

Lyric and Form. The Poetry of Alejandro Crotto.

In his novel *Los detectives salvajes*, Roberto Bolaño depicts an exchange between an aspiring young poet and the leader of the literary workshop he has just joined. The young man, García Madero, makes the mistake of asking a question about prosody. He knows the answer himself, as he has a near-encyclopedic knowledge of modern and classical verse forms, and the question is at least in part intended as a provocation. It has become clear to him that Julio César Álamó, the *tallerista*, neither knows nor cares about the meaning or use of terms like *pentapodia*, *nicárqueo*, or *tetrástico*. The only poet in Mexico who knows these things by heart is the group's arch enemy, Octavio Paz. And when García Madero asks what a *rispetto* is, Álamó, after an initial confusion in which he thinks the tyro is asking for *respect* for his verses, responds, "No me vengas con chingaderas, García Madero" (1998: 14).

While not axiomatic, there is something more widely applicable about this sequence: for several years now, in contemporary Latin American poetry, verse and rhyme have been out of favour.ⁱ In Guerrero's recent 600-plus-page anthology of contemporary Latin American poetry, only a very small percentage of poems conform to traditional metrical forms,ⁱⁱ following instead models of conversational, language, and objectivist poetry. Something similar might be said of González and Araya's collection (2005), in which even prose poems outnumber traditional verse forms, and the majority of the material included is in one form or another of free verse. In the introduction to his anthology of twenty-first-century poetry, Ortega argues that today, "leemos 'poesía' en un lenguaje que ya no es 'literario' o 'poético'" (2001: 16). That is to say, poetry does not need to be recognizably poetic. *Medusario*, the influential 1999 collection of Latin American poetry coordinated by Roberto Echavarren, states in its introduction, or "Razón de esta obra", that, "Hemos preferido no incluir ejemplos de verso métrico tradicional como los llevados a cabo por Martín Adán, Carlos Germán Belli o Severo Sarduy" (1996: 9). *Medusario* as a collection is closely associated with the so-called *neobarroco* poets, who came to prominence in the late 1980s and 1990s. Although free verse dominated their production, poets such as Néstor Perlongher and the Uruguayan Eduardo Espina did pay attention to form, but they did

so mostly as another innovation in their works. Espina's poems occupy a large column, each line almost exactly the same length as the last. In conversation with the author (2008), Espina stated that he worked by composing *alejandrinos* and then reworking these, as word breaks permitted, to fit his column form. Perlongher, in his later poetry, wrote sonnets using the *silva* form (Bollig 2008: 153) and experimented with models of religious composition, such as the *auto-da-fé*. But in both cases, these were heavily reworked to fit the contemporary mystical and esoteric experiences Perlongher was exploring at the time, not least through use of the Amazonian drug *ayahuasca* or *yagé* and participation in associated esoteric religions.

In the specific case of Argentina, this tendency towards free and non-traditional verse is also dominant, as the selection in Campaña's anthology (2010) testifies. A survey of the influential *Diario de poesía*, one of the central reference points for the resurgence of poetry as a popular form in Argentina in the late 1980s and 1990s suggests that free verse and innovative or imported forms, in particular the haiku in Spanish, dominated.ⁱⁱⁱ The same might be said for an influential magazine of the recent *neobarroco*, *Plebellla*. In their critical anthology of Argentine poetry of the 1990s and early 2000s, Kesselman *et al* talk of a "materialist tendency" that emerged: a focus on both material things in themselves and the materiality of language. If the *neobarroco* had been interested in the sensual pleasures of language, privileging sonic play, indeterminacy, and almost indecipherable metaphors, in the work of the writers included in *La tendencia materialista* (2012), the focus is on the colloquial and the quotidian. Fernanda Laguna, Alejandro Rubio, Juan Desiderio and others use the language of everyday conversation, often full of humour and expletives, and form follows as if naturally from that which is described.

When contemporary writers do use traditional forms, it is often done ironically, as in the case of Washington Cucurto's rhymes, or with significant variation on established forms, such as Sergio Raimondi's incorporation of English syntax and modern industrial terms into unrhymed Spanish hendecasyllables in his collection *Poesía civil*.^{iv} Other poets have developed their own, recognisable but very personal forms, such as the long, drifting lines and ambiguous syntax of Andi Nachón, or the poem-equations in Martín Gambarotta's volume *Relapso+Angola*.

Where does this resistance to traditional forms stem from? I have no answer, but it is a tendency with long roots, going back at least to the social poets of the 1950s (the *Pan duro* group associated with Raúl González Tuñón, Juan Gelman and Juana Bignozzi). But it also covers the experimental and existential poets of the 1960s, including Alejandra Pizarnik, Olga Orozco, often poets associated with Raúl Gustavo Aguirre's journal *Poesía Buenos Aires*. This is not to say that writers did not employ verse and rhyme. Many of Julio Cortázar's poems are in traditional forms.^v He though, is almost universally read as a prose writer. Much of Jorge Luis Borges's middle and later work is too. But as Perlongher wrote in 1992, many poets then wrote not just post-Borges, but also "anti-Borges" (184). Examining the corpus he includes (Osvaldo Lamborghini, Eduardo Espina, Tamara Kamenszain and others), it would seem that formal correction is precisely one of the features to be avoided. Perhaps one might look back to Leopoldo Lugones, with his apparent exhaustion of the possibilities for rhyme in Spanish, and hence his importation of words such as "domino" and "Watteau" for the purposes of rhyme (1988: 154), as the moment at which, inevitably, Argentine poetry would move away from traditional metrical forms.^{vi}

What does it mean, then, to write poetry today in a manner that is both overtly formal and metrically precise? Alejandro Crotto is a young poet whose work is at once entirely contemporary in theme and lexis, yet also marked by an overt formal and syntactical literariness that seems, today, almost deliberately anachronistic. Born in 1978, he is a lawyer by profession, and has published two collections of poetry with Bajo la luna, the independent publisher run by Miguel Balaguer, son of the influential poet, translator and editor Mirta Rosenberg, from whom he took over the company, and who has been largely responsible for its growing list and critical and commercial success.^{vii} Perlongher (1992) noted that while poetry did not sell, it did circulate with great dynamism; however, in recent years, small independent publishers such as Bajo la luna, Vox Senda (of Bahía Blanca) and Espacio Hudson (Comodoro Rivadavia), as well as micro-presses such as Curandera and social projects such as Eloísa Cartonera, have been able to support a continued existence through sales, subventions, and/or grants.^{viii} That is to say, Crotto is at once at the heart of the Buenos Aires poetry scene and yet, as we shall see, something of an outsider.

One could argue that Crotto's poetic skill – the ability to compose poems in highly constraining forms, is a mark of his importance or value as a poet. One might add that the publication of these collections is emblematic of a particular moment or context in the Argentine literary sphere. But there is more. Not only does Crotto write in sonnets, *silvas*, *liras* and other forms mostly abandoned by his immediate predecessors and his peers; moreover, these forms are often hidden, and require some skill and knowledge on the part of the reader to detect. What does it mean, then, to at once display one's poetic skill and to hide it, not least in his second collection, *Chesterton*?

Much of Crotto's activity as a poet is in keeping with that of his peers. He contributes to literary workshops, he gives readings, nationally and as an invited speaker overseas, for example at New York University in March 2013. As well as his books, he publishes extensively online, including an entry on the online poetic network *Las afinidades electivas / Las elecciones afectivas*. He also collaborates with the important poetry magazine *Hablar de poesía*, managing its Facebook page. Most striking is his blog, *los porques de la rosa*, aka words words words. "Blog", a term used to describe an often impromptu online diary or archive, is perhaps too small a word to describe these pages. In them, Crotto offers a selection of his own poems, drawn from his two collections to date; links to the websites of other writers and literary magazines; a large selection of his own translations into Spanish of a wide selection of writers from the twentieth century and earlier, working in a variety of modern European languages as well as from Latin and Japanese (in the latter case via an intermediary language); and, finally, a set of "Antologías", small collections, sets, or even pairs of poems by other writers on a particular theme or with shared characteristics: animal poems, poems with hendecasyllabic final lines, prose passages that are especially poetic, poems about life, death, birth and pregnancy. I shall talk more about this aspect of his work further on, in particular his translations.

Abejas.

Crotto's first collection, *Abejas*, is a slender book of eighteen poems. I would argue that the volume shows a poet starting out from the objectivism that, to a certain extent, dominated 1990s and early 2000s poetry in Argentina, characterized by the careful and small-scale observation of everyday objects and phenomena, but developing a personal style that foregrounds the formal and the literary. The opening poem, I would suggest, is a clear statement of poetic principles:

Frotá en mis ojos menta y nieve, y con las uñas
que hace un rato rayaron de naranja las nubes
desprendeme las costras, rascá el óxido;
teneme de los hombros, restregame
en el limón de pulpas ácidas, y con tu limpio
soplo aliviá el ardor mientras me das de nuevo.
Porque pido mi puesto, despertar. (2009: 7)

Crotto describes the act of waking, asking an unidentified other to perform a series of revitalizing and possibly painful actions in order to bring the speaker fully into consciousness. The poem is vernacular and familiar – note the use of the *voseo* second person – and also more or less contemporary (for the same reason, and also with the reference to “óxido”). Like the *objetivistas* of the 1990s and 2000s, Crotto is describing an everyday experience using concrete language and more or less colloquial forms. The poem and the things described come into being together, as do the parts of the narrator's voice and the addressed other (eyes, nails, shoulders, breath). Yet in a fashion even more marked than Sergio Raimondi's seminal *Poesía civil*, Crotto describes the scene with extreme care for sound and rhythm and with keen eye on the Spanish prosodic tradition. Furthermore, at the grammatical and thematic centre of the poem are a first person singular and its relationship to a second-person other: there is a lyric-I that pre-exists the poem, rather than being immanent to it.

The poem consists of one long sentence, made up of a series of requests or commands. One immediately notices the rhythm, tending towards acute words, itself in part a product of the verb person and mood (the imperative of the *vos* form), as well as lexis (“limón”) but also marked by proparoxytones (“óxido”, “ácidas”). Similarly, assonance and alliteration function

throughout the poem to link sound and sense, at first in pairs: rato – rayaron; naranja – nubes; rascá – óxido. The groups grow as the poem develops: limón – pulpas – limpio – soplo; aliviá – ardor, with arching and interconnected alliterations; before the final line uses a string of plosives to link the act of requesting with the request itself and the subject of the whole poem, awakening: the poem thus performs the action that is described.

Sound and rhythm mark this poem. Furthermore, analysis of its line composition reveals that the poem is made up of lines of eleven and fourteen syllables, i.e. the hendecasyllable and the Spanish *alejandrino*. This, in one sense, a variation on the composition of *versos sueltos*; but in another, we have a variant on the form of the *silva*, the free combination of seven and eleven syllable lines, some rhymed and some unrhymed, with the complication being that Crotto doubles the seven-syllable lines (and indeed most of his *alejandrinos* in this poem can be read as two heptasyllables). Crotto takes the verse form perhaps perfected by Luis de Góngora's *Soledades*, and doubles the length of half of the lines. Although the poem is full of assonance and alliteration, Crotto uses half rhymes (nubes – uñas), anachronistic rhymes (restregame – despertar – a rhyme in, for example, the *romancero viejo*) or eye-rhymes (nubes – nuevo). Indeed this poem creates two sensations that are common throughout the collection: firstly, that despite the actual layout of the poems, there are heptasyllables, hendecasyllables, and *alejandrinos* contained within the poem, part of a scheme that is just beyond the wit of the reader; and, secondly, that there are sonic connections and patterns far more complex than mere assonant end-stopped rhyme.

As stated above, the poem is addressed to a second person. This is not, in itself, uncommon; near contemporaries such as Andi Nachon and Martín Gambarotta have poems written in the second person, as do earlier poets including Orozco, Pizarnik and Thénon. Juan Gelman uses the second person to address those of emotional importance, either as loved (his son, his country, his mother) or hated (the murderers of his son and daughter-in-law; the kidnappers of his grandchild). Yet Crotto's poem comes in the shape of a series of commands, which rather than foregrounding the other, I would argue, reinforces the focus on the lyrical I, the one who is doing the asking.

The poem is also striking in its materiality, in the physicality and sensation being described: the speaker is scrubbed with acid lemon, rubbed with mint and snow. Simplifying greatly, one might suggest that this is a poem about taking a very vigorous morning shower. This everyday activity is, however, marked as poetic. This is not, in itself, in any way unique. It is often remarked that Góngora's *Soledades* use daring metaphors and classical references to ennoble the humble shepherds and fishermen and their everyday activities described (Beverley 1980); likewise Pablo Neruda's *Odas* make elaborate comparisons to stress the dignity and value of everyday objects such as socks and carrots. But Crotto does something different: it is not comparison to something else that poeticizes waking; rather it is the focus on precise and material description, with the addition of rhythmic and sonic care, which makes the simple action at once beautiful and fascinating. Nor is he following, for example, Carlos Germán Belli, in using a tradition form of prosody to describe a modern phenomenon. In a poem about the poet waking up, we see a form that simultaneously is half hidden and decidedly self-assured.

The last words of Crotto's collection, in the poem "Verano", are "el material encanto"; this, I think, is close to a summary of the collection: a focus on the world and objects themselves, described with care over lexical accuracy and prosodic composition, thus obliging the reader to consider the uncanny or even magical effect of examining the world very closely. The poem "Mediodía" asks the reader to look beyond the "tallarines", "salsa de tomate", and "pan" to see the "harina", "huevo", "manos", "trigo", "sol" and "noche"; the acts of seeing, of smelling ("olé" in the *vos* form) and of chewing should be done happily and "devotamente" (15). "Las palomas", a reflection on a youthful hunting trip and the plucking and skinning of pigeons for cooking that followed, concludes that "la vida / es material, / y la materia / es difícil, sagrada" (10).^{ix} Difficulty is of course manifest in the complexity of form. Yet there are other difficulties. At times, it is violence that we must see: "Domingo" devotes six of its eight lines to a basic yet happy lunchtime scene, but concludes with the image of "...el cordero al que anteayer / colgamos de una pata y degollamos" (35). The personal "a" with reference to the lamb, the explicitation of "de una pata", and the verb "degollar", a term that in Argentina has inescapable connotations to violence against people, as well as to animals, reminds us of the unpalatable actions that stand behind even the most everyday experiences.^x

Thus I would argue that Crotto's poems both in form and content oblige us to consider the obvious, or manifest, and what is mysterious or inscrutable within it. I take another example, "Sobre el efecto mariposa":

Cómo se arranca súbita del tallo
y mientras lejos
relampaguea
mueve
las alas tormentosas
como piedra
en el agua
y crecen frías ráfagas
de su moverse y trueno
y vuela pareciendo subir
mientras
desciende
parpadeante
a los yuyos
y llueve. (2009: 25).

Again, one has the suspicion that the poem may have a prosodic form almost too subtle or complex for the naked eye, as well as a series of sonic connections, not least through the sound /u/, which creates half-rhymes and echoes throughout the poem. The "butterfly effect" is a well-known and widely popularized aspect of chaos theory by which seemingly insignificant variations in initial conditions can have very significant later consequences within a complex system (such as climate), the example often being given as that of a butterfly flapping its wings in one location leading to, eventually, a storm somewhere far away. The effect is an unsuspected relation of causation; lexically, we would expect to see this manifested in conjunctions such as "porque" or "para que" for example. Instead, "y" appears five times in the poem, four times at the start of a line; "mientras" also appears. Thus the poem foregrounds relationships of coincidence and simultaneity. But in the middle section (around lines 4-10) there is a simile: the "alas tormentosas" are "como piedra / en el agua". The adjective is also of interest, for the storm is inscribed as a quality of the wings themselves. Their action, which theory would say is starting the storm, is described metaphorically as being like the stone that

falls in the water. Thus, instead of causation, we see simultaneity and literary comparison. From line nine onwards, a further nuance is given to the relationship, an imbrication of the actions of butterfly and weather, through the repeated “y” and through the alternation between, for example, “moverse” (butterfly), “truenas” (weather), “vuela” (butterfly). The final two lines compress this: the butterfly descends and it rains. The relationship is still grammatically coincidental or consecutive, not causal, but the impression created is otherwise: the butterfly’s movement has caused the storm. This effect is enhanced by the variation and thus ambiguity in the subject of the verbs, not least in the subject-less “llueve”, linked sonically (ll-y; u) to the “yuyos” where the butterfly looks to rest. This closes up any physical separation; the second line noted the distance involved (“lejos”), but by the end that distance is overlooked and almost forgotten, overtaken by the simultaneity of the actions and events. The poem thus makes visible an invisible relationship, foregrounding the material manifestation of a theory that describes relationships we cannot otherwise detect.

This attention to the laws of the physical world is found in much of the collection. “Me parece que nunca voy a ver un poema más lindo que un árbol” offers a gloss on Joyce Kilmer’s popular poem “Trees”,

Hacia esta luz que anima
la ciega sed de encuentro
que hace ávida copa, pronta vida
que se estira a encontrar
un paulatino amor más y más alto,
a tientas, vertical,
escala entretejida con espina,
el deseo, insistiendo
su amor, materializa
su ánimo de abrazarse encandilado. (2009: 29)

Crotto asks the reader to consider a simple fact: the growth of trees. Gongorine elements again feature, not least the enumeration with its internal rhyme, “ávida copa, pronta vida” to describe the tree. The tree grows towards the light; the light is the sun, and thus the ultimate goal of growth would be suicidal. The poem thus concludes with a pun: not *abrazarse*, to

embrace but *abrasarse*, to burn. For the tree, communion with the source of its growth would be terminal, a permanent and fatal embrace. Again we see Crotto's interest in the materiality of the immaterial: the way "el deseo" and "su ánimo" are manifested – indeed are only ever evident – in physical actions and phenomena. Thus Crotto's collection uses lyrical and formal composition to focus our attention on the material world around us. Poetry not only draws our attention to what we might overlook, it performs ways of seeing and paying attention.

Chesterton.

Crotto's second collection, *Chesterton*, is similarly slim, and again consists of eighteen poems.^{xi} The title is immediately striking. While G.K. Chesterton was an author admired by Borges and his circle, it is difficult to think of a figure more out of favour, less likely to appear in contemporary poetry magazines and websites in Argentina. In a personal interview, the author stated that even his editor had been opposed to the title, for the conservative, Catholic, and unfashionable connotations that it brings. There is, however, little of Chesterton's voice, which one might superficially call a form of optimistic traditionalism, about the collection. The opening poem, once again, is something of a statement of principles, describing a child climbing into a sugar pine tree, a "lambertiana" (2013: 7) or *pinus lambertiana*: "Era otro mundo / ahí dentro, como ver otro lado de las cosas, / lo que las sostenía". Once again, it is written in a mixture of hendecasyllables, heptasyllables, and loose *alejandrinos*. Full rhymes are few (calor – sol) but half rhymes and internal alliteration and assonance are many. The lyric voice is that of the child, speaking of "los grandes" and as one of the "primos" left behind at the house to swim and play. At times the voice seems to echo received wisdom, or even catechism; the adults have gone to mass, to pray to God, "que no se ve y es santo". But something of this experience, of seeing the world from the other side, stays with the lyric voice: "luz / filtrada, que me dura". The tree is a shape made visible by light; from inside the tree, it is the light that becomes the focus of our attention. And of course it is light, sunlight that makes the tree visible in the first place. Indeed, if one thinks back to Crotto's poem from *Abejas*, light (and water) is its *raison*

d'être. So the climb inside the tree, like the attention paid by the poem, is the opportunity to invert our customary relationship with the world, to see inside and behind things.

What is most striking about the collection, beyond the thematic, is found in its form. The second poem, “Como creciendo en el carbón la brasa” is a sonnet in hendecasyllables, but strikingly it is constructed so that only the last syllables rhyme (as opposed to the last two, more usual in Spanish),^{xii} in the form ABAB (*rima alternada*), a remarkably consistent, marked, and apparently deliberate variation on an established rhyme scheme in Spanish. There is only one concession to this pattern, the final couplet (*pupila – vacila*), which in the fashion of the Shakespearean sonnet aims to summarize the argument of the piece (“Que sea nuestro cuerpo la pupila / que se abre si hace falta y no vacila” 2013: 9). The first twelve lines comprise one long sentence, in which a number of key terms or word roots repeat: *cumplirse – cumplida*; *pulso*; *sal*; near homophones are also used: *sal – se aleja*; *que sea – que se abre*. The poem is packed with alliteration. Sub-clauses, enumerations, enjambments, and marked syntax make the poem dense in signification, with meaning shifting heuristically and retroactively as one reads. As in the work of, for example, Sor Juana, the poem delights in paradox, contrast, and light and shade, in particular the “brillo oscuro” that we see and experience. This is language charged with meaning to the maximum, Crotto once again using poetry to analyse the materiality of sensation. The world’s mystery is a central theme for Crotto’s poetry; another of his titles (again notable for its Golden Age precision) is “Si usted va y mira una gallina durante una hora o dos, va a encontrar al final que el misterio más que disminuir ha aumentado” (2013: 15).

“Una canción tan fría y apasionada como el alba” looks, at first glance, to be a simple piece of free verse:

Latas, vasos de plástico tirados al azar. Arranca
el día; arranca y muestra drástico en la playa
vacía el final de la fiesta. En la luz fría,
tapado con arena a nuestros pies, el resto
carcomido de un tronco humea apenas.

Detrás el mar, el ruido

opaco de las olas repetido. (17)

The poem describes the remnants of a party, the morning after on the beach; it is reminiscent of the work of colloquial and political poets such as Ernesto Cardenal. Its content is similar to that of many contemporary objectivist poems, seeing an unidentified observer contemplating an everyday – and somewhat desolate – scene. However, with some attention, one notices something else (internal rhymes, certain rhythms), and with some rearrangement, we can set out the poem thus:

Latas, vasos de plástico
tirados al azar. Arranca el día;
arranca y muestra drástico
en la playa vacía
el final de la fiesta. En la luz fría,

tapado con arena
a nuestros pies, el resto carcomido
de un tronco humea apenas.
Detrás el mar, el ruido
opaco de las olas repetido.

The poem, therefore, is a sort of hidden *lira*, heptasyllables and hendecasyllables rhyming thus: aBabB. As Quilis (108) points out, this is a stanza form imported from Italy and perfected in Spain by Christian mystical poets such as Fray Luis de León and San Juan de la Cruz. The final couplet remains unchanged in the second (my) arrangement, and it would also fit in a *silva* (see above). The scene on the beach will be washed away soon, by the repeated, and implacable, waves. The poem balances control and emotion; man's efforts and nature: "fría ... apasionada"; "canción ... alba". So form is at once polished and hidden; Crotto's poems function simultaneously in two ways. Register and prosody diverge, indeed they almost clash. This poem plays out the tension between futility and artistic work, to write so that only some will see, while describing an everyday event – the tide, the waves – washing away man's presence on the shore or in the world.

Some of Crotto's work with prosody can have, deliberately I would argue, comic effects.

Que sea pura desmesura compactada.
Armada la cabeza a ras del piso.
Macizo, la piel gruesa, un poco cosa:
una forma monstruosa de belleza.
Mucho, inquietante, gris blindado.
Potente, amontonado hacia delante.
Monte indolente. Así: rinoceronte. (25)

In lines of eleven and thirteen syllables (with some leeway for poetic licence) Crotto creates a dense network of rhyme, matching the enumeration of qualities – as nouns and adjectives – associated with the rhinoceros. The combination of the abstract and the concrete is also striking: “gris blindado”, “un poco cosa”, for example: such juxtapositions seem wholly appropriate for an attempt to turn a hulking beast into a thing of poetic beauty. One could suggest that the poem is a sort of compacted sonnet, with the verses and rhymes compressed, like the dense body of the creature described. In the “Animalía” section of his website, Crotto includes animal poems by César Mermet, José Watanabe, and Jorge Luis Borges (“El bisonte”), among others. He also includes a translation of D.H. Lawrence’s “The Elephant is Slow to Mate”. Not mentioned, however, is Ogden Nash, whose prosodic playfulness when dealing with animals, as in his libretto for Saint Saëns’ *Carnival of the Animals*, and in particular his cultivation of the comic couplet, seems to offer a notable intertext for Crotto’s work. The poem’s rhyme becomes increasingly dense, as do the occurrences of the /nt/ sound, a marker of the big beast’s presence. “Así” is an adverb, and thus does not usually modify a noun. Here it does. The effect is an echo of the gerund form (-nte), as if the rhino was, somehow, “rhino-ing”, and that is how s/he does it. This freedom in language, the unusual collocation, again demonstrate Crotto’s invention in describing the everyday.

The most striking example of Crotto’s work with prosody is found in the series of three poems “Acá el fuego transforma la madera en más fuego” (2013: 35-37). I include the first of the series by way of an illustration:

Como forma la ostra en su interior / la perla
exacta, esta canción nacida / desde un punto
que quema, y escondida, / esta canción tensada

en ese ardor. / Un íntimo relámpago, el fulgor /
dándose forma luego de encendida / crisálida
de nácar, pura herida, / pura brasa encriptada,
espinas y flor. / La sílaba, su voz, dijo tu nombre, /
metió a tu cuerpo –y quema y da placer / – la encina
entera en una actual bellota. / Está en tu cuerpo
ahora, no te asombre / que así de dulce duela
componer / su potencia precisa, su alta nota. (2013: 35, my divisions)

These poems look, at first glance, like *versos sueltos*, each comprising eleven *alejandrinos*. But as with “Una canción tan fría...” (above), attention to internal rhymes, and some rearrangement of the lines, reveals that instead we have three rhymed sonnets in hendecasyllables: instead of eleven by fourteen, we have fourteen by eleven. This technique of disguising one poetic form within another has a comic predecessor in Shakespeare, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, in which the Prologue (Act V, Scene 1) “doth not stand upon his points” and reads his piece as one rides “a rough colt”; instead of positive and laudatory sentiments, the actor presents the play as an attempt to offend and insult those present, “If we offend it is our good will”, “We do not come as minding to content you”. Rearranging the Prologue gives the positive sentiments that are garbled in the misreading. Yet Crotto’s work here is not comic in intention. The first poem is a variation on the Petrarchan sonnet, the second on the Spenserian, and the final a variant of the Shakespearean. Furthermore, the titles (also opening lines) of the three sonnets, form a whole: “Como forma la ostra en su interior la perla”, “Así como la lluvia cae del cielo y se filtra”, “Acá el fuego transforma la madera en más fuego”.

The poems compare artistic creation, and therefore themselves, with nature. The poem is a potential within, like growth or change in sentient and non-sentient beings, and indeed within inanimate beings too: “la encina / entera en una actual bellota” (35), “la brasa viva / en la ceniza” (36), “un dulce poder” (37). The final poem sums up this relationship in terms of a paradox – one that would have delighted poets of the Golden Age: “Y aunque sea fuego es agua verdadera”, “Es fuego, es agua”, “pira, manantial”, “agua clara. Fuego feroz” (37). Why would fire and water thus be synonymous or identical? Both are destructive, yet both support life. Both are ancient elements. But the three poems all deal with the power of differentiation, of

the spark that sets light to a fire, the drop that turns into a flood; earlier, we read of the butterfly effect. Hiding the sonnet, the perfect form, tucked away within the lines of verse, is a performance of the hidden forms that we may otherwise miss. The “alta nota” with its “potencia precisa” is already in “tu cuerpo” (35); its production may be painful (read difficult), but the potential is there, like the pearl in the oyster, the spark in the ember, of the “dulce poder” of the final poem (37). Crotto thus links animate and inanimate life, and the act of writing to that of processes of differentiation that we observe in nature.

Crotto shows himself to be not unaware of the questions of class and privilege that may be at play in a discussion of composition or poetic form. “El loco” begins, “Yo iba tranquilo esta mañana a trabajar, de traje, y vi al linyera”. There is no little irony here, for the terms “crotto” and “linyera” are, in Argentine slang, synonymous, meaning a hobo or homeless person. “Crottos” were named after a politician, a distant relative of the poet, José Camilo Crotto (his great-great uncle, the brother of his great grandfather, and also a poet), who in the early years of the twentieth century promoted a law allowing migrant workers to travel for free on good trains and on the roof of passenger trains in the province of Buenos Aires.^{xiii} The narrator is the office worker – like Crotto, a lawyer – marked out in his suit. He is similar in age to the *loco* (“unos treinta años”) who, in the third verse, the longest, is no more than a laughable presence, explaining what taxis are to anyone who will listen. But as the poem progresses, the madman becomes something of a holy fool, asking the narrator a question that is at once stupid but also quite profound: “¿Vos ya sabés tu nombre?” (29). The exchange is reminiscent of an incident from a Cortázar short-story, as the bourgeois is interrogated by the down-and-out, but it shows the narrator being distracted and diverted from the morning commute, interpellated by one whose social function is usually to be ignored, pitied or abused, but one who mirrors and questions the narrator and indeed the poet. The *linyera*’s name, he says, is “Fui Bendecido” [*sic*], I was blessed. In a collection named after a Christian apologist, and by a writer whose poems include many allusions to Christianity and religious faith, the “blessedness” of this unfortunate character adds layers of nuance to the position of the narrator and the poet, not least as his own family history and personal status are quite plainly referenced.

Words Words Words.

As stated above, Crotto's blog is divided into a number of sections, and one of the most important – as numerous and revealing of his poetic practice – is that dedicated to translations. Dozens of poets, writing in many languages, are included (sometimes translated through an intermediary text). Given the title of this second collection, I choose one by Chesterton for further analysis, "Ecclesiastes":

There is one sin: to call a green leaf grey,
Whereat the sun in heaven shuddereth.
There is one blasphemy: for death to pray,
For God alone knoweth the praise of death.

There is one creed: 'neath no world-terror's wing
Apples forget to grow on apple-trees.
There is one thing is needful – everything –
The rest is vanity of vanities. (1957: 285)

Crotto's version reads as follows:

Hay un pecado, sí: decir que la hoja verde
es gris. Y hace que se estremezca el sol.
Hay una forma de blasfemia: orar pidiendo
la muerte; sólo Dios conoce su riqueza.

Hay una verdad: bajo ningún horror alado
olvidan los manzanos dar manzanas.
Hay una sola cosa necesaria -Todo-
y el resto es vanidad de vanidades.

Chesterton writes in full-rhymed iambic pentameters; the metre is loose in line six, for either the rhythm has to shift or "apples" and "apple" need to be stressed on different syllables. Like Crotto, Chesterton is linking observations of the natural world to greater philosophical or perhaps more accurately religious statements. In contrast to Crotto, Chesterton's particular faith is more strongly foregrounded through the condemnation of pessimism and the inclusion of religious commandments (lines 3-4). Chesterton is quoting Ecclesiastes 1:2 and 12:8, verses

with a long association with art, and in particular the *vanitas*, the artistic reflection on the futility of man's earthly endeavours.

Crotto's translation is less metrically constrained than Chesterton's. The strong stressed final syllables are replaced by a majority of *grave* endings, with one *agudo* exception, "sol". A poem that today is marked by antiquated forms ("shuddereth", "knoweth", "'neath") is rendered in more or less contemporary and vernacular Spanish, with perhaps the one exception of "orar", for "pray", rather than "rezar". These are characteristics shared by many of Crotto's translations, in which the constraints of the original are often relaxed in order to allow an idiomatic semantic translation, albeit one that is clearly marked as poetic, even if not by the same means as the source text. Compensation for the loss of strict rhyme and metre is obtained through internal rhymes (sí – gris), eye rhymes (muerte – riqueza) and alliteration and assonance.

One decision in this translation is particularly notable: Crotto translates "everything" as "Todo". Through the capital letter, Crotto thus makes explicit what might only be implicit for a contemporary reader – that "everything" refers to God, or at least a divinity (and hence the capital letter). It is not the same, I would suggest, to say "todo" as to say "Todo".^{xiv} Crotto turns what might look like a vague statement into quite a specific one, and thus makes explicit Chesterton's lessons: we must describe the world as it is (1-2), never despair (3-4), be aware that natural laws are obeyed (5-6), and other concerns can be left in God's hands (7-8). Crotto's interventions as a translator thus illustrate his own poetic practice and underscore the religious focus of the source poem; furthermore, they highlight the difference between Chesterton's worldview and that of Crotto's poetry. If there is a certainty in Chesterton, it is the existence of a benign God who is manifest in the world. He does not need to make this explicit. In Crotto, the certainty is the world's mystery and wonder. The existence of a divinity, "Todo", needs explicitation. If for Chesterton, artwork is, in the end, vanity (i.e. futility), for Crotto it is evidence of the same spark that gives life to fire, like the heliotropism of plants and trees, a phenomenon whose duty it is the poet's to observe and attempt to describe. This is not a simple duty, as it is marked by the risk of futility, as we see in the scene on the beach, above,

and set against a backdrop of class and social conflicts. Its difficulty is performed in Crotto's complex yet often half-hidden prosody. The latter offers a development of the work done with form earlier by other Argentine writers such as Néstor Perlongher and Sergio Raimondi.

Crotto's translations, weblinks, and anthologies are part of a poetic education, in two ways: the process by which the author informs his composition, and a poetic education of the reader, in formal and intertextual fashion. They are, I would argue, a performance of growing self-confidence in poetry as an end in itself. The lyric-I does not come into being in Crotto's poems, rather it preexists them. Yet at the same time, this voice is capable of ironising itself, and the poem emerges like a point of differentiation inside the poetic voice. For Crotto, poetic form and composition is at once a game and something very personal. His poetry is intimate and small scale, but in its growing self-confidence, is also aware that it is creating an audience.

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Notes.

ⁱ It is worth remembering that early twentieth-century literary avant-garde movements in Spain and Latin America were not as formally iconoclastic or radical as one might necessarily think: to give just a few examples, the Spanish Generation of 1927 recuperated the baroque poetics of Góngora, not least his treatment of the metaphor; the poems of César Vallejo's *Trilce* (1922), that most revolutionary of collections, are marked by vestiges of the more standard forms of his earlier *Los heraldos negros* (1918). And an apparently free verse composition, Pablo Neruda's "Alturas de Macchu Picchu," is marked by lines and lines of hendecasyllables.

ⁱⁱ I am aware that these terms are somewhat vague; by "traditional metrical forms" I refer to types of verse and, more generally, poetry, that are described by, for example, Antonio Quilis (2009), with the exception of course those covered by the heading "6.4.4. Poemas de versos libres" (170).

ⁱⁱⁱ Crotto's blog also includes his translations of haiku by Jack Kerouac. Neither the source nor the target text are, strictly, haiku. See Henderson (1958).

^{iv} It might be suggested that Raimondi's *versos sueltos* follow one aspect of the tradition of Latin verse, and also of Golden Age translations of Latin verse. See Quilis (2009: 169-170).

^v Cortázar's poetry, like Crotto's, also includes many references to bees. See, for example, Cortázar (1971).

^{vi} Away from Argentina, the story might be rather different. An apparently "experimental" poet such as Nicanor Parra (Chile) has also been drawn to popular regular metrical forms such as that of the *cueca*. Roque Dalton combined poems dealing with everyday matters and international politics with references to and poetics drawn from the Golden Age. And Pablo Neruda, to name one other, composed both odes and very many sonnets.

^{vii} The publisher's shop, La tienda Bajo la luna, opened in Villa Crespo, Buenos Aires, in September 2013.

^{viii} As one editor I interviewed in Buenos Aires pointed out, Bajo la luna had the advantage of a solid poetic base and some cultural and economic capital in the form of Rosenberg's own works and the many excellent translations that she had produced, not least as a contributing editor for *Diario de Poesía*.

^{ix} The poem has what appear to be deliberate echoes of Paul Celan's poem "Eine Hand" (from the collection *Sprachgitter* (1959): "Der Tisch, aus Stunden / Holz, mit / dem Reisgericht und dem Wein. / Es wird / geschwiegen, gegessen, getrunken. / Eine Hand, die ich küßte, / leuchtet den Mündern." Celan would be a very obviously "difficult" poet to choose as an interlocutor.

^x Death by slashed throat was a common means of execution in the early post-colonial era, and had a particular association with the militia of Juan Manuel de Rosas, known as the *mazorca*. Several formative works of Argentine literature, such as Esteban Echeverría's short tale "El matadero" (1871) or Hilario Ascasubi's popular poem "La refalosa" (1843) include references to such acts of violence. A list of more recent Argentine works dealing with political violence, not least in the latter half of the twentieth century, would far exceed the scope of this paper.

^{xi} Sixteen are listed in the index but one, "Acá el fuego transforma la madera en más fuego," comprises three poems.

^{xii} In a personal communication Crotto called these "rimas Larkin" (Buenos Aires, September 2014).

^{xiii} Personal communication with the poet, Buenos Aires April 2013. See also Baigorria (2008: 14).

^{xiv} William Rowe makes a similar point about Ernesto Cardenal's poetry: to say "nothing" is behind the world is certainly not the same as saying that "Nothing" is (2000: 148), and to choose one or the other has implications for the way in which poetic composition works.