

POETRY'S TOTAL SCANDAL: POETS  
AND POSTMEN IN ANTONIO SKÁRMETA'S  
*EL CARTERO DE NERUDA*<sup>1</sup>

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The accepted violence of everyday political discourse is interrupted from time to time by poetic interventions. Recent examples include the *Letter to Mexico's Politicians and Criminals* by the Mexican poet Javier Sicilia. Sicilia explores in this letter the clashes between, and intersections of, poetic and everyday language in an indictment of the ideological and ethical affinities between the Mexican political class and the country's criminals (Sicilia, 1976). Several decades before Sicilia, and articulated from a different historical experience and political context, Salvador Allende's use of poetic language in his last speech interrupted the violence of *golpista* actions and discourse.

In this article I wish to propose a theorization of such poetic disruptions of the "theatre of politics", and of the ways in which poetic language –often wrapped into prose– can disrupt political discourse. Allende's use of poetic language echoes Pablo Neruda's, and it is the transition from Neruda's to Allende's use of poetic language that this article traces. My argument will be developed through an analysis of Antonio Skármeta's short novel *El cartero de Neruda* (*Ardiente paciencia*, 1985), a text which represents and implicitly theorizes the intersections of poetic language and a political project in Allende's Chile, between 1968 and 1973. Moreover, Skármeta's short novel traces the travel of poetic language from the private sphere into public spaces, where "poetry" and poetic language then become significant for the political project that most of the protagonists are committed to.

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The theoretical and analytical dimension of *El cartero* is located in its development of a series of concept-metaphors, which illuminate the dynamic relationship between poetry and politics along the lines of poetry's travel from the private sphere into public space. I borrow the term "concept-metaphor" from Mieke Bal. She argues in her article "Scared to Death" that metaphors –the replacing of one word with another– are important tools for analysis and for knowledge production. According to Bal, «Metaphors are not vague, poetic oddities or decorations but fundamental forms of language used with an indispensable cognitive function, in addition to the more generally recognized affective and aesthetic functions» (Bal, 2006: 157). They contribute to knowledge production in three important ways. Firstly, by substituting one term with another they establish similarities between two items and, in so doing, «illuminate aspects of the first term that are not immediately visible, and because they place a term within the wider discourse from which the metaphorical term stems» (Bal, 2006: 158). Secondly, they redirect meanings «to something else, for example, from the events to the subject that gives them meaning» (Bal, 2006: 158). Thirdly, they frame items or subjects by offering «a second discourse within which the first term can be placed» (Bal, 2006: 158). Thus, concept-metaphors permit a mapping of complex and dynamic relationships between terms and discourses, for example between poetry and politics.

In my analysis of *El cartero* I will focus on concept-metaphors which reflect on poetic "offenses" or "scandals". Hazard Adams uses both terms in his study *The Offense of Poetry* (2007) to capture the ethical and innovative potential of poetry. He argues that the defining characteristic of poetry is its ability to create through language "stumbling blocks", which are «challenges to a way of thought that too narrowly circumscribes experience» (Adams, 2007: 9). The stumbling block of poetic offense «challenges us to confront and pass through offense to active mental involvement» (Adams, 2007: 9), and this is also where Adams locates the ethical potential of poetry.

His approach contrasts with that of Roland Barthes, who in his 1960 essay "Écrivains et écrivains", argues that the "total scandal of language" is impossible. "Écrivains" (authors) and "écrivains" (writers) strive for the scandal in different ways. Writers attempt to achieve it by way of innovative thought, which they develop from their position on the margins of society. Authors wish to achieve the total scandal by way of language, and do so from their position inside the institution of literature<sup>2</sup>. However, neither of the two can complete the total scandal:

[...] la fonction sociale de la parole littéraire (celle de l'écrivain), c'est précisément de *transformer la pensée* (ou la conscience, ou le cri) *en merchandise*; la société mène une

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of readability, I will from now on use the English translations of Barthes' original terms.

sorte de combat vital pour s'appropriier, acclimater, institutionnaliser le hazard de la pensée, et c'est le langage [...] qui lui en donne le moyen: le paradoxe, c'est ici qu'une parole "provocante" tombe sans peine sous la coupe de l'institution: les scandales du langage, de Rimbaud à Ionesco, sont rapidement et parfaitement intégrés; et une pensée provocante [...] ne peut que s'extenuer dans un *no man's land* de la forme: il n'y a jamais de scandale complet (Barthes, 1964: 153).<sup>3</sup>

Barthes ascribes to the literary institution a disciplining function towards potentially scandalous writing:

Cette sacralisation du travail de l'écrivain sur sa forme a de grandes conséquences, et qui ne sont pas formelles: elle permet à la (bonne) société de distancer le contenu de l'oeuvre elle-même quand ce contenu risque de la gêner, de le convertir en pur spectacle, auquel elle est en droit d'appliquer un jugement libéral (c'est-à-dire indifférent), de neutraliser la révolte des passions, la subversion des critiques [...] bref de récupérer l'écrivain: il n'y a aucun écrivain qui ne soit un jour digéré par les institutions littéraires, sauf à se subordonner, c'est-à-dire sauf cesser de confondre son être avec celui de la parole [...] (Barthes, 1964: 151).<sup>4</sup>

What Barthes terms "embarrassment", "revolt of passion" and "subversion of criticism", Adams calls the "offense of poetry". For Adams, the poem can offend and scandalize because it stands on its own and is, to an extent, autonomous from its surroundings. For Barthes, the institution of literature absorbs or silences the potential scandal of the poem's language and, consequently, the total scandal becomes impossible.

As we will see, *El cartero* presents a scenario in which the total scandal of poetry was possible in ways that Barthes did not foresee or admit: poetry becomes constitutive of a political project which is metaphorized through Arthur Rimbaud's "splendid city". The novel consists of a story and a frame narrative. The frame narrative is told through a preface and an epilogue. The narrator of the story introduces himself in the preface and explains his reasons for writing down the story. He is an unsuccessful and mediocre writer who admits his enthusiasm for "out-dated" literary devices such as the omniscient narrator and exaggerated metaphors. At the time of writing down the story in the later phase of the military dictatorship in Chile, he has been suffering from

<sup>3</sup> «[...] the social function of literary language (that of the author) is precisely to *transform thought* (or consciousness, or protest) *into merchandise*; society wages a kind of virtual warfare to appropriate, to acclimatize, to institutionalize the risk of thought, and it is language [...] which affords it the means to do so: the paradox here is that "provocative" language is readily accommodated by the literary institution: the scandals of language, from Rimbaud to Ionesco, are rapidly and perfectly integrated; whereas "provocative" *thought* [...] can only exhaust itself in the no man's land of form: the scandal is never total» (Barthes, 1972: 149).

<sup>4</sup> «This sacralisation of the author's struggle with form has great consequences, and not merely formal ones: it permits society –or Society– to distance the work's content when it risks becoming an embarrassment, to convert it into pure spectacle, to which it is entitled to apply a liberal (i. e., an indifferent) judgment, to neutralize the revolt of passion, the subversion of criticism [...] in short, to recuperate the author: every author is eventually digested by the literary institution, unless he [...] ceases to identify his being with that of language» (Barthes, 1972: 146-147).

writer's block for several years. He tells the story –to which he allegedly was an eyewitness– because Beatriz González, the wife of the «disappeared» postman Mario Jiménez, the story's central character, asks him to write it for her, «no importa cuánto tardase ni cuánto inventara» (Skármeta, 1985: 12) [«*even if you have to take a long time and invent a lot*» (Skármeta, 2001: x)].

The story is set in the village of Isla Negra. It traces the friendship between the poet Pablo Neruda and his postman Mario Jiménez, which develops at the same time as Mario's and Beatriz' relationship. Neruda's and Mario's friendship develops through a series of conversations on poetry and on specific poems against the background of the 1968 elections that brought Salvador Allende to power and is viewed against the backdrop of Allende's politics of liberation. Mario solicits Neruda's help during his courtship of Beatriz, whilst his turbulent friendship with Mario gives Neruda the opportunity to explore what it means to be «the poet of those without schooling or shoes»<sup>5</sup>. The story ends with Neruda's death and Mario's enforced disappearance, just after the military coup of 11<sup>th</sup> September 1973. Throughout the story the narrator introduces several concept-metaphors to explore the relationship between poetry and politics, and that between the poet and his readers. These concept-metaphors are deployed repeatedly in different contexts, and each of them explores different facets of the relationship between poetry and politics.

### **Like a Boat Trembling in Your Words: The Promise of Friendship**

The first extensive conversation between Pablo Neruda and his postman Mario Jiménez highlights the centrality of the subject of metaphor for the novel; and it introduces in the figure of the reader as a boat trembling in the poet's words a concept-metaphor about the relationship between poet, poetry, and the reader.

Mario initially applies for the job as Neruda's postman because he believes that Neruda is the poet of lovers and of eroticism, and he hopes that some of Neruda's alleged success with women will rub off on himself if he convinces the poet to

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<sup>5</sup> In his memoirs *Confieso que he vivido*, Neruda quotes the journalist Curzio Malaparte, who coined this phrase with reference to Neruda:

Curzio Malaparte [...] lo dijo bien en su artículo: "No soy comunista, pero si fuera poeta chileno, lo sería, como Pablo Neruda lo es. Hay que tomar partido aquí, por los Cadillacs, o por la gente sin escuela y sin zapatos. Esta gente sin escuela y sin zapatos me eligió senador de la república [...]" (Neruda, 1974: 236).

Curzio Malaparte [...] stated it well in his article: "I am not a Communist, but if I were a Chilean poet, I would be one like Pablo Neruda. You have to take sides here, with the Cadillacs or with the people who have no schooling or shoes. These people without schooling or shoes elected me senator [...]" (Neruda, 1977: 166).

Skármeta's novel explores what it means not to be the senator of those without schools and without shoes, but also their poet.

autograph a book of poetry. The two collections that Mario buys for this purpose are *Odas elementales* and *Nuevas odas elementales*, collections that poeticize daily life but are unrelated to love poetry. While Mario waits for an opportunity to ask the stand-offish and evasive Neruda for an autograph, he reads the books and starts to describe his own environment through the words he finds in Neruda's poems. When he then does this in a short conversation with the poet, Neruda criticizes him for the wrong application of «a metaphor». Mario's response is the fateful question «What is a metaphor?» Neruda does not reply with a definition but with an example: he self-assuredly recites one of his poems about the sea. Mario's response is that he finds the poem «weird». He explains<sup>6</sup>:

- Raro no lo es el poema. Raro es como *yo* me sentía cuando usted recitaba el poema.  
 [...] –¿Cómo se lo explicara? Cuando usted decía el poema, las palabras iban de acá pa'llá.  
 –¡Como el mar, pues!  
 –Sí, pues, se movía igual que el mar.  
 –Eso es el ritmo.  
 –Y me sentía raro, porque con tanto movimiento me mareé.  
 –¡Te mareaste!  
 –¡Claro! Yo iba como un barco temblando en sus palabras. [...]  
 –¿Sabes lo que has hecho, Mario?  
 –¿Qué?  
 –Una metáfora.  
 –Pero no vale, porque me salió de pura casualidad, no más.  
 –No hay imagen que no sea casual, hijo (Skármeta, 1985: 25-26).<sup>7</sup>

Mario's metaphor of himself –«I'm like a boat trembling in your words»– can be read in several different ways. On a cognitive level, the sea is a metaphor for poetry, and the boat is a metaphor for the reader. Poetry and reader give each other meaning: the boat could not travel without the sea, yet conversely, the sea without the boat would not have any significance beyond its beauty. On an affective level, the metaphor

<sup>6</sup> All translations from the Spanish into English are Katherine Silver's, from the English translation of the novel which is referenced in the bibliography. However, within the analytical part of this article I use some of my own translations of the metaphors, as my own stay closer to the Spanish (for example: "tremble" for "temblar", "uncovered" for "sin fondo").

<sup>7</sup> «–The *poem* wasn't weird. What was weird was the way *I* felt when you recited it. [...]  
 –How can I explain it to you? When you recited that poem, the words went from over there to over here.  
 –Like the sea, then!  
 –Yes, they moved just like the sea.  
 –That's the rhythm.  
 –And I felt weird because with all that movement, I got dizzy.  
 –You got dizzy?  
 –Of course. I was like a boat tossing upon your words. [...]  
 –Do you know what you just did, Mario?  
 –No, what?  
 –You invented a metaphor.  
 –But it doesn't count, 'cause it just came out by accident.  
 –All images are accidents, my son» (Skármeta, 2001: 12-13).

conveys Mario's trust in Neruda's words, and Neruda's ability to honour this trust. As Mario listens to Neruda's recitation of the poem, he entrusts himself to the words and to their speaker, and he makes himself vulnerable to the effect of poetic language. This is even more significant because, thanks to the omniscient narrator, the readers know that Mario experiences the sea as threatening, and that he gets seasick. That he can brave the element he most fears when he is guided by Neruda and cradled in his words, conveys the extent of his trust. However, the metaphor posits the reader as passive: it is the poet and the poem which provide safety and protection, as well as the vehicle for travel. And there are no further demands on the poet than those –or so it seems at first. For Mario takes the enunciation of the poem as an implicit promise of «I will look after you on your journey». As the story and their friendship unfold, he holds Neruda to this promise; and the metaphor of the boat trembling in the poet's words illuminates the changing and evolving relationship between poet and postman, and that between poetry and politics.

#### «Words Are an Uncovered Cheque »

Mario's and Neruda's metaphor of the reader as a boat trembling in the poet's words contrasts starkly with the metaphor of words as an uncovered cheque. It is introduced by Doña Rosa, Beatriz' mother, with reference to love poetry. When Mario falls in love with Beatriz, he starts to use metaphors from Neruda's love poetry to express his emotions to her. This alarms Doña Rosa. She explains to her daughter: «Estamos frente a un caso muy peligroso. Todos los hombres que primero tocan con la palabra, después llegan más lejos con las manos»<sup>8</sup> (Skármeta, 1985: 54). She then elaborates in conversation with Beatriz: «No hay peor droga que el bla-bla. Hace sentir a una mesonera de pueblo como una princesa veneciana. Y después, cuando viene el momento de la verdad, la vuelta a la realidad, te das cuenta de que las palabras son un cheque sin fondo»<sup>9</sup> (Skármeta, 1985: 54).

Doña Rosa's conception of poetic language maps onto the one outlined by Shoshana Felman in her study *The Literary Speech Act* (1983), on the language of seduction deployed in Molière's *Don Juan*. Felman argues that the play stages the clash of two opposing views of language,

one that is cognitive, or constative, and another that is performative. According to the cognitive view, which characterizes Don Juan's antagonists and victims, language is an

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<sup>8</sup> «We are in the thick of a very dangerous situation. All men who first touch with words go much further afterward with their hands» (Skármeta, 2001: 35).

<sup>9</sup> «There isn't a drug in the world worse than all that blah-blah-blah. It makes a village innkeeper feel like a Venetian princess. Later, when the moment of truth arrives, when life catches up with you, you'll realize that those words are no better than a bad check». (Skármeta, 2001: 35-36).

instrument for transmitting *truth*, that is, an instrument of knowledge, a means of *knowing reality*. [...] Don Juan does not share such a view of language. Saying, for him, is in no case tantamount to knowing, but rather to *doing: acting* on the interlocutor, modifying the situation and the interplay of forces within it (Felman, 1983: 27).

In the specific case of Don Juan, «acting on the interlocutor» means “seduction” and, as Frances Wilson points out in *Literary Seductions* (1999), seduction disturbs the order of things:

To seduce also means to divert from one’s path, and the implication is that the diversion directs one away from the truth and into the realm of deceit. Like seduction, diversion has risky connotations too and the pleasure yielded includes an element of danger: both reading and seduction lead one astray. [...] In diversion, as in seduction, there is a pleasure involved with putting yourself in someone else’s hands and letting go, and this is the pleasure of reading as well: it is a form of abandonment. Once you are diverted from the straight and narrow, there is no guarantee of return, and if you lose yourself in a book you might not find that same self again (Wilson, 1999: xxi).

In Doña Rosa’s view, finding pleasure in abandonment is fine for the world of fiction, but dangerous in real life. She immediately identifies the shy and tongue-tied Mario as a potential Don Juan, who will sweet-talk her daughter into falling in love with him and who, once he has diverted her from the path of virtue and has indulged in the physical pleasures that are the reward for skilful talk, will abandon her to the fate of an unmarried woman and single mother in rural 1960s Chile. Not for a moment does she consider the possibility that Mario’s metaphors might transmit the intensity of his feelings.

Her inability to trust, and her sense of disempowerment before what Felman has called «the authority of the first person» (Felman, 1983: 51), is reflected in her conception of words as an uncovered cheque. A cheque, covered or uncovered, works according to previously agreed terms. The rules that govern this transaction leave no doubt as to who has to give what to whom, and the counter-value of the cheque is usually determined before the transaction takes place. A promise of love is reified within such a conception of words as a linguistic negotiation based on mistrust; and it has to be secured by marriage because Doña Rosa assumes that by itself and on its own the cheque is uncovered.

The metaphor of poetic words as an uncovered cheque returns in a conversation between Mario and Neruda. Mario asks Neruda to intervene on his behalf, when Doña Rosa requests a meeting to discuss «un tal Mario Jiménez, seductor de menores» (Skármeta, 1985: 63) [«*a certain Mario Jiménez, seducer of minors*» (Skármeta, 2001: 44)]. Neruda refuses. Mario argues:

Usted tiene que ayudarme porque usted mismo escribió: «No me gusta la casa sin tejado, la ventana sin vidrios. No me gusta el día sin trabajo ni la noche sin sueño. No me

gusta el hombre sin mujer, ni la mujer sin hombre. Yo quiero que las vidas se integren encendiendo los besos hasta ahora apagados. Yo soy el buen poeta casamentero.» ¡Supongo que ahora no me dirá que este poema es un cheque sin fondos! (Skármeta, 1985: 63-64).<sup>10</sup>

Thus confronted with his own poem, Neruda agrees to help Mario and to speak to Doña Rosa. However, his intervention results in a spectacular failure. As evidence that Mario has slept with Beatriz, Doña Rosa produces a poem she has found on her daughter. The sonnet evokes the beautiful body of a naked woman and is, according to Rosa's maternal authority, an exact representation of her daughter's body. Neruda cannot clarify that he, not Mario, is the author of the poem because this might lead Rosa to the conclusion that *he* has slept with Beatriz. The poet is deprived of the "authority of the first person" (Felman) by friend and adversary alike, and he ends up understanding «lo que siente un boxeador cuando lo noquean al primer round» (Skármeta, 1985: 73) [*what a boxer feels when he's been knocked out in the first round*] (Skármeta, 2001: 53)].

Thus, neither Mario nor Neruda gain anything from the poet's interventions into his postman's love life. The reader knows this right from the start, because the omniscient narrator informs her / him early on in the novel that Beatriz likes Mario because he chooses metaphors for her, and not because he is friends with a famous poet. The real significance of Neruda sharing Mario's tribulations and embarrassments is revealed through a reading of this episode via the concept-metaphor of Mario's sea-bound journey through poetry. Now the poet no longer guides his reader through poetry; instead, he embarks on a journey with his friend. The boat no longer stands for words enunciated by the poet; instead, the "poetry" shared by the poet and his postman turns into the vehicle in which they explore the challenges of life and love. Their shared travels are made possible by friendship and mutual trust –and like love, those are non-negotiable. Such a *praxis* of poetic language does not permit the reification of poetic words, nor of the relationships and feelings that they express and nurture. Thus, it is impossible to conceive of words as a cheque. The two concept-metaphors of the boat and the sea, and of words as an uncovered cheque, do not express contradictory or opposite conceptions of poetic language, but rather alternative and incompatible ones<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> «You have to help me because it was you who wrote: 'I do not like a house without a roof, a window without glass. I do not like a day without work, a night without sleep. I do not like man without woman or woman without man. I want lives to meet and ignite the now dormant kisses. I am the good matchmaking poet.' I guess now you'll tell that that poem is worth as much as a bounced check!» (Skármeta, 2001: 44).

<sup>11</sup> As the novel progresses, Doña Rosa increasingly pitches proverbs against Neruda's and Mario's metaphors. Most articles quoted in the bibliography deal in detail with this aspect of the novel (for the most detailed analyses see Chasar, 2000; Gordils, 2001; and Henighan, 1999). My interest lies in the exploratory and conceptual potential of metaphors, and I will therefore leave aside an analysis of the proverbs. It is worth mentioning, though, that Doña Rosa's use of proverbs undermine her own agency vis-à-vis social conventions. Rosa embraces her own disempowerment and refuses to recognize any possibility for emancipation; for example, she never realizes that with respect to the poem that catches

### Poetry-Containers

For Doña Rosa, the poetic language of love is offensive in Adams' sense and scandalous according to Barthes' definition. Treating words as a cheque aims at the containment and curtailment of poetry, an aim she shares with the literary institution as Barthes sees it. In *El cartero*, the institution of literature is metaphorized through the poetry album. Two characters propagate its use: Doña Rosa, and the conservative politician Labbé.

The first poetry album that appears in the novel belongs to Doña Rosa. She confesses to Beatriz that when she was young she copied Neruda's *Veinte poemas de amor* into her diary. Her own act of self-disciplining –tucking away Neruda's poetry between the pages of a book– helps Rosa to contain her youthful flirt with poetic offense. Moreover, hiding Neruda's poetry in the most private of all books ensures that the poems cannot escape into the public arena since a diary is not supposed to be read by anyone but its author, and even those who write diaries do not always read them. Thus, the diary curtails the public effect of poetry.

The second poetry album is politically contextualized within the 1968 election campaign, and it is metonymically connected to the usage of political language as a tool for deception. The album is given to Mario by the representative of traditional and right-wing politics, the conservative politician Labbé. He appears in the village at the beginning of the 1968 election campaign. The narrator introduces him as

el diputado Labbé, representante de la derecha en la zona, quien había prometido en la última campaña extender el servicio eléctrico hacia la caleta, y que lentamente se iba acercando a cumplir su juramento como constaba con la inauguración de un desconcertante semáforo [...] en el cruce de tierra por donde transitaba el camion que recogía pescado, la bicicleta Lagnano de Mario Jiménez, burros, perros y aturdidas gallinas (Skármeta, 1985: 45).<sup>12</sup>

The traffic light, a symbol of progress, is meant to make a broken promise appear as a yet-to-be-kept promise. However, it shows more than anything Labbé's disinterest in the villagers and his indifferent attitude towards their quality of life. For there would have surely been better uses for electricity than a traffic light, a point which is highlighted by the fact that even if the traffic light worked, it would be useless in the

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Mario and Beatriz in the act, *she* is the one who determines the meaning of the poem.

<sup>12</sup> «The right-wing deputy of the región, who had won the last election on the promise of bringing electricity to the village. The closest he had ever come to fulfilling his pledge was to install a stop light at the intersection of two dirt roads where the only traffic was the truck that came to collect the fish, Mario's Legnano bicycle, donkeys, dogs, and bewildered chickens» (Skármeta, 2001: 28).

context of Isla Negra. Transport and mobility in the village do not require a traffic light, and the traffic participants listed by the narrator cannot process the meaning of one.

When Labbé returns to Isla Negra for the 1968 election campaign, the fishermen accept the leaflets he distributes for the conservative candidate. Only Mario returns the leaflet to Labbé and says: «Yo voy a votar por Neruda» (Skármeta, 1985: 45) [*«I'm going to vote for Neruda»* (Skármeta, 2001: 29)]. Labbé responds to this comment with a Platonian argument: «Neruda es un gran poeta. Quizá el más grande de todos los poetas. Pero, señores, francamente no lo veo como presidente de Chile» (Skármeta, 1985: 45) [*«Neruda is a great poet. Perhaps the greatest of all poets. But frankly, gentlemen, I cannot imagine him as president of Chile»* (Skármeta, 2001: 29)]. Labbé implies –like Plato– that someone who writes poetry cannot be good at politics by the very nature of what he does. This is in fact Labbé's personal opinion; but his skillful deployment of rhetorical abilities, social status, and implicitly, of a Greek philosopher's authority makes it appear as an uncontested description of reality.

The contrast between the narrator's laconic description of the political reality symbolized by the traffic light, vis-à-vis Labbé's skillful use of rhetoric, invites the question of whether it is the poet who deceives the villagers, or the politician. However, none of the villagers asks this question. They accept Labbé's dismissal of Neruda, his subsequent harassment of Mario so that the postman accepts a leaflet and, finally, they collaborate in his discursive consolidation of power:

[...] el diputado se agachaba a remover las almejas de un canasto.  
–¿A cuánto tienes la docena?  
–¡A ciento cincuenta, para usted!  
–¡Ciento cincuenta! ¡Por ese precio, me tienes que garantizar que cada almeja trae una perla!

Los pescadores se rieron, contagiados por la naturalidad de Labbé; esa gracia que tienen algunos ricos chilenos que crean un ambiente grato, allí donde se paran. El diputado se levantó, con un par de pasos se distanció de Mario, y [ . . . ] le dijo en voz lo bastante alta como para que nadie quedara sin escuchar:

–He oído que te ha dado por la poesía. Dicen que le haces la competencia a Pablo Neruda.

Las carcajadas de los pescadores explotaron tan rápidas como el rubor en su piel. [ . . . ] Esta vez acudieron palabras a su mente, pero fueron: “Quiero morirme” (Skármeta, 1985: 46).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> «[...] the deputy bent down to look at some clams in a basket.

–How much a dozen?

–For you, sir, only one hundred and fifty.

–One hundred and fifty? At that price you'll have to guarantee I'll find a pearl in each one.

The fishermen all laughed along with Labbé, who, like many rich Chileans, had a way of infusing a sense of ease and comfort into the very air around him. He then stood up, walked a few steps away from Mario, and with a smile that had become almost beatific, said in a voice just loud enough for everyone to hear:

–I understand you're getting interested in poetry. They say you're trying to compete with Pablo Neruda.

The fishermen's laughter rose as quickly as the blush in Mario's cheek. [...] When he could finally string together a few words in a sentence, it was “I want to die”» (Skármeta, 2001: 29-30).

Labbé's rhetorical mobilization of social privilege and party political power creates an impression of joviality and benevolence, which the fishermen embrace at the cost of being patronized and, possibly, underpaid and cheated. Labbé's style of negotiation of the price for the clams evokes Rosa's conceptualization of words as a cheque, and it shows the unequal power relations which are at play during the negotiation that determines the cheque's value –an issue that Rosa refuses to address. Once Labbé has assured himself of the villagers' willingness to accept their own subjugation in good spirits, he tackles the one person who stood up to him. He first humiliates Mario and immediately afterwards tries to corrupt and co-opt him. With a regal gesture, Labbé gives Mario a «poetry-container», a beautiful album «para que escribas tus poemas» (Skármeta, 1985: 46)<sup>14</sup>.

When Labbé invites Mario to inscribe poetry into an album, he invites him to capitalize on an ability that everyone should have, but that makes Mario stand out in his community: he can read and write, whereas most inhabitants of Isla Negra are illiterate. With the album, Labbé symbolically offers Mario the poor man's version of the status attached to being one of the privileged few who form part of the institution of literature. That Labbé does this after humiliating Mario in front of everybody else and with the complicity of everybody else, highlights to the postman that his status –were he to embrace it, which he does not do, depends on Labbé's grace and mercy.

Mario's small but courageous gesture of rejecting Labbé's leaflet constitutes a moment of self-assertion and of dignity for the postman, and it is all the more powerful because the ensuing events show that it is made by a fallible human being, not by a hero. Moreover, the gesture expresses the type of power of Neruda's poetry. There is no outright contestation of Labbé's statement that poets should not be in politics; but Mario's example shows that Neruda's poetry has strengthened the postman's subjectivity and self-confidence to such an extent, that he can refuse Labbé's leaflet. Moreover, Mario's engagement with Neruda's poetry renders the album meaningless in any practical sense: Mario never writes in it because he does not want to spoil the beautiful pages. Thus, Neruda's poetry is politically powerful because it sustains Mario in the process of taking his own decisions; not because it puts him into a privileged position over his peers, like Labbé's words try to do.

The travel of the album-metaphor from Rosa's personal and intimate diary to Labbé's public attempt at corruption and co-option, suggests a connection between Rosa's rigorous rejection of strong emotions and her deep mistrust of other human

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<sup>14</sup> Silver translate the sentence as «Here, my boy. This is for you» (Skármeta, 2001: 30). However, this does not convey the sinister connotations of the invitation as it is pronounced in Spanish, literally «for you to write your poems».

beings on the one hand, and Labbé's paternalistic and deceptive mode of politics on the other. Both rely on control and containment, and both need to keep poetry away from public life: Rosa, because it destabilizes relationships which are organized around mistrust and the inability to deal with her own emotional vulnerability; Labbé, because poetry calls the bluff of his deception by reminding Labbé's "subjects" of their dignity and potential agency. For both Rosa and Labbé, poetry undermines the *status quo* on which their relative power is built. In their respective cases, their attitude to poetry translates directly into political allegiances. Rosa turns out to be a faithful political supporter of Labbé's who, at the end of the novel, is shown to be an accomplice of Pinochet's *golpistas*. The concept-metaphor of the poetry-album explores the nature of their alliance, taking the institution of literature as an example. Moreover, it exposes the institution of literature as complicit with a morally confining society, as well as with an oppressive and deceptive political system<sup>15</sup>.

### **The Poet's Postman**

The poetry-album that Labbé offers to Mario is modelled upon the leather-bound, prestigious Losada-edition of Neruda's complete works. Early on in the novel, Neruda gives Mario a copy and Mario studies it diligently. Yet, for him, Neruda's poetry is most powerful when it leaves the page and is spoken by himself, by the poet, or by others. For Neruda, embracing his poetry's life outside of the Losada-edition entails a learning process, which is guided by Mario's friendship and which culminates in his Nobel laureate speech.

Neruda's Nobel Prize plays a significant role within the story. The first conversation with Mario, which introduces the metaphor of the reader as a boat travelling in the poet's words, is preceded by Neruda receiving a telegram informing him that he would not be given the prize at the time. He finally receives the desired prize several years later, when he is ambassador in Paris. This most prestigious of literary prizes would provide the perfect occasion for Pablo Neruda to embrace his author-status as a «prêtre appointé» (Barthes, 1964: 150) [a «salaried priest» (Barthes, 1973: 146)]. Rebecca Braun has analyzed the phenomenon created by literary prizes as "creator fetishism" and, with reference to European authors, suggests that the

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<sup>15</sup> Henighan points out that Labbé's name recalls the French term for "abbot", thus evoking «images of celibacy, bespeaking a rejection of human sexuality, fecundity and cooperative endeavor» (Henighan, 1999: 178). Beyond the metaphorical implications, the choice of names in the novel points towards its theoretical dimension: most characters are types, and their primary purpose is not the exploration of individual experience but the enacting of a theoretical debate on the relationship between poetry and politics.

combination of prize culture with celebrity culture makes it almost impossible to escape or sidestep the reification of authorship into celebrity status (Braun, 2011).

The narrator addresses the institutional power of the Nobel Prize when he carefully stages the performance of Neruda's laureate speech. He describes in some detail how the villagers come together in the village bar to watch the performance on television. They sit in a half-circle around the TV, where they can watch Neruda on a stage in Stockholm delivering his speech. Apart from the detailed description of the setting, the narrator gives no information on the situation in Stockholm nor, indeed, on Neruda's speech. He only quotes its closing passage:

Hace hoy cien años exactos, un pobre y espléndido poeta, el más atroz de los desesperados, escribió esta profecía: À l'aurore, armés d'une ardente patience, nous entrerons aux splendides villes. "Al amanecer, armados de una ardiente paciencia, entraremos en las espléndidas ciudades".

Yo creo en esa profecía de Rimbaud, el vidente. Yo vengo de una oscura provincia, de un país separado de los otros por la tajante geografía. Fui el más abandonado de los poetas y mi poesía fue regional, dolorosa y lluviosa. Pero tuve siempre la confianza en el hombre. No perdí jamás la esperanza. Por eso, he llegado hasta aquí con mi poesía y mi bandera.

En conclusión, debo decir a los hombres de buena voluntad, a los trabajadores, a los poetas, que el entero porvenir fue expresado en esta frase de Rimbaud: solo con una ardiente paciencia conquistaremos la espléndida ciudad que dará luz, justicia y dignidad a todos los hombres (Skármeta, 1985: 112).<sup>16</sup>

Rimbaud's «splendid city» evokes Neruda's poem "Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu", part of *Canto general*, where Neruda redefined his poetics through the communion with the indigenous roots of Latin America<sup>17</sup>. In his Nobel Laureate speech Neruda no longer looks to the past for his splendid city, but to the future; and he is no longer driven by the memory of the achievements of the dead, but by his trust in those who are alive. Furthermore, he acknowledges that he only came to this point of hope and optimism because of his trust in human beings. This evokes the concept-metaphor of his and Mario's sea-bound poetic journey. One last extension of the concept-metaphor suggests that it is the poet who travels, thanks to the human beings he can trust in; and that he only made it to the Stockholm stage because he embraced his role as his postman's poet. The trusting relationship that they developed through the encounter with the strong and unsettling emotion of love is carried over into the area of politics.

One might be tempted to read such an acknowledgement as the total scandal of poetry, one in which poetic language transcends the boundaries of the institution of literature. Yet, Neruda's embracing of his role as his postman's poet does not complete

<sup>16</sup> «Exactly one hundred years ago today, a poor and splendid poet, the most profoundly despairing of all, wrote this prophecy: "À l'aurore, armés d'une ardente patience, nous entrerons aux splendides villes". At dawn, armed with burning patience, we shall enter the splendid cities».

<sup>17</sup> See Felstiner (1981) and Santí (1982).

the total scandal of language, nor of poetry, in Barthes' sense. For Barthes, the impossibility of the total scandal is linked to the notion of *praxis*. He argues that for the author, language constitutes a *praxis* and is therefore fundamentally tautological because it is self-affirming, like Don Juan in the previously quoted analysis by Shoshana Felman. For the writer, on the other hand, «la parole supporte un faire, elle ne le constitue pas» (Barthes, 1960: 151) [*language is merely a means: for him, languages supports a praxis*] (Barthes, 1972: 147)]. In contradistinction to this, Neruda and Mario turn poetic language into a *praxis*; but not into a tautological one. Their *praxis* of poetic language is an equal and indispensable partner in the political project metaphorized through the splendid city. This, it does not support the political project in any instrumental sense, it is part of it and therefore, poetic words become world-making. This is when the total scandal of poetry takes place.

The poet on his own cannot complete this total scandal, not even when he accepts the Nobel Prize in his role as his postman's poet. The poet needs the postman to actively participate in the *praxis* constituted by poetic language; but the kind of participation is up to the postman. The Neruda in the story knows from experience that his stubborn and idiosyncratic postman rarely does what he is told to do. Thus, instead of trying to «act on others and modify their actions» (Felman, 1983) –here, manipulating Mario into completing the scandal– Neruda himself sets an example and assumes the role of Rimbaud's postman. According to Barthes, Rimbaud did not complete the total scandal because he fell silent so as not to be absorbed by the institution of literature. In his Nobel Laureate speech, Neruda claims Rimbaud's metaphors of the splendid city and of burning patience not for the institution of literature, but for the splendid city that Neruda, Allende, and many others tried to build in 1973, and where poets do not deceive people but remind them of their dignity. Spoken by Neruda, Rimbaud's poetry becomes “world-making”. And this, as I argued above, constitutes the total scandal of poetry.

### **Tough Choices: Scandalizing Criticism**

Starting with Neruda's Nobel Laureate speech, and reflecting the gradual escalation of the political situation in Chile, the narrator introduces a series of metaphors and similes that provoke interpretation. In so doing, he obligates readers to position themselves towards Neruda's belief in the human being, his political project, and his poetry. These interpretative choices, and the positionings that they entail, interrogate the position of readers, literary scholars and critics towards Neruda and Mario's *praxis* of poetic language.

The first of these devices is the figure of the postman. Many scholars have been scandalized by the novel because they feel that it short-changes Mario, who never becomes a poet in his own right<sup>18</sup>. On one level, this criticism misses the point of Mario's self-realization, as Yanis Gordils and Donald Shaw have eloquently argued (see Gordils, 2001; Shaw, 1994 and 1996). Moreover, and within the context of the argument presented here, Mario's becoming a poet would have made the poetic scandal impossible. Neruda would have lost his most committed postman, and poetic offense would have been absorbed by the literary institution (or, alternatively, Neruda's poetry would have stayed between the pages of any of its poetry-containers). As things stand, the total scandal of Neruda's poetry becomes impossible because those who wish to contain his poetry, "disappear" and kill the postman; not because postman and poet become part of the institution of literature<sup>19</sup>. Faced with this horrific ending, the narrator still leaves the readers with the interpretative choice between hope or resignation: if they validate the figure of the postman, they preserve the possibility of the total scandal of poetry and in so doing, choose for hope. If readers interpret the postman as only a failed poet, the total scandal of poetry becomes impossible and readers have to resign themselves to a world where politicians abuse, poets deceive, generals kill –and postmen disappear out of the equation.

Shortly after Neruda's laureate speech, readers again need to take a stance, this time with regard to the after-party of the ceremony. After an inspiring performance of Beatriz and Mario in the kitchen of the village bar, the members of the community disappear into the dunes in heterosexual couples and celebrate the occasion with what Donald Shaw has called «a collective release of sexual energy» (Shaw, 1991: 26). The image of the orgy in the dunes is so crass and inappropriate –in Barthes' terms: «scandalous»– that scholars have found it difficult to make sense of it and have dedicated little or no space to it in the various articles that have been published on the novel.

One possible interpretation treats the orgy in the dunes as a not necessarily tasteful metaphor of release and liberation, or even as an endorsement of the countercultural belief in the inseparability of political and personal (here: sexual) liberation, which informs many novels of the post-Boom (see Shaw, 1991). According to this interpretation, the author Skármeta develops the metaphor, and the literary scholar decodes it by drawing on their knowledge of post-Boom literature. Readers who choose

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<sup>18</sup> Wilson argues with reference to the film *Il postino* that «what he [Mario] says has nothing to do with him and is no more than a tissue of quotations» (Wilson, 1999: xvii), and Henighan notes that «Mario can only memorize» (Henighan, 1999: 182). Both read the figure of Mario as one of failed aspirations.

<sup>19</sup> The validation of the postman invites a comparison to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a play which Neruda refers to elsewhere in the novel.

this interpretive approach withdraw into the enlightened safety of the literary institution and of specialist knowledge. The political charge of the concept-metaphor is confined to the actual metaphor, and does not translate into the political environment.

Alternatively, one can dismiss the orgy in the dunes as a misfired metaphor chosen by a depressed and confused narrator of mediocre literary abilities, whose desperate infatuation with his “disappeared” friend’s wife regularly explodes into the erotic fantasies he generously shares with his readers, under the flimsy pretext of telling them a story about Pablo Neruda and his postman. By selecting this interpretation, the readers claim for themselves moral and intellectual superiority over the intensely fallible narrator of the story. The response of this superior position towards human fallibility is a cynicism which, given that human beings are inevitably fallible, can lead only to political defeatism.

Finally, one can read the orgy in the dunes as a concept-metaphor through which the narrator enquires into why Neruda’s poetry did not become world-making. Read in this way, the orgy in the dunes expresses the narrator’s consternation at the villagers, who by night indulge in the limited liberation of sexual transgression, and by day undermine the politically liberating policies of the government supported by Neruda through a series of endless complaints and petty acts of sabotage, thus insisting on treating Allende’s and Neruda’s political promise as an uncovered cheque, even when it is not. The momentary transgression of social norms might be inspiring, uplifting and liberating, but it does not express a public positioning and is therefore as politically effective as young Rosa copying *Veinte poemas de amor* into her diary. It does not threaten the social order of the village, and it is perfectly compatible with the political inertia of many of its inhabitants.

Only if an interpretation confronts this bitter reality and does not respond with a sense of defeat, is there hope for the scandal of poetry. The narrator’s clumsy but independent analysis of his compatriots’ behaviour indicates that by telling the story, he just might be recovering his own voice and a sense of Self akin to that expressed by Mario when the postman rejected Labbé’s leaflet. If this is true, then the narrator might become another postman and, possibly, complete the total scandal of Neruda’s poetry. However, this is only possible if the reader responds to, and interpellates the narrator on the basis of this potentiality. Such a reading of the novel requires Neruda’s «burning patience», as well as his trust in the political project, in the poetic word, and in the human being. For literary scholars, such a reading constitutes an offense against traditional conventions of literary criticism and against the academic institution, both of which draw on specialized expertise as evidence. Literary scholars who read the episode “with burning patience” relinquish the showcasing of specialized expertise and the

secure position of the specialist. Instead, they put their trust in a fallible, somewhat unpredictable, and politically incorrect narrator.

### Poetic Offense in the Name of Politics: From Construction to Disruption

One character in the novel has in fact already chosen to do so; and within the framework provided by the novel it is safe to say that had she not made that choice, there would be no story. When Beatriz asks the narrator to write down the story, she places her trust in an intensely fallible human being in the hope of him finding his own voice again and at the risk of making herself vulnerable to his desiring gaze. Throughout the novel, Beatriz stands firm in her belief in the human beings who deserve her trust. When her mother tells her that «detrás de las palabras no hay nada. Son luces de bengala que se deshacen en el aire» (Skármeta, 1985: 54)<sup>20</sup>, she replies: «Las palabras que me dijo Mario no se han deshecho en el aire. Las sé de memoria y me gusta pensar en ellas cuando trabajo» (Skármeta, 1985: 54)<sup>21</sup>. Beatriz works with Mario in keeping his words alive and, faced with her mother's emotional brutality, stands up for her belief that a promise is kept when the person who makes that promise takes action to keep it. Beatriz trusts in Mario to do precisely that, and he proves her trust to be justified. Equally, Neruda justifies Mario's trust when he accompanies him on his journey through love, and Mario justifies Neruda's trust when he takes good care of the poet's metaphors. In all these cases, trust is informed and validated as much by sound judgement as by hope; and this trust is indispensable to the non-transactionary character of poetic language.

In the area of politics, the ability to deal with non-transactionary poetic language becomes the touchstone for integrity. Salvador Allende, implicitly present throughout the novel, articulates such integrity in his final speech<sup>22</sup>:

Seguramente Radio Magallanes será acallada y el metal tranquilo de mi voz no llegará a ustedes. No importa. La seguirán oyendo. Siempre estaré junto a ustedes. Por lo menos mi recuerdo será el de un hombre digno que fue leal con la patria.

El pueblo debe defenderse, pero no sacrificarse. El pueblo no debe dejarse arrasar ni acribillar, pero tampoco puede humillarse.

Trabajadores de mi patria, tengo fe en Chile y su destino. Superarán otros hombres este momento gris y amargo en el que la traición pretende imponerse. Sigán ustedes sabiendo que, mucho más temprano que tarde, de nuevo se abrirán las grandes alamedas por donde pase el hombre libre, para construir una sociedad mejor.

¡Viva Chile! ¡Viva el pueblo! ¡Vivan los trabajadores!

<sup>20</sup> «[...] there isn't anything behind those words. They're like fireworks that disintegrate in thin air» (Skármeta, 2001: 36).

<sup>21</sup> «The words Mario said to me haven't disintegrated in thin air. I know them by heart and I like to think about them while I'm working» (Skármeta, 2007: 36).

<sup>22</sup> See Gordils (2001) for a reading of Allende's final speech as a subtext of the novel.

Estas son mis últimas palabras y tengo la certeza, de que mi sacrificio no será en vano. Tengo la certeza de que, por lo menos, habrá una lección moral que castigará la felonía, la cobardía y la traición<sup>23</sup>.

Allende made this speech after refusing to turn the promise he made to his people into an uncovered cheque by negotiating for his life in exchange for stepping down. Allende emphasizes his desire to be remembered as «un hombre digno», «a man of dignity», and his dignity is constituted by his refusal to negotiate what is non-negotiable: the trust that was placed in him<sup>24</sup>. By the same token, Allende reminds his listeners that the respect for dignity excludes senseless self-sacrifice, as well as the acceptance of humiliation. These points recall Mario's response to Labbé, when he refuses to accept the leaflet but does not sacrifice himself in a senseless contestation of Labbé's aggression. The last passage of Allende's speech resonates with Neruda's Nobel laureate speech and his evocation of Rimbaud's metaphor of the splendid city. An important difference is Allende's use of «fe» (*faith*) rather than Neruda's «confianza» (*trust*). This might allude to the betrayal of the trust Allende himself had placed in military leaders like General Pinochet, and the change in terminology reflects the precariousness of the subjective situation created by the betrayal of trust. The last line of the speech echoes the last line of Neruda's laureate speech «Thus, poetry will not have sung in vain». By metonymically linking his own sacrifice with Neruda's poetry, Allende reiterates again the constitutive role of poetic language for his political project, and poetry's potential to become world-making.

In the moment of Allende's final speech, the distinction between poetic offense and poetry's total scandal becomes crucial. Allende's final poetic offense against political conventions –his emphasis on dignity rather than on ideological integrity; the metaphor of «el metal tranquilo de mi voz», «the calm metal of my voice», as distinct from a thundering condemnation of the *golpistas*; the implicit appeal to the *praxis* of «burning patience»– constitutes a stumbling block against an increasingly reductive and violent experience of politics and of political language. However, the responsibility of

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<sup>23</sup> «Surely Radio Magallanes will be silenced, and the calm metal of my voice will no longer reach you. It does not matter. You will continue hearing it. I will always be next to you. At least my memory will be that of a man of dignity who was loyal to his country.

The people must defend themselves, but they must not sacrifice themselves. The people must not let themselves be destroyed or riddled with bullets, but they cannot be humiliated either.

Workers of my country, I have faith in Chile and its destiny. Other men will overcome this dark and bitter moment when treason seeks to prevail. Go forward knowing that, sooner rather than later, the great avenues will open again and free men will walk through them to construct a better society.

Long live Chile! Long live the people! Long live the workers!

These are my last words, and I am certain that my sacrifice will not be in vain, I am certain that, at the very least, it will be a moral lesson that will punish felony, cowardice, and treason» (Translation: [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Salvador Allende%27s Last Speech](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Salvador_Allende%27s_Last_Speech); last view, 7-12-2011).

<sup>24</sup> The willingness to negotiate everything and conversely, to turn everything –even love, trust, peace, and dignity– into negotiable entities, is in turn a constitutive part of what I term the “neoliberal etiquette”.

turning the offense into a total scandal, falls on the postmen and postwomen: only they can make poetry world-making and, in so doing, complete poetry's total scandal. The Preface and the Epilogue contain several invitations to do so. Beatriz calls on the narrator to continue the *praxis* of «burning patience» when political conditions do not permit the total scandal; and the narrator himself, in the epilogue to the novel, challenges the readers into making one last interpretative choice. He claims that Mario wins a prize for the one poem he ever manages to write. However, the narrator eventually meets a journalist who was supposedly a member of the jury, and this character does not remember the poem or its author. It is never clarified whether the journalist has forgotten, or whether the narrator has invented it. The narrator makes his own choice: when the journalist offers him coffee, he asks for it amargo, black. It now falls to readers to decide whether they deny Mario the prize so that he does not turn from a postman into a poet, or whether they hand him over to the institution of literature as yet another prize-winning poet, or, finally, whether they trust him to be both poet and postman even when the institution of literature claims him for its folds. Moreover, readers can choose bitterness like the narrator, or they can choose Allende's option who, in the very beginning of his last speech, stated that «Mis palabras no tienen amargura, sino decepción», «My words do not have bitterness but disappointment».

Poetic language –taken from the pages of a book to a stage in Stockholm, onto the airwaves of Radio Magallanes and finally into the multi-generic story of Neruda's postman<sup>25</sup>– comes to protect, salvage and perpetuate the promises and the hope that political violence attempts to destroy. The political efficacy of poetic language will depend on whether the postmen and postwomen will share this experience with others and secure poetry its space as a *praxis* for political world-making.

Transposed into the sphere of literary criticism, Neruda's and Allende's *praxis* of trust indicates that scholarship which is carried out “with burning patience” does not preclude specialist knowledge, critical thought, and rigorous analysis; quite the contrary, it requires them in order to be effective. However, the effectiveness of such scholarship is measured against the commitment to the splendid city, before it is measured against the commitment to the academic institution. Concept-metaphors offer one possibility for such a rigorous, critical and committed practice of scholarship. Because they explore complex relationships rather than establish truths, they allow for knowledge to be adjusted to context. In so doing, they offend the conventions of

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<sup>25</sup> Skármeta's novel was originally conceptualized as a play, then published as a novel, and finally adapted to the cinema screen as the film *Il postino*. I do not wish to endorse here those elements of the film that Teresa Longo has termed the “de-chilenization” and the “de-politicization” of Neruda, and that absorb poetry into a rather meaningless political spectacle. My reading of the novel suggests that poetic language and the total scandal –not multi-genericity– are the touchstone for political efficacy.

criticism because they do not claim a monopoly of truth, specialist knowledge, or specialized competence. But they do require intellectual rigour and critical thought in order to become meaningful. Moreover, they turn object of analysis –poetry– into a means of producing knowledge, and knowledge production is in turn informed by poetic language. In this sense, poetic language becomes world-making for both politics and knowledge<sup>26</sup>.

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