

PABLO NERUDA'S SONG OF PROTEST: HISTORY AS SENSUAL DELIGHT

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*I was born to sing these sorrows,
to expose destructive beasts,
to contain shamelessness with a scourge,
to touch inhuman scars.*

Pablo Neruda, "I Come From the South"¹

Pablo Neruda unleashes in *Song of Protest* a "direct and aimed weapon, an elemental and fraternal aid . . . to sibling nations in their daily struggle".² Puerto Rico, Cuba, Chile, Venezuela, Guatemala, all Latin America is confronted by Neruda's 42 poems paradoxically recreating its bitterly sad history into sensually delightful literature. Such poetry demands examination of it as a social product of a particular historical epoch. Neruda's life, together with the events, governments and politics in Latin America, will be discussed towards an understanding of the forces which shaped the poet and his poetry.

In his lifetime, Pablo Neruda saw the exploitativeness of colonizers in the East. He found himself involved in the Spanish Civil War. He joined the Communist Party. He was elected Senator; a year later, he had to flee Chile. He was appointed Ambassador to Paris by the Socialist government of Allende. He died soon after the death of that President and the Socialist government.³

Neruda's work, therefore, embraces the history not only of his own country (Chile), but also of what he calls "the Americas" as well as the rest of the world. Discarding the early "mournful pessimism and metaphysics of 'Residence on Earth'", Neruda produced a political testament in "Canto General", a work of "epic grandeur and militancy" which

celebrates the "landscape, history and peoples of Nuestra America"⁴; at the same time, it condemns the economic exploitation by the United States and/or by multinational corporations as it does the "genocidal Spanish conquest".⁵ In fact, Neruda's literary works are a "rewriting of history", premised on the falsehood of the existing written ones.⁶ *Song of Protest* is a commitment to freedom and the struggle for it:

...
My duty moves along with my song:

I am I am not:

that is my destiny.

*I exist not if I do not attend to the pain
of those who suffer: they are my pains.*

...

*I come from the people and I sing for them:
my poetry is song and punishment.*

...

*I am the man of bread and fish
and you will not find me among books
but with women and men:
they have taught me the infinite.*

("So Is My Life", XXII, 68)

Faithfully reflecting the realities of his time in the world he lived in, all the poems in Neruda's *Song of Protest* address the issues of imperialism and tyranny and celebrate the vision of a pristine tellurian world created by the people, their heroes, and their poets. The poems mercilessly accuse the greedy and the cruel, the destroyers and the exploiters; they

lavishly praise the generous and the brave, the workers and builders.

Imperialism is the most glaring and recurring theme in *Song of Protest*. Continual United States intervention in the national affairs of Latin American nations is enumerated one by one: "In Guatemala", the communist government established by Arbenz in 1950 was overthrown by the CIA in 1954; "... thus Guatemala was assassinated/in full flight, like a dove" (XVI, 59). "A bloody flavor soaks/the land, the bread and wine in Salvador". ("In Salvador, Death", XVII, 60) After saluting the beauty of Panama, Neruda whispers ("one must speak of bitterness in privacy") that "little sister" was cut and eaten and left "like a gnawed olive pit". This repulsive and radical surgery does not redound to the benefit of Panamanians but foreigners who spill "nothing but whiskey", and having "dug the earth with blood/. . . dollars are sent to New York/leaving . . . graves." ("History of a Canal", XXXIII, 89) The next poem, "Future of a Canal" (XXXIV) is still a lamentation and sorrowfulness over the present condition of Panama and its potentials. Panama should be "the grand union of two nuptial oceans:/ . . . for men and not exploiters, for love not for money, not for hate but for sustenance". With the Panamanian flag presiding "over the passage of ships", Panama should own and control the canal "and all other canals/built on your territory", simply because "these are your sacred springs". (90-1)

heinous crime is recounted in detail in three more poems ("That Friend", X, 51., "Treason", XI, 53., "Death", XII, 54).

The abstraction that is US imperialism is concretized in the flesh-and-blood presence of: "sailors grown and paid for in New York" who "dressed very well for war/shining shoes and weapons", and ". . . Louisiana fighters/accustomed to hanging blacks/with superhuman valor:/two thousand hooded men busy/with one black man, a rope and a tree". ("That Friend", X, 51).

"The Explosion of 'Le Coubre' 1960" (a French ship carrying armaments which mysteriously exploded in the Havana harbor on March 3, 1960) was without doubt armed imperialist aggression. (118) The duplicity of the then current US President Eisenhower is angrily drawn by the poet:

*... two Eisenhowers in partnership,
one navigated under water
and the other smiled in Argentina,
one deposited the explosive,
the other knighted the approaching men,
one pushed the torpedo button
the other lied to all America,
one swam like a green octopus
and the other was milder than an aunt.*

(... "Le Coubre", XXXI, 84)

In another poem "Ancient History", where Neruda "remembers" . . . "the bitter and magic history of Cuba", there is peace and joy in Cuba until "from the North", "threatening, covetous, unjust", "bloodied nails" are driven into the land. "It was the the dollar with its yellow teeth/commandant of blood and grave." (VI, 46)

In the poem entitled "OAS Meeting", Neruda scathingly demonstrates the servility of South American representatives to their "North American Chief":

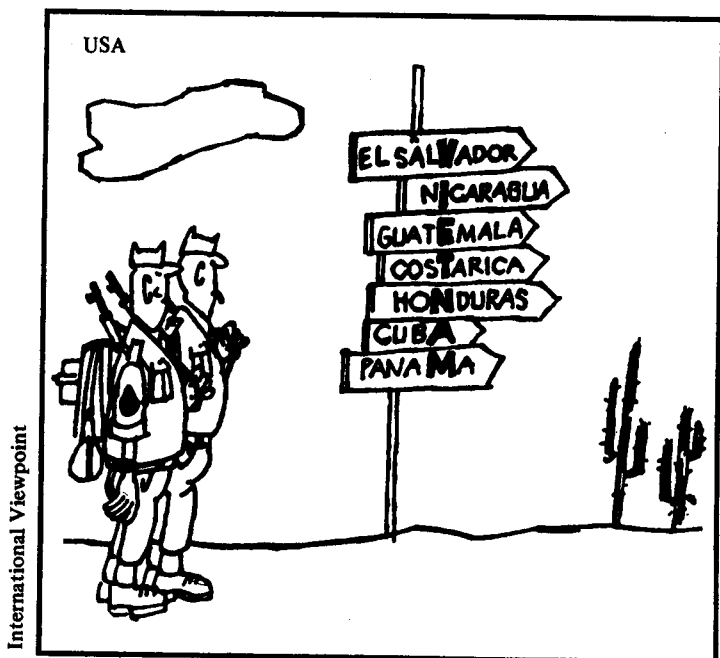
*Our assembled ambassadors
form a soft silk cushion
and for that sacrosanct rump
Argentina designs its wool,
Ecuador its best macaw,
Peru its ancestral llamas.*

*...
they fight to be the first cushion:
"At least they should step on me"*

*...
their North American Chief arrives:
He sits on everyone without noticing
whom he sat upon first*

(XXX, 82-83)

The cupidity of the ambassadors representing the oppressed nations is not only humiliating but also damaging to the countries, which are allowed to be continuously ravaged by the greedy North American. The OAS (Organization of



Nicaragua, the current obsessional target of the United States, has had a lengthy history of battling "El Norte". In "It Is Happening", (III, 41) the progress of the United States space program is bitterly contrasted to the deterioration of Nicaragua, a condition which dishonors the heroic (Sandino) and the poetic (Dario) sons of Nicaragua. In the 1930s, Augusto Cesar Sandino organized a resistance movement against the US in Nicaragua, after which he was treacherously murdered by Somoza's National Guard. Sandino's spirit carried the Frente Sandinista through a long revolution, which finally toppled the Somoza Regime on July 19, 1979. This

American States) becomes a travesty since it was created purportedly to advance the interests of all American nations equally.

Even while extolling the beauty of the Americas, Neruda does not miss an opportunity to condemn "the empire of the dollar . . . rooted there with its attending demons" ("Midland", VII, 47) The poet is relentless in exposing the unjust relations in the name of free trade between North America and South America: "If New York City shines like gold", it is because

... *Chileans spit up blood*
...
... *Bolivians collapse with hunger;*
...
Sugar builds the walls,
Chilean nitrate the cities,
Brazilian coffee buys the beds,
Paraguay gives them universities,
from Colombia they receive emeralds,
...
Puerto Ricans give their blood.

(“Mean Events”, XXVIII, 79)

“Mean Events” are North American progress and enjoyment of life from exploitation and misery in South America.

In spite of suffering in the South due to the rapaciousness of the North, Neruda reaches out to the “Man from the North” in the poem “North American Friend” (XXXIX, 100). He addresses the “Yankee of the villages and factories/ with wife, responsibility and children,/fertile engineers. . ./workers broad, narrow and bent, dissolute poets” --- single human individuals who comprise a nation of exploiters. He clarifies that “My only rebuke against you/is for the silence that says nothing:” (100). He appeals to them:

we are Americans like you;
we do not want to exclude you from anything
but we want to conserve what is ours,
...
we can live without trampling
... *we don't believe*
that there must be a victory of bombs and swords.

(“North American Friend”, XXXIX, 101)

Almost sardonically, he reassures the exploiters that the South will not inflict on the North what is being inflicted on them:

we are not going to exploit your petroleum,
we will not intervene with customs,
...
we are peaceful people who can
be content with the little we earn,
we do not want to submit anyone
to coveting the circumstances of others.
...

... *the geography*
that unites us in the desired land,
... *we are sailing in the same boat:*
...
let us load it with bread and apples,
let us load it with Blacks and Whites,
with understanding and hopes.

(“North American Friend”, XXXIX, 102)

Dictators, aside from armaments, are utilized by imperialists to protect their interests in the countries where they extract their wealth. Neruda's experience of elected Latin American leaders who then turned against the interests of the people in favor of the imperialists was an actual one. In his *Memoirs*, Neruda narrates the Chilean election of “the great leader of the petite bourgeoisie, Arturo Alessandri Palma, a dynamic and demagogic man”, who “once in power quickly turned into the classic ruler of our Americas; the dominant sector of the oligarchy, whom he had fought, opened its maw and swallowed him and his revolutionary speeches”.⁷ With passion and conviction, therefore, Neruda damns Latin American leaders who betray the interests of the people for their own self-interest. He enumerates one by one the tyrants in each of the Latin American countries; he paints them as ugly, greedy, subhuman creatures. Four completed poems, aside from intermittent mention in other poems, are devoted to Venezuela and her long succession of dictators. “The Tiger” (XXIV) is Juan Vicente Gomez, “The name of emptiness. . .the name of that death” (71), dictator of Venezuela from 1908 to 1935, during whose dictatorship oil was discovered off the Venezuelan coast. From 1951 to 1958, “Perez Jimenez” was the repugnant dictator:

... *named the bat,*
He was rotund of soul with a pestilent
belly, a thief and sly,
he was a fat lizard from the swamp
a gnawing monkey, an obese parrot,
he was a spineless mugger
a cross between a frog and a crab,
Trujillo's and Somoza's bastard
... *a yellow doormat,*
...
voracious shark of excrement.

(XXV, 72)

Relentlessly, Neruda attacks the next dictator Romulo Betancourt who ruled from 1959 to 1963:

this man is square outside
and opaque inside like cheese:
he prepared himself well for the Presidency
(but to be a man he never had time).
... *he learned English in order to obey orders,*
he was prompt and circumspect in everything:
eyes and ears toward North America
while to Venezuela deaf and blind.

(“A Strange Democrat”, XXVI, 74)

The poet mercilessly denigrates the leader who serves not his country, but the exploiter.

In Nicaragua, "Somoza was the traitor's name/the mercenary, the tyrant, the executioner", ("The Traitor Dies", XIII, 55) who ruled for 20 years until his assassination, which, however, still did not free Nicaragua from tyranny as:

*... from the guts that spilled
came little Somozas:
two clowns splattered with blood:
from the cruel frog two little fertile frogs.*

("Monarchs", XIV, 56)

In the Dominican Republic, the name of the dictator from 1930 to 1961 (31 years!) was General Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. Because of him, the Dominican Republic is "a bloodied, poor land . . . half . . . a radiant island:/Trujillo's teeth gnawed her/wound for thirty consecutive years." ("It is Happening", III, 41).

In Puerto Rico, Luis Muñoz Marin, governor from 1949 to 1964, is the predatory "worm" growing "fat in a maggot heap", "a tapeworm", "that traitor", "Judas of the blood-let land". ("Muñoz Marin", II, 40) A host of insults is capped only by the final one "chauffeur of North American whiskey". ("Muñoz Marin", II, 40) Even in a poem on Nicaragua, the attack on Muñoz Marin continues:

*... Muñoz of Puerto Pobre
falsifies his island's signature
and under the pirate's banner
he sells out language and reason, lands and delights,
sells our poor America's honor,
sells parents and grandparents and ashes.*

("It Is Happening", III, 41)

The dictator is a pirate, a *falsificador*, doubly dishonourable because of selling out what does not belong to him. The poverty and alienation of Puerto Pobre is the sole responsibility



Muñoz Marin of Puerto Pobre, Puerto Rico with Richard Nixon.

of Muñoz Marin, who indeed merited the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Lyndon B. Johnson (1963).

In El Salvador, it is still another dictator, Martinez, who ruled from 1931 to 1944, and who ordered the assassination of fifteen hundred people:

*In Salvador, death still patrols.
The blood of dead peasants
has not dried, time does not dry it,
rain does not erase it from the roads.
Fifteen hundred were machine-gunned.
Martinez was the assassin's name.
Since then a bloody flavor soaks
the land, the bread and wine in Salvador.*

("In Salvador, Death", XVII, 60)

Tyranny is accompanied by paranoia manifested by brutal repression (ably supported by imperialists) of the people's rights. *Song of Protest* testifies to the fact that imperialism, tyranny, abuse of people and their rights are one -- "a theme/hot with blood" ("Puerto Rico", I, 39). The Venezuelan dictator

*... Perez Jimenez buried
Venezuela and tormented her.
Her stores were filled with pain,
torn limbs and broken bones
and the prisons once again were
populated with the most honest men.*

("Perez Jimenez", XXV, 73)

"Honest men in jail. Thieves on the streets adorning themselves with the public's trust. Yet even when armed insurrection managed to topple these treacherous leaders, even when 'the walls of the tyrant were broken/and the people unfettered their majesty', these defeated rulers found a 'palace' in the 'free world' which awaited them with open arms."⁸ Under dictators,

*... Venezuela silently
sank into the obscurity of prison,
into the sickness of penitentiaries and fevers.*

("The Tiger", XXII, 71)

Political prisoners die tortuous deaths:

*the worms ate him alive,
...
until those short, cruel screams ended. . .
...
no one answered. The worms and death lived.*

("The Tiger", XXII, 71)

The disappearance of Jesus de Galindez, a Basque writer who planned to publish a book about Trujillo, is recorded by

Neruda. The professor is abducted in New York and brought to Santo Domingo where a pale "ruffian with an old face reigns/a satanic monkey supported/. . . by the state department".

*"It is not known whether he was burned alive
or slowly flayed,
or cut into little pieces,
or roasted in the blood of other dead men".*

("A Professor Disappears", XXXVII, 97-8)

If there is imperialism and tyranny and human despoliation, there is heroism and heroes and vision. In Neruda's world, there is no lack of these positive elements to combat evil. Neruda himself experienced the oppression of a government he had campaigned for: a strong protest speech he delivered as a senator merited not only removal from the senate but also a warrant of arrest. The poet had to escape through the impassable Andes mountains into Argentina; and even when he had safely resurfaced in Paris, he continued to be hounded by his government. It was at this time that in reply to a newspaperman, he declared: "say that I am not Pablo Neruda, but another Chilean who writes poetry, fights for freedom, and is also called Pablo Neruda."⁹ In his life as in his writing, indomitable courage and unwavering commitment to freedom was Pablo Neruda's response to persecution and repression.

The national hero of Cuba, Jose Marti—who first articulated the aspirations of Cuba and who led the revolution against Spain in 1895 -- is extolled by Neruda as:

*That man saw near and far
Awakened the daydreamer and the peasant*

*Building with blood and thought
The architecture of the new light.*

("I Remember a Man", IX, 50)

As long as there are heroes who "dream of liberty" even when it means "changing life for death", there will be "new light". (50)

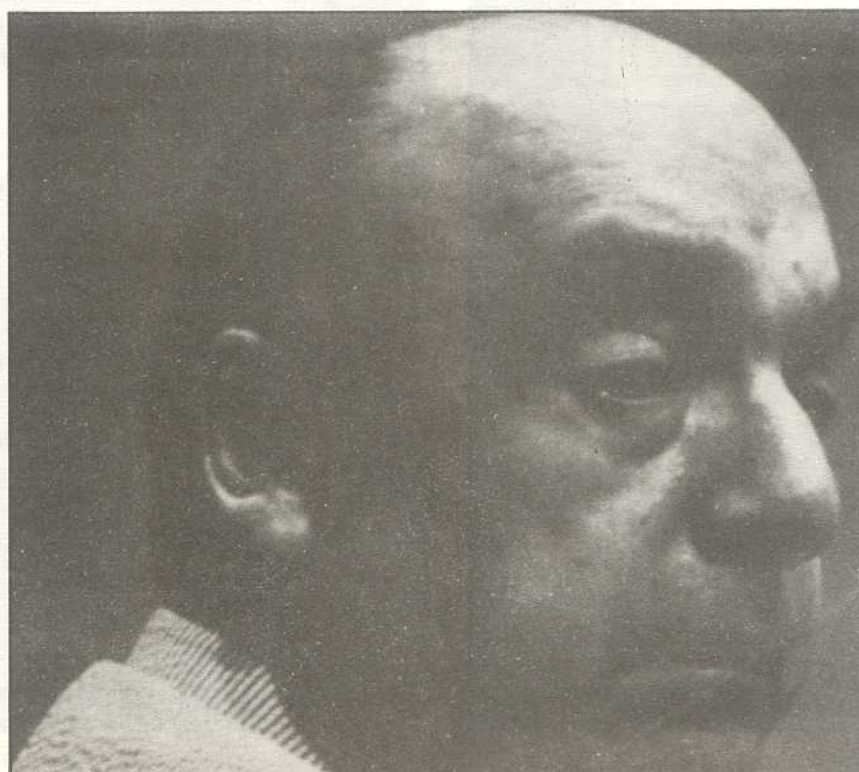
Indisputably a hero, Augusto Cesar Sandino, is dishonored by Nicaragua's rotting "in a dynasty of worms" ("It Is Happening", III, 41). The son of a small farmer, Sandino led the struggle to support Vice-President Juan Bautista Sacasa's claim to the Presidency. When the United States intervened in 1927 to assure "peace", Sandino and his followers launched a highly successful guerilla war against both the US Marines and Nicaraguan National Guard.¹⁰ Sandino's guerrillas fought with "sacred gunpowder" those "sailors grown and paid for in New York".

*Sandino attacked and waited,
Sandino was the coming night,
he was the light from the sea that killed.
Sandino was a tower with flags,
Sandino was a rifle with hopes.*

...

*Augusto C. Sandino he was called.
And in this song his name will remain
full of wonder like a sudden blaze
so that it can give us light and fire
in the continuation of his battles.*

("That Friend", X, 51-2)

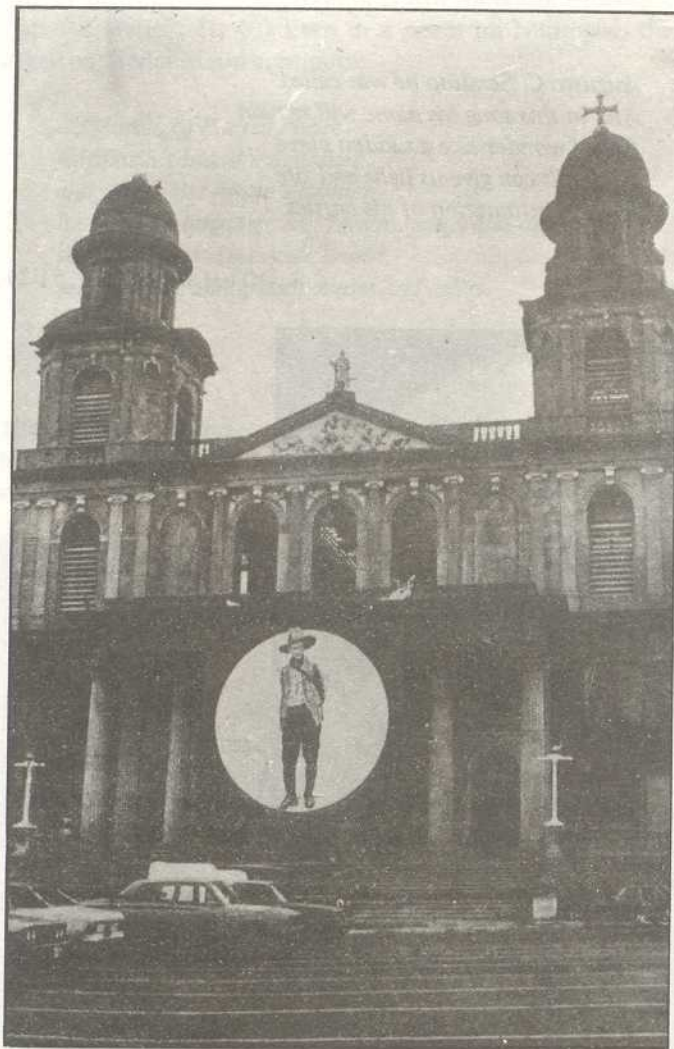


Pablo Neruda

When the Marines departed in 1932 and Sacasa was inaugurated President, Sandino agreed to lay down arms. The following year, after dining with President Sacasa, (the very man he had supported), he was murdered by the "Guardia Nacional", created by the United States to keep order after the departure of the Marines and led by Anastasio Somoza.¹¹ This night of premeditated treachery is minutely and evocatively recorded in two poems entitled "Treason" and "Death".

*Sandino stood up not knowing
that his victory had ended
As the ambassador pointed him out
thus fulfilling his part of the pact:
everything was arranged for the crime
between the assassin and the North American.
And at the door as they embraced him
They bade him farewell condemning him.
Congratulations! and Sandino took his leave
Walking with the executioner and death.*

("Death", XII, 54)



Augusto Cesar Sandino.

The death of Sandino is an immeasurable loss to the nation and cause for great mourning:¹²

*"O feast of bloodied wine!
...
O pale stars that did not speak!
...
O banquet of silver and agony!
O shadow of premeditated treason!*

("Treason", XI, 53)

In contrast, the assassination of Somoza, "the mercenary, the tyrant, the executioner", who for 20 years "strangled Nicaragua with a thief's hands and turbulent fingers", is hailed as a patriotic act of restoring "dead honor" to the country. ("The Traitor Dies", XII, 55) Rigoberto Lopez, the assassin, is "valiant": "His heroic exploit was his seed of death!/May the universal hymn honor his name!" ("The Traitor Dies", XII, 55) in the Latin America and the whole world.

Fidel Castro is the hero (a live one) who led Cuba to a new world:

*Fidel's hand comes forth and in it
Cuba, the pure rose of the Caribbean.
And so History teaches with her light
that man can change that which exists
and if he takes purity into battle
in his honor blooms a noble spring.*

("Cuba Appears", IV, 43)

An entire poem narrates the guerilla war which began with Fidel Castro's landing with "that handful of men on the sand". ("The Challenge", V, 44) The original 15, together with those who later joined, are celebrated by Neruda:

*Fatigued and fervent they walked
for honor and duty toward war
they had no weapons other than their blood:
...
the peasant told of his sorrow,
and the pure army of the poor
grew and grew like the full moon:*

("The Challenge", V, 44-5)

Only raw courage, their love for their country, their determination, the people's love and support sustained them, as nature nurtured them "A Song for Sierra Maestra" pays homage to "the mysterious mountains" which kept alive "the spark that would burn" in Latin America:

*I celebrate the rough groves,
the tough habitat of the rocks
the night of indecisive murmurings,
with the flickering of the stars, the naked silence of forests.*

(XLI, 104)

The triumph of the revolution in Cuba has given all Latin America a basis for hope. Cuba has actualized and concretized the once-distant possibility of full sovereignty for people in Latin America.

*Cuba is a clear, upright mast visible
throughout space and darkness,
it is like a tree born in the center
of the Caribbean Sea and its ancient sorrows:*

*...
raising in dark America
the edifice of springtime.*

(“Written in the Year 2000”, XLII, 112)

Even in the midst of haranguing Venezuelan dictators, particularly Betancourt, Neruda holds up the example of Fidel and the nation that he is building—through land reform, massive housing, sale of sugar—as cause for loss of sleep and anxiety for those who would like to maintain the present oppressive structures.

In his Preface to *Song of Protest*, the first book dedicated by a poet to the Cuban Revolution, Neruda promises: “. . . my passion and my work will continue, as in this book, to fortify and defend the Cuban Revolution. . . . It is great historic acts that have importance in our peoples’ journey. . . .”¹³ Belonging to “the great brotherhood of true fighters”, all Latin America shares in the victory of Cuba: “I think of freedom reconquered:/. . . in Cuba grows . . ./the seed of our dignity.” (“Liberty”, XVIII, 61)

International Viewpoint



Two young Nicaraguans.

Neruda’s vision then is of unity, “of lasting brotherhood”,¹⁴ of equality among men, of justice for all:

*The children in school with shoes
The giving out of bread and justice
As the sun gives out with summer.
I see fulfilled simplicity. . .*

(“Written in the Year 2000”, XLII, 107)

When communist youths are able to correct the follies of tyrants in Latin America, and when “there is no necessity to run between governors and courts of justice”, then everyone will be content and “Thus, History begins once again.” (“Written in the Year 2000”, XLII, 111)

This rewriting of history is Neruda’s way of appropriating for himself the “right to define, rather than submit to alien definitions” of the conqueror.¹⁵ His love for nature leads him to look to the “tellurian” origins of man, that is, to pre-conquest primeval man. The relation of man to earth is clear in Neruda’s “La Lampara en la Tierra”: “Man was earth, a vessel/ the eyelid of the quivering mud/ a shape of clay. . . seen it all”¹⁶, when things were simply things, and not symbols, the plea is still that “man be in harmony with nature”, that man should use natural forces positively, the man and nature be linked in mutual compassion.¹⁷ For if man were in harmony with nature, he would be at peace with himself as well as with other men; and if man were to be like nature, he would be natural in his desires and be devoid of greed. “Nature as accomplice, nature as education, nature as the source of powerful secrets denied those who do not live by her, and liberation as the recovery of those secrets, temporarily lost during the conquest”—these are the precepts of . . . Pablo Neruda’s writing.¹⁸

Revolutionary Cuba



Volunteer sugarcane worker, Cuba.

A deep kinship with nature is evident in Neruda's poetry including *Song of Protest*. "Caribbean Birds" are enumerated: the martin, the hummingbird, the quetzal, water troupial, partridge, thrushes, "chocorocay", "tintora", rock roosters, water birds: "How did feathers surpass flowers?" the poet joyously marvels. With them, he too must sing, "and see and live for all men". (XVII, 76-7) Neruda says, "my poetry is becoming a material part of an atmosphere that extends infinitely, that runs under the sea and under the earth both, it begins to enter galleries of startling vegetation, to speak in broad daylight with the specters of the sun, to explore pits of minerals hidden deep in the secretive earth, to establish forgotten links between autumn and man."¹⁹ Even his poetry of the primeval is steeped in history. Because it was used by Simon Bolivar as a base for his resistance against Spain, the Orinoco River "was an infinite letter/written with caymans and news". ("For Venezuela", XXIII, 69)

Neruda's affinity for nature is due to a childhood in the forests of southern Chile. Later in life, the articles he collected were all related to the sea, such as bottled ships, shells and old ships' figureheads. The gifts he deeply appreciated were those offered by his wife Matilde "from the earth . . . all the roots, all the flowers, all the sweet-smelling fruits of happiness."²⁰ "A tree invaded by most and deeply scarred, quiet and yet seething vitality within its furring adjoining lives", are the images Neruda calls up in Gabriela Mistral (who first introduced Neruda to Russian literature), the only other Latin American poet to have won the Nobel Prize in Literature.²¹

Not only images but also qualities of nature are reflected in Neruda's poetry. "The originality of Neruda's language, his adoption of violent and strong words, correspond . . . to a nature that, because of its wealth, is overflowing and naked . . ."²² as in his description of the Americas:

*a leadership of pitiless mice,
an inheritance of armed spit,
a stinking cavern of imperious orders,
a gutter of tropical mud,
a black chain of torments,
a rosary of unsurpassed misery*

*O lean chain of sorrows,
O gathering place for the tears of two oceans.*

("Mid-land", VII, 47-48)

Brutal sarcasm, religious seriousness, emotional and linguistic allusions are all aimed at the experiencing of the pain of the systematic exploitation of Latin America. The consistent use of "Puerto Pobre" for Puerto Rico demands a confrontation with the present and actual poverty of a country with promised wealth. The enemy is described in deceptively matter-of-fact terms which at the same time contrast the orderly clinical preparation for war with the chaotic bloody actuality of war: "He dressed very well for war/shining shoes and weapons"; "at West Point, learning was clean:/they were never taught. . ./that he who kills could also die:" ("That Friend", X, 51-2) Corruption and oppression is put in the flesh by "cannibal judges" ("Cuba Appears", IV, 43) and "bloodied Caribbean cannibals". ("Mid-land", VII, 47)

The sensuous Neruda writes with colors to evoke meaning, ". . . blue is the most beautiful color. It suggests space as man sees it, like the dome of the sky, rising toward liberty and joy."²³ He realizes, however, "that there are other colors in the landscape of the world. Who can forget the color of all the blood senselessly spilled in Vietnam everyday? Who can forget the color of the villages leveled with napalm?"²⁴ Color is used as objective correlative for life and emotions: "Our old gray capital needs green leaves the way the human heart needs love." Venezuela is "a geographic emerald" ("For Venezuela", XXIII, 69); ("Caribbean Birds," XXVII, 77). "Caribbean Birds" are "birds of yellow lighting kneaded with drops of turquoise/. . . light dancers of golds and air/spartailed ultraviolet tintora". (XVII, 76) Puerto Rico is an island where "ash-colored days come and go". ("Puerto Rico, Puerto Pobre", I, 39)

The purpose of both poetry and propaganda is to move and to persuade; the difference between the two is that propaganda (unlike poetry which appeals only to a select few), must appeal to as wide an audience as possible. Protest poetry must therefore "conjure immediate, widely shared associations."²⁵ The "well-worn rhetorical cliché"--a short-cut to communication--is one of its conventions.²⁶ It is from this view that Neruda's sometimes facile accusations should be appreciated: "The Commonwealth stinks of death" ("Returning to Puerto Pobre", XX, 65), "a golden claw separates her/from her lovers and her birthright". ("Puerto Rico, Puerto Pobre", I, 39) A translator of Neruda's *The Captain's Verse* claims that Neruda expresses his poetic ideas so simply and directly that "it is possible to translate him quite literally with no loss of validity, as will be seen by any reader with a knowledge of the two languages."²⁷

The poet uses words as weapons to "fight against. . . enemies".

*. . . each one of my lines carries
the threat of gunpowder or steel,
that will fall over the inhuman,
over the cruel and over the arrogant.*

("Do Not Ask Me", XXXIX, 80)

The poet must defend the beaten, who are of the same "flesh and bones". His chores include searching for those who fall, and finding them, soothing and closing their wounds. The intention of the book is to "attend to the pain/of those who suffer: they are my pains" ("So Is My Life", XXII, 68) In his Preface to *Song of Protest*, Neruda expressly states the service he wishes his poetry to achieve: "Much must be constructed. May everyone arrive at what is his with sacrifice and happiness. Our nations have suffered so much that we will have given them little when we have given them everything."²⁸ The dignity attributed to man is accompanied by the responsibility to maintain it through actively participating in the creation of a world that is just and beautiful:

*because we were born on this planet
and we must arrange man's society
because we are neither birds nor dogs.*

("Do Not Ask Me", XXXIX, 80)

Neruda's sense of his duty is reiterated throughout the poems: "It is my duty to tell what you don't know/and what you do know I'll sing with you:" ("Caribbean Birds", XXVII, 78). "This is my song, I ask this:/I ask nothing if not all,/I claim all for our people/" ("Americas", XXXII, 87).

Neruda believed in the ancient concept of the poet as seer.²⁹ A sequence in "A Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu" ends with an incantation to his dead Indian ancestors to speak through him, to bring to "the goblet of this new life" their "old buried pains".³⁰ To him,

*Poetry is a deep inner calling in man; from it came liturgy, the psalms, and also the content of religions. The poet confronted nature's phenomena and in the early ages called himself a priest, to safeguard his vocation. In the same way, to defend his poetry, the poet of the modern age accepts the investiture earned in the street, among the masses. Today's social poet is still a member of the earliest order of priests. In the old days he made his pact with the darkness, and now he must interpret the light.*³¹

Crises call for poetry:

*It has been the privilege of our time—with its wars, revolutions, and tremendous social upheavals—to cultivate more ground for poetry than anyone had ever imagined. The common man has had to confront it, attacking or attacked, in solitude or with an enormous mass of people at public rallies.*³²

Neruda felt that his poetry "opened the way for communication" with, and acceptance by, his suffering countrymen. The peak moments in his life are those in touch with the working man, as when

*from the depths of the Lota coal mine, a man came up out of the tunnel into the full sunlight on the fiery nitrate field, as if rising out of hell, his face disfigured by his terrible work, his eyes inflamed by the dust, and stretching his rough hand out to me, a hand whose calluses and lines trace the map of the pampas, he said to me, his eyes shining: "I have known you for a long time, my brother." That is the laurel crown for my poetry, . . . a worker . . . who has been told often by the wind and the night and the stars of Chile: "You're not alone: there's a poet whose thoughts are with you in your suffering."*³³

In Brazil, "after each line of my slow reading, there was an explosion of applause. . . . That applause had a deep resonance in my poetry. A poet who reads his poems to 130,000 people is not the same man, and can not keep on writing in the same way, after such an experience."³⁴ The supreme accomplishment of a life of suffering and struggling, of loving and singing, "of triumphs and defeats", of "bread and blood", of a life lived for poetry and nourished by poetry, is to be the poet of his people.

Such poets who identify with the people are named by Neruda in the chapter significantly titled "Poetry Is An Occu-



Dazzle Rivera

The supreme accomplishment of a life of suffering and struggling . . . is to be the poet of his people.

pation". Gyorgy Somlyo is a poet "Hungarian . . . down to his bone marrow—in his generous readiness to share the reality and the dreams of a people", "a poet of faithful love and active commitment". Because "life and poetry, history and poetry, time and the poet, intertwine" in Hungary, its poets are committed before they are born.³⁵ Rafael Alberti "embodied all the resplendent qualities of Spanish poetry" and applied his poetry to the benefit of the majority; Alberti "invented poetry's guerilla warfare, poetry's war against war", that is, he wrote and read epic sonnets in barracks and at the front and invented "songs that grew wings under the thunder of artillery fire".³⁶ Neruda also mentions Quasimodo as "the universal man" who considered it a poet's obligation to show that "poetry, truth, freedom, peace, and happiness are gifts that belong to all alike".³⁷ He mourns the assassination "by evil medieval men" ("Written in the Year 2000", XLII, 110) of his beloved friend, Federico Garcia Lorca (1899-1936), the Spanish poet and playwright who was executed at the outset of the Spanish Civil War. Antonio Machado (1875-1939), Spanish poet who died in exile in France, as well as Miguel Hernandez (1910-42), another Spanish poet who died in one of Franco's prisons, are among those martyred by "assassins of . . . nightingales".³⁸ Even the exponent of the avowedly apolitical Modernista Movement, Ruben Dario, is dishonored by the tyranny and injustice in Nicaragua. ("It Is Happening", III, 41) For Paul Eluard, "poet of the highest kind" and Neruda's comrade in the Communist Party, being a communist "meant reasserting the values of humanity and humanism with his poetry and his life".³⁹

Having been beaten up as a student while supporting the rights of the unemployed in Santiago, Neruda wrote poetry that was inseparable from politics. "In my poems I could not shut the door to the street, just as I could not shut the door to love, life, joy, or sadness in my young poet's heart."⁴⁰ He began to examine how poetry could serve his fellowmen and its role in their struggles.⁴¹ Neruda was converted to communism as "a direct result of his living in Spain as Chilean consul in the 1930s and of his witnessing the Spanish Civil War".⁴² This Communist membership (of which Neruda writes about as a momentous occasion in his *Memoirs*) was an intrinsic part of a radical change of outlook. Neruda eschewed the concept of the isolated, self-absorbed, suffering artist as "part of the ritual of happiness in the twilight of capitalism".⁴³ The alienated artist is the result of the division of labor, which separates material from intellectual work, the artist from material means of production.⁴⁴ Neruda assumed the public role of "the militant troubadour whose poetry defines and shapes at the same time that it mirrors and speaks to the spirit of a people".⁴⁵ Neruda recalls such events: after reading poetry for more than an hour, "shaken by the magnetic power that linked my poems and those forsaken souls" (a union of some 50 market men in Santiago), he was simply profoundly thanked by one of them: ". . . nothing has ever moved us so much". Several of the men were weeping. "Can a poet still be the same after going through these trials of fire and ice?"⁴⁶ he asks. With his brother poet, a Turk, Nazim Hikmet, Neruda saw that the writer could not but include in his writings all the conflicts, problems, the progress and growth of nations moving towards a change in political, economic and social systems. "Can literature or the arts assume an air of ethereal independence before events of such vital significance?" he asks again.⁴⁷

Neruda chose to write on topics which answered a need of the community, for a specific purpose, as the *Song of Protest*.

*"A poet can write for a university or a labor union, for skilled workers and professionals. Freedom was never lost simply because of this. Magical inspirations and the poet's communication with God are inventions dictated by self-interest. At the moments of greatest creative intensity, the product can be partially someone else's, influenced by readiness and external pressures."*⁴⁸

Here, Neruda echoes the Marxist belief that art is first of all a social practice. The author is a producer, not a creator, of social product; he is a living historical human subject, who receives--not makes--forms, values, myths, symbols, ideologies; and he uses certain means of production--specialized techniques of his art--"to transform materials of language and experience into a determinate product".⁴⁹ More than that, the truly revolutionary artist. . . "is never concerned with the art object alone, but with the means of its production. Commitment is more than . . . presenting correct political opinions. . . The artist (must) reconstruct artistic forms at his disposal, turning authors, readers and spectators into collaborators."⁵⁰ There is no better example of an artist collaborating with his spectators than Neruda: the rapport between poet and audience is almost always palpable as has been earlier recorded. One more



" . . . Our nations have suffered so much that we will have given the



Children Under Apartheid



Philippine Labor Monitor

little when we have given them everything."

occasion was at a political meeting with 10,000 miners, who "uncovered their heads" at the poetry that "was about to speak": "ten thousand hands went down in unison, in a groundswell impossible to describe, a huge soundless wave, a black foam of quiet reverence. Then my poem outdid itself. It took on, as it never had before, a tone of combat and liberation."⁵¹

Neruda includes among poets a Polish patriot who turned to printing as part of the effort to rebuild Poland after World War II. Jerzy Borejsza's prodigious energies constructed the House of the Printed Word, where "the biggest rotary printing presses in the world arrived", and where thousands of books and magazines were printed.⁵² Printing and distribution, together with writing, are important steps in the production of literary works.

He stringently criticizes those who "begrudge poets a better standard of living" as those who should be happy that books of poetry "are printed, sold and fulfill their mission".⁵³ Throughout his life, Neruda carried out his early resolve to "maintain the integrity of his poetry". He considers it is signal service to the people that "Poetry, with a capital P, was shown respect. Not only Poetry but Poets as well. All Poetry and all Poets."⁵⁴ That "the occupation of the poet, the profession of poetry" has become respected at least in his country is a source of satisfaction for Neruda. How can the people not esteem one whose life and poetry has been wholly committed to them?

*I stir up the grief of my people
I incite the root of their swords,
I caress the memory of their heroes,
I water their subterranean hopes,
For to what purpose my songs,
The natural gift of beauty and words,
If it does not serve my people
To struggle and walk with me?*

("I Come from the South", XV, 57)

*I have a pact of love with beauty:
I have a pact of blood with my people.*

("Do Not Ask Me", XXXIX, 80)

That promise to his people was to be its living accurate memory by illustrating how the past is part of the present, and how the present, part of the future.

All the poems in **Song of Protest** from the first, "Puerto Rico, Puerto Pobre" to the forty-second, "Written in the Year 2000", are sensuous representations of the history of Latin America in the last fifty years. It is a history of oppression pervading all areas of life -- political, economic, religious, cultural, ethical -- made manifest in specific events and concrete individuals by Neruda's poetry. The poetic documentation of the evil of the oppressor and the courage of the oppressed reveals a world constructed by men. The poem-participant becomes aware of his historic individuality rather than just his individual psychology; he is then moved to become a dynamic participative historical force.

Thus does Neruda's poetry contribute to changing the world.

Notes:

- ¹ Pablo Neruda, *Song of Protest*, trans. Miguel Algarin (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1976), p. 57. Subsequent quotations from this basic text will be indicated by the title of the poem, the poem number in Roman numerals, and the page number in parentheses.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- ³ Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs*, trans. Hardie St. Martin (Middlessex: Penguin Books, 1978), *passim*.
- ⁴ Robert Marquez, ed., *Latin American Revolutionary Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), p. 21.
- ⁵ Emir Rodriguez Monegal, ed., *The Borzoi Anthology of Latin American Literature* Vol. II (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977), p. 613.
- ⁶ David Patrick Gallagher, *Modern Latin American Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 58.
- ⁷ Neruda, *Memoirs*, pp. 52-3.
- ⁸ Miguel Algarin, Foreword to *Song of Protest*, by Pablo Neruda (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1976), p. 20.
- ⁹ Neruda, *Memoirs*, p. 187.
- ¹⁰ Nicolas Guillen, *Man-making Words*, trans. Robert Marquez and David McMurray (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts, 1972), p. 207.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² In *Zero Hour and Other Documentary Poems* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1980), Ernesto Cardenal, Catholic priest and Minister of Culture of Nicaragua, also records the treacherous murder of Sandino.
- ¹³ Neruda, *Song of Protest*, p. 35.
- ¹⁴ Neruda, *Memoirs*, p. 227.
- ¹⁵ Gallagher, *Modern Latin American Literature*, p. 58.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- ¹⁹ Neruda, *Memoirs*, p. 149.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- ²¹ Anne Fremantle, ed., *Latin American Literature Today* (New York: New America Library, 1979), p. 196.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- ²³ Neruda, *Memoirs*, p. 123.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 297.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 342.
- ²⁶ Robert Pring-Mill quoted by Gallagher, *Modern Latin American Literature*, p. 56.
- ²⁷ Pablo Neruda, *The Captain's Verses*, trans. Donald D. Walsh (New York: A New Directions Book, 1972), no page.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- ²⁹ Monegal, *The Borzoi Anthology of Latin American Literature*, p. 612.
- ³⁰ Gallagher, *Modern Latin American Literature*, p. 61.
- ³¹ Neruda, *Memoirs*, p. 266.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 253.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 313-4.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 282.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-9.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 283.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 278.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- ⁴² Gallagher, *Modern Latin American Literature*, p. 53.
- ⁴³ Neruda, *Memoirs*, p. 263.
- ⁴⁴ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On Literature and Art* (New York: International General, 1977), p. 71.
- ⁴⁵ Marquez, *Latin American Revolutionary Poetry*, p. 26.
- ⁴⁶ Neruda, *Memoirs*, pp. 253-55.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 267.
- ⁴⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 68.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ Neruda, *Memoirs*, p. 257.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 279-81.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 263.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 265.