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I Was Among Them: Pablo Neruda Turns 100.

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"The people paraded their red flags
and I was among them on the stone
they struck, in the thunderous march
and in the struggle's lofty songs,
I saw how they conquered step by step,
Their resistance alone was road,
and isolated they were like broken bits
of a star, mouthless and lusterless.
Joined in the unity made silence,
they were fire, indestructible song,
the slow passage of mankind on earth
turned into depths and battles.
They were dignity that fought
whatever was trampled, and they awakened
like a system, the order of lives
that touched the door and sat down
in the main hall with their flags."

(Canto General, 1950).

Shortly after giving birth to Ricardo Neftali Reyes in 1904, his mother died. As he grew older, he began to feel the urge to retell his experiences in poetry. His father, who resented the circumstances of his birth, disliked this tendency toward the arts. A rail-driver who married again into a family of moderate means in southern Chile, he wanted his son to enter one of the more lucrative professions. The son would not, but to avoid antagonizing his father, he adopted an alias - Pablo Neruda.

That name is now chiseled in the stones and seashells that surround all of us. Even those who have not heard his poems know his name. Those who have read his verses, even in translation, cannot fail to be moved by his enormous contribution. Those who disagreed with his political views or who disliked his formal manipulation of poetry had to yet agree that there are few poets of his caliber in the modern age. The Argentine conservative Jorge Luis Borges called Neruda "a great writer," while his comrade in arms the artist Pablo Picasso said of him, "He is not only the greatest poet in his country, Chile, but also the

greatest poet in the Spanish language and one of the greatest poets in the world."

But Neruda's poetry was only a part of this enormous man, for he also wrote a cookbook (on Hungarian food) and a Chilean bird book, he translated *Romeo and Juliet* into Spanish, he worked off and on for the Chilean Foreign Ministry, he joined the Communist Party and became one its most important partisans, he won the Stalin Peace Prize and worked on the committee of the Lenin Peace Prize, and he fought hard across the world against the vulgarity of imperialism. When the Swedish Academy's Karl Ragnar Gierow introduced Neruda as he accepted the 1971 Nobel Prize in Literature, he said, "To sum up Neruda is like catching a condor with a butterfly net. Neruda, in a nutshell, is an unreasonable proposition: the kernel bursts the shell."

Neruda's poetic output is staggering: thousands of poems, some epic, some short, now being collected in a complete works series by Barcelona's Galaxia Gutenberg that have already filled-up five encyclopedic volumes. These volumes already total over 6,000 pages, and more volumes are expected. From his first, surrealist book *Crepusculario* (1923) to his last *La rosa separada* (1972), and to the posthumously collected *Oda a las flores de Datitla* (2002), Neruda's work moves briskly from style to style, mood to mood. There is no one Neruda - he can be equally found in a love poem, in an ode to nature, in a spacious historical sweep, in a self-deprecating dig at his own profession or his body, and, of course, in the great political poems of indignation, struggle and hope. If there is anything that unites his massive oeuvre it is his love for the world, his passion for small things such as seashells and for significant historical developments such as the Spanish Civil War. As he descended the steps of his plane in Stockholm to receive the Nobel, a journalist asked Neruda what he thought was the "prettiest word." He paused, then said, "I'm going to reply in a fairly vulgar way, like in a radio song, with a word which is extremely hackneyed: the word *love*. The more you use it, the stronger it gets. And there's no harm abusing the word either."

A short while later, in September 1972, Neruda addressed a Communist youth group in Chile, La Jota. In his speech he offered the arc of his life, "Young people must learn to be young, and that is no easy task. I was a boy in mourning. The sadness of the poor peoples of the south [of Chile, where Neruda lived], the cry of the rain, the intransigent solitude, fell on my life. Later on, I found that the more serious the problems life throws at us, the more difficult the discovery of our path, the more serious our sense of social injustice, the more reasons we have to feel worthy of our responsibility. That's how we discover the road to joy. We fight to make sure that our joy can be shared and handed out all over the world."

In 1924, a very young Neruda published a book of poems that would

make his reputation, and that continues to be one of the most popular poetry books on the planet: *Veinte poemas de amor y canción desesperada* (Twenty-one love poems and a song of despair). Till his death, when Neruda read his work, audiences across the Spanish-speaking world waited earnestly for these poems. In the late 1960s, as Neruda read at the Ursuline Nun's College in Lima, Peru, the audience reached out to him to read from what he self-deprecatingly called his "most mediocre" of books. He went on with his newer work, and then, he began *Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche*, "Tonight I can write the saddest lines," one of his most beautiful love poems (no. 20 from the collection). Neruda's friend Jorge Edwards (then counselor at the Chilean embassy in Peru) recounts, "A gigantic sigh ran through the hall, a great collective breath, largely feminine in tone but in which everyone took part: men and women, young and old. It was something which, until that moment, it had seemed, had been repressed. The poet smiled broadly, and went on reciting, this time in sacrosanct silence."

Neruda's poetic range has always startled critics. He has much the same impact on poetry critics as his friend the Pablo Picasso had on art critics: both moved from phase to phase, from phrase to phrase, searching for a different idiom to help shape their current concerns and visions. Martin Espada, whom the Mexican-American novelist Sandra Cisneros calls the "Pablo Neruda of North American authors," points out that there "is a Neruda for everyone. There's Neruda the love poet, Neruda the surrealist poet, the poet of historical epic, Neruda the political poet, Neruda the poet of common things, with the odes, the poet of sea and so on." Indeed, within one of his epic poems, one finds many of these forms. The critic Roberto González Echevarría points out of *Canto General* (1950),

"[The] poem is tropological cornucopia. Everything is in a state of flux, everything is in the process of becoming something else or looking like something else. The analog here is America's proliferating nature ("In fertility time grew"). There is no conventional rhyme, or strophic arrangement, and although the history recounted begins before the beginning of history, it does not flow chronologically from there until the end. The *Canto* establishes its own inner rhythms. There is something sacramental in Neruda's poetic language, like the words of a religion in the process of being founded, of a liturgy establishing its rituals and choosing its words. The grandiose tropes of his verse emerge as if not only to give names to things but to anoint them."

If this is true of his epic poems, what of his odes, the many, many short poems that he wrote for things both mundane and spiritual: his odes to Maize, to a Stamp Album, to Bees, to the Dictionary, to Walt Whitman, to the Atom, to Laziness, to the Artichoke? Critic Ilan Stavans, who edited a six-hundred page collection of the best of Neruda in 2003, tells us that Neruda had written these odes "Buddhist-like

concentration on the mundane, insignificant objects" to publish in newspapers alone. Neruda chaffed when literary critics tried "to force creative artists to deal only with the sublime themes. But they are wrong. We'll even make poetry from those things most scorned by the arbiters of good taste." His command of rhythm and language allowed him to reflect beautifully, and painfully on such things as the atom,

La ciudad	The city
desmoronó sus últimos alveolus	crumbled its last honeycombs
cayó, cayó de pronto,	and fell, fell suddenly,
derribada,	demolished,
podrida,	rotten;
los hombres	men
fueron súbitos leprosos,	were instant lepers,
tomban	they took
la mano de sus hijos	their children's hand
y la pequeña mano	and the little hand
se quebada en sus manos.	fell off in theirs.

After a tour in the Chilean Foreign Ministry in Rangoon and Colombo (including a trip to the 1928 Indian National Congress at Calcutta), Neruda went to Spain. He came at a crucial time, in 1934, when the Spanish Republic had begun to feel the earth move under its feet. Having come to power in 1931, the democratic and progressive forces had to deal with a resurgent right (they held a majority in parliament in 1933) and with an explosion of revolutionary feeling among the people of Catalonia and Asturias at the presence of the right in the government. Neruda arrived in Spain with politics that might be vaguely described as anarchist (in a 1933 letter, Neruda wrote, "A few years ago, I was an anarchist, editor of the anarchist trade union journal, *Claridad*, where I published my ideas and things for the first time"). As Franco defeated the Republic, Neruda left as a communist. Enlivened by the explosion of sentiment for the Popular Front victory in 1936, Neruda relished his time with Spain's great socialist artists, people like the poet and playwright Federico García Lorca and the poet Miguel Hernández. When the fascists killed Lorca, Neruda wrote his first collection of overtly political poetry, *España en el corazón*, "Spain in My Heart" (1936). Among the poems, we find his glorious and timeless, "Song for the Mothers of Slain Militiamen,"

"They have not died! They are in the midst
of the gunpowder,
standing, like burning wicks.
Their pure shadows have gathered
in the copper-colored meadowland
like a curtain of armored wind,
like a barricade the colors of fury,
like the invisible heart of heaven itself.

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Put aside
your mantle of mourning, join all
your tears until you make them metal:
for there we strike by day and by night,
there we kick by day and by night,
there we spit by day and by night
until the doors of hatred fall!"

As with W. H. Auden's "Spain 1937," César Vallejo's *España, aparta de mi este cáliz* (Spain, Take this Cup from Me), Langston Hughes' "Letter from Spain," and Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, Neruda's poem created an emotional and political reaction from the world's concerned people about the events in Spain. He forced his government to help as he rescued two hundred refugees from the torments of Franco's rule and from concentration camps - they traveled to Chile and many later helped Neruda in his time of crisis. The poem's deep commitment to the oppressed social classes and to the struggles of the left changed the way Neruda wrote. When he returned to Chile, he stood before the porters' union in Santiago's main market, and read *España*. The porters' did not seem to react, then after a moment silence,

"This man, with a sack around his waist like the others, got up, leaning with his large hands on his chair, looked at me and said: 'Comrade Pablo, we are totally forgotten people. And I can tell you that we have never been so greatly moved. We would like to say to youŠ' And he broke down in tears, his body trembling with the sobs. Many of those around him were also crying. I felt a knot form in my throat."

Neruda moved away from the deliberately surrealist obscurity of his poetry, and translated his passions and his visions into verses legible to those who had not the luxury of an advanced education. The workers, after this Santiago experience, became his readers and listeners. Neruda wrote for them. In his great poem, *Explico algunas cosas*, "Let Me Explain a Few Things," Neruda described his stylistic shift,

"You will ask: And where are the lilacs
and the metaphysics petalled with poppies
and the rain repeatedly spattering
its words, filling them with holes and birds?
You will ask why his poetry
Does not speak of dreams and leaves,
And of the great volcanoes of his birthplace?

Come and see the blood in the street.
Come and see

The blood in the streets.
Come and see the blood
In the streets!"

In 1944, a year before he formally joined the Communist Party, Neruda successfully ran on the Communist ticket for the Chilean Senate. As a delegate of the people, Neruda spoke openly against the domination of the Chilean economy by the US transnational corporations, of the infringement of freedoms for the working-class by the government, and of the dictatorial moves made by the President in light of the Communist-led strikes among the mine-workers (copper being Chile's main export). Annoyed by Neruda's vehemence in parliament, the President named him *persona non grata* and called for his arrest. Neruda went underground, where he lived at the mercy of his friends, of those whom he had rescued from Spain and of the Communist Party. During his years underground, Neruda wrote the bulk of his greatest work, his *Canto General*. In one section of this epic poem that spans the length of the continent of the Americas and the history from pre-Columbian times to his present, Neruda recounted the immediate conjuncture for his flight,

"And atop these calamities
a smiling tyrant
spits on the betrayed
miners' hopes.
Every nation has its sorrows,
Every struggle its torments,
But come here and tell me
If among the bloodthirsty,
Among all the unbridled
Despots, crowned with hatred,
With scepters of green whips,
There was ever another like Chile's?"

In *Canto General*, Neruda included a section that was also published independently, his magnificent "The Heights of Macchu Picchu" (1948). Neruda had visited the ancient Inca ruins of Peru in 1943, and he had then been stunned not only by the magnificence of the ancient history of the Americas, but also of the vista this gave him. At 8,000 feet, the city which had been built in the middle of the 15th Century, allowed Neruda to see his Americas from a transcendental viewpoint: he could see the history of the continent from its ancient past to the present, and from North to South. The critic González Echeverría says of this poem, "It is here that Neruda's vision is refocused by the presence of these ruins, testament to a utopia in the past, an allegiance to a collectivity with nature to create beauty and justice. It is an allegiance also marred by violence, abuse and betrayal." Nature had protected

Macchu Picchu from destruction by the Spanish conquistadors in the 16th Century, and Neruda used the ruins to help him summon up his ancestors to speak clearly about the betrayal of American promise. "Rise up with me, American love," sings the poet, and asks the Incas to teach him how to read his history, but "you'll not return from subterranean time."

"Give me silence, water, hope.
Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.
Cling to my body like magnets.
Hasten to my veins and to my mouth.
Speak through my words and my blood."

From the Heights, Neruda summons this great American voice, as he begins to tell the story of Columbus, the conquistadors, the resistance of Tupac Amaru, the Bolivarian revolution, the betrayal of its hopes to his present. The *Canto* is Neruda's greatest poem. While extracts from the *Canto* are available in a number of Indian languages, the complete poem should be translated and published (for a recent translation into Hindi of selected verse from Neruda, see Chandrabali Singh's *Pablo Neruda: Kavita Sanchayan*, Sahitya Akademi, 2004, or else an earlier volume translated by Prabhati Nautiyal, *Ruko-o-Prithvi*, also Sahitya Akademi, 1997).

Neruda gave much of his life to travel, to his readings of his magnificent verse and to his service to the cause of Communism. He worked hard at the World Peace Conferences, at the various writers' conferences, for the Lenin Peace Prize, for the academies of Eastern Europe and of South America. He spoke out against dictators and tyrants, against the persecution of writers. He lived in a charmed world with such luminaries as the Turkish Communist poet Nazim Hikmet, the Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, the French poet Paul Eluard, the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén and the Brazilian novelist Jorge Amada, among others. These were large-scale artists whose political sensibility informed their artistic achievement. Neruda spoke for them when he told the Continental Congress of Culture in May 1953, "We are writing for modest people who, very, very often, cannot read. And yet, on this earth, poetry existed before writing and printing. That is why we know that poetry is like bread, and must be shared by everyone, the literate and the peasants, by all our vast, incredible, extraordinary family of peoples."

But Neruda was always a man who enjoyed the people more than power. As a young consular official in Rangoon (then part of British India), Neruda rejected the colonial caste system. He shunned the British officials because "they were monotonous and even ignorant,"

and kept company with native Burmese people (including a lover, Josie Bliss) for which the British expelled him from their social institutions. "Those intolerant Europeans were not very interesting," Neruda wrote many years later. "And, after all, I had not come to the Orient to spend my life with transient colonizers, but rather with the ancient spirit of that world, with that large, hapless human family." For this reason, he took refuge in the bazaar, in the streets,

"The street became my religion. The Burmese street, the Chinese quarter with its open-air theatres and paper dragons and splendid lanterns. The Hindu street, the humblest of them, with its temples operated as a business by one caste, and the poor people prostrate in the mud outside. Markets where the betel leaves rose up in green pyramids like mountains of malachite. The stalls and pens where they sold wild animals and birds. The winding streets where supple Burmese women walked with long cheroots in their mouths. All this engrossed me and drew me gradually under the spell of real life."

Wherever Neruda went, from Ceylon in the 1920s to Italy in the 1960s, he sought out the vibrant worlds of the people much more than the hallowed, hushed halls of power. The latter beckoned him, feted him, awarded him, but it was among the former that he found his greatest audience and his main inspiration.

The problem with a close look at an icon like Neruda is that as you read about his life you tend to like the person less. Or else you recognize that the iconic individual is human, only too human. Base human emotions like deceit, jealousy and anger marred the personal career of Neruda, who went through three marriages after he badly hurt his Burmese lover from the 1920s, Josie Bliss. In his memoirs, Neruda tells us that Bliss became deeply attached to him, and that he had to abandon her for fear of his life. Neruda called her his "love terrorist." Without telling her, he skulked out of Rangoon for his next post in Colombo. Bliss followed him, and when he finally ejected her from Ceylon, she fell to his feet, and "the chalk polish of my white shoes was smeared like flour all over her face." Neruda wrote years later that he remained heartbroken, and when he visited Rangoon in 1957, he searched for her. Nonetheless, not days long after he had sent Bliss back home, Neruda raped his sweeper.

Tribulation is an apt description for Neruda's emotional and personal life. He married thrice, once in Java to a woman with whom he barely shared a language and who bore him his only child. Maria Malva had severe birth defects, and Neruda only saw her briefly in her first year before he divorced her mother, Maria Hagenaar. When she was eight, Maria Malva tragically succumbed to her many ailments. Neruda left Maria Hagenaar because he had already begun a relationship with the Argentinean communist, Delia del Carril, twenty years his senior. Delia and Neruda had a formidable partnership, since she became his

principle editor and his main political advisor. They remained together for close to two decades, before Neruda began another relationship with Matilde Urrutia, a Chilean woman who would become the muse for his many mature love poems (such as the 1960 *Cien sonatas de amor* and the 1966 *Arte de pájaros*). Neruda and Matilde tried several times to have children, and that they failed here distressed them to no end. When Matilde had her last of three miscarriages in 1952, "A shadow descended on our surroundings," she wrote in her memoirs, "and threatened to wrap us in sadness and anxiety." In turmoil, Neruda told her, "I'm going to give you a child. It's just been born, and its name is *Las uvas y el viento*," his most recent book of poems. In 1949, after their first pregnancy was lost, Neruda wrote a very moving poem, *La pródiga*,

"I ask you: where is my son?
Wasn't he waiting for me inside you, recognizing me,
And telling me: 'Call me out across the land
To continue your struggles and your songs.'

Give me back my son."

Neruda saw his child only as a son, and more as the elaborator of his father's legacy than anything. This masculine ethos infected Neruda's relationship with his entire household. He disdained housework and openly criticized his wife, Delia, for her lack of interest in their home. When a friend of Neruda's asked Delia why she did not make him breakfast, she rightly said, "And why doesn't he make *me* breakfast?" In *Las manos del día* (The Hands of the Day, 1968) Neruda loathes his hands, his *las manos negativas* for their lack of grit. They have not done any physical labor, and they are free of grime and dirt. Neruda wanted to labor, but to him this meant farm work or factory work. He admired his friend Miguel Hernández, who earned the sobriquet "goatherder" in the beautiful elegy Neruda wrote for him (in *Cantos General*). Neruda's guilt for clean hands is a masculine one, a macho fantasy of labor; he could easily have helped clean his own houses, or cooked to feed his ravenous appetite (García Márquez called him "a refined gluttonous Renaissance Pope"). If he used his hands to aid his life, he would have had less cause for regret.

In 1970, Luis Corvalán, the leader of the Chilean Communist Party asked Neruda if he would consider being the Popular Unity coalition's candidate for president. In the last decade, he had moved away from his more overtly political poems to a consideration of his childhood and of the southern Chilean coast that had raised him (*Cantos Ceremoniales*, 1961 and *Memorial de Isla Negra*, 1964). Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin and the Soviet invasion of Hungary (both in 1956), the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution (one of whose victims was Neruda's friend the writer Ai Qing) had dampened his mood. When asked repeatedly why he had

not condemned the Soviet government for its treatment of Boris Pasternak or of Joseph Brodsky (or Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel), Neruda offered two explanations. First, in 1966, Neruda argued that any public, condemnatory statement by him on the plight of these artists whom he admired would "contribute - by taking up this cause, which may be questionable - to fueling the Cold War." He did not want to provide enemies of the USSR, such as the Committee for Cultural Freedom, ammunition from his own mouth (of course, it could be said that the persecution of Pasternak was an ordinance itself). Second, in 1958, on the occasion of Pasternak's Nobel Prize for Literature, Neruda argued that any statement by him against the USSR would be taken as a commentary on communism, and that would "lend ammunition to the enemy's arguments," where the enemy was not the US government, but Chile's own anti-communist right-wing. Neruda knew that "Communism," by the 1950s, had come to mean the Soviet Union, and that any criticism of the USSR would be taken automatically as a criticism of the Chilean Communist Party. In 1972, Neruda took up the case of Alexander Solzhenitsyn with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, who "listened to me, silently, with a wooden face, and I had no choice but to change the subject."

None of this changed Neruda's immense commitment to the communist cause. In *Memorial*, Neruda wrote a wonderful poem, *Los Comunistas* in which he noted that even though a dark moon had eclipsed the star of Communism, "Now you will see what we are truly worth/Now you will see what we are and will be." So, when Luis Corvalán, leader of the Chilean Party asked him to be their presidential candidate, he accepted. Neruda traveled the length of the country, fighting for the cause, and in the end, the Popular Unity coalition chose to go with the Socialist Party founder, Salvador Allende, who had unsuccessfully run for the presidency thrice (first in 1951). Neruda, already afflicted with prostate cancer, campaigned energetically for the Popular Unity slate, and for Allende. When Allende won, Neruda celebrated. In Buenos Aires, the poet defended the actions of his new government,

"We know that oil was nationalized in Mexico under Cárdenas more than thirty years ago, that the Suez Canal was nationalized in Egypt by Nasser. There's a nationalization every day somewhere in the world. In Chile, a country so well-developed politically and intellectually foreign companies were permitted to own the telephone and electricity companies, not to mention copper, which produces a million dollars a day for the North Americans. Please! Why be scared if we try to clothe our people, build hospitals, schools, roads, with those million dollars a day which we want to - and shall - recover?"

His deteriorated health meant that he had to cut short his tenure as Chilean Ambassador to France, where he helped negotiate his nation's external debt.

On September 11, 1973, Neruda's world withered once more. Given the green light from Washington, DC, General Augusto Pinochet released his armed forces from the barracks and onto the streets. They seized control of the country and assassinated Allende. Neruda's friends say that if the Popular Unity government had recovered from this assault, the poet might have lived. As it was, his premonition that Allende's regime would go the way of the Spanish Republic came to pass. Neruda asked his third wife, Matilde Urrutia to get a pen and paper. He dictated a note to her, which told the story of the betrayal of Chile by "conservative and mediocre" governments. "I am writing these quick lines," he intoned, "for my memoirs only three days after the unspeakable events took my great comrade, President Allende, to his death." The army killed him, and secretly buried his body. "That glorious dead figure was riddled and ripped to pieces by the machine guns of Chile's soldiers, who had betrayed Chile once more." As he dictated this, soldiers flooded his home, and as the commander came before Neruda, the ailing poet said, "Look around - there's only one thing of danger for you here - poetry." The soldier bowed, took off his helmet and withdrew, "Forgive me, Señor Neruda."

The painter Nemesio Antúnez visited him a few days later, and Neruda prophesized,

"These soldiers are acting with great brutality at the moment, but later they are going to try to make themselves popular, make themselves look like the goodies. They're going to kiss the children and the old people in the public squares, in front of the television cameras. They're going to hand out houses, baskets of sweets, medals. And they're going to be around for many years. And in culture, art, television, everything, the most complete and utter mediocrity is going to prevail."

The next night, on September 23, 1973, Neruda said, "Me voy," (I'm going), and died.

"Comrades, bury me in Isla Negra,
facing the sea that I know, every wrinkled area
of stones and waves that my lost eyes
won't see again.
ŠI want to sleep there amid the eyelids
of sea and earthŠ"

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