

Between the desert and the sky: Raúl Zurita's "Purgatorio" (Purgatory) as an antecedent of documentary poetry in Latin America

Entre o deserto e o céu: "Purgatório" de Raúl Zurita como precursor da poesia documental na América Latina

Entre el desierto y el cielo: "Purgatorio" de Raúl Zurita como un antecedente de la poesía documental en Latinoamérica

Claudia Paola Delgado Garaycochea<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1184-9400> Independent journalist and graduate researcher
of the Master of Creative Writing from the
National Major University of San Marcos
(UNMSM), Lima - Peru.claudia.delgado@unmsm.edu.pe (correspondence)**ABSTRACT**

The Chilean poet Raúl Zurita writes from the pain of living during the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). At that time, Zurita was kidnapped and, in his memory, there remains a wound that cannot heal. Although the term documentary poetry does not exist in Latin America, this article addresses the possibility that the poet is a precursor of Latin American documentary poetry. For this, it is based on the importance of the context in which Zurita lived and how he found a way to transform pain through poetry. In this article we will see how in Purgatorio —translated to English as purgatory— (1979), Zurita applies tools typical of documentary poetic creation such as intervened images, polyphony and wordplay. In the United States, documentary poetry has as its referents poets such as Ed Sanders, Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams, among others. They also wrote about historical events using documentary poetry tools. Therefore, we consider the importance of a poet like Zurita to demonstrate how violent and historical events in Latin America remain through poetry.

Keywords: documentary poetry, military dictatorship, Latin America, Raúl Zurita.**RESUMO**

O poeta chileno Raúl Zurita escreve sobre a dor que lhe causou viver durante a ditadura militar de Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). Naquela época, Zurita foi sequestrado e, em sua memória, permanece uma ferida que não cicatriza. Embora o termo poesia documental não exista na América Latina, este artigo aborda a possibilidade de o poeta ser um precursor da poesia documental latino-americana. Para isso, baseia-se a importância do contexto em que Zurita viveu e como ele encontrou uma forma de transformar a dor por meio da poesia. Neste artigo veremos como em Purgatório (1979), Zurita aplica ferramentas típicas da criação poética documental como imagens intervencionadas, polifonia e jogos de palavras. Nos Estados Unidos, a poesia documental tem como referências poetas como Ed Sanders, Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams, entre outros. Eles também escreveram sobre acontecimentos históricos utilizando as ferramentas da poesia documental. Portanto, consideramos a importância de um poeta como Zurita para demonstrar como os acontecimentos históricos e violentos na América Latina permanecem através da poesia.

Palavras-chave: poesia documental, ditadura militar, América Latina, Raúl Zurita.**RESUMEN**

El poeta chileno Raúl Zurita, escribe desde el dolor que le produjo vivir durante la dictadura militar de Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). En aquella época, Zurita fue secuestrado y, en su memoria, permanece una herida que no puede cicatrizar. Aunque en Latinoamérica no existe el término de poesía documental, el presente artículo aborda la posibilidad de que el poeta sea un precursor de la poesía documental latinoamericana. Para ello, se basa la importancia del contexto en el que vivió Zurita y cómo encontró la manera de transformar el dolor a través de la poesía. En este artículo veremos como en Purgatorio (1979), Zurita aplica herramientas propias de la creación poética documental como las imágenes intervenidas, la polifonía y los juegos de palabras. En Estados Unidos, la poesía documental tiene como referentes a poetas como Ed Sanders, Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams, entre otros. Ellos también escribieron sobre acontecimientos históricos utilizando herramientas propias de la poesía documental. Por ello, consideramos la importancia de un poeta como Zurita para demostrar cómo los acontecimientos violentos e históricos en Latinoamérica, permanecen a través de la poesía.

Palabras clave: poesía documental, dictadura militar, Latinoamérica, Raúl Zurita.**ARTICLE HISTORY****Received:** 02-11-2023**Revised Version:** 21-12-2023**Accepted:** 22-12-2023**Published:** 26-12-2023**Copyright:** © 2023 by the authors**License:** CC BY-NC-ND 4.0**Manuscript type:** Article**ARTICLE INFORMATION****Science-Metrix Classification (Domain):**

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This article addresses the possibility that the Chilean Poet, Raúl Zurita, is a precursor of documentary poetry in Latin America, based on the importance of the context in which Zurita lived and the ways the poet found to transform his pain through poetry.

Originality/value:

In the United States, documentary poetry, or investigative poetry, has as references poets such as Ed Sanders, Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams, among others. Therefore, we considered the importance of a poet like Zurita to demonstrate how Latin America violent and historical events remains through poetry.

INTRODUCTION

On the morning of September 11, 1973, the poet Raúl Zurita, an engineering student, was walking calmly through Valparaíso while carrying a folder of poems. Suddenly, a military patrol stopped him and took him to the Playa Ancha Stadium, a place where people opposed to the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) were taken. Later, together with 800 people, Zurita was transferred to the holds of the Maipo Ship, also in Valparaíso. This place was used as a prison ship, where the poet, like the other detainees, suffered beatings and torture. In spite of the pain he went through, one of the things he remembers most is having lost the poems he had with him:

"When they put me on the ship, they asked me again about the folder, but there the interrogator called another guy to investigate my papers. This guy looked at them and said <ah, yes, these are poems>, and threw the folder into the sea. There I felt that the world was really breaking", said the poet during a conversation with journalist Andrés Piña (1990) collected in the book *Conversaciones con la poesía chilena* (Conversations with Chilean poetry) (2007).

This event led him to experiment with spaces in which pain, violence and despair intersect. Everything was vital for his poetic creation, which becomes a form of protest and resistance. The scenes of the day of the arrest, because of their great pain and impact, walk alongside Zurita.

"Forgetting is impossible (...) For me it was a totally decisive event, to the point that I have defined that September 11, 1973 was a crucial day in my life. It was a crucial day of my poetry," says the poet in an interview conducted by journalist Abril Becerra (2018).

Directly experiencing the pain and injustice during the Pinochet dictatorship allowed Zurita, like other survivors, to live "not with memories of the past, but with an event that continues in the present and is current in every aspect" (Fischer, 2010, p. 174). All of this is embodied in his poetry: a life marked by memories that began with a deep wound.

In this article, we want to find out how this historical event impacted Zurita's life —and work— and we propose that the poet may be one of the precursors of documentary poetry in Latin America.

REVIEW OF THE LITERARY WORK

Documentary poetry and its link with Latin America

The term documentary poetry emerged in the late 1970s in the United States and is based, fundamentally, on the importance of researching before writing. The poet Ed Sanders, in his book-manifesto, *Investigative Poetry* (1976), believes in the importance of the poet as a researcher and that poetry, in order to continue, must begin a journey that describes history (p. 7). In addition, Sanders (1976), considers that verses can be presented by means of calligrams, vectors, pictures, different typographies, *cut-up* techniques, among others (p. 34). In the aforementioned book-manifesto on documentary poetry, Sanders (1976) mentions poets such as Charles Olson and William Carlos Williams.

Both in *Paterson* ([1946-1958] 1983) by William Carlos Williams and, according to Sanders (1976, p.8), in *The Maximus Poems* by Charles Olson, historical information, medical and judicial records and newspaper articles are compiled and later incorporated into his poetry. For his part, Raúl Zurita, as we will see below, also uses photographs, medical examinations, images and interventions in open spaces in his poetry. In this way, we see how, with the use of the tools of documentary poetry, a historical fact, which in Zurita's case is the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), becomes poetry. However, according to the Peruvian poet Paul Guillén (2014), the term documentary, or investigative, poetry has not existed in Latin America:

It should be noted that there are two moments: a triad with Neruda, Cardenal and Cisneros who propose entries related to history, political criticism and irony. A second moment that spans from Martínez to the present day, where this "investigative poetry" is found more in relation to its North American peers (p. 7).

We are going to focus, as Guillén (2014) mentions, on Juan Luis Martínez. Chilean poet contemporary to Zurita. In his work *La nueva novela* (1977), Martínez employs cut-outs, scores, symbols, iconographies, graphics, transparencies, collages, logical exercises and cartoons. He also mentions the importance of the word "*pajarístico*", a language he considers unbreakable and transparent (Martínez, 1977, p. 89), through which the poet communicates when the oppression of the dictatorship tries to silence people.

As Zurita (2016) mentions, both poets were friends and even shared the same typewriter, and they shared the fact that they had been traversed by the violence of the Chilean military dictatorship. Through their poetry, Zurita and Martínez wrote, each with their own timeless style, about that which corroded them internally.

Meanwhile, in Argentina, the poet Jorge Santiago Perednik in the book *El shock de los Lenders y otros poemas* ([1986] 2012) portrays the murder of the Shocklender family that occurred in the context of the Argentine military dictatorship and allows the reader to move between words that confuse, breathe and ride on the pages. To achieve this, the author immerses himself in press clippings and "strips the parricide of the 'hard' data (those that matter so much in journalistic newsrooms) and frees them through the incontrovertible sensations conveyed by the words" (Delgado, 2017, p. 67). In Latin America, Perednik shows how it is possible to investigate the details of a murder, in his case the parricide of the Shocklender family, turning it into poetry.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

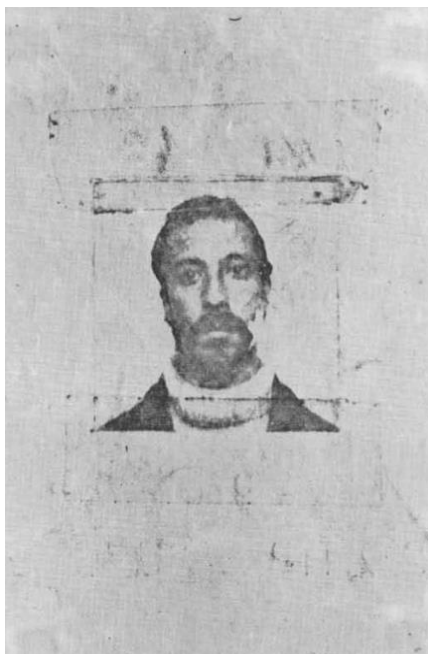
***Purgatorio* (1979) and the pain transformed into poetry**

In 1979, Zurita published *Purgatorio*, a collection of poems with logical exercises, intervened images, medical reports, as well as the presence of historical and religious characters that question reality. In addition, the book of poems refers us to Chilean geography: majestic mountain ranges, eternal deserts and blue skies become silent witnesses to the agony of the people who disappeared during the military dictatorship. *Purgatorio* (1979), then, is a cry before what happens and tears. The title, for Zurita, refers to the fact that life is that which takes place between heaven and hell and, purgatory, "is everything we can express with words" (Gabinete, 2017).

The book, from its cover, presents the image of Zurita's cheek burned with an incandescent iron. It was the poet himself who, in a bath, decided to burn his cheek in 1975. The poet says that he did this in order not to commit suicide in a "country where so many are being harmed" (Cervantes Virtual, 2014).

Zurita's pain is manifested in verses such as "but now the damned memories/ no longer even let me sleep at night" (1979, p.17) and "Zurita will never again be a friend/ since 7 P.M. it has begun to get dark/ the night is the madhouse of plants" (1979, p.18). These poems lead us into an atmosphere that does not distinguish delirium from reality or, probably, briefly escapes reality to avoid agony.

Figure 1. Image of Raúl Zurita with a wounded cheek.



Source: from Zurita, Raúl. *Purgatorio*: 1970-1977. Editorial Universitaria

In reviewing the poems of *Purgatorio* (1979) we consider that they could prove to be an interesting antecedent to documentary or investigative poetry. Zurita sees poetry as a way of not losing his sanity and finds salvation in a reconciliation with a language that allows life to go on. According to Joaquín León's article (2019), Zurita asserts that:

When one has survived, when one is alive and in one's own country, one understands that the relationship between literature and life is fundamental, that what really matters is to make the existence we live more livable and that all literary and artistic works participate in this project.

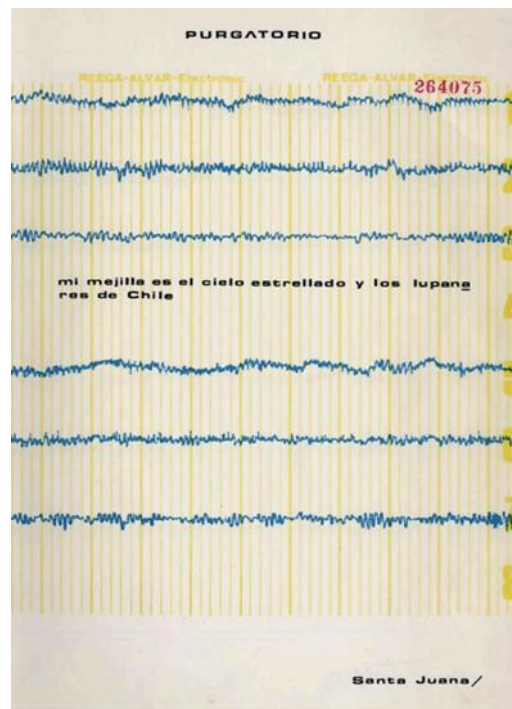
Finding refuge in poetry was vital. According to the National Institute of Human Rights (INDH) of Chile, the victims of the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet exceed 40 thousand people (Garde, 2020).

This painful historical context, marked as an open wound, is translated in Zurita's verses such as "I know that you were afraid/ when you knew that he had gone into those filthy pampas" (1979, p. 27) and suddenly, a spiral of confusion: "tell me: you thought it was a small thing/ to head that way/ to return after his own/ never turned around/ as a plain in front of us" (1979, p. 27).

In these lines, belonging to the poem "Como un sueño" (1979, p. 27), we find voices that resonate between uncertainty and the sorrow of not knowing what to expect when one finds oneself in the void, in the desert. The use of multiple voices also brings Zurita's poetic work closer to documentary poetry. The poems about the Atacama Desert in *Purgatorio* (1979, pp. 22-38) involve echoes, whispers, silences and scenes of apparent delirium that unfold in a spiral of characters and landscapes fed by a mournful language that creeps across the desert. We consider the poetics of *Purgatorio* (1979) to establish a link between history and poetry, *Poesy* for Ed Sanders (1976, p. 8).

Another interesting aspect in the collection is the incorporation of the indications that the poet receives from his psychologist: "The results, especially Rorschach, fully coincide with your diagnosis, with numerous positive elements of epileptic-type psychosis" (1979, p. 45). In addition, the poet also incorporates in his poems images of the encephalograms that reveal his brain activity (1979, pp. 63-68).

Figure 2. Poem-encephalogram.



Source: from Zurita, Raúl. *Purgatorio*: 1970-1977. Editorial Universitaria

Some of the verses present in the encephalograms are: "Inferno/ mi mejilla en el cielo estrellado/ Bernardita/ Purgatorio/ mi mejilla es el cielo estrellado y los lupanares de Chile/ Santa Juana/ Paradiso/ del amor que mueve el sol y las otras estrellas/ Yo y mis amigos/ MI LUCHA" (1975, pp. 63-68).

We could say that the poet's journey covers the cycle: Inferno-Purgatorio-Paradiso. Let us not forget that, for Zurita, the work of Dante Alighieri has a fundamental value, since his grandmother, Josefina Pessolo, an Italian immigrant, used to read him excerpts from *The Divine Comedy* when the poet was a child.

Zurita's journey begins with the wounded cheek, crosses the sky and the emptiness to conclude in a paradise where, stripped of suffering, it is love that leads him to the struggle. On the other hand, for Alejandro Tarrab (2011), the characters that appear in these poems such as Bernardita, the girl of the Lourdes Grotto and Santa Juana, would mean: "a clear redemptive gesture, of sacrifice, condemnation and salvation".

The mention of these historical characters is another reason why we consider that, with *Purgatorio* (1979), we find ourselves before a forerunner of documentary poetry. Something similar was done by Juan Luis Martínez in *La Nueva Novela*

(1977). However, in Martínez's collection of poems, historical characters are incorporated in logical exercises, collages, games, intervened images, etc.

Zurita (2016), furthermore, comments on the aforementioned collection of poems by Martínez and asserts that "his greatness is that he did not recognize the limits of literature but opposed to the autism of the words that weave works, the multiple dimension of history. The words of Juan Luis, his unit of expression, were entire books, epochs, histories, languages, myths, sagas".

As we can see, Juan Luis Martínez also transformed research into poetry and did not hesitate to open the path of poetic language, a timeless language that sought freedom in the midst of a historical context where pain and uncertainty reigned.

Another aspect that is relevant is the energy projected in the poems of *Purgatorio* (1979). On this subject, Charles Olson in *The Projective Verse* (1950) explains that the documentary poet moves away from the closed form and opts for open, or projective, verse, which will take us from one perception to another (1950, p. 372). This is also what we find throughout the Chilean poet's work.

On the other hand, beyond writing about a certain historical context, it is Zurita's own experience that will serve as a backbone for the poetic construction.

Moreover, as we saw earlier, in *Purgatorio* (1979), by incorporating his medical examinations and diagnoses into poetry, we link Zurita with poets such as the American William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), a physician by profession, who incorporated his medical experiences, as well as letters, prescriptions and historical information, in his extensive poetic work on the city of New Jersey: "Paterson" ([1946-1958] 1983).

Writing between the desert and the sky

In the late 1970s, Zurita joined the Colectivo de Acciones de Arte (CADA), a group that carried out a series of reactionary actions and interventions in the face of the Chilean military dictatorship. Regarding the activities he did not develop with CADA, Zurita assures that "thousands of marvelous ideas will die when I die, that they will be extinguished with me and that I will only have seen them in their dementia and beauty" (Neudstand, 2001, p.81).

But not all the ideas Zurita had will be extinguished, as he brought visual poetry to open spaces. "Interventions are for Zurita a way of reading and understanding our destinies, places where we can find the signs" (Gabinete, 2017). Thus, in 1982, the sky of New York was furrowed by airplanes that wrote with smoke, at four thousand meters above the ground, the first fifteen verses of his poem *La vida nueva*. The event was recorded by the artist Juan Downey.

Eleven years later, in 1993, in the desert south of Antofagasta, with the help of large excavators, a 3-kilometer poem is written with the phrase *Ni pena ni miedo* (*Neither sorrow nor fear*). This work of visual poetry is considered one of the poet's great dreams and we believe it establishes the eternal union between poetry and history. From this moment on, with each rereading, both of *Purgatorio* (1979) and of the poet's other works, we will discover new paths to explore. In the meantime, Zurita will continue to write with a permanent pain that lies between the desert and the sky.

CONCLUSION

Living during the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) left an open wound, permanently, in authors such as Raúl Zurita. We consider that, through the poetic creation of texts such as *Purgatorio* (1979), the poet was able to express that which wounded him internally. This means that, through poetry, the author found a way to channel the pain and turn it into art. Later, through other artistic interventions, such as writing verses in the sky and the desert, Zurita continued to express his pain and, perhaps, to seek reconciliation with his own memories.

We saw how, unlike traditional poetry in which the poetic "I" predominates, Zurita used creative tools belonging to documentary or investigative poetry. We also saw how contemporary poets such as Jorge Santiago Perednik and Juan Luis Martínez incorporated these techniques in their creations. This means that, in Latin America, there was already a firm idea of transforming historical events into poetry.

Returning to the case of *Purgatorio* (1979), we discover how the poet used medical results, historical and personal references, intervened photographs, and word games. These tools were also used by documentary poets in the United States, the birthplace of this type of poetry in which the poet is seen as a researcher.

In the article, we also review authors such as Ed Sanders, Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams, who address

historical themes through the creation of documentary or investigative poetry. The importance of researching, nurturing a particular theme and, in the case of poets such as Zurita, going directly through pain, allows him to be, in our opinion, considered one of the precursor poets of Latin American documentary poetry.

Finally, we propose that poetic creation in Latin America should expand and address historical themes that include research prior to writing. In this way, poetry will be eternal and will resonate, permanently, in the memory of generations that, although they have not lived through certain historical events, find Latin American history reflected in its landscapes and silences.

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