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Chile in his Heart: The Last Poems of Pablo Neruda

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Abstract

The present paper is a modest attempt to show why the propaganda poems of Pablo Neruda do not add much to the reading of Chilean history and how one gain from these strongly worded and heavily politically loaded poems the humanitarian values which uphold the victory for the 'people', not for an individual. These are some of the ways in which these poems are the source of courage and regeneration. The paper also focuses on how he urges his people in the poems to think clearly and use their common sense and avoid disputes and how his ability to see human values such as worship of nature and the desire to uplift the condition of the poor makes him a greater leader worth celebrating worldwide.

Keywords: Humanitarian values, propaganda, communism, politics

Chilean poet Pablo Neruda became famous at the age of 20 years for his poetry. It was common for the Chilean government to send their poets as diplomats to other countries and Neruda was most of the time away from his homeland for that purpose. Neruda had no other occupation. He was a

poet first and by the time he returned to Chile in 1971 as the President of the Chilean Communist Party, after living in exile from time to time, he had been identified as a world leader in communist thought. His overtly political poems were in praise of communism. For a while in the nineteen thirties he was praising Stalin. In those years of Stalin's rule, the greater world was not fully aware of the latter's despotism apart from a few failures such as the famines in the Soviet Union. He was praising Fidel Castro as well who followed Marxism-Leninism to the letter. Finally, in Chile he resolved to favour the Socialist nominee Salvador Allende and campaigned for him. When Allende won the election Neruda was yet again appointed as the poet ambassador to France. While in France, he developed prostate cancer and returned to Chile. Meanwhile he was also awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

Although Allende was an elected President of Chile, there was tremendous insecurity. To gain influence in the South Americas the then president of the United States of America, interfered with the politics and economy of these smaller states. This was in view of the constant tension between two power blocs that is known as Cold War. In those years of Cold War between the communist countries lead by the Soviet Union and the democratic states led by the USA, Neruda wrote vehemently against the Vietnam War and the American president Nixon.

Neruda preferred the medium of poetry even for his political expressions. Salvatore Bizzarro noted in the introduction to his book on Neruda that "He argued that there are books which are important at a certain moment in history, but once these books have resolved the problems they deal with they carry in them their own oblivion. Neruda felt that

the belief that one could write solely for eternity was romantic posturing.” (Bizzarro, 1974) Nevertheless, he infused his political poetry with images of nature against catastrophe brought on by man. He praised the rise of Allende in Chile as the beginning of a new era of peace. He considered Nixon a tyrant and wrote poems about the Vietnam War. He criticized Nixon for escalating the armed conflict in Vietnam. When the war actually ended as a result of the withdrawal of American forces, North Vietnam captured South Vietnam and the country became the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Nixon and his predecessors had always intervened with the governments of Latin America through economic warfare. In particular by taking control over Chile’s valuable resources such as copper, nitrate and timbre and by blockading essential supplies such as oil to the country and financially weakening them, the American government ensured their superior economic power. Their influence in politics and military support in the overthrow of elected governments by the army or authoritarian leaders, commonly known as regime change, was also part of this policy. This also restricted the spread of communism. Neruda was aware of Nixon’s Latin American policy and his poems reflect his opposition to it. It was a systematic destruction of the economy of Chile through the policy of economic war. It affected the transportation infrastructure, the power supply, the supply of farm implements and the like. The strategies that they put in place in order to decrease the economic power of Chile and other South American states and tilted the international balance of power in their favour through economic warfare have been only recently studied and assessed in universities. As late as in 1988 and since an economist named Christian Harbulot, director of the Economic Warfare School in Paris, writing in

French, provides a historical reconstruction of the economic balance of power between states. (Web)

As late as 1994, the South American states had not been able to recover from the destructive economic policy of the United States. It was President Clinton who involved Mexico in his free trade policy. This has taken the environment into consideration along with the existing factors such as transportation infrastructure and agriculture. It has been beneficial for Mexico as they increased their production of manufactured goods and also export their corn to the US.

It is a well known fact that communism has not been a harmful political ideology after all. The only despot was Stalin, although he was popular in Russia and Georgia. The others like Mao Zedong and Fidel Castro have ruled their countries without much difficulty. In the case of Cuba, the Cold War caused substantial tension until the Cuban Missile Crisis after which Fidel Castro endeavoured in furthering socialism in the world until he in fact joined the Non Alignment Movement.

Now China, North Korea, Laos and Vietnam in Asia and Cuba in South America are the only communist countries of the world.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Chile experienced severe left-right political polarization and turmoil. In 1973 after the overthrow of Salvador Allende's democratically elected left-wing government, Chile was plunged into a long right-wing military dictatorship headed by Augusto Pinochet for 16 years that left more than 3,000 people dead or missing. The regime ended as late as in 1990. Now it is a sovereign state called the Republic of Chile.

Salvador Allende was Chile's communist leader whom Neruda championed. Allende was dead on September 11, 1973 and Neruda died just 12 days later. It has been reported that Neruda too was killed in the hospital. He was in fact infected with the Staphylococcus aureus bacterium, which can be highly toxic and result in death if modified. [*País, Ediciones El (2015-11-06)*. "Chile believes it "highly likely" that poet Neruda was murdered in 1973". Web]

Notable Neruda critics, Manuel Duran and Margery Safir have observed humanitarian aspects permeating all his political poetry.

"He produced Nature poetry that continued the movement toward close examination, almost still shots of every aspect of the external world, in the odes of *Navegaciones y regresos*, in *The Stones of Chile*, in *The Art of Birds*, in *Una Casa en la arena* and in *Stones of the Sky*. He continued as well his role as public poet in *Canción de geste*, in parts of *Cantos ceremoniales*, in the mythical *La Espada encendida*, and the angry *Incitement to Nixonicide and Praise for the Chilean Revolution*."

Duran 1981

The Poet's Obligation is a poem written in 1961 where Neruda clearly states that his work is to communicate the scent of revolutionary ideas to the deprived people. He has to be alert, keep his eyes and ears open and whenever there is any dispossession, his poetry can energize people to retaliate. Even in a prison or a remote location, his poetry should reach the underprivileged or the wronged.

So, drawn on by my destiny,
I ceaselessly must listen to and keep

The sea's lamenting in my consciousness,
And gather it up in a perpetual cup
So that, wherever those in prison may be,
Wherever they suffer the sentence of the autumn,
I may be present with an errant wave,
I may move in and out of windows,
And hearing me, eyes may lift themselves,
Asking, "How can I reach the sea? (p. 620)

His poems should motivate people to fight for their rights and to dream big. He calls it the poet's obligation or duty because hearts are shrouded in doubt, confusion, ignorance and domination by the powerful. Imagination is a rare privilege. It is the poet who would do the duty of imagining the good things for the future and transferring it to the people's minds through his poetry.

Neruda believed that while the poet is an inspiration to the common people, in turn it is the vast nature that wakes up the poet to his task. The poet is only an admirer of the power of nature to upturn human civilization wherever it has gone wrong. He composed several poems in love for the power of nature around the time he was practically deeply involved in political affairs that jolted him. He was aware of the evil of human civilization that tries to destroy the laws of nature and he constantly took cognizance of the power outside human affairs so that drawing inspiration from the earth, the sky and the sea, he could reconstruct the world gone stale. Or so he thought until he died.

In 1970, he published *Stones of the Sky*, a collection of 30 poems dedicated to the power of nature to recall the land that is destroyed by humans. The sky has now become the cradle of the rocks. The first poem can also be interpreted as the sign of upheaval in political terms. It says:

The succulent
 Sky
 Had not only clouds,
 Not only space smelling of oxygen,
 But an earthly stone
 Flashing here and there
 Changed into a dove,
 Changed into a bell,
 Into immensity.... (p. 805)

Here, the dove and the bell are more than just powers of nature. They are human cries that restore the human order. These have political overtones that can be ignored if read out of context. Since, Neruda was writing in an era of post nuclear warfare, it can also be said that the cloud in the sky, which was supposed to pour rain as a blessing, is now capable of pouring stones, like one can envisage in a nuclear explosion.

Conversely, “it is son of the salt/ that shoots up to heaven” (p. 806). The poet further asks, “Does the rock live without moving or growing?” and admits that “I will not answer because I cannot”, as a mortal who appreciates “the churning genesis/ of glowing and growing stones/ that live on, ever since, in the cold” (p. 808).

It can mean that it is in the nature of things to change, metamorphose into another kind of rock over time. It is in the nature of the earth to keep ‘shooting up’ its ‘salt’ from time to time so that there is an overhaul. It might be that the poet in Neruda asserted his right to rouse a revolution in the sense that he believed the bringing about of a socialist state was a revolution. If he addressed the need for a change in the societal order from time to time he would certainly call it a natural ‘churning genesis’, rather than man-made conflicts.

Earlier it was capitalism that replaced aristocracy and in the twentieth century there was an attempt to replace capitalism with socialism as a better economic order in a country. However, there were other combinations such as parliamentary democracy that perhaps escaped him and he furthered the cause of 'revolution' in Chile despite the possibility of free election.

In part XV, he describes the shore of Lake Tragosoldo in Atinana as a land of 'slippery stones, soaked, crystalline, ashen...' where he finds his humility. He has been famous and decorated. He has been working towards a better future for his country and has big dreams but when he pays homage to the shores early in the morning, he realizes that he knows very little. He writes:

and with burnt-out fires,
Of secret structures,
Of clear almonds
I go back to my family,
To my obligations,
More ignorant than the day I was born,
More simple each day,
Each stone. (pp. 808-9)

Chile is often called the land of fire and ice. It is dotted with hundreds of magnificent lakes and volcanoes. One gets a true feel of the majesty and power of nature in Chile. Since lakes are abundant, a view of one such beauty can be humbling. It is 'a substantial witness' to changes. He says:

The stone was there before the wind,
Before the man, before the dawn:
Its first movement
Was the first music of the river." (p. 810)
"I am this naked

Mineral:
 Echo of underneath:
 I am happy
 To have come so far,
 From so much earth...
 Fated to live and drop like a leaf...
 I want to go back (pp. 810-11)

In *Barren Terrain*, Neruda asks about the genesis of humanity. He asks, “why were we ordered, reduced to quantities?” He says, “we are rolled into numbers and soon fall off a list into oblivion.” (p. 815)

In his book, *The Separate Rose*, he says, “We all arrive by different streets, by unequal languages, at Silence” (p. 819). The gloom of desperation overtakes him. He remembers that life is ephemeral and even his strife would come to an end sooner or later. He also suffers from illnesses around this time so all the more gloom and desperation appears in his poetry. He writes:

We transients, followers of the wrong star,
 Were shipwrecked on this island as in a lagoon,
 Like in a lake in which all distances end,
 On a motionless journey, so difficult for men. (p. 819)

The thought of failing to make a mark crowds the poet’s mind every time his pen is poised over paper. Like “an aftertaste of blood and dust”, the poet also ruminates on death as what is usually called journey to the unknown. Should one die and still continue to feel anything, it would be “a long, long way... even farther from the stone masks”, and “just an oceanic emptiness”. (p. 821)

For a poet of his stature, it was not the time to contemplate death. He was more for the living. He dedicated

his art to the cause of the nation. He was unwilling to let life flow into the gutter as it were. It was necessary for a poet in his time and in the condition his country was in to use his contagious poetry to move his people towards a common goal which he believed to be beneficial.

The idea that a poet's craft can come in handy in politics and not just sit there like a tranquilizer during critical times is well known and has been articulated by Indian nationalist poets also. In the case of Neruda, it was more appropriate as he was also a political man.

A Call for the Destruction of Nixon and Praise for the Chilean Revolution is a poet's war cry. He wrote more than 30 poems during 1971-72 for the propaganda of Allende's party. He was aware that the economic war waged by Nixon from Washington was damaging his country. He invokes the mystic poet Walt Whitman to begin with, as the ambassador of Nixon's fall. It says: *I Begin by Invoking Walt Whitman*

Because I love my country
 I claim you, essential brother...
 So that, with your special help,
 Line by line, we will tear out by the roots
 And destroy this bloodthirsty President Nixon...
 Asking the old bard to confer with me
 I assume the duties of a poet
 Armed with a terrorist's sonnet (p. 825)

Soon after, he wrote *I Say Goodbye to Other Subjects*. In it he clearly states his purpose: "so that with my true verse/ I can punish the powerful rage/Of the immense executioner" (p. 826). He refers to President Nixon as the executioner whose mistress is money, calls him a beetle and a criminal who has robbed Chile of her copper and the Vietnamese of their innocent lives. He exhorts the earth calling her "sister-

comrade to “deliver the judgment” and apply the sword “over the neck of Nixon” (p. 827).

Come with Me urges the people of Chile to work for the better future of the country by supporting the “red flags in the dawn”. In these lines the poet truly expresses his belief that the red flags are ‘liberating’. And he writes further on in *Portrait of the Man* that “Nixon, the trapped mouse, his eyes wide with fear, is watching the rebirth of flags shot down” (830).

It is natural to be enraged by the interference of other governments in the internal matters of one’s country. Interference is achieved by generating opinion against a political side. So Neruda shrieked out in rage: Fratricidal claws want to lead us/into a civil war full of contradictions.

As a poet, in *Against Death* he also reasserted that the people of his nation were not so foolish that they would throw away the gift of life for a feud within the land. As Fernando Alegria wrote in his essay “What I want to emphasize is something very simple: Neruda was, above all, a love poet and, more than anyone, an unwavering, powerful, joyous, conqueror of death” (Alegria, 1974). He urged his people to think clearly and use their common sense and avoid disputes within the family. Finally, when Allende won the elections he wrote: As long as Allende is rising to victory/ the Fascists will run away like cockroaches” (833).

It may be argued that these propaganda poems do not add much to the reading of Chilean history. What we do gain from these strongly worded and heavily politically loaded poems is the humanitarian values that every poet tries to uphold: the victory should be for the ‘people’, not for a man; the land should survive all strife and the one who is responsible for the death of innocent people should be

punished by the earth. These are some of the ways in which a political propaganda can also be a source of courage and regeneration. It is not just the need to lead or dictate or to prosper in an administrative capacity that a poet works. His function in the world is far reaching and all encompassing. His ability to see human values such as worship of nature and the desire to uplift the condition of the poor makes him a greater leader worth celebrating worldwide. That is why Neruda's political poems too have been zealously translated by American scholars into English.

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