

Pablo Neruda For Us: An Intervention

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It is a rare pleasure and honor to be asked to intervene in this unrepeatable occasion—the centennial anniversary of Pablo Neruda's birth—in a site convulsed by revolutionary upheavals. A pleasure not only because Neruda, to quote Gabriel Garcia Marquez, is “the greatest poet of the 20th century, in any language.” An honor because he was also a communist artist. But more than being the finest poet and a communist militant, he was one of the most useful for the “conscientization” (to use Paulo Freire's term) of at least two generations of Filipino intellectuals and activists. More significant, this event is happening in the Philippines, and particularly here in the University of the Philippines, Diliman, birthplace of the unprecedented First Quarter Storm that exploded on the eve of the infamous martial-law regime of the U.S.-Marcos collaboration.

Neruda is not a stranger to Filipinos precisely on account of that terrible convulsion and catalyst called the U.S.-Marcos dictatorship from 1972 to 1986. We, partisans in the brigade of cultural workers, found Neruda useful for making sense of reality—the reality of colonialism, poverty, oppression, fascist violence, injustice, and suffering that Neruda descanted from his early *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (1924) to *Extravagarios* (1958) and the formidable *Memorial de Isla Negra* (1966-70). We found Neruda of service for making intelligible, even bearable, that fierce solitude of underground exile, imprisonment, and desperate ostracism for which the only remedy (given the models of perseverance in the three volumes of *Residencia en la Tierra*) is fraternity, collective struggle, intransigent sacrifice. It was both serendipitous and fortuitous.

Allow me to delineate the genealogy of this usefulness and serviceability. From 1927-35, Neruda served as unsalaried consul to Burma, Ceylon, Java, Singapore, and elsewhere. One can speculate on the probability of his visit to the Philippines, that land (according to the annals of the Tang dynasty in China) "fittingly inhabited by snakes and savages." In his memoirs, he expresses identification with the travails and resistance of diverse Asian peoples. This empathy found its seductive mimesis in that classic of anti-romantic surrealism, the first cycle of *Residencia en la Tierra* (1933), right in the midst of the global crisis of finance capitalism, the last stage of imperialism (in Lenin's definition). In this, as in all his works, Neruda shares Walter Benjamin's prophetic judgment that every work of art is both a document of civilization and of barbarism. Whether you like it or not, one cannot escape being tried and judged in the crucible of the disasters and crises of our time.

Both barbaric and civilized forces traverse the labyrinthine narratives of Neruda's poetry as it evolved from the twenties to the middle of the century. Intractable paths are inscribed in the trajectory of his imagination. Was the obscure, bewildering style of the early Neruda an escape from the tragic predicament of Chilean society? Was he a fugitive from existential anguish and alienation celebrated by Nietzsche, Heidegger and their cult of nihilist relativism? Neruda staked out a peculiar itinerary, enigmatic but logical, in its historical situatedness. Between the romantic exuberance of his *Crepusculario* (1923) and the poignant lyricism of *Veinte poemas*, between the monumental epic sweep of *Canto general* (1950), the rigorous self-reflexion in *Tercera Residencia* (1935-47) and the disarming simplicity of *Odas elementales* (1954-59), we find Neruda descending—like Dante in *La Divina Commedia*, into the infernal wasteland. The critic Luis Monguio captures Neruda's inscription into the historical "thickness" of this cultural maelstrom between the "wars" whose climax was the materialist vision of the heights of Macchu Picchu in *Canto general* (1961; on Neruda's "moral realism," see the insightful essay by Greg Dawes 2003).

It was as if Neruda anticipated the searing vision of Antonio Gramsci, his Italian contemporary, who in a way provided the ethical and aesthetic rationale for radical anticapitalist surrealism. Gramsci observed that in the interregnum, that volatile no-man's land, between a decadent crumbling world and another painfully struggling to be born, we encounter the most dreadful morbid symptoms of humans struggling to survive. We encounter

wild excesses, strange transformations, perverse and monstrous happenings—all these spectacular or imperceptible occurrences faithfully chronicled in the “magic realism” of Garcia Marquez, Alejo Carpentier (who coined the term “lo real maravilloso”), the surrealist and expressionist experiments of Cesar Vallejo, Andre Breton, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, and other avant-garde guerillas of the last century. This is explainable as a revolt against the life-denying repressiveness of capitalist society and as a symptom of frustration, hopelessness, despair.

The early Neruda may be self-indulgent, like the “Europhile cadavers” he scorned in his later years. But in his engagement with the political crisis of his epoch, he succeeded in forging the “conscience” of his race (to echo the hero of Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) through the critical and fantastic realism of his vocation as citizen-artist caught between two worlds. This is the Neruda we might consider exemplary.

We in the Philippines, and millions in the beleaguered “third world” (now known as the peripheral South to the metropolitan North) found insight and catharsis in Neruda’s wrestling with the mystifying demons of capital and its comprador executioners. Of course, Neruda was not the only one we read, but he was one of the more exceptionally lucid and provocative. This episode of Neruda’s bohemian individualism soon ended—not yet with the martial law of General Augusto Pinochet (now on trial for his crimes), but with a benchmark event of modernity: the civil war in Spain in 1936–1938. This was the decisive break, the turning point, for Neruda, just as the Marcos dictatorship was for progressive Filipino intellectuals of my generation and the next. From this perspective, Neruda helped us make sense of that key moment in our national life, affording us a taste of agency when the gatekeepers of history nodded and allowed us to take a measure of control even in the role of victims and exiles. And this break in the quotidian routine of neocolonialism has closed, opened, narrowed, widened, in the momentous years following February 1986, “the people power” insurrection which overthrew Marcos, Estrada, and now threatens the present incumbent in Malacanang Palace.

During the Cold War, in spite of the prestigious Nobel Prize, Neruda had been reviled for his communist militancy. This dates back to his commitment to revolution in the thirties when he sided with the Republican forces in Spain, a turn often ignored, marginalized, or glossed over, by

scholars and reviewers. Neruda's partisanship with the Soviet Union and the Republican cause, with the camp of Federico Garcia Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Miguel Hernandez, and other fighters for socialism, against fascist nihilism (allied with Hitler and Mussolini and a death-worshipping Catholic Church that fully supported Generalissimo Franco), all contributed to the transformation of the neoromantic Neruda into a poet of universal import, the bard of secular grace and materialist redemption. It was not a transformation but a metamorphosis since old elements of baroque wit were sublated, by a dialectical sleight-of-hand, into the ironic and comic conceits of *Incitacion al Nixonicidio y alabanza del revolucion chilena* (1971). In this he resembled the Peruvian Cesar Vallejo whose *Poemas Humanos* and *Espana, aparta de mi este caliz*, written between 1936 and 1938, testify to the same praxis of compassionate sharing and communal struggle.

We can say with conviction that the poet of *Espana en el corazon* (1937) was the Neruda we read and translated then, the bard who spoke truth to power, the poet of devotion to the revolutionary ideals of the oppressed but insurgent community of peasants, workers, indigenous communities, and middle elements. It was a meeting of comrades engaged in a common struggle. Poetry became a mode of social action and communication, achieving Neruda's desire to "write with your life and my own." Neruda himself attested to what his engagement in the Spanish Civil War contributed to his growth: it helped him understand more, be more natural, and above all "live more near the people" (1971, 162). Our enjoyment of Neruda's art, then, was strategic, for pedagogical and programmatic reasons. This education of the senses—a production of social existence, as Marx stressed in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (1964)—was mediated by the practices of everyday resistance, condensed in art, love, scientific inquiry and political mobilization. In this way, the sensory faculties become practical "theoreticians," debunkers of ideologies. We find the entire history of feelings crystallized in every phantasy or intuition that condenses the whole society's dream of release, fulfillment and happiness amid hunger, torture, exploitation and death, the dream of freedom through the ordeal of physical and historical necessities (Caudwell 1937).

We find a confirmation of this thesis in Neruda's project for an antipoetic strategy, "Toward an Impure Poetry," targeting the elite

aestheticism of Wallace Stevens, Juan Ramon Jimenez, Octavio Paz, and others: "Let that be the poetry we search for: worn with the hand's obligations, as by acids, steeped in sweat and in smoke, smelling of lilies and urine, spattered diversely by the trades that we live by, inside the law or beyond it" (Neruda 1961, 39). But this is not naive empiricism or vulgar pragmatism. What Neruda accomplished in this "impure" craft is the discovery of "anticipatory illumination," or, in Ernst Bloch's words, the Marxist poet "makes the world become aware of an accelerated flow of action, an elucidated waking dream of the essential" (1996, 88). In the artistic dream-work, absence and presence are articulated in a productive synthesis. Rene Jara calls Neruda's quest for the presence of what is absent, that call for a more intense life, the key to the principle of composition in his major works: "The world takes on form through a mechanism of contiguities and displacements that arises from the polyvalence of worlds and the constitution of an alternate symbolic process that springs from a preconscious figurative plane prior to the semantics of definition" (1992, 149).

When Neruda became a Communist senator in the Chilean parliament, he had to disavow sectarian ultra-leftism and fight for the democratic rights of all the people—not just workers or peasants. He knew the lessons of Lenin's warning against "left-wing infantilism." In his *Incitement to Nixonicide and Praise for the Chilean Revolution*, Neruda rejected the "mystical hermeticism" of his previous work by assuming the office of the people's tribune: "I reserve, as an experienced mechanic, my experimental office: I must be, from time to time, a poet of public use, that is to say, I must give the brakeman, steward, foreman, farmer, gasfitter, or the simple regimental fool the capability of cutting loose with a clean punch or shooting flames out of his ears" (1973, 5-6). Indeed Neruda's desire is to be the bardic witness of the people, the organic intellectual of the laboring masses.

Let us invoke our own Amado V. Hernandez, one of the few Filipino writers of the pre-war generation, who not only translated Neruda but also imitated his materialist approach to ordinary things. Hernandez drew inspiration from Neruda's love for quotidian reality: watermelon, artichoke, dictionary, onions, animals, and so on. It was a celebration of everyday life before global consumerism had reduced everything to goods for sale or fetishized simulacras. It was this homage to the sensuous texture of worldly

life that appealed to the young rebellious spirits of the First Quarter Storm and the nationalist movement that preceded it. It was not so much the melancholy aestheticism of the *Veinte poemas* and the early *Residencia* that fascinated us; rather, it was the works that defied the "insurmountable solitude" of Latin America and, from the heights of Macchu Picchu, sought to recover the indigenous, aboriginal creativity of the millions subjugated by the ruthless glories of the European, Anglo-Saxon "civilizing mission."

One wonders at the striking affinities between the lives of Neruda and the Filipino socialist rebel. Hernandez followed an analogous path in his transcendence of the genteel tradition via a passage through labor union activism and his partisanship for the Huk uprising. Hernandez's underground experience during the Japanese occupation, and his persecution by the neocolonial state, paralleled Neruda's exile, his return to Chile in 1943, and his subsequent political engagement as a member of the Communist Party of Chile. Like Neruda, Hernandez valued the creative process of work, everyday labor interacting with mundane objects and places, humanizing the environment and caring for the now endangered ecology of our planet. In February 1948, Neruda escaped from military violence, crossing the Andes mountains with the manuscript of his masterpiece, *Canto general*, rescued in his saddlebag. He had lived an underground life from 1947 to 1949, only to emerge into exile until 1952. Countless "third world" writers' lives—one recalls here the Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, the Indonesian Pramoedya Ananta Toer, the Turkish Nazim Hikmet, and many others—find an allegorical mirror in Neruda's vocation and its articulations. For our part, we found in Neruda of the polemical *Incitation (A Call for the Destruction of Nixon)* a logistical toolkit for the simple art of speaking the truth in defense of humanity, a calling that Robert Bly (1971), amid anticommunist hysteria, regards as Neruda's lasting virtue. His relentless attack on U.S. imperialism was a vow of solidarity with our struggle against that Cold War behemoth which supplied weapons and diplomatic support to the state terror of the Marcos regime whose blood-debts are still unsettled up to now. Neruda took sides, a protagonist in the drama of the continuing class struggle of our time—he chose life and the creative vitality of the people, all the subjugated and dispossessed, as well as the indigenous survivors of imperial conquest.

In these dark days of terror in the Homeland Security State, blessed by the USA Patriot Act, despite the rumored end of the Cold War, we

find neoconservative scholars and even postcolonial critics praising Neruda the surrealist, the sophisticated humanist, the lover in the 1994 film *Il Postino*. Every persona or mask assumed by Neruda, no matter how tactical or expedient, becomes aggrandized and fetishized. We can already discern this in Ben Belitt's (1972) obsessional pursuit of the "unknown Neruda," protean and multiplicitous. Nowadays, almost every quality of the chameleonic poet becomes praiseworthy—except the communist militant enamored of a classless future. Indeed the Marxist-Leninist Neruda, winner of the Stalin Prize, is anathematized, demonized, stigmatized. He is a curse to be exorcized by distraction and trivialization. In his erudite volume on Neruda, Rene de Costa (1979) would summon the figure of Neruda the flamboyant trickster, the verbal magician, whose performance eludes discursive critique.

But these reactionary arbiters of taste cannot wholly suppress the truth distilled in the homage paid by the Nobel Prize committee that, in 1971, singled out Neruda's art whose "elemental force brings alive a continent's destiny and dream." The all-encompassing mythopoeic reach of *Canto general* cannot be deflected nor deconstructed into mystical aporias. Nor can the voice of the 1948 classic ode, "I wish the woodcutter would wake up" (1982)—read by generations of American students—be silenced, a Whitmanesque hymn that resurrected the seemingly eclipsed presences of the multiethnic proletariat, of the African slave "who brought you the music born in his country," and the Native American warriors.

In his addressing the heterogeneous multiethnic "peoples" of both north and south hemispheres of the American continent, Neruda seemed to have successfully translated into practice Kenneth Burke's wise but ignored counsel to the 1935 American Writers' Congress. In the spirit of the Popular Front, Burke proposed correctly that instead of the worker, the symbol of the "people" be used for an effective "propaganda by inclusion" that would engage the full allegiance of the vast majority of citizens, including factory workers. Mindful of sectarian dogmatism and the profoundly seductive forms of alienation pervading bourgeois life, Burke's reason coincides with Neruda's concern for inclusiveness, transitions, mediations, linkages: "And since the symbol of 'the people' contains connotations both of oppression and of unity, it seems better than the exclusively proletarian one as a psychological bridge for linking the two conflicting aspects of a transitional, revolutionary era, which is Janus-

faced, looking both forward and back" (1997, 280). Looking backward and forward, Neruda prophesied at the end of that utopian but realistic epic, *Canto general*:

Y nacera de nuevo esta palabra,
tal vez en otro tiempo sin dolores,
sin las impuras hebras que adhirieron
negras vegetaciones en mi canto,
y otra vez en la altura estara ardiendo
mi corazon quemante y estrellado.

[And this word shall be born again, perhaps in another time without suffering, without the impure offshoots that dark vegetation adhered to my canto, and once again in the heights my impassioned heart will be burning and starry.] (Costa 1979, 177)

Cynical academics today dismiss communism as something that has allegedly lost "gravitas" (Stavans 2004). Neruda's communism, in my view, is what underlies his protean, versatile and metamorphic art that Belitt, Costa and others celebrate. It is identical to his fidelity to the vision of freedom and social liberation from natural and man-made historical necessity. It is not dictatorship nor totalitarian domination of the multitude condemned by liberal democrats worshipping the free market, private property of productive means, consumerism and "free play" of the ego-centered individual. It is equivalent to Neruda's vision of solidarity with the builders of Macchu Picchu, with the toiling masses of the three continents that produced the accumulated wealth of modern society. In effect, it is emblematic of revolutionary hope. We need to distinguish this signifier and its concept from the straw-figure or caricature fabricated by the apologists of U.S. imperial hubris.

We may appeal to the poet Roque Dalton's testimony to situate Neruda's fundamental vocation: "The revolutionary is, among other things, the person most useful to his epoch because he lives to bring about ends that signify the highest interests of humanity. This holds true for the revolutionary poet—as revolutionary and as poet—in that, from the publication of his first word, he is addressing all people in defense of their own highest longings" (2002, 9). And so it is precisely Neruda's fidelity to the socialist goal of emancipation of the larger part of humanity from the

tyranny of profit and commodity fetishism (of whose insidious impact Marx first warned us), from exploitation by alienated and alienating structures of class and race, that makes Neruda's work permanently useful and valuable to Filipinos and "third world" peoples (San Juan 1994). This, I think, is the kernel of the essential Neruda.

Caught in the second front of the U.S. war of terror against its victims, we find this combative Neruda a comrade in the anti-globalization battle-front. He provides weapons that enlighten and sustain, necessary and pleasurable instruments for the common good. On the whole, Neruda's art represents a subtle and passionate dialectical grappling with the sensuous richness of nature and the built environment. The power of his poetic intuition derives from his political and civic responsibility, not only to Chileans but also to all humans sharing the same predicament of fighting for justice and popular liberation, with all its attendant dangers and opportunities. As he affirmed in his Nobel Prize speech, *Hacia la ciudad esplendorosa* (an image inspired by the French communard Arthur Rimbaud):

All paths lead to the same goal: to convey to others what we are. And we must pass through solitude and difficulty, isolation and silence, in order to reach forth to the enchanted place where we can dance our clumsy dance and sing our sorrowful song.... For I believe that my duties as a poet involve friendship not only with the rose and with symmetry, with exalted love and endless longing, but also with unrelenting human occupations which I have incorporated into my poetry. (1971, cited in San Juan, 16).

Seen from this angle, Neruda's historicizing and futurist imagination does not contradict the Marxist stance of moral realism; in fact, it reinforces it. We can see this prophetic and critical realism extending its universal reach in the antiglobalization movement today, as well as in traditional revolutionary movements—from the Zapatistas of Mexico, the Palestinians in the occupied territory, to the Nepali and Peruvian Maoists, to the black and brown militants in the United States, and of course the combatants

of the New People's Army in our midst. In one of his late poems, "El Pueblo," Neruda revitalized his popular-democratic inclusiveness, that combination of presence and absence we have noted earlier:

Por eso nadie se moleste cuando
parece que estoy solo y no estoy solo,
no estoy con nadie y hablo para todos:

alguien me esta escuchando y no lo saben,
pero aquellos que canto y que lo saben
siguen naciendo y llenaran el mundo.

[So let no one worry when
I seem to be alone and am not alone,
I am not with nobody and I speak for all—
Someone is listening to me and, although they do not know it,
those I sing of, those who know
go on being born and will fill up the world. (1970, 453)

Our debt of gratitude to Neruda can be measured only by the victories of our national-democratic struggle. For his resourceful resistance to fascism in Europe and Latin America, for his resolute opposition to the U.S. invasion of Vietnam and Cambodia, for his sympathy with the Cuban revolution, for his support of President Salvador Allende and the brief socialist interlude interrupted by the Pinochet coup of September 11, 1973, twelve days after which Neruda died—all these are registered in the 6,000 pages of his *Obras Completas*—we salute Pablo Neruda (born July 12, 1904 as Neftali Ricardo Reyes y Basoalito and died on September 23, 1973) and express our solidarity with the invincible peoples of Chile and the Americas. *Mabuhay si Pablo Neruda!*

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