

## REREADING THE UNKNOWN NERUDA

- SELECTED POEMS. A BILINGUAL EDITION.* PABLO NERUDA. Edited by NATHANIEL TARN; translated by ANTHONY KERRIGAN, W. S. MERWIN, ALASTAIR REID, AND NATHANIEL TARN. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1970. Pp. 509. \$2.95.)
- EXTRAVAGARIA.* PABLO NERUDA. Translated by ALASTAIR REID. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974. Pp. 303. \$8.95.)
- FULLY EMPOWERED.* PABLO NERUDA. Translated by ALASTAIR REID. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975. Pp. 135. \$8.95.)
- TOWARD THE SPLENDID CITY. NOBEL LECTURE.* PABLO NERUDA. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972. Pp. 35. \$1.95.)

English translations of Neruda have been around at least since the thirties when his committed poetry struck a familiar note to the social upheaval of the times, but it has not been until recently that we've had a genuine surge. We can certainly interpret the undue delay in terms of the dismal state of Latin American literary studies in this country, which came of age only lately and largely as a result of the boom in the new novel and novelists (Cortázar, Fuentes, García Márquez, et al.). Other reasons, however, seem to account for Neruda's restricted circulation. A Marxist since 1945, he became better known in this country for his strident political poetry. From *Spain at Heart* (1938), the war poems written during and after the Civil War in that country, to *Canto General* (1950), the volume which emulates *Leaves of Grass*, to *The Grapes and the Wind* (1954), his last socialist-realist book, we have a committed Neruda, the tenor of whose writings parallels the increasing tensions of the Cold War. This is the better-known Neruda, the writer of callow odes to Stalin and Lenin that are still an embarrassment to those of us who attempt a serious study of his works. Such was also the Neruda whom critics and scholars (and, in turn, U.S. publishers) rejected—often, it must be admitted, with good reason.

Fortunately, there was more than just one Neruda. Not that the better-known one may be philosophically reprehensible, but that in the case of a poet creative renewal is as much a bill of health as the relative originality he may display in any given text. To be sure, there had been an earlier Neruda: an adolescent Romantic whose *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (1924) had first made him famous among Latin American readers, and whose erotic and visionary insights reached even more desperate proportions in *Residence on Earth* (1933, 1935), the two-part poetic diary of a "season in hell" written mostly during a five-year sojourn in the Far East. There was also a later Neruda: a warmer, less confident voice who emerged from the tundra of the Cold War in 1958, in effect, to rewrite his previously austere political poetry. Two of the above books show us, for the first time, this later and, in the words of one of his translators; "unknown" poet;<sup>1</sup> a barely visible image that took nearly twenty years of poetic *détente*, as many as twenty additional volumes of nonpolitical

poetry, one Nobel Prize in Literature (1971), and a brutal military coup during which the poet succumbed to his own ailments to replace, finally, the monolithic image of the ascetic Marxist Neruda once had been.

That Neruda's career followed a complex development is a reasonable assumption we can derive from all this. His poetry reflects, in direct succession, the anguish, outrage, and ultimate uncertainty of the times he lived. Each stage of his work arranges clusters of existential issues, thematic nodes, arguments, and concerns that outline a coherent voice, thereby tracing a clear image of the speaking poet. As Neruda underwent different stages, as new issues replaced the old, so did the poet's voice renew itself in a series of rewritings, or creative self-corrections, that, paradox and contradiction notwithstanding, allowed successive changes of skin: the poet as a kind of scribal salamander.

As a workable guide to the length and breadth of Neruda's poetic changes, the volume edited by Tarn is the best text now available.<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps fitting that various hands translated the poetry collected therein, inasmuch as the anthology is itself a collection of voices from the archives of Nerudiana. It contains representative texts from thirteen books, as early as *Twenty Love Poems* and including many from his post-1958 period like "Fiesta's End" from *Ceremonial Chants* (1961) and a few from *Black Island Memorial* (1964). The last poem is a selection from *The Watersong* (1967), which means that this 1970 volume includes no poems from the fifteen other books Neruda wrote in his last six years, eight of which were posthumously published. Yet once past this general overview of Neruda's work, the other two volumes recently translated by Reid, *Extravagaria* (1958) and *Fully Empowered* (1962), provide the best introduction to the reading of the "unknown" Neruda.

Indeed, the translation of *Extravagaria* alone is enough cause for rejoicing since it is one of Neruda's more unusual books. Reid himself had translated excerpts from this crucial volume for previous anthologies (including Tarn's), but never had the entire book been rendered as beautifully as now. As its title suggests, it is a compilation of extravagant texts, although other words like *vagrance* or *vagary* also come to mind. (In a prefatory note on p. 11, Reid admits to the difficulty of translating the original *Estravagario* and explains that his own version took refuge "in a Latin cast"). Neruda chose this title to parody that of his first book, *Crepusculario* (1923), a compilation of Romantic adolescent poems, in a revisionary gesture which actually means more than meets the eye. The book's first Spanish edition, in 1958, had baffled readers because of its unusual format. Unlike any of Neruda's previous volumes, it was conceived as a *livre objet*, a limited, carefully edited and illustrated volume whose physical and visual appearance was given primary importance. Each of the sixty-eight poems was preceded by corresponding small prints taken from the *Libro de objetos ilustrados*, a nineteenth-century reading manual published in Mexico. In addition, two full-page prints taken from Paul Ferat's illustrations of Jules Verne's *Complete Works* had served as front and back inside covers. The first of these showed a melodramatic scene where a distraught sailor is seen standing in the middle of a circle of shipmates appearing to be confessing some terrible experi-

ence; the second showed an interior scene where a man is stealthily following another whose faded image looks uncannily similar to his pursuer's.

Both the unusual title and the amusing "pop" format (a format that, unfortunately, has not been retained in subsequent editions, including Reid's translation) thus served to complement the book's whimsical content, for the reader's bafflement in 1958 was as much due to Neruda's outrageous new mode of writing as to the book's formal features. This new poetry could not help but seem outrageous then since Neruda had devoted the immediately preceding years to the writing of a series of poems he called "elementary odes"—poetry at its most basic and accessible, whose ambitious scope had been to take an encyclopedic stock of reality, endowing familiar emotions with a sense of wonder and proclaiming the joys of everyday objects (such as in his famous "Ode to the Artichoke"). For three years, then, Neruda wrote no fewer than four hundred (almost five hundred) of these odes; yet despite the virtuoso performances their structure often allowed him, a sharp divergence was soon to be expected. Both the odes' subject matter and objectivist aesthetic—a desire to render objects purely and directly—excluded the possibility of any subjective content. In fact, the aesthetic of Neruda's odes went as far as to prescribe the repression of all subjectivity. In the first of these odes, aptly titled "The Invisible Man," there were lines that could be read as a kind of aesthetic credo: "I want / everyone else to live / in my life / and to sing in my song: I am not important."<sup>3</sup> To this curious poetic asceticism, Neruda soon opposed a new poetry of the self in *Extravagaria*.

It is said that the new poems forced themselves on Neruda while he was at work on *One Hundred Love Sonnets* (published subsequently in 1959), a Petrarchan love cycle devoted to his third wife, Matilde Urrutia. It is perhaps significant that the first poem Neruda wrote was "I ask for Silence," where he explicitly sheds his old skin by bidding a withdrawal from his poetic duties: "Now they can leave me in peace / and grow used to my absence." The revisionary implications of this request couldn't be clearer; instead of the former desire to lose himself in the object, the poet now zealously demands a leave of absence: "It happens I'm going to live. / To be and to go on being" (p. 19). Neruda's break with the past, his request for silence echoed in yet another poem of the same collection ("Keeping Quiet"), is no less than an introspective gesture, a movement toward quietism that may yield some needed self-knowledge: "a huge silence / [that] might interrupt this sadness / of never understanding ourselves / and of threatening ourselves with death" (p. 29). Yet far from being a Narcissistic exercise in which the text becomes a reliable mirror, Neruda's extravagant meditations yield not merely a self-assured subject, not the singular poetic self we are accustomed to find in most Romantic poetry, but instead a gallery of deceptive reflections, a closet full of masks and disguises—a broken glass. In the tranquil pause of recollection, Neruda confronts, finally, what his readers had suspected all along (p. 33):

Now it dawns on me that I have been  
not just one man but several,

and that I have died so many times  
with no notion of how I was reborn,  
as if the act of changing clothes  
were to force me to live another life.

Neruda's introspective gesture feeds upon a retrospective glance: an almost-nostalgic rereading of previous texts that unveils the repetition of *personae* or dramatic masks; and such middle-age stock-taking (Neruda was 54 in 1958) could not help but incorporate the theme of multiple personality, which is so prevalent in the modern poetic tradition. Along with Whitman's epic claim that "I am immense. I contain multitudes," other modern poets like Laforgue, Mallarmé, Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Pessoa also come to mind. All had adopted myriad dramatic poses in their search for an impersonal voice, an elusive quest, certainly, that was always a paradox since a multiplicity of identity would stem from an initial abolition of the self. This, however, is precisely the key to this traditional motif and to the reading of *Extravagaria* as well. For in the absence of a centered poetic self, the poet now takes recourse to the free play of disguise that, besides signalling a drama of identity, points to a poetics of loss, of the self as a lost and irretrievable mask. After all, Pablo Neruda had only been the convenient pen name of Neftalí Ricardo Reyes y Basoalto.<sup>4</sup>

In poem after poem of *Extravagaria* we can detect the pervasive irony that allows such free play. Whimsical speakers engage in absurd syllogisms, extravagant philosophical meditations, capricious situations that tax the mind and patience of the seriously intent and underscore the poetry's paradox and contradiction. In those poems in which paradox becomes internalized to illustrate the speaker's dilemma, the polemical debate between his different and conflicting selves—a latter-day "Dialogue of the Body and Soul"—yields some dazzling effects. For example, in "Parthenogenesis," the dialectic between self and society occasions this ironic quandary: "should I leave, or enter / travel or linger. / Buy cats or tomatoes?" (p. 83). Predictably enough, the way out of such torturing conflict is yet another rebirth that sweeps away the perplexities of self and community: "And then, if they leave me in peace, / I am going to change completely, / and differ with my skin" (p. 83). The same uncertainty can be gathered from "Too many names," where the subject's anxiety poses the following paradox: "When I sleep every night, / What am I called or not called? / And when I wake, who am I / if I was not I while I slept?" (p. 235). By far, the most explicit formulation of this theme is found in "We are many," one of Neruda's most popular poems, where the self-consciousness of multiplicity acquires amusing implications. Like Eliot's Prufrock, Neruda's insecure speaker is a helpless, clumsy agent who gropes for the correct demeanor in a variety of situations. It is as though the subject's ego (which Freud, incidentally, was fond of comparing to a "switchboard") had suffered a short circuit that threw its controls beyond repair. Thus, when the intelligent Neruda is called forth, "the fool I always keep hidden / takes over all that I say"; and in place of the dashing hero of yesteryear, out comes, "a coward unknown to me." In words that exploit the subtle resources of colloquial language—richly captured in Reid's translation—

the subject finally wonders: "What can I do to distinguish myself? / How can I pull myself together?" The answer to this existential quest is nowhere posed save in the cryptic lines that begin the last strophe: "While I am writing / I'm far away; / and when I've come back, I'm gone" (pp. 100–101). Here lies a summary of Neruda's poetics of loss in its trembling conviction that writing cannot possibly mirror or compensate for a stable, original self, but instead can only deflect this elusive project onto something entirely different: free play, disguise, mask. The subject is thus perpetually condemned to produce what are (always unsatisfactory) textual versions of itself, though in Neruda this patently modern, and often tragic, topic is given more than just an ironic stamp.

For, above all, *Extravagaria* is a humorous book in which ironic questioning is a function of diffidence and self-mockery. The overall impression of the poet is that of an undisciplined, whimsical fellow whose extravagant lack of rigor opens his volume to all sorts of different meditations. This is hardly the typical prophetic stance for which Neruda had been known in his previous poetry, and instead suggests a radical gesture of deconstruction, or systematic dismantling, of his former selves. Even a cursory reading of such key poems as "Through a closed mouth," a diffident praise of ignorance, or "On my bad education," perhaps Neruda's most vicious assault on himself, can detect this strategy of irreverence. In turn, the laxity of organization predicated by this poetics of anarchy opens the volume to other poems which are unrelated to the central theme of identity. Such is the case of "Horses," the narration of a brief visionary experience, or "Where can Guillermina Be?," one of Neruda's most moving autobiographical poems. The book's final text is, fittingly enough, a last will and testament, a long "Autumn Testament," in fact, divided into eleven sections where the poet makes all his last, necessary arrangements. That Neruda intended this autumnal farewell to contrast sharply with the other testaments he had included in his Whitmanian *Canto General* (1950) is explicitly noted in the third of these sections where he says: "I've left my worldly goods / to my party and my people," precisely the heirs mentioned in the poems dating from Cold War days. Now, however, the occasion calls for something different, for "we're talking of other things, / things both obscure and clear, / which all add up to one thing." Thus, the earlier Manichean dialectic of black against white, the good guys versus the bad, is now regarded as deceptively simplistic, since "all clarity is cloudy" and "It's not all earth and adobe" (pp. 286–89), a clear reference to the former commitment to fatherland and proletariat. Despite a later statement to the contrary ("The people defined me and I never stopped being one of them," p. 301), the "unknown" Neruda reaffirms his later choice: "I never denied my heart / or oysters, or stars." The eleventh and last section, concerning the poet's "transformations," restates the multiplicity of being that shatters any remaining orthodoxy "while things are settling down," and sweeps away the traces of a monolithic mask: "a clear and bewildered man, / a man rainy and happy, / lively and autumn-minded" (p. 302).

After *Extravagaria*, then, Neruda was a different poet altogether, though one whose personal involvement in Latin American politics was no less restrained. Not only was he an avid supporter of the Cuban revolution, for

example, (he even wrote an enthusiastic though minor volume in praise of Castro, *Canción de gesta*, 1961), but he also took an active part in the Chilean campaigns of 1964 and 1969. As it is well known, up until the formation of the Chilean Unión Popular, which gave way to Allende's ill-fated candidacy, Neruda had been the perennial Communist party candidate. But if Neruda's militancy was indeed relentless during all these years, it is not something we can easily gather from the poetry he wrote then. A reading of his work after 1958 does not yield the comfortable relationship between poetic and political selves one would expect, but rather a seemingly paradoxical rift or gap between the two. After this date, with the notable exception of *Canción de gesta*, his books become increasingly concerned with such secular themes as identity, time, and love, occasionally yielding a few somber meditations on history (as in *Ceremonial Chants*). All this means that the introspective vein we find in *Extravagaria* was Neruda's first step toward the mode in which all these themes would eventually converge, and that would occupy the poet until his last days: autobiography and confession. In 1962, the same year as the publication of *Fully Empowered*, Neruda published a series of ten autobiographical essays in *O Cruzeiro Internacional*, a Brazilian magazine, which would later make up the bulk of his posthumous memoirs *Confieso que he vivido*. And two years later these prose memoirs would further find their poetry counterpart in Neruda's *Black Island Memorial*, the five-volume autobiography which, in its subject matter and sheer ambitious range, invites comparison with Wordsworth's *Prelude*.

We can locate the thrust of *Fully Empowered*, then, within this autobiographical vein, even though it is one of Neruda's more heterogeneous works. It is a less crucial volume than *Extravagaria*, to be sure, though one which is by no means unimportant if we wish to understand the workings of this "unknown" poet. It is, first of all, a work of maturity, as implied in its suggestive title, rich in sexual, diplomatic, and poetic meanings. It is also, in a sense, a kind of postscript to Neruda's earlier books of odes, inasmuch as it contains at least eight of these poems. Above all, it is a poet's book of poetry, where the reader witnesses a further unveiling of Neruda's different selves, at once obsessed with time and death and fascinated with the mysteries of creation.

The first and last poems are two key texts that frame, as it were, this unveiling of identity within a dual poetics. In their solemn conception of the poetic task, both of these poems recall the vatic prefaces of Victor Hugo, whose famous "Fonction du poète" (in *Las rayons et les ombres*, 1859) seems to have been the model for Neruda's own "The Poet's Obligations." Unlike the diffident ironist we found in *Extravagaria* we now find a self-assured poet whose mission is to break down the dusty barriers of faulty perception. He sees the reader as a withdrawn prisoner, for whom "I arrive and open the door of his prison" which in turn means that "through me, freedom and the sea / will call in answer to the shrouded heart" (p. 30). We find that same liberating message in "Fully Empowered," the last poem, in which the poet's task is "to forge the keys," "and keep on opening broken doors to the sea / until I fill the cupboard up with foam" (p. 133). While all this surely harks back at least to the tone of the militant Neruda of earlier fame, there is a noticeable displacement of the subject's focus

of interest from the indignant curse of evil historical forces to the clearing up of internal, subjective conflicts. Within this dual frame, therefore, the autobiographical thrust can easily be traced in several key lyrical evocations, such as in "The Wanderer Returned," where the subject's pursuit of his own past in a forlorn city prompts a familiar response: "I will ask leave of myself to enter / to return to the missing city. / Inside myself I should find the absent ones" (p. 79). In "Past," a similar autobiographical meditation, the metaphor of a building's reverse construction, a dismantling or deconstruction ("first broken tiles / then proud doors, / until, from the past / dust falls") serves to illustrate the self's struggle with temporality: "another soul / took on our skeleton; / what once was in us now is not" (p. 105). The speaker's image we gather from *Fully Empowered*, at once so close and so different to the one in *Extravagaria*, is perhaps best captured in "The Night at Isla Negra," where, himself a prisoner on the waterfront, he witnesses a vision of the spectacular battle between nature's telluric forces ("Ancient night and the unruly salt"), only to describe their resolution as pure temporality (p. 95):

So on the coast comes to light,  
out of seething shadow, the harsh dawn,  
gnawed at by the moving salt,  
swept clean by the mass of night,  
bloodstained in its sea-washed crater.

When in 1971 Neruda won the Nobel Prize in literature, it took no one by surprise. (Sartre had refused it a few years earlier because, among other reasons, he felt Neruda had deserved it more.) In his Nobel lecture, Neruda chose the occasion to describe poetry as "our daily bread," a blatantly religious image which he immediately attempted to secularize by calling the poet "the nearest baker who does not imagine himself a god" (p. 23). At best, this was an uneasy description, and it is valuable to us not so much for what it says about Neruda's ideas on poetry as for what it reveals about his own hesitations regarding his work. Caught between an idealistic conception of the poet as a lyrical singer with a sacred mission and the radical materialist's view of history as revolutionary action, his descriptions of poetry waver as much between one pole and the other as the language he himself employed to write it. Such wavering—which at times reaches outright paradox—is the movement that best describes Neruda's writing, up to and including the poetry of *Extravagaria* and *Fully Empowered*, the so-called "unknown" Neruda. Like Rimbaud, from whose *Season in Hell* he borrowed the title of his Nobel lecture, he was essentially a Romantic visionary who saw himself as a poet with a mission, one that was as multifarious as it was necessary. Whether through a vigilant witnessing of reality's hidden forces or through a diffident self-awareness, his writing is guided by an Orphic desire whereby "each and every one of my songs has endeavored to serve as a sign in space for a meeting between paths which cross one another" (p. 29). This desire, which echoes Wallace Stevens's well-known phrase that "the theory of poetry is the theory of life," subtends, as we have seen, the poetry of the known as well as of the "unknown" Neruda. In the end, however, this dichotomy turns out to

be utterly false, and we may now dispel it in favor of a single image of the poet as an ever-changing though self-same writer. Reading and rereading Neruda, as more of us are beginning to find out, yields a single though still disturbing experience: in the search for ourselves in poetry, we only find the poet in search of himself.

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#### NOTES

1. See Ben Belitt's Introduction to Pablo Neruda, *New Poems (1968–1970)*, trans. and ed. Ben Belitt (New York: Grove, 1972).
2. Along with this anthology consult, also, *Pablo Neruda: Five Decades, A Selection*, trans. and ed. Ben Belitt (New York: Grove, 1974).
3. My translation from "El hombre invisible," Pablo Neruda, *Obras Completas* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1967), I, 1007.
4. For the details of Neruda's life and the psychoanalytic implications of his pen name, see Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *El viajero inmóvil. Introducción a Pablo Neruda* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1966), soon to appear in English translation from the University of Chicago Press.

Following is a list of available English translations of Neruda's poetry:

- Selected Poems*. Edited and translated by Ben Belitt, Introduction by Luis Monguió. New York: Grove Press, 1961.
- The Heights of Macchu Picchu*. Translated by Nathaniel Tarn, Preface by Robert Pring-Mill. London: Cape, 1966.
- A New Decade; Poems 1958–1967*. Edited with an Introduction by Ben Belitt; translated by Ben Belitt and Alastair Reid. New York: Grove Press, 1969.
- Pablo Neruda: The Early Poems*. Translated by David Ossman and Carlos B. Hagen. New York: New Rivers Press, 1969.
- Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems*. Edited by Robert Bly; translated by Robert Bly, John Knoepfle, and James Wright. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.
- New Poems (1968–1970)*. Edited and translated with an Introduction by Ben Belitt. New York: Grove Press, 1972.
- The Captain's Verses*. Translated by Donald Walsh. New York: New Directions, 1972.
- Memoirs*. Translated by Hardie St. Martin. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977.