

The Most Dangerous Gift: Language, Architecture and the Discourse of Identity in the Catholic University of Valparaíso

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"... but a sudden, violent pitch of the boat will often go far to topple him, because length of foundation is nothing without corresponding breath."

H. Melville, Moby Dick

When the School of Architecture of the *Universidad Católica de Valparaíso* (UCV) steps into the void of intervention, it does so with the purpose of foundation[-*fundar*];, with the purpose of establishing an opening in the inhabitation of the continent: "*La obra de arquitectura – se basa en una 'fundación'.* – The work of architecture is based on a 'foundation'."¹ This condition of foundation can easily be misunderstood. It could be read as a pragmatic call for a tectonic understanding of the production of architecture. It could be understood as a search for origin, a search for identity guided by technique, method, or discourse. In all it could be seen as a call for a grounding. This is not the case, but very much on the contrary I will argue that the members of this school follow that precarious condition that Neruda described as: "*el día sucesivo como una gota.*"²

"Nothing will content them but the extremest limit of the land."

H. Melville, Moby Dick

Language — [*Lenguaje*]: ποιησις-poiesis

The UCV has foundations[-*fundamentos*]. This is an important statement, and it is a statement that one will hear repeatedly when visiting the school: "*Esta escuela tiene fundamentos.* – This school has foundations."³ There can be no question that *fundamento* is understood as grounding[-*cimiento*] and that in this all acts of foundation[-*actos de fundación*], all interventions done by the school, have that sense of gravity common to all architectural discourse and production. But foundation[-*fundamento*], and this is the challenge, is also the woof of

weaves[-*trama de los tejidos*]⁴ that materializes the instability of any act of foundation itself. In this it presents a wider view that challenges the understanding of foundation as a manifestation of permanence[-*firmitas*] forwarding it as an activity rather than a stability. From being the revelation of depth/permanence (a grounding, architecture as the consolidation of a historical memory or national identity), it becomes the activity that exposes the measure of grounding. Foundation becomes the activity of measuring. This is central to understand the production of the school. Foundation[-*fundamento*] is not the base on which the school stands but rather, the activity of measuring by which they reveal the magnitude of their praxis.

What tool reveals this magnitude? This tool is language. It is hard in our present prosaic state of affairs to understand the magnitude of language. Language brings into crisis the prosaic understanding of foundation. The multiplicities inscribed in words mark the series of discontinuities that are contrary to all grounding discourses. When language gives us full measure of our actions, when it reveals the magnitude of our realizations it is called *poetic language*. Thus when the UCV forwards an architecture guided by language, its "grounding" becomes a measure of its own existence. Thus, it is not that the school chooses poetic language over any other, but rather that because of its ability to manifest or unfold the full measure of existence poetic language becomes for the school the only possible language. This is why the UCV makes a clear distinction between poetry and the poetic: a differentiation that strikes at the core of the question of identity. What better sign of the presence of identity than a stable body of works. Yet for them, it is not a question of poetry or architecture, of a body of work or of a particular style, but rather of the ability to manifest a full measure of existence. It is not that the UCV rejects the notion of identity. It is that rather than asking who they are, as a question of grounding, they ask it as a question of becoming.

Architecture is thus the subject of poetic discourse [*palabra poética*]: ποιησις. *Poiesis*, a making, presents a vision of reality that chains existence to language. In this, it offers full knowledge, a privileged perspective, an unfolding reality, which is far from mystical. *Poiesis* offers an expansive knowledge of the world because it gives us full measure of the world. For the UCV *poiesis* is a research tool. It is simply another system of observing reality. It is poetic discourse directed at the world at large in empirical fashion. This most perceptive of systems based on language allows us to occupy a world of intangibles and resist discursive practices that aim at fixing our productions in a stable and classified world of social, political, historical, and cultural contracts. It is this understanding of the empirical systems of research, scientific and poetic what makes the UCV truly unique.

“Es en la aventura misma que la ciencia y la poiesis contemporáneas nos proponen – el hallazgo de un fundamento – donde se juega la independencia y la libertad, únicas luces para una justicia social humana y cabal.”

It is in the same adventure which contemporary science and poiesis propose to us – the finding of a foundation – where independence and liberty, only lights for a complete human and social justice is played.”

Placed alongside science, poiesis expands our knowledge and experience of the world for it is not bound by the pragmatic forces that haunt and hunt science. This is the stroke of genius of the UCV. And because of this the school, like Hölderlin, considers language to be the most dangerous gift.

“It was not down in any map; true places never are.”
H. Melville. *Moby Dick*

Territory[-Territoriobfo]: América

This critical eye, which is able to unfold multiple layers of experience, is first and foremost released unto the continent. From its creation in 1952⁶, the school had a research agenda. Early projects developed by the school reveal an empirical approach to architecture. The *Instituto de Arquitectura*, more than a school presents itself as a testing ground for architectural experimentation. But it is not until the *Travesía Amereida* in 1965, a journey of international poets, architects, artists and writers⁷ from Punta Arenas to Santa Cruz de la Sierra in Bolivia, that the school gains its fundamental practice. This journey is captured in a text developed primarily by Godofredo Loumi (the school's main poet) during the crossing itself. It formalizes the concerns and inquiries that members of the school were struggling with before and after its foundation. *Amereida* (the name of the text⁸) becomes the source and direction of the school.⁹ For *Amereida* the territory appears as a question. Referencing Mallarmé's poem *Un Coup de Dés*, which



stresses the void as well as the figure, *Amereida* brings together a symphonic play between word, void and map. The word *qué*-what, appears alone in the page.¹⁰ The geography of the word, its position announces what follows: a blank page followed by a map of the southern part of the American continent.¹¹ Its interior is voided, like a empty page. Yet, its contour is painstakingly described¹², accompanied by oceanic depth contour lines. America appears as a question, contour and void.

What is extraordinary in the formulation of this text, its call to journey the territory, is that the poet make this call. *Amereida* presents the understanding of the territory, the creation of maps through poetic inquiry, through *poiesis*. The charge of this new geography is handed to prosaic dwellers, to those researching the inhabitation of the continent (architects and artists), by the poet. *Amereida* signals the need for a new cartography, for a new map. It signals the intensities to be recorded. From this journey four theses, or directives, about the continent appear:

1. Edges[-bordes]



*desde la proeza/américa/fue palpada querida y ocupada por sus/bordes*¹³

form prowess/america/was felt loved and occupied through its borders.

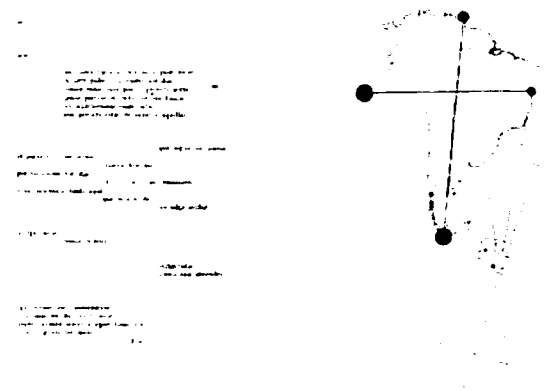
2. Interior Sea[-mar interior]



vivir en los contornos de una figura frente a su mar de dentro de nuestro modo¹⁴

to live the contour of a figure/in front of its interior sea/is our way

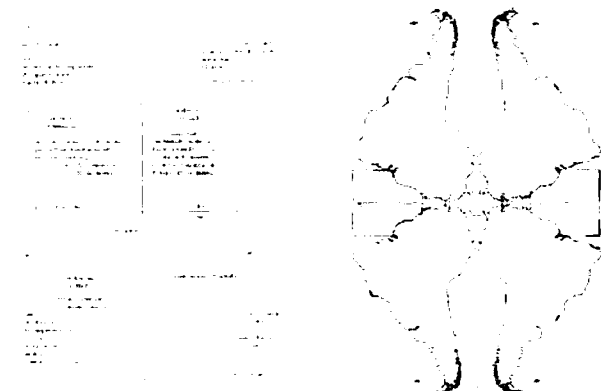
3. Southern Cross[-cruz del sur]



me volví hacia la derecha y puse mental otro polo y ví cuatro estrellas/nunca vistas sino por la primera gente¹⁵

I turned right and put my mind/to the other pole and saw four stars/never seen but by the first people

4. Proper North[-norte propio]



y más que sur/éno es ella nuestro norte/ly su extremo/umbrelaparecídala quienes por primera vez la remontaron?¹⁶

and more than south/is this not our north/and its extreme/revealed/summit/to those who for the first time surpassed it?

The American continent has been inhabited through its edges. We occupy a periphery, the outline[-*contorno*] of the territory.¹⁷ This border is defined by the two oceans: The first one is that one which Melville recognized, those oceans and seas that wrap the continent. Playing with the edges of the continent, they become the source of connection, the possibility of contact. The poet names them according to their activity: *origen-ancha*, *luz-aventura* – origin-anchor, light-adventure. These correspond to, Caribbean-Antarctic and Atlantic-Pacific. These oceans are the source of a recognizable language. They are connectors, permeable boundaries that allow transference and communication. The UCV knows what Melville knew, that the oceans speak.¹⁸

The second ocean that defines the figure of America is the interior sea[-*mar interior*]. Recognized by the *cronistas*, the cartographers of time and territory of the early conquest, it proclaims with its unrecognizable signs, silence. Silence permeates the discourse of the continent. Fernández de Oviedo already pointed this out in the 16th Century.¹⁹ But for the UCV this condition, this silence remains true even today. We still ignore the names[-*“se ygnoran los nombres”*]. For *Amereida* we still ignore the existence of the continent. This vast sea like Queequeg's land, appears in no map, it remains hidden, for as Melville pointed out: “true places never are.”²⁰ This is the evidence of the need for *poiesis*, for poetic discourse, and why the foundation of architecture rests on this discourse. For architecture has the ability to make these places appear.

The acknowledgment of a spatial condition brings with it the realization of occupation, a sense of place, of identity. Traditionally this has led to a directed or compromised understanding of the design process, to a need for permanence charged by “social or national responsibility.” This understanding forwards an architecture of collective definition:

“La arquitectura constituye para nosotros un elemento básico en la consolidación de nuestra memoria histórica y, por ende, en la definición de nuestra identidad.

Architecture constitutes for us a basic element in the consolidation of our historic memory and in the definition of our identity.”²¹

Architecture becomes encased in a discursive agenda. More responsive to need than to situation this discourse reformulates the condition of instability by forwarding a defense of the territory, of history and culture through the densification called

identity. The Valparaíso Schools radically departs from this vision:

“El urbanista descubre el destino de la ciudad y lo coloca en el espacio, para que la ciudad y sus habitantes vivan su destino. Sea este suave o duro, heroico o no heroico. Pero no anda buscando medios para hacerle la vida agradable a nadie.”

The urban planner discovers the destiny of the city and places it in space so that the city and its inhabitants may live their destiny. Be it hard or soft, heroic or non-heroic. But the planner is not looking to make anyone’s life pleasant.”²²

We see a clear separation from the social agenda of architecture so prevalent in Latin America. But we also see a clear return to the *trazas fundacionales* to the “colonial foundations” of Latin American cities.

The geographic conditions brought to the foreground by *Amereida* are not abstract spaces; they are a reality. We can draw their maps. But it would be too easy to assign their existence only to the territory. They are not so easily contained, nor measured. These conditions are not born from geography, but rather manifest through geography. More than delineating a territory, more than giving us the physiognomy of a place, these bring to the surface the condition of precariousness[*-precariedad*] that defines the territory.²³ The understanding of this condition generates a particular practice of architecture. It is through this geography, through the activity of navigating this territory, what are called *travesías*[*-journeys*], that one experiences this condition of precariousness, and understand it to be our sole companion, *nuestro único contemporáneo*.

We must recognize that it is precisely architecture that materializes the condition of precariousness. It is not that it becomes a mirror, the reflection of a reality, but rather, the actualization of a work materializes the precarious condition of its existence. We see this in the works of the UCV. We see it in the nature, process and materials of their constructions. It is not the materiality of the work, the use of scrap or donated materials, it is not the physical condition of labor, the scarceness of resources, the difficulty of building (all of these celebrated by the UCV) but the understanding of the fragile condition of existence, the understanding that a work lives in recognition of this precariousness, what makes foundation a necessary activity. It is through foundation²⁴ that we reveal the precarious condition of the work, its weak reality, its condition of wound. This is the charge of all making, of all *poiesis*; a directive restored to architecture, to all the crafts, by language. Making celebrates the precarious condition of the work, its fragile condition. It resists the development of roots for it embraces the uncertainty of the present – the chance apparition of life. It is precisely this that the UCV attempts to manifest.

Why? Because only this makes the work contemporary. It is only through the condition of precariousness[*-precariedad*] that the work engages Rimbaud’s maxim: *Il faut être absolument modern* – One must be absolutely modern.”

“Future things swim before me, as in empty outlines and skeletons.”

H. Melville, *Moby Dick*

Time[*-Tiempo*]: *Il faut être absolument modern*

No future, no past, the UCV calls for an embrace of the present. It lives the present, for it lives the time of the work. The work does not live a historical time. The work always assumes the form of a question, and in this it can only be contemporary. By being forced into discursive practices (identity) Architecture abandons its possibility of taking the form of a question. It becomes encased in speculations, at times brilliant, yet always failing to connect, becoming proclamation rather than intonation. Enticed by discourse we as architects are left with two possibilities: to proclaim the advent of a new world or to proclaim the defense of a lost one.

It is not that the UCV refuses history. The School is not born out of isolation.²⁵ There are many influences. The UCV answers the question raised by modernity; in this it has a frame. But this frame does not serve as the guard of history, place or inheritance. The school answers the question raised by modernity with a particular answer. To be modern one must live a precise time; one must live a precarious time: the present. *“Hoy en día el nacimiento está en cualquier acontecimiento. Recojo lo que hoy acaece.”* Alberto Cruz²⁶ signals a time not set by the fashions of history but by the work. In this the UCV turns against the traditional notion of an architecture defined by place, by identity: Latin American Architecture. There is not a construction of identity, the engagement of a national or regional discourse through architecture; there is a continental architecture.

“. . . for it is the harpooner that makes the voyage”

H. Melville, *Moby Dick*

Sea[*-Mar*]: *Travesías*

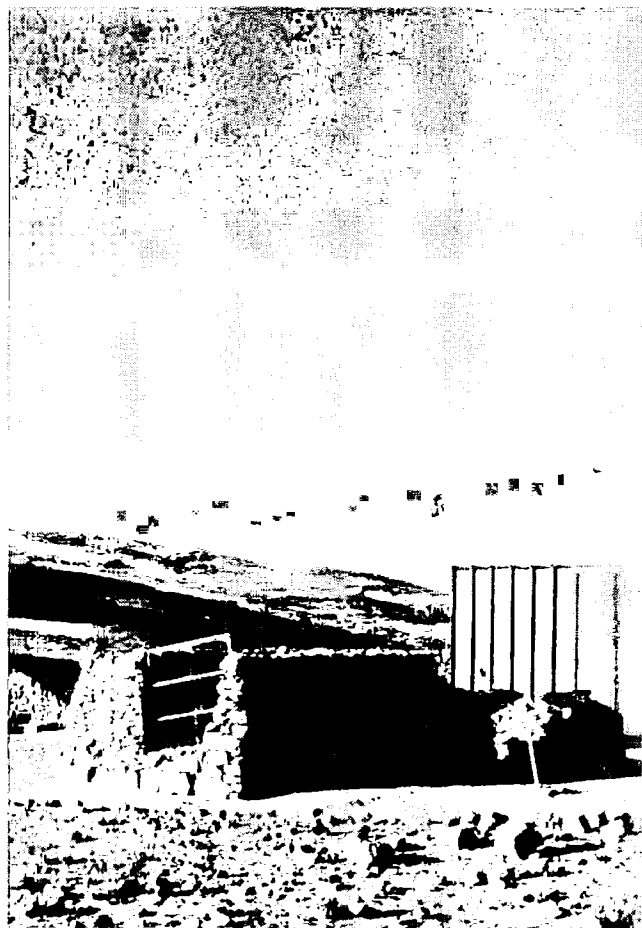
It is in this sense of the present, that we must understand the acts of foundation[*-actos de fundación*] known as *travesías*[*-journeys*]. *Amereida* calls for examination and survey, through the crossing of the continent; *ramos de inventario*.²⁷ It must be noted that the practice of architecture is not that of place or program but of fidelity to poetry.²⁸



The journey to the *Cordillera de los Andes-Curimáuida* (1986)²⁹ was born from Amereida's call for the occupation of the interior sea. This site was at the geographic border between the interior sea and the Pacific Ocean[-aventura]. It is from this point at 3650 meters above sea level that both seas are experienced. Architecture must accept the site in the light of *Amereida*. This prompted the school to engage the area and build a structure that spoke about the proximity of these oceans. With more than 40 students and 5 faculty having to safely arrive, inhabit, build and leave a site at more than 10,000 feet above sea level, the *travesía* becomes a monumental endeavor. It becomes a measure of the difficulty of any enterprise. The *travesías* call for a detailed organizational structure. They are organized throughout the semester and executed generally in two weeks. Everything used in them is designed and constructed by the school. For example, Industrial Design (*Diseño de Objetos*) is charged with collaborating in the works of architecture (prefabrication of elements, transportation, assembly, etc.) but they must also "configure and equip its inhabitation."³⁰ Every aspect, from food supply to packaging, from hygiene to transportation, from materials to intervention, must be planned out, orchestrated and executed between the students and faculty of three departments.³¹ For Curimáuida extensive geographical surveys had to be prepared, before and during the journey. Several rivers were taken in order to penetrate this inhospitable territory. "These measurements,

along with those obtained from cartographic and climatologic charts, and from conversations with the inhabitants of the area were the basis for the organization of the journey."³² Through these incursions a specific site that manifests "the singular resonance of our search,"³³ appears. This journey has a specific charge but no clear predetermined footing, neither programatically nor geographically. In the case of Curimáuida, the specific site or program was unknown to faculty and students, who had only the charge given by the poet. The pragmatic resolution was a making in travel. In Curimáuida, the work of architecture develops a series of platforms to celebrate the extensive nature of the territory, the connection between the *Mar Interior*[-Interior Sea] and the Pacific Ocean. Rocks, the only available material, are cut and assembled to create sloping walls that give evidence of this extensive terrain. The work responds to any visitor who might encounter it. It will be waiting to house their craft.³⁴ Shelter and refuge, this work like many others performed by the UCV await its inhabitants as gifts in the territory. They are works "born from poetry, with precarious means, in far and unknown places,"³⁵ that form a poetic geography. These are works that give position and orientation, that give measure and form to the poetic inhabitation of the continent.

The *travesías* are distinct operations of aperture. It is as if Fernández de Oviedo and students and faculty that participate



in the journeys inhabit the same space. They do not re-create a historical event but rather inhabit a historical continuum by embracing a poetic condition of space. As stated in *amereida*: “los viajes nos enseñan (entre otras cosas) que las palabras son como extrañas a las cosas que nombran (. . .) – Words remain extraneous to the things they name.”³⁶ This is what the *travesías* teach. There is no possibility of escaping Oviedo’s pronouncement. There is no possibility of inhabiting a static map. We can never know the names of this territory, for it is a sea. The sea testifies to the precarious condition of existence, to its condition of present. If we are to be absolutely modern, if we are to inhabit the present, we can only be witness to the sea. Some would argue that this presents a certain naïveté, a lost time. I would argue that this is the manifestation of a solitude. This is not the effect of absence. The UCV is alone because it fully inhabits the condition of precariousness. For them the condition of inhabitation is not that of refuge, for they have decided like Neruda, *ser el último habitante del mundo*—to be the last inhabitant of the world.

NOTES

- ¹ “Nuestra Latitud Patagonia”, *CA* 40 (Chile: Junio 1985):14.
- ² Neruda, Pablo. *La Espada Encendida* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1970), p. 11. Although there is a patented disregard for Neruda and his work, I establish this connection in order to bring down the mythology of isolation cultivated by the members of the UCV.
- ³ I am quoting from a conversation with Alberto Cruz.
- ⁴ *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, Vigésima Primera Edición (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1992)
- ⁵ *Fundamentos de la Escuela de Arquitectura UCV*, (Valparaíso: UCV, 1971)
- ⁶ Truly a re-founding for there was a school of architecture already operating in the Catholic University of Valparaíso.
- ⁷ It is to be noted that no scientists answered the newspaper call.
- ⁸ The name comes from a synthesis between *América* and *Eneida*; the *Eneid* being the mythological foundation of Rome.
- ⁹ *amereida* is consulted very much like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were. These sacred texts were so not because of an abstract distance (the words of the gods) but because they were considered as living forces in concrete reality. When the momentum of the Open City had waned in the mid 80’s a need for new inquiry, a new plane of research was perceived. The school turned to the text. In *amereida* they followed the answered. When questioned why the *travesías*, they simply answer that the reason for them is that *amereida* tells them so. And this is not a mystical interpretation of a poetic text. *amereida* states clearly that in order to attain knowledge of the continent they must travel the continent. In this sense, *amereida* becomes a temporal road map for the school.
- ¹⁰ *amereida*, page 7. There is no question mark to announce the word *qué* as a question. A little knowledge of Spanish exposes this for the word *qué* with an accent reveals that it is being used as a question. Tommi plays with the subtleties of language and layout. (We must remember the influence of Mallarmé’s poem. But we must also note Neruda’s consistent erasure of question signs, as a source of this move.)
- ¹¹ *amereida* (Valparaíso: UCV, 1986): 7 - 9.
- ¹² David Jolly, presently the director of the school, pointed out the precision of this contour line to me.
- ¹³ *amereida*, vol.1, (Valparaíso: UCV, 1986)
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 23
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 34
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.41
- ¹⁷ For the other-America this manifests geographically, politically, economically and technologically.
- ¹⁸ It may be that its discourse is not an acceptable one—the continuation of colonial dependency—but nevertheless it is a discourse that speaks to the inhabitants of this periphery. It speaks to them, even if they may not agree with what it says. We see this clearly in Le Corbusier’s project for Buenos Aires. How the towers grounded in the sea (La Plata river) speak to the city and to the land.
- ¹⁹ “Es menester abrir camino y es que en esto se podría decir es un mare magno e oculto, porque aunque se ve lo más de ello, se ignora los nombres. – It is necessary to open a path, for we could say that this is a vast and hidden sea, and although we can see the most of it, we ignore the names.” Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo Spanish historian (1478-1577), author of *Historia General y Natural de las Indias* quoted in *amereida* vol. 1, op. cit., p. 28.
- ²⁰ Melville, Herman, *Moby Dick* (New York: Signet Classic 1961), p.70
- ²¹ Ramón Gutiérrez, “Historia de una ruptura: La arquitectura latinoamericana vista desde América,” *A&V* 13 (1988), p.4
- ²² *Fundamentos de la Escuela de Arquitectura UCV*, (Valparaíso: UCV, 1971)
- ²³ In many conversations with Juan Ignacio Baixas—a member of the UCV—the notion of *precariedad*, precariousness arose as fundamental within architectural production. In fact, other architects in Chile not necessarily affiliated with the UCV recognize this condition as part of their design culture. This usually manifests itself in conversations through accounts on the *difficultad de construir*, the difficulty of the act of building experienced through their careers and projects.

²⁴ "Si ella es fundamento y cimiento de un mundo a construir o término de uno iniciado y elaborado. - If it (architecture) is foundation and footing of a world to be constructed or end and crowning of one initiated and elaborated." Cruz, Alberto, "Escuela de Arquitectura Universidad Católica de Valparaíso," *AUCA* vol. 23, (Chile: 1975), p. 27. It is to be noted the play between *término*-end and *coronación*-crowning. *Término* can be translated as end, as in *término de un trabajo*-the end of a work; but it also carries with it its architectural definition of stay that is "the support which the ancients gave to the head of their god Terminus." Velázquez, op. cit.

²⁵ The School is officially born in 1952.

²⁶ Chilean architect Alberto Cruz and Argentinean poet Godofredo Tommi were the founders of the school.

²⁷ *amereida*, op. cit., p. 51

²⁸ "Travesía y Obra en la Cordillera de los Andes," *CA 48* (Chile: Junio 1987): 58

²⁹ From conversations with J. I. Baixas. All Curimáhuída pictures are by J.I. Baixas.

³⁰ "Los Talleres en Travesía por América," *CA 47* (Chile: 1987): 56.

³¹ Generally the *travesías* involve all three departments: Architecture, Industrial Design and Graphic Design.

³² "Travesía y Obra en la Cordillera de los Andes," *CA 48* (Chile: Junio 1987):58

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ "Enfrentado a encargos nacidos de la poesía, en lugares lejanos y desconocidos, y con medios precarios," "Los Talleres en Travesía por América," *CA 47* (Chile: 1987): 56.

³⁶ *amereida* vol. 1, op. cit., p. 77.