

THE
ESSENTIAL
NERUDA
SELECTED POEMS

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Preface

There have been many Pablos in history, and Pablo Neruda is one to exceed Picasso in the prolific production of great works, as well as in the depths of his proletarian empathies.

I met this Pablo in the Hotel Havana Libre (once the Havana Hilton) in 1959 in the first days of revolutionary euphoria, and that night he spoke his poetry to several thousands of multi-ethnic Fidelistas (still in combat clothes) in the great government hall where the late dictator had held forth. His rapport with the masses was evident in every poem he spoke (with standing ovations), just as poems in this book speak to us all, Spanish-speaking or not.

Neruda had told me before the reading, “I love your wide-open poetry”—by which he meant, I believe, the poetry of the Beat Generation that we had published in San Francisco and some of which had been published in translation in *Lunes de Revolución* (the Monday literary supplement to the big daily).

And I answered, “You opened the door.” I hope this edition will open the door for the greater North American public. We all need these messages.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti
San Francisco, January 2004

Introduction

This has been a long voyage. After backpacking through three years of dreams and adventures down through Latin America, I found myself in Chile, that slender country sliding off towards Antarctica, working on a rustic ranch in the rugged central valley. It was Neruda's earth. Here grew his red poppies; here grew the grapes that made his velvet red wine; here was his sea; here was his dirt.

As a junior at the University of Michigan I had studied and worked abroad in Central America. A friend told me to take along some Neruda, and I have ever since, that same weathered book always in the top of my tattered green pack, from Cuba to Mexico to the silver stones of Macchu Picchu. But in Chile, Neruda was everywhere. I became saturated with his poetry and began to translate his poems. Although there were many beautiful existing translations, many others did not flow as I felt they should and I often had interpretive differences with them.

Then, on one of my frequent visits to *La Chascona*, Neruda's house in Santiago, I met a young Chilean woman. She was working for the *Fundación Neruda* [Neruda Foundation] while doing graduate work in feminist Latin American literature at the poet's old school, the University of Chile. She let me sit at Pablo's desk, with his framed picture of Walt Whitman on it. She introduced me to her professors and members of the Foundation, and it was in conversations there that the idea for this book was conceived: in honor of the centennial of Neruda's birth in the year 2004, a new book of translations would be born as a fresh voice, involving an

unprecedented collaboration with academics to better empower the translator-poets.

Translation is an arduous and complicated process involving many phases of thought and work. John Felstiner has written a very important book about translating based on his experience with just one single work of Neruda's canon, *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*, and in it he indicates the breadth of analysis and interpretation that must accompany the art of crafting a new translation. "With hindsight, of course," Felstiner wrote, "one can all too easily fault earlier practitioners or forget that one's improvements depend on their work in the first place. And possibly the early stages of translating a poet are marked with too much fealty: word or sense-for-sense renderings that stop short of exploiting the translator's own tongue. Still, the essential question is not one of stages, of early as against contemporary versions. We have always to ask if a given translation comes across in its own right, as convincing as any good poem of the day. In most cases, the idiom of translators goes stale sooner than that of other writers, so that ideally, the salient poets from any period deserve retranslating for the ear of each new generation."

Before writing a translation, one must read into the poem. One must digest the words and their meanings and let them flow back out like a jeweled river. And there will be questions, some of which will never be solved. The only person who could answer them is the poet himself, if even he could. One poet can sense a poem differently than another does. There can be no "definitive" translation. As Gregory Rabassa, a well-known translator of Latin American literature from Mario Vargas Llosa to Gabriel García Márquez puts it: "a translation is never finished . . . it is open and could go on to infinity." Edmund Keeley, prominent translator of Greek poetry, wrote: "translation is a moveable feast

... there must always be room for retouching and sharpening that image as new taste and new perception may indicate.”

In the case of this project, the discovery and achievement of those new perceptions were achieved through collaborative effort. Scholars — *Nerudianos* — in both Chile and the U.S. were asked to participate, forming a bridge linking academics, editor, translators and poets. Federico Schopf, Professor of Literature at the University of Chile, one of the world’s most important voices on Neruda, was the first to join; thereafter the University’s Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities became a patron of the project. Upon my return to the United States, I engaged two Chileans, Jaime Concha of the University of California-San Diego, one of the sharpest Neruda scholars, and Marjorie Agosín, human rights activist, poet, and Professor of Spanish at Wellesley College. Concha introduced me to his compañero Michael Predmore, a professor of Spanish at Stanford, who would become my mentor and hero. John Felstiner was also at Stanford where I had applied for graduate work, and I am indebted to him for his initial validation of and enthusiasm for the project. All of these academics helped to select and refine the list of poems that would finally be included in this volume, and they also helped us translators to discover some of those “new perceptions” to which Keeley alluded.

Now the project needed translators, and those who agreed to participate did so out of faith in both me and the idea of this book. For this, I thank each of them, especially Stephen Kessler for his generous advice and Alastair Reid for his ongoing support. I wanted translators who were also poets and who could dissolve the borders of language through lucid, magical, but faithful

translation. I believe they have, and I hope that the reader's experience will reflect this belief. The vast majority of the poems included here are new translations. In some instances, previous versions have been revisited and revised, and a very few have just been left alone in their original form, since none of us could think of a thing to improve in them.

Finally, we all felt it was critical that this book be bilingual. Even if you do not speak Spanish, I urge you to read the original poems. The words have notes, they resonate like a song. Our translations can never aspire to exactly replicate the rhythms and colors of Neruda's words, but you must feel their tones. Just as a wonderful bottle of vintage wine has no words but you can taste its language, so it is with the earthen textures of Neruda's red poppies and politics. Alastair Reid wrote that translation is "a process of moving closer and closer to the original, yet of never arriving. It is for the reader to cross the page."

¡Que viva Pablo Neruda! ¡Que viva!

Mark Eisner

San Francisco, January 2004

VEINTE POEMAS DE AMOR: 1

Cuerpo de mujer

Cuerpo de mujer, blancas colinas, muslos blancos,
te pareces al mundo en tu actitud de entrega.
Mi cuerpo de labriego salvaje te socava
y hace saltar el hijo del fondo de la tierra.

Fui solo como un túnel. De mí huían los pájaros,
y en mí la noche entraba su invasión poderosa.
Para sobrevivirme te forjé como un arma,
como una flecha en mi arco, como una piedra en mi honda.

Pero cae la hora de la venganza, y te amo.
Cuerpo de piel, de musgo, de leche ávida y firme.
Ah los vasos del pecho! Ah los ojos de ausencia!
Ah las rosas del pubis! Ah tu voz lenta y triste!

Cuerpo de mujer mía, persistiré en tu gracia.
Mi sed, mi ansia sin límite, mi camino indeciso!
Oscuros cauces donde la sed eterna sigue,
y la fatiga sigue, y el dolor infinito.

TWENTY LOVE POEMS: 1

Body of woman

Body of woman, white hills, white thighs,
you look like the world in your attitude of giving.
My savage peasant body plows through you
and makes the son surge from the depths of the earth.

I went alone as a tunnel. Birds fled from me,
I was invaded by the power of the night.
To survive myself I forged you like a weapon,
like an arrow in my bow, like a stone in my sling.

But the hour of vengeance strikes, and I love you.
Body of skin, of moss, of ardent, constant milk.
Ah the chalices of the breasts! Ah the eyes of absence!
Ah the roses of the pubis! Ah your voice slow and sad!

Body of my woman, I will persist in your grace.
My thirst, my infinite anguish, my indecisive path!
Dark riverbeds where eternal thirst follows,
and fatigue follows, and infinite sorrow.

ME

VEINTE POEMAS DE AMOR: 7

Inclinado en las tardes

Inclinado en las tardes tiro mis tristes redes
a tus ojos oceánicos.

Allí se estira y arde en la más alta hoguera
mi soledad que da vueltas los brazos como un náufrago.

Hago rojas señales sobre tus ojos ausentes
que oleen como el mar a la orilla de un faro.

Sólo guardas tinieblas, hembra distante y mía,
de tu mirada emerge a veces la costa del espanto.

Inclinado en las tardes echo mis tristes redes
a ese mar que sacude tus ojos oceánicos.

Los pájaros nocturnos picotean las primeras estrellas
que centellean como mi alma cuando te amo.

Galopa la noche en su yegua sombría
desparramando espigas azules sobre el campo.

TWENTY LOVE POEMS: 7

Leaning into the evenings

Leaning into the evenings I throw my sad nets
to your ocean eyes.

There my loneliness stretches and burns in the tallest
bonfire,
arms twisting like a drowning man's.

I cast red signals over your absent eyes
which lap like the sea at the lighthouse shore.

You guard only darkness, my distant female,
sometimes the coast of dread emerges from your stare.

Leaning into the evenings I toss my sad nets
to that sea which stirs your ocean eyes.

The night birds peck at the first stars
that twinkle like my soul as I love you.

Night gallops on her shadowy mare
scattering blue wheat stalks over the fields.

ME

VEINTE POEMAS DE AMOR: 15

Me gustas cuando callas

Me gustas cuando callas porque estás como ausente,
y me oyes desde lejos, y mi voz no te toca.
Parece que los ojos se te hubieran volado
y parece que un beso te cerrara la boca.

Como todas las cosas están llenas de mi alma,
emerges de las cosas, llena del alma mía.
Mariposa de sueño, te pareces a mi alma,
y te pareces a la palabra melancolía.

Me gustas cuando callas y estás como distante.
Y estás como quejándote, mariposa en arrullo.
Y me oyes desde lejos, y mi voz no te alcanza:
déjame que me calle con el silencio tuyo.

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.

Me gustas cuando callas porque estás como ausente.
Distante y dolorosa como si hubieras muerto.
Una palabra entonces, una sonrisa bastan.
Y estoy alegre, alegre de que no sea cierto.

TWENTY LOVE POEMS: 15

I like it when you're quiet

I like it when you're quiet. It's as if you weren't here now,
and you heard me from a distance, and my voice
couldn't reach you.

It's as if your eyes had flown away from you, and as if
your mouth were closed because I leaned to kiss you.

Just as all living things are filled with my soul,
you emerge from all living things filled with the soul of
me.

It's as if, a butterfly in dreams, you were my soul,
and as if you were the soul's word, melancholy.

I like it when you're quiet. It's as if you'd gone away now.
And you'd become the keening, the butterfly's insistence.
And you heard me from a distance and my voice didn't
reach you:

it's then that what I want is to be quiet with your silence.

It's then that what I want is to speak to your silence
in a speech as clear as lamplight, as plain as a gold ring.
You are quiet like the night, and like the night you're
star-lit.

Your silences are star-like, they're a distant and a simple
thing.

I like it when you're quiet. It's as if you weren't here now.
As if you were dead now, and sorrowful, and distant.
A word then is sufficient, or a smile, to make me happy,
Happy that it seems so certain that you're present.

RH

VEINTE POEMAS DEL AMOR: 20

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.

Escribir por ejemplo: “La noche está estrellada, y tiritan,
azules, los astros, a lo lejos”.

El viento de la noche gira en el cielo y canta.

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.
Yo la quise, y a veces ella también me quiso.

En las noches como ésta la tuve entre mis brazos.
La besé tantas veces bajo el cielo infinito.

Ella me quiso, a veces yo también la quería
Cómo no haber amado sus grandes ojos fijos.

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.
Pensar que no la tengo. Sentir que la he perdido.

Oír la noche inmensa, más inmensa sin ella
Y el verso cae al alma como al pasto el rocío.

Qué importa que mi amor no pudiera guardarla.
La noche está estrellada y ella no está conmigo.

Eso es todo. A lo lejos alguien canta. A lo lejos.
Mi alma no se contenta con haberla perdido.

TWENTY LOVE POEMS: 20

I can write the saddest verses

I can write the saddest verses tonight.

Write, for example, "The night is full of stars,
twinkling blue, in the distance."

The night wind spins in the sky and sings.

I can write the saddest verses tonight.
I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too.

On nights like this I held her in my arms.
I kissed her so many times beneath the infinite sky.

She loved me, at times I loved her too.
How not to have loved her great still eyes.

I can write the saddest verses tonight.
To think that I don't have her. To feel that I have lost her.

To hear the immense night, more immense without her.
And the verse falls onto my soul like dew onto grass.

What difference that my love could not keep her.
The night is full of stars, and she is not with me.

That's all. In the distance, someone sings. In the
distance.

My soul is not at peace with having lost her.

Como para acercarla mi mirada la busca,
Mi corazón la busca, y ella no está conmigo.

La misma noche que hace blanquear los mismos árboles.
Nosotros, los de entonces, ya no somos los mismos.

Ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero cuánto la quise.
Mi voz buscaba el viento para tocar su oído.

De otro. Será de otro. Como antes de mis besos.
Su voz, su cuerpo claro. Sus ojos infinitos.

Ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero tal vez la quiero.
Es tan corto el amor, y es tan largo el olvido.

Porque en noches como ésta la tuve entre mis brazos,
mi alma no se contenta con haberla perdido.

Aunque éste sea el último dolor que ella me causa,
y éstos sean los últimos verso que yo le escribo.

As if to bring her closer, my gaze searches for her,
My heart searches for her, and she is not with me.

The same night that whitens the same trees.
We, of then, now are no longer the same.

I no longer love her, it's true, but how much I loved her.
My voice searched for the wind that would touch her ear.

Another's. She will be another's. As before my kisses.
Her voice, her bright body. Her infinite eyes.

I no longer love her, it's true, but maybe I love her.
Love is so short, and forgetting is so long.

Because on nights like this I held her in my arms,
my soul is not at peace with having lost her.

Though this may be the final sorrow she causes me,
and these the last verses I write for her.

ME