

## On the tension between the poetic self and the public. Humor and ethics in Mario Montalbetti's *Notas para un seminario sobre Foucault*.

De la tensión entre el yo poético y el público. Humor y ética en *Notas para un seminario sobre Foucault* de Mario Montalbetti.



[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). DOI: 10.32870/sincronia.axxix.n88.8.25b

**Julio Rivas Rojas**

University of Guadalajara  
(MEXICO)

CE: [rivasrojasjulio@gmail.com](mailto:rivasrojasjulio@gmail.com)

ID <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1057-596X>

Received: 11/12/2024 Revised: 11/03/2025 Approved: 12/06/2025

### Abstract.

*Notes for a seminar on Foucault* by Mario Montalbetti is a long poem. This means that it is a text that is composed of words that form verses and in which there are enjambments. Also, that these verses, which are dispersed over 129 pages, in addition to their internal pauses, are corralled, grouped, or at least pretend to be, under the same great title. As the title foreshadows, the poem fictitiously recreates the dynamics of a university seminar. The poetic I, who plays the role of professor, addresses an audience, which, at times, also participates in the dialogue.

**Keywords:** Mario Montalbetti. Poetry. Poetic humor. Poetic self.

### Resumen.

*Notas para un seminario sobre Foucault* de Mario Montalbetti es un poema largo. Esto quiere decir que se trata de un texto que está compuesto de palabras que forman versos y en donde hay encabalgamientos. También, que dichos versos, que se dispersan por 129 páginas, además de sus pausas internas, están acorralados, agrupados, o al menos pretenden estarlo, bajo un mismo gran título. Como este lo prefigura, en el poema se recrea ficticiamente la dinámica de un seminario

### How to cite this article (APA):

In paragraph (parenthetical citation):  
(Rivas, 2025, p. \_\_).

In reference list:

Rivas, J. (2025). On the tension between the poetic self and the audience. Humor and ethics in *Notes for a seminar on Foucault* by Mario Montalbetti. *Revista Sincronía*. XXIX(88). 145-159. DOI: 10.32870/sincronia.axxix.n88.8.25b

universitario. El yo poético, quien desempeña el rol de catedrático, se dirige a un público asistente, el cual, por momentos, también participa del diálogo.

**Palabras clave:** Mario Montalbetti. Poesía. Humor poético. Yo poético.

When I do linguistics, I try to prove that language does not exist (*laughs*). When I write poems, I try to prove that I am wrong (*laughs*).

M. Montalbetti<sup>1</sup>

Mario Montalbetti's *Notas para un seminario sobre Foucault* (hereafter Notes) (2018) is a long poem. This means that it is a text that is composed of words that form verses and where there are enjambments. Also, that said verses, which are scattered over 129 pages, in addition to their internal pauses, are corralled, grouped, or at least pretend to be,<sup>2</sup> under the same great title. As foreshadowed by the title, the poem fictitiously recreates the dynamics of a university seminar. The poetic I, who plays the role of professor, addresses an audience, which, at times, also participates in the dialogue. Hence the sections of the poem are titled, with the exception of two of them (Antisidro and NOTAS FINALES [13.12.17]), as SESSION I (21.2.17), SESSION II (28.2.17), SESSION III (7.3.17) [...] up to SESSION VIII (11.4.17). The periodicity of these, as can be quickly ascertained by the dating, is weekly: the same with which the French philosopher met with his students at the University of Paris (see the recordings of the courses available on the Gallica website:

<sup>1</sup> Stagnaro, G. and Zevallos, J. (2005). "Interview with Mario Montalbetti". *el hablador*, (10). Retrieved from [https://www.elhablador.com/entrevista10\\_1.htm](https://www.elhablador.com/entrevista10_1.htm)

<sup>2</sup> I allude to one of the ideas developed earlier by the poet, that of the dissonance that exists between the impulse of the poem towards unity and the impulse of the verse, which strives more towards anti-unity, towards interruption:

To put it once and for all: the poem believes in unity, in the whole, in a whole body, integrated, complete, however much we speak of open poems and however much we may think that poems never end, etc. The poem tries to make-one with the verses it submits to its title. On the other hand, the verses abhor unity, they are essentially autonomous, independent and do not respond very well to the harassment of sheepdogs. On the contrary, they constantly rebel against them (Montalbetti, 2014, p. X).

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/html/und/enregistrements-sonores/sur-foucault-le-pouvoir-1986-enregistrements-des-cours-de-gilles-deleuze?mode=desktop>).

Despite being a title that appeared more than five years ago, with a print run of 2500 copies, and not being an author who disavows the dissemination of his work and public discussion, as evidenced by his many interviews and public presentations, either as a professor of linguistics or as a poet, literary studies of this poem seem to be rather few. This is evidenced by a quick Google search and ChatGTP's response for the amount of research on the subject: "Specific studies on this work are limited". Of the few, the one by Alvarado (2022) stands out, who takes on the task of developing Agamben's concept of potency-of-not and applying it to Notes. Curiously, although this author focuses on the arbitrariness of the poetic self and the constant refusal to please the demands of the audience, on the fertility of not saying, he overlooks the humorousness that also emerges therefrom. In another approach, Prieto (2019) develops a political ethic not only of the text at hand but of much of Montalbetti's work. That which contrasts the poem, and what the poet identifies as his blindness, to the more recent novelistic, affiliated to visual art, dependent on seeing, which is aligned to the production ends of capital. And while he does not make invisible the humor in Notas and the parodic resource its author makes use of, he does not dwell on it, he mentions it in passing. Finally, Aquino (2018) and Sandoval (2021) focus on the metafictional devices and the multiplicity of genres that coexist in the collection of poems without delving into the desacralizing character of these literary mechanisms.

As in some of the previous works, what I intend to do here is to explore the relationship that is established between the poetic I of the poem, the I who gives the seminar, and the audience to whom it is addressed and who, sporadically, intervenes: sometimes with questions, sometimes with requests, sometimes with... words that are registered as inaudible. However, unlike them, I do so on the assumption that from such interactions the sparks of humor in the poem jump out, whose humorous basis rests on the literalness of the words, in most cases, as we shall see below. This allows me to relate this dynamic to the one established between the hero and the chorus in some classical tragedies

and comedies. On the one hand, this is a professor whose teaching mission seems to be not without dangers ("one can get hurt with all this" [p. 109]) and who even dares to compare himself to a classical hero ("I am trying to say no more / to abandon language / [...] as Theseus abandons his labyrinth" [p. 109]). On the other hand, as we shall also see, the audience not only shares the collective and anonymous character of the classical chorus, but even conveys the feelings of the community, in this case, the reading community. Such a relationship ends up rounding off a new reading of the poem: that of the parodic staging of the university professorship.

Finally, continuing with the daring, one can extract from all this a kind of political ethics, different from the one Prieto (2019) finds. One that points, paradoxically, more to the attending public than to the one who has the power of speech. To delineate it I turn directly to the following verses of Notas:

But there are two facts about Brodsky:

The clowns and the audience. The clowns do their thing

but the audience is absent, no longer  
 attends the show, he prefers another one,

[...] they go to the beach, they go sightseeing,  
 and only applauds when there is nothing to applaud (p. 108).

As can be seen, the presence of an audience is insisted upon, since without it there is no one to judge, when the time comes, the overrepresentation of the speaker, in the form of a clown and in the act of "throwing down the circus", through the abuse of authority, even when there are only a few of his words registered, even when there are only suspension points that indicate his presence. Without that collective feeling, no matter how minimal its registration, everything becomes a soliloquy and there is no denunciation, at least, or there is a recognition where there should not be, which is even worse.

### Mockery as a didactic strategy

That of seriousness and divertimento is a historical antagonism that even today is repeated, revived and certainly not exhausted in literary discussions and studies. Writers of the Western canon have swelled and represented the ranks of one side or the other, not always in a fixed way, but ductilely, sometimes flying one flag, sometimes the other (sometimes both). On the one hand, there is a strong advocate for a literature where the sublime prevails and where there is only room for the great themes of humanity; on the other hand, in its most exacerbated version, where the engine is procacity and even the most scatological of topics is allowed to be addressed. The quarrels that have arisen from this binomial between Aristophanes and the sophists, Quevedo and Góngora, Borges and Gombrowicz are famous. The truth is that over-reliance on one leads to closing oneself off to the goodness of the other and vice versa. In the case at hand, to take a text too seriously, whether one's own or someone else's, is to deny not only room for literary amusement at its most elementary level, that of playing with words; it is also to discard the subversive trait of humor, mockery and the complicity of the smile.

Now, perhaps one of the most provocative and destabilizing manifestations of humor is precisely that of parody. Taking Bakhtin's carnivalesque notion as a background, García (2013) defines it as follows:

Parody then fosters a denaturalization of the dominant or generic text (or approach). It is an exercise that breaks with the automatism of that dominant-institutionalized approach, through variation and ridicule. Parody is thus evidence that the text-serious, extended, consistent, all-encompassing, inevitably presents a certain exhaustion and is susceptible to being deconstructed, disrupted or reinvented (p. 124).

In Mario Montalbetti's Notes there is a hint of parody. Earlier I used the verb *recrear* to identify what happens in the poem, whose author, in addition to taking Deleuze's courses on Foucault as a basis, also takes his own experience as a university professor, I mean Montalbetti's, and although it was not entirely conscious on my part to choose this verb at

the beginning, now I would like to insist on it for its playful connotation, for its allusion to recreation and recreation, even to the theatrical. Alvarado (2022) already pointed out the movement from the oral to the written in the source text and which survives in *Notas* in a pronounced (and I would add, parodic) form:

Everything is due to the fact that there is an attempt to adapt the oral register to the written register for a better reading and to preserve the features of orality proper to the classes. In *Notes*, on the other hand, it is an intentional and imaginary feature (pp. 16-17).

Indeed, in addition to carrying the prosody characteristic of the speech of some passages of Deleuze's recording that Sandoval (2021) also emphasized, there is an intertextual manipulation that opens the door to mockery, mainly when the interactions between the speaker self and the audience are provoked. Take for instance the verses on which Sandoval also relies to illustrate his point, those that open the second session of the seminar: "I see knobs of ibuprofen on the tables / bottles of water and huge glasses of coffee / I see that you have not slept well, // let's begin" (Montalbetti, 2018, p. 25).

Within the higher education classroom there is usually a more or less veiled code of interaction, more or less recognized by those who occupy one position and another. As a general rule, respect, cordiality should reign and the limits of professionalism should not be overstepped. In this context, there is not much room for personal aspects, much less for criticism of them. In short, although not completely, it is quite formal and serious. What *Notes* does is to reveal those assimilated social codes of conduct through slight transgressions here and there. To a certain extent, it shows what is theatrical in a university seminar, where the actors and actresses fully comply with a libretto learned in the previous educational stages, and occasionally laugh at the monotony and seriousness with which it is usually approached. In the quoted fragment, the "let's begin" with which it ends is taken almost entirely from the transcripts of Deleuze's course (Sandoval, 2021), but before that there is an observation that points suggestively to the tribulations of the common life of the



university student and that is comical for being observable, familiar, yes, but also for being indolent and indifferent, an attitude to some degree defiant of what would be expected of a representative of a training institution (empathetic, committed to the welfare of their students, etc.).

Likewise, on more than one occasion, the poem's professorial self resorts to mockery as a teaching strategy. This works like this: he generates an expectation that points to the metaphorical aspect of language, and once he sees that the students have taken the bait (including the reader), he diverts attention to the literalness of the words. Consequently, he breaks with a double automatism: that of language and that of teaching. The reflex act of reading in a figurative sense, as for the first one, and that of attending without grumbling to what the teacher says, by means of pointing and cheating, as for the second one. The following verses are a sample of this:

I am going to tell you one thing

(prolonged silence)

... I tell you "I'm going to tell you one thing".

and you don't even blink

We don't say things

No-de-ci-mos-co-sas

The river, on the other hand, says things

that are things

we only say words (p. 29).

This burlesque strategy also serves the speaker to criticize institutionality, any form of State power and the power it pretends to exercise over language, and language itself in its

communicative facet. This is a constant throughout Montalbetti's work, as traced by Prieto (2019).

**Intervention from the audience:** "Isn't it there?"

**Response:**

Yes, it is there

but you won't find it there

because what the DLE says (which is blah, blah as well)

is that a counterexample "is an example  
 that contradicts another example". See?

You won't find a counterexample there

nor red nor blue nor green nor anything singular

or anything finally that we can work with (p. 34).

"Limpia, fija y da resplandor" is the well-worn motto of the Real Academia Española. For Montalbetti (2019), fixing language through meaning enables a process of domestication by capital, whose current phase depends on the words thus fixed for its purposes of incessant production of content ("in an era in which everyone 'generates content' / the first thing NOT to generate is 'content'" [p. 22]). Certainly, in this process the large publishing conglomerates play an important role: "It is that language forces us to speak / on condition that we don't have to say / (that's the business: Planeta, Random, Alfaguara, Penguin, / [...])" (p. 32). Undoubtedly, when something is static, it is easier to take it and dispose of it at will. It is to make language useful, exclusively useful and mercantile.

Even so, why insist so much on the literalness of words? In *El más crudo invierno*, Montalbetti (2017) starts from a verse by Blanca Varela, from which he takes the words of the book's title, to combat a common idea: poetry equals metaphor. There, to the repulsion to rhyme that he left as written in one of the essays of *Cualquier hombre es una isla* (2014),



he adds that of metaphor. For Montalbetti (2017), metaphor is akin to interpretation in the sense that both direct toward something that is not in the poem. As if it were a riddle, a swap of one thing for another. They put a distance "between words and things, or between words and certain internal contents, or between words and other words" (p. 17). At the opposite pole, there is shamelessness, nakedness, immediacy. "Another name for the same thing: literalness" (p. 17). The shameless professorial self and the mockery as a didactic strategy awaken the audience and the reader: they bring us back to the poem, to the verses, to the words. Between laughter, they draw a bridge so as not to fall into the temptation of interpretation and rather go back into language. "In the poem there is only saying (there is no seeing)" (p. 119).

#### **The chorus is also composed by the reader**

Until not so long ago, the educational paradigm of the professorship was rather vertical: the professor, a figure of power and possessor of reason, transmitted knowledge to the students, who passively, without further questioning, received it. The distinction was even material: cathedra was also the name of the elevated seat where the teacher was positioned, who looked down on the disciples. Recently, however, new pedagogical visions have been developed, which, paradoxically (in the end, the new is always part of the old), take up elements of the Socratic method and of teaching in the agora (not without some of its elitist traces). From these perspectives, the classroom is seen as a horizontal terrain where knowledge is constructed by both figures, teacher and student, regardless of the place they occupy. Thus, rather than as an authoritarian figure, the teacher sets discussion in motion, encourages doubt and stimulates students' critical thinking. If we look up the definition of seminar in the DLE, even knowing that we will not find any seminar there, it is easy to determine that it is at the antipodes of the old university chair.

On YouTube you can watch one of the videotaped sessions of Deleuze's course, not on Foucault, but on Leibniz. The French philosopher is seated in the center of the classroom, surrounded by assistants. There does not seem to be anything that distinguishes him

hierarchically from the rest of the people gathered there. Rather, there is not materially, but there might be something of a symbolic order. By then, at the end of 1986, Deleuze was already a recognized figure in the intellectual circle in France and elsewhere. Two of his most renowned publications have come to light: *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) and *The Anti-Oedipus* (1972), both written in collaboration with Félix Guattari. Therefore, it is easy to perceive an admiration on the part of the attendees: most of the time they just listen and constantly make notes; actually, it is not that there are none, but it is difficult to find interventions from the audience in this visual register. There is a reverential respect. As is well known, the problem with this type of relationship is that it often prevents confrontation, there is not much room for pointing fingers, and what is expressed by the revered figure is sometimes taken disproportionately or infallibly. So, there is certainly not a collaborative environment, but rather the one-way instruction survives, with some of its edges reworked. One of the comments to the video concludes with the following: "I love Deleuze although I never know if I have understood him".

In *Notes*, this atmosphere is conveyed in a theatrical and critical way. As if it were a classic comedy, in the style of those of Aristophanes, but also of Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna*, the poem brings with it less deference and more rebellion. Indeed, Mario Montalbetti is aware of the seriousness and institutionalism of the source text and destabilizes both aspects with parodic onslaughts. In the first place, perhaps to denounce the eminent protagonism of the philosopher and the passing into the background of the rest of the audience, but more probably to give him the possibility of expressing the feelings of the community, the audience is presented as an anonymous collective. The latter allows him, in the manner of the classical chorus, to intervene boldly in the flow of the verses, to require clarifications or to doubt the professorial self. Here is an example:

**Intervention from the audience:** "Why not Tudela and Varela?"

**Response:**

No.

Do you want someone more local? I'll give them to you:

it's about an extraordinary poem by

Dryden!

and that's 17th century, mind you;

and that's not local -but you'll see

how it ends up being so (p. 39).

And here's another one: "**Intervention from the audience:** ' but then it is not removed...' / **Answer:** / Please, I am trying to conclude, / I am trying to say no more // to abandon language / as Lycomedes abandons Skyros / as Theseus abandons his labyrinth" (p. 123).

As Aquino (2018) points out, the metaliterary elements of the poem match the diegetic audience with the extradiegetic reader. Not only because the use of deictics creates the effect that when the poetic I, the dissertator, addresses the audience he also seems to be addressing the reader, including him; but also because with the interventions of the latter, now seen as a chorus, Montalbetti would seem to anticipate some of the reader's concerns, questions, confessions when he is not sure he is understanding, which reinforces the identification of this figure with the fictional whole. Now, to reaffirm the confrontational kinship between this group and that of the classical comedies, I would like to bring up the chorus' response to Bdclicleon at one point in Aristophanes' *The Wasps* (2024): "Dialogue with you, enemy of the people, / Supporter of the monarchy, / Who meet with Brasidas, wear stripes / Of wool and leave your beard untrimmed?" (p. 90). Although not with the same degree of intensity, in one and the other of the fragments of Notes cited above in the same way there is a questioning of what the dissertator says, both from the no. The collective refuses to lower its head and let a soliloquy take place; on the contrary, it wants to be part of the learning process.

To a large extent, the above serves to point out the unequal power relationship between the individual and the collective despite the supposedly egalitarian nature of the university seminar we have already developed. The first excerpt highlights the tyranny of the

professorial self, the abuse of authority, the negativity of which Sandoval (2022) spoke. Let me explain. After the categorical and destabilizing "no", the professor self seems to reconsider and give in to the demands of the chorus, however, what he does is only pretend to attend to them. Although he predicts that this will be the case, the example he is about to talk about is neither contemporary nor geographically local. In the second, he simply ignores it, claiming to be in a hurry to conclude the poem. In short, only the professor has the power to direct the discourse, to exemplify, to develop ideas. And the chorus evidences it, denounces it. The audience and the fully identified reader use, although not the same answer, the same spirit of solidarity and some of the thirst for justice that seized the people of Fuenteovejuna against the commander, to point out the tyranny of the one who has the word. It is no wonder that, at the end of the YouTube video, Deleuze, after speaking almost exclusively for more than two hours, sighs and exclaims: "I'm tired!"

### **The tragedy of the poem**

Of course, the poetic self operates in this way because it has a goal. For him, Machiavellianly, the end justifies the means. Apparently and unexpectedly in equal measure, that of tyranny seems to be a disguise, the price to be paid in order to accomplish the mission he has set himself. Is this a comedy of entanglements? In any case, it is an adventure not without dangers: "I think we should stop here. As I said, / one can get hurt with all this" (p. 129). What the professor fears could be to arrive at meaninglessness, or else to meaning, to the staticity we mentioned above, to the state in which words serve as squire for the agents of power, hence the constant refusal to complacency, to exhaust the verses that compose notes with explanations and interpretations. In order not to fall into one of these two poles, the only thing he can do is to point out the direction, what the author himself points out in this and in another of his books as the meaning of the poem: to trace an arrow towards the outside, leaving aside the destination. It is as if he were preaching by example. That's right, we are really in front of a hero! And what this heroic figure aspires to is to do something to language, or at least to join forces for it.

It is not a better world  
that we must leave to our children  
(neither a better country, nor a better city)

but a better language.

What is a better language?

A better language is a language  
that does not submit to the laws  
of that to which it gives rise.

A language that does not submit to the city,  
that does not submit to the laws of the city,  
that does not submit to the people  
that decide the laws of the city,

that does not submit to the highest bidder.

These lines appear at the end of the book, in the ENDNOTES section. Following the narrative I have proposed, this section can be seen as the hero's confession. The testament that reveals why he did what he did.

**By way of conclusion: the testimonial parentheses.**

The labels of inaudible and the ellipses between parentheses that often make up the interventions of the audience allude to technological difficulties, to the impossibility of recording the words or of recording them intelligibly by the audio recorder that was used during Deleuze's university courses, the text that Notas parodies. These are also marks of editing or censorship on the part of Montalbetti's creative genius. Thus, in order to reach the

poem, these interventions had to circumvent both networks: the networks of that which is parodied and the networks of artifice on the part of the poet. Ultimately, they are marks that recall the presence of the audience, and not only that, but they are also traces of the audience's action, of its will to also direct the poem and prevent a monologue from taking place, a type of discourse that by definition prevents anyone else from speaking. And although this verbal formulation is not achieved on many occasions, the parentheses, rather than indicating laughter or applause in the background, seem to be there in the form of boos, disapproval, booing. Finally, they can also be read as an invitation for the reader to replicate this behavior: to complete and ask questions of his or her own to the poem.

### References

- Alvarado, V. (2022). Yo digo poema porque no puedo pronunciar la r. La potencia-de-no in Notes for a seminar on Foucault by Mario Montalbetti. *Nameless America*, (27), 8-24.
- Aquino, E. (2018). Notes for a seminar on Foucault by Mario Montalbetti. *Revista Espinela*, (6), 113.
- Aristophanes, (2024). *Comedies II* (trans. Luis Gil Fernández). epublibre.
- Montalbetti, M. (2014). *Any man is an island. Ensayos y pretextos*. Lima, Peru: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Montalbetti, M. (2016). *El más crudo invierno. Notes to a poem by Blanca Varela*. Lima, Peru: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Montalbetti, M. (2018). *Notes for a seminar on Foucault*. Lima, Peru: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Prieto, J. (2019). The blindness of the poem: a reading of Mario Montalbetti. *Theory Now*, 2(2), 42-68.
- Sandoval, J. (November 27, 2021). Montalbetti: "The poem without metaphors" or "The gap of the poem". *Multiversos*.