

My Favorite Poem: Autumn Testament, by Pablo Neruda

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The question is, of course, impossible to answer, so I asked myself, “what poem do I go back to most often?” & ***Autumn Testament*** by Pablo Neruda, the late Chilean Nobel Laureate, quickly returned in answer. Ask me again three months from now & some other poem might nominate itself, but for now, ***Autumn Testament*** is the clear winner. This is because lately I have been opening it during those famine times when months have passed since I last made a satisfying poem, when my senses have sent no pregnant images to my mind, when every stanza that I lay down reads sterile & off-key. Usually in such times this, & other poems of Neruda’s, will set my imagination into a productive energy that will yield promising drafts.

This is not to say that ***Autumn Testament*** is his greatest poem; most critics think that honor belongs to ***The Heights Of Macchu Picchu***, a magnificent epic that was based on his ascension to that Incan city in the Andes. Many South American readers are partial to the early, lusty love poems, which thousands have committed to memory. ***Residence In The Earth***, published in two volumes in 1933 & 1935, also has its advocates. & who could dispute with anyone who adduced these brilliant lines from an early autumn poem?

From ***Autumn Returns***

A day dressed in mourning falls from the bells
like a fluttering veil of a roving widow.
it is a color, a dream
of cherries sunk in the earth
a tail of smoke restlessly arriving
to change the color of water and of kisses.

So if you prefer some other poem of his to ***Autumn Testament*** I certainly won’t argue the point; in fact, I will waste neither time nor thought trying to adjudicate the work of a poet as prolific & brilliant as Neruda. I write here to say that ***Autumn Testament*** has a particular personal resonance for me. Perhaps this is because it is a poem of reflection & bequest by an old guy who enjoys the hell out of his remaining days, but is preparing himself for their end. I’m in that place too, & I appreciate how Pablo Neruda renders it with such exuberance. (Let me pause to write that I don’t claim to be a Neruda scholar; in fact, I have no Spanish & thus know, at best, half of the poet: his eye, but not his ear.)

He originates a very clever device: each section is introduced with an explanatory note in the margin. For example, he begins:

Autumn Testament

THE POET To die or not to die.
BEGINS TO I came out for the guitar
ACCOUNT FOR and in that fierce profession
HIS CONDITION my heart knows little peace –
AND for where they least expect me
HIS PREFERENCES I'll turn up with my gear
 to reap the early wine
 in the stetsons of Autumn...

“wine / in the stetsons of Autumn.”? That kind of incongruous juxtaposition is emblematic of Neruda in the way that he situated both his nouns & his modifiers. Though he was not a Surrealist, he often employed Surrealist devices such as free association & the placement of adjectives & adverbs next to nouns & verbs that they could never modify. Yet he does it with such skill & ease that the reader's intuition cops to it.

He continues: “I'll enter if they shut me out: / if they receive me, I'm off again.” &, having received him, having accepted that this will be a journey of paradoxes, we know that we're off on a trek to literally amazing places:

and if I rest up anywhere
I'll choose the kernel of the fire
choose whatever throbs and crackles
and travels on without a goal.

In the section that he names HE DISCUSSES / HIS ENEMIES / AND SHARES / OUT HIS / INHERITANCE (I'll just place these margin titles in the line from here on) he is generous, sort of, to his adversaries::

So I leave to those who barked
my hiker's eyelashes,
my preference for salt,
the address of my smile,
so that they can steal it all...

& then he girds himself against canonization by the hypocritically devout: “Let them not wear my clothes / and not appear on Sundays with slices of my corpse...”

This man whose virulence is clarion in hundreds of poems treats the fundamental old guy issue in HE SHARES / OUT HIS / SUFFERINGS

To whom was destined so much joy
brimming in my veins,
this being and not being fertile

that Nature helped me to?
I've been a river wide and filled
with hard stones ringing
clear night-time noises
and dark day song:
to whom can I then leave so much –
so much to leave, so little left,
a happiness without an object,
a horse alone among the waves,
a loom weaving the wind?

Another paradox: he's wielded the fluid dynamism of the river in his day; now, after a lifetime of joyous stud work, he is the old horse standing in impotent irrelevance off shore, waves of the power that he once deployed crashing at his knees. Old guys will recognize the feeling.

But this is not a mopey or bitter poem. In the AND DISPOSES / OF HIS JOYS section he wrote:

My sadness I intend for
those who caused me to suffer
but I forgot what they were
and I don't know where I left them:
if I see them in mid-forest
they are climbing vines
rising up with their leaves
and they end where you end,
in your head or in the air;
if they're not to rise again
you must change to another spring.

Here is another facet of Neruda's incredible poetic imagination: it possesses a projectile momentum that puts the reader in flight. That stanza, which is one compound sentence, contains a single idea: that he has forgotten the face of his sadness. Most poets would have stopped with "...I forgot what they were..." & gone on to the next thought. Neruda stares into his metaphors to find more metaphors beneath them. This not only deepens the poem, it pours motion into it, gives it impetus, life.

After two sections that dismiss hatred we arrive at the gorgeous FINALLY HE / ADDRESSES / HIMSELF / ECSTATICALLY / TO HIS / BELOVED in which he leaves his treasured paradoxes to his last wife:

Matilde Urrutia, I leave you here
what I had and did not have,
what I am and what I'm not...

You are the one most beautiful,
the wind has most tattooed...

You are red and you are hot,
you are white and very salty...
you are a piano laughing
with all the notes your soul
your eyelids and your hair
consent to shed on me,
I bathe in your golden shadow
and your ears delight me
as if I had found them
in the pools of coral reefs:
for your fingernails I fought
with terrifying fish...

It is difficult to present images like this without making them read sappy, insincere, like a pickup line. That's why love poems are so hard to write: yes. you publish them and you hope that the reader will find empathic sentiments among their lines; but most of all you want the lover who called those lines into being to believe that they are true, & be moved. This requires that you convey a natural honesty in your hyperboles. As I said, this is not easy.

This Matilde Urrutia is strong enough to make a myth of; according to Neruda's love, she was born of ancient magic & heroic struggle:

Body and face arrived
like me from angry regions
from rainy rituals,
old earths and martyrdoms,
the Bio-Bio sings
along our blood soaked clay
but you brought out of jungles
every secret aroma
and that manner of shining,
the profile of lost arrows,
a warrior's medallions...

What can he bequeath the woman who has everything? "...if in your touch you own / that perfume of burned leaves,..." Perhaps he should just pay his debt:

I owe you this silent valley
in which sorrows are lost
and only joy's corollas
rise to the forehead...

Or perhaps he should just let time take care of it:

Some time if we're not yet,
if we're not gone, if we're not coming,
under seven layers of dust...
we'll be together, love,
strangely confused together...

No, that won't get it: "but what will be the use / of graveyard unity? Let life not part us / and to hell with death!" My sentiments exactly.

In FINAL / INSTRUCTIONS Neruda lays out his testament to his friends:

...as I leave you nothing
you should all have something:
the most inclement thing I owned,
the most insane, the most intense,
sinks back to earth and into being –
petals of generosity
falling like peals of bells
into the green mouth of the wind.

And then, THE POET ENDS / BY TALKING ABOUT / HIS VARIED
METAMORPHOSES AND / BY / CONFIRMING / HIS FAITH IN / POETRY,
which has some of the most honest lines of verse on the subject of impending
death that I've experienced:

I've had a good experience
of all the times I have been born
like creatures of the sea
who've known sky-changes
and earthly destinations.
And thus I go, and cannot know
to which earth I shall return
or if I'll go on living.
While things make up their minds for me,
I leave my will and testament,
my shipshape box of tricks,
in order that, with many readings,
no one can ever learn too much
if not the never-ending motion
of a man clear and confused,
a man of rain and happiness,
energetic and autumn-bound.

And now behind this very page
I go and do not disappear:
I'll jump into transparency
like a swimmer in the sky
and then I'll get back to growing
till I'm so small one day
that the wind will take me up
and I won't know my own name
and I won't be anymore when he wakes:

and then I'll sing in silence.

Autumn Testament speaks of every aspect of what I once called in a poem my summary years, when the poet looks at the great distance behind & the shorter distance before him & wonders at, if not the meaning, at least the implications of his life, celebrates the miracle that his great love is still reciprocated, & prepares for the inevitable ascendance of his bones. With all that he has learned, he knows that he is not wise, & wonders if that admission is all that wisdom is. He hopes that he has affected the world at least a little, but knows that the world has a greater volition of its own that rolls within the scope of his touch but not his grasp. He writes poems about all of this in the spirit of generous offering, but knows that these probably are his most selfish works, for he has written them to himself.

Man, I wish that I had written this one.

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