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Twenty Love Poems:
Pablo Neruda's Image
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Twenty Love Poems:
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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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“In his work a continent awakens
to consciousness.”
 (“Award Ceremony Speech 1971”)

“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.”

(Dominic Moran)

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 “highly elliptical and frequently obscure.”

What Neruda achieved was to propagate an idea of what a poet should be: both romantic and political, able to speak for all in one voice. Perhaps his greatest work is not so much the poetry 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.



**THIS IS NOT
A LOVE SONG**

One might be tempted to read a narrative through the sequence of poems, which begins as the woman offers up her body to the poet, but which ends, after the lovers are increasingly distanced, with the poet looking back on a relationship that is now over.

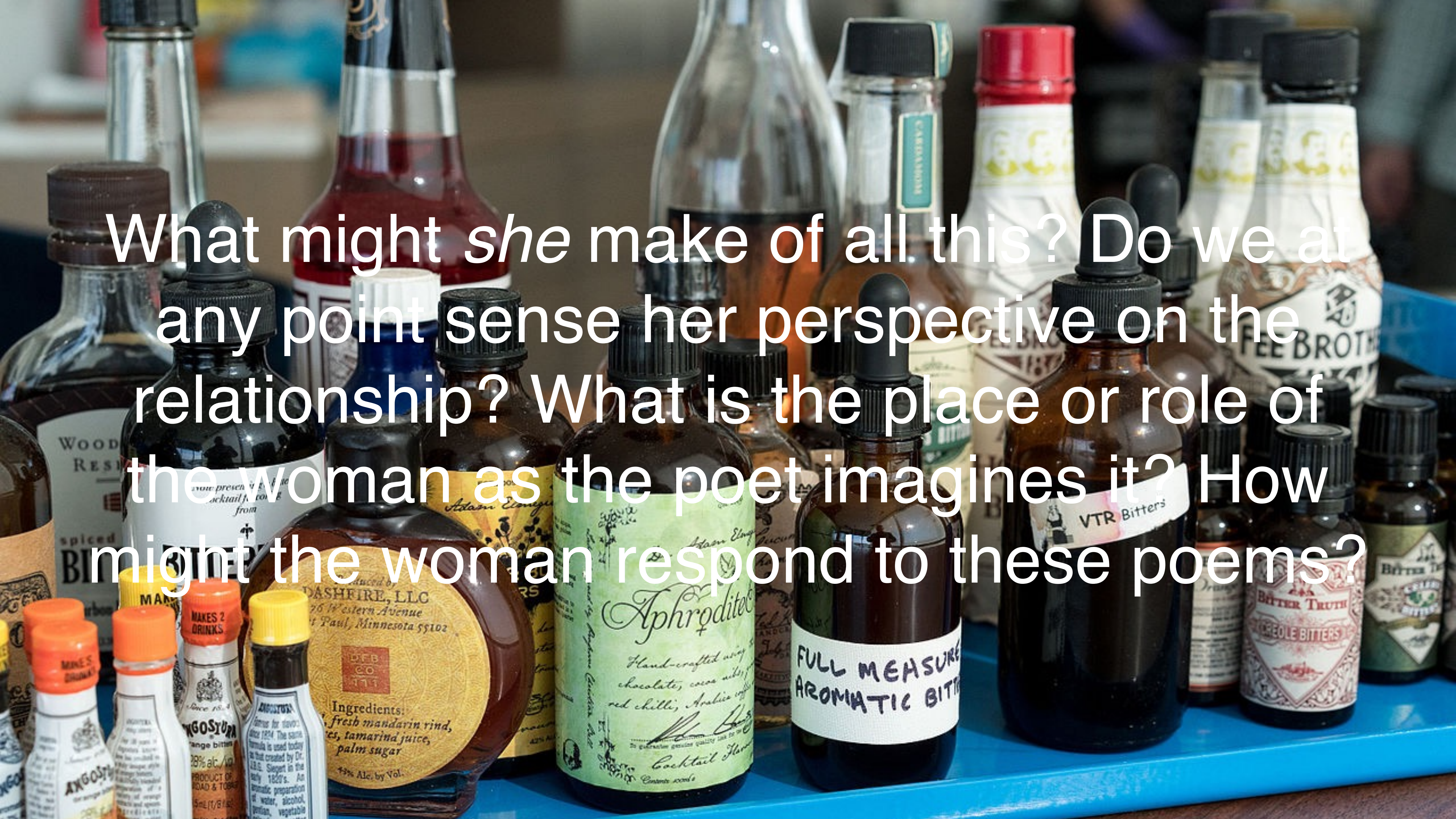
“I no longer love her, that’s certain,
but how I loved her.” (49)

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but how I loved her.” (49)

“It is the hour of departure.
Oh abandoned one!” (55)

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).

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? How might the woman respond to these poems?



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There is minimal space for
the woman's perspective here.

The loved one is consistently envisaged as
passive and mute or "speechless" (5).

“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.” (Chris Perriam)

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).

“I want to do with you / what spring
does with the cherry trees.” (33)

Poem 1 “could quite possibly
describe/imitate an act of rape.”
(Louise Detwiler)

“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.” (Chris Perriam)

“You please me when you are silent,”
then, because “it is as though
you were absent” (35).

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then, because “it is as though
you were absent” (35).

The woman’s desirability hinges upon her
silence and her absence.

“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.”

(Dominic Moran)

What kind of readers do we want to be?

“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.” (Dominic Moran)

“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.”

(Dominic Moran)

Neruda was present for a lively debate on women's bodily autonomy and right to choose their own partners.

Neruda was present for a lively debate on women's bodily autonomy and right to choose their own partners.

Yet that debate seems not to have left its mark on his poetry.

This may be “love poetry tailor-made
for young anarchists.”

This may be “love poetry tailor-made
for young anarchists.”

But it is also tailor-made for young anarchist
men, who are given license to forget their
political and social background.

“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.”

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.



TONIGHT I CAN WRITE

“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.” (Dominic Moran)

**“This line of argument can be used to defend anything, even the indefensible.”
(David Runciman)**

The point about Neruda's poetry is that what is of interest is precisely the execution, not the intention, and the poet's struggle with that execution, with putting things into words, or making words approximate things.

These are not really poems about love, but about how love (or any other strong affect) 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.”

“I no longer love her, that’s certain.” (49)

“Tonight I can write the saddest lines.” (47)

“I can write the saddest lines tonight.”

This is an assertion of properly poetic, writerly power, before which whatever ambivalent or uncertain power the poet may previously have asserted over the woman, or the figure of woman, now fades.

“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.”

(Dominic Moran)

Neruda is not a lover, but a writer.

The story that Neruda tells is that of the increasing autonomy of language, its resilience and distance from the things that it purports to describe.

“They are more yours than mine. / They
climb on my old suffering like ivy” (11).

“They are more yours than mine. / They
climb on my old suffering like ivy” (11).

They are “stained with your love” (13).

By the end, Neruda's words 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.

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.

“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”
(Pierre Bourdieu).

Neruda established a new paradigm,
which made it possible to read and write
in new ways, making new forms of
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which made it possible to read and write
in new ways, making new forms of
language writable and legible.

Amazingly, in fact, he achieved this feat
not once but twice!

First, 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.

Later, 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)

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.

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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.

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has this Promethean image of the
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It is surely much harder to appreciate
Twenty Love Poems in the era of “#metoo.”

The epoch that Neruda inaugurated
has run its course.

The epoch that Neruda inaugurated
has run its course.

But we still remember it, which is why
even today we are initially seduced by
the sheer audacity of Neruda's
towering ambition and drive.



MUSIC


Fósforo,
“Cochabamba”



PRODUCTION

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