

THE ART OF POETRY NO. 14

PABLO NERUDA

“I have never thought of my life as divided between poetry and politics,” Pablo Neruda said in his September 30, 1969, acceptance speech as the Chilean Communist Party candidate for the presidency. “I am a Chilean who for decades has known the misfortunes and difficulties of our national existence and who has taken part in each sorrow and joy of the people. I am not a stranger to them, I come from them, I am part of the people. I come from a working-class family . . . I have never been in with those in power and have always felt that my vocation and my duty was to serve the Chilean people in my actions and with my poetry. I have lived singing and defending them.”

Because of a divided Left, Neruda withdrew his candidacy after four months of hard campaigning and resigned in order to support a Popular Unity candidate. This interview was conducted in his house at Isla Negra in January 1970 just before his resignation.

Isla Negra (Black Island) is neither black nor an island. It is an elegant beach resort forty kilometers south of Valparaiso and a two-hour drive from Santiago. No one knows where the name comes from; Neruda speculates about black rocks vaguely shaped like an island which he sees from his terrace. Thirty years ago, long

before Isla Negra became fashionable, Neruda bought—with the royalties from his books—six thousand square meters of beachfront, which included a tiny stone house at the top of a steep slope. “Then the house started growing, like the people, like the trees.”

Neruda has other houses—one on San Cristobal Hill in Santiago and another in Valparaiso. To decorate his houses he has scoured antique shops and junkyards for all kinds of objects. Each object reminds him of an anecdote. “Doesn’t he look like Stalin?” he asks, pointing to a bust of the English adventurer Morgan in the dining room at Isla Negra. “The antique dealer in Paris didn’t want to sell it to me, but when he heard I was Chilean, he asked me if I knew Pablo Neruda. That’s how I persuaded him to sell it.” It is at Isla Negra where Pablo Neruda, the “terrestrial navigator,” and his third wife, Matilde (“*Patoja*,” as he affectionately calls her, the “muse” to whom he has written many love poems), have established their most permanent residence.

Tall, stocky, of olive complexion, his outstanding features are a prominent nose and large brown eyes with hooded eyelids. His movements are slow but firm. He speaks distinctly, without pomposity. When he goes for a walk—usually accompanied by his two chows—he wears a long poncho and carries a rustic cane.

At Isla Negra Neruda entertains a constant stream of visitors and there is always room at the table for last-minute guests. Neruda does most of his entertaining in the bar, which one enters through a small corridor from a terrace facing the beach. On the corridor floor is a Victorian bidet and an old hand organ. On the window shelves there is a collection of bottles. The bar is decorated as a ship’s salon, with furniture bolted to the floor and nautical lamps and paintings. The room has glass-panel walls facing the sea. On the ceiling and on each of the wooden crossbeams a carpenter has carved, from Neruda’s handwriting, names of his dead friends.

Behind the bar, on the liquor shelf, is a sign that says *no se fia* (no credit here). Neruda takes his role as bartender very seriously and likes to make elaborate drinks for his guests although he drinks only Scotch and wine. On a wall are two anti-Neruda

posters, one of which he brought back from his last trip to Caracas. It shows his profile with the legend “Neruda go home.” The other is a cover from an Argentine magazine with his picture and the copy “Neruda, why doesn’t he kill himself?” A huge poster of Twiggy stretches from the ceiling to the floor.

Meals at Isla Negra are typically Chilean. Neruda has mentioned some of them in his poetry: conger-eel soup; fish with a delicate sauce of tomatoes and baby shrimp; meat pie. The wine is always Chilean. One of the porcelain wine pitchers, shaped like a bird, sings when wine is poured. In the summer, lunch is served on a porch facing a garden that has an antique railroad engine. “So powerful, such a corn picker, such a procreator and whistler and roarer and thunderer . . . I love it because it looks like Walt Whitman.”

Conversations for the interview were held in short sessions. In the morning—after Neruda had his breakfast in his room—we would meet in the library, which is a new wing of the house. I would wait while he answered his mail, composed poems for his new book, or corrected the galleys of a new Chilean edition of *Twenty Love Poems*. When composing poetry, he writes with green ink in an ordinary composition book. He can write a fairly long poem in a very short time, after which he makes only a few corrections. The poems are then typed by his secretary and close friend of more than fifty years, Homero Arce.

In the afternoon, after his daily nap, we would sit on a stone bench on the terrace facing the sea. Neruda would talk holding the microphone of the tape recorder, which picked up the sound of the sea as background to his voice.

—Rita Guibert, 1971
Translated by Ronald Christ

INTERVIEWER

Why did you change your name, and why did you choose “Pablo Neruda”?

PABLO NERUDA

I don't remember. I was only thirteen or fourteen years old. I remember that it bothered my father very much that I wanted to write. With the best of intentions, he thought that writing would bring destruction to the family and myself and, especially, that it would lead me to a life of complete uselessness. He had domestic reasons for thinking so, reasons which did not weigh heavily on me. It was one of the first defensive measures that I adopted—changing my name.

INTERVIEWER

Did you choose “Neruda” because of the Czech poet Jan Neruda?

NERUDA

I'd read a short story of his. I've never read his poetry, but he has a book entitled *Stories from Malá Strana* about the humble people of that neighborhood in Prague. It is possible that my new name came from there. As I say, the whole matter is so far back in my memory that I don't recall. Nevertheless, the Czechs think of me as one of them, as part of their nation, and I've had a very friendly connection with them.

INTERVIEWER

In case you are elected president of Chile, will you keep on writing?

NERUDA

For me writing is like breathing. I could not live without breathing and I could not live without writing.

INTERVIEWER

Who are the poets who have aspired to high political office and succeeded?

NERUDA

Our period is an era of governing poets: Mao Tse Tung and Ho Chi Minh. Mao Tse-tung has other qualities: as you know, he is a great swimmer, something which I am not. There is also a great poet, Léopold Senghor, who is president of Senegal; another, Aimé Césaire, a surrealist poet, is the mayor of Fort-de-France in Martinique. In my country, poets have always intervened in politics, though we have never had a poet who was president of the republic. On the other hand, there have been writers in Latin America who have been president: Rómulo Gallegos was president of Venezuela.

INTERVIEWER

How have you been running your presidential campaign?

NERUDA

A platform is set up. First there are always folk songs, and then someone in charge explains the strictly political scope of our campaign. After that, the note I strike in order to talk to the townspeople is a much freer one, much less organized; it is more poetic. I almost always finish by reading poetry. If I didn't read some poetry, the people would go away disillusioned. Of course, they also want to hear my political thoughts, but I don't overwork the political or economic aspects because people also need another kind of language.

INTERVIEWER

How do the people react when you read your poems?

NERUDA

They love me in a very emotional way. I can't enter or leave some places. I have a special escort which protects me from the crowds because the people press around me. That happens everywhere.

INTERVIEWER

If you had to choose between the presidency of Chile and the

Nobel Prize, for which you have been mentioned so often, which would you choose?

NERUDA

There can be no question of a decision between such illusory things.

INTERVIEWER

But if they put the presidency and the Nobel Prize right here on a table?

NERUDA

If they put them on the table in front of me, I'd get up and sit at another table.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think awarding the Nobel Prize to Samuel Beckett was just?

NERUDA

Yes, I believe so. Beckett writes short but exquisite things. The Nobel Prize, wherever it falls, is always an honor to literature. I am not one of those always arguing whether the prize went to the right person or not. What is important about this prize—if it has any importance—is that it confers a title of respect on the office of writer. That is what is important.

INTERVIEWER

What are your strongest memories?

NERUDA

I don't know. The most intense memories, perhaps, are those of my life in Spain—in that great brotherhood of poets; I've never known such a fraternal group in our American world—so full of *alacraneos* (gossips), as they say in Buenos Aires. Then, afterwards,

it was terrible to see that republic of friends destroyed by the civil war, which so demonstrated the horrible reality of fascist repression. My friends were scattered: some were exterminated right there—like García Lorca and Miguel Hernández; others died in exile; and still others live on in exile. That whole phase of my life was rich in events, in profound emotions, and decisively changed the evolution of my life.

INTERVIEWER

Would they allow you to enter Spain now?

NERUDA

I'm not officially forbidden to enter. On one occasion I was invited to give some readings there by the Chilean Embassy. It is very possible that they would let me enter. But I don't want to make a point of it, because it simply may have been convenient for the Spanish government to show some democratic feeling by permitting the entry of people who had fought so hard against it. I don't know. I have been prevented from entering so many countries and I have been turned out of so many others that, truly, this is a matter which no longer causes the irritation in me that it did at first.

INTERVIEWER

In a certain way, your ode to García Lorca, which you wrote before he died, predicted his tragic end.

NERUDA

Yes, that poem is strange. Strange because he was such a happy person, such a cheerful creature. I've known very few people like him. He was the incarnation . . . well, let's not say of success, but of the love of life. He enjoyed each minute of his existence—a great spendthrift of happiness. For that reason, the crime of his execution is one of the most unpardonable crimes of fascism.

INTERVIEWER

You often mention him in your poems, as well as Miguel Hernández.

NERUDA

Hernández was like a son. As a poet, he was something of my disciple, and he almost lived in my house. He went to prison and died there because he disproved the official version of García Lorca's death. If their explanation was correct, why did the fascist government keep Miguel Hernández in prison until his death? Why did they even refuse to move him to a hospital, as the Chilean Embassy proposed? The death of Miguel Hernández was an assassination too.

INTERVIEWER

What do you remember most from your years in India?

NERUDA

My stay there was an encounter I wasn't prepared for. The splendor of that unfamiliar continent overwhelmed me, and yet I felt desperate, because my life and my solitude there were so long. Sometimes I seemed locked into an unending Technicolor picture—a marvelous movie, but one I wasn't allowed to leave. I never experienced the mysticism which guided so many South Americans and other foreigners in India. People who go to India in search of a religious answer to their anxieties see things in a different way. As for me, I was profoundly moved by the sociological conditions—that immense unarmed nation, so defenseless, bound to its imperial yoke. Even the English culture, for which I had a great predilection, seemed hateful to me for being the instrument of the intellectual submission of so many Hindus at that time. I mixed with the rebellious young people of that continent; in spite of my consular post, I got to know all the revolutionaries—those in the great movement that eventually brought about independence.

mi día aquí hasta 20 de junio

Hôtel du Quai Voltaire

19, Quai Voltaire

PARIS - 7^e

TÉLÉPHONE

Hôtel : 548-42-91 (lignes groupées)

Bar : 222-28-11

Aliril
30 mayo

Querida Rita, Solo ayer
recibí la entrevista,
la conegire' este weeck-end
y te la mando el martes
4 proximo (mayo) Perdo-
na, pero hubo toda
clase de aventuras con
tu typescrit, pero
lo tendré!

Te abrazamos,

Pablo

INTERVIEWER

Was it in India that you wrote *Residence on Earth*?

NERUDA

Yes, though India had very little intellectual influence on my poetry.

INTERVIEWER

It was from Rangoon that you wrote those very moving letters to the Argentine, Hector Eandi?

NERUDA

Yes. Those letters were important in my life, because he, a writer I did not know personally, took it upon himself, as a Good Samaritan, to send me news, to send me periodicals, to help me through my great solitude. I had become afraid of losing contact with my own language—for years I met no one to speak Spanish to. In one letter to Rafael Alberti I had to ask for a Spanish dictionary. I had been appointed to the post of consul, but it was a low-grade post and one that had no stipend. I lived in the greatest poverty and in even greater solitude. For weeks I didn't see another human being.

INTERVIEWER

While there you had a great romance with Josie Bliss, whom you mention in many poems.

NERUDA

Yes, Josie Bliss was a woman who left quite a profound imprint on my poetry. I have always remembered her, even in my most recent books.

INTERVIEWER

Your work, then, is closely linked to your personal life?

NERUDA

Naturally. The life of a poet must be reflected in his poetry. That is the law of the art and a law of life.

INTERVIEWER

Your work can be divided into stages, can't it?

NERUDA

I have quite confusing thoughts about that. I myself don't have stages; the critics discover them. If I can say anything, it is that my poetry has the quality of an organism—infantile when I was a boy, juvenile when I was young, desolate when I suffered, combative when I had to enter the social struggle. A mixture of these tendencies is present in my current poetry. I always wrote out of internal necessity, and I imagine that this is what happens with all writers, poets especially.

INTERVIEWER

I've seen you writing in the car.

NERUDA

I write where I can and when I can, but I'm always writing.

INTERVIEWER

Do you always write everything in longhand?

NERUDA

Ever since I had an accident in which I broke a finger and couldn't use the typewriter for a few months, I have followed the custom of my youth and gone back to writing by hand. I discovered when my finger was better and I could type again that my poetry when written by hand was more sensitive; its plastic forms could change more easily. In an interview, Robert Graves says that in order to think one should have as little as possible around that is not handmade. He could have added that poetry ought to be written

by hand. The typewriter separated me from a deeper intimacy with poetry, and my hand brought me closer to that intimacy again.

INTERVIEWER

What are your working hours?

NERUDA

I don't have a schedule, but by preference I write in the morning. Which is to say that if you weren't here making me waste my time (and wasting your own), I would be writing. I don't read many things during the day. I would rather write all day, but frequently the fullness of a thought, of an expression, of something that comes out of myself in a tumultuous way—let's label it with an antiquated term, "inspiration"—leaves me satisfied, or exhausted, or calmed, or empty. That is, I can't go on. Apart from that, I like living too much to be seated all day at a desk. I like to put myself in the goings-on of life, of my house, of politics, and of nature. I am forever coming and going. But I write intensely whenever I can and wherever I am. It doesn't bother me that there may be a lot of people around.

INTERVIEWER

You cut yourself off totally from what surrounds you?

NERUDA

I cut myself off, and if everything is suddenly quiet, then that is disturbing to me.

INTERVIEWER

You have never given much consideration to prose.

NERUDA

Prose . . . I have felt the necessity of writing in verse all my life. Expression in prose doesn't interest me. I use prose to express a certain kind of fleeting emotion or event, really tending toward

narrative. The truth is that I could give up writing in prose entirely. I only do it temporarily.

INTERVIEWER

If you had to save your works from a fire, what would you save?

NERUDA

Possibly none of them. What am I going to need them for? I would rather save a girl . . . or a good collection of detective stories . . . which would entertain me much more than my own works.

INTERVIEWER

Which of your critics has best understood your work?

NERUDA

Oh! My critics! My critics have almost shredded me to pieces, with all the love or hate in the world! In life, as in art, one can't please everybody, and that's a situation that's always with us. One is always receiving kisses and slaps, caresses and kicks, and that is the life of a poet. What bothers me is the distortion in the interpretation of poetry or the events of one's life. For example, during the P.E.N. club congress in New York, which brought together so many people from different places, I read my social poems, and even more of them in California—poems dedicated to Cuba in support of the Cuban Revolution. Yet the Cuban writers signed a letter and distributed millions of copies in which my opinions were doubted, and in which I was singled out as a creature protected by the North Americans; they even suggested that my entry into the United States was a kind of prize! That is perfectly stupid, if not slanderous, since many writers from socialist countries *did* come in; even the arrival of Cuban writers was expected. We did not lose our character as anti-imperialists by going to New York. Nevertheless, that was suggested, either through the hastiness or bad faith of the Cuban writers. The fact that at this present moment I am my party's candidate for president of the republic

shows that I have a truly revolutionary history. It would be difficult to find *any* writers who signed that letter who could compare in dedication to revolutionary work, who could equal even one-hundredth of what I have done and fought for.

INTERVIEWER

You have been criticized for the way you live, and for your economic position.

NERUDA

In general, that's all a myth. In a certain sense, we have received a rather bad legacy from Spain, which could never bear to have its people stand out or be distinguished in anything. They chained Christopher Columbus on his return to Spain. We get that from the envious *petite bourgeoisie*, who go around thinking about what others have and about what they *don't* have. In my own case, I have dedicated my life to reparations for the people, and what I have in my house—my books—is the product of my own work. I have exploited no one. It is odd. The sort of reproach I get is never made to writers who are rich by birthright! Instead, it is made to *me*—a writer who has fifty years of work behind him. They are always saying: “Look, look how he lives. He has a house facing the sea. He drinks good wine.” What nonsense. To begin with, it's hard to drink bad wine in Chile because almost all the wine in Chile is good. It's a problem which, in a certain way, reflects the underdevelopment of our country—in sum, the mediocrity of our ways. You yourself have told me that Norman Mailer was paid some ninety thousand dollars for three articles in a North American magazine. Here, if a Latin American writer should receive such compensation for his work, it would arouse a wave of protest from the other writers—“What an outrage! How terrible! Where is it going to stop?”—instead of everyone's being pleased that a writer can demand such fees. Well, as I say, these are the misfortunes which go by the name of cultural underdevelopment.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't this accusation more intense because you belong to the Communist Party?

NERUDA

Precisely. He who has nothing—it has been said many times—has nothing to lose but his chains. I risk, at every moment, my life, my person, all that I have—my books, my house. My house has been burned; I have been persecuted; I have been detained more than once; I have been exiled; they have declared me incommunicado; I have been sought by thousands of police. Very well then. I'm *not* comfortable with what I have. So what I have, I have put at the disposal of the people's fight, and this very house you're in has belonged for twenty years to the Communist Party, to whom I have given it by public writ. I am in this house simply through the generosity of my party. All right, let those who reproach me do the same and at least leave their shoes somewhere so that they can be passed on to somebody else!

INTERVIEWER

You have donated various libraries. Aren't you now involved in the project of the writers' colony at Isla Negra?

NERUDA

I have donated more than one entire library to my country's university. I live on the income from my books. I don't have any savings. I don't have anything to dispose of, except for what I am paid each month from my books. With that income, lately I've been acquiring a large piece of land on the coast so that writers in the future will be able to pass summers there and do their creative work in an atmosphere of extraordinary beauty. It will be the Cantalao Foundation—with directors from the Catholic University, the University of Chile, and the Society of Writers.

INTERVIEWER

Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair, one of your first books, has been and continues to be read by thousands of admirers.

NERUDA

I had said in the prologue to the edition which celebrated the publication of one million copies of that book—soon there will be two million copies—that I really don't understand what it's all about—why this book, a book of love-sadness, of love-pain, continues to be read by so many people, by so many young people. Truly, I do not understand it. Perhaps this book represents the youthful posing of many enigmas; perhaps it represents the answers to those enigmas. It is a mournful book, but its attractiveness has not worn off.

INTERVIEWER

You are one of the most widely translated poets—into about thirty languages. Into what languages are you best translated?

NERUDA

I would say into Italian, because of the similarity between the two languages. English and French, which are the two languages I know outside of Italian, are languages which do not correspond to Spanish—neither in vocalization, or in the placement, or the color, or the weight of the words. It is not a question of interpretative equivalence; no, the sense can be right, but this correctness of translation, of meaning, can be the destruction of a poem. In many of the translations into French—I don't say in all of them—my poetry escapes, nothing remains; one cannot protest because it says the same thing that one has written. But it is obvious that if I had been a French poet, I would not have said what I did in that poem, because the value of the words is so different. I would have written something else.

INTERVIEWER

And in English?

NERUDA

I find the English language so different from Spanish—so much more direct—that many times it expresses the meaning of my poetry, but does not convey the atmosphere of my poetry. It may be that the same thing happens when an English poet is translated into Spanish.

INTERVIEWER

You said that you are a great reader of detective stories. Who are your favorite authors?

NERUDA

A great literary work of this type of writing is Eric Ambler's *A Coffin for Dimitrios*. I've read practically all of Ambler's work since then, but none has the fundamental perfection, the extraordinary intrigue, and the mysterious atmosphere of *A Coffin for Dimitrios*. Simenon is also very important, but it's James Hadley Chase who surpasses in terror, in horror, and in the destructive spirit everything else that has been written. *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* is an old book, but it doesn't cease being a milestone of the detective story. There's a strange similarity between *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* and William Faulkner's *Sanctuary*—that very disagreeable but important book—but I've never been able to determine which was the *first* of the two. Of course, whenever the detective story is spoken of, I think of Dashiell Hammett. He is the one who changed the genre from a subliterary phantasm and gave it a strong backbone. He is the great creator, and after him there are hundreds of others, John MacDonald among the most brilliant. All of them are prolific writers and they work extraordinarily hard. And almost all of the North American novelists of this school—the detective novel—are perhaps the most severe critics of the crumbling North American capitalist society. There is

no greater denunciation than that which turns up in those detective novels about the fatigue and corruption of the politicians and the police, the influence of money in the big cities, the corruption which pops up in all parts of the North American system, in “the American way of life.” It is, possibly, the most dramatic testimony to an epoch, and yet it is considered the flimsiest accusation, since detective stories are not taken into account by literary critics.

INTERVIEWER

What other books do you read?

NERUDA

I am a reader of history, especially of the older chronicles of my country. Chile has an extraordinary history. Not because of monuments or ancient sculptures, which don't exist here, but rather because Chile was invented by a poet, Don Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga, page of Carlos V. He was a Basque aristocrat who arrived with the conquistadores—quite unusual, since most of the people sent to Chile came out of the dungeons. This was the hardest place to live. The war between the Araucanians and the Spanish went on here for centuries, the longest civil war in the history of humanity. The semisavage tribes of Araucania fought for their liberty against the Spanish invaders for three hundred years. Don Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga, the young humanist, came with the enslavers who wanted to dominate all America and *did* dominate it, with the exception of this bristly and savage territory we call Chile. Don Alonso wrote *La Araucana*, the longest epic in Castilian literature, in which he honored the unknown tribes of Araucania—anonymous heroes to whom he gave a name for the first time—more than his compatriots, the Castilian soldiers. *La Araucana*, published in the sixteenth century, was translated, and traveled in various versions through all of Europe. A great poem by a great poet. The history of Chile thus had this epic greatness and heroism at birth. We Chileans, quite unlike the other crossbred people of Spanish and Indian America, are not descended from the

Spanish soldiers and their rapes or concubinages, but from either the voluntary or forced marriages of the Araucanians with Spanish women held captive during those long war years. We are a certain exception. Of course, then comes our bloody history of independence after 1810, a history full of tragedies, disagreements, and struggles in which the names of San Martín and Bolívar, José Miguel Carrera and O'Higgins carry on through interminable pages of successes and misfortunes. All this makes me a reader of books which I unearth and dust off and which entertain me enormously as I search for the significance of this country—so remote from everybody, so cold in its latitudes, so deserted . . . its saltpeter pampas in the north, its immense patagonias, so snowy in the Andes, so florid by the sea. And this is my country, Chile. I am one of those Chileans in perpetuity, one who, no matter how well they treat me elsewhere, must return to my country. I like the great cities of Europe: I adore the Arno Valley, and certain streets of Copenhagen and Stockholm, and naturally, Paris, Paris, Paris, and yet I still have to return to Chile.

INTERVIEWER

In an article entitled “My Contemporaries,” Ernesto Montenegro criticizes the Uruguayan critic Rodríguez Monegal for expressing the vain wish that contemporary European and North American writers study their Latin American colleagues if they want to achieve the renovation of their prose. Montenegro jokes that it is like the ant saying to the elephant, “Climb on my shoulders.” Then he cites Borges: “In contrast to the barbarous United States, this country (this continent) has not produced a writer of worldwide influence—an Emerson, a Whitman, a Poe . . . neither has it produced a great esoteric writer—a Henry James, or a Melville.”

NERUDA

Why is it important if we do or don't have names like those of Whitman, Baudelaire, or Kafka on our continent? The history

of literary creation is as large as humanity. We can't impose an etiquette. The United States, with an overwhelmingly literate population, and Europe, with an ancient tradition, can't be compared to our multitudes in Latin America without books or means of expressing themselves. But to pass time throwing stones at one another, to spend one's life hoping to surpass this or that continent seems a provincial sentiment to me. Besides, all this can be a matter of individual opinion.

INTERVIEWER

Would you like to comment on literary affairs in Latin America?

NERUDA

Whether a magazine is from Honduras or New York (in Spanish) or Montevideo or from Guayaquil, we discover that almost all present the same catalogue of fashionable literature influenced by Eliot or Kafka. It's an example of cultural colonialism. We are still involved in European etiquette. Here in Chile, for example, the mistress of the house will show you anything—china plates—and tell you with a satisfied smile: "It's imported." Most of the horrible porcelain exhibited in millions of Chilean homes is imported, and it's of the worst kind, produced in the factories of Germany and France. These pieces of nonsense are accepted as top quality because they have been imported.

INTERVIEWER

Is fear of nonconformity responsible?

NERUDA

Certainly in the old days everybody was scared of revolutionary ideas, particularly writers. In this decade, and especially after the Cuban Revolution, the current fashion is just the opposite. Writers live in terror that they will *not* be taken for extreme leftists, so each of them assumes a guerrilla-like position. There are many writers who only write texts which assert that they are in the front lines of

the war against imperialism. Those of us who have continually fought that war see with joy that literature is placing itself on the side of the people; but we also believe that if it's only a matter of fashion and a writer's fear of not being taken for an active leftist, well, we are not going to get very far with that kind of revolutionary. In the end, all sorts of animals fit into the literary forest. Once, when I had been offended for many years by a few pertinacious persecutors who seemed to live only to attack my poetry and my life, I said: "Let's leave them alone, there is room for all in this jungle; if there's space for the elephants, who take up such a lot of room in the jungles of Africa and Ceylon, then surely there's space for all the poets."

INTERVIEWER

Some people accuse you of being antagonistic toward Jorge Luis Borges.

NERUDA

The antagonism towards Borges may exist in an intellectual or cultural form because of our different orientation. One can fight peacefully. But I have other enemies—not writers. For me the enemy is imperialism, and my enemies are the capitalists and those who drop napalm on Vietnam. But Borges is not my enemy.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think about Borges's writing?

NERUDA

He is a great writer, and people who speak Spanish are very proud that Borges exists—above all, the people of Latin America. Before Borges we had very few writers who could stand in comparison with the writers of Europe. We have had great writers, but a writer of the universal type, like Borges, is not found very often in our countries. I cannot say that he has been the *greatest*, and I hope he will be surpassed many times by others, but in every

way he has opened the way and attracted attention, the intellectual curiosity of Europe, toward our countries. But for me to fight with Borges because everybody wants me to—I'll never do it. If he thinks like a dinosaur, well, that has nothing to do with my thinking. He understands nothing of what's going on in the contemporary world; he thinks that I understand nothing either. Therefore, we are in agreement.

INTERVIEWER

On Sunday we saw some young Argentines who were playing guitars and singing a *milonga* by Borges. That pleased you, didn't it?

NERUDA

Borges's *milonga* pleased me greatly, most of all because it is an example of how such a hermetic poet—let's use that term—such a sophisticated and intellectual poet can turn to a popular theme, doing it with such a true and certain touch. I liked Borges's *milonga* very much. Latin American poets ought to imitate his example.

INTERVIEWER

Have you written any Chilean folk music?

NERUDA

I've written some songs which are very well known in this country.

INTERVIEWER

Who are the Russian poets you like most?

NERUDA

The dominant figure in Russian poetry continues to be Mayakovski. He is for the Russian Revolution what Walt Whitman was for the Industrial Revolution in North America. Mayakovski impregnated poetry in such a way that almost all the poetry has continued being Mayakovskian.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think about the Russian writers who have left Russia?

NERUDA

People who want to leave a place ought to do so. This is really a rather individual problem. Some Soviet writers may feel themselves dissatisfied with their relationship to the literary organizations or with their own state. But I have never seen less disagreement between a state and the writers than in socialist countries. The majority of Soviet writers are proud of the socialist structure, of the great war of liberation against the Nazis, of the people's role in the revolution and in the Great War, and proud of the structures created by socialism. If there are exceptions, it is a personal question, and it is correspondingly necessary to examine each case individually.

INTERVIEWER

But the creative work cannot be free. It must always reflect the State's line of thought.

NERUDA

It's an exaggeration to say that. I have known many writers and painters who have absolutely no intention of eulogizing this or that in the State. There is a kind of conspiracy to suggest that this is the case. But it's not so. Of course, every revolution needs to mobilize its forces. A revolution cannot persist without development: the very commotion provoked by the change from capitalism to socialism cannot last unless the revolution demands, and with all its power, the support of all the strata of society—including the writers, intellectuals, and artists. Think about the American Revolution, or our own war of independence against imperial Spain. What would have happened if just subsequent to those events the writers dedicated themselves to subjects like the monarchy, or the restitution of English power over the United States, or the Spanish king's over former colonies. If any writer or artist had exalted

colonialism, he would have been persecuted. It's with even greater justification that a revolution which wants to construct a society starting from zero (after all, the step from capitalism or private property to socialism and communism has never been tried before) must by its own force mobilize the aid of intellect. Such a procedure can bring about conflicts; it is only human and political that these occur. But I hope that with time and stability the socialist societies will have less need to have their writers constantly thinking about social problems, and that they will be able to create what they most intimately desire.

INTERVIEWER

What advice would you give to young poets?

NERUDA

Oh, there is no advice to give to young poets! They ought to make their own way; they will have to encounter the obstacles to their expression and they have to overcome them. What I would never advise them to do is to begin with political poetry. Political poetry is more profoundly emotional than any other—at least as much as love poetry—and cannot be forced because it then becomes vulgar and unacceptable. It is necessary first to pass through all other poetry in order to become a political poet. The political poet must also be prepared to accept the censure which is thrown at him—betraying poetry, or betraying literature. Then, too, political poetry has to arm itself with such content and substance and intellectual and emotional richness that it is able to scorn everything else. This is rarely achieved.

INTERVIEWER

You have often said that you don't believe in originality.

NERUDA

To look for originality at all costs is a modern condition. In our time, the writer wants to call attention to himself, and this

superficial preoccupation takes on fetishistic characteristics. Each person tries to find a road whereby he will stand out, neither for profundity nor for discovery, but for the imposition of a special diversity. The most original artist will change phases in accord with the time, the epoch. The great example is Picasso, who begins by nourishing himself from the painting and sculpture of Africa or the primitive arts, and then goes on with such a power of transformation that his works, characterized by his splendid originality, seem to be stages in the cultural geology of the world.

INTERVIEWER

What were the literary influences on you?

NERUDA

Writers are always interchanging in some way, just as the air we breathe doesn't belong to one place. The writer is always moving from house to house: he ought to change his furniture. Some writers feel uncomfortable at this. I remember that Federico García Lorca was always asking me to read my lines, my poetry, and yet in the middle of my reading, he would say, "Stop, stop! Don't go on, lest you influence me!"

INTERVIEWER

About Norman Mailer. You were one of the first writers to speak of him.

NERUDA

Shortly after Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* came out, I found it in a bookstore in Mexico. No one knew anything about it; the bookseller didn't even know what it was about. I bought it because I had to take a trip and I wanted a new American novel. I thought that the American novel had died after the giants who began with Dreiser and finished with Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Faulkner—but I discovered a writer with extraordinary verbal violence, matched with great subtlety and a marvelous power of

description. I greatly admire the poetry of Pasternak, but *Dr. Zhivago* alongside *The Naked and the Dead* seems a boring novel, saved only in part by its description of nature, that is to say, by its poetry. I remember about that time I wrote the poem “Let the Rail Splitter Awake.” This poem, invoking the figure of Lincoln, was dedicated to world peace. I spoke of Okinawa and of the war in Japan, and I mentioned Norman Mailer. My poem reached Europe and was translated. I remember that Aragon said to me, “It was a great deal of trouble to find out who Norman Mailer is.” In reality, nobody knew him, and I had a certain feeling of pride in having been one of the first writers to allude to him.

INTERVIEWER

Could you comment on your intense affection for nature?

NERUDA

Ever since my childhood, I’ve maintained an affection for birds, shells, forests, and plants. I’ve gone many places in search of ocean shells, and I’ve come to have a great collection. I wrote a book called *Art of Birds*. I wrote *Bestiary*, *Seaquake*, and “The Herbalist’s Rose,” devoted to flowers, branches, and vegetal growth. I could not live separated from nature. I like hotels for a couple of days; I like planes for an hour; but I’m happy in the woods, on the sand, or sailing, in direct contact with fire, earth, water, air.

INTERVIEWER

There are symbols in your poetry which recur, and they always take the form of the sea, of fish, of birds . . .

NERUDA

I don’t believe in symbols. They are simply material things. The sea, fish, birds exist for me in a material way. I take them into account, as I have to take daylight into account. The fact that some themes stand out in my poetry—are always appearing—is a matter of material presence.

INTERVIEWER

What do the dove and guitar signify?

NERUDA

The dove signifies the dove and the guitar signifies a musical instrument called the guitar.

INTERVIEWER

You mean that those who have tried to analyze these things—

NERUDA

When I see a dove, I call it a dove. The dove, whether it is present or not, has a form for me, either subjectively or objectively—but it doesn't go beyond being a dove.

INTERVIEWER

You have said about the poems in *Residence on Earth* that “They don't help one to live. They help one to die.”

NERUDA

My book *Residence on Earth* represents a dark and dangerous moment in my life. It is poetry without an exit. I almost had to be reborn in order to get out of it. I was saved from that desperation of which I still can't know the depths by the Spanish Civil War, and by events serious enough to make me meditate. At one time I said that if I ever had the necessary power, I would forbid the reading of that book and I would arrange never to have it printed again. It exaggerates the feeling of life as a painful burden, as a mortal oppression. But I also know that it is one of my best books, in the sense that it reflects my state of mind.

Still, when one writes—and I don't know if this is true for other writers—one ought to think of where one's verses are going to land. Robert Frost says in one of his essays that poetry ought to have sorrow as its only orientation: “Leave sorrow alone with poetry.” But I don't know what Robert Frost would have thought

if a young man had committed suicide and left one of *his* books stained with blood. That happened to me—here, in this country. A boy, full of life, killed himself next to my book. I don't feel truly responsible for his death. But that page of poetry stained with blood is enough to make not only one poet think, but all poets. . . Of course, my opponents took advantage—as they do of almost everything I say—political advantage of the censure I gave my own book. They attributed to me the desire to write exclusively happy and optimistic poetry. They didn't know about that episode. I have never renounced the expression of loneliness, of anguish, or of melancholia. But I like to change tones, to find all the sounds, to pursue all the colors, to look for the forces of life wherever they may be—in creation or destruction.

My poetry has passed through the same stages as my life; from a solitary childhood and an adolescence cornered in distant, isolated countries, I set out to make myself a part of the great human multitude. My life matured, and that is all. It was in the style of the last century for poets to be tormented melancholiacs. But there can be poets who know life, who know its problems, and who survive by crossing through the currents. And who pass through sadness to plenitude.