, the new American poets. On the other hand, the yearning for modernity was motivated and mediated by the desire to create art forms expressive of more culturally specific constructs: *porteñidad, brasilidade, andinismo/indigenismo* or the more continental *americanismo*.¹ This phenomenon characterized to varying degrees avant-garde activities in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela and parts of the Caribbean and Central America. A fundamental theme of international avant-garde discourse was the “problematics of language,” to borrow a phrase from Roland Barthes (9). Underlying verbal gymnastics was a rejection of conventional representation, an antipathy and/or parodic stance toward narrative and a mistrust of the cognitive power and vitality of rational discourse. Exalting originality as a creative principle, avant-garde writers privileged oral forms over written, the material over the semantic qualities of words, the development of writing more akin to unconscious experience and the unexpected syntheses of disparate ideas and images.² In Latin America, the preoccupation with language was often recast around questions of national or regional linguistic autonomy, and the dual search for modernity and cultural identity was defined in specifically linguistic terms. The affirmation of the anti-academic spirit of international vanguardism and the rejection of normative expressive forms which characterized many manifestos was combined with the experimentation with vernacular language in literary works and the exploitation of the creative potential in the rhythms, syntactical variations and colloquial nuances of how people actually talked. Sometimes these ventures
led to the production of highly creative hybrid works which combined self-consciously vanguardist strategies with elements of autochthonous expression; the outstanding example is probably Mário de Andrade’s *Macunaima* (1928), but there were others throughout Latin America. A humorous and linguistically rich example of this synthetic process is the Nicaraguan play *Chinfonía burguesa* by Joaquín Pasos and José Coronel Urtecho, first published in 1931 as a dramatic poem but transformed in 1936 into a “farseta en un prólogo, dos actos y un epílogo.” Staged three times by the founding members of the Anti-Academia Nicaragüense—organized by Coronel Urtecho, Pasos and nine other writers including the accomplished poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra—this parody of bourgeois art and aesthetic attitudes combines vanguardist strategies with colloquial forms and in its exaltation of vernacular expression constitutes a manifesto of linguistic nationalism.

The dual agenda of the Nicaraguan vanguardistas—to modernize literary expression and to create a viable national tradition—was set forth in the “Ligera exposición y proclama de la Anti-Academia Nicaragüense,” published in Granada’s *Diario nicaragüense* in April 1931. On the one hand, the group’s goal was to “dar a conocer la técnica de vanguardia que domina en el mundo hace más de diez años y que es casi desconocida en Nicaragua,” an enterprise which was undertaken through the translation of French and North American poets. The purpose of the aesthetic modernization campaign, on the other hand, was to enable young writers to “sentir la nación,” to “expresar la emoción paisana,” to “dar rienda suelta a la emoción de ser y estar en Nicaragua” and, above all, to “emprender la recreación artística de Nicaragua.” To this end, the young poets affirmed their intention to create “poesía nacional, teatro nacional y pintura, escultura, música y arquitectura nacionales.” In a retrospective analysis of the aesthetic revolt he helped to initiate, Cuadra noted the use of vanguardist approaches to discover autochthonous sources: “La fórmula era clara,” he explained, “lo original era lo originario” (188). The explicitly linguistic nature of this quest was affirmed in a polemical “Cartelón de vanguardia” which rejected “la retórica, las reglas, el purismo lingüístico” and embraced “la originalidad, la creación, la obra nueva que dicta sus propias leyes, la invención lingüística” and “la mala palabra” (173). Cuadra later characterized the movement as “un nombrar nuevo de las cosas,” in spirit a profoundly vanguardist process but cast within a nationalist framework:

> Y nos fuimos al pueblo interrogando su voz, su expresión, su lengua viva, sus formas, sus nombramientos. En un principio captamos lo más superficial y aparente de la vieja y tradicional poesía popular. Estudiamos el canto de las guitarras nativas, las rimas y las canciones de cuna, los juegos infantiles, y comenzamos a verter en esas formas nuestra balbuciente inspiración nicaragüense. (188)

In general, the effort to renew literary language within the context of a national tradition was a serious undertaking which produced some of these writers’ best early work, including Coronel Urtecho’s “Parques” series, Cuadra’s “Cantos de pájaro y señora” and *Poemas nicaragüenses* and Pasos’ “Poemas de un joven que no ha viajado nunca” and “Misterio indio,” all written in the 1920s and 1930s. The *Chinfonía burguesa*, however, a more
humorous enterprise but equally rich linguistically, was somewhat unique in the avant-garde landscape as one of the relatively few dramatic works to emerge from a historical movement which in Latin America was associated primarily with experimental poetry and narrative. On the other hand, dramatic elements—in particular performance and audience engagement through recitations and demonstrations—were an important dimension of the vanguardist phenomenon. A commitment to the development of dramatic works, moreover, was a significant component of the Anti-Academia’s ambitious first manifesto which included plans not only for a ‘‘cafe de las artes,’’ an anthology of new poetry and a series of ‘‘cuadernos vernáculos,’’ but also for the establishment of a ‘‘teatrito’’:

Abriremos en cualquier plaza o barraca, o escenario existente, un teatrito en el que exhibiremos nosotros mismos piezas de teatro moderno extranjero, misterios, autos, bailelas o bailetes, coloquios, entremeses, pastorelas y toda suerte de actos de actores y títeres, del teatro colonial, del teatro popular y del nuestro. (26)

The gradual metamorphosis of the Chinfonía burguesa from a dramatic poem into a play, moreover, was shaped by the performance strategies which characterized the group’s engagement of the Nicaraguan public in a series of ‘‘recitales.’’ The poetic version was first performed by Joaquín Pasos in 1931 in Granada, to the backstage accompaniment of drums, cymbals, whistles and shots. Reminiscent of the 1916 Dada performances in Zurich’s Cabaret Voltaire, the event also included a recitation of Charles Cross’s ‘‘Le Hareng Saur,’’ translated by Coronel Urtecho as ‘‘El Arenque’’ and performed by poet Luis Downing dressed as a clown and carrying a ladder, a nail, a hammer and a rope. Cuadra performed his own composition ‘‘Stadium,’’ wearing boxing gloves and punctuating his recitation with punches in the air, and Octavio Rocha recited from Nicolás Guillén’s Sóngoro cosongo. Although much of the group’s early literary activity was limited to poetry, in 1936, these earlier theatrical ventures were revived with the establishment of the teatrito Lope where the dramatic version of the Chinfonía burguesa was staged three times.

A closer examination of the work itself reveals a synthesis of vanguardist preoccupations and procedures with linguistic resources of the Nicaraguan popular tradition. Employing the style of the Opera bufa and based upon a traditional Hispanic coloquio, the piece gives brief testimony to the tragicomic life of a petit-bourgeois couple—Don Chombón (also called Don Trombón, Don Bombón and Don Bombín) and Doña Chomba (also Doña Tromba and Doña Bomba) whose only daughter Fifí—‘‘linda como un tití’’—marries a young third rate poet, ‘‘el pueta.’’ The issue of this unfortunate union includes endless lines of execrable verse parodying latter day rubendarismo and ‘‘el nieto garrobo,’’ named Jacobo, ‘‘producto del robo/ que es una mixtura impura/ de la poesía y la burguesía’’ (35). The domestic complacency and aesthetic sterility of the liaison is self-perpetuating; although Doña Chomba fears that ‘‘el pueta’s’’ arrival will bring her family to ruin, the longer he resides in this environment, the less poetry he produces and the more contented with his presence the others become. The materialist idyll is
interrupted abruptly by the arrival of "la muerte fuerte, sorda y gorda," who whisks them all away in her bag. In contrast to the studied and stereotypical verse mass-produced by "el pueta," the rest of the play unfolds in a range of popular verse, repetitive rhymes, word plays, tongue twisters and onomatopoetic play which shape the speech of the other characters.

In his work *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger examines the emergence of avant-garde discourse and creative works as a systematic challenge both to the notion of the autonomy of the art-object and to the social status of art as a bourgeois institution. "With the historical avant-garde movements," Bürger writes, "the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self criticism" (22). Thus, the pervasive concern of avant-garde art becomes its own social status and its forms of expression. In this spirit, the *Chinfonía burguesa* constitutes a comic but acerbic critique of the relationship between conventionalized art forms and contemporary society as well as of the specific linguistic formulas such forms generate. This critique, moreover, unfolds in both the substance and the structure of the *Chinfonía* itself.

The literary theme of the play is announced in the initial scene—a prologue declaimed by actors standing behind and playing the roles of individual pieces of furniture in Don Chombón’s parlor. One by one, they introduce themselves, the other characters and the subject matter of the play: "esta vieja pareja/ con su malaria ordinaria" and their "historia meritoria,/ sumaria y literaria" (16). This is, we are clearly told, to be a literary story. We gradually learn, furthermore, that for the *burgués* Don Chombón aesthetic objects are predilect items in his inventory of personal possessions: "Saco mi alma de mi almario," he declares, "mi alma de propietario millonario/ y lentamente invento el inventario/ siguiente," which includes his favorite object "la pianola Manola" (29-30). This player-piano, programmed to reproduce autonomously a variety of art based upon repetition without variation, is Don Chombón’s principal source of aesthetic inspiration:

*La pianola*

*Yo alegro al suegro sentimental*
*con mi ser musical,*
*soy su perfecta predilecta,*
su secretaria ordinaria,
su musa principal. (15)

Although enjoying special status, however, "la pianola Manola" is still only one of the collection of furniture pieces which populate Don Chombón's parlor and open the play, among them "la silla Paquilla, el sillón Chon, la butaca Paca y el sofá Sabá" (13). Significantly, moreover, yet another piece of furniture is introduced to the scene at the beginning of the first act and with the arrival of "el pueta": a reified "asiento rima," upon which he sits when he arrives to court the lovely Fifí.

The figure of the poet—"el pajarito que sabe cantar," in the words of Fifí—and the language of his art provide the most evident elements in this play’s critique of conventionalized aesthetic forms. The young artist seduces the object of his affection with his compulsive versification—incisive parodies
of the studied metaphors, synesthesias and metrical variations of the *modernista* model:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tu mano cálida como el verano} \\
\text{me da una impresión de pajarito} \\
\text{chiquito en confesión,} \\
\text{y ante la porosidad de tu} \\
\text{sinceridad} \\
\text{se me quita del dedo el miedo} \\
\text{a don Chombón.} \\
\text{Tus miradas cargadas} \\
\text{de babosadas} \\
\text{ponen mi corazón acurrucado} \\
\text{como un puño cerrado} \\
\text{mientras el tuyo está inquieto} \\
\text{como un secreto,} \\
\text{pero tu cabeza está tiesa} \\
\text{con su moña ñoña} \\
\text{y siento en tus piernas tiernas} \\
\text{y en tus pies al revés} \\
\text{las perezas de las patas de las} \\
\text{mesas} \\
\text{y las cosquillas de las ancas de las} \\
\text{sillas.} 
\end{align*}
\]

Gradually, Fifí—“nerviosísima”—is infected by her suitor’s verbiage and mimics his cumbersome analogies:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Pero amarga el momento de la} \\
\text{despedida,} \\
\text{cuando siento tu pensamiento} \\
\text{como un tren de carga en la} \\
\text{partida,} \\
\text{y cuando la ternura de tus besos} \\
\text{tiene la premura de los expreso} \\
\text{s...} 
\end{align*}
\]

The poet, in turn, responds “amorosísimo”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Por eso me asomo por última vez} \\
\text{a tus retinas} \\
\text{para ver las colinas de mi amor} \\
\text{en preñez;} \\
\text{mientras tú, tienes la fiebre de la} \\
\text{liebre,} \\
\text{el recato del pato} \\
\text{y la estupidez del pez,} \\
\text{... pero eres sencilla como una} \\
\text{bacínilla.} 
\end{align*}
\]

The imprudence of the *pueta/burgués* connection is manifested not only in the proliferation of bad poetry and birth of “el nieto garrobo” but also in the disintegration of the would-be artist in this slothful environment of bourgeois domesticity. After “9 meses burgueses de idilio a domicilio,” the poet is
rapidly "engordando como una ruleta" as well as losing his poetic inclinations. According to Don Chombón:

Ya está curado de los pies—
quebrados,
le ha nacido un bigote en lugar
del estrambote
y se han pulverizado los
esqueletos de sus sonetos. (31)

Faced with impending death, however, he still sees art as the hope for immortality and vainly pleads with "la muerte sorda y gorda" for more time:

Dame tiempo de sobra para escribir mi obra.
Dame un segundo para el tomo segundo.
Te mostraré la muestra de mi obra maestra
que aunque me salga mal
me hará inmortal. (43)

More profound than the Chinfonía's open assault on the figure of the modernista poet and the exhausted literary tradition his cumbersome verse is intended to parody is the aesthetic critique undertaken in the evolution of its own form. In the opening prologue, characters designated as actors stand behind pieces of furniture and introduce themselves to the audience. "Yo soy la silla Paquilla," declares the first, sticking his head out from behind the chair and then hiding it once again. This simple gesture disrupts the expectation of dramatic illusion and lays bare the device of character representation. Similarly, at the end of the prologue, in despair over Fifi's announcement of her impending marriage, Don Chombón takes solace in the fact that this is, after all, only a play:

Don Chombón

(cayendo hincado de rodillas, suplicante)

Telón, telón, telón,
mírame con compasión.
Baja a cubrir mi desgracia,
mi desgracia Engracia! (20)

These self-reflexive moves alert a perceptive public to the fact that this is a play about a play, and more inclusively, about art. A fundamental element, moreover, in the work's response to prevailing aesthetic conventions is its own structure. Ostensibly, the Chinfonia is a "farseta"—an allusion to its parodic tone—in a prologue, two acts and an epilogue, scenic demarcations which superficially organize the brief character encounters constituting the very limited dramatic action. Far more significant, however, is the fact that this
piece is a *chinfonia*, a metaphor for a specific type of creative process conceived by Joaquín Pasos—although practiced by others in the group—and described in his essay, “Un ensayo de poesía sinfónica.” The concept of “poesía sinfónica”—as well as of the dramatic *chinfonia* which evolves from it— alludes, on the one hand, to the interweaving of voices in a single composition, as in the initial version of the *Chinfonia burguesa* which included seven sections: “Preludio en forma burgués, andante doméstico, diálogo a la sordina, agitato furioso, moderato comercial, piano psíquico and luna de miel final.” This notion of *sinfonia/chinfonia*, Pasos explained, was intended as an analogy to the principles of symphonic orquestration but without musical pretensions. The non-linear organization of an aesthetic exercise around superimposed and/or coordinated elements is comparable in principle, moreover, to the exercises in synthesis and simultaneity of futurism and Dada. The futurists, for example, sought to integrate in their “synthetic theatre” all aesthetic forms in order to “compress into a few minutes, into a few words and gestures, innumerable situations, sensibilities, ideas, sensations and symbols” (124). Similarly, Dada participants created the multi-generic theatre *Merz* and experimented with the simultaneous performance of song, dance, music and declamations. The simultaneity of the *chinfonia* form, however, functioned primarily on a linguistic level, synthesizing essentially auditory elements—words, syllables and sounds—into a symphony of voices. This process was employed in the transformation of the poetic version of the *Chinfonia burguesa* into a play in which the interaction of voices and sounds is more significant than the limited communicative interaction among the characters. This can be seen by comparing a few introductory lines from both pieces. The following lines appear in the poetic version:

```
En casa vieja
con oreja de teja
vive la pareja
2
Tos.
Adiós.
Sala de Gala
El sillón Chon.
La silla Paquilla
y la butaca Paca.

Tan tán
al zaguán,
ten ten la puerta abierta Norberta, Berta Tuerta
Pan.
Pon
la mesa Teresa
la tortilla tiesa
la mayonesa
la salsa inglesa
la ssssssssssss . . .
Cho
Chon (98)
```
In the dramatic version, on the other hand, lines similar to the second half of this segment are distributed among several individual character-voices which, when articulated with precise timing, create the synthethic effect of the *chinfónía*:

(Se oyen golpes en la puerta)

*Una voz adentro*

¡Tan! ¡Tan!
al zaguán . . .

(Todos los actores de los muebles esconden la cabeza)

*Inmediatamente la voz de doña Chomba—dentro—*

Ten, ten la puerta Norberta Berta tuerta.

(Pasa Norberta)

*La voz de la puerta—dando un golpe—*

¡¡¡Pan!!!

*La voz de don Chombón—dentro—*

Pon
la mesa, Teresa,
la tortilla tiesa,
la mayonesa
la salsa inglesa
la . . .

*Voz de doña Chomba (dentro)*

Sssssssssssss . . .

*Ambos cónyuges a la vez (saliendo)*

¡¡¡Chó!!! . . .

*Una voz adentro*

Chon (16-17)

Thus, the interaction among the characters is fundamentally a linguistic relationship developed through the symphony of sounds which they create together. The collectively elaborated *chinfónía* provides a humorous and rhythmical contrast to the awkward and inane exchange between the “pueta” and Fifí which constitutes much of the play’s initial dialogue. The *chinfónía* metaphor, however, also operates at a more fundamental level. The auditory connection between the words *sinfónia/chinfónia* as well as between *soneto/*
choneto—alluding to the Nicaraguan vanguardists’ parodies of one of the modernista*s predilect poetic forms—in-illustrates, according to Pasos, a primitive human rhyming impulse whose specific phonetic features and semantic nuances are culturally acquired and shaped. On the most rudimentary level, he suggests, this impulse produces constant repetition with variations of a specific rhyme, leading “más allá de los límites de un verdadero agotamiento idiomático,” for example in these lines from the poetic version of the Chinfonía:

Chón  
Patachón  
chon chon chonete  
7  
Don  
Napoleón de los trapos  
Don  
Leon de los perrozompopos  
Don Melón  
Don Bombín  
din  
din  
bacín  
belín  
tililín  
Fin (98)

Similarly, idiomatic limits of rhyme are repeatedly stretched in the dramatic version of the Chinfonía, for example when Norberta the maid worries about her parents overhearing Fifi’s amorous exchanges with “el pueta”: “¡Todo esto lo han sabido/ Doña Chomba y su marido!/ Junto a la estufa bufa,/ como una loca oca cocoroca foca fofooroca!” (26)

As an antidote to academic literary forms which they associated with bourgeois art and assaulted in their manifestos, the Nicaraguan vanguardists, and in particular the authors of the Chinfonía, sought to exploit the creative potential of oral language. This fascination with the powers and creative limits of living speech pervades avant-garde discourse and practice, as in Apollinaire’s poème conversation—for example “Les femmes” (1902), a poem based upon bits of conversation of several women—, Marinetti’s tributes to the lyric facility of the “brilliant talker,” the sound poems and vowel concerts of Dada, the surrealists’ cultivation of automatic writing as a verbal form more “akin to spoken thought” and, in Latin America, the disintegrating verbal quest of Huidobro’s Altazor which explores the limits of oral language and of its pre-discursive modes. In a much more lighthearted vein than Altazor’s tragic quest, the characters of the Chinfonía burguesa explore in their exchanges the semantic nuances of a range of pre-discursive oral elements. Doña Chomba’s hysterical collapse in reaction to the presence of “el pueta” in her home, for example, exploits the plasticity of sounds in a verbal disintegration which matches the character’s emotional state: “¡Kekereké, kokorokó, kikiriki!/ ¡Kikiriki, kerereké, kokorokó!” (27). A variation of Doña Chomba’s echolalic distress organizes the “tertulia de la digestión” in which
the characters are engaged in the play’s epilogue when they are suddenly interrupted by “la muerte sorda y gorda”:

*Don Bombín (amodorrado, roncando)*

Kkkkoooo kkkkoooo kkkkooooooo
¡Así ronco yo!

*Fifi*

kkkaaa kkka kkkaaa
así ronca papá.

*Norberta*

Kkkeee kkkeee kkkeee
así ronca usté.

*El pueta*

Kkkii kkiii kkkiiiii
así ronca Fifi.

*Doña Chomba (al pueta)*

Kkkuú kkúúü kúúúúúúú,
así roncas tú.

*Don Bombín*

¡Qué felices que somos!

*Fifi*

Qué tranquilos que estamos.

*Doña Chomba*

Qué sabroso comemos.

*El pueta*

Y qué bien dormimos. (39-40)

In both substance and form, the *Chinfonía burguesa* questions the relationship between bourgeois life and the fossilized literary tradition which is the object of the play’s parody. In its exploration of alternative forms of verbal art, the piece synthesizes avant-garde concerns and strategies with the linguistic resources of Nicaragua’s popular tradition. The result is not only a highly entertaining farce but also a significant document of the autochthonous current of Latin American vanguardism which can contribute to our understanding of that movement’s pursuit of modernity.

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Notes


3. Other examples would include Nicolás Guillén's Motivos de son (1930) and Sóngoro cosongo (1931); Luis Palés Matos' Tuntún de pasa y grifería (1937); the avant-garde indigenista poetry of Peruvian Alejandro Peralta (Ande 1926 and El Kollao 1934); the surrealist trilingual indigenista novel of Gamaliel Churata, El pez de oro, written in 1927 though not published until 1957 and Pablo de Rokha's surrealist narrative of a Chilean huaso, Escritura de Raimundo Contreras (1929).

4. Historical accounts of the Nicaraguan avant-garde movement which document the staging of the play as well as the group's other activities include Jorge Eduardo Arellano's El movimiento de vanguardia de Nicaragua 1927-1932 (Managua: n.p., 1969) and Pablo Antonio Cuadra's "Los poetas en la torre (Memorias del movimiento de 'Vanguardia')," in Torres de Dios: Ensayos sobre poetas (Managua: Academia Nicaragüense de la Lengua, 1958) 149-207.

5. For a detailed account of the group's translation efforts, see Arellano, 36-38. Many of these were published in the early 1930s in the literary supplement "Vanguardia," which appeared biweekly in Granada's daily El Correo.

6. Although the decades between the wars were of critical importance for the development of Latin American theatre, the literary activity of groups or individuals who explicitly called themselves "de vanguardia" or "de arte nuevo" was normally restricted to poetry and prose. The vanguardism of those groups dedicated to the cultivation of experimental theatre—such as Mexico's Ulises and Orientación—was directed toward the dissemination of international trends and the translation and production of European and North American works; often works by national authors were not specifically within a vanguardist mode. Important exceptions would include Vicente Huidobro's En la luna (1934), Oswald de Andrade's O Rei da Vela (written in 1933, published in 1937 but not staged until the 1960s) and some of Xavier Villaurrutia's one-act Autos profanos (written between 1933 and 1938).

7. For a more detailed account of this performance, see Arellano, 32-33.

8. See, for example, Cuadra's "Sonsoneto No. 2—Leda, de Herrera," in 50 Años del Movimiento de Vanguardia en Nicaragua, 110.

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