



Pablo Neruda and the struggle for political memory

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ABSTRACT *This article deals with a topic—poetry—that is often considered to be of marginal interest to politics. To prove otherwise is the article's principle task—a task that is pursued through an engagement with Pablo Neruda's work. Nobel laureate, international diplomat and political activist in one, Neruda reveals how poetry can enter the political process and, perhaps more importantly, turn into a critical historical memory. To engage political struggles a poet must be as accessible as possible. Neruda was well aware of this necessity, which is why he wrote in the language of everyday life. But he was also aware of the need to break through existing linguistic habits, for it is through these very conventions, inaudible and seemingly harmless as they are, that practices of domination become objectified. The article discusses both the theoretical issues that are at stake in this paradoxical tension and the more specific attempts Neruda undertook to engage political issues related to fascism, imperialism and class domination.*

Few public figures are more convincing than Pablo Neruda when it comes to substantiating the possible relevance of poetry to the study—and conduct—of global politics.¹ Nobel laureate, political activist and international diplomat in one, Neruda and his poems epitomise the *Zeitgeist* of an epoch, the ups and downs of a century whose spirit has come to define the passage into the next millennium. Between his early assignment as honorary consul in the colonial Far East of the late 1920s and his role as Salvador Allende's Ambassador to France in the early 1970s, Neruda wrote some three dozen volumes of highly influential poems. His extraordinary writings are matched perhaps only by the persistence and the audacity of his political engagement. He stood at the forefront of the fight against fascism and imperialism and he battled relentlessly for social equality in his native Chile. He spoke about gaps between North and South, rich and poor, about how the United Fruit Co 'disembarks, / ravaging coffee and fruits / for its ships that sprit away / our submerged lands' treasures / like serving trays'.² While exposing the undersides of the international political economy, Neruda never lost sight of the least privileged. Indeed, his writings were all about heeding to whispers that risk drowning in the roaring engines of high politics:

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Meanwhile, in the seaports'
 sugary abyss,
 Indians collapsed, buried in the morning mist:
 a body rolls down, a nameless
 thing, a fallen number,
 a bunch of lifeless fruit
 dumped in the rubbish heap.³

Neruda's voice was the voice of the working class, the voice of peasants and factory workers, of ordinary people whose perspectives are so often obliterated from the more grandiosely perceived domain of global politics. Of course, Neruda's sense of justice and dignity, no matter how poetically refined, cannot possibly represent the diversities of the human condition. The very idea of speaking for those who have no voice is a highly problematic practice.⁴ Some of the political causes championed by Neruda are as compelling today as they were half a century ago. Others appear naive at best, irresponsible at worst, especially if judged from the perspective of currently prevailing neoliberal triumphalism. Neruda vigorously defended Castro's revolution and stood behind Stalin long after his authoritarian side had become excessive. 'You showed me how one being's pain has / perished in the victory of all', said the apologetic poet-politician.⁵ Neruda's image of gender relations can, likewise, be criticised at length. His world is a world of working men and fighting men, of struggles and defeats, of victories and heroes, in short, a masculine world in which women are either obliterated or fulfil the traditional functions of lover, childbearer and caretaker. Men venture out into the turbulent political realm to fight tyrants of all kind. Women, by contrast, are passive onlookers to this unfolding drama. They represent 'home and hearth and the humble verities of everyday life'.⁶ The point of this article, however, is not to problematise such images, important as this task may be. Rather, the objective lies in understanding the more general processes through which the poetic image reflects or interferes with the constitution and conduct of global politics.

One may or may not agree with the content of Neruda's politics, but one can hardly deny that his influential poetry fulfils the function of a historical memory. It testifies to the controversies and complexities of an epoch gone, to the political contingencies that have rendered some elements of the past into what we call the present. Neruda's poems hold on to faint voices and perspectives that may otherwise have vanished into the dark holes of historical narratives. For better or for worse, Neruda's poetic testimonies are part of today's collective consciousness. They have entered the canons of Western thought. This is why even those commentators who are hostile to his politics readily accept the central role Neruda has played as a poet and a poetic chronicler of our time. Some even argue that, from such a perspective, Neruda's 'unfortunate Stalinism' becomes no more than 'an excrescence, a kind of wart on the texture of his poems'.⁷

This article draws attention to the intersections between poetry and global politics in ways that go beyond the writer-activist persona. It contemplates the political dimensions of poetry and the poetic dimensions of politics through an engagement with some of Neruda's testimonies. What follows will thus lay no claim to presenting events in an empirically or historically exhaustive manner.

Rather, the idea is to illustrate how an inquiring mind may help us see old things in new ways, and how this reviewing may engender more critical, more tolerant and more ethical approaches to global politics. The point, therefore, is not to argue for or against Neruda, but to explore the core of what poetry and politics are all about—or, to be more precise, to acknowledge that there is no such core, that the very nature of politics emerges from the forms of representation that are employed to make sense out of human interactions. The political dimensions of poetry are located precisely in the engagement with these linguistically conditioned representations, with the inevitable gap that opens up between an event and the way this event has been imbued with meaning and significance. The poet, then, explores the political in domains that are located outside what is usually considered politics proper.

To illustrate these rather abstract points, the essay looks at a well known poem from Neruda's *Residence on Earth*, a collection that is said to have revolutionised Spanish language poetry. The poem in question, called 'A Few Things Explained', speaks of the dilemmas that its author faced when posted as Consul to Madrid in the mid-1930s. Neruda had not been particularly political until then but, with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, he abandoned his diplomatic neutrality and sided with the Republicans—a move that would soon cost him his post. He started to publish openly political verse, collaborated with a group of activist poets and organised a prominent writers' congress aimed at opposing Franco—in short, he became an increasingly vocal public figure. 'A Few Things Explained' underlines the moral necessity to speak up and take sides, but it does so in ways that go beyond merely screaming for help or documenting the fight against fascism. The poem also engages politics in a wider sense, for it deals with some of the underlying forces that shape political struggles, from the heroic to the everyday, from the local to the global.

Of tomatoes and toothaches: poetry and everyday life

Neruda was in no way predisposed to take on a political role, certainly not one that would span the geographical and temporal dimensions of twentieth century global politics. Born in 1904 as Neftalí Reyes Basualto in a small agrarian town in southern Chile, he grew up in a rather modest environment. His father was a railroad worker and his mother, a primary school teacher, died of tuberculosis soon after giving birth. Neftalí wrote and published poetry from early on. To conceal this activity from his disapproving father he took on a *nom de plume*, Pablo Neruda. Some commentators believe that this very pseudonym, taken from the then well known Czech writer Jan Neruda, 'signified a refusal to be limited by his provincial background'.⁸ At 17 he moved to Santiago with the intention of becoming a French teacher but with the result of living the life of a bohemian poet. Two years later he published his first book of poems, *Crepusculario*; soon afterwards appeared *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, a volume that speaks of love in the language of everyday life. It was to become a classic in the Spanish-speaking world. Neruda had already acquired a poetic reputation among the bohemian circles he frequented, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He wanted to leave Santiago, a place where he could find only sporadic work as translator and journalist.

Most Latin American countries, including Chile, had a long tradition of sending poets—men that is—abroad as consuls or sometimes even as ambassadors. Neruda had approached the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on several occasions and in 1927 he was offered a posting as Honorary Consul to Rangoon. He was an adventurous 23-year-old poet with no qualifications for the task that awaited him. Soon he set out on the long journey that would take him to his rather modest consular position in Burma. The income he was able to generate barely covered his living expenses. In 1928 he was transferred as consul to Colombo, Ceylon, and the following year to Batavia, the capital of the Dutch East Indies. Most biographers of Neruda agree that his stay in the colonial Far East was by and large a frustrating experience, mostly because of his persistent financial difficulties and the isolation he experienced as a poet surrounded by foreign tongues. ‘The Orient for Neruda’, say some, ‘was a mixture of chaos, poverty, and fascinating perceptions of the ancient cultures in contrast with a degrading colonial present’.⁹ After a final brief posting to Singapore in 1932 Neruda embarked on the two-month journey back to Chile. In early 1934 he was sent to Buenos Aires but was soon appointed consul in Barcelona, only to be transferred again to Madrid, where he arrived in December 1934.

Neruda’s move to Madrid occurred primarily for poetic reasons. His boss in Barcelona, so the story goes, noticed Neruda’s less than impressive skills in subtracting and multiplying. ‘Pablo’, he is said to have said, ‘you should go live in Madrid. That’s where the poetry is. All we have here in Barcelona is that terrible multiplication and division that certainly doesn’t need you around. I can handle it.’¹⁰ And so Neruda left for Madrid at a time when his literary success was mounting. The first two volumes of his *Residence on Earth*, partly written in East Asia, had been published and were received with critical acclaim. Soon he was actively involved in a literary circle that included Spain’s leading avant-garde poets.

One of the key trademarks of Neruda’s poems was their simplicity, their accessibility. For much of his life he tried to dispel the widespread perception that poetry is a mere entrance key to the society of high culture, a pleasant distraction for those who have the leisure to pursue verse-based fantasies, for those whose privileged education has rendered the obscure style of poems accessible. Poetry, for Neruda, was not just an ode to the beauty of life as viewed from the sheltered living rooms of the upper classes. Poetry had to deal with the verities of everyday life, with tomatoes and toothaches, with old shoes, haircuts and artichokes. Neruda wrote ‘for simple habitants who request / water and moon, elements of the immutable / order, / schools, bread and wine, guitars and tools’.¹¹ Like the American poet Walt Whitman, Neruda operated in the language of everyday life. Consider how Neruda describes his arrival in Spain in the opening passages of ‘A Few Things Explained’.

I’ll tell you how matters stand with me.

I lived for a time in suburban

Madrid, with its bells

and its clocks and its trees.

The face of Castile

could be seen from that place, parched,

like an ocean of leather.

People spoke of my house
as 'the house with the flowers;' it exploded
geraniums: such a beautiful
house, with the
dogs and the small fry.¹²

By bringing alive the dailiness of life, its rhythm and its ruptures, poetry must see beyond the pleasant and the harmonious. It ought to grasp the complexities of life, its ups and downs, its frustrations and hopes. It ought to deal with the impurities of our existence, Neruda insists, and search for words that are 'steeped in sweat and in smoke, smelling of lilies and urine'.¹³

Poetry as political memory

Neither Neruda's poetry nor his life stayed for long with the beautiful house in suburban Madrid. In July 1936 General Franco staged a right-wing revolt and with the subsequent onset of the Spanish civil war the geraniums gave way to a different kind of life:

Till one morning everything blazed:
one morning bonfires
sprang out of earth
and devoured the living;
since then, only fire,
since then, the blood and the gunpowder,
ever since then.¹⁴

A political poem like 'A Few Things Explained' can be read in a variety of ways. One approach is to focus on how the poem functions as a historical memory. To do this successfully the poem must go back and forth between the private and the public, the local and the universal, the immanent and the timeless. 'But I saw it', Neruda explains. 'A million dead Spaniards. A million exiles. It seemed as if that thorn covered with blood would never be plucked from the conscience of mankind.'¹⁵ For Neruda the war experience was intrinsically linked to the circle of avant-grade poets in which he was active, the so-called Generation of 27. Most of its members became heavily politicised. They sought to defend the Republic and paid for it dearly. Neruda's close friend Federico García Lorca, one of Spain's foremost poets, was assassinated by Franco's forces. Two others, Rafael Alberti and Miguel Hernández, were members of the Communist Party. They supplemented their pens with guns and employed both of them on the battle field. The former was exiled and the latter died in one of Franco's prisons:

Remember, Raul?
Remember it, Rafael?
Federico, under the ground
there, remember it?
Can you remember my house with the balconies where
June drowned the dazzle of flowers in your teeth?¹⁶

Neruda's poem mourns the death of his poet friends. But this is not all. He also seeks to retain their voice and their struggle. He wants to preserve their activist commitment by lifting it out of a purely personal context into the larger public domain, into politics, into history. The poem, then, becomes a form of presence beyond death and beyond the current, historically delineated moment. Many commentators consider this to be the key aspect of poetry in general.¹⁷ It is certainly one of its oldest functions.

It is no accident that poetry began as a form of speaking that revolved around rhyme and other regularities. The rhythmic and rhyming elements of a poem made it easy to remember. Poetry thus came to fulfil the function of a societal memory. It was a way of recollecting things past, of handing down from generation to generation the wisdom that had accumulated over time. Poems transmitted and inscribed into cultural traditions the insights that had emerged from specific historical struggles. Rhyme was essential because it maximised both the likelihood of remembrance and the adequacy of memory. This stylistic component of poetry was to remain essential until the widespread use of paper and printing created new possibilities for the collective retention of facts and data. Free verse, the prevalent form of poetry today, was able to emerge only because the function of remembering could be consigned, as James Scully emphasises, to a variety of alternative memory banks, from conventional books to their latest electronic extensions. 'With increasing dependence on such repositories, and with less individual need to remember, free verse becomes possible and even, perhaps, inevitable'.¹⁸

Technological developments may have widened the stylistic horizons of poetry, but Neruda believes the poem still has to fulfill its original function as a critical societal memory:

I
 am the one who remembers,
 although there are no eyes left on the earth,
 I'll go on seeing
 and that blood
 will be recorded here,
 that love will go on burning here.
 There's no forgetting, ladies and gentlemen,
 and through my wounded mouth
 those mouths will go on singing!¹⁹

Of course, Neruda the chronicler cannot insert himself into the mind of victims such that their voices carry on as if they had never vanished, as if silence had never been imposed onto their fading plea for help. Some form of silence may always be there. Indeed, one of the key tasks of a poet is to deal with silence, to transform its terrifying void into hope. The voices that emerge from this engagement will never be authentic, but they are nevertheless important. They remember in the name of those who cannot remember, for, as Paul Celan once expressed it, 'no one/bears witness for the/witness'.²⁰

The poem functions as memory long after the inevitable rupture between a text and its author. Neruda, for instance, died in 1973. His poetic testimonies,

however, are as timely and compelling today as they have ever been. It may well be that in a hundred years from now people will remember the Spanish Civil War through Neruda's 'A Few Things Explained' or Picasso's *Guernica*, rather than through the countless history books that seek to represent historical events in ways that seem, at least at first sight, more 'realistic'. Consider how Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Pushkin or Gogol have told the world far more about social and political life in 19th century Russia than all history books taken together. It is through the voices of Anna Karenina, Count Wronskij, Raskolnikov, Evgenii Onegin or the brothers Karamazov that the values and struggles of an epoch have been conveyed to subsequent generations. Likewise, our future recollection of the Holocaust may be shaped primarily by, for instance, the writing of Primo Levi and Paul Celan, or by movies such as Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*. All this is not only the case because these representations are read or viewed far more than detailed history books. A poetic rendering of an event or epoch is also able to deal more adequately with the gap that opens up between what is and how this 'is' is represented through language. Poetry recognises that this inevitable gap is the very location of politics. The poem, then, becomes a critical historical memory because it speaks from multiple perspectives. Instead of trying to repress or ignore representation it deals with its political function, with the inherently problematic nature of rendering meaningful that which often has no meaning for those who live through and around it.

Of factories, town squares and trenches: poetry and the public sphere

The Spanish Civil War transformed Neruda. From then on politics would take a central role in his life and his poetry. In this sense the politically active avant-garde poets may have shaped Neruda even more than his poetry influenced them. Neruda increasingly believed that the poet had a certain responsibility to the public, that a poet had the ability and the responsibility to 'write about any given subject, about something needed by a community as a whole'.²¹ He gave up the neutrality that his position as Chilean consul demanded and used his growing international reputation to support the leftist forces that opposed General Franco. The dismissal from his official duties soon followed, but Neruda stayed on nevertheless. He started to publish a poetry review called *The Poets of the World Defend the Spanish People* and travelled to Barcelona and Paris in order to help organise a major international conference of writers and artists—mostly men—who supported the besieged Spanish Republic. Hemmingway, Koestler, Yeats, Spender, Auden, Aragon and Malraux, amongst others, took part in the conference or sent their explicit support. Spain suddenly turned into a *cause célèbre* for all those who sought to ward off the increasing menace of fascism in Europe.²² 'A Few Things Explained' speaks of this fight back, of how resistance emerged from all walks of life and in all parts of Spain:

Turncoats
and generals:
see the death of my house,

look well at the havoc of Spain:
 out of dead houses it is metal that blazes
 in place of the flowers,
 out of the ditches of Spain
 it is Spain that emerges,
 out of the murder of children, a gunsight with eyes,
 out of your turpitude, bullets are born
 that one day will strike for the mark
 of your hearts.²³

The poem becomes more and more combative, and so does Neruda the activist. Poetry, he believes, has always had the same obligation throughout history. It had 'to go out into the street, to take part in this or that combat'. The poet did not shy away from this task, did not mind being branded as subversive. 'Poetry is rebellion', Neruda insists.²⁴ Neruda's activist approach to poetry is, of course, not beyond criticism. Far from it. Various gendered images are embedded in this approach, and so are puzzles that have to do with the nature and function of language. But before going on to problematise Neruda's political poetry we must at least heed the premise of his undertaking.

To be rebellious and effective at the same time a poem must reach a wide public. 'It must excite indignation and admiration', Neruda emphasises, 'inflamm the heart, move the hand towards the gun. It must become a flag, a slogan, a marching song.'²⁵ This is why he sought to write poetry in the language of everyday life. A poem cannot be obscure if it is to be used as a political weapon. Neruda knew that his poems had to speak to a large audience if he wanted to have any impact on the Civil War and the struggle of the working class in general. Given his status as one of the most widely read poets of the twentieth century, one could argue that Neruda's poems have indeed bridged the gap between the personal and the public. When he urges 'Federico, under the ground/there, remember it?' he speaks not only of Federico García Lorca, his close poet friend who was assassinated by Franco's forces. He speaks not only of victims and their muffled voices, but also of the more fundamental dialectic of violence into which both perpetrators and perpetuated have been sucked. 'Out of murdered children ... bullets are born', bullets that will haunt subsequent generations, bullets 'that one day will strike for the mark of your heart'. The issue at stake is thus no longer Neruda himself, or even his testimonies, but the effect that they will have on future lives. When he writes: 'I bear witness! / I was there ... / I am the one who remembers',²⁶ he speaks not primarily of himself, of Neruda the diplomat and activist who recalls the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War. He speaks of a collective memory, of a time in which he, as the author of the poem, will no longer be around to serve as witness. The task of remembering will be fulfilled by the poem alone—and by its future readers.

Political poetry, Neruda stresses, has to be oral poetry, poetry that is read aloud in town squares, trenches and at the dinner tables, poetry that sticks to the mind and carries with it the force of language to convince and convert. 'At the gates of factories and mines I want / my poetry to cling to the earth, / to the air, to the victory of abused mankind.'²⁷ Neruda's book *Spain in My Heart*, where

‘A Few Things Explained’ appeared first, did indeed come out of the earth and cling to it. This volume, which expressed Neruda’s anguish and contained explicitly political poems, dealt with the Civil War. It was printed in an old monastery near Barcelona, close to the frontlines. The production was not only interrupted by intermittent bombardments, but also occurred in a rather improvised way. Because of the lack of proper paper pulp—so the story goes—the book was produced from a variety of makeshift materials, including enemy flags, bloodstained shirts and pieces of discarded paper. By the time the book appeared the defeat of the Republic was all but complete. But the soldiers who printed the poems under great threat nevertheless held on to them. Among the half a million refugees who hastily left Spain for a long march to France, many are said to have carried copies of *Spain in My Heart* in their bags. Or so at least Neruda wants us to remember the episode.²⁸

Come see the blood in the streets ...

Despite his courageous and persistent political commitment, Neruda always had a certain ambivalence towards political poetry. Less so perhaps than most other poets, but he still felt the need to justify the act of writing activist poetry. Clearly, when it came to standing up for what he felt was a just political and humane cause, Neruda did not hesitate to commit his poetry. ‘A Few Things Explained’ was written to defend this commitment—a task that was needed not only because Neruda had never written openly political verse before, but also because he was well aware of the dangers that were entailed in doing so:

Would you know why his poems
never mention the soil or the leaves,
the gigantic volcanoes of the country that bore him?

Come see the blood in the streets,
come see
the blood in the streets,
come see the blood
in the streets!²⁹

The echo of these final lines is terrifying. At first sight they do not seem to need any justification. And yet, the fact that, even in the face of immanent political need, Neruda feels compelled to defend his approach testifies to the complexities that are entailed in the interactions between poetry and politics.

The main issues at stake, and the reasons for Neruda’s hesitation, have to do with the contentious terrain of poetry itself. What actually renders a poem political? Of course, a poem about war inevitably deals with politics. But this does not necessarily mean that the poem is political in the sense that it gazes beyond the ego’s horizon or engages the foundations of political discourse, that is, the manner in which an issue, event or epoch has been constituted and framed through language. Many seemingly political poems are either short-lived battle cries or expressions of agony that reflect, despite their urgent subject matter, above all personal testimonies.

There are those, like Neruda, who take sides in conflicts and use poetry as a

weapon to pursue a political objective. And there are those, like the German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who see the political dimensions of poetry precisely in a detachment from short-term purposes of agitation. The political task of a poem, Enzensberger insists, is 'to refuse any political task and to speak for everyone, even when it speaks of no one, of a tree, a stone, of that which is not'.³⁰ Poetry, then, is political because it resists being drawn into the narrow black-and-white debates that characterise politics. Instead of getting entangled in myopic purposes of agitation, poetry seeks to investigate the forces that have already circumscribed the functioning of politics, the ones that have silently predetermined what can be said and what not. Poetry locates politics in the search for a language that can stretch the range of these boundaries and reveal the foundational framing of political choices.

The struggle over the location of politics and political criticism became particularly intensive with the emergence of the modernist movement. Modernism sought to detach art from society and carve out an autonomous sphere within which art is pursued solely based on its own grounds: *l'art pour l'art*. In such a situation, says the leading modernist art critic Clement Greenberg, 'content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything but itself'.³¹ Art that severs all links to the world and represents nothing outside of itself has, of course, come under harsh criticism from those who seek a more committed form of political engagement. Those who defend the autonomous work of art locate its political relevance precisely in the attempt to create a critical distance from moral norms and social conventions. Theodor Adorno, for instance, fears that committed and overtly political art is already a form of accommodation, for it often merely struggles in the name of a noble cause that has already become a political trend. Autonomous art, by contrast, constrains critical potential because its refusal to identify itself with the sociopolitical order contains a hidden 'it should be otherwise'.³²

The debate about the politically autonomous nature of art is complex and cannot possibly be engaged here, at least not in a sustained manner. Suffice it to say that Neruda tried to navigate between these two perspectives on poetry and politics. He clearly defended the need for an engaged poetry but he was, at the same time, aware that a too direct, too combative message could not interfere with the more fundamental forces that had already constituted the boundaries of the political, that is, the linkages between language and the representation of sociopolitical realities. This is why he knew that the poet had to hover back and forth between reality and utopia, between what is and what might be. 'The poet who is not a realist is dead', Neruda said. 'And the poet who is only a realist is also dead'.³³

No single poem, no matter how politically incitative and poetically insightful, can possibly achieve what poetry seeks to do: to break through the boundaries of existing reality constructs and reveal to its reader that which is, or perhaps even that which ought to be. 'Come see' is the prime dictum of a poem, whether it has political aspirations or not. But the process of seeing inevitably takes time. 'I write for the people, even though they cannot / read my poetry with their rustic eyes'.³⁴ There has to be a language first, a way of understanding that can actually

see the blood in the streets, that can pierce through the dialectic of violence within which the more immediate political battles are waged. Poets are, of course, not the only ones who have come to this insight. Some critical practitioners of global politics have reached similar conclusions. John Burton, for instance, is aware that entrenched political conflicts cannot be solved through approaches that simply extend old thinking patterns. Different mindsets are needed to mediate successfully in a conflict that opposes hostile parties. Without a shift in thinking there can be neither dialogue nor compromise. And 'any shift in thinking' Burton emphasises, 'requires a new language'.³⁵

There is, of course, an inherent tension in this interaction between language and politics. A poet and, indeed, any political communicator, must be as accessible as possible if he or she wants to engage the struggles that shape societal dynamics. Neruda was well aware of this necessity, which is why he sought to write in the language of everyday life. But he was also aware of the need to break through existing linguistic habits, for it is through these very conventions, inaudible and seemingly harmless as they are, that practices of domination become objectified. There is no easy way of dealing with this dilemma. Indeed, the dilemma may never go away.

Neruda likens the problematic process of breaking through the inaudible walls of linguistically objectified conflicts to the work of Arctic fishermen. 'The writer has to look for the river, and if he finds it frozen over, he has to drill a hole in the ice. He must have a good deal of patience, weather the cold and the adverse criticism, stand up to ridicule, look for the deep water, cast the proper hook, and after all the work, he pulls out a tiny little fish.'³⁶ But eventually the labour will bear fruit, the catches become more frequent and the fish grow bigger. And then, one day, poetry will find its voice and its listeners, the 'moment will come in which a line, the air / that stirred my life, will reach their ears, / and then the farmer will raise his eyes, / the miner will smile breaking stones, / the brakeman will wipe his brow, / the fisherman will see clearly the glow of a quivering fish that will burn his hands'.³⁷

Of circles, ruptures and hope

Time to recapitulate. To observe Neruda and his effort to render poetry political is not to endorse all his ideas and ideological *Leitmotifs*. Much of Neruda's post-Spain activism, in particular his unwavering support of Stalin, can be criticised from a variety of perspectives. And so can the masculinism that accompanied most of his poetry and politics. It was not the purpose of this article to problematise these images—a task that would require a sustained engagement with a variety of themes that could not be put to rest in an essay-length exposé. A brief revisit to at least some of these problematic zones is, however, necessary to put Neruda's poetic politics into perspective.

Neruda's world is a world of men, a world of brakemen and fishermen, of shoemakers and shovellers, of se(a)men, woodcutters and welders, of miners, mountaineers and mechanics. Of course, there are women in Neruda's worlds. There are many women. Neruda devotes some of his most beautiful and important poetry to them. 'Rest here with me', he pleads, 'let us darken our

eyelids together.³⁸ But Neruda's women are mostly seen through the male gaze. They are painted as objects of beauty and desire, even as places of worship. The world of women is 'like a cloudburst, sultry and dense: / red sulphate of quicklime, a secret sun / opening and closing the genital doors'.³⁹ For Neruda women are 'minimal, supple, earthy, transparent, round'.⁴⁰ They are passive objects rather than full-fledged agents, members of a society with their own political will, individual or collective. When women occasionally surface as agents or as metaphor for agents, then it is in typically womanly trades, as gardeners, childbearers and menders, as lovers and nocturnal fantasies. The battles women fight are the battles of fire and foam, of wrinkles and piles, of linens and coarse cottons, in short, the 'wars of the washerwomen'.⁴¹

Neruda was a chronicler of his time. He was a mirror of society, a mirror that reproduced, in an unproblematised way, prevalent images of unequal gender relations. Neruda's mirror was a mirror with blind-spots, with dark corners and blurring edges. There were scratches too, even the occasional crack. Of course, no mirror can represent all that is or ought to be. It can only show what lies within its frame. Neruda may have employed multiple mirrors and directed them in multiple directions. But he still took decisions, inherently personal decisions, inherently political decisions, about how to position his poetic viewing devices.

A poet who wants to function as a chronicler of his or her time must do more than merely reflect the *Zeitgeist* of an epoch. Reflection is not enough. To write poetry that is of poetic and political value, the author must produce more than mirror images of society. He or she has to distort visions in order to challenge the entrenched forms of representations that have come to circumscribe our understanding of sociopolitical reality. The poet's task is to help us see familiar things in new ways, to make us recognise how we have constituted our vision of the world and, by extension, the world itself. By opening up different perspectives on realities, poetry may be able to provide new solutions to old dilemmas. But in order to aspire to this ambitious endeavour the poet may at times have to hurl a rock against the mirror and shatter its deeply embedded image of the world. Only then can multiplicities emerge. Only then can poetry remain open, anticipate the unexpected and seek out the Other, the one that has not even come into sight yet. This search for conversation beyond the here and now, beyond the current understanding of social reality, is the essence of poetry, its *raison d'être*. Poetry, Neruda says, 'has to walk in the darkness and encounter the heart of man, the eyes of women, the strangers in the streets, those who at twilight or in the middle of the starry night feel the need for at least one line of poetry'.⁴² Neruda's stroll through the twilight of politics, his play with mirrors and mirror-images, was characterised by mixed success. It is in the mixture of this success, and in a critical engagement with it, that we can most successfully locate the insight Neruda may bring to contemporary sociopolitical challenges.

There were days in Neruda's poetry, bright days, days when his words showed the way, glowing in the midday sun. His poems gave voice to many people who had no voice before. They dealt with the unjust arrangements of class societies, the suffering caused by war or the inequalities of the political and economic relations between North and South.

There were nights in Neruda's poetry too, dark nights, nights when his words

were suffocated by deathbringing silence, nights when his own words drowned the voices of others. He was clearly unable to recognise the authoritarian dimensions of Stalinism. He also failed to understand the complex and far-reaching political forces that are at play in unequal gender relations. Neruda's poems not only left the masculine images of society intact, but actually replicated them, thereby entrenching the patriarchal status quo and its corresponding relations of domination.

Neruda died only weeks after Allende's government was ousted by the *coup d'état* that brought general Pinochet to power. But the silence that followed the death of Neruda and his political vision for Chile did not last forever. Neruda's body vanished. His poetry re-emerged, and so did the people of Chile. Poetry 'has a cat's nine lives', Neruda knew before his inevitable physical demise. 'They harass it, they drag it through the streets, they spit on it and make it the butt of their jokes, they try to strangle it, drive it into exile, throw it into prison, pump lead into it, and it survives every attempt with a clear face and a smile as bright as grains of rice'.⁴³

Poetry is like water. It may evaporate but it never disappears. It will always return and it will do so in ever changing forms, as rain, as snow, as rivers, as oceans, as something that constantly flows and seeps into all aspects of life, even the most minuscule cracks. It is this oozing and mutating quality of poetry that gives Neruda hope, the kind of hope for utopia that he expressed in his acceptance speech at the Nobel Prize Ceremony in Stockholm in 1971. 'We poets of today', he said, 'have been struggling and singing for happiness in the future, for a peace of tomorrow, for universal justice, for the bells of the year 2000'.⁴⁴ Of course, the turn of the millennium is imminent and Neruda's vision is as far away as ever from being global reality. But his hope for the good life, whatever it may be, remains as timely and important as ever, for it is this very aspiration—utopian and inherently impossible as it is—that helps us keep alive the struggle for a better world:

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.⁴⁵

Notes

¹ Thanks to Don Fletcher, Subhash Jaireth and Christine Sylvester for critical comments on an earlier draft of this essay, and to Rodo Paz for discussions about Neruda and Chilean politics that were as stimulating as the remaining aspects of La Posada.

² Pablo Neruda, 'United Fruit Co', in *Canto General*, trans Jack Schmitt, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993, p 179. *Canto General* is usually considered Neruda's most important work, a poetic *tour de force* that spans all the way from prehistoric America to postwar global politics. The original edition was published in 1950 in Mexico City, where Neruda served as Chile's consul general. For a selection of his poems see *Five Decades: Poems 1925–1970*, trans B Belitt, New York: Grove Press, 1974.

³ Neruda, 'United Fruit Co', p 179.

- ⁴ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in C Nelson & L Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- ⁵ Neruda, 'To My Party', in *Canto General*, p 399.
- ⁶ Jean Bethke Elshaint, *Women and War*, New York: Basic Books, 1987, p xiii.
- ⁷ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1994, pp 478–479.
- ⁸ Jean Franco, 'Introduction' to *Pablo Neruda: Selected Poems*, London: Penguin, 1975, p 14.
- ⁹ Manuel Durán & Margery Safir, *Earth Tones: The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981, p xvii.
- ¹⁰ Neruda, *Memoirs*, London: Penguin Books, 1978, p 116.
- ¹¹ Neruda, 'Great Happiness', in *Canto General*, p 393.
- ¹² Neruda, 'A Few Things Explained', in *Residence on Earth, Series III*, in *Five Decades*, p 53.
- ¹³ Neruda, 'Towards an Impure Poetry', in *Five Decades*, p xxi.
- ¹⁴ Neruda, 'A Few Things Explained', p 55.
- ¹⁵ Neruda, *Memoirs*, p 122.
- ¹⁶ Neruda, 'A Few Things Explained', p 53.
- ¹⁷ D Grünbein, 'Zu Kieselstein gehärtet: über das lyrische Sprechen', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 30 September 1995, p 50; J. Derrida, 'Shibboleth for Paul Celan', trans J Wilner, in A Fioretos (ed) *Word Traces: Readings of Paul Celan*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994, pp 3–72.
- ¹⁸ James Scully, *Line Break: Poetry as Social Practice*, Seattle WA: Bay Press, 1988, pp 126–127.
- ¹⁹ Neruda, 'I Remember', in *Isla Negra: A Notebook*, trans A Reid, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970, p 157.
- ²⁰ Paul Celan, 'Aschenglorie', in *Atemwende, Gesammelte Werke*, Vol II, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986, p 72.
- ²¹ Neruda, *Memoirs*, p 267.
- ²² For a more detailed analysis of Neruda's role during the Spanish Civil War see Durán & Safir, *Earth Tones*, pp xviii–xx, 74–80; and René de Costa, *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971, pp 92–99.
- ²³ Neruda, 'A Few Things Explained', p 57.
- ²⁴ Neruda, *Memoirs*, p 294.
- ²⁵ Durán & Safir, *Earth Tones*, p 79.
- ²⁶ Neruda, 'I Remember', p 157.
- ²⁷ Neruda, 'Great Happiness', p 394.
- ²⁸ Neruda, *Memoirs*, pp 125–126.
- ²⁹ Neruda, 'A Few Things Explained', p 57.
- ³⁰ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Poesie und Politik*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987, p 135.
- ³¹ Clemence Greenberg, 'Avant-grade and kitsch', in Cl Harrison & P Wood (eds), *Art in Theory: 1900–1990*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, pp 531–532.
- ³² Theodor W Adorno, 'Commitment', in Harrison & Wood, *Art in Theory*, pp 762–764.
- ³³ Neruda, *Memoirs*, p 265.
- ³⁴ Neruda, 'Great Happiness', p 393.
- ³⁵ John Burton, *Conflict Resolution: Its Language and Processes*, Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 1996, p 10.
- ³⁶ Neruda, *Memoirs*, p 198.
- ³⁷ Neruda, 'Great Happiness', p 393.
- ³⁸ Neruda, 'Southern Cross, trefoil of aromatic phosphor', in *A Hundred Love Sonnets*, in *Five Decades*, p 219.
- ³⁹ Neruda, 'Semen', in *The Hands of Day*, in *Five Decades*, p 329.
- ⁴⁰ Neruda, 'Naked you are simple as a hand', in *A Hundred Love Sonnets*, in *Five Decades*, p 209.
- ⁴¹ Neruda, 'Ode to ironing', in *Full Powers*, in *Five Decades*, p 259.
- ⁴² Neruda, *Memoirs*, p 260.
- ⁴³ *Ibid*, p 137.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p 268.
- ⁴⁵ Neruda, 'The Heights of Macchu Picchu', in *Canto General*, p 42.