

## Pablo Neruda: Poetics and Politics

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**Abstract:** *The paper explores the predicament in Pablo Neruda's dual commitment to poetry and politics and argues that they, though generically different in vocations, are inseparably interdependent. Neruda's whole life is characterized by a renewed impetus for change and by a command to go beyond his own attainment. His poetic mind responded to the same as the situation and environment demanded: sometimes to the intensely personal emotion or sometimes to the socio-political public affairs. This is true that the proper place of each major section of his work, political or nonpolitical, needs to be settled on its uniqueness, in the larger context of modern poetry as well as in the more personal context of his total work. This, too, cannot be ignored that his socially concerned and politically charged poems were evidently produced during his mature and diversely experienced age after an equally serious period of personal crises. The final poetic result is a unified whole where no associated ideas can be compartmentalized. Neruda smoothly balanced his equally important twofold commitments: towards poetry and people; and even after his serious dilemma, the booming accomplishments of these commitments finally branded him as poet-politician Pablo Neruda.*

**Key Words:** *Poetics, Politics, Poet-politician, Neruda, Dual Commitment, Crisis, Dilemma, Equilibrium*

### Objective and Methodology:

The objective of this research is to investigate the crisis in embarking on dual commitment of a poet as well as a politician. A qualitative evaluation is utilized for this research project leveraging objective methods like consulting primary and secondary sources e.g. poems by Pablo Neruda, some other critical texts by some Neruda scholars, online and printed journals and other research works on Neruda. Among the specified documents by Neruda there were *Memoirs, Canto General, Twenty Poems of Love and a song of Despair, and Residence on Earth*. The research methodology for this paper required gathering relevant data from the specified documents and compiling them in order to analyze the material and arrive at a more comprehensive understanding and historical reconstruction of the life and work of Neruda and the subsequent crises and dilemmas in executing

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dual personality and responsibility. To reach to the goal of this research, in-depth poetic analysis is done, and comparisons of the poet's political life and poetic life are made.

“... I believe that my duties as a poet involve friendship not only with the rose and with symmetry, with exalted love and endless longing, but also with unrelenting human occupations which I have incorporated into my poetry.” [1]

Most Latin American writers don't subsist in the imaginative landscape of utopia; rather, they prefer to engage themselves with realistic and predominant issues of the ordinary people. Hence, politics, which is an essential variable for the changes of the very mood of human existence, is one of those factors where these writers and poets stride. Consequently, we witness a good number of Latin American writers or poets being actively involved in politics. Their writings contributed to revolutionize the literary as well as socio-political future of Latin American countries – both by theorizing a uniquely Latin American ideology, and by attempting to implement it practically through active participation in politics - shouldering important government responsibilities for different periods of time. Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who views poetry as a social act [2], bears the same legacy of politics in his personal as well as poetic life; but in his own distinctive style. Neruda, like all other poet politicians, fused himself in the mass, suffering and living through pain but actively voicing against all these sufferings of people through poetry and politics alike. He declares:

“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 lived singing and defending them.” [3]

Neruda practiced politics through poetry sung to his people, and moved to defend their rights through political movements and struggles with poetic tools on hands. In reality, politics is a way of life in Latin America; and poetic ventures reflect that extraordinary fact as well. Therefore, in the instance of a committed political activist like Neruda, it is futile to separate his politics from his poetics. Though Neruda undertook both his vocations successfully as he wrote poetry as well as worked to fight even presidential election, his predicament is expressed when he says “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.” [3] So, his actions were to accomplish political activism. Jean Franco<sup>2</sup>, in the introduction to the *Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda* vehemently proclaimed: “Just as we cannot separate Dante and Milton from their theology nor Hugo and Whitman from the idea of democracy and progress so we cannot take Neruda's poetry without the political nettle...”. [4] Neruda dexterously drew equilibrium among his multiple

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<sup>2</sup> Professor Jean Franco is Professor Emeritus English/Comparative Literature, Columbia University. He was the first Professor of Latin American Literature in England.

personalities, say, of a poet, refugee, bohemian, Ambassador and finally of a politician (though his politics was not purely admired by everyone). And his own life reflects the same force as seen in his poetry. Thus, the study of Neruda exclusive of the acknowledgement of his political engagement and political influence on his poetry will stay incomplete and hence imperfect.

Therefore, some vibrant poetic as well as political incidents from mere a decade of Neruda's life ascertain how poetry and politics mix up and create the whole of Neruda with proportionate balance. From the publication of the *Twenty Poems of Love and a song of Despair* in 1924 to his appointment as consul in Barcelona in 1934 and so on, Neruda's story is diverse and exceptional; and his writing is the outgrowth of these varied experiences of his real life, e.g. loneliness (friendless in Rangoon), personal crises and loss (estrangement from his wife, relationship with Delia del Carril, political killing of his friends Lorca, Alberti etc.), financial desperation (facing poverty), political catastrophe (Spanish civil war) and what not. In 1927, when he was appointed to a diplomatic post in Rangoon and for five years lived in the East, serving in Rangoon, Colombo and Java and all the time cut off from spoken Spanish and lonely to the point of desperation, his poetic self started to struggle for an outlet of relief. Though engaged in political and governmental responsibilities, his poetic mind wandered back in his homeland searching for the company of his own people and environment. Hence, *Residencia en la Tierra (Residence on Earth)* completed during his stay in the Far East (1927-31) affirms his personal predicament<sup>3</sup>. As an outlet, the poet's nostalgic psyche sings out:

*I am alone with rickety materials,  
the rain falls on me, and it is like me,  
it is like me in its raving, alone in the dead world,  
repulsed as falls, and with no persistent form. [5]*

But he neither lost balance nor fell short impounding his responsibility only within personal, political or poetic life. He stood controlled and plunged into political motion driven by the sense of responsibility for people. So, simultaneous use of politically charged bold words along with archetypal poetic expressions, e.g. *petals and bullets, rain fall and dead world, flowers and Treacherous generals, people and proletariat, humble honeycomb and black vomit of generals etc.* (first one of the pair typically relates to poetics and the later one to politics) can be traced in his poetry.

As Spain became engulfed in civil war, Neruda became intensely politicized for the first time. His experiences of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and its aftermath moved him away from distinctive, privately focused exertion into the direction of collective obligation. He decides to speak not only for himself but also for others. He sings of the Spanish people and of their sufferings, and performs his responsibility by standing beside them with his poem:

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<sup>3</sup> Became lonely and frustrated in a distant alien land

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*I love your barren soil and your rough bread,  
your stricken people! . . .  
Stone of the sun, pure among territories,  
Spain veined with bloods and metals, blue and victorious,  
proletariat of petals and bullets,  
alone alive, somnolent, resounding. [5]*

In addition, the poet even tried to serve his people by fighting the senatorial election in the provinces of Tarapacá y Antofagasta in his own country. [6] For his political beliefs, we can say, the communist ideology he was preserving was linked to his close awareness of the Civil War in Spain. He was basically infected by the radical leftist politics of his literary and political friends<sup>4</sup>, as well as that of del Carril<sup>5</sup> [7] and indulged himself into this welcoming attitude towards politics. According to Jean Franco:

(his) initial involvement in politics had much to do with his friendship with Rafael Alberti, whose home was destroyed by Fascists in 1934, and with Garcia Lorca whose assassination soon after the outbreak of civil war in 1936 drew a passionate protest from Neruda together with the statement that he did not consider himself to be a political poet. [4]

Yet he lost his post as consul because of his involvement in the struggle, which ultimately led him into direct political confrontation, instead of keeping him away. Thus, Neruda became an ardent communist, and remained so for the rest of his life. This event of his life endorses his seriousness in active political involvement and justifies that he was not mere an amateur political commentator. By means of his speeches and writings as in a collection of poetry *España en el corazón* ("Spain in My Heart") Neruda offered his support for the Republican. He performs his political responsibility through poetry and writes:

*Treacherous  
generals:  
see my dead house,  
look at broken Spain:  
from every house burning metal flows  
instead of flowers.[8]*

In this connection, to avoid misunderstanding of Neruda just as political poet and his works as political manifesto Chilean author Fernando Alegría commented:

For those who find it difficult to separate Pablo Neruda's frame from the revolutionary vortex..., it is necessary to say that to know him as only a

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<sup>4</sup> Revolutionary Spanish poet Garcia Lorca, socialist President Salvador Allende of Chile and others

<sup>5</sup> In August, 1934 Neruda meets Delia Del Carril, who later became his second wife.

political figure or as a political poet is to overlook his transcendental aspects of his work.... Neruda made an effort to reach the mass through traditional devices, such as rhyme. [9]

Yet, consequently, Neruda's poetry started becoming less personal and depicted the sociopolitical concerns of man from a socialist ideological perspective. Though his first poems were intensely lyrical and personal, his later work was fiercely political and public. His poems would be addressed to the masses, and therefore had to be simple and direct:

*Madrid, alone and solemn, July surprised you with your joy  
of humble honeycomb: bright was your street,  
bright was your dream.  
A black vomit  
of generals, a wave  
of rabid cassocks  
poured between your knees  
their swampy waters, their rivers of spittle. [10]*

Many of his poems about Spain are moving, whether they are elegies or fierce attacks, but many are propaganda pieces. [11] But he never shed his poetical identity and never let it taken over by a pure image of politician. He overcame the confusion and dilemma and balanced his both commitments by showing his new faith in man and mankind making his poetic voice plural in tone and becoming a part of society. So, later, he declares: "Now I realize that I have been not simply one man but several". [2] He yet again brings the balance declaring himself as a socially committed writer:

I am not a communist. Nor a socialist. Nor anything. I am simply a writer.  
A free writer who loves freedom. I love the people. I belong to the people  
because I am one of them. That is why I am antifascist. My adherence to  
the people is not tainted with orthodoxy nor submission [12]

At times, Neruda moved to even more explicitly political and autobiographical writing which upheld historic quest and struggle of Latin Americans, social justice and more specifically his own political ideas for which he was persecuted and exiled for a considerable period of time. His two front journeys along the same border line gave birth to his masterpiece *Canto general*, which obviously Marxist in content, was written largely in the late 1940s while he was in hiding in Chile to avoid arrest for statements he had made against the government.<sup>6</sup> So

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<sup>6</sup> Neruda's life itself is a legendric saga of active political involvement. During his lifetime, Neruda occupied many diplomatic posts and served a period as a senator for the Chilean Communist Party.

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the growth of a poet and of a politician was simultaneous in pace and intensity and the function of both was sometimes blended in and expressed through the same poetic work. Martin Espada, poet and professor of creative writing at the University of Massachusetts, has hailed the work *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* (The Height of Macchu Picchu), a book-length poem in twelve parts in *Canto General*, as a masterpiece, declaring that "there is no greater political poem" [13] than this which marked a growing awareness and interest in the ancient civilizations of the Americas. [14] Though some of the poems of *Canto General* contain a series of the mystic exaltation of Latin American glorious past, the politically charged poems of it assorted itself as the political condemnation of a series of political agenda including issue of the Anaconda Mining Company<sup>7</sup>. As in "Some Beasts" the poet conveys his angst:

*And in the deeps of great water  
the giant anaconda lies  
like the circle of the earth,  
covered in ritual mud,  
devouring and religious*

He invested his lines to awaken the consciousness of the diseased and deprived. At this stage, politicized, critical and dissident Neruda, who had never planned of a political life along with his poetic one, actively participated in leftist political issues until he announced his membership of the Chilean Communist party of Chile.

Yet, his decision of shouldering political responsibility was not without any predicament, and the certification of this dilemma can be traced in his reaction towards his own unexpected dual life as he declared, "I have never thought of my life as divided between poetry and politics" in his September 30, 1969, acceptance speech as Chilean Communist Party Candidate for the presidency. [3] He, however, found the solution by combining both the vocations in complementary one.

Neruda-scholars have also tried to criticize Neruda for his dual responsibility and dilemma:

By becoming a political poet, Neruda faced a serious dilemma: how to meet his obligation as a militant, which demanded from him simplicity

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When Conservative Chilean President González Videla outlawed communism in Chile, a warrant was issued for Neruda's arrest. Friends hid him for months in a house basement in the Chilean port of Valparaíso. Later, Neruda escaped into exile from Chile through a mountain pass near Maihue Lake into Argentina in 1949, and did not return until 1952 when a new regime came to power.

<sup>7</sup> It's one of the largest American mining companies. Its territorial history was marked by conflict, including wars with Native Americans and disputes among mining interests. In 1971 Chile's newly elected Socialist president, Salvador Allende, expropriated Anaconda's Chilean copper mines under powers granted by an amendment to Chile's constitution. The Allende government was toppled in 1973, and the new government agreed to pay Anaconda more than \$250,000,000 for its expropriated mines.

and social realism in literature and at the same time maintain the hermetic beauty of his surrealist art? He would have to either purify his poetry of all decadent elements or give up revolutionary militancy. He could not, of course, follow either of these paths. [9]

Even after some scholars' indication that Neruda failed to maintain the equilibrium, Neruda arguably justifies his political involvement in an interview with Rita Guibert, and continues his life style not simply as a harmless naïve poet rather as lion that pounces and establishes its territory securing its rights with might and spirit:

Our period is an era of governing poets: Mao Tse Tung and Hồ Chi Minh. ... 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,...[3]

What he himself believes about poetry is: "poetry is like bread; it should be shared by all, by scholars and by peasants, by all our vast, incredible, extraordinary family of humanity." [15]

However, even after Neruda's stern political involvement Octavio Paz considered Neruda "the greatest poet of his generation" [7]. But, fearing 'frustrated dream'<sup>8</sup> which we find much later in Carlos Fuentes, Neruda blends and makes a uniquely balanced course to follow merging poetic expression of romantic love with realistic political consciousness:

My struggle is harsh and I come back  
with eyes tired  
at times from having seen  
the unchanging earth,  
but when your laughter enters  
it rises to the sky seeking me  
and it opens for me all  
the doors of life. [16]

He justifies his dual act of poet and politician by subjecting his themes to a realist's approach. He did not forget his duty even during his final days of departure to the other world in 1973. Neruda wrote the last chapter of his *Memoirs* just seventy-two hours after the fascist coup; and defined the coup as a criminal attempt against the people of Chile. His writings worked not only during his lifetime; his funeral turned into a massive protest meeting against the military dictator in Santiago. [17] So, his whole conception of life and art takes on a materialist's course that drains out his former metaphysical anguish. Thus, his poetry incorporates the power of revolution and change, asserting again Foucault's complex idea about the function of power in literature and society. This power has worked as a correspondent breeze between the poetic world of imagination and the very conscious and practical life of a politician; each giving

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<sup>8</sup> Fuentes sees the Mexican Revolution as a frustrated dream.

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the momentum to the other. So, even though, we can superficially opine that poetry and poetics just don't mix, here, in the case of Neruda, they just fuse into single generic element, one complementing the other. That is why, Neruda is remembered today for the power of his poetry, for his protest against fascism and oppression, and for the voice he gave to the people of Chile.

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