

HONOURING PABLO NERUDA

PABLO NERUDA became a trade union activist after joining the Communist Party of Chile in 1945, and is known as much for his political participation in the anti-fascist struggle during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and his struggle against the Gonzalez Videla dictatorship in Chile (1945-1950) while defending the rights of mine workers, as for his poetry.

When the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936 with a military coup led by Francisco Franco against the Republican government, Neruda got involved in the heroic resistance against the fascist forces. He was dismissed from his consular post for his involvement and his poet friends became targets of fascist attacks. Rafael Alberti's house was torched and Garcia Lorca was assassinated. Neruda's outrage against the events is reflected in his collection of poems *Spain in my Heart* (1936), which also changed him as a poet.

This collection of poems was printed under extraordinary circumstances. Amidst the roar of guns, the Republican soldiers learnt to make paper and printed the poems in an old mill. They used all kinds of materials to make paper, from an enemy flag to a soldier's bloodstained tunic. Neruda describes in his *Memoirs* how the book became "the pride of these men who had worked to bring out my poetry in the face of death." Many soldiers carried copies of his book in their pockets instead of food and clothing. When the war was lost, the last copies of the book were confiscated and burnt in a bonfire as Spanish refugees reached France.

Neruda returned to Chile soon after, determined more than ever to play an active part in changing the destiny of his people. In 1945 Videla, who came to power on a democratic agenda with the support of the communists, was under pressure to find solutions to alleviate the appalling conditions in which the miners and the working class lived. These measures were not acceptable to the old feudal oligarchy and to the big American corporations such as the Chile Exploration Co., The Anaconda Cooper and Anglo-Chilean Nitrate, which had full control over the Chilean mining industry. The influence of these forces were so great that Videla gradually sidelined the Communists, using the argument that since war between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States was inevitable, Chile would have to support the U.S. in order to safeguard its economy. He sold mineral-rich land to foreign monopolies for a pittance, did nothing to better the economic and living conditions of the workers, and began hounding the Communists under pressure from the Americans.

The economic situation in Chile was heading towards a catastrophe. There was no money to pay salaries to government employees, the currency had been devalued and inflation was spiraling. The President, who had earlier presided over innumerable anti-fascist and anti-Francoist committees in order to woo the electorate, began to persecute

these very groups and even Spanish exiles. Nazi provocateur groups, in connivance with American military agents and Videla, became more active.

Meanwhile, the deepening economic crisis and the miserable working conditions of the miners in Lota and Coronel – the carbon mines – led to a general strike. In his *Memoirs*, Neruda describes life in the mines, in the harsh cold weather with the mining corridors stretching to 8km under the sea. It is impossible to imagine such working conditions. Videla decried the strike call, denying the prevalence of bad working and living conditions, attributing the unrest to international complots, and treating the strikers with a cruelty only known in Nazi concentration camps. He sent in the Army to crush the rebellion, declared himself dictator with full powers and unleashed unprecedented repression on the workers. Cordoning off the entire area, the Army and the Police were sent in to arrest thousands of workers and their families were persecuted and expelled from Chilean territory. Two concentration camps in the island of Santa Maria and in Pisagua (where many intellectuals and political leaders were taken) were set up, and the police were called in from Argentina to help repress the strikers.

In subsequent years, there was complete censorship of the press and radio, and individual rights were withdrawn. An atmosphere of terror and intimidation reigned. People could be imprisoned without reason or charges. The press was forced to report only the Presidential declarations containing lies and propaganda. Neruda stood by the miners and fervently campaigned against Videla's policies by writing – the most powerful tool that he could use. He wrote a piece called "L'Accuse" in the Venezuelan daily *El Nacional* on November 27, 1947, denouncing Videla's actions. Soon after, Videla pushed for Neruda's expulsion from the Senate. In 1948, Neruda was forced to leave the country clandestinely and remained in exile for about two years.

When Neruda was asked to contest for the presidency in 1969, he declined but later pushed Salvador Allende's name as the popular Unity candidate. He campaigned actively in the elections, seeing in Allende's victory a new hope for the Chilean people. Neruda was appointed ambassador to France in 1970, but returned to Chile owing to ill health in 1972. He received the Nobel Prize in 1971.

On September 11, 1973, Pinochet took over the Presidential Palace in a military coup and Allende was killed. Nine days before his death and 72 hours after the fascist coup led by Pinochet, Neruda started writing the last chapter of his *Memoirs* in which he described the coup as a criminal putsch against the people of Chile. Neruda died on September 23, 1973, heartbroken by what had happened to his friend Allende and his country. His funeral became the first massive protest meeting against the military dictatorship. ■

NERUDA--THE PEOPLE'S POET

Vibha Maurya and Vijaya Venkataraman

Remembering Pablo Neruda, on his birth centenary, for the power of his poetry, for his struggles against fascism and oppression and for the voice that he gave to the people of Chile

NEFTALI RICARDO REYES BAYSOALTO (1904-1973), known to the world as Pablo Neruda, Chilean poet and political activist, became a legend in his lifetime. Neruda's first collections of poems, *Crepusculario* (1923) and *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (1924), written at a very young age, won him acclaim in Chilean literary circles and form a part of popular lore in America. He is also known for his participation in the anti-fascist struggle during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), his trade union activities as a member of the Communist Party in organising mine workers against the Gonzalez Videla dictatorship and his involvement in Salvador Allende's presidential campaign in Chile. While most literary critics divide Neruda's oeuvre into love poetry and political poetry, such a division is not justifiable because Neruda reached across to people's hearts and became a people's poet, as much of his love poetry and writings

Neruda's formative years as a poet coincided with a modernist movement in Latin American literature, Latin American Modernism, which created new literary forms to express the new personal societal realities in the context of political independence. While works of poets such as Ruben Dario (1867-1916), a Nicaraguan - "Azul" (1888-1890) for instance - gave Latin America a sense of telluric identity and self-confidence, they also marked a continuity in the tradition of literature as high art. Thus, these literary forms did not seek to alter the role and function of literature. It remained within the hermetic and aesthetic boundaries assigned to it, negating its social function. The avant-garde literature, e.g. futurism, or euphoric modernism, and many critics and artists used these literary terms interchangeably. However, avant-garde artists were more radical in their aesthetic and political vision than the modernists. They had greater faith in the role of art and literature in society. They also considered the traditions of high art to be excessively restrictive and that is why they use radical experimental methods to challenge established aesthetic or social traditions.

Interestingly, Pablo Neruda's first two collections of poems do not seem to be influenced by these trends. Unlike the avant-garde artists, who were experimenting with form, Neruda's first concerns as a poet sprang from an extensive and vivid exploration of nature. In these poems, the adolescent Neruda is concerned with nature himself the mysteries of nature and the secrets of women's bodies. Neruda's contrast with the forests of Araucania, the volcanoes, the

cold torrential and interminable rain, the wind and the sound of the waves lashing the cliffs during his childhood in Temuco in the southern part of Chile, left a deep impression on his young mind and is probably the reason for his obsessive preoccupation with nature and its elements. *Twenty Love Poems* is a collection of intense and passionate poetry about adolescent love, written in a warm, humane and personal tone. Simple, yet original, in its use of imagery, it alternates between exultation and bitterness. Despite their subjective, melancholic tone, they are a tribute to the joys of life.

Having won a literary prize at school and some popularity in literary circles, Neruda wanted to explore the world and presented himself for a diplomatic post. When asked to choose a country from a list of names that all sounded equally unfamiliar to him, he chose Rangoon. He left for Asia in 1927 and stayed there until 1932. The first two parts of the three-part series entitled *Residence on Earth*, written in these years and published in 1933 and 1935, are recognized as high points of the avant-garde movements in Latin America, along with the Peruvian Poet Cesar Vallejo's *Trilce* (1922). These poems were radical and innovative in perception and forms of expression. Unlike European avant-garde movements, such as futurism, or euphoric modernism, which praised man's conquest over nature and technological achievements, Neruda internalized avant-gardism and modernism within the human consciousness.

The distinctiveness of his poetics lay in his representation of fractured and fragmented life, men/women dichotomies and the division between mind and matter. He tried to capture dislocated and broken relationships and the alienation and uncertainties of life. The poems reflect his deep disillusionment with life in Rangoon and Colombo. The distance from his homeland made him desolate and the feeling of solitude he experienced amidst two irreconcilable worlds - that of the Asian people and that of the British colonial administrators and merchants - permeated his poetry. The poems were pervaded by a sense of disgust and revulsion and display a deep resentment against the routine emptiness of life. The destiny of man in this chaotic and senseless world is portrayed in poems like "Walking Around", in which the poet is weary of existing in a world with which he cannot identify himself.

*It happens that I am tired of my feet and my nails
And my hair and my shadow.
It happens that I am tired of being a man.
Just the same it would be delicious
To scare a notary with a cut lily*

*R knock a nun stone dead with one blow of an ear.
It would be beautiful
To go through the streets with a green knife
Shouting until I died of cold.*

Neruda's disillusionment and existential angst reflected in these poems often lead critics to categorise him as a poet of solitude and oneliness. However, it is also possible to read the poems as stories of a solitary man consciously fighting his solitude. His lifelong friend and comrade V. Teitelboim said: "Solitude weighed on Neruda that's why he traveled from the South to the North, he came out of the rains to the sunshine, in search of poetry, of the world, of love and friendship." Nevertheless, the bizarre experience in Asia did leave a mark on him. That is perhaps the only time when we see the poet in a somber and self-reflexive mood. He himself describes these poems in a letter to his friend as "... piles of poems of great monotony, almost ritualistic, and of great mystery and sorrow like in the poems of yesteryears. It is very uniform, like something beginning again and again, like something rehearsed to permit, unsuccessfully."

Neruda's posting in Spain in 1934 brought him in contact with young Spanish poets such as Federico Garcia Lorca and Rafael Alberti, Miguel Hernandez and Manuel Altolaguirre, who were experimenting with the avant-garde, especially surrealist, forms. Neruda was asked to edit the literary magazine *Green Horse for Poets* and brought out five issues until 1936, when the Civil War broke out in Spain. In the prologue to the first issue, published in 1935, eight months before the outbreak of the Civil War in Spain, Neruda wrote: "This is the kind of poetry we are looking for, spent as if by acid by manual labour, penetrated by sweat and smoke, smelling of urine and lilies, touched by all the diverse professions. Impure poetry, like suit, like a body, with stains of nutrition and shameful activities ..."

The political events of the 1930s in Spain, which culminated in the civil war, made these poets aware that art had to address social as well as political reality. Lorca's assassination in 1936 and the subsequent exile of most of the other poets who supported the republican forces in the war changed the way Neruda looked at poetry. Neruda's *Third Residence* (1937) contains a poem, "Spain in My Heart", written during the Civil War. He expressed his outrage against the fascist forces in the famous poem "I'm explaining a Few Things." He wrote:

One morning the bonfires
Leapt out of the earth
devouring human beings –
and from then on fire,
gunpowder from then on,
and from then on blood
....
from every house burning metal flows
instead of flowers,
....

And you will ask: why doesn't his
Poetry
speak of dreams and leaves
and the great volcanoes of his land?
Come and see the blood on the streets.

Some of these poems were so powerful that they became a part of the people's discourse against war. Neruda's addresses changed just as his style and content. For him, poetry was no longer a private statement but an utterance that belonged to the public domain. His "poems were never intended to be merely script or signs on a printing page but were to be uttered and declaimed in order to elicit a response", says Jean Franco, a well-known critic and professor of Latin American literature in Stanford University.

In 1936, Neruda went to Paris and helped organize the Anti-Fascist Writers' Congress in Madrid in 1937. He returned to Chile soon after to find that the Nazis had supporters all over Latin America. This persuaded Neruda to find a tone in his poetry that would accompany people in their struggle for survival and justice. Neruda returned to Paris briefly, in 1939, to help in rescuing Spanish intellectuals who were seeking refuge in Chile, and his experience with the refugees from the concentration camps further deepened his commitment to this new poetic vision.

Neruda's last diplomatic assignment in Mexico in the early 1940s brought him in contact with Mexican muralists and painters. He began work on his *Canto General* (1950), envisioned as a poem of epic dimensions on the history of Latin America. Neruda confesses that his visit to the Incan ruins of Macchu Picchu in Peru had opened his eyes to yet another reality. He says: "I felt Chilean, Peruvian, American. I had found in those difficult heights, among those glorious and disperse ruins, a profession of faith to continue my song."

According to Saul Yurkievich, an Argentinean critic, two distinct poetic conceptions co-exist in *Canto general*, proceeding from two distinct world visions based on dissimilar perceptions and find two different expressions. On the one hand is the natural world expressed with a mythical, primitive, archaic vision through a metaphoric, oracular and obscure language, the other presents a historical, social progressive world in an impersonal and objective vision through clear and unequivocal language. Song XI of the famous poem "The Heights of Macchu Picchu" is an interesting amalgamation of both these elements: the first part of the poem is an ascent from the abysmal depths of the dark ages while the latter part describes the social realities of the moment.

*Through a confusion of splendour
through a night made stone let me
plunge my hand
and move to beat in me a bird held for
a thousand years,
the old and unremembered human heart!*
....

*I see the ancient being, the slave, the
 Sleeping one,
 Blanket his fields – a body, a thousand
 bodies, a man, a thousand
 women swept by the sable whirlwind,
 charred with rain and night,
 stoned with a leaden weight of
 statuary:
 Juan Splitstone, son of Wiracocha,
 Juan Coldbelly, heir of the green star,
 Juan Barefoot, grandson to the
 turquoise,
 rising to birth with me, as my own brother*

In other poems, the past is invoked to put into perspective the social inequalities in a post-colonial world. "They come for the Islands" (1993) describes the colonization of the island of Guanahani (Cuba). "Discoverers of Chile" and "The Magellan Heart" describe the destruction and violence unleashed by the colonizers. In the part entitled "Betrayed Sand" he writes against dictators, especially Gonzalez Videla, oligarches, the advocates of the dollar, exploiters, United Fruit Company, Standard Oil Company, diplomats and heavenly poets, to name just a few. In the poem "Advocates of the Dollar", he says:

*He is adopted. They put him
 On leash, He dresses like a gringo.
 Sits like a gringo,
 Dances like a gringo, and he rises.
 He has a car, whiskey, newspaper
 He is elected judge and senator,
 He is honored, made a Minister,
 And is heard by the government.
 He knows who can be bribed.
 He knows who is bribed,
 He licks, massages, honours,
 Pleases, smiles, threatens
 And thus he empties through the ports
 The bleeding republics.*

After *Canto General*, Neruda became more conscious of language and was concerned with clarity of communication. The sense of the public also became more important as he had begun to read his poetry aloud at trade union meetings and political rallies. He consciously chose an aesthetics that would serve as a strategy of social action during the rise of dictatorships in Latin America. As a cultural activist and a political leader, Neruda ground himself firmly in the ideological debates of his time. He affirmed that the primary task of an artist was to explore the unknown and to create new means of seeing, thinking and acting. Thus, he sought to identify the common elements between art and the forces of historical change and to construct an aesthetics that would help these forces.

This was the period when he was actively involved with the miners' struggles and was elected Senator in 1945 (he had joined the Communist Party of Chile in the same year and remained a militant member until his death in 1973). He campaigned passionately against Videla's dictatorship and had to remain underground and go into exile to escape death. Between 1952 and 1957, Neruda published several collections of poetry, name *The Grapes and the Wind*, a private and anonymous *edition of Captain's Verses*, *Elementary Odes*, *New Elementary Odes*, *The Third Book of Odes*, *Hundred Love Sonnets*, *Estravagario* and *Navigations and Returns*. In all these collections, Neruda turns to a simple style and colloquial language not only to communicate with the masses but also to sing the praises of ordinary objects. He treats the traditional form of the ode with irreverence and humour, using simple, short verses, rich in poetic images. This new form of writing was in tune with Neruda's activism and his conception of social poetry. The odes were also meant for public readings, hence the simplicity of language and the expression of solidarity with the pain and suffering of the collective.

When Neruda was asked to make a weekly contribution of poetry for the Venezuelan newspaper *El Nacional*, he insisted that his poems appear in the main newspaper and not in the literary supplement. One of the first odes to be published was "Ode to the Bread":

*In the bread
 I look
 Beyond the form:
 I like bread, I bite it
 And then
 I see the wheat,
 The new wheat fields,
 The green form of spring,
 The roots, water,
 And so
 Beyond the bread
 I see the land,
 Water, Man,
 And thus I love everything
 Looking for you
 In everything.*

By the time *Captain's Verses* was published in 1962 politics had become an indispensable dimension of his poetry. *Captain's Verses* contains love poems dedicated to his wife, Matilde Urrutia, but unlike his earlier love poems, the poet does not explore an unknown mysterious nature with an equally unknown woman. Instead, love for the woman manifests itself in a celebration of the natural elements of daily life like maize, wheat, stem, root and leaves and the beloved is his companion in arduous struggles. *Fully Empowered*, another collection published in the same year, engages with the task of a poet and writer. These poems reflect the tension between the poet and his creation and Neruda highlights, yet again, the importance of the written and the spoken word.

Neruda wrote till the last day of his life. He died on September 23, 1973. He is remembered today for the power of his poetry, for his struggles against fascism and oppression and for the voice that he gave to the people of Chile.

In his *Memoirs*, he writes:

"The human crowd has been the lesson of my life. I can come to it with the born timidity of the poet, with the fear of the timid, but once I am in its midst, I feel transfigured. I am part of the essential majority, I am one more leaf on the great human tree.

Solitude and multitude will go on being the primary obligations of the poet in our time. In solitude, the battle of the surf on the Chilean coast made my life richer. I was intrigued by and have loved passionately the battling waters and the rocks they battled against, the teeming ocean life, the impeccable formation of the 'wandering birds,' the splendour of the sea's foam.

But I learned much more from the huge tide of lives, from the tenderness I saw in thousands of eyes watching me together. This message may not come to all poets, but anyone who has felt it will keep it in his heart, will work it into his poems. To have embodied hope for many men, even for one minute, is something unforgettable and profoundly touching for the poet."

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