



Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.

Valparaíso in Chile is one of the country's most important sea ports and has often been called 'The Jewel of the Pacific' by international sailors. Since 1536, when a homesick Spanish lieutenant named this small settlement after his home town, the 'Valley of Paradise' has sprawled in all directions. In particular, the town has spread over its 45 hills that frame the bay like an amphitheatre, guaranteeing each property a box seat.

The streets of Valparaíso stubbornly defy the colonial chessboard pattern that often defines Latin American cities. It might be due to its immanent rebellion, the lovable chaos of its infrastructure, the permissiveness of its harbour dives and the radical nature of its bar manifestos that from its early days onwards, Valparaíso has attracted the country's bohemians: artists, poets and intellectuals.

Standing downtown and looking up, the colourful houses on the hills look like worn-out books gently leaning on their shelves. Aside from its steep streets and endless stairways, Valparaíso is famous for its *ascensores*. These centenarian cable railways, with their jerking steel cables, pass behind buildings, offering glimpses of everyday life. Past washing lines, kitchen windows and pot plants, until the bruised glass windows of the car finally offer a view of the port and never-ending horizon.

Chilean poet Enrique Winter is one of the best examples of how Valparaíso still attracts writers and artists from the city of Santiago. 'Valparaíso has the perfect distance to the country's capital for me to isolate and concentrate on my creative process. At the same time, the artistic scene here is strong and whenever I step out of my isolation I bump into other poets, writers and artists.'

The city, with its 300 000 inhabitants, is rather small and interdisciplinary projects have been commonplace for the artistic community for many years. The openness of Valparaíso, its authenticity and genuine subversiveness blaze the trail for enormous artistic freedom and creativity.

Downtown, near the port in the bustling centre, one of Valparaíso's oldest cultural institutions can be visited. Next to

flea markets, where anything from car parts to old furniture, second-hand clothing and DIY accessories is available, one enters a small, inconspicuous, old building. Inside there is a treasure trove for any book lover. The Librería Crisis has been a family business for several generations and is a place that is rarely found, even in bigger cities. The Llancaqueo family that owns it is deeply connected to its customers and is extremely knowledgeable. Books that you cannot find in the overloaded sales counters or in the bursting shelves will be ordered for you. Enrique Winter is a customer as well and that this family of book lovers is so informed and interested in the novel that Enrique is currently writing, speaks volumes about the spirit of Valparaíso. 'Every time I am coming here they show me some important books to support my intellectual research for the novel. Sometimes I buy, sometimes I don't and it is always great to chat and exchange,' says Enrique after a long conversation with the owner about his latest projects.

Enrique Winter was born in 1982 and belongs to the young generation of poets who are playing an integral role in the renaissance of Valparaíso after the dark and traumatising Pinochet years. The coup d'état started in the port of Valparaíso in 1973, when the battleships anchored in the bay and directed their cannons at their own people in order to overthrow the democratically elected government. The dictatorship acted with enormous cruelty for 17 long years. Opponents were imprisoned, tortured, killed and disappeared if they could not escape into exile. During these troubled times, the bay of Valparaíso became a kind of graveyard, where the bodies of many of those who disappeared were dropped to destroy any evidence of their perpetrators' wrongdoing.

In the early 1990s, investment crept onto the *cerros* (hills) of Valparaíso after those leaden years. Writers and artists returned from exile. But the dark legacy still constitutes an important part of the current artistic and political debate of the city and the country as a whole. Present and past are tightly interwoven and history still holds on with its iron grip.



Salvador Allende, former president of Chile, 1970 - 1973

The sea above and the sky below. A city is burned or abandoned, ashes coming through the roof. She stands and the trembling lake is covered with petals: a carpet where the shore lays its head, our names the only reminder we used to be them. Desire won't fill this bottle, only seal it like a bag or a lid....

These lines are taken from Enrique Winter's poem 'Muñoz' (2010), which tells its own compelling story of the contradictory structure of longing. A longing that might be fulfilled or might be futile and that comes with happiness as well as torture and destruction. The cruelty of its finite nature, the deception of its memory, its fragile beauty, its dichotomy of belonging and alienation – contrasts that are yet mutually dependent. It doesn't matter if we deal with personal relationships, with the perception of past and present, or with nature and humankind. These paradigms are not only inherent in our personal relationships, but also in the troubled history of Chile and its difficult path to reconciliation.

If Enrique Winter is 'the Prince of Valparaíso' as one art gazette called him recently, Pablo Neruda is the city's undisputed king. Neruda bought his Valparaíso house, *La Sebastiana* on Cerro Bellavista, in 1959 and lived there



Enrique Winter and his dog

regularly until his death in 1973, shortly after the coup. 'We learned from him how to relate directly to things, to the landscape, in a vivid and sensual way. He could be choral and material at the very same time, displaying all the five senses,' says Enrique Winter on the importance of Neruda, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1971.

Neruda was maybe the grandest newcomer into a city that is not short of great sons and daughters. Today his house, which is now a museum, still towers over Valparaíso and its bay as a reminder of the power of the arts, of the power of an independent mind and of the very Chilean way in which the arts have become intertwined with politics and dissent.

Valparaíso charms with the seeming effortless with which the arts have awakened new life in the city and created an amazing amalgam of old and new, of strength and sensibility, of seriousness and playfulness, all at the same time. **CF**