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Pablo Neruda and the Construction of Past and Future Utopias in the *Canto general*

MARK J. MASCIA

THE POETRY OF PABLO NERUDA, the Chilean Nobel laureate, has most often been analyzed for themes such as nature, love, human existence, and politics. The lengthy collection of the *Canto general* (*General Song*, 1950) is largely known for its fusion of two of the aforementioned elements, nature poetry and political discourse. Divided into fifteen sections, this collection poetically recounts Latin American history from its pre-Columbian origins to the point at which it was published. During the collection's coverage of approximately five and a half centuries of history, a number of poems stand out as ones which advance a highly optimistic and future-oriented vision of Latin American, and to an extent global, society. This vision is decidedly Marxist in nature, in accordance with Neruda's public stance as a leftist. This study will show that in many of the poems from the *Canto general*, what Neruda offers is indeed a utopian vision of the world, one which ironically finds many of its origins in human suffering and exploitation but one whose future success depends upon social action and its lyrical glorification.

The *Canto general* remains one of Neruda's principal works of poetry for a variety of reasons. One reason, as mentioned, is the fusion of different thematic elements that have been hallmarks in Neruda's work. Another is that it represented a milestone in his career with respect to his intended audience. For a number of years prior to this work, namely during the early years of his literary career (the 1920's and 1930's), Neruda's audience had often been an educated elite accustomed to reading the hermetic and highly symbolic poetry of the varied Latin American Vanguardists¹ in vogue at the time. With the profound historical and social changes occurring in Chile and in the world at large during the 1940's, however, Neruda's growing commitment to the Marxist cause had led him to alter his approach to poetry writing. Even before the Second World War, Latin America had become subject to numerous investment enterprises (originating largely, though not exclusively, in the United States) which exploited the majority of working citizens and helped create the conditions for left-leaning political activism. As a result, Neruda wanted the recipients of his work to include all people, whether members of an educated elite or the much larger working classes with which he had chosen to associate. The themes became more heavily infused with social concerns, and Neruda's poetic language ceased to be as difficult as it once was. This concern for social issues in Neruda's life and

work has some additional grounding in the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), about which Neruda had written a number of poems glorifying the Republican struggle and condemning fascism.² Much of Neruda's life, due to political changes at home, had also changed course and was led clandestinely. Neruda became an exile (both in Latin America and Europe), often coming in close contact with many blue-collar individuals and families whose cause he hoped to capture in verse. It should also be mentioned that the author, though highly literate and seemingly a member of an elite himself, was the son of a railwayman who did not want him to undertake a career in writing. It is for these personal reasons—as well as the historical events unfolding at the time—that, I believe, Neruda grew to have a distinctly utopian and optimistic worldview.

The first poem of the collection, “Amor América (1400)”, appearing in the section “La lámpara en la tierra” (“A Lamp on Earth”)³, is significant in that it creates a foundational, pre-Columbian utopian environment from which the remainder of Latin American history is to form. In this view, before the arrival of the *conquistadores*, the land presently known as Latin America was uncorrupted, and from the perspective of modern eyes, “innocent”. This myth of an uncorrupted ancestral land is one example of the utopian nature of much of the work. This land and its inhabitants also coexisted in a state of harmony which remained untouched before the arrival of Columbus and Western culture:

*Before the wig and the dress coat
there were rivers, arterial rivers:
there were cordilleras, jagged waves where
the condor and the snow seemed immutable:
there was dampness and dense growth, the thunder
as yet unnamed, the planetary pampas.*

*Man was dust, earthen vase, an eyelid
of tremulous loam, the shape of clay—
he was Carib jug, Chibcha stone,
imperial cup or Araucanian silica.
Tender and bloody was he, but on the grip
of his weapon of moist flint,
the initials of the earth were
written. (2000: 13)⁴*

The harmonious nature of humankind and the land is emphasized by a vision of pre-Columbian civilizations as being, quite literally, autochthonous, born of the earth and made in its likeness. This utopian return to the past creates a myth of the human race parallel to the Christian myth, later brought by the invading Spanish explorers, of humankind being formed in the image of God. Dianna C. Nieblyski has observed this utopian strain within Neruda's views of history:

Neruda, for whom the present is not real for its inauthenticity and the future only an ill-fated force against which one must oppose in word and deed, proposes an historical utopia; a nostalgic garden of origins but one well-founded in

the time of humanity; an earthly utopia. The world (primordial or otherwise) which the Chilean insists on celebrating has a known geography, the world has a name (it is called America, and also Juan), and it is populated by known beings. The Nerudian utopia goes back to the origins, but these origins are defined by their daily reality: earth, wheat, fruit, and sea. (210. My translation)

It is also in this past that Neruda hopes to find his roots as both a Latin American and as a human being. Using the metaphor of the father as an indication of his ancestry and his telluric heritage, the poet openly states his narrative intention of the *Canto general* further along in this initial poem:

*I am here to tell the story.
From the peace of the buffalo
to the pummeled sands
of the land's end, in the accumulated
spray of antarctic light,
and through precipitous tunnels
of shady Venezuelan peacefulness
I searched for you, my father,
young warrior of darkness and copper,
or you, nuptial plant, indomitable hair,
mother cayman, metallic dove. (14)*

This as-of-yet unnamed land, untouched by foreign hands and unspoiled by what will later come to be characterized as a society founded on exploitation and inequity, is reminiscent of an older utopian ideal, that of a "Golden Age" in the past where people did not engage in strife and conquest but rather peaceful cooperation among themselves and with their natural environs. Ostensibly, the variant on this tradition is, in this case, intended to be indigenous. Though some of the native cultures of Latin America are enumerated above, the land and the people are generally presented in this poem and in this section as being without name, in a state also resembling the paradise of Biblical legend.⁵ However, much of the rest of the *Canto general* will subsequently detail Latin America's "fall", in this instance not due to sinful decisions, but rather to the pernicious influence and domination by an imperial force, Spain. More recent forms of imperialism and injustice, most frequently identified with North America, will also be treated, as Neruda creates a dystopia of conquest and horror to contrast with the primeval utopia which begins the work. This dichotomy between utopia and dystopia, and the relationship among different chronological frames of reference, will help form the underlying progression of the *Canto general*.⁶

A construction of a future utopia, as opposed to one in the past, can be seen in "Llegará el día" ("The Day Will Come"), taken from the work's fourth section, entitled "Los libertadores" ("The Liberators"). In this poem, Neruda openly calls forth to all the unnamed heroes of Latin American independence to forge a brighter future and reject tyranny—a call replete with Marxist ideology. This section of the *Canto general* comes after the previous three sections had detailed the mythical roots of indigenous Latin American peoples and their subsequent conquest at the hands of Spanish

explorers. Given the history of Latin America, it should not come as a surprise that many people such as Neruda felt compelled to advocate the ideology of Marxism as the chief philosophical underpinning for a future society. In traditional Marxist fashion, the roots of a better future lie in the troubled past; this poeticized future, however, is a utopian place. Neruda's opening call to Latin America's heroes from "The Day Will Come" conjoins the public and the private spaces of Neruda's activity and glorifies his Marxist struggle: "I give you my people's / infinite leaf, the exultation / of every hour of struggle" (147).

Neruda continues the poem and openly mentions his chosen movement later, with respect to the anonymous fighters for freedom. The soldiers who have defended Latin America (unspecified by time and country but assumed to be from the period of the initial Conquest through the Twentieth Century) are "communists, / combatant heirs / of the metallurgic torrents" (147)—implying that, in theory, communism (in the sense of working-class vindication and comradeship with others of the same background) was already seeded in the minds of Neruda's heroes centuries earlier. An echo of the Nineteenth Century Cuban independence leader, José Martí, is contained in the following segment addressed to everyone Neruda had honored:

We're from the same land, the same
persecuted people,
the same struggle encircles the waist
of our America. (147)

Martí's voice is contained in the phrase "our America", as he had once published an essay (literally entitled the same in Spanish, "Nuestra América") advocating Latin America's need for cultural and political independence from Spain. Neruda then adds numerous references to suffering and discontent which the wealthy minority (and, implicitly, the foreign investor who aids it) had sown in the hearts of the poor, and ends the poem on a markedly utopic note in addressing his "liberators":

Descend to the mineral roots,
and in the desolate metal's veins
reach mankind's struggle on earth,
beyond the martyrdom that mauls
the hands destined for the light.
Don't renounce the day bestowed on you
by those who died struggling. (148)

This struggle is one not only to free Latin America from those who exploit its people, but also to create a more perfect and just society. In the end, Neruda believes, all people "rise up to the light of the universe" (148), as eternally honored heroes and creators of a better world. Helpful in understanding this ideal is the analysis of Inés Arredondo, who has observed, "in the earth, like hope, buried blood, bones, and wrath grow, and from it the new men will do so singing upon planting, and whose corn, kernel by kernel, will repeat the song of freedom upon its birth" (91. My translation).

Implied in this poetry is the utopian notion that eventually a communist society will triumph through revolution and armed conflict, as a logical next stage after the decay and defeat of capitalism and free enterprise. Equally utopian in nature is the notion (both in this poem and throughout the entire *Canto general*) that all poor people not only relate well to each other but also share the same common cause, regardless of their own cultures' histories and internal concerns.⁷

Several brief poems from the *Canto general*'s fifth section, "La arena traicionada" ("The Sand Betrayed"), portray Neruda's hopeful vision of a successful outcome in the struggle against oppression and injustice. This section details many of the villains whom Neruda considers blameworthy for Latin America's problems, such as large corporations and especially the conservative leaders and dictators of Latin America who support them. The theme of betrayal is especially relevant to the writing of the *Canto general* in that it was at this time, the decade of the 1940's, when Gabriel González Videla was elected to the presidency of Chile. Originally favored by Neruda and other leftists, he quickly outlawed the communist party in Chile, and as a result Neruda was forced into hiding and exile.⁸ This idea of betrayal thus highlights the relationship between utopia and dystopia, between a tumultuous present and a brighter future. As Roberto González Echevarría has noted regarding this section,

Betrayal is the leitmotiv of the litany, the culmination of which is betrayal of the land itself . . . , the very ground, the clay out of which humanity emerged innocent, uncorrupted, clean . . . It is here that the prophetic mode of Neruda's poetry enters, as an effort to reestablish links between beneficial events in a near future with broken promises in the past. The utterance of the words themselves is already the beginning of a restoration. (*Canto general* 11-12)

"Están aquí" ("They Are Here"), "Siempre" ("Forever"), and "El pueblo victorioso" ("The Victorious People") present many of these ideas without naming specific people or institutions responsible for the dystopic present.

In "They Are Here", Neruda generically refers to all people as his brethren, and highlights the theme of struggle and future redemption. Though the poet is not blind to the turbulence of the present time, his notion of a brighter future ends the brief poem on a decidedly optimistic tone:

I must summon them here as if they were here.
Brothers and Sisters: rest assured that our
struggle on earth will continue.

It will continue in the factories and fields,
in the streets and nitrate works.

In the crater of green and red copper,
in the coal and its terrible cave.
Our struggle will be everywhere,
and in our hearts, these flags
that witnessed your death,
that were bathed in your blood,

will be multiplied like the leaves
of the infinite springtime. (191)

It should be noted that not once in these poems does Neruda actually state when the just (and implicitly classless) society of the future will be created; his utopian dream of the "infinite springtime" is, instead, generalized and not laid out according to a predetermined plan. These ideas are also evident in "Forever":

A thousand dark-winged nights will fall,
without destroying the day these dead await.

The day so many of us await throughout
the world, the final day of suffering.
A just day conquered in struggle,
and you, fallen brothers, in silence,
will be with us on that vast day,
the final day of our struggle. (191)

Finally, "The Victorious People" again generalizes Neruda's self-declared affiliation with "the people" (the common masses not belonging to an oligarchy) without reference to geographical or personal identities. In the spirit of the familiar communist exhortation for workers of all countries to unite, Neruda's voice conjoins the particular and the named (himself) to the general and the unnamed (most of humanity):

My heart's in this struggle.
My people will overcome. All the peoples
will overcome, one by one.

These sorrows

will be wrung like handkerchiefs until
all the tears shed on the desert's
galleries, on graves, on the steps
of human martyrdom, are squeezed dry.
But the victorious time's nearby. (199)

Once again, a utopian vision of the future is grounded on an opposite state within the present, and the certainty of that future lends the poems a certain millenarian and apocalyptic character.

Further along in the *Canto general*, the notion of a union of oppressed, poor, and disenfranchised peoples is evident in two poems from its ninth section, "Que despierte el leñador" ("Let the Woodcutter Awaken"). This section is purposely named after Abraham Lincoln for his humble roots and renown as the leader who had ended American slavery. The section's third poem, whose first line is "Yo también más allá de tus tierras" ("Beyond your lands, America, I also wend my way") links the peoples of the Soviet Union (under Joseph Stalin at the time), Latin America, and the United States in their perceived common struggle. There are several main utopian traits to this poem: first, that people from these vast geographical groupings should even be able to fight together for the Marxist cause; second, the cause itself (in spite of Marx and other like-minded thinkers often insisting

that their worldview could not be utopian)⁹; and third, the specific characterization of Stalin's Soviet Union as a "worker's paradise" instead of a totalitarian dictatorship. The last of these traits can be seen in quotes such as the following:

Here wheat and steel were born
of mankind's hand and breast.
And a song of hammers cheers the ancient forest
like a new blue phenomenon. (261)

Neruda sees in Stalin's terrain "extensive zones of humanity" as well as "factories and songs", "smoke / from a thousand workshops", and "the wonder of harnessed energy" (261)—comforting images of the aforementioned "worker's paradise" which the Soviet state had purported itself to be and of the implied "utopia of the classless society" (Tillich 169). Utopian portrayals of specific places in this vast land are also evident. For example, Stalin-grad's collective resistance in wartime is a part of Neruda's agenda, as the city itself inches towards a utopian future: "Stalingrad, your steely voice surges, / floor by floor hope's reborn / like a collective house . . ." (262).

Communism's fight against the "decadent" capitalist West and against fascism occupies later segments of the poem, along with the utopian call to arms which Neruda extends to his model society:

Soviet Union, if we joined
all the blood spilt in your struggle,
all that you gave like a mother to the world
that moribund freedom might live,
we'd have a new ocean,
greater than any,
deeper than any,
alive as all the rivers,
active as the Araucanian volcanoes' fire. (263)

Soviet (official) culture is reborn after the devastation of the Second World War (or, as the Soviets then, as Russians now, had called it, the Great Patriotic War), led by idealized representations of men such as Stalin (much besieged by other forces, as "The world and his country allow him no rest" [264]) and his generals, who are also men from the masses ("None of them has palaces", as Neruda resolutely elaborates [265]).¹⁰ Dystopic destruction in the War is followed by a utopian result. The heroic resistance which the Soviet Union had made against Nazi terror is recounted (though without any references to Soviet terror mechanisms or any departure from the implied official Soviet rendering of many of the Nazis' victims as simply "victims of fascism" as opposed to specifically genocidal anti-Semitism.) An example of this official history can be seen in a polarized view of the War, with Nazi Germany and its Western appeasers on one side fighting against the Soviet Union:

But later the Germans fattened by Chamberlain
advanced in a wave of lead.
Stalin confronted them on all the vast frontiers,

on all the retreats, on all the advances,
and entered Berlin with his children like a
hurricane
of peoples and brought Russia's spacious peace. (264)

Even with the crisis of the Second World War, however, Neruda sees Soviet leaders as responsible for creating a political, social, and economic experiment—a clearly utopian one, as history has actually shown—which culminated in what the poet believes to be the following set of accomplishments:

They washed the villages.
They distributed land.
They raised the serf.
They expunged the beggar.
They annihilated the cruel.
They gave light to the spacious night. (265)

Later in his life, Neruda enumerated many of the same ideas in lectures and in other forms of public discourse outside of his poetry. For instance, in a speech given in Santiago de Chile in 1968, in which he mourned the death of cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, Neruda elaborated the same idealized notion of the Soviet Union and of its wartime struggles: "We know that the Soviet Union is a formidable seedbed of modest but illustrious heroes. The world still thrills at the memory of its glorious defense of peace and liberty in crushing the threat of Hitler. Those were somber and bloody days, and all humanity recognizes its immeasurable debt to the Soviets" (*Passions and Impressions* 369–70). This clearly idealized viewpoint, nevertheless, is born from a mixture of utopian thinking and observed historical reality. Adam Ulam's observations on Soviet communism, especially under Stalin, are useful in understanding the utopian strain present here:

With Marxism, and especially Communism, the key word is struggle. No ideological legerdemain can abolish class struggle, no single revolutionary eruption can overnight transform society and reform human nature. The extreme of this doctrine was formulated by Stalin when he affirmed that the closer one got to socialism the sharper became the character of class struggle, even in a society ruled by socialists. For the dream of a perfect society Communism substitutes the cult of the perfect Party. (129)

Never once are Stalin, his party, or his state taken to task in this poeticized history, though Neruda does try to show how Stalin supposedly transformed society into a better place.¹¹

Finally, Neruda addresses the United States and its denizens as unknowing fellow parties to the fight, and conjoins with that country the USSR and Latin America to create a better and more inclusive society. Comparing commoners in both Latin America and the United States through the use of names like Juan and John, Juana and Jane (266), Neruda concludes his poem:

You and I are going to open the doors
so that air from the Urals

can breach the ink curtain,
 you and I are going to tell the enraged:
 "My dear guy [in English in the original], you've reached the limit,"
 on this side the land belongs to us
 so that we won't be hearing the hiss
 of a machine gun but rather a
 song, and song after song. (266)

Of note, however, is the rather comfortable way in which this future is conceived, with an ironic reference to Winston Churchill's remark about the Iron Curtain as seen in the aforementioned "ink curtain". This treatment of the East-West divide implicitly places the blame for it on the capitalist West rather than on Stalin and his creation of the Eastern Bloc, though it also suggests that such a boundary can be breached if both sides joined together in one cause. This conflation of "realism" and idealism pervades the poem. Additionally, in understanding the thought which informs Neruda's writing, one must consider that Marxist "realism" is, in fact, another form of subjectivity: "But Marxist realism, with its apparent objectivity, is as subjective as any other interpretation of reality; for that reason, Neruda will only have eyes for that which is his, for his comrades or for that in which he sees a social sense close to his own" (Navas-Ruiz 258. My translation). Objective reality for Neruda is really a subjective utopia.¹²

The fifth poem from this section, "Que nada de esto pase" ("Let none of this come to pass"), focuses briefly on Abraham Lincoln and his roots as the poet's inspiration for a rebirth of proper values (and, as it is understood, as a representative precursor to communism.) The injustices of old are merged with those of Neruda's day, implying that modern day capitalism is a new form of slavery:

Let Abraham come, let his old
 yeast swell Illinois's
 gold and green earth,
 and let him heft his people's ax
 against the new slaves,
 against the slave's whip,
 against the poison press,
 against the bloody merchandise
 that they want to sell.
 Let the white youth, the black youth,
 march singing and smiling
 against walls of gold,
 against the manufacturer of hatred,
 against the merchant of their blood,
 singing, smiling and conquering. (270)

Though clearly well-intentioned and in and of itself a work of literature which does not advocate totalitarianism, the poem evinces a utopia in which racial harmony, working-class vindication and upper-class overthrow are all merged into the same space.¹³ Assuming that these goals are mutually inclu-

sive as well as fully attainable is a utopian dream. This conjoining of other parts of the world within a larger work primarily about Latin America, a work in which disparate areas are shown to struggle to achieve the identical goal of communism, is further evidence of this dream.

Later, the tenth section of the *Canto general*, "El fugitivo" ("The Fugitive"), refocuses on Chile as Neruda's troubled existence is brought to light. A reference to his actual flight from state-sponsored persecution under González Videla's regime, this section also articulates a utopian dream at the same time that it autobiographically recounts the poet's lifestyle as a fugitive. Its thirteenth and last poem, whose first line is "Arena americana, solemn" ("American sand, solemn"), illustrates Neruda's personal and political desires. These desires evince a longing for a utopian renaissance which is both individual and collective. Using an agricultural motif, Neruda promises a rebirth in Latin America in addressing its people:

let's join each living kernel
before it returns to the earth,
and may the new corn that comes forth
have heard your words
and repeat them and multiply. (286)

The "words" of the people will "again rise to be born, / to be sown, to perform / like bread, like hope" (286), further indicating the somewhat vague and utopian rebirth that the poet is promising. Collective effort, implicitly a reference again to the working-class agitation that stems from communist ideology, can be seen as Neruda later addresses his compatriots:

Give me your hands, I see them
through the rasping sands
of our American night,
and I choose yours and yours,
that hand and that other hand,
the one that rises to struggle
and the one that's sown again. (287)

The corn motif concludes the poem to highlight once more the notion of growth and fruition, transposed on a broader social and political level. Again, this "germination" takes place only after struggle and implied devastation; utopia is born from dystopia:

*Death, martyrdom, shadow, ice,
suddenly shroud the seed.
And the people seem to be buried.
But the corn returns to the earth.
Its implacable red hands
pierced the silence.
From death we're reborn.* (287)

In being a figurative rebirth, the bright future and its implied revolution for which Neruda yearns are, in essence, a return to a lost and ideal past: "The revolutionary act, in always being necessarily re-active (that is, as it intends

to correct history by returning us to a previous state), sends us back to the lost past, to the original point from which we were exiled, and to a future which is but a return to the beginning" (Niebylski 204. My translation).

Not long after the preceding poem, "La letra" ("The Letter"), from the collection's eleventh section, "Las flores de Puntiaqui" ("The Flowers of Puntiaqui"), generally glorifies the common man's struggle to create a more perfect world and continues with the same basic notion of rebirth. Addressing the people (commonly referred to as the "pueblo" in Spanish, a word frequently used in Marxist discourse in the Spanish language), Neruda triumphantly claims:

Enter, O people, the shores of the day.
March like an army, united,
and pound the earth with your footsteps
and with the same sonorous identity. (301)

The journey that the people face is both "uniform" and stained by "the dusty blood / of people murdered on the roads" (301), and ultimately leads to an apparent utopia. This utopia is reminiscent of the aforementioned "worker's paradise" frequent in the language and esthetics of leftist literature:

Above this clarity, farms, cities,
mines will bring forth,
and above this unity like firm
germinant earth, creative permanence
has been disposed, the seed
of the new city for lives. (301)

The metaphor of the "new city" stands as a clear indication of the utopian future which Neruda believes he can help create through verse.

At the poem's conclusion, the utopian ideal becomes cosmic, unlimited by geography and global in scale:

You return, exiled peace, shared
bread, dawn, sorcery
of earthly love, built
above the four winds of the planet. (301)

It is intentional that Neruda should use the future tense of many verbs within the poem, suggesting the notion of a utopian society actually capable of taking shape and, in fact, destined to do so. With these utopian characterizations of a future time, Neruda's work takes on a mythical quality with respect to the Americas: "Neruda's taste for roots, and their presence in the *Canto general*, are, above all, the expression of a myth. A myth created along with biography as well. This work is a sacred history, it is the expression of an absolute truth, it is a book of revelation and of the divine creation of America" (Matos Moquete 15. My translation). The primeval utopia of Latin America before 1492, examined earlier, coupled with the vision of Latin America (and the rest of the world) in an undated future together undertake this mythical quality.

Finally, two poems from the collection's fifteenth and last section, "Yo soy" ("I Am"), continue to construct a mythical and utopic future in which the poor and the oppressed are given voice and in which justice is achieved, both for the poet as an individual and for mankind as a whole. "La gran alegría" ("Great Happiness"), in addition to having a highly optimistic title, adds to the self-reflection which characterizes this section and begins the process of closure for this epic work. The poet's hopes seem simple, but when taken together and when fused with his sense of historical and moral determinism, they carry a utopian subtext:

I write for the people, even though they cannot
read my poetry with their rustic eyes.
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,
the mechanic, clean, recently washed,
smelling of soap, will see my poems,
and perhaps they will say: "He was a friend." (393)

Of note is Neruda's self-placement among the masses and his intent to reach a wide audience. Equally important is the Marxist vocabulary which is evident from the original Spanish. For the last phrase above, "'He was a friend'", one finds a non-literal translation of the Spanish word "camarada" (1986: 430), which means comrade—the Marxist term of choice for a fellow man—as well as friend or companion.¹⁴

Neruda creates a dual utopia—one of both macro- and micro-levels—as the poem concludes, in that a more perfect society is achieved generally, and as the individual reader is understood to be at peace with Neruda's work, with himself, and with the rest of the world:

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.
In the hardness that I built, like a box,
slowly and with metals, I would like
the youth who opens it, face-to-face, to find life,
and plunging his soul in may he reach the gusts
that spelled my happiness, in the stormy heights. (394)

This is Neruda's rendering of a revolution—at any rate, of its desired end.¹⁵ In considering Neruda's esthetic and political vision, however, one must take into account the perception of struggle and its desired outcome. As has been the case in many of the poems thus far, the struggle itself is almost described utopically, as its own object of glorification, along with what is supposed to come afterwards. In Marxism, one can easily conflate the means and the end, as Melvin Lasky has noted: "For Karl Marx, living

rather in apocalyptic hope, the longed-for means was the end; the revolution was itself utopia" (30, 31). This is one element occurring throughout the entire *Canto general*.

This future-oriented poetic treatment of the world and of one's own life is seen in the collection's last poem, "Termino aquí (1949)" ("I End Here [1949]"), in which Neruda states his inspiration for writing his work. It was not only in suffering but also in shared strength that Latin America was formed and that the poet chose to sing of it. After declaring his seemingly militant quest for a better life, "conquering indomitable happiness" (399), Neruda writes:

Common book of mankind, broken bread
is this geography of my song,
and a community of peasants
will one day harvest its fire
and will again sow its flames
and leaves in the ship of the earth.

And this world will rise again,
perhaps in another time free of sorrow,
without the impure fibers that adhered
black vegetation in my song,
and my burning and starry heart
will flame again in the heights. (399, 400)

As can be seen in poetic segments such as these, Neruda's basic principles for human interaction, government, and self-fulfillment may not be difficult for his reading audience to grasp, yet they contain a clearly utopian focus. With the *Canto general* concluded, the reader is able to ponder the broader meanings contained in the concept of utopia, whether Neruda's version or anyone else's. Such meanings include the following: "Utopia is nowhere, not only geographically, but historically as well. It exists neither in the past nor in the future. Indeed, its esthetic and intellectual tension arises precisely from the melancholy contrast between what might be and what will be" (Shklar 104). History has proved that modern revolutionary struggles may prove fruitful in establishing a communist or socialist system of party control, but what has not happened in such cases is the completely equitable and just society, free from repression by the state, which writers like Neruda had hoped would take shape—whether the frame of reference was Latin America, the Soviet Union, or elsewhere.

To conclude, Neruda's utopia certainly is not one born out of a desire to control or conquer in the usual militant or selfish sense. His desire to conquer is, as mentioned above, one to overcome grief (both individual, as an exiled writer, and collective, as a self-declared "man of the people") and to "conquer happiness." But is this conquest of a better world not itself a universal utopian dream? That is to say, in spite of the obvious historical and cultural context which needs to be remembered in order to fully grasp the meaning of this poetry, a variation of the universal human dream to create a perfectly happy space both for oneself and for one's fellow citizens is present.

Add to that the contemporary reader's hindsight in knowing how world politics have changed over the last half century—specifically, the collapse of communism in most of the world—and one can even more clearly see the construction of a utopian fable. Neruda wants his reader to be a part of that grand design, and perhaps in bridging the fictive world of the poet's lyrical utopia with the pragmatic knowledge of what the world really is—in combining the idealism and the realism that, somewhat paradoxically, can together be found in this collection—the reader can at least appreciate what the poet wanted human beings to feel. The problem is that humanity has not gotten there, more than a half century after the *Canto general* was published. With these ideas, it is hoped that further study will be undertaken in the utopian trends in Neruda's writing and that of other Latin American contemporaries.

NOTES

1. A number of prominent Vanguardists stand out among this group. Such poets and some of their key works include the Chilean Vicente Huidobro (*Poemas árticos*), the Peruvian César Vallejo (*Los heraldos negros* and *Trilce*), numerous poems by the prolific Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, and Neruda himself (above all with *Residencia en la tierra*).

2. Neruda's socially and politically oriented poetry, though utopian as it so often can be, thus has some historical basis in empirical observation. In this instance, the reality is the poet's witnessing of the carnage and eventual undesired outcome of the Spanish Civil War. Jaime Alazraki analyzes these concerns and their relationship to the poet's observations of the War, though the eventual utopian dream which infuses the *Canto general* and other similarly-themed poetry is not as often taken into account. Alazraki's analysis instead is grounded in this initial "realism" which so heavily influenced Neruda: "Neruda's political connection to the Left and then to communism is not established via a partisan or ideological link with these forces, but rather through the bloody epic of the Spanish people for their freedom. It is not about this or that party, these or those political ideas; rather, it is about the spilt blood and his voice clamoring for justice." (188–189) (All translations of secondary sources are mine.) This realism, however, would later be melded together with the idealism and utopianism of the *Canto general*. For further study of the origins and evolution of Neruda's sociopolitical poetry, see Sicard.

3. All direct quotations of Neruda's poetry from the *Canto general* are taken from the translation by Jack Schmitt (2000). Some poem titles and some of the sections of this poetry collection may not have been translated literally by the translator.

4. The poem as presented here appears in italics in both the original Spanish version and this English translation. All poems henceforth in this study will appear either in normal type or in italics as per their actual appearance in publication in both languages. I have not altered the appearance of any poems.

5. In addition, during the age of exploration and colonization in the New World, present-day Latin America had often been seen as its own utopia through European eyes. This perspective, it must be noted, was still one based on a European worldview that was just emerging from the Middle Ages. For examples of how pre-modern Latin America had been exploited in utopian literature in Europe, see Pastor.

6. Roberto González Echevarría, in his introduction to the edition of the *Canto general* used here, recognizes this relationship between a past utopia and a contemporary dystopia. Refer-

ring specifically to the second section of the collection, "Las alturas de Machu Picchu" ("The Heights of Machu Picchu"), he writes, "It is here that Neruda's vision is refocused by the presence of these ruins, testament to a utopia in the past, an allegiance of a collectivity with nature to create beauty and justice. It is an allegiance also marred by violence, abuse, and betrayal" (7).

It should also be noted that the reason these poems come from such disparate sections of the *Canto general* is because they best represent the different chronological frames of reference for creating utopias. In this instance, most clear references to past utopias occur in the collection's initial section, whereas many versions of future utopias simply occur scattered in other sections, including the work's last one. The *Canto general* itself, though generally linear in its approach, is not completely linear in the sense that it does not poetically treat history from c.1400 to the mid-twentieth century without some gaps, pauses to reflect on ideas and events, and overlapping of different epochs.

7. Emir Rodríguez Monegal, among other scholars, has stated that many of Neruda's notions regarding the interaction between societies and regarding global politics are flawed and simplistic in their bipolarity. He suggests also that Neruda does not acknowledge what today would be considered human rights abuses and other such crimes in, for example, the Aztec and Incan empires before Spanish colonization, or the imperial activity of the French and Dutch before the independence of Latin America. Finally, he critiques Neruda for not following actual Marxist philosophy in his conception of geopolitics, but rather "the varying postulates of the Cold War" (238. My translation). Niebylski also shares the view that Neruda's views are often bipolar. From her perspective, it is not only a question of separating the capitalist West from the communist East, but also a broader question of "distinguishing the good from the evil" (209. My translation) on which Neruda's politics are founded.

8. As mentioned in the essay, many leftists and like-minded thinkers in Chile had supported González Videla and had considered him a "man of the people". However, as González Videla acted to persecute leftist sympathy in his country, while courting the favor of the United States government and a number of corporate special interests, Neruda's literary activity began to treat this betrayal (and usually clandestinely so). One good example of this is a relatively short text written by Neruda, aptly titled *González Videla, el Laval de América Latina; breve biografía de un traidor* (*González Videla, the Laval of Latin America; A Brief Biography of a Traitor*). Notable is the fact that it was actually published outside Chile (in Mexico, in this instance), and in 1949—after the Chilean leader had begun to abandon his prior base of leftist support and actively work against its adherents.

9. Northrop Frye examines the utopian issue with respect to Marxism and its insistence on not being utopian. The dream of this philosophy was indeed one of utopia, though supposedly the process by which it was achieved was not: "The goal, a classless society in which the state had withered away, was utopian; the means adopted to reach this goal were 'scientific' and anti-utopian, dismissing the possibility of setting up a utopia within a pre-socialist world" (29).

10. Neruda's own personal recollection both criticizes and praises Stalin, somewhat paradoxically, from the perspective of hindsight. In his autobiography, Neruda states how he admitted to Stalinist repression yet was still left with his initial image of Stalin as a great leader of popular struggle against fascism, "a principled and good-natured man, frugal as a hermit, titanic defender of the Russian Revolution" (*Confieso que he vivido* 414–15. My translation).

Other scholars have noted Neruda's contradictory tendency to both accept and reject Stalin. As María Magdalena Solá has observed with respect to this attitude, "there are many lines of praise which Neruda, in time, will qualify, although he never comes to reject them" (194. My translation).

11. Raúl Silva Castro observes some of the same ideas and states that Neruda clearly fell into the tendency of echoing propagandistic sentiment from the Soviet Union and the Eastern

Bloc. Like some of the other scholars mentioned previously, Silva Castro also accuses Neruda of an excessively simplistic division between the East and West, between good and evil. During Stalin's regime, much propaganda was created which specifically targeted the notion of world peace—in this instance, a notion which gleefully proclaimed the USSR as a harbinger of peace and condemned exclusively the United States and its allies of being capable of breeding war. (207) Neruda's utopianism thus relies, in part, on a belief in what the Soviet propaganda machine put forth to the rest of the world.

12. Equally useful in understanding Neruda's conflation of "Marxist realism" with utopian ideology is Silva Castro's analysis and critique of "Socialist Realism", an artistic and cultural movement very much in vogue at the time and officially promoted by the Soviet Union: "Lines of poetry must thusly be dynamic, happy, vibrant, and bright; and as much as possible they should sing of things which mankind sees by his side, even when they are not exquisite, refined, or excellent. In sum, this is Socialist Realism" (213. My translation).

13. It should be mentioned that this mythical rendering of past, present, and future—within the United States specifically—is not limited to Pablo Neruda among Latin American writers. For example, the Cuban poet and contemporary of Neruda, Nicolás Guillén, had written many poems similar in focus and theme (the elimination of racial discord, the support of Fidel Castro's regime, and the eventual dismantling of Western capitalism.)

14. Neruda's vision of historical and future utopias, and his belief in recovering a lost ideal society for a future time, come, in fact, from a longer line of human thought. As Frank Riess has noted, "In the Golden Age, as described in the Renaissance, the ideal state of man was destroyed by the pursuit of wealth, namely of precious metals such as gold and silver. In the *Canto general* Neruda uses old tropes to suit new historical facts, giving them a Marxian gloss. Worker and gold exist in a society corrupted by commercial exploitation: but the ideal state is destroyed because the gold does not remain in the hands of the people, whereas formerly it was because the gold did not remain in the earth" (163–64). In poems such as this one Neruda effectively re-creates a future "Golden Age" with an obviously Marxist rendering, while promoting himself as a literary messenger of this future time.

15. Neruda's rendering of this revolutionary "happiness" is, once more, still based on a polarized philosophy of world politics, as noted earlier. Silva Castro examines this idea further when he states, "For Neruda, the socialist world is completely right, and is undertaking a gigantic task of construction destined to achieve the happiness of its peoples" (208. My translation). Though not all poems of the *Canto general* explicitly treat such a simplified view of the world, all sections of the work, to a greater or lesser degree, reflect Neruda's utopian and socialist stance regarding the world and often do indeed assume that a successful, joyous social revolution is predetermined to take place. Naturally, it is the Left and its way of thinking that emerge as the defenders of this future outcome.

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