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Conversation with Nicanor Parra about Violeta¹

Leónidas Morales

The day on which we were supposed to record our conversation about Violeta² Nicanor welcomed me dressed in a long poncho. We went up to the second floor of his library. He asked me if I had any Araucanian³ music. He said he was very interested in it. Then he started to imitate the hollow sound of the *trutruca*⁴ and to dance the final part of an Araucanian song, turning and tapping the rhythm with his feet. He stretched his arms, lifting his poncho up, which gave the dancer the look of a ritual bird. Then he talked to me about the idea of a musical that should be like a “collage, a dissemination”, made only from the ends of songs, beginning with the national anthem. “Take the national anthem, for example, and make it end like a rumba, or a conga, or a waltz, or an opera. And they’re all farewells, farewells, farewells. Never-ending.” Immediately he took the idea of mixing the ends of songs in another direction. He remembered a song from Chiloé, a *sirilla*⁵ and he sang part of it, in a very good voice. “Look what happens now,” he said. He hummed the fragment of the *sirilla*, but entwining it at the end with the fragment of the Araucanian song, always tapping the rhythm with his feet. The result was surprising: the two fragments seemed to have forgotten their differences, blending together and

¹ In translating this interview, I have sought to give as much contextual information as possible so that the reader can follow the references to Chilean and Latin American culture that are made by Nicanor Parra. I have not annotated references to well-known figures of European literature. In the research into the Chilean figures mentioned here, I am indebted to the website of the Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, www.memoriachilena.cl, and I refer the reader to that site for further information.

² The interview was done in two sessions, recorded on 3 August 1989 and 2 May 1990, in the poet’s house on the east of Sanitago, La Reina Alta. Note by Leónidas Morales.

³ Araucanian was the name given to the indigenous peoples of Chile by the Spanish conquerors. The largest indigenous group was the Mapuche.

⁴ *Trutruca*: a wind instrument, either a coiled or a long horn, used by the Mapuche, especially on ceremonial occasions.

⁵ The *sirilla*, also known as the *seguidilla*, is an old dance from Chiloé, an island in Chiloé Archipelago in the south of Chile. It originated in Spain.

giving birth to an entirely new musical product. “Look how they move from one to the other, how naturally that happened! How they become deeper as they pass from the slightly picturesque Spanish feel to the earthy Araucanian feel”. He ended saying: “Spain and America: integration”.

This introduction, obviously, was not far from the theme of our conversation. Nicanor was without doubt creating the atmosphere of an incantation. The name of Violet had not yet been mentioned, but neither was it necessary: her memory had already been invoked.

LM. This interest in music, have you always had it?

NP. Always. And it interests me more and more. Sometimes I find myself confusing myself with people who see music as the most worthy form of artistic expression.

LM. I know that you had a lot of influence on Violeta’s orientation towards folklore, and of course you were her literary critic. Were you also her musical critic?

NP. No, no, no. Not at all.

LM. What about music in general?

NP. I led her away from peripheral music. I kicked her out of there. And it wasn’t easy for me, believe me. That was something! Of course, I had some critical criteria. I’d gone to university. I was a friend of Tomás Lago,⁶ who was a specialist, a folklorist. So I was in direct contact with what popular culture was. Also, I had had the same upbringing as Violeta, I had seen the same things as she had seen. And I could look at those things with a minimum of critical spirit, university level at least.

⁶ Tomás Lago Pinto (1903-1975) was a poet, researcher and promoter of Chilean popular culture. His *Arte popular chileno* (1971) was a defining statement on the subject. He was the director of the Museum of Popular Culture.

LM. She arrived in Santiago in 1932. Is that right?

NP. No. Later. I arrived in 1932.

LM. Isabel,⁷ in her book on Violeta, says that it was '32.

NP. No, it was later. It must have been '35. Because I was already there. So, '32, '33. '34 ... and we had already created the *Revista Nueva*,⁸ I think.

LM. That's to say that you were still an inspector at the Barros Arana boarding school.

NP. But I was already in the teacher training section. So, yes, I started as an inspector in the year 1933. And then there are a couple years I don't have so clear. So it must have been about '35 more or less. And Violeta turned up at the boarding school, out of nowhere: "There's someone here for you".

LM. With her suitcase.

NP. What suitcase! Her guitar, nothing else! What suitcase! Just her guitar! I couldn't believe it. And anyway, what was I going to do with poor Violeta? I was a poor wretch too. But it worked out well. I understood, it seems, what she was there for.

LM. So, what did you do?

NP. I knew why she was there. Because she had come from Chillán,⁹ and at that time the rest of the family was in Chillán. I took her in. I took her to the home of some relatives, where she

⁷⁷ Isabel Parra (1939), daughter of Violeta. She is also referred to in the interview as Chabela and Chabelita. The book referred to is *El libro mayor de Violeta Parra* (Madrid : Libros de Meridion),

⁸ *Revista Nueva* was a journal created by Nicanor Parra and colleagues that was read by staff and pupils of the boarding school Barros Arana.

was fine. It was the house of Uncle Ramón Parra Quezada. This uncle was a cousin of my father. And he was a very humble man, very kind, very good. He worked for the Electricity Company. He was in payroll. And he had a very good little house in Avenida Cumming in the centre of Santiago. You never know, maybe we can go there one day. One of the things we should do, I imagine. You can still take photos of sacred places! Absolutely sacred! That nobody knows exist. For example, the house where Violeta lived still exists! The little house of Uncle Ramón Parra. In Cumming, near Balmaceda.

LM. Violeta going to school, to the *Escuela Normal*,¹⁰ was your idea.

NP. Absolutely! Taking her there, to culture, to the temple of culture! Because you see the rest of the family had no experience of education. The only academic to come out of the family was me.

LM. So, the two years that she was in school she lived in the house of your Uncle Ramón.

NP. No, no. In reality she studied and was in the boarding school of the *Escuela Normal*. Of course, when she went out, she'd go to Uncle Ramón's house. That family was made up of Uncle Ramón, Matilde, who was ... a niece of his. He'd married his niece Matilde. She was a delightful, very generous woman, so she was. And then Matilde's siblings set up house there too. Elba, of course. She was my girlfriend and fiancée. And Chaco! Chaco's dead now. And Héctor, or Tito as we called him. Because the other one, the eldest, lived in Valparaíso. And there was one more, semi-floating in and out, that they talked about. There were references to him... Ah,

⁹ Chillán is a town in the south of Chile where the Parra family lived. Founded in 1580, it played an important role as a frontier town and a major post in the governance of Chile during the colonial period. For Violeta Parra, singing "a la chillaneja", in the way of Chillán, is to be true to the values of popular Chilean culture.

¹⁰ The *Escuela Normal* was the basis of state primary education from the mid-nineteenth century until 1974.

no, he had died ... that was what it was like, more or less, in Uncle Ramón's house. It was a little middle class house, very well set up, because it even had a piano in the living room. And it was a brick house with a porch, a corridor down the centre. At the entrance, two rooms, one at each side. They could be used as bedrooms. One of them was my bedroom. Then there was an interior corridor and a little patio on the right. On the other side, the master bedroom and then, at the back, the dining room and some little adjacent rooms. Then Uncle extended it and made other alterations. He even had lodgers because that was the way it was there.

LM. An old house, I imagine,

NP. A relatively old house. I would say about 1920, 1930. But with pretensions of being modern. It wasn't "Bauhaus" but neither was it adobe or plasterboard. No, sir. It was made of brick. And that's where we went. Uncle used to invite us to eat, to have lunch, whatever. A petit-bourgeois lifestyle, you know. Jorge Millas went too, and (Carlos) Pedraza too and Luis Oyarzún.¹¹

LM. Had Violeta begun to write poetry in those days?

NP. No, not at all. No, no, no. That's much later. I remember phrases she'd say, when she was very young, in Chillán. Children's games. I used to pay attention to what she said. She was a few years younger than me, four or five. And I was a type of cultural guru for her. We had a very close relationship, very close. The teacher, Miss Berta, would ask her for poems and she would recite them. And the poetry, "the author was Nicanor Parra". Patriotic poetry ... but I remember phrases of hers from that time. I really like this one: "Viva el Dieciocho 'e Septiembre / con

¹¹ Jorge Millas, Chilean philosopher (1917-1982); Luis Oyarzún, Chilean novelist and essayist (1920-1982); Carlos Pedraza (1913-2000), Chilean artist, National Prize for Art, 1979.

pulgas, piojos y liendres!” (Long live the 18 September / with lice, nits and fleas)¹² It’s all there, by God! In a Chillán neighbourhood. And there’s another one that became quite popular. It’s as if it belonged to the folklore of the region. The main street in Chillán is called Libertad, then there’s Constitución, and they both start at the station. So the children would be playing, and they’d sing their game: “Mi papá con mi mama / se agarraron a patá’ / en la calle Li-ber-tá” (My mother and my father beat each other up in Libertad Street). Imagine. I remember that these verses came from her. And of course since she was very small she had to be putting on a show, that was just her. Because my father, who was a primary school teacher, musician and poet, always put on little literary shows at home, with his children. And Violeta shone, of course. She knew all the songs that people sang. For example: “En una mesa te puse / un ramillete de flores / María no seas ingrata / regálame tus amores” (On a table I put / a bouquet of flowers / María don’t be ungrateful / give me your love). *Pasodobles* as well, eh? This was the era of the gramophone. Everybody in those neighbourhoods had their little gramophone.

LM. Did you?

NP. At home we didn’t have one, but our neighbours did. I’ve just remembered something about those songs I was telling you about. ... The children in the neighbourhood, kids in the street, friends, we all lived pretty precarious lives, you know. Nobody had shoes, for a start. Remember the words of that song: “En una mesa te puse / un ramillete de flores. María no seas ingrata / regálame tus amores” (On a table I put / a bouquet of flowers / María don’t be ungrateful / give me your love.). But this is how the children sang it: “En una mesa te puse un plato de chicharrones, / María no seas ingrata / abájate los calzones” (On a table I put a plate of

¹² The 18 September is Chile’s National Independence Day. In translating these verses I have sought to convey meaning. All the verses are made by humour, clever rhymes and recognized rhythm.

pork belly / María don't be ungrateful / pull down your pants). These are the origins of anti-poetry.¹³ On one side the establishment, all tight-arsed, let's say, and on the other, the freedom of the childish imagination, where you get, "María no seas ingrata / abájate los calzones".

LM. So, in the shows organized by your father, Violeta did musical numbers.

NP. And with her guitar, even then. No, no, no, she was always with her guitar from when she was a girl. And she reproduced the songs that she heard on the gramophones. But also, and this was important, the songs of the Aguilera sisters, in the countryside. They were peasant singers, and sang threshing songs, all about farm work. La Tencha ... let's see, what was the other one called? There were three, I think.

LM. I've read a few testimonies about the years Violeta spent in Chillán and the Aguilera sisters appear as important figures in her experience of Chilean peasant music. Were they only friends of the family, or were they related?

NP. They were kind of related to us. Look, Leónidas, we have to be clear about this. These were communities, family groups that lived there, in Malloa, which is a valley. It was also called Huape. Huape means 'between rivers': between the River Ñuble and the River Chillán. Very fertile land. The families of our maternal grandmothers are from there. They are semi-comfortable peasants, with their own land and above all with vineyards. And at the same time our grandfather Richard was an administrator on an estate. So, that was the cultural life of the community: song, *tonadas* and *cuecas*.¹⁴ Of course, and all the women Chilean peasant singers always had guitars. Not popular singers: peasant singers, who had their own repertoires. The

¹³ Nicanor Parra's first received major recognition with his anti-poetry, a rupture from the past and reinvention of poetry, in *Poemas y anti-poemas* (1954)

¹⁴ The *tonada* is a typical songs and the *cueca* is the traditional dance of Chile.

gramophone hadn't arrived there yet, or the odd family might have had one. No, no, no: this was music that was transmitted orally.

LM. The same peasant songs that your mother used to sing, I imagine.

NP. As well, of course. Songs that my mother used to sing. But of course, that was where she came from. The families from that community were all related and had family ties with each other. Even when there wasn't a drop of blood in common, it was common to call each other affectionately, for example, cousin such and such, cousin so and so.

LM. Even if they weren't.

NP. Even if they weren't! Later we discovered that they weren't. They were no such thing. For example, my mother would say "the Aguilera cousins". She wouldn't say "the Aguilera girls". No: "the Aguilera cousins". That was a way that people in the region had of, how could I put it, of connecting. And anyway those relationships between those families were real family bonds. For example, Viola used to go to the Aguilera's house for the summer. And the Aguileras especially welcomed her because of her musical talents, her character. Because from when she was a child, she was as bright as a button, as my mother would say. And she learned her first songs from the Aguilera sisters.

LM. At eight or ten years old, more or less.

NP. Exactly. And so did Hilda. Because they sang as a duet. Hilda was a couple of years older. At the same time, the boys formed another duet, so that was Roberto and Eduardo. But they didn't have much to do with the countryside. No, they worked in the outskirts of the towns.

They did their apprenticeship in the popular life of the suburbs, playing gigs, messing about, as they say.

LM. And in the summer, eating grapes, I'm sure.

NP. Well, in summer, not only eating grapes, but also drinking sweet chicha,¹⁵ from ...

LM. From a tap.

NP. A tap, was that what they called it?

LM. I think so.

NP. We said pipe. Everybody had their pipe. And, of course, at the least oversight of the owners of those pipes stacked up, in the bodegas, you got your mouth round a pipe, and sucked in the *chicha*. We were often strewn there lying around the pipes, blind drunk. Because the *chicha* was too good, and when you got yourself a pipe you didn't want to let it go. And it wasn't only with *chicha*, but also with *chichón*, which is stronger, and also the wine. There were pipes with wine that nobody controlled and all half opened so that the barrel could breathe.

LM. For the fermentation, of course.

NP. During the fermentation process. Well, that was the life of poor children. I didn't take part in it much. I was already going to school. I already had other habits and other projects. I

¹⁵ Chicha, fermented grape juice.

didn't enjoy my childhood the way those devils did, Violeta and Roberto,¹⁶ I mean. Now, you can see in Roberto's language, in the vitality of that language, what was happening at that time.

LM. However, it was many years before Violeta rediscovered the language of her childhood and opened up to the world of folklore.

NP. She had repressed it. But one day she had a revelation. In Mac-Iver 22, where I was living at the time. I had just come back from England and it seems that the kids had grown up.

LM. So when was that?

NP. I came back in '51, so this could have been in '52, because my *Antipoemas* hadn't come out yet. But one day she turned up in the apartment I had there. It was an apartment with two rooms. Late one day, late. We didn't see each other very much. I had just got back to Chile from England with Inga.¹⁷

LM. The Swedish woman.

NP. The Swedish woman. And Inga hadn't taken to Violeta very well. Because Violeta was a bit of a disaster. In her personal appearance, you see? But that time I was alone. I was working, reading. At that time my interest was in the poetic counterpoint of Taguada and don Javier de la Rosa.¹⁸ I wanted to do an edition of that counterpoint and complete it.

¹⁶ Roberto Parra (1921–95), younger brother of Nicanor and Violeta. He was a musician and a popular poet, becoming most famous later in life for *Las décimas de la Negra Ester* (1980), which became the source for the internationally acclaimed play *La Negra Ester* (1988) directed by Andrés Pérez (1951-2002) with his company Gran Circo Teatro.

¹⁷ Inga Palmen, Nicanor Parra's second wife.

¹⁸ This refers to the *mulato* Taguada and Don Javier de la Rosa who legend has it were engaged in a duel of improvised poetry, a *paya* or counterpoint performed in quatrains, in 1790. It was put into writing by the poet Nicasio García in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

LM. Complete it?

NP. With other verses that I was adding, that I was improvising. I wanted to see if something could be done with it, if it could all be put on record, from the standpoint of the twentieth century, in a higher level literary work based on the document from the nineteenth century. It was a project that never materialized ever. That was the idea at that time. And that was when Violeta turned up. I think she realized that I wasn't paying her any attention and she asked, "What are you doing?" I don't think I took my glasses off and just sat there. I said, "I'm in the middle of some very difficult work". "And what does it consist of, that work?" she said, a bit annoyed. So I explained it to her and I read her some quatrains of the counterpoint, which she didn't know. "So this is what you're studying?" she said. I think that when she said that there was a type of revelation. "Yes," I said "why are you asking?" "Wait a minute," she said "I'll be back in a while". She left and came back a couple of hours later with a huge quantity of verses. A huge quantity. All wonderful. Excellent. "Study that," she said.

LM. She'd been writing them for a while.

NP. No! She wrote them there and then!

LM. In an hour?

NP. In an hour! In a couple of hours! The verses sprang from her like water from a spring, to quote Martín Fierro.¹⁹ So she gives me these verses and I take off my glasses, stand up and say, "Violeta, for God's sake ...who wrote this?" "Who do you think wrote it?" "We have to talk

¹⁹ Martín Fierro is the eponymous *gaucho* hero of an epic poem by the Argentine poet José Hernández (1834 – 86). It was originally published in two parts: *El gaucho Martín Fierro* (1872) and *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* (1879). Early in the poem, Martín Fierro says how uneducated he is but how the verses still flow from him like water from a spring.

about this stuff,” I said. “Let’s see, let’s talk. Because you see that these are quatrains. But the most important thing is the *décima*”.²⁰ “And what’s that?” she says. “What are *décimas*?” I gave her an example of a *décima*. I had my books, my bibliography. I was studying popular Chilean poetry. I knew the Chilean folklorists from the beginning of the century. So I was well equipped. And I say to her, “So, let’s have a look at *décimas*”. The person that had studied what was called the “vulgar poetry” of Chile was a man called Rodolfo Lenz.²¹ So I read her a few *décimas*, and Violeta says to me, “but they’re the songs drunks sing”. That was her response. “What drunks?” I say. “What do you mean what drunks! The drunks in Chillán!” she says. “Well, and do they have music?” “Yes, they’re the songs drunks sing,” she said, and she began to sing. I said, “Okay, now what we have to do is get a guitar”. I didn’t have one at that moment. And she came back two or three days later with what she had put together. Then we began to study the forms of popular Chilean poetry, the verses to the human, to the divine, verses for the end of the world, the traditional popular verse forms. Everything imaginable. I talked to her about everything I knew at that time, and she got it all immediately. More than that, I’d say that between us there was a communication in the style of the morphogenetic fields that ecologists speak of. I don’t know if you know what that is ...

LM. No, no, I don’t.

NP. I can explain what it is. In some islands somewhere, someone taught gorillas to wash their potatoes before eating them. And quickly the gorillas that hadn’t had any lessons began to wash their potatoes too. The funniest thing is that gorillas on neighbouring islands that were not

²⁰ Décima: ten line octosyllabic verse form.

²¹ Rodolfo Lenz (1863-1938) arrived in Chile in 1889 where he developed research in the areas of linguistics and of the folklore and oral culture of the country. He created a vast collection of the *lira popular*, which is held at the National Library in Santiago. The *Lira Popular* was a series of pamphlets of poetry by popular poets and was most popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

in communication with the first one, all started to wash their potatoes before eating them too. Ecologists call this type of communication morphogenetic fields. And that's what there was between Violeta and me. It was communication through looks, through the tone of voice, through bodily expression. We were practically one single person. I mean it was enough for me to study something for that to be automatically passed to her, without me having to mention it.

LM. Because of the attachment, the respect or admiration that Violeta felt for you from when she was young, I think that when she saw you studying that poetry so seriously, she also perceived something like a legitimisation of a language, of a culture, repressed until then, as you were saying.

NP. Absolutely. Because I'd say..."Study this too". So an enduring alliance was created from that moment. We were in communication before then, but the communication was exclusively about family. I used to tease her because every time I'd go to the suburbs where she lived with our mother, I'd find her dancing waltz, or *guaracha*,²² or singing those types of songs. I'd say to her: "When's this going to stop, Violeta, this is no good. You've got to do your own research". And she didn't understand what that was. But on the day that I'm talking about, there was a revelation and it was no longer necessary to insist too much. We even made trips together. Once, for example, we went to Puente Alto at the south of Santiago to see don Emilio Lobos and don Isaías Angulo, two of the popular singers of the time. Then it became all about the *guitarrón*,²³ about learning how to accompany those drunkards' songs. Because she only remembered the melodies, but not the accompaniment. The accompaniments we took from the singers of Puente Alto. There was, for example, don Emilio Lobos, who sang like this, throughout his moustaches,

²² Guaracha, dance of Caribbean origin, introduced into Chile in the 1930s.

²³ The *guitarrón* is a twenty five string guitar used to accompany the song of rural Chile.

you see. He sang *a lo divino*. He'd say: "Un día que Asuero tomando recreo, / vino a verlo Mardoqueo, / a quien el rey apreciaba" (One day King Asuero was relaxing / when Mardoqueo came to see him / who was much appreciated by the King). Those were songs "with the Bible in the hand" as they used to call it, you see, based on themes from the Old Testament. I've still got Violeta's tape recorder somewhere, one of those tape recorders that weighed more than a plumber's kitbag, remember them? A Philips make of the time. We'd go out with that tape recorder. No, I went out a couple of times with her. We went to the north once too, with a photographer, Queco(Sergio) Larraín. But that was much later. Violeta was famous by then. So, how did the move from my apartment to the public domain come about? Well, in those days I had to go to a summer school in Valdivia in the south, with Jorge Millán, Luis Oyarzún. And when I got back after a fortnight, or maybe a month, all people were talking about in Santiago was Violeta Parra!

LM. Folklore had started to make its mark.

NP. Of course. Because she knew it all because it was in her subconscious, and she started to release it. And she went to Radio Chilena and Radio Chilena received her with a bouquet of flowers just about. They made her sing, and then everybody else was going around singing *canto a lo humano* and *canto a lo divino*. Now, this was taken, so to speak, to the most demanding judges. Because very quickly they did a recital with her in the Museo de Arte Popular, with programmes, posters, and with an academic presentation by the director of the Museo del Arte Popular, who was Tomás Lago. Now that was very significant. And also, although against his wishes, Neruda himself got on board and he lent his house here in Patricio Lynch, so that Violeta could do a performance. He had a cold that day, or so he said, and he didn't turn up. Because he never believed in Violeta, eh?

LM. Really?

NP. No, no, no. He never believed in her, he never understood her. On the other hand, Tomás Lago realised from the first day who Violeta was. And Pablo only got on board at the last moment. He wrote that ...

LM. That poem that appears in the introduction of the *Décimas*.²⁴

NP. That poem. He wrote that, of course.

LM. I thought that Neruda had also intuited something from the beginning.

NP. He must have intuited something. But Violeta was a difficult character and there was something else. Violeta put everyone else in the shade. And in any social gathering up until then the centrepiece at the table had been Neruda. But then Violeta appeared with her guitar and quite simply the only thing that people wanted was for Violeta to play her guitar. And the poets became history! You have to understand that too.

LM. I had the impression that in those first years, in general the radios hadn't taken Violeta's folkloric songs up with any great enthusiasm.

NP. Of course not, not at all. But in Radio Chilena they did. The other radios didn't. She had problems. Who was in Radio Chilena? Was Ricardo García²⁵ already there?

LM. He was there.

²⁴ Violeta Parra, *Décimas autobiografía en versos chilenos* (Santiago: Universidad de Chile, 1970).

²⁵ Ricardo García (1922–2000) was a major figure in Chilean radio and one of the most important figures in the popularisation of folk and popular music in Chile.

NP. Of course. I knew some people in recording label RCA Víctor, because she very quickly began to make recordings. There are some very funny anecdotes. For example, I went with her to RCA Víctor one day. She had a recording session booked. Well, she had already recorded her *guarachas* and her *rumbas*, but she was seen as being in the fourth league. Music for suburban bars, something like that. But then Violeta turned up to record on her own terms. And I was there to demand complete respect. And the following happened. The person in charge, the manager, let's say, said, "Okay, Violeta, everything's ready". They didn't make her wait much, just hours, but finally they said that yes, everything was ready. So, she goes in and we were about to do the recording. They had agreed to record some *tonadas*. They had refused at first, because they were peasant *tonadas*, which wasn't commercial music. But I said to her, "You have to be firm here". I was there to support her. I couldn't be considered an authority either, but at least I was a physical force that was present for her. Then after a while she says to me, "The recording's starting right away". "And how are they going to do it", I said. "El Guatón Campos"²⁶ is going to accompany me," she said. "No, I said "El Guatón Campos isn't going to accompany you, and neither is any other fat musician. Here, you are simply going to play your guitar, just like we agreed and that's the end of that discussion". So she went away and came back saying, "But it's the greatest honour here in RCA Víctor to play with El Guatón Campos. He's the best guitarist in Chile, and anybody would want to be accompanied by El Guatón Campos". I told her that El the Guatón Campos should get out of my sight ... That he should get lost! And we managed to get the first *tonadas* recorded, simply, in the style of the sisters Aguilera from Malloa, Huape, from Chillán and further to the south. And that's when the party really started.

²⁶ El Guatón Campos: Humberto Campos (1924-1982). Chilean musician, guitarist, session musician. Guatón means literally big belly, chubby and is a common nickname in Chile.

LM. That's to say, the transmission of authentic folkloric song as a direct result of a process: the opening to the culture of infancy, and from there, to the wider world of Chilean and Spanish-American folklore.

NP. And each time she consulted me about whether it could be broadened. For example, in the end she wanted to incorporate village waltzes, which were also a type of folklore. And at that point I saw that she was so firm, so convinced, that I gave the go-ahead to all her proposals. The last time she asked for my go-ahead was when she went to Paris. So, that was after she had become famous. She was very shy, eh? She said to me, "Tito, what do you think of this little instrument? It's so lovely. Of course, it's not an instrument that belongs to Chilean folklore". It was a Venezuelan instrument. A Venezuelan *cuarto*, their typical guitar. That was the instrument that was driving people wild in Paris, in the Spanish American, Latin American clubs, the *peñas*. They did nothing without the *cuarto*. And she had learnt how to play it. She started playing, and I said, "On you go". Because folklore isn't a museum, it's alive. So, let's add the *cuarto*. Of course, she wanted to change its name, "Let's call it the *guitarilla*, the little guitar".

LM. The *cuarto* is like a little guitar.

NP. *La guitarilla*. She came back to Chile with the *guitarilla*. And so she started the carnival of Andean music here, of music that wasn't only Chilean peasant music, but Spanish American.

LM. The recordings you're talking about, they're the transmission of pre-existing music. When does Violeta start adding in her own work, creating her own songs?

NP. She starts that early too. Well, she was already doing things while she was playing commercial music. I've got a record here of her with songs from the time. The Parra sisters duet, but with music and words by Violeta, you see.

LM. No, I know that. There are also some boleros out there.

NP. Some boleros too, of course.

LM. I'm talking about the time before, when her rediscovery of folk music started.

NP. Well, this is later and it becomes possible only after she's studied properly for herself, and started her archaeological dig into Chilean music.

LM. And she absorbs it.

NP. She absorbs it, she learns for herself, and then she sees that she's able to do it, from that information, elaborating and proposing things by herself. And at the same time encouraged, always supported by her older brother. There's a key phrase out there, that's been published a few times, "Without Nicanor there is no Violeta".

LM. Did she show you what she wrote? The words to the songs, for example.

NP. At one time, of course. At the beginning she showed me. I never corrected anything. On other hand, she corrected me once. At first she recorded songs with my lyrics. For example, the first song with my lyrics that she recorded was: "Cuando salí de Chillán / salí sin ningún motivo / salí a recorrer el mundo / porque ése era mi destino. / Fue mi destino ay sí / fue mi destino" (When I left Chillán / I left without a motive / I left to travel the world / because that was my destiny. / That was my destiny ay yes / that was my destiny).²⁷ The words are mine. The music is hers. Then I publish *La cueca larga* (1958). I was already working on giving form to improvised poetic counterpoint, and I had a project at that time, a book that never happened, called *Tonadas y cuecas*. I liked the title a lot for a book. Well, she read this, and since she had a ferocious

²⁷ The song is "El hijo arrepentido", The Repentant Son.

sensitivity for these things and knew that that it was a good project, what did she do, for God's sake, but decide that she had to start on those texts, and put them to music. And so she suddenly realised that she could do it and she got to work.

LM. Reading Violeta's poetry, and of course the lyrics to the songs, it appears that she could have read some of those writers, some of those poets.

NP. Ah no, she began to see the material that I had, but didn't pay much attention. You see, you have to understand something. For example, Violeta, when she was in the Louvre ... when she was exhibiting her pictures, her plastic work, in the Louvre, she didn't know the Louvre. She was someone who was absolutely self-centred. I had to take her almost by force her to see "The Winged Victory of Samothrace" and the "Mona Lisa". That's how bad it was. But in any case she looked out of the corner of her eye. Of course, modern art was already triumphant, although it was dead, as Habermas would say, and it was all over the place. Of course, she saw Picasso. She saw everything everywhere.

LM. The poetry of Violeta, although it has its origin in the forms of folklore, is clearly modern. That's why I made the observation about the possibility that she had read modern poets.

NP. Well, she certainly read all my anti-poetry. She read them all, not only the popular poems,

LM. But apart from your poetry, did you see her interested in any other Chilean poets, for example?

NP. She read very little. She had no weakness for reading novels either. She read a bit, eh? But more throw-away literature. I don't even think she knew Neruda properly. Of course, she

knew Gabriela Mistral²⁸ from school and in the reading books there was some poetry by Magallanes,²⁹ some of the poets of early Chilean modernism. That's for sure. And also I was always reading aloud, commenting on things, and that passed automatically to her. It was enough for me to read with my eyes closed for all that to communicate itself to her morphogenetically. But she wasn't a scholar like I have been of French literature, for example. I don't know if she knew the name Rimbaud, the name Baudelaire. I didn't know them very well myself at that time. The first time that a Baudelaire fell into my hands, it was a Baudelaire that belonged to Neruda and it got to me, via Gonzalo Rojas.³⁰ One day, Neruda came to my house, in Larraín, round the corner from his house. He had almost taken me there. He had even lent me money so that I could pay some months' rent in advance on this new little cottage, newly built. And so, Pablo turned up there. He'd come by all the time, eh? When he was going to get the bus, he'd pass by my house and ring the bell to say that he'd passed by. But one day he picked a book off my shelves and said, "This book is mine. How did it get here?" It was the La Pléyade edition of Baudelaire. I said to him, "I got it from Gonzalo Rojas. He lent it to me". It was a bit of a scandal ... I think that Pablo had lent it to Gonzalo and he'd forgotten about it, either Pablo or Gonzalo, I don't know which one. So there was an impasse there. And I think that the relationship between Neruda and Gonzalo, which was never great, got even colder from then on.

LM. Patricio Manns wrote a book about Violeta. Have you seen it?³¹

NP. Yes, I've seen it. Very rhetorical, eh?

²⁸ Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), first Latin American Nobel Laureate (1945) and National Prize for Literature (1951).

²⁹ Manuel Magallanes Moure (1878-1924), major Chilean modernist poet.

³⁰ Gonzalo Rojas (1916-2011) Chilean poet and Premio Cervantes 2003.

³¹ Patricio Manns, *Violeta Parra. La guitarra indócil* (Concepción: Ediciones Literatura Americana Reunida, 1986).

Patricio Manns (b. 1947) was one of the leading figures of the *nueva canción chilena*, the new Chilean song movement that began in the 1960s.

LM. I think what he says is interesting. That to understand Violeta's poetry, you have to understand the production of the *Lira Popular*.

NP. They weren't being produced very much at that time. That period had ended. The *Lira Popular* appeared only occasionally. Well, Violeta could see those *Liras Populares* in my house.

LM. Patricio Manns thinks that Violeta, above all in the lyrics of her protest songs, is a descendant of the popular pamphlet poets..

NP. I never saw her with a copy of the *Lira Popular*. They were hardly in circulation. Very occasionally. And anyway she could see all of that in my library.

LM. And she wasn't interested in it?

NP. No, she was interested, and she got to know that language absolutely. But I read out loud to her the whole anthology of popular poetry by Rodolfo Lenz. Do you know that work?

LM. Yes, in the National Library I looked through the collection that Lenz published.

NP. No, Violeta knew all of that through my personal library. And we'd read things together. I'd say to her, "Look, this is wonderful, Violeta, for God's sake, "La Diabla se fue a bañar / y le robaron la ropa, / y otro Diablo le decía: / eso te pasó por loca" (The Devil woman went to bathe / and her clothes were taken away / and another Devil said to her / that's what you get for being mad.). Anyway, we'd grown up on this in Chillán, in our neighbourhoods. "En una mesa te puse / un plato de chicharrones, / María no seas ingrata / abájate los calzones" (On a table I put a plate of pork belly / María don't be ungrateful / pull down your pants). "Mi papá con mi mamá / se agarraron a patá / en la calle Libertá" (My mother and my father beat each other up in Libertad

Street.).³² Or I'd say to her, "Look at this". The *Romances populares y vulgares* de Julio Viciña Cifuentes (1912), which I knew from very early on. I read her all the *romances*. For example, this, look how Chilean this is: "Del cielo cayó un carnero / y del golpe que se dio, enterró un asta en el suelo" (A ram fell from the sky / and with the thump / it buried a post in the earth.). "Mi mamá hizo un puchero / apesta que estaba bueno" (My mother made a stew / it stank but it was good.).

LM. I don't know if Violeta, talking to you, ever showed any awareness of the fate of the culture of folklore. A culture that the development of modern society condemns practically to die, to disappear.

NP. She tried to prolong the agony. But at the same time she knew, she was absolutely sure about the values of this type of culture, which, it has to be said, are nothing other than the survival of cultural itself. I'm going to get a bit difficult here. I don't know if you'll agree with this. Popular poetry, Chilean, Spanish American and Spanish ... what's the origin of all this? It's the poetry of the minstrels and troubadours, the poetry of the troubadours of the twelfth century. I've read somewhere that the process of the development of western culture was halted in the twelfth century, with the Inquisition and the crusades and expulsion of the *Albigenses*, the destruction of the pure men, of the bulgarians as they were also called.

LM. Bulgarians? Cathars.

NP. Cathars. So these are the last echoes of that culture that was destroyed by blood and fire by the Pope and by the King of France. A few of these troubadours escaped and fled towards Spain. And the Spaniards took them in, even though the Inquisition was still at work, I think, in

Spain. So, we shouldn't be surprised by the supreme quality of this music and poetry. This was Albingensian culture. *The Langue d'Oc* and *the Langue d'Oil*. Do you know Miguel ... Serrano?³³

LM. Yes, I know him.

NP. Miguel Serrano shed some light on the situation for me. Well, I studied the twelfth century at some point. But he said to me that precisely what Hitler was trying to do was to recuperate that culture. Because what had happened between the twelfth and the twentieth centuries is only ...rubbish.

LM. Your thoughts on the Cathars, the troubadours and western culture aren't very much in keeping with what the historians have established, are they?

NP. No, no, no. This is esoteric history ...

LM. That's the impression I get ...

NP. No, you've got to start from that basis: that it's esoteric history. But the esoteric exists for a reason too. But be careful. The esoteric takes Miguel Serrano to the extremes. He blindly believes that Hitler is frozen in I don't know what pole, and that at some point he will come back in glory and majesty. And then there's the whole legend of the Holy Grail, eh?

LM. I want to propose to you a relationship between the suicide of Violeta and the state of folkloric culture, with which she identified so much. That identification that José María Arguedas³⁴ underlined.

³³ Miguel Serrano (1917-2009), author and thinker, who dedicated himself to themes of nationalism and published a the *Trilogy of Esoteric Hitlerism* between 1978 and 1991..

NP. He also committed suicide.

LM. Of course. Don't you think that the perception of that culture on the edge of extinction, condemned in some way, could have contributed to creating, in a subterranean way, the conditions for her final decision?

NP. It's maybe one element. I couldn't deny that. That's impossible. Neither of us has committed suicide, but I at least feel in a part of myself the erosion that's happening. How terrible for that to disappear for ever. What seems to have been a fundamental component of ourselves as individuals, of our grandparents, of our ancestors.

LM. And in her case, it wasn't even that it was a component, because it was everything.

NP. Yes, yes, because she never replaced it with anything else.

LM. So, an identification so strong, that it's almost an identification with destiny.

NP. But here we have to make a small collateral observation. Which is the following: you can't think that the culture has disappeared, eh?

LM. No, no, no. it still exists.

NP. It's in the neighbourhoods, it's in the countryside. It's disfigured, but it continues. It continues in street language, in the language of La Vega,³⁵ in the language of the workers. One hundred per cent. And she knew where she had to nurture herself. When she came back, for example, from Europe, and immediately opened her stall in the park in the Zanjón de la Aguada,

³⁴ José María Arguedas (1911-69), Peruvian indigenist author, who said of Violeta Parra that she was the Chilean and the most universal artist, and that her work was "the most illuminating, the most fertile, for any creator of any kind" because of her connection with marginality and suffering.

³⁵ La Vega is the popular market in the centre of Santiago.

or wherever it was, she ... she said it to me once: "Nicanor, forgive me, I've just come from the Louvre and I'm going to the Zanjón de Aguada, but that's where I get my energy from". From people. From innocent people.

LM. Absolutely in agreement with you. I'm talking about something else, though: within a modern society, the culture of folklore is historically lost as a system, even if its remains persist. And the only way to recuperate it, to save it, is perhaps what Violeta actually did, that's to say, transforming it artistically and inserting it into modern culture.

NP. It seems like that to me. Recuperating what's lost.

LM. In Violeta to a certain extent the loss is definitive. But her artistic development wouldn't have been what it was without the experience of urban culture, of modern art, even if it was out of the corner of her eye, as you said, and of course without the morphogenetic communication that existed between you two.

NP. Well ... I considered her part of my own being. I would never have dreamt of closing myself off to her. I repeat, we were the same person,. She's even in one of my antipoems: "La Viola y yo somos la misma persona, / Sí: / no me tomen en serio pero créanmelo" (Viola and I are the same person / Yes: / don't take me seriously but believe me). That sums it up, in pen and ink. Now, I had a better economic situation than her. I was a more practical person than her. I even managed to create a little empire, don't you think, Leónidas? Something that wasn't possible for her. I'm talking about material things. Of course, her empire would have been much greater if she had survived, because she was on the verge of breaking through. For example, she was on the verge of recognition as a painter. And once I said to her, "Violeta, you've also got to look after your nest". ... I had my little house here. So she said to me, "The nest makes itself".

The nest makes itself. ... Of course, she knew that she was on the point of doing something ... I could have prevented it. The influence I had over her as the big brother was so great that I could have prevented it.

LM. You believe that.

NP. Of course, if I had been as prepared as I am now. But at the time that she committed suicide, Taoism hadn't got here. So I knew nothing about human relationships.

LM. But, would she have been able to follow you?

NP. She would have accepted, out of empathy, because of our communicating vases. That it is to say, that it would have been passed on to her immediately. Just because. At least her temperament would have been dampened, she was so possessive, eh? So she never had the least idea that the correct formula for communicating with another person is different, that it's distance. That nobody owns anybody.

LM. Above all in a relationship.

NP. Of course. Nobody owns anybody. And you should be delighted if the other person gives up some minutes of their life.

LM. It's difficult, you know. It's an easy formula, but I imagine her existential situation, with all its ramifications. I don't know how far she would have been able to open herself up to that thinking.

NP. Well, either open up or you've had it. In Taoism it says the following. ... Nobody is asked to accept this philosophy, eh? But it warns: that you don't know what can happen in life if

you don't connect. And if you do connect, we can't be sure of anything. There is a possibility of recuperation, but it's very difficult. That's more or less the general proposition.

LM. Nicanor, do you remember when Violeta started writing the *Décimas*? Isabel says in her book that it was in '58, but we've already seen that another date was wrong.

NP. When I got back to Chile in '58 they were already written. I can tell you exactly. She wrote them quickly, eh? She wrote them in a month.

LM. In one go.

NP. In one go. And in one go she did her visual art as well. She did her visual work and the *Décimas* simultaneously. In '58 the *Décimas* were already written. I was living in Mirador de los Leones. "Admirador de Los Leones" my nephew Angel used to call it. Number 16006, I think it was, "when I heard about Violeta's *Décimas*. Of course. And on the way back from a long journey. On my return I found the *Décimas*. No, they were already written in '58. La Chabelita was right.

LM. The idea of narrating her life in *décimas* was like she says, your suggestion no?

NP. I don't remember. I was always giving her some task to do, that's true. Even on the Saturday before her suicide I gave her a task. We were here in a little terrace, opposite the gorge. I invited her to lunch, on the Saturday. She was leaving on the Tuesday for Europe, via Buenos Aires. She arrived late. Very late. With a present: some ducks, white. And these ducks were tied together so that they wouldn't fly away. So, the first thing I did was I cut the ties and the ducks flew off. ... She was shocked at first and said, "We're going to lose the ducks". But then she understood the situation completely. And I don't know why I did it. It was a kind of poetic

happening. We thought the ducks were lost. Now, I remember that after we'd been there for a long time, a long, long time, all of a sudden we saw that the ducks were in the gorge looking at us ... an unfathomable mystery.

She turned up with a friend, Carlos Rodríguez I think he was called. They came in Carlos Rodríguez's jeep. Carlos Rodríguez was a young man, I bet. I don't know if he was a boyfriend or just a friend. We had lunch there, the three of us. The new task I tried to give her was to write a novel. "We need the great great novel", I said. "Who else but you could write it? Postpone your trip to Europe until after you've written your novel". But it seems that she had already made her decision, judging by the nature of her reply, "You're going to have to do that yourself. Let me sing you the last song". Stupidly, I didn't understand what she meant by that statement. I thought it was the last song of that day's session. But later I realised it was the last one ever. Then something very special happened. The song was called "Día domingo en el cielo" ("Sunday in Heaven"). Well, she had an argument with me, because I said to her, "No, sing me another one first. Sing my favourite song, the one from Chiloé". It describes a family from Chiloé in a boat, "No es vida la del chilote" (The life of the people of Chiloé isn't life). Well, she was annoyed that I asked for that song, but she sang it for me. She sang it quickly and then she sang "Día domingo en el cielo". And she stood up, like a shadow, and the guitar was there ...

Then she went with Carlos Rodríguez to the *peña*.³⁶ She had to sing that night. And strangely, you know, she turned up again three hours later. She came back here. Did she come back with Carlos that time? No, I think she came back alone. Because she got to the Carpa and there was a group of Argentinians looking for me. So she came here. She was here for a while. And that

³⁶ La Carpa de la Reina.

night there was a big party up there. A neighbour of ours, a very good friend of hers ... what was he called that sculptor? That ... Edwards ... Do you remember what he was called?

LM. No, I don't know him.

NP. Arturo Edwards ... He practically owned all this land. I bought it from him, so I understand, or he had a lot to do with it. He was a businessman. Arturo Edwards. A great man, eh? Sculptor and businessman simultaneously, and a great gentleman, but not a Chilean scoundrel.³⁷ A great Chilean gentleman. A great friend of Violeta. They'd worked together, they've even become colleagues and had made a great stall in the Park. And Arturo was there, imagine! He didn't feel belittled by being in that environment and doing that type of thing with Violeta. So, well in the house of Arturo Edwards ... Or had Arturo died by then? No, I can't remember. But young Arturo was there, he'd just come back, as far as I know, from the Easter Islands. The house was full of people from the Easter Islands.

LM. And they were all partying.

NP. They were all partying. A great party, a big party. And young Arturo came down and said, "Nicanor, everybody's got to come back to mine". To the party, for God's sake. And I said, "Violeta, let's go". "No, I've got to go to the Carpa." And she went to the Carpa. And I didn't suspect a thing. If I had even vaguely suspected, I'd have gone there, of course. In any case, I had a last chance. The next day I had some guests for lunch, and I didn't have wine. At that time, more or less, I said, damn it, I've got to go and find wine. And it occurred to me to go by her house, the little wooden house that she'd bought with the royalties for that song ... the black ...

³⁷ This a reference to the novel by Eduardo Barrios (1884-1963), *Gran señor y rajadiablos, Lord and Scoundrel* (1948).

LM. “Casamiento de negros” (“Black Wedding”).

NP. “Black Wedding”. So I passed by there in my white Beetle. And I said, Violeta must have wine. Violeta wasn’t there. Her daughter, Carmen Luisa, was there. She said, “No, uncle, there’s no wine here”. “And Violeta?” “In the Carpa.” “Well,” I said, “I’ll go to the Carpa”. And then something diabolical happened. Carmen Luisa said, “Don’t go to the Carpa, uncle. You’ll not find wine there either. Mum doesn’t keep wine in the Carpa”. By that time it was already half past one in the afternoon.

LM. If you’d gone, you’d have got there in time.

NP. Of course. We were two hours, two or three hours away ... from the shot. Of course, it would have happened later in any case because it wasn’t the first time that she had tried to commit suicide. It wasn’t the first time. Now, at five in the afternoon of that day ... it must have been about five ... I was transplanting a bamboo there behind the house. It was hot. And in the middle of the transplanting ceremony, all of a sudden I saw that somebody was coming, an envoy, an emissary, I don’t know how to characterise him, because he wasn’t just a worker from the Carpa, because it was this man and his wife.that looked after it.

He came out of nowhere, like a ghost, while I was transplanting the bamboo. “Don Nicanor something terrible has just happened”. “I suspect so,” I answered. “Why don’t you take her to emergency?” He looked at the floor in silence. Then he gave me a letter. “This letter was on her knees”. A letter stained in blood ... terrible ... that nobody but me has read ... Maybe one day I’ll dare to publish it ... Because it doesn’t let anybody off the hook. ... Only one person is

saved ... Rimbaud's "Letter of a Seer"³⁸ is no more lucid, no more apocalyptic, no more humble.

LM. What were you thinking about when you said to her that she should write a novel? Did you want to test her?

NP. No, not at all. No, because I was thinking sincerely that she could see a project as ambitious as that through to completion. Writing a novel is not like writing a song. It needs, it seems to me, many more resources. And it seemed to me that she had got to such a situation that we could expect a novel from her or ... anything. I thought for certain that in a novel she could be compared to the great Spanish American novelists. I was sure that she could be better than all of them.

LM. But what made you think that she could do it? What were the signs?

NP. She was a wonderful writer of prose. Ah no, no, no, we have to establish that for once and for all. You have to read, for example, her letters. Or a little book she wrote on poetry ... What's it called?

LM. *Poesía popular de los Andes (Popular Poetry of the Andes)*?³⁹

NP. *Poesía popular de los Andes*. So, there she presents the characters, and with such style! It's as if she had been born knowing how to write.

LM. And also in the *Décimas*.

NP. Well, the *Décimas* are in verse.

³⁸ Arthur Rimbaud (1854-91, *Lettre du voyant, Letter of the Seer*, 1871.

³⁹ Violeta Parra, *Poesía popular de los Andes (Paris: Editorial Maspéro, 1964)*.

LM. But they tell a story, and I'm remembering how easily she manages the characters and presents them there.

NP. Of course. No, I was talking about prose. No, no, no: I'm an admirer of Viola's prose, eh? For example, you have to read her last letter, that she left, that I simply put on the level of the "Letter of the Seer". That's to say, I don't see any other prose ... The adjectives she uses are simple and apocalyptic, something like that. The integration of opposites. Of course, I remember now how the "Letter of a Seer" starts, you know. Like types of lightning flashes; "Sir, I have decided to give you an hour of new literature". And look at the leap: "I begin at once with a present-day psalm. And then, "Canto de guerra parisiense" (Chant de guerre parisien, incorporated in the "Letter of the Seer), which is a long poem of his. There you have it. And on the other hand it has nothing to do with the poetic art he will develop after that. He goes on. He says: "Here I have the poetic prose of the future". What! He was only fifteen years old, what could he say about the future of poetry? Look at the little phrases he sets himself: "Here I have the poetic prose of the future" ... "All ancient poetry culminates in Greek poetry" ... That's the pulse of the letter of Violeta, and not only that letter. I remember a speech she made, a political speech after González Videla⁴⁰ was defeated. That's to say, she was a little Gorbachov of the time.

LM. González Videla defeated? He won.

⁴⁰ Gabriel González Videla (1898-1980), politician of the Radical Party and President of the Republic between 1946 and 1952.

NP. He won? No, then it was later. It was a candidate that lost, sorry. No, no it wasn't with González Videla. It was with ... of course at some point the candidate lost. Maybe it was when Frei won.⁴¹

LM. So the defeated candidate was Allende,⁴² then, in '64.

NP. Exactly. It was Allende. And she went berserk! She took no prisoners then, in an assembly of the Central Committee! And the names she called Volodia.⁴³ She tore them apart one by one! And she said the same things that they say now, how can I say it. The rebels of the ...

LM. Of the PC (Partido Comunista, Communist Party).

NP. Of course, the rebels of the PC. Exactly. The out-of-control rebels of nowadays.

LM. Let's get back to the novel that Violeta didn't write. When you proposed that to her, what type of novel, what genre did you expect from her?

NP. Well, if she did it, I'd hope she'd do it according to the norms, eh, to the canon. And evidently I didn't know the canon at that time. I know them now, after studying Macedonio. Have I talked to you about Macedonio?⁴⁴

LM. No.

⁴¹ Eduardo Frei Montalva (1911-82), politician of the Christian Democrat Party and President of the Republic between 1964 and 1970, at the head of a government that sought to bring about a "revolution in liberty".

⁴² Salvador Allende Gossens (1908-73), a socialist politician and President of the Republic between 1970 and 1973 at the head of the Popular Unity. He sought to follow the peaceful road to Socialism and was killed in the military coup led by Augusto Pinochet on 11 September 1973.

⁴³ Volodia Teitelboim (1916-2008), poet, a leading figure in the Communist Party, he won the National Literature Prize in 2002.

⁴⁴ Macedonio Fernández (1854-1972), Argentine writer, author of *Museo de la novela de la Eterna* (1967).

NP. Ah, no! Do you know *Museo de la novela de la Eterna*.

LM. I read it many years ago, and just right now I can't remember what Macedonio Fernández proposed.

NP. Well, when you re-read it, then you'll find that I'm right ... He says that until that moment, until the moment that he wrote *Museo de la novela de la Eterna*, from which all contemporary literature descends it's said, all South-American literature, eh, including Borges., When Macedonio died, Borges said in the cemetery that his only aspiration was to plagiarise Macedonio, because nothing else was possible. And the sensation that I have about Macedonio coincides with Borges. I had written the following: "Flaubert cannot be read after Kafka". I had said it without knowing who Macedonio was, and I have to rectify this artifact.⁴⁵ Of course, when I read Macedonio, for the first time I found something that could be read after Kafka, that could be read effectively, eh? But everywhere. Well, he says that the novel up to this moment, and poetry, had been written by historians. That the novel hadn't started, that what we need is a novel written by poets. But a novel, how can I put it, where nothing happens. That's the first requirement. Because if something happens, that's history. And for him the poem, because he was a poet too, has to dislocate the reader. The idea is: the reader has to doubt even their own existence. That's the goal of poetry. It's not to tell little stories, according to him, eh? In a certain way, you could say that he is on the side of creationism.⁴⁶ What he proposes is a type of creationism. Things that happen in real life shouldn't be repeated. He doesn't talk about inventing new realities. He goes beyond that, I would say. He says that you mustn't invent

⁴⁵ *Artefactos* (1972). The artefact for Nicanor Parra is a short burst of words that can evoke multiple references and meanings to be deciphered by the reader.

⁴⁶ Creacionismo refers to a poetic practice developed by the avant garde poet Vicente Huidobro (1893-1948) in which, in short, the word is supreme and separated from any contextual reference points.

anything; that nothing should happen in the novel. He's thinking about a novel without characters and without the world. Imagine. What he narrates are states of consciousness, to clarify a bit.

LM. So, a novel that isn't a novel.

NP. Because the novel would also have to say that it doesn't see the truth. The novel doesn't see the truth.⁴⁷ But reality didn't matter to him.

LM. So you think that in some way Violeta could have completed Macedonio's project?

NP. I think that Violeta could perhaps. At that time I didn't know exactly, I didn't have a theory about the novel. Not at all! That is to say, for me the prose writer had to be Kafka, or in his absence, Gombrowicz.⁴⁸ But I wasn't thinking about a novel in the style of Mariano Latorre, or Julio Cortázar, or García Márquez. No, nothing like that. No, no, I was thinking that she would come up with something like she did in music, or in her own poetry. No, don't think that I was imagining that she'd produce some costumbrist novel and that it would be full of peasants dancing typical dances.

LM. If you think that she could write a novel whose theory you didn't possess when you made the proposal, then it was only an intuition that you had.

NP. In the final instance, it was a blind confidence that I had in her. And on the other hand I perceived an abyss, a gap. How can I put it, a work in prose that was at the level of Chilean poetry was missing. At that time it seemed to me that it didn't exist. And, strangely, it seems that

⁴⁷ This is a play on the word "novela", whose syllables—no-ve-la—spells out does not see, so: La novela no-ve-la-realidad, so "The novel does not see reality" ..

⁴⁸ Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969), Polish-born Argentine writer.

she had already made her decision and as I said before, she put the ball back in my court. She said, “You’re going to have to do it yourself”.

LM. She didn’t write the novel, but what a wonderful story she left us in the *Décimas*.

NP. You’ve seen Roberto’s *décimas*, haven’t you?

LM. The *Décimas de la Negra Ester*, yes.

NP. So you see now three of us from the Parra stable are famous. Four, with Lautaro, because Lautaro has some *décimas* that are pretty decent. Somebody should do an anthology of those poets: Roberto, Lautaro, and Violeta and Nicanor. Let’s see, who else? There may be some things around by Eduardo too. That would make five, imagine that. It must have been done in the United States.

LM. An anthology of the family.

NP. Of course.

LM. Nicanor, what obstacles do you see for Violeta’s letter to be known, published?

NP. I wanted to talk to you about that. That’s to say, it’s the topic that I wanted to talk about. I want you to see the text and see what you think about it. And you would have to tell me if the time has come or not, because obviously up until now it couldn’t. You’ll see that it couldn’t be published before now.

LM. I understand that there are uncomfortable family references.

NP. For a start.

LM. Not only that.

NP. There are references to Fidel Castro, to Frei, to Hitler.

LM. But the most delicate part would be the family.

NP. The family part, of course, is very harsh. Nobody escapes. The only one who's saved is me. "Except one," she says at the end of the letter. She tears everybody apart, except one. There are judgements on relatives who are still alive. Judgements on her children, named explicitly. These are judgements, how can I put it, from the grave ... Well, if you want, I'll go and get the letter, you read it and we'll see what you think of it. Eh?

LM. Very well.⁴⁹

Translated by Catherine Boyle

⁴⁹ To this date, the letter has not been published.