

Pale Mourner, Lost Discoverer:
The Romantic Pilgrim and Transcendental Lover
in Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*

Arthur Lovejoy argues that it is possible to view Romanticism as both the inaugural moment of modernity and as a movement completely continuous with the present. As such, in the realm of literature it echoes in many of the poets of the twentieth century, not least among them Pablo Neruda, in particular in his youthful collection, *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. Marked by an emphasis on strong emotion, an insistence on the individual imagination as a critical authority, and a belief in the possibility of the experience of sublimity through a connection with nature, Romanticism clearly played a part in the formation of the young poet. In *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, René de Costa applies the term “neoromantic” to Neruda and indeed these early poems are as redolent of lyric passion, longing and despair as any of those written by the nineteenth-century masters of the tradition, Byron and Shelly. Yet, they are twentieth-century poems and as such they foreshadow the frank appreciation of the body and the unashamed eroticism that would mark the later decades of the century. Moreover, poised as the young Neruda was at the threshold of modernism, he was, as Costa states, “between later symbolism and the avant-garde, between the search for an ever more refined literary expression and the revolutionary notion of the need to update completely the language and the forms of literature” (36). Thus, the movements of the later nineteenth century would also leave their mark on the poet.

Romanticism spawned audacious offspring as it moved through the nineteenth century, among them American Transcendentalism and French Symbolism. These later movements were marked by a continued distillation of the idea that knowledge could be gained through intuition, through a flash of insight. Indeed, among the Transcendentalists' core beliefs was the idea of an ideal spiritual state that transcends the physical and is only realized through the individual's intuition (Wikipedia). In his 1846 essay, *Nature*, Emerson elevated the natural world to a spiritual realm; he spoke of the “spiritual magnificence” of the stars (217) and the “fathomless powers of . . . life, preexisting within us in their highest form” (225). He also wrote in 1842 of the “tendency to respect the intuitions and to give them . . . all authority over our experience.” In like manner, the French Symbolists believed that absolute truths could be accessed only through indirect methods. Their poets depended on highly metaphorical language which endowed particular images or objects with symbolic meaning. As stated in the Symbolist manifesto of 1886, “In this art, scenes from nature . . . and other real world phenomena will not be described for their own sake; here, they are perceptible surfaces created to represent their esoteric affinities with the primordial Ideals.”

This sense of the primordial, along with the intuitive approach to knowledge and a vision of nature as a vehicle by which to connect to the vast and the unknown are all richly present in *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (1924). Here we find a spiritual state that, although defined by the elements of Neruda's native landscape, transcends the physical and approaches what Thoreau, referring to the “cosmogonical philosophy” of the Bhagavat Geeta, called “a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conception” (*Walden*). It is a place both primordial and timeless, a place where rain, sea and forest dominate the poetic and imaginary world of the young

poet. This is a dynamic and lyrical space “peopled with echoes and nostalgic voices” (31; poem 12), one that encompasses “a vastness of pines, murmur of waves breaking” (7; poem 3), and one where the poet transcends time: “Oh let me remember you as you were before you existed,” he implores. It is a place where an ordinary lover is transformed into a “pale mourner” and a “lost discoverer,” a place of cosmic forces and archetypal encounters between the sexes. It is also a place where lovers transcend their humanity, where woman becomes the earth itself.

If, as Marjorie Agosin suggests in *Pablo Neruda*, the substance of Neruda’s poetry is “terrestrial, material, and telluric” (12), it is also subject to the elemental forces that sweep the earth. Here “The wind goes slaughtering butterflies” and “The snow unfurls in dancing figures” (47; poem 18). “The sky is a net crammed with shadowy fish” and “The storm whirls dark leaves / and turns loose all the boats that were moored last night to the sky” (35; poem 14). Here too the sun, the moon, and the “high, high stars” are essential and tangible elements of the poet’s environment. His is a spinning, storm-tossed cosmos where all is personified. It is also an environment where the word has no currency.

For the poet, communion with this natural world requires a mediator. Language is an ineffective tool in this land of archetypal forces. Here his words “grow thin” and he watches them “from a long way off.” Here “The wind of anguish still hauls on them” and “hurricanes of dreams still knock them over” (11; poem 5). It is only through woman that the poet can find reconciliation with nature. In an article entitled “Entre La Espada y La Piedra: La Función Exegética de La Figura Femenina en Neruda (Between the Sword and the Rock: The Explanatory Function of the Feminine Figure in Neruda), Kristine Ibsen not only sees the woman as central to the poet’s reconnection to nature, she also sees her as a crucial element in the poet’s search for a voice and in his journey towards self knowledge. For Ibsen, marginalized as she is from the linear progression of history, woman retains her closeness to nature. Through her, the poet can return to a primordial state of oneness with the elements. Indeed, Ibsen suggests that the sexual act functions as a metaphor for poetry and agrees with Octavio Paz when he argues that “poetry and love are two faces of the same reality;” both are an attempt to recover Edenic man – to return to the time in which man and nature formed a oneness” (260, 261). Ibsen’s argument that through woman, who is thus associated with the very act of writing, the poet can return to the original word, (257) seems to overstep her thesis, but the poems here do display a passionate intensity towards both the physical presence of the desired one and the poet’s art.

Like nature, woman communicates not with words but through elemental forces and through her fecundity. Associated with the elements and the earth, she takes on a transcendental importance (Agosin 15). She is synonymous with nature and the cosmos; she is the sun, the sea, the universe itself. She is “the earth shell in whom the earth sings (7; poem 3) and the “dark river beds where the eternal thirst flows” (3; poem 1). Through her, man can participate in the creative force of nature; the poet wants to do with her “what spring does with the cherry trees” (35; poem 14). In Poem IX, “Drunk with Pines,” Neruda evokes the creative act in metaphors of striking erotic force: “Pale and lashed to my ravenous water . . . Hardened by passions, I go mounted on my one wave” (23). Like nature, woman provokes tenderness but also violence, both “assault and the kiss,” “the bitten mouth” and “the kissed limbs,” until finally she becomes a destructive force in her

own right and the poet, in despair, laments to the departed lover: “You swallowed everything, like distance. / Like the sea, like time. In you everything sank!” (55; Song). The “distant female” with “absent eyes,” the silent and mysterious other has abandoned the poet and denied him his reconciliation with nature. In so doing, with “the word scarcely begun on the lips,” she has also denied him the full development of his poetic voice.

Thematically, the poet may be denied his voice but in actuality these poems exhibit a voluptuous and lyrical expression of Neruda’s poetic vision. His conceptualization of the woman as geographic terrain and natural phenomenon, coupled with a controlled but striking use of metaphor, creates an organic structure in which the verses seem to shoot like natural growth or wash over the reader like sea spray. The flow and march of his words parallel their meaning. When Neruda writes that “Suddenly the wind howls and bangs at my shut window” (35, poem 15), the repetition of “howls” and “bangs” effectively creates the sensation of the wind. When in rapturous admiration, he lists the qualities of his love in *Body of a Woman*, the lines are measured and evenly divided: “Oh the goblets of the breast! Oh the eyes of absence! / Oh the roses of the pubis! Oh your voice slow and sad!” (3). The very structure of the collection as a whole follows the development of the love affair; Costa expresses it perfectly when she states: “Like twenty failed attempts to express the same sentiments, closed by a final cry of desperation, Neruda’s book was calculated to affect its reader” (32), and affect us it does in the same way we can imagine it affected the intended or implied recipient. Here the themes of desire, loss and absence generate the form whether in tightly structured patterns of traditional verse, as in Poem XV, *Me Gustas Cuando Callas (I Like For You To Be Still)*, which in the original more clearly reveals poetic devices such as rhyme and alliteration:

Déjame que te hable también con tu silencio
Claro como una lámpara, simple como un anillo.
Eres como la noche, callada y constelada.
Tu silencio es de estrella, tan lejano y sencillo.(38)

or in a looser conversational structure, what Costa calls “unarticulated flow of thought” (32) as in *Pensando, Enredando Sombras (Thinking, Tangling Shadows)*:

Thinking, tangling shadows in the deep solitude.
You are far away too, oh farther than anyone.
Thinking, freeing birds, dissolving images,
Burying lamps. (43)

Whichever form Neruda chooses, and there is a rich diversity here, the sheer exuberance of the metaphorical imagery, which is appropriately restrained in the use of adjectives but shot through with vigorous verbs, contributes to a unity of theme and style. Any feeling of suffocation or extravagance is avoided by making the verbs and nouns propel the meaning. Neruda’s language is never overblown or overly sentimental despite the Romantic and melancholic tone. And ultimately Costa is right when she argues that unlike some of the best Romantic poetry, Neruda’s achieves the quality of sincerity (32).

In departing from tired and predictable representations of female beauty, he frees romantic love from saccharine sentimentality and elevates it to a sublime plane worthy of man's highest spiritual aspirations. That he does so through the vehicle of a nature thrilling to both the divine and the elements places Neruda among those writers who have kept alive the best of the Romantic and Transcendentalist traditions in the twentieth century.

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