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Wandering writing and the poetics of failure in *Gas lacrimógeno y otras cosas que no son poemas* by Ángel Ortuño.

Escritura errante y poética del fracaso en *Gas lacrimógeno y otras cosas que no son poemas* de Ángel Ortuño.

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Abstract.

The generation of Mexican poets born at the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, is a generation that shares as a life history the experience of the recurrent economic and institutional crises of the 70s and 80s, while at the aesthetic level they inherit the critical and experimental spirit of the avant-garde. The result is a group of poets whose writing seeks to desacralize the status of the poem as an expression of distrust in the discourses of a failed institutionality. This type of writings that bet on putting in crisis the legibility of the poetic object represent a challenge for critics, so this paper explores Julio Prieto's concept of "wandering writing" as a tool for the study of this type of expressions. The book *Gas lacrimógeno y otras cosas que no son poemas*, by the writer Ángel Ortuño from Guadalajara, whose work, as we attempt to demonstrate, configures a particular *poetics of failure* characterized by a self-ironic discourse that exhibits and celebrates its own deviation from the institutionalized poetic norm.

Keywords: Mexican poetry. Poetics of failure. Generation of the 70s.

Resumen:

La generación de poetas mexicanos nacidos a final de la década de 1960 y a lo largo de la década de 1970, es una generación que comparte como historia de vida la experiencia de las recurrentes crisis económicas e institucionales de los años 70 y

80, mientras que en el nivel estético heredan el espíritu crítico y experimental de las vanguardias. El resultado es un conjunto de poetas que en su escritura buscan desacralizar el estatuto del poema como expresión de la desconfianza en los discursos de una institucionalidad fallida. Este tipo de escrituras que apuestan por poner en crisis la legibilidad del objeto poético representan un desafío para la crítica, por lo cual el presente trabajo explora el concepto de "escritura errante" de Julio Prieto como herramienta para el estudio de este tipo de expresiones. Se toma como objeto representativo de dicha generación el libro *Gas lacrimógeno y otras cosas que no son poemas*, del escritor tapatío Ángel Ortuño, cuyo trabajo, como se intenta demostrar, configura una particular *poética del fracaso* caracterizada por un discurso autoirónico que exhibe y celebra su propio desvío de la norma poética institucionalizada.

Keywords: Poesía mexicana. Poética del fracaso. Generación de los 70.

An avant-garde *tradition*?

In his book *Las vanguardias literarias en Hispanoamérica*, Hugo Verani affirms that the year 1922 can be considered the "miraculous year" of the Hispanic American avant-garde, since several important milestones in the history of the rupture movements occurred on that date. The date and the term have been fortunately incorporated into the jargon of avant-garde studies, so much so that the year 2022 was considered as a reference to date the centenary of the continental avant-gardes.

Among the many reflections triggered by the avant-garde ephemeris is the question of whether the poetics of the avant-gardes have been able to stand the test of time to permeate the exercise of contemporary writing. And if so, the next question is how this recovery happens: what attitudes, resources or forms of the poetics of the so-called "historical" avant-gardes and the "neo-avant-gardes" are recovered, reworked or confronted by contemporary poetics? Do such resources maintain their disruptive character or have they sedimented as already predictable resources in today's poetry?

One of the working hypotheses that motivate the present text is the idea that the attitudes of the avant-garde, as an expression of a self-consciousness and critical discursivity of art (Bürger, 1987; Del Gizzo, 2018), appear recurrently in the poetics of different periods. In this context, from the historiography and criticism of the Mexican literature, the imprint

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that the avant-gardes have left in the evolution of Mexican poetry from the mid-twentieth century to the present has been pointed out.

A recent example of this critical corpus is the *Historia crítica de la poesía mexicana*, coordinated by Rogelio Guedea, which in its volume II dedicated to the period from the 1950s to the first decade of the 21st century proposes a periodization of Mexican poetry in three large blocks which the editor has called neo-romanticism, post-modernism and amphiguardism. Guedea explains that under the heading of postmodernism are located "the heirs of the poetry of language, derived directly from the most experimental avant-garde, those authors mostly concerned with exploiting all the potentialities of language as a channel or way of knowledge" (2015, p. 11). This postmodern generation would have emerged in the 1960s to 1970s and counts among its exponents, according to the critic, Marco Antonio Montes de Oca, Gerardo Deniz, David Huerta and Coral Bracho. Subsequently, Guedea proposes the notion of amphiguardism to group authors born in the 1960s and 1970s, who would see their period of greatest production between 1980 and 2010 and whose work is distinguished by:

> [...]a tension between a retroguard (those lyrical constructions that look towards more traditional poetics, not necessarily from immediately previous eras) and an avant-garde (which includes elocutions with a will for visible renewal of language and the constant search for new syntaxes) (Guedea, 2015, p. 12).

According to Guedea's assessment, it would seem that the critical reception of expressions that explore the experimentalism of poetic language would be sufficiently sedimented. However, there are indications that such products still represent a challenge for critical examination, as will be seen below.

Of frauds and excesses

The periodization of contemporary Mexican poetry proposed by Guedea points out among the heirs of the poetry of language derived from the avant-garde in its most experimental facet to Gerardo Deniz, an author whom the critic Julián Herbert has named, together with

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Eduardo Lizalde, as the two poets "who most influence the present" (2010, p. 5). Regarding Deniz's influence on current poetry in Mexico, the critic Alejandro Higashi proposes in his article "El dificultismo de Eduardo Lizalde y Gerardo Deniz en la tradición de la poesía mexicana actual" a review of the formal resources that constitute Deniz's poetics and the way in which these are replicated by young authors. Higashi takes as a starting point to characterize Deniz's poetry the notion of "dificultismo" coined by Alejandro Palma Castro (Higashi, 2018, p. 42) The author points out that it is possible to identify the way in which manifestations of recent poetry "sink their roots" in Deniz's work and considers that the presence of Deniz's poetics is evident in the new generations from a poetic style "enriched by the crossing with specialized languages, the splitting of literary references, the discursive fragmentation, the juxtaposition of quotes and references from very different origins (and) the sonority that emerges from the rigor of the forms..." (2018, p. 43). In his account, the critic considers that these compositional strategies imply by their density a challenge for reading, but nowadays they have evolved and found "new possibilities of articulation in books of wide-ranging depth" (p. 43). Nevertheless, the author considers that these resources taken to the extreme can have a pernicious effect on poetic production. As an example of this extreme *diffidence*, he gives as counterexamples of what should not be done the work of Ángel Ortuño (Guadalajara 1969-2021) and Diana Garza Islas (Santiago, Nuevo León, 1985):

> I think, for example, of the automatism with which all these resources are *abused* in Ángel Ortuño's *Perlesía* (2012) and *1331* (2013) or Diana Garza Islas's *Caja negra que se llama como a mí (*2015) (Higashi, 2018, p. 43. Italics mine).

In this sense, already previously in his extensive study on current Mexican poetry, published in 2015 with the title *PM/XXI/360 Crematística y estética de la poesía mexicana contemporánea en la era de la tradición de la ruptura* (Higashi, 2015)*,* Higashi warns that the type of procedures present in much of today's poetry, taken to the extreme, lend themselves "with ease, to improvisation and *fraud*" (2018, p. 413, italics mine) and immediately presents the case of two texts by Ángel Ortuño as evidence of this and points to this:

> In the case of Ángel Ortuño and of a botched book like *1331*, the results of nonsense and defabulation end up afflicting those who either read without understanding, or simply abandon the book minutes after having begun to browse through its pages (Higashi, 2018, p. 413).

In his judgment, the author considers that in Ortuño's work contained in the book *1331* "the explicit renunciation of meaning leaves the reader with a toolbox and a set of loose ends that, in practice *do not put together a poem* (p. 413, my italics)" and concludes the brief mention of the work of the poet from Guadalajara with the certainty that "poetry like that written by Ángel Ortuño explains the reason why the reading public has distanced itself so much from recent poetry."[1] In sum, the study warns that this case is an example of a set of certain current poetic practices that "have opted to present challenges and excluding enigmas instead of *true inclusive processes of communication* in which (the reader) can participate" (pp. 413-414, my italics).

In view of the judgment of Ortuño and Garza Islas' work, it is worth asking whether the role of literary studies in the face of this type of poetic practices should be limited to denouncing their excesses and *fraudulent* nature, to turn the page and move on to deal with those expressions that do manage to *put together a poem* and are *true inclusive processes of communication.* Would it not be necessary to ask ourselves about the context of production of these works and about the esthetic, social and historical processes that drive this type of positioning, since, as we can see, these are not isolated cases.[2] Rather, we should ask

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[1] The issue of the reception of this type of expressions that "are not poems" or "fraudulent" would deserve another discussion about whether they have effectively run out of readers. In the case of Ortuño, it is worth quoting the comment of the poet, also from Guadalajara, Ricardo Yáñez on the circulation of his work: "Perhaps not since Ricardo Castillo has there been a poet from Jalisco with such a wide response from readers" (Yáñez, 2021). Evidence in favor of this supposedly favorable reception among the reading community could be Ortuño's strong presence in social networks, for example, in the social network X, formerly Twitter, one can see publications where his poems are shared.

[2] A proof that the categories of the *experimental* and the formal searches inherited from the avant-garde are an important part of the current poetic production is the *Poesía Mexa* portal*,* dedicated to the free diffusion of authors, whose selection criteria, the editors point out, consists of:

> [...] to include authors who value some kind of risk in their writing, understanding risk as an attribute present not only in the work of openly experimental poets (formally, conceptually or discursively), but also in that of others who, even from a more stable assimilation of the multiple poetic traditions in our language, are not

ourselves whether the crisis of meaning postulated in these "challenges and excluding enigmas" might not imply a provocative call to modify what we understand by *meaning* and, ultimately, to question the system of values on which the notion of *poet* and *poem* is built.

From this perspective it is highly relevant that Ángel Ortuño chooses to title as for one of his latest books a statement that warns about his own fraudulent mood: *Gas lacrimógeno y otras cosas que no son poemas* (2018). We will deal briefly with this last book as a representative case of the critical attitude towards the notions of *poem* and *poet* shared by a group of authors born after 1968 and up to 1980. The working hypothesis is that the generation of poets born in this period is a generation that inherits from the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements their character of critical self-awareness, understood as a questioning of the conventions of the art institution, of the status of the work of art -in this case, the poem-, as well as of the notion of authorship (Bürger, 1987 and Foster, 2001); while on the political-historical level it is a generation marked by the effects of the precariousness caused by the recurrent economic crises brought about by the neoliberal system imposed since the 1980s. The result is a group of authors who, from the questioning of the institutional categories of *poem* and *poet*, question literary practice in general, while from the crisis of legibility they also formulate a critique of the discursiveness of a political-economic system that has repeatedly failed to provide stability and certainty to its citizens.

"Children of systemic precariousness."

The community of poets born after the 1968 student movement and before the 1980s are part of a generation of Mexicans whose lives were marked by the crises that marked the Mexican economy from the end of the 1970s and into the first decade of the 21st century. Those who lived their childhood in the early 1980s as a member of a working class or middle class family undoubtedly experienced the debacle that the fall of the *Mexican miracle* meant for the family economy with the first great devaluation of the peso in 1976, in what would

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satisfied with reproducing them passively, but add something to the heterogeneous and mutant body of Mexican poetry. (Poesía Mexicana, s.f. para 1).
The site begins its compilation precisely with Gerardo Deniz, until reaching authors born in the 2000s, with more than 80 people included.

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be the first episode of a series of recurring crises, each one more fierce than the last. If for the generation born in the 1950s, the economic debacle meant disenchantment with the promises of stabilizing development (Tello, 2010a), for those born in the late 1960s and early 1970s, precariousness was the norm to which they were forced to become accustomed. This is a generation that lived its childhood and youth in the shadow of the so-called neoliberal period of the Mexican economy. A period that by the end of the first decade of the 21st century left as a result zero economic growth, persistent inequality in the distribution of wealth, overwhelming poverty and deplorable living conditions for at least half of the population. As well as insufficient and deficient basic infrastructure, few opportunities for well-paid, stable and secure employment, as well as exponential growth of informality in the labor market and massive migration to the United States (Tello, 2010b).

Hand in hand with the economic disaster came the social debacle and with it violence and insecurity. According to the study *Crime Statistics in Mexico: Historical Series 1926-2008* the crime rate per hundred thousand inhabitants dropped from 223 in 1926 to 105 in 1975 and from 1976, the year of the first great economic crisis of the chain, the rate began a continuous ascent throughout the neoliberal period, to reach a maximum of 208 reported crimes per hundred thousand inhabitants in 2004 (Piccato, Hidalgo and Lajous, 2018). In this spiral of violence it will be during the last decade of the twentieth century when begins to register the series of cases of femicide in the northern border strip of the country, as well as the accelerated crisis due to the violence unleashed by drug trafficking.

A contradictory effect of the beginning of the neoliberal period in the 1980s was that the economic strategy proposed the opening of international markets, which brought an increase in the access to consumer goods, as well as a greater circulation of mass culture, especially that generated in the United States. Thus, the lower price of household appliances -either through the opening of markets or through smuggling sponsored by the informal economy, the so-called *fayuca*-, allowed that generation to have television in their homes. Thus, the generation born in the 1970s regularly consumed animated series in their childhood and in their adolescence witnessed the proliferation of rock as a musical genre, as

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well as the emergence of the video-clip, thanks to the U.S. network MTV. This mass culture, as we shall see, was assimilated by this generation of poets and its referents and codes will appear repeatedly and shared in their works.

In her essay "Los setenta, una generación a caballo", included in the volume *Escribir poesía en México,* the poet Maricela Guerrero -born in 1977- refers to those born after '68 and before 1980 as the "children of systemic precariousness" and whom she describes as a generation that keeps going "around uncertainty" (2019, p. 86). This generation witnessed the Gulf War, the first war to be televised live, thus normalizing barbarism while trivializing the status of the real. Thus, for them the possibility of knowing the real thing vanished or simply was not something to be concerned about, because as the poet warns: "we had to attend a function in which the ideas of stability or continuity were fractured like the Regis or like the building in Colonia Juarez where Rockdrigo died during the 1985 earthquake" (p.89).

Economic and political instability would have as a correlate the questioning of the very idea of the *literary* and of the *poem*, because from this precariousness, Guerrero herself points out, her generation was engaged in multiple searches that aspired to the "desacralization of the poem" (p.87). In short, for these daughters and sons of the crisis, the status of the poem as a stable entity has been lost, which is why it is symptomatic that Guerrero herself speaks of "those verbal artifacts that we call poems" (p.84).

If, as the poet points out, this generation had as a shared horizon the fact that "the idea of prosperity and progress regularly vanished every six years", it is foreseeable that this community of poets shared the skepticism towards any political, economic or cultural discursivity that postulated an idea of stability, which is evidently manifested in their matter of interest and action: poetry.

Thus, formulating the critique of the poem's institutionalism is an operation that, from different intensities and resources, will appear in an important line of the poets of this generation. Precisely, the reading of the different essays gathered in the volume *Escribir poesía en México* shows that even with diverse positions and tones, the poets of this generation formulate their own questioning of the notion of *poetry* and *poet.* For example,

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in his text "Valor de culto y valor de exhibición o cómo herir críticamente la poética nacional", Oscar de Pablo -born in 1979-, postulates that the Mexican literary field actively participates in a historical resistance to abandon the cult value of the work of art, which occurs in a more stubborn way in poetry. De Pablo points out that, faced with the impossibility of accessing the massive sale of his works, the Mexican poet needs to maintain his conventional quasi-mystical status as an exceptional being that assures him the benefit of patronage (De Pablo, 2019, p. 205). The author warns that the ruthless struggle for symbolic capital and the proliferation of aspiring *poets* brought with it the imperious need to separate and distinguish the "Great Serious Poets" from those "*charlatans*, marked by prosaically human traits such as the need to experiment or a sense of humor" (p. 209, my italics).

Also compiled in the volume *Escribir poesía en México,* but in a more festive and humorous tone, the text by Eduardo Padilla -born in 1976-, entitled "Escribir de espalda a la tradición", also questions the privileged status of poetry, by considering it even as a vice: "The verb is proclaimed as a virtuous vice and nobody is discussing it, because to discuss it would be to confirm its virtues and demonstrate its condition of vice" (Padilla, 2019, p 213). The desacralization undertaken by this generation, pointed out by Maricela Guerrero, transcends the realm of the merely literary to infect even the life project of the person himself, at least discursively, which is why Padilla renounces to polemicize about the poetic tradition, not out of rebellion, but out of a simple sense of uselessness and absence:

> My coldness towards them (my ancestors) could well be attributed to a serious lack of my own character, for my lack of enthusiasm for tradition turns out to be proportional to my lack of enthusiasm for procreation, happiness, and transcendence (Padilla, 2019, p. 205).

"A poet from Guadalajara"

Ángel Ortuño was born in Guadalajara 1969, the city where he lived until the day of his death in 2021. He published his first book *Las bodas químicas* in 1994, which was followed by a dozen titles until *Gas lacrimógeno y otras cosas que no son poemas* (2018) and *La edad de oro (*2020), his last book published during his lifetime.

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In the volume *Escribir poesía en México*, an essay by Ángel Ortuño is also collected, where in a similar way to his generational cohorts he formulates a critique of the status of *poet* and *poem*. Ortuño begins the essay by referring to the absurdity of being summoned to "perorate" on what it means to be a poet, specifically "a poet from Guadalajara". In order to fulfill the assignment, Ortuño begins by asking himself what a poem is, for which he resorts to a definition of the poetic by José Gorostiza:

> [...] why this word "poem" implies intelligent organization of poetic matter. (...) Would it be too much to demand that the parts of a composition are all poetic and that the composition, as a whole, results in a poem? (Ortuño, 2019, p. 188).

Faced with the definition, more or less tautological, and before the "demand" of the bard, Ortuño himself admits that his writing work does not satisfy it and with cynical humor declares: "And well, how to be a poet and at the same time recognize that I do not write poems? There is nothing left but shamelessness, misrepresentation [...]" (2019, p. 188). Next, Ortuño goes on to formulate a set of problems that could well constitute a programmatic text for the dismantling of the very notion of poetic writing and formulate something that in principle we could call a *poetics of failure*.

Based on the poetic ideal set forth in José Gorostiza's quotation, Ortuño proposes as a compositional principle the task of "exacerbating in style the difference with respect to the ideal horizon". That is to say, if writing well implies signifying the author's demand of *Muerte sin fin*, the task will be to operate against the current, since Ortuño admits that "writing well is very difficult, it takes years to do it and it is not fun" (Ortuño, 2019, p. 193). In this sense, the author proposes to return to the pejorative term "provincial" (from Guadalajara) not for the sake of fighting for its dignification, but to assume what being provincial has of failure in the impetus to access the cosmopolitan and universal ideal. It is a matter, he warns, of "delving into this failure, manipulating -or trying to- the magnitude of that failure with respect to the canon". Ortuño ends the essay by recovering a quote from Emil Cioran as a synthesis of what the work of those of us who "are in this (writing) in the here and now" implies:

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Having exhausted the modes of expression, art is oriented toward meaninglessness, toward a private and incommunicable universe. All intelligible shuddering, whether in painting, music or poetry, seems to us, rightly, old-fashioned or vulgar (quoted in Ortuño, 2019, p. 195).

However, for Ortuño it is not only a matter of affirming the rupture of meaning as a clear and univocal path, therefore, aware that even the apparently rebellious gesture of advocating nonsense would also be pontificating as Gorostiza does, he clarifies that his statements are not credible and should also be distrusted, which is why he warns in his last line: "I lie". This self-denunciation of the enunciator as a fraudulent source alludes to the practice of self-irony typical of the avant-garde, think for example of the text by César Vallejo, "Se prohíbe hablar al piloto" where after formulating a series of programmatic principles, he ends with "Todo lo que llevo dicho hasta aquí es mentira" (Vallejo, 2005, p. 156).

Wandering **writing**

Ortuño's position is not fortuitous since, as we have seen, it is inscribed in the condition of skepticism shared by his generation. Behind this attitude that questions the validity of poetic practice as a correlate of distrust in an economic and political system where there are no expectations for the future operates a long-standing attitude in the writing of modernity, what the Spanish critic Julio Prieto calls the "gesture of writing badly", the same that would have in the avant-gardes one of its turning points. Prieto (2016) proposes the notion of "errant writing" to characterize the practices derived from the gesture of writing badly, a gesture that, he points out, emerges as a constant disseminated in 20th century art.

The critic understands the idea of *wandering* in two senses: first, as an irruption of error or failure that manifests itself in *bad writing.* Secondly, he understands the idea of *wandering* as a drift, as a mobilization that begins with the abandonment of a logic of ownership (Prieto, 2016, p. 13).

From the perspective of negativity that runs through modern art, Prieto points out that the gesture of writing badly is framed in an aesthetic reduction, visualized as "the

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gesture of making a lack productive, of operating from what is subtracted or denied" (2016, p. 14). The gesture of writing badly, the author affirms, runs through the modern tradition and is manifested, for example, in Duchamp's *ready-mades* or, in the Latin American context, in Macedonio Fernández's "writing badly and poorly", among others.

On the other hand, the idea of *wandering* in modern art signals the fall of the aesthetic into temporality, Prieto explains. If classicism postulated the artistic as a timeless value and a belief in the "validity of the good in all times and places," modern art emerges as a practice traversed by time; it is wandering in the sense that it will constantly set in motion the ideals of the "good" and the "valid." In its temporal dimension, the modern is continuously open to the present, which constitutes a key element of the gesture of writing badly, thus, Prieto (2016) explains that "writing badly, in that sense, would be another way of naming the opening interval by which the aesthetic is traversed by the social political and cultural antagonisms of the present" (2016, p. 15).

As can be seen, the notion of wandering writing is not limited only to the specific act of writing, but implies a critical positioning in the face of practices and discourses enthroned in categories that claim to be outside temporality, such as, for example, the idea of what a *true* poem should be, a *true* poet or, to return to the critical notes that motivate this reflection: a "true inclusive process of communication". Moreover, from their strong insertion in the historical, the tactics of bad writing point towards the political, insofar as they question the discursivities of power, so as to bring "into play the aesthetic as a way of making visible the cuts, lacks and failures of legibility of the social body" (2016, p. 16). This point is particularly important when considering Maricela Guerrero's account of the absence of certainties, that is, an absence of legibility that faced the generation born around the 1970s. For a generation of poets that grew up with the lack and failure of the economic and political system as the norm, it is therefore not strange that its members make writing a practice that calls into question the status of the *poem*, as in the case of Ortuño and Padilla, disqualifying even their own reliability, legibility and legality as *poets*.

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Tear Gas, Descartes and The Kite Runner

The idea of exploring the *wandering* character in the poetics of the generation of those born in the 70s of the twentieth century opens then as a working hypothesis that would deserve of course a long-range development, however, for obvious reasons of space in this paper we propose only an approach to some of the poems of the book *Gas lacrimógeno y otras cosas que no son poemas* (2018) by Ángel Ortuño, in order to point out possible lines of further work.

Before going on to review some texts of the book, it is necessary to warn that this position on the part of the author to discredit his figure of alleged poet, is a attitude visible prior to the publication of *Gas lacrimógeno y otras cosas que no son poemas.* A brief example of this is Ortuño's fondness for referring to his texts as "versitos" or as just a few "lines" (De Aguinaga, 2021). By reducing his work to the fragmentary diminutive of *versitos* and not *poems*, he indicates his refusal to insert himself under the denominations of Poetry and Poet, thus, with capital letters. In Prieto's words, we would say that this is a deliberate attitude to give away his own wandering (2016).

Apparently, Ortuño replicates the attitude of referring to his work as "versitos" of Guillermo Fernández, another poet from Guadalajara, who also liked to refer to his work with this diminutive. Precisely in an essay on Fernández, Ortuño explains that Fernández's fondness for referring to his work as "versitos" denotes an attitude that seeks to disarm the image of the poet as "that celestial lightning rod, that tormented chosen of the gods" (Ortuño, 2012, p. 52). The case of his countryman serves Ortuño to formulate his own desacralizing idea of what a poet does and clarifies:

> No, the poet makes verses, writes units that procure certain patterns of repetition, counts syllables. And all this nonsense is done exclusively in search of pleasure, as do the perverse polymorphs that before Freud were called babies (Ortuño, 2012, p. 52).

For Ortuño, the poet's task is merely a childish, puerile and perverse pleasure. Here the idea of perversity, in the meaning registered by the RAE dictionary, in the sense of something that

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corrupts "the usual state of things", acquires a specific dimension in the context of the fault, of the failure as a rupture of the usual state, an error that deliberately points to the poem itself. Thus, composing "versitos", moves away from the requirement of seeking the harmony/unity/authority of a unitary whole that is understood as *the* Poem.

This is therefore the attitude that functions as an engine in the texts of *Gas lacrimógeno and other things that are not poems,* although with different variations and expressions. One of the representative texts of this system is the poem "Isabel de bohemia tuvo problemas. y nosotros también los tenemos",[3] it is a short poem of 24 verses in free form, distributed in three stanzas and which we reproduce in its entirety:

Is there, perhaps,

is there any definition of "soul" that distinguishes

what it does

from

what it

that

is?

The desert is full

of huge stones. They look like

sculpted

but they are

drawn with the sole purpose

of demonstrating nothing

while a coyote walking on two legs

tries to assassinate

a roadrunner whose design hates

realism

to look more like a blue ostrich.

blue.

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[3] The spelling of the titles of the poems in the book is respected in all cases.

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> Descartes came up with the image of a stone, moved by its weight
>
> moved by its weight,
>
> But neither Isabel
>
> nor the roadrunner
>
> fell into the trap. (2018, p.13-14)

The text is based on a recurrent procedure in Ortuño's work: the recovery of references to mass culture in order to put them in dialogue with some reference to high culture or some allusion to intellectual history. In this case, the text makes a clear parallelism between the relationship of the palatine princess Isabel de Bohemia and the philosopher René Descartes with the cartoon series known in Mexico as _El Correcaminos_, produced by the American company Warner Brothers. In order to show the way in which the poem festively recreates the notion of wandering, it is necessary to dwell on both references.

The epistolary relationship between the aristocratic Isabel de Bohemia and Descartes constitutes a famous episode in the history of Western philosophy. Isabel de Bohemia studied history, physics and astronomy in a self-taught way. In 1642 she became acquainted with the work of the French thinker and began an epistolary relationship with him. Although Isabel showed interest in Descartes' work, she maintained a critical position against his dualistic conception of soul and body. The first stanza of Ortuño's text refers precisely to the argument that, in a letter dated May 16, 1643, Isabel formulated against the idea that the soul, immaterial and inextensive, could act on the material body. Faced with the problem, the aristocrat asks the philosopher for a better definition of the concept of soul:

> Your notion of the soul totally excludes extension, and it seems to me that something immaterial cannot touch anything else. So I ask him for a definition of the soul that approaches its nature in a more exhaustive way than the one he offers in

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his meditations, that is: I want a definition that distinguishes what it does from what it is (reproduced in Perez, 2017).[4]

Faced with the demand of his interlocutor, Descartes responds on May 21, 1643 and seeks to give an answer by formulating a simile between the body moved by the soul with a rock that falls under the effect of the invisible force of gravity. The answer fails to convince Elizabeth and so she expresses it in the letter of reply, where without being deterred she points out to the thinker "I do not see why we should be convinced that a body can be pushed by something immaterial" and points out that it would be more feasible to reformulate the notion of soul and attribute extension to it than to think of something immaterial acting on something material (reproduced in Perez 2017).

On the other hand, El Correcaminos and El Coyote are the protagonists of a cartoon series created in 1949 by Chuck Jones initially for the *Merry Melodies* series of the American network Warner Brothers and which would later be an independent program with the title *The Road Runner Show*. Although the series was produced between the 1950s and 1960s, in Mexico it circulated extensively on broadcast television in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s.

The anecdote of the series is simple: a coyote, a carnivorous predator, unsuccessfully seeks to hunt a roadrunner over and over again. In order to achieve his goal, Coyote uses all kinds of ingenious inventions and technological resources to catch the fast and elusive Roadrunner. On each occasion, Coyote not only fails, but his traps and stratagems are turned against him and he is always beaten by them. It is thus a variation on the same theme: the failure of the hunter before his prey.

In the poem "Isabel de bohemia tuvo problemas. y nosotros también los tenemos", a parallelism is constructed between the skeptical Isabel, who is identified with the

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[4] There are several translations of the passages of the letters that shape this episode, in this case I refer to a version that corresponds more to the reference in Ortuño's text. There is however a translation of the letters that offers a variant: "I therefore ask you for a definition of the soul more particular than the one we find in your *Metaphysics*, namely that of its substance, separate from action and thought" (reproduced in Descartes, 1999, p. 26).

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unattainable Roadrunner, while Descartes is assimilated to the ingenious Coyote. The implicit story proposes to visualize the father of rationalism and pillar of modernity as a hungry predator who, by means of ingenious traps, wants to catch and symbolically eat an elusive/skeptical young aristocrat. Under the magnifying glass offered by the idea of wandering, the allegory proposed by the text presents a series of interesting edges.

For those who know the *Roadrunner* series well -that is, the generation that grew up watching the same program in the 70s and 80s of the twentieth century- it is clear that the expectation is not to witness the success of the predator hunting his prey, but to witness again and again something that is known beforehand: the failure of the hunter in his attempt. The interest lies in to assist in each chapter to a new form of failure. In fact, the theme song of the version that was broadcast on Mexican television read: "poor Coyote... thousands of traps he has wanted to set for you, but in all of them he has to fail" (Zona Retro, 2017).

In this way, the very pointed irreverent humor in Ortuño's work is manifested in this text by presenting the father of rationalism as the always defeated and humiliated Coyote. Descartes is par excellence the philosopher of modernity and of the scientific method, which is why some dictionary entries refer to the adjective "Cartesian" as a synonym of "methodical", "rational" and "logical" (El pequeño Larousse, 1996, p. 209). Thus, we can understand that the figure of Descartes is assimilated in the text to a representation of the certainties that should emerge from modern reason and its promises of truth. In this same scheme, the figure of Isabel de Bohemia is assimilated to the elusive Roadrunner, who repeatedly defies the efforts of Coyote/Descartes to catch her with his traps/truths.

In the first instance, it is clear that the intention of the text is to caricature and exhibit the failure/errancy of modernity and rationalism as the only way of knowledge. The sufficiency of Reason and its rock is opposed by the skepticism of Isabel as a champion of mistrust, to which the enunciative voice of the poem joins as an accomplice from the exteriority of the title, almost as if we were listening to a *voice-over*: "Isabel de bohemia tuvo problemas. y *nosotros* también los tenemos" (Isabel of Bohemia had problems. And *we* have them too). That is to say that the enunciative voice becomes one with the young skeptic to

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conjugate in an all-encompassing "we". Who would this "we" be then? It would most likely be the community of that generation alluded to by the poet Maricela Guerrero, who, in her text cited here, also significantly uses the first person plural to refer to herself and her generation mates.

However, the operation of the text does not end here, because if we stop a little in the second stanza of the text, we can see that an important nuance appears. The stanza refers to the desert setting where the chase of the animated series takes place. This space/scenario where reason sets traps for critical skepticism, will be revealed in the text as a trap in itself.

Let us recall that the stanza mentions that the desert looks full of stones, stones that should be forceful in all their materiality, thus in the poem they are associated to Descartes' rock as discursive weapons. However, the text reveals that these stones are only hollow images, without material reality and warns that they only "seem" but *are* not: "They seem/ sculpted/ but are/ drawn for the sole purpose/ of demonstrating nothing".

If in the analogy proposed by the text, the desert is the scene of the persecution of skepticism by the instrumental reason of modernity, in the same way, the text is the space/desert where the rational trap is denounced. That is to say, the terrain of the dispute between certainty and skepticism is the text itself. Although the text seeks to unmask the rational trap, we cannot trust the intentions of the text either, since it itself emerges as a desert populated by rocks whose only purpose is "to prove nothing". And if the Roadrunner appears to be the rebel who with agility resists the fallacies of rationality, this swift hero cannot be trusted either, for he himself *is* not what he *seems:*

> while a coyote walking on two legs
>
> tries to assassinate
>
> a roadrunner whose design hates
>
> realism
>
> to look more like a blue ostrich.
>
> blue. (2018, p. 13)

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The warning is clear: the text opens as a space for the denunciation of the absence and impossibility of any certainty, but at the same time, it denounces itself as a source of deception, since "it proves nothing". As part of this operation, the enunciative voice of the text is assimilated from the *we* to the Isabel/Roadrunner, who also fails as the agent that will unmask the rationalist fallacy, since she herself, like the text everything, is not what it seems, the errancy of the text is also manifested in the fact that it points to something *else.*

At the level of enunciation, the crisis of the principle of truth is reinforced by the use of antithesis as a resource, for example, at the beginning of the second stanza we read, "the desert is *full*", the contradiction thus alludes to the violation of the identity of the desert with itself: at the level of discourse the desert ceases to be the *emptiness* it should be. The antithesis also occurs between the being and the seeming of the stones that fill the desert, since they only "seem", but *are* not authentic, thus betraying their quality of being and their ontological truth. Again the antithesis appears discursively in the verses that read: "pero están/ dibujadas con el solo *propósito/* de *no demostrar nada/*" (but they are/ drawn for the sole *purpose/ of proving nothing/*). If the definition of "purpose", according to the RAE is an "objective that is intended to be achieved", in this case the purpose is the non-purpose, that is, "not to achieve anything".

Additionally, from the use of the simile, the poem reiterates the mismatch between the authentic and the represented in the discourse, since the roadrunner is not a real roadrunner, but is presented "*like* an ostrich/blue ostrich". On the other hand, the composition of the poem is distinguished by a reiterated use of enjambment, which, however, does not fulfill the function of framing a metrical scheme, since the poem is composed in free verse. Rather, the use of enjambment taken to the extreme would seem to have the purpose of violating the expository-descriptive use of the discourse by forcing a fragmented reading. This is the case in the last lines of the first stanza of the poem, since the syntactic period is broken down to its minimum expression and each line is made up of only one word: "lo que hace/ de/ lo/ lo/ que/ es/ es?".

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In short, the poem proposes a system of the fraudulent, understanding the idea of fraud in the definition of the RAE as "Action contrary to truth and rectitude, which harms the person against whom it is committed". This system of fraud was already postulated in the aforementioned text by Ortuño, "Un poeta de Guadalajara", where the author warned about himself: "I lie". In the same way, the text "Isabel de bohemia..." subtly lies to confirm his own *wandering*.

This ethic of failure will appear constantly in other texts that make up *Gas lacrimógeno and other things that are not poems.* For example, in "poema con pájaros" (poem with birds), the text itself declares its failure:

> There has been a
>
> error.
>
> Here
>
> no
>
> is. (2018, p. 32)

The text alludes to the well-known legend presented by Internet browsers when the page or material searched for no longer exists on the servers. In the slang of digital communications when this happens it is said that the "link is broken". In this case, the error itself constitutes the raison d'être of the "poem with birds", its subject matter, as an aspiration to poem is just an absence, a gap in the expectation of those who trust in technology -product of science and reason- to access the Poem. The message to the receiver is clear, if there is a poem, it is not here, consequently, the wandering is set in motion, pointing to another place outside the text itself.

The fascination with failure is recurrent in the motifs and references of the texts of *Tear Gas and other things that are not poems,* another case is the text that bears the very significant title of "antecedents":

> Plan 9 from Outer Space
>
> was curiously similar

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to a promise of Christianity:

The Resurrection of the Dead (2018, p. 22).

As is known, the film *Plan 9 from Outer Space,* by director Ed Wood released in 1959 is considered one of the worst films of American cinema (Bartlett, 2019), but at the same time, it is considered a cult film precisely because of the number of errors in its production. We have again the appeal to error, which in an equally irreverent way is assimilated to one of the "promises of Christianity". Now, if we read the poems "Isabel de bohemia..." and "antecedentes" in parallel, the result is that two usually exclusive spaces, Cartesian reason and religion, are comparable in terms of failure, insofar as both betray their promise of certainties.

The praxis of failure will be carried in the collection of poems in a self-critical manner against the very desacralizing intention it seems to postulate, for if the poetic discourse wants to set itself up as a destructive act, it is incapable of carrying out the enterprise, since it has ridiculously and unknowingly arrived late to the destruction of idols. This is the case in the poem "charles atlas blues", whose title refers to the fitness system that was popular in the 1980s. The program takes its name from its creator, the bodybuilder Charles Atlas, which was sold by mail order and its advertising in Mexico appeared on the back covers of children's comic magazines published by Editorial Novaro in the 1970s and 1980s. The program's advertising used a brief comic where a skinny young man was humiliated on the beach by his rival who kicks sand in his face, but by following the training program, the alfeñique is transformed into an athlete who manages to beat up his rival on the same beach. Here is the complete poem:

I did not care for the strengthening

of scientific facts.

It was not my intention to fight with the employees.

At the age of 13

can't even imagine

wasting time in anterooms.

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I ordered a gymnastics course by mail to kick sand in his face.

to kick sand in the face

God himself

God himself.

Then I read in a book that you died

in the 19th century.

But, at least,

I'll walk along the beach with the gesture

that it was me who killed him. (2018, p. 80)

Once again, a reference to mass culture and advertising campaigns is intertwined with a cultured intertextual allusion to the history of philosophy and the topic of the death of God and the work of Frederich Nietzsche. From the resource of allusion, the advertisement that sells the possibility of strengthening the body for a physical fight between men competing for the love of a woman is transferred to the quarrelsome eagerness of an adolescent in his metaphysical battle against God and religion. Despite the epic boast of the lyrical voice, the failure is present again when it is revealed that the fight with divinity is meaningless, since God was already dead since the nineteenth century, thanks to the work of Nietzsche. Nevertheless, the lyrical voice, in a cynical rant, announces that it will perform the farce of claiming the deicide, thus reintroducing the idea of the poem's fraudulent action.

Following similar procedures, the texts that compose *Gas lacrimógeno y otras cosas que no son poemas*, carry out diverse variants of the poetics of error. For reasons of space let us mention only a few titles that likewise shamelessly exhibit their failure and inadequacy to the poetic ideal: "silly song", "where is the poetry there?", "poetry and other decorative elements", "the subject of this poem is subject to change without notice" and "this is not art, but only a piece of clumsy rhetoric".

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Another noteworthy element in the idea of wandering writing in Prieto's terms is the way in which it declares its own temporality, whereby the text in its wandering proposes a retrospective review of a historical situation from its own present. In the case of the text "Isabel de bohemia..." the work recovers a pop culture reference that refers to the cultural consumption habits of a generation that lived its childhood in the 1980s. References to television productions of the 1980s appear in other pieces of the volume, for example, the text that opens the book, "¿qué te hiciste, oh musa, que estás tan suavecita?", which refers to the *slogan* of an advertising campaign for Darling soap and which was broadcast on Mexican television in the 1980s (Solavá, 2013). On the other hand, the text "the magical world of color" takes its title from the homonymous series produced by Walt Disney Studios between 1961 and 1969 and which was broadcast on Mexican television in the 1970s and 1980s (Disney Nauta 2013), another reference to the mass culture of the 1980s is the aforementioned poem "charles atlas blues". These references allude to various products of mass culture shared by an entire generation. By using them as an intertextual resource, Ortuño's texts seek to construct his interlocutor, while, as Prieto points out, fully introducing temporality into writing, as a "practice traversed by time" (Prieto, 2016, p. 15).

Finally, the idea of wandering, in terms of the meaning of moving aimlessly, will appear thematized as the punishment of wandering away from a promised land, the punishment that the poetic voice receives, resulting from the fraudulent nature of her supposed "poems" and her failure in trying to reproduce an ideal of poetic beauty. This "expulsion" from the poetic Paradise occurs in the poem "a poem at the height of the world":

> I came back a little late,
>
> when I was going to illegal parties where there was
>
> alcohol and drugs
>
> for teenagers.
>
>
> Then, even if I had to endure a fierce scolding,
>
> they finally opened the door to the house for me.

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But now that I'm back

to great poetry,

they shut me out. (2019, p. 39)

Conclusions

Examining current poetic productions that are constructed from the refusal to postulate themselves as *poems, insofar* as they are required to mean *something*, as is the case with the work of Ángel Ortuño reviewed here, undoubtedly entails a challenge for the critical exercise. The task can become pressing if we also start from the idea that one of the functions of criticism is precisely to guide guidelines for reading and interpretation, how to fulfill this task in the face of texts that exhibit precisely their illegibility and refusal to function as *poems*?

The brief exercise carried out here seeks to orient possible critical ways of approaching a group of Mexican poetry texts published in the first two decades of the 21st century and which are distinguished by a certain tendency towards illegibility or meaninglessness. These are works that are inserted in that avant-garde genealogy of Mexican poets that Sergio Mondragón associates with the avant-garde and that make of "the volatility and asymmetry of their language the adventure par excellence of their lives" (1988, p. 20), works that find their filiation in texts such as *Trilce*, by César Vallejo, *En la masmédula* by Oliverio Girondo or in the antipoetry of Nicanor Parra and that, due to their characteristics, demand a more specific critical exercise. In this spirit, we have shown that resorting to a theoretical tool such as the one offered by Julio Prieto with the notion of errant writing proves productive in the face of the character of *bad writing* or *illegibility* that this type of work implicitly or deliberately exhibits.

The case of *Gas lacrimógeno y otras cosas que no son poemas* (2018) is an indication that these kinds of searches are much more than mere automatisms or abuses of certain procedures indebted to the iconoclastic attitude of the avant-garde. The brief review of this

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work shows that the gesture of writing badly, as Prieto points out, reveals an "ethics of the illegible" in which: "The gesture of writing badly thus proposes an illegible becoming: a movement towards an other of the text in which a semiotic dimension and a sociopolitical dimension converge" (2016, p. 42). In the case of Ortuño's texts reviewed here, this aesthetic dimension is oriented towards questioning the values of rationality by putting into crisis the values of truth and authenticity associated with the concept of poem and poet, while the sociopolitical aspect points towards denouncing the precariousness -economic, political, and even ontological- to which an entire generation of Mexicans was condemned by the failure of the neoliberal regime.

For this generation of crises, the only way to deal with this customary precarious existence was, as Maricela Guerrero points out, to become "a rampant fatalistic resignation" in order to "believe that the crisis does to us what the wind does to Juárez" (2019, p. 86); resignation and fatalism that in Ángel Ortuño's poetry are translated into the irreverent rants and the use of irony with which he formulates his reading of the literary institution.

The ethics of bad writing in Ortuño postulates that, faced with the onslaught of reality, the option is to take refuge in infantilism, cynicism and error as a response to institutional ideals. In the face of accusations of fraud towards these expressions that do not "put together a poem", the "artifacts" themselves cynically exhibit their character of error, they declare themselves to be errant before the stable ideal of work, all with the purpose of exhibiting the failure of the aesthetic system together with that of the economic and political system. The way in which the political denunciation converges with the aesthetic denunciation is concretized in the poem "a democracy radiant as a sun", where in a hidden way, the formal resource of the simile is exhibited as a metonymy of the literary system, at the same time that an analogy is made between this and the political system:

> A tasty lobster
>
> like a sun.
>
> A sad clown
>
> like a sun.
>
> A sun above the two with nothing

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to resemble. (2018, p. 19).

Here the adverb "as", as a grammatical component that alludes to the comparison procedure, is used repeatedly not as a metaphorical resource, but as an ironic display of a fraudulent operation, as occurs in the poem "Isabel de bohemia..." already commented. The principle of identity that demands that something to be true must be equal to itself, is absent in the poem, because everything in the poem is *like* something else, so we are again in the system of fraud. The poem's denunciation results from the fact that democracy itself, as a political ideal, is also a deception, in the sense that it *is* not itself, but is *like* something else, while the repeated use of "like" alludes to a poetic-rhetorical system worn out in predictable formulas.

Finally, it should be noted that *Gas lacrimógeno y otras cosas que no son poemas* (2018) fulfills the function of being fully integrated to its social actuality as Prieto points out in his concept of wandering, since the collection of poems, from intertextual resources alludes to a historical moment and a shared generational experience, located in the 70s and 80s, but simultaneously the texts that make up the collection also actively insert themselves in their own present, which bursts into the text with the allusions to the internet that we have already mentioned in "poema con pájaros" or through discursive registers typical of virtual social networks, for example with the title of the text "personas que quizá conozcas" ("people you may know") (88).

As for the political and presentist dimension that the collection of poems manifests, it must be taken into account that the book appears in May 2018, in the midst of the electoral race for the Presidency of the Republic. Faced with the new barrage of promises of change and well-being massively disseminated by political parties, the collection of poems interpellates its present from its ethics of failure and seeks to express the inevitable fatalistic vocation of an entire generation. Thus, the work seems to postulate that it is better to resort -again- to the nihilistic cry of the punk movements of the 70s and 80s: "There is no future". Therefore, on the eve of the announced political transition, it is not strange that the book

closes with a text ironically entitled "don't be afraid", whose final verses, in a warning tone, hint at skepticism about the promises of a promising future by the political class:

> This Prime Minister,
>
> compatriots,
>
> loves you.
>
> But only God was a miracle worker.
>
>
> And he lost the habit. (2018, p. 92).

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