

The *Chinfonía 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 *ultraístas* 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 *Macunáima* (1928), but there were others throughout Latin America.³ 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.⁴

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 (25).⁵ 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" (25). To this end, the young poets affirmed their intention to create "poesía nacional, teatro nacional y pintura, escultura, música y arquitectura nacionales" (25). 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.⁶ 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 “café de las artes,” an anthology of new poetry and a series of “cuadernos vernáculos,” but also for the establishment of a “teatrino”:

Abriremos en cualquier plaza o barraca, o escenario existente, un teatrino en el que exhibiremos nosotros mismos piezas de teatro moderno extranjero, misterios, autos, bailadas 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*.⁷ 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 *teatrino 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 Fifi—“linda como un titi”—marries a young third rate poet, “el poeta.” 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 poeta'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

of the studied metaphors, synesthesias and metrical variations of the *modernista* model:

Tu mano cálida como el verano
me da una impresión de pajarito
chiquito en confesión,
y ante la porosidad de tu
sinceridad
se me quita del dedo el miedo
a don Chombón.
Tus miradas cargadas
de babosadas
ponen mi corazón acurrucado
como un puño cerrado
mientras el tuyo está inquieto
como un secreto,
pero tu cabeza está tiesa
con su moña ñoña
y siento en tus piernas tiernas
y en tus pies al revés
las perezas de las patas de las
mesas
y las cosquillas de las ancas de las
sillas. (24)

Gradually, Fifi—"nerviosísima"—is infected by her suitor's verbiage and mimics his cumbersome analogies:

Pero amarga el momento de la
despedida,
cuando siento tu pensamiento
como un tren de carga en la
partida,
y cuando la ternura de tus besos
tiene la premura de los expresos . . . (24)

The poet, in turn, responds "amorosísimo":

Por eso me asomo por última vez
a tus retinas
para ver las colinas de mi amor
en preñez;
mientras tú, tienes la fiebre de la
liebre,
el recato del pato
y la estupidez del pez,
. . . pero eres sencilla como una
bacinilla. (25)

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 *Chinфонía*'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 *Chinфонía* 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 *chinfonía*, 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 *chinfonía* 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 *Chinfonía 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 *sinfonía/chinfonía*, Pasos explained, was intended as an analogy to the principles of symphonic orchestration 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 *chinfonía* 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 *Chinfonía 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 sssssssssss . . .
 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 *chinfonía*:

(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—adentro—

Ten, ten la puerta Norberta Berta
tuerta.

(Pasa Norberta)

La voz de la puerta—dando un golpe—

¡¡Pan!!!

La voz de don Chombón—adentro—

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

Voz de doña Chomba (adentro)

Sssssssssss . . .

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 *chinfonía* provides a humorous and rhythmical contrast to the awkward and inane exchange between the “pueta” and Fifi which constitutes much of the play’s initial dialogue. The *chinfonía* metaphor, however, also operates at a more fundamental level. The auditory connection between the words *sinfonía/chinfonía* as well as between *soneto/*

choneto—alluding to the Nicaraguan vanguardists' parodies of one of the *modernista's* predilect poetic forms⁸—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 foforooca!” (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, kikirikí! ¡Kikirikí, 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)

Kkkkooo kkkkooo kkkkoooooooo
¡Así ronco yo!

Fifi

kkkaaa kka kkaaaa
así ronca papá.

Norberta

Kkkeee kkeee kkeee
así ronca usté.

El pueta

Kkkii kkiii kkkiiii
así ronca Fifi.

Doña Chomba (al pueta)

Kkkuú kkúúú 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

1. For recent comprehensive characterizations of the Latin American avant-gardes in which varying degrees of attention are devoted to issues of nationalism and cultural autonomy see Merlin H. Forster, "Latin American *Vanguardismo*: Chronology and Terminology," *Tradition and Renewal* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1975) 12-50; Noel Jitrik, "Papeles de trabajo: Notas sobre la vanguardia latinoamericana," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 15 (1982): 13-24; Klaus Müller-Bergh, "El hombre y la técnica: Contribución al conocimiento de corrientes vanguardistas hispanoamericanas," *Revista Iberoamericana* 118-119 (Jan.-June 1982): 149-176; Julio Ortega, "La escritura de vanguardia," *Revista Iberoamericana* 106-107 (Jan.-June 1979): 187-198; Nelson Osorio, "Para una caracterización histórica del vanguardismo literario," *Revista Iberoamericana* 118-119 (Jan.-June 1982): 227-254; Saúl Yurkievich, "Los avatares de la vanguardia," *Revista Iberoamericana* 118-119 (Jan.-June 1982): 351-366 and *A través de la trama: Sobre vanguardias literarias y otras concomitancias* (Barcelona: Muchnik Editores, 1984).

2. Major theoretical considerations of international vanguardism which include some attention to linguistic issues are Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Trans. Michael Shaw, v. 4 of *Theory and History of Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minn. P, 1984); Matei Calinescu's *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence and Kitsch* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977); Octavio Paz's *Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*, Trans. Rachel Phillips (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974) and Renato Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Trans. Gerald Fitzgerald, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982).

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) 143-207.

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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