

5. *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair: Pablo Neruda's Image of the Writer*

Pablo Neruda is one of the giants of Latin American literature, and the most famous of all Latin American poets. He was incredibly productive and ambitious, publishing a couple of dozen books of poetry over his lifetime, including the epic *Canto General* (1950), which aims to re-tell, in verse, the entire history of the New World from its mythic origins to the present. In line with this grandiose aspiration, the presentation speech by Karl Ragnar Gierow of the Swedish Academy, conferring on Neruda the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 1971), claims that "In his work a continent awakens to consciousness" ("Award Ceremony Speech 1971"). But Neruda's best-known and best-selling collection is the apparently more intimate and personal *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (*Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*, 1924), published when the poet was only nineteen years old. Indeed, *Twenty Love Poems* is "the most popular collection of poetry ever penned in Spanish, and the best-selling collection of poetry published in any language in the twentieth century" (Moran, "'Cuerpo de mujer'" 56). Critic Dominic Moran claims that this short book has become "a bible for young—and not so young—lovers throughout the continent and beyond," and this despite the fact that it is, as he puts it, "highly elliptical and frequently obscure" (Moran, *Pablo Neruda* 31, 32). Neruda's success does not necessarily depend on any special clarity. What he achieved, however, was to propagate an idea of what a poet should be: both romantic and (above all in his later work) political, able to speak for all in one voice. Perhaps Neruda's greatest work is not so much the poetry—some of which, unsurprisingly given his prodigious output, is forgettable at best—as the poet. That image of the poet as universal mediator may now have run its course, but we can still see and appreciate its traces today.

1. *This is Not a Love Song*

At first sight, what we get with this collection is exactly what is written on the tin: twenty fairly short numbered poems (untitled, though sometimes they are referred to by their opening line or initial phrase, e.g. "Body of a Woman" or "Cuerpo de mujer" for Poem 1) that deal in one way or another with love, followed by a longer poem entitled "The Song of Despair" ("La canción desesperada"). Moreover, as the title also hints, one might be tempted to read a narrative of sorts through the sequence of poems, which begins as the woman "surrender[s]" or offers up her body to the poet in the opening poem, in which

he also declares his love (“I love you”) as he promises to “persist in your grace” (3), but which ends, after the lovers are increasingly distanced (halfway through, in Poem 10: “I am sad and feel you are far away” [23]), with the poet looking back, in Poem 20, on a relationship that is now over: “I no longer love her, that’s certain, but how I loved her” (49). Hence the “Song of Despair” comes at the conclusion of this cycle of falling in and out of love, now that the poet is on his own and has to move on, ending with the final line: “It is the hour of departure. Oh abandoned one!” (55). The rest is silence.



Couple outside La Chascona, Pablo Neruda’s house in Santiago de Chile

But what kind of love affair is this? It may seem almost too obvious to note that this is a heterosexual relationship: the poetic voice is male or masculine, the beloved is female or feminine. Moreover, from the start the poems emphasize the woman’s materiality, her corporeality—“Body of a woman,” the collection opens, after all—as well as a certain possessiveness on the part of the poet: “Body of *my* woman” (3; emphasis added). Indeed, at one point he refers to her as “*hembra*” (16), a word more commonly used to refer to female animals. What might *she* make of all this? Do we at any point sense her perspective on the relationship? What is the place or role of the woman as the poet imagines it? Write

down some thoughts on how the woman might respond to these poems. While you do that, I'll have a gin and tonic with fir bitters, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Gin and Tonic, with Douglas Fir bitters

There is drunkenness in these poems, but few actual drinks, unless we count turpentine: "Drunk with pines and long kisses," says the translation to Poem 9 (21), but "*trementina*" is in fact the product of distilled pine resin, mostly used as a solvent, for instance to thin oil paints. Mariners used to drink it as a treatment for parasites, and in the eighteenth century it was added to gin, but it is basically a poison, and even its vapour can irritate skin and eyes, and damage lungs. We may assume that Neruda did not drink turpentine: a warning, if one is needed, not to take these poems (or any others) too literally. (Why should we assume, either, that he was ever drunk on "long kisses"?) And while there are drinks made from pines, notably *Zirbenz*, the so-called "agave of the Alps," made in Austria, it is probably safer simply to add some Douglas Fir bitters to a regular gin and tonic (Schnitzler, "Bartender"). We get the piney odour without risking life or limb.

Let us be clear: there is minimal space for the woman's perspective here. The loved one is consistently envisaged as passive and mute or "speechless" (5). As Chris Perriam notes, "she is equated with the unthinking world of objects and belittled as a charming, dreamy, flighty creature [. . .]. Much of the metaphorical language of the *Veinte poemas* links the woman with the non-human world" ("Re-reading Neruda's *Veinte poemas*" 100). She is compared to the landscape, the soil, which the poet's "rough peasant's body digs" through to make "the son leap from the depth of the earth" (3). She is a "frightened statue" with "breasts [. . .] like white snails" (19). She is a "dark butterfly, sweet and definitive / like the wheat-field and the sun, the poppy and the water" (45). And so on and so forth, endlessly and repeatedly. The poet does describe the woman's voice, as "slender and flowing" (45), but we never have much sense of what, if anything, she may be saying. The poet's own words, meanwhile, are described as "rain[ing] over you, stroking you." In the same stanza, he says that "you own the universe," and yet it ends again with the woman as passive object, subject to the poet's own life-giving creative force: "I want to do with you / what spring does with the cherry trees" (33). What the cherry tree may have to say about all this is less clear.

There is, moreover, an undertone of violence throughout the collection, such that Louise Detwiler observes that Poem 1 “could quite possibly describe/imitate an act of rape” (“Deconstructing the Role of Love” 88). Worse still, then, this would give us the age-old sexist trope of rape as somehow redeemed by subsequent love: “the hour of vengeance falls, and I love you” (3). At the very least, as Perriam argues, also in a reading of the opening poem, this is an instance of what, following the critic Dale Spender, he calls “Man Made Language: the woman is pushed into a conceptual corner, positioned by a discourse that makes her close to nature and far from articulateness, the receptor of male energies, there to image back to the male desires which are not hers” (“Re-reading Neruda’s *Veinte poemas*” 100). Perhaps the most shocking instance of this silencing of the woman is Poem 15, translated here as “I like for you to be still” (35), though a more literal rendering would be along the lines of “You please me when you are silent”: the verb “*callar*” or “*callarse*” in everyday language means simply to “shut up.” “You please me when you are silent,” then, because “it is as though you were absent” (35). The woman’s desirability hinges upon her silence and her absence.

Critic Dominic Moran comes to Neruda’s defence, though even he sees the problems that other critics, notably Perriam, point out. As Moran himself says of Poem 15, “What for die-hard romantics is a disarmingly childlike love song is frequently viewed by less soft-centred types as a protracted male fantasy, in which the female addressee is infantilized and praised for keeping her mouth shut while, in the final stanza, the poet is afforded a frisson by the thought of her dying” (*Pablo Neruda* 36). This suggests that the choice between these two readings—“childlike love song” or “protracted male fantasy”—is more a test of who we are, as readers, than of Neruda’s poetry. If we are “die-hard romantics” we will be favourable; if we are “less soft-centred,” we may judge the poem more harshly. What kind of readers do we want to be? Here, Moran leaves our options open.

In an article on Poem 1, however, Moran seeks to influence our choice, arguing that “much recent, gender-based criticism [relies. . .] on a sort of strategic anachronism, that is, on the imposition of current theories concerning the ‘construction’ or ‘situatedness’ of gender, subjectivity and the like on to literary or social scenes to which those same theories would have appeared utterly alien, if not plain incomprehensible” (“*Cuerpo de mujer*” 57). He therefore expands on the context of Neruda’s composition of this poem,

in the early 1920s, focusing on the poet's involvement with the anarchist journal *Claridad*, whose "radical" politics preached "a freedom which was to be enjoyed equally and unconditionally *by both sexes*" (58; emphasis in original). Moran argues that, as a reader of and contributor to *Claridad*, "Neruda was well acquainted with what, given the socio-historical context, was some of the most progressive and challenging thought concerning sex and gender available to him at the time" (61). But surely this contextualization makes what Moran calls the "case for the prosecution" (57) simply stronger still? After all, then, it is not as though Neruda were unaware of feminist (or proto-feminist) discourses that called for female agency. He was present for a lively debate on women's bodily autonomy and right to choose their own partners. But that debate seems not to have left its mark on his poetry.

It may be that the metaphor employed in Poem 1, of tilling a feminized virgin field, was borrowed from anarchists and other progressives' exhortations "to the youth of Chile to rise up in revolt and create a new social order" in which women would be as free as men (64). To make this point, Moran cites pages of what he calls "erotic writing which with hindsight might be viewed as splendidly misconceived" (66). But Neruda privatizes and de-politicizes the image; it is not today's readers who have stripped it of social context, it is Neruda himself who has done so. This may be "love poetry tailor-made for young anarchists" (68), but it is also tailor-made for young anarchist *men*.

As if all this were not enough, feminist criticism of Neruda has only amplified as attention has been drawn to a brief passage from the poet's (posthumous) 1974 memoirs, in which he describes an incident of non-consensual sex with a Tamil maid in what was then Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where he served as a diplomat in the late 1920s: "One morning, I decided to go all the way. I got a strong grip on her wrist and stared in her eyes. There was no language I could talk with her. Unsmiling, she let herself be led away and was soon naked in my bed. [. . .] It was the coming together of a man and a statue. She kept her eyes wide open all the while, completely unresponsive. She was right to despise me" (Neruda, *Memoirs* 100). We might note that the comparison of a woman to a statue, the pang of the failure of language, the haunting image of her eyes, and the sense of subsequent dismay, are all aspects that suggest continuity, rather than contradiction, with the images outlined in *Twenty Love Poems*. A 2018 proposal to rename Chile's national airport in the poet's honor was defeated in the light of the scandal that erupted when this

episode was rediscovered (McGowan, "Poet, Hero, Rapist"). And though some say we should separate a writer from their work—many great works were written by bad people—to do so seems particularly difficult with Neruda, much of whose life's work was the creation of his image as a writer.

2. *Tonight I Can Write*

Dominic Moran concludes his defence of Neruda with the argument that "we should have the tact and properly cautious common sense to distinguish intention from execution when responding to works which some of us may initially find distasteful" ("Cuerpo de mujer" 68). But this surely gets things quite the wrong way around. It is not that we "initially" find Neruda's poetry "distasteful." At first reading, *Twenty Love Poems* is an undoubtedly powerful and entrancing collection. It is more likely that it is on second or even subsequent readings—Perriam's critical indictment is, after all, entitled "*Re-reading Neruda's Veinte poemas*" (emphasis added)—that a sense of distaste arises. Moreover, intentions are seldom a good way to evaluate a work of literature or art, and not merely because they are often inscrutable (who knows what Neruda may have intended?) or because the road to hell is paved with them. I may intend to write the greatest novel on earth, but I never will, and nothing I write should be judged as if I had. As for a politics (as opposed to an aesthetics) of good intentions, political theorist David Runciman points out that "This line of argument can be used to defend anything, even the indefensible" ("The Politics of Good Intentions"). But above all, the point about Neruda's poetry—and perhaps any writing—is that what is of interest is precisely the execution, not the intention, and his struggle with that execution, with putting things into words, or making words approximate things. Neruda struggles with that process throughout *Twenty Love Poems*, and if anything this is what constitutes the real narrative, the real theme of the book. These are not really poems about love, but about how love (or any other strong affect, such as loneliness, desire, even hate) both challenges and inspires the drive to write, to put words in order, to shape a form that becomes recognizable as a "love poem" or a "song of despair."

The triumphant moment of *Twenty Love Poems* comes in Poem 20, which Moran calls "Neruda's single best-loved poem" (*Pablo Neruda* 26), and yet which, of the entire collection, is the least like a love poem. It is here, after all, that the poet twice declares "I no longer love her, that's certain," albeit, the second time, with the ambivalent

acknowledgement of a possible ongoing trace of what is otherwise past, “but maybe I love her. / Love is so short, forgetting is so long” (49). But the question of whether or not the poet loves the woman who was once his beloved, or of whether what he has experienced has been a genuinely reciprocated love affair (“*sometimes she loved me too*” [47; emphasis added]) is no longer what is important, if it ever had been. For all the poem’s talk of loss—“to think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her” (47)—what we have here is an unequivocal affirmation, albeit somewhat mangled in the translation. “Tonight I can write the saddest lines,” is how the translation puts it. But in fact the poem opens more emphatically, without qualification: “I can write” (“*Puedo escribir*”). Its first word, “*puedo*” (“I can”) is where the emphasis lies, with all the stress on that opening syllable, whereas in the English version the stress more naturally falls on “saddest.” A better translation would highlight the sense of accomplishment indicated by the announcement that “*I can write the saddest lines tonight.*” The word “*poder*,” from which the “*puedo*” of “*puedo escribir*” comes, means both “to be able to” and also, simply, “power.” This is an assertion of properly poetic, writerly power, before which whatever ambivalent or uncertain (and perhaps despicable) power the poet may previously have asserted over the woman, or the figure of woman, now fades. By this point, it is clear that this is poetry about poetry, rather than poetry about love, as the poet self-consciously picks over the form and content of a love poem: in Moran’s words, when Neruda cites the “saddest lines” (“The night is all alight, / And the blue stars shiver in the distance”), “because we know that *he* knows that he is reduced to trotting out lachrymose romantic truisms, we sympathize with his plight. By resignedly citing platitudes, then, Neruda manages to reinvigorate them” (*Pablo Neruda* 38). He goes over the old forms to show that we need new forms. But above all the point is that what he needs now is a new poem, not a new woman. And tonight he can write. *Twenty Love Poems* concludes that Neruda is not a lover, but a writer.

The story that Neruda tells, then, is that of the increasing autonomy of language, its resilience and distance from the things that it purports to describe. At the outset, the poet’s words are described as “thin,” and not even his: “They are more yours than mine. / They climb on my old suffering like ivy” (11). They are “stained with your love” (13), contaminated by their ongoing attachment to the woman. Later, however, his words are “fugitive” (as the woman is also dispossessed of agency; she is a “toy doll”), though

“something sings” in them (29). By the end, they have captured and transformed the affect on which they feed, and the woman on whom these verses once depended can be left behind.

A great writer not only writes great work, but also, more fundamentally and importantly, changes our sense of what great work is, and even charts a new role for the writer in society. We cannot separate his life from his work because—as with, say, Lord Byron or Ted Hughes (whose sexual politics were similarly problematic, at best)—his life also *is* his work. And it is by these standards that Neruda is undoubtedly a great writer, a writer who refashions our image of what it is to be a writer. Moreover, a great writer is not to be judged by the context in which he (or she) happened to find themselves, but by the context that he or she creates, as they change the frame within which we understand the work. In the words of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (in a reading of the novelist Gustave Flaubert), “writing abolishes the determinations, constraints and limits which are constitutive of social experience”; the writer’s “specific labour [. . .] both against these determinations and thanks to them, [. . .] is to produce himself as creator, that is, as the *subject* of his own creation” (*The Rules of Art* 27, 104). This is why we still read Neruda, and not, for instance, his contemporaries who were writing in journals such as *Claridad*. Neruda established a new paradigm, which made it possible to read and write in new ways, making new forms of language writable and legible, but inevitably condemning other forms to obsolescence. Amazingly, in fact, Pablo Neruda achieved this feat not once but twice.

First, at the tender age of nineteen with *Twenty Love Poems*, he established a vision of the love poet as earthy, sensual, but also accessible, his feet almost literally rooted in the ground. This is the image that will much later be celebrated in the movie *Il postino* (1994), in which an exiled Neruda on a small island in Italy makes friends with the lovelorn local postman. Later, with *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* (“Alturas de Macchu Picchu,” 1947, subsequently incorporated into the *Canto General*), Neruda also crafted the *persona* and defined the task of the politically-committed writer in Latin America, with an invocation to the continent’s countless victims of colonialism and historical oppression: “Arise to birth with me, my brother [. . .] I come to speak for your dead mouths” (*The Heights of Macchu Picchu* 67, 69). Thus Neruda brought together what the subtitle of one popular biography summarizes as “Passion, Poetry, and Politics” (Shull). But to link the three terms, the poet conjures up the inert body of the figure that his poetry sets out to celebrate:

woman, in the one case; and the indigenous or the working class, in the other. His poetic voice then claims retrospectively to give that body life, to grant it words and purpose. To do so, however, it has first to presuppose that such bodies cannot speak for themselves, that they are fatally mute.

Only recently, in the last couple of decades, has this Promethean image of the Latin American writer come under scrutiny and doubt. It is surely much harder to appreciate *Twenty Love Poems* in the era of “#metoo,” or his political poetry in the aftermath of *testimonio* and other media forms through which subalterns are thought to speak for themselves. The epoch that Neruda inaugurated, of the writer as self-authorising creator and supreme instance of mediation, claiming to transcend difference and speak for everybody as one, has run its course. But we still remember it, which is why even today we are initially seduced, if by nothing else than by the sheer audacity of Neruda’s towering ambition and drive.

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Song: "Me gustas cuando callas" (Brazilian Girls)