

RESURRECTING NERUDA

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I call this talk “Resurrecting Neruda”; not that I am resurrecting him, but that he does so himself, somehow, constantly. The word becomes an adjective: a “resurrecting Neruda”.

2004 was the 100th anniversary of his birth, and I spent most of that year in Chile. There were dozens of new books about Neruda released in honor of the date, but no so much in honor of him. A great deal of it was insulting to the poet, and considerably too commercial. My wife and I were horrified to see, on a beautiful tree-lined street, the new Neruda Hotel; what made it worse was that because of where we lived, we walked past it almost every day for seven months. Neruda himself would not have approved of the hotel, but unfortunately, the “Fundación Pablo Neruda”, the Neruda Foundation, gave its blessing, which it must do, before his name is used for anything commercial. Long ago Neruda told his friend, who was incidentally my friend, too, the legendary Chilean writer Francisco Coloane, that “after I’m gone, they will even sell my socks!” (Of course, one of Neruda’s most famous Odes is precisely “Ode to Socks”.) And while the Foundation has done a great job of restoring his house at Isla Negra and converting it into a museum, it was to have been, according to Pablo, free for the Chilean people, which it is not. The Neruda Foundation has successfully promoted him, but they have not always succeeded in doing the right thing.

In his poem “Testamento I”, Testament I, he says: “*I leave to the copper, coal and nitrate workers my house next to the sea at Isla Negra. I want the mistreated children of my country to rest there/I want the tired to rest there/the oppressed to sit at my table/the wounded to sleep on my bed.*” (All translations by David A. Petreman, unless otherwise noted.) Neruda, through his work, and by his spirit and presence in his work for those who read it, always succeeds in resurrecting himself.

We can begin with his three burials. It’s as if he keeps coming back to life. He died on September 23, 1973, twelve days after the first—and the more devastating—September 11th tragedy in our consciousness, the “golpe” that launched a bloody and brutal 17-year dictatorship in Chile. When Pablo, who was very sick with prostate cancer, left Isla Negra to go to a Santiago hospital, his ambulance was stopped twice and he was roughed up by soldiers of the new regime, actions which certainly hastened the Poet’s death.

A wealthy family offered their mausoleum in Santiago’s “Cementerio General”, the General Cemetery, and Neruda was buried there by friends who defied the military by holding a public funeral for him. Indeed, illegally, Francisco Coloane gave an impromptu eulogy for him on the streets of Santiago. Three days after Neruda died, the government issued a decree that stated that people could mourn him and fly flags at half-mast if they wished, but added that they could only do so between the time of his death and the date that the decree was issued, meaning they couldn’t do a thing. The psychological torture of the dictatorship had already begun.

Then, as if they had not already proved their wisdom, the government had Neruda disinterred and buried in a common grave across from the section of temporary graves. He was placed only several spaces away from Víctor Jara’s grave. Jara

was a famous folk singer and guitarist who was swept up within hours of the “golpe”. He was tortured—they broke all of his fingers—then beaten, then shot and killed. Later, Pablo’s wife Matilde Urrutia, the greatest love of his life, was placed right next to him.

The government thought that this burial among the poor would be a posthumous insult to Neruda; they did not understand that Neruda, considering his solidarity with the poor and with the working class, would have been much happier here. And here he stayed, until December 12, 1992, when he resurrected again, to be buried for the third time, where he had requested, in the back patio of his house at Isla Negra, and, along with him, the beloved Matilde, the woman—not object—of his affection as seen in his One Hundred Love Sonnets. She died in 1985.

His poem “Disposiciones”, “Stipulations”, goes like this:

*“Friends, bury me at Isla Negra,
facing the sea that I know,
facing each rough place of stones
and of waves that my lost eyes
will never again see.*

*Every ocean day
brought me fog, or pure
turquoise cave-ins
or simple extension, rectilinear, invariable water,
what I requested, the space my mind devoured.*

*Every mournful step of the cormorant, the flight
of great gray birds that loved the winter
and every gloomy circle of sargasso
and every serious wave that shakes off the cold,
and even more, the land of a hidden, secret herbalist,*

*son of mist and salt, worn away by acidic wind,
miniscule corollas of the coast stuck to the infinite sand:
all the humid keys of the marine earth
know every state of my joy
they know
that there I want to sleep among the movements
of sea and of land...
I want to be pulled under
in the rain that the wild wind of the sea
combats and diminishes,
and then, by way of subterranean channels
continue toward the profound springtime that is reborn.*

*Open a space next to me
for the one I love, and
one day
let her accompany me again
on the earth.*

As one can see, long ago Neruda spoke of a rebirth of his own springtime, which would occur after his burial at Isla Negra.

In his memoirs, a short essay/prose poem called “Cristales rotos”, “Broken Glass”, reinforces his belief in rebirth. These are comments Neruda made upon returning one time to Isla Negra, and again we see his hope and his ability to start over, to resurrect:

*“Three days ago I entered my house again after a long absence.
Huge cracks wounded the walls. The shattered windows formed a
painful tapestry on the floors of my rooms.*

We should clean up, get things in order, begin again.

My latest works were a translation and a long love poem which remained unfinished.

Come on, love poem, rise up among the broken glass, for the time to sing has arrived.

Help me, love poem, to restore integrity, to sing above the pain.

It is true that the world does not cleanse itself from war, does not wash itself from all the bloodshed, does not correct itself because of hatred. It is true.

But it is equally true that we are beginning to see some evidence: violent people are reflected in the world's mirror and their faces are not beautiful even to themselves.

And I continue to believe in the possibility of love. I am certain about an eventual understanding among human beings, achieved beyond the pain, beyond the blood, and beyond the broken glass.”

Neruda always had a belief in renewal, in the resurrection of love and hope. He once said: *“Vine a cantar/y para que canten conmigo.”* *“I came here to sing, and for you all to sing with me.”*

Neruda's spirit is alive and well. In Chile, you hear the people say things like, “Pablo says...” and “On that subject, Pablo will tell you that...” He is spoken of in the present tense, as if he were still alive. Well, he is. People from all walks of life, whether educated or not, can recite poetry by Neruda. He crosses all lines, social, economic, even political. With our political divisions in this country, we tend to reject—not even read—the literature of someone “from the other side”. But in Chile, despite Neruda's political affiliation—he was a

Communist, as are (and were) many important writers—people from all sides appreciated, and appreciate, his work.

Through the years and across the miles, Neruda’s magic and spirit have made their way to Dayton. Many times I have been able to rise above difficult times—by reading Neruda. He once said: “*The antidote for bad luck is poetry.*” Magically, his words can perform miracles.

It was actually Pablo Neruda who brought my wife and I together. The first time I offered an upper-level seminar on him, there she was, out of nowhere, to audit my class. I have always thanked him for that. During our wedding ceremony we read to each other, she in English and I in Spanish, one of his love sonnets. In that same class—magically—several former students just appeared to sit in on the class. The second time I offered it, I was pleased, but not totally surprised, to read student papers in which people confessed that Neruda had changed their lives. Here are but a few examples:

Ana R. “Because of Neruda, I want to read and write more. I want to be a better person. There are aspects of my life that Neruda has changed. He is a man who has the power to change the lives of many people. I am one of those people. An education and money are important. However, they mean nothing without love. Neruda taught me this. After reading Neruda I have a better perspective about life.”/////On the negative situation in her relationship with a man who is the father of her child: “I realized that Neruda’s words had the power to help me. I believe that his words of love made me understand the problem. Neruda is very important because I believe he saved our relationship. Because of this class, our child has both parents at home.////I know that his poetry

changed me. It made me a better person. Neruda opened my eyes.”

Dawn S. “The immersion into this writer’s work was a miracle for me. He calls attention to the most important things in life. Neruda is almost an angel because now I am realizing certain aspirations that I had forgotten.”

Dorothy A. “The work of Neruda is a mirror in which I can truly contemplate who I am as a woman, a child, a sister, a wife, a student, a Puerto Rican, as a human being—and a spiritual being, which I often forget to be. Thanks to Pablo Neruda I can not only see the beauty of humanity but also believe in it and in myself—again. Through his work he gives me the marvelous opportunity to live hope. I thank him for teaching me that I can be born again in life and in death. I thank him for reminding me that together in brotherhood, we can fight forever.”

Another student said that her broken relationship between her and her parents was healed by Neruda...

Pablo Neruda was born Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto in Parral, a small town in the interior of southern Chile, near Temuco and the legendary land of the Mapuche Indians. He was a bit trapped there, by rain, by forest vines, by an oppressive father. It was when he moved to the sea that his world opened up:

THE SEA

*I need the sea because it teaches me,
I don't know if I learn music or awareness,
if it's a single wave or its vast existence,
or only its harsh voice or its shining*

*suggestion of fishes and ships.
The fact is that until I fall asleep,
in some magnetic way I move in
the university of the waves.*

*It's not simply the shells crunched
as if some shivering planet
were giving signs of its gradual death;
no, I reconstruct the day out of a fragment,
the stalactite from a sliver of salt,
and the great god out of a spoonful.*

*What it taught me before, I keep. It's air
ceaseless wind, water and sand.*

*It seems a small thing for a young man,
to have come here to live with his own fire;
nevertheless, the pulse that rose
and fell in its abyss,
the crackling of the blue cold,
the gradual wearing away of the star,
the soft unfolding of the wave
squandering snow with its foam,
the quiet power out there, sure
as a stone shrine in the depths,
replaced my world in which were growing
stubborn sorrow, gathering oblivion,
and my life changed suddenly:
as I became part of its pure movement.*

(Translation by Alastair Reid)

Neruda did his best to help those who suffer, to help the common person. He says in “Testamento de otoño”, “Autumn Testament”: “*The common people identified me/and I never stopped being one of them.*” He also said: “*We poets hate hatred and wage war against war.*” In the poem “Alturas de Machu Picchu”, “Heights of Machu Picchu”, he states: “*Brother, rise up and be born again with me.*” This sounds somewhat egotistical, but knowing Neruda through a great deal of his writings, it really is not so.

Neruda wrote three books of Odes. These are tributes to objects in the world, as well as concepts. He has odes to bread, to a bicycle, to socks, to the tuna in the market, to a dictionary, etc. This is his “Oda a la esperanza”, “Ode to Hope”:

*Morning twilight
in the middle
of my life,
the waves like grapes,
the solitude of the sky,
you fill me
and you overflow,
the whole sea
the whole sky
movement
and space
the white battalions
of foam,
the orange land
the fiery waistline
of the agonizing sun
so many gifts and gifts
birds
who come to their dreams
and the sea, the sea*

*suspended
aroma,
chorus of sonorous salt
meanwhile,
we,
humans,
next to the water
fighting
and waiting
next to the sea
waiting.*

*The waves say to the solid coast:
everything will be fulfilled.*

One of my favorite Neruda poems about hope is called “Si cada día cae..., “If every day falls...”:

*If every day falls
into every night
there is a well
where light is enclosed.*

*You must sit at the edge
of the well of shadows
and fish with patience
for fallen light.*

Neruda’s two books of memoirs are Confieso que he vivido (I Confess that I Have Lived), an obvious play on Catholic confession, “I confess that I have sinned” and Para nacer he nacido (I Was Born in Order to be Born Again). So again, we see the idea of his resurrection. In his essay, “Poetas de los pueblos”, “Poets of the People”, he states: “*I have always*

wanted people to see a person's hands in poetry. I have always wanted a poetry with traces of fingers. A poetry of clay so that water sings in it. A poetry of bread, so that the whole world may partake of it."

Once a young neighbor of Neruda's had a baby, and she wanted Pablo and Matilde to be the godparents. The priest from the nearest town said no. A Communist godfather? Never. The girl was heartbroken and didn't understand. On another occasion an old clockmaker was losing his wife of 50 years. Neruda wrote a poem for them and a fellow writer took the poem to a newspaper in Valparaíso. They wouldn't publish it. The editor was also a priest, who said he wouldn't take the poem because Neruda was an excommunicated Communist. Neruda said, in an essay called "Poetry and Policy": *"I want to live in a world with no excommunicates. I will never excommunicate anyone. I would never say tomorrow to that priest: 'You cannot baptize anyone because you are anti-Communist.' I wouldn't say to the other one: 'I will not publish your poem, your creation, because you are anti-Communist.' I want to live in a world in which beings are only human, with no other title than that."*

All aficionados of the movie "Il Postino" know of Neruda's solidarity with a semi-literate postman who, because of Neruda's influence, opens his mind to poetry and politics, and as we watch the man's evolution toward new worlds, we, too, realize how much rebirth is possible.

I would like to finish today with my own tribute to this positive, magical, spiritual, renewing, resurrecting man called Pablo Neruda with a poem of mine called "Littoral Birth at Isla Negra", l-i-t-t-o-r-a-l, meaning "coastal". This poem speaks about Neruda's leaving the interior of Chile to discover the sea:

LITTORAL BIRTH AT ISLA NEGRA

I

A boy stands on a beach
At Isla Negra
Facing the horizon.
The line is straight
The water has no color.
He stares
Past the fish
Hurling themselves
Onto the sand at his feet.

Only his head turns back
Toward the limits of land.
He cannot see the man behind him
Worn green from a forest shroud,
The avid embrace of tree and vine
Curtailing the reach of his heart.

He comes with empty eyes
To discover the sea
With empty hands
To gather in nets of algae
Filled with motion and blue
He hears a language
Emerging from salt and foam.
One by one, the waves
Become his heartbeat.

II

**On the beach at Isla Negra
Neruda walks the rocks.
His wary staff prods,
Then strokes igneous lumps
Sprung by liquid fire.
They rise and fall, fluid
As a submarinal scheme.**

**With a wave of his hand
He taps the world of stone,
Awakens spirits we have lost,
Watches empty crevices
Fill with foam.
His words are the ocean's
Breath as he recreates the planet.**

III

**When his words drop
Into hearts like needed rain
People come to see
What they have done to him.**

**Twice they buried him
In the earth of his youth.
He lies now at Isla Negra
On a bed of salt,
Dreams the sleep
Of silent motion,
While waves lift him gently
Toward a sea of stars.**

