

FLIRTING WITH THE MASTERS: POETS ON PABLO NERUDA

Arts Club of Washington

Remarks made on July 8, 2008 by E. Ethelbert Miller. They have been edited for this website.

I don't know at what age Pablo Neruda's poetry arrived in search of me. I do know when I examine the books in my personal library, they include 7 titles by Neruda. They are:

The Captain's Verses

Selected Odes of Pablo Neruda

Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda

Winter Garden by Pablo Neruda (Copper Canyon Press, 1986)

Memoirs by Pablo Neruda

The Poetry of Pablo Neruda edited by Ilan Stavans

Luis Poirot's Pablo Neruda, Absence and Presence with translations by Alastair Reid

Many of these books were purchased in the 1980s. I'm saddened by the fact that no one ever presented me with a gift of Neruda's work. Maybe this is indication that I've never been loved in this life. I did receive a poster of Neruda once. Neruda's work came to me after being baptized in blackness by the poets of the Black Arts Movement. It came after the influence of such poets as Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown. Where Hughes would be attracted to the Big Sea and Brown would walk the Southern Road, water and earth would come together in the poetry of Pablo Neruda.

Neruda's work entered my life as my life was being changed by people I met who resided in the neighborhoods of Mt. Pleasant and Adams Morgan. People who came from Nicaragua, and El Salvador. In the early 1980s I started spending more time around the Institute for Policy Studies and got to know such people as Isabel Letelier, Ariel Dorfman, and Saul Landau. For these individuals the politics of Chile changed their lives. Their friendship changed mine. The promise of the Allende Government, the Coup of 1973, the assassination of Orlando Letelier in DC, the struggle against the Pinochet regime – all opened the door to the poetry of Pablo Neruda.

Like many people it was Neruda's love poems that touched my heart.

I began to include in my own readings lines from Neruda's Sonnet XVII which can be found in his collection of One Hundred Love Sonnets:

I love you without knowing how or when
or from where
I love you simply without problems or pride
I love you in this way because I don't know
Any other way of loving
But this, in which there is no I or you
So intimate that your hand upon my chest
Is my hand

So intimate that when I fall asleep
It is your eyes that close

What I like about this poem is how it embraces the mystery of love. In the poem love is to be found in humility; love in this poem is also intimacy and oneness. In Neruda's work this type of love embraces not just man and woman, it also represents one's love of land, life and country. It also represents a love for the people.

In Pablo Neruda's *Memoirs*, Chapter 11 "Poetry Is An Occupation" Neruda mentions a number of things that continue to provide clarity for the type of writer I see myself becoming.

Here are 3 quotes:

When I wrote my first lonely books, it never entered my mind that, with the passing years, I would find myself in squares, streets, factories, lecture halls, theaters and gardens, reading my poems. I have gone into practically every corner of Chile, scattering my poetry like seed among the people of my country.

And if I am satisfied about one thing, it is that one way or another, at least in my own country, I have made people respect the occupation of poet, the profession of poetry.

It's obvious that the poet's occupation is abused to some extent. So many new men and women poets keep cropping up that soon we'll all look like poets, and readers will disappear. We'll have to go looking for readers on expeditions that will cross the desert sands on camels or circle the sky on spaceships.

Poetry is a deep inner calling in man; from it came liturgy, the psalms, and also the content of religions. The poet confronted nature's phenomena and in the early ages called himself a priest, to safeguard his vocation. In the same way, to defend his poetry, the poet of the modern age accepts the investiture earned in the street, among the masses. Today's social poet is still a member of the earliest order of priests. In the old days he made his pact with the darkness, and now he must interpret the light.

The interpretation of light I would equate with vision. I would link Neruda's words with those of Martin Luther King, Jr. The Beloved Community which King believed in can be found in the "seeds" of Neruda's poems.

For Neruda, poetry was always something useful and functional. In his 1971 Nobel Prize for Literature acceptance remarks, he mentioned that the best poet is often he who prepares the daily bread. The handing us of our daily bread is a duty and act of fellowship.

If we keep this in mind, then we will always move our lives towards communion with others.

We will understand that language can hold us together, and that the bread we prepare is for everyone. It sustains life. The breaking of bread, the sharing – this is an act of love. It moves us from the despair of solitude into a better understanding of who we are, and why we are here.

The influence of Pablo Neruda on my life and work can be measured in three ways:

- On my love poems. I became more aware of how playful language could be. Neruda's work opened the door to the sensual, the surreal and the erotic.
- I became more aware of how my surroundings could be included in a poem.
- Neruda as collector, traveler and diplomat; also a people's poet. He created work that spoke to people; work that even explored its own mythmaking.

Let me conclude with a poem that makes a direct reference to Pablo Neruda:

The Sea

*neruda once told me
that I should visit the sea
that to know a wave is to love
is to come and flow from one to another
the sand is like our hearts
so many parts to care for
so endless and yet it touches the sea
as one*