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Las Hojas Sueltas: Nineteenth-Century Chilean Popular Poetry

Ericka Verba

In the *Poverty of Progress*, E.B. Burns makes a compelling argument that the study of the intense cultural conflicts between the elites and the folk in nineteenth-century Latin America will lead to a greater understanding of the process and effects of that series of economic, political and social changes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries commonly referred to it as "modernization". It will also "require the mastery of new sources."¹ What follows is a preliminary exploration into one source that, while not strictly new, has yet to receive the full attention of historians. It consists of a collection of *hojas sueltas* or broadsides of popular poetry, produced during the latter part of the nineteenth-century and the first decades of the present, and conserved in the *Biblioteca Nacional de Chile* as the Lenz Collection.²

In their times, these broadsides were described by one of the few members of the elite who deemed to study them as "literature of noble ancestry that has fallen into the gutter."³ In stark contrast, the popular poets who authored the broadsides were known to boast of their fine and inspired talent which they often compared to that of Apollo, Homer, and Quevedo.⁴ This wide divergence in opinion is evidence of the culture clash that existed between the elite and popular sectors of Chilean urban society in the late nineteenth century. It also suggests that a more thorough analysis of the broadsides would provide a deeper understanding

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of folk reactions to modernization.

The poetry printed on the broadsides is a direct descendent of the Spanish *decima*, cultivated by the courtesan society of Spain during the sixteenth century, and carried to Chile by Spanish emigrants during the colonial era. The clergy in particular played an important role in establishing the *decima* in the mainstream of Chilean folklore. As the songs of settlers were passed down from one generation of rural singers to the next, they evolved into a unique style of popular poetry, *el canto a lo pueta* (sic) or "the poet's song." These anonymous songs preserved the literary form of their courtly ancestors, but their language and content were modified over the centuries into a full expression of Chilean campesino culture. They became an integral part of religious festivals, baptisms, harvests, and wakes in the Chilean countryside.

The distinction between the rural and urban branches of *el canto a lo pueta* dates back to the eighteenth century and the formation of urban centers in the central valley and along the coast of Chile. While the singers of both town and country continued to perform songs on traditional themes, the more cosmopolitan *cantores de fonda* also delved into newsworthy and sensationalist topics — earthquakes, fires, executions, and murders.⁵ The broadsides represent this more urbanized *canto a lo pueta*. Their place in history corresponds to the rapid modernization of Chilean society which began in the mid-nineteenth century, and intensified during the prolonged period of the "cuestion social." James O. Morris synthesizes this period:

It refers to an initial period of social tension, workers' protest and intellectual effervescence that began with industrialization itself. In Chile, this initial period lasted almost forty years, from the mid-1880s to the mid-1920s.⁶

The lives of the poets themselves symbolize this dramatic transformation. As they joined the ranks of the thousands of campesinos migrating to the city, they adapted their talents to their new urban environment, actually inventing a profession where none had existed before. In the rural tradition, *cantos* were communal property performed by *la rueda de los cantores* or "the circle of singers." In Santiago, this circle of singers was broken and its participants became *verseros* or "venders of verses," just as other, less poetic campesinos became venders

of hot chocolate, *empanadas* and cheese. The urban poets faithfully continued their campesino tradition in style and form, but the tone and content of their verses expressed their new surroundings. The extensive and rapid distribution of their poems turned the authors into a mouthpiece for "los rotos" of Santiago's burgeoning slums

Satirical poems about the political struggles between patriots and royalists, *tibios* and *exaltados*, and *pipiolos* and *pelucones* were an integral part of the numerous and short-lived newspapers published in the first decades of the Republic of Chile. But this poetic production was limited to members of the elite. The first printed versions of popular poetry by people of campesino extraction did not appear in Chile until the 1865-1866 war with Spain. As Juan Uribe Echevarria explains this phenomenon:

The war brought about the meeting of elite and popular poetry. The evolutionary process of satirical journalism and the unanimous reaction of public opinion created a conducive environment for the appearance of the first broadsides of popular poetry commenting on current events.⁷

This first batch of patriotic broadsides were printed on sheets of paper 26cm and 38cm on small presses with worn out keys. As their popularity expanded, so did their size— to 54cm by 38cm— and their number of editions, with more successful broadsides printed in runs of up to 3,000 copies. Each sheet comprised four to eight poems, and any left-over spaces were filled with the lyrics of traditional folk songs. The poet's name or a pseudonym almost always appeared at the bottom of the page, and many included an address as well. The broadsides' illustrations fall into two categories. The first consisted of pre-fabricated imprints left over at the printers from some novel or almanac, often as not with no relationship to the themes of the poems they accompanied. Others were decorated with crude and expressionist imprints carved out of wood or lead and commissioned from a folk artist by the poet. Many broadsides were decorated with a combination of both styles.

From their first appearance in 1865 to their eventual decline in the first part of the twentieth century, the *hojas sueltas* were a regular feature of the markets, train stations, and other popular gathering places of Santiago. This commerce in verse extended well beyond the capital, as

poetry peddlers traveled up and down the entire length of Chile on the newly constructed railroad lines. Broadsides were hawked on streets and trains by the poets themselves, by a young *versero*, or by newspaper vendors. They were advertised by calling out their most sensationalist title: "The husband who cut off his wife's head," "The miraculous boy for Coltauco," "The milk-cow with three heads," "The mule who gave birth in Chimbarongo," etc.⁸ Rodolfo Lenz, renowned collector and scholar of this genre, likened the *hojas sueltas* to a supplement from a modern newspaper: "they come out almost exclusively to publicize some extraordinary event, a brutal assassination, an accident, the execution of some criminal, etc."⁹

What little biographical information is known about the popular poets themselves comes to us from the testimony of their contemporaries, or, as is more often the case, from their autobiographical *versos por saludo* or "verses of greeting." The vast majority were male and of campesino extraction. Many also claimed to have been previously employed in some other profession—miner, share-cropper, shoe-maker, artisan, railroad worker, soldier, or shop-keeper, to name a few. It appears that some of the poets were physically incapacitated for any office besides that of poet, and more than one had the title "the blind man" before their names. Some poets were also singers and regularly performed their verses in the popular taverns of Santiago, while those less musically-inclined confined their poetic activities to the printed page. The constant stream of published flattery and insult that they threw back and forth at one another shows the poets to have been in close contact, and one study implies that they had even formed a *gremio* or union.¹⁰

Perhaps a more detailed description of Bernardino Guajardo, the most famous and oldest of the nineteenth century popular poets, can serve as an archetype of the plebeian bards. Zorobabel Rodriguez, a contemporary of Bernardino, wrote in 1873:

He was tall, skinny, blind in one eye and not too good in the other. . . he was around 55 years old and could always be found with a collection of his works under his arm. He sold them for two cents each and sometimes sold up to a peso in a day. He lived with his family.¹¹

Another contemporary, Pedro Balmaceda Toro, captured the poet's popularity:

The announcement of a new broadside by Guajardo circulated throughout the morning in the warehouse district, at lunchtime, and by the afternoon one could see a group of men, huddled in a corner of a street or a building under construction, smoking cigarettes and reading unhurriedly, as if to savor down to the last detail the emotions of their small Homer.¹²

And the poet offers his own version of himself in these verses from "The Story and Celebrated *Romance* of the Life and Adventures of the Popular Poet":

...Yo fui entrando en edad
y estaba bastante anciano
me vi falto de la vista
y entorpecido de manos
inutil para los juegos
y mas para los trabajos,
y como desde pequeno
era muy aficionado
a acomodar mis versitos
aunque no bien arreglados,
me vali de ese recurso
como presente les hago

I was getting on in years
and was fairly old
I had lost my sight
and the use of my hands.
useless for play
and even more so for work
and as since a small boy
I have always been fond
of arranging my verses
although not very neatly
I fell back on this skill
as I now do for you.¹³

Guajardo and his fellow poets included both *versos heredados* or traditional verses and *versos compuestos* or original compositions on their broadsides. The *versos heredados* give proof of a world view still firmly anchored in campesino culture. The *versos compuestos* reveal how this world view was shaping itself to "modern" society. The *contrapunto* may serve as an example of this process, which was often one of conflict. Traditionally, the *contrapunto* was an improved poetic competition between two singers who challenged each other's skill in dominating a given biblical or mythological *fundamento* or theme. In the *contrapuntos* of the broadsides, the debate is no longer between equals. Instead, it is "the opposition of two characters typifying different social classes or political groups... 'the Dandy versus the Peasant'...'the Yankee versus the

Chileno'...'Balmaceda versus Jorge Montt'...'the Old versus the New.'...'Jorge Montt versus the People'"¹⁴

Social conflict takes on a variety of forms besides the *contrapunto*. In his poem, "The law of deception," Guajardo uses the structure of a Spanish traditional *romance* to expose the contradictions of rural society in a mock dialogue between a peasant and landlord.

*Dime hermano campesino
te lo pido con franqueza
a quien debes tu pobreza
si quieres saber si es justo
preguntaselo al feudal.*

Tell me, brother campesino
I beg of you, with all sincerity,
To whom do you credit your poverty...
If you want to know, if it is right:
ask the landlord.

*Decidme feudal mezquino
la causa de tu avaricia
Sigue, roto, tu camino...
eterno es tu malestar...
¡acortemos la cuestion
tu naciste para peon
yo naci para gozar...*

Tell me stingy landlord
the cause of your greed...
Go on your way, *roto*...
Your misfortune is forever
and let us cut this conversation short
you were born to be a peon
and I was born to enjoy myself...¹⁵

Poems like Guajardo's, "The life of the Poor" and Rosa Araneda's, "The inequality of the laws between the Poor and the Rich" condemn the widening gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" of society.¹⁶ Still others — "The woman with two crinolines," for example — make fun of the *ricos*' preference for foreign fashions.¹⁷

Lenz referred to the popular authors of the above verses as "curious manifestations of the intellectual life of the Chilean lower classes...that prove that these lower classes long to have some kind of participation in the culture of the upper classes."¹⁸ Whether he is correct or not in this assumption, the verses of the popular poets make one thing very clear: they longed for and demanded participation in the politics of the upper-classes. But if the poets were unanimous in their interest in politics, they did not present a unified front when it came down to which party or ideology to stand behind. Devoted Catholic poets, and there were many of them, hated Liberals in general, and Balmaceda in particular.¹⁹ Jorge Montt, Balmaceda's usurper and successor, was just as unpopular to others.²⁰ The fraud and coercion that characterized elections of the era were recounted in minute detail in poems by Guajardo—"The Election and the vote counts," "Report on the elections," and "Election news."²¹ And

the more militant poets condemned all of the parties for being faithful servants of aristocracy:

*Mira los dos candidatos
hoy no hallan ya que ofrecer
pero estando en el poder
ellos son los mas ingratos...
Vamos con mas patriotismo
no seamos ignorantes
trabajemos mas constantes
para podemos unir
y jamas nunca seguir
a los partidos farsantes!*

Look at the two candidates
They don't know what to promise next
But once they are in power
They are most ungrateful
Let us be more patriotic
Let us not be ignorant
let us work more consistently
so that we can unite
and never again follow
these farcical parties!²²

The broad range of topics covered by the poets in their broadsides allow us to transcend obviously political issues and begin to form a picture of what life in the rapidly growing city was like for its lower classes. The *vendedoras* or women vendors, an important segment of the "roto" population, are the frequent subjects of both affectionate and piqued verses. The *chocolateras* appear to have been quite popular among the poets, unlike the "three rowdy *vendedoras* who sell in the Talca train station."²³ Rituals of courtship are revealed in "The Virgin Mary's mailbox," a didactic poem on how to send a letter to your suitor while attending mass by slipping it under the cloak of the statue of the Virgin Mary. When a tram company decided to hire women drivers, the prolonged poetic debate it sparked exemplifies popular reactions to the changing roles of the "modern" woman. And countless *brindis* or "toasts demonstrate the numerous new professions created by urban life.

The tenuous living conditions of the slums and shanty-towns growing up in and around the city are graphically depicted in the popular poets' verses. Inflation, which ran rampant during this period, is a favorite theme of the broadsides. On this topic there is absolute consensus, and its negative effects on the poetry trade are lamented in many a verse: "business is so bad / that it can't compare...buried in poverty / I don't know what to do."²⁴ Urban poverty was devastating: "being poor is expensive where ever you live / no furniture, yet you still end up in debt / and nobody offers to lend you a hand."²⁵ Violence, an integral part of this poverty was another popular theme of *versos rojos* or "red verses."²⁶ And drinking provided an escape from poverty in the short term, and

disastrous consequences in the long run:

*Por fin, por su gran torpeza,
bebe el hombre sin cesar,
sin poder soportar
sus maluras de cabeza
el vino con la cerveza
son su mayor perdicion
y bebiendo en confusion
y a veces, sin ningun cobre,
cada dia esta mas pobre
sumido en la perdicion.*

In the end, in his great stupidity
the man drinks without pause
and without being able to endure
his headaches
wine and beer
are his damnation
and drinking, confused
and often without a cent,
every day he is poorer
and closer to damnation.²⁷

Finally, the public's overwhelming predilection for sensational poems about natural catastrophes and unnatural acts of violence— "Floods in Valparaiso," "Death and suffering in the devastated zone," "Collapse of the Black Hill and the appearance of the Devil," "A daughter that kills her mother," "The woman who got turned into a snake for cheating on her husband"— could be interpreted as coded expressions of the feelings of displacement that "Progress" provoked amongst its involuntary participants.

Concluding Remarks

In 1956, folklorist Manuel Dannemann published the findings of a five-year study of the inedited seven volume Lenz Collection of *hojas sueltas de poesia popular*. Out of an approximate 3,000 poems viewed, the author identified 134 that could be classified as genuine folk manifestations. In what smacks as nineteenth-century cultural dualism carried over into the twentieth century, Dannemann dismissed the remaining poems as follows:

They grow like a parasitical fungus and then vertiginously disappear, as their sensationalist zeal, their lack of esthetic resources, and their fleeting themes of economic and political protest and cheap

and gory police incidents, earn them the passing curiosity of the amorphous masses in the over-populated zones...²⁸

It is my hope that this preliminary examination of the *hojas sueltas*

convinces the reader that the "defects" enumerated above are precisely what make the broadsides a valuable resource to historians of nineteenth-century Latin America. The study and analysis of their "passing curiosity" may serve as a window on the cultural *contrapunto* between the Rich and the Poor during this crucial period of modernization.

NOTES

¹E. Bradford Burns, *The Poverty of Progress*, (Berkeley: University of California Press) p. 86.

²Rodolfo Lenz, "Coleccion inedita de poesia popular en 7 volumenes," Sala Matta, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, Santiago. As I have not had the opportunity to visit Chile, I have based my observations on those broadsides published in cited anthologies and articles.

³Rodolfo Lenz, "Sobra la poesia popular impresa de Chile," first presented in Germany in 1894 and translated and printed in the *Revista de folklore chileno*, VI (1916-1927), p. 108. This and all other translations are by the author.

⁴Juan Uribe Echevarria, *Tipos y cuadros de costumbres en la poesia popular del siglo XIX*, (Santiago: Pineda Libros, 1973) p. 26.

⁵Ines Dolz-Blackburn, *Origen y desarrollo de la poesia tradicional y popular chilena desde la Conquista hasta el presente*, (Santiago: Nascimento, 1984) p. 86.

⁶James O. Morris, *Las elites, los intelectuales y el Consenso. Estudio de la Cuestion Social y del Sistema de Relaciones Industriales en Chile*, (Santiago: Editorial del Pacifico, 1967), p. 79.

⁷Juan Uribe Echevarria, *Canciones y poesias de la Guerra del Pacifico*, (Santiago: Ediciones Universitarias de Valparaiso, 1979) p. 20.

⁸Desiderio Lizana, "Como se canta la poesia popular," *Revista Chilena de historia y geografia*, VII (1912), p. 245.

⁹Lenz, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁰Lenz, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

¹¹Cited in Dolz-Blackburn, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹²Cited in Raul Silva Castro, "Notas bibliograficas para el estudio de la "poesia vulgar" en Chile," *Anales de la Universidad de Chile*, CVIII:79 (1950), pp. 76,77.

¹³Published in Uribe, *Tipos de cuadros...*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁴Lenz, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁵Cited in Eduardo Embry, "Poesia popular 'a lo humano'; impresa en Hojas Sueltas," *Araucaria de Chile*, XIV (1981), p. 117.

¹⁶Embry, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹⁷"Dama de dos polisonos" in Uribe, *Tipos y cuadros...*, *op. cit.*, p.72.

¹⁸Lenz, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁹"Sentencia al Presidente y tres de sus companeros" by Rosa Araneda. Reprinted in Uribe, *Tipos y cuadros...*, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

²⁰"El Patriotismo de los Constitucionales y las consecuencias de la revolucion" by El Nato Quillotano. Reprinted in Diego Munoz, *Poesia popular chilena*, (Santiago: Editora Nacional Quimanto Limitada, 1972), p. 67.

²¹Uribe, *Tipos y cuadros...*, p. 18.

²²"Lo que es clase obrera proletaria en Chile" by Juan Bautista Peralta. Reprinted in Munoz, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

²³Uribe, *Tipos y cuadros...*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

²⁴"Lamentos del poeta" by Bernardino Guajardo. Reprinted in Uribe, *Tipos y cuadros...*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

²⁵"La triste situacion del pueblo chileno" by Javier Jerez. Reprinted in Munoz, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

²⁶Lenz, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

²⁷"Aguardiente, vino y chicha" by Atalicio Aguilar. Reprinted in Uribe, *Flor de canto a lo humano*, (Santiago: Editora Nacional Gabriela Mistral, 1974), p. 88.

²⁸Manuel Dannemann, "Variedades formales de la poesia popular chilena," *Atenea*, XXXIII:372 (Sep. - Oct., 1956), p. 47.