

The House in the Sand

PABLO NERUDA

Translated by DENNIS MALONEY
& CLARK M. ZLOTCHEW

Photographs by MILTON ROGOVIN

White Pine Press, \$16.00 paper, ISBN 1-893996-74-3

Pablo Neruda

Absence and Presence

LUIS POIROT

Translated by ALASTAIR REID

Norton, \$25.00 paper, ISBN 0-393-30643-7

My Life With Pablo Neruda

MATILDE URRUTIA

Translated by ALEXANDRIA GIARDINO

Stanford University, \$27.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8047-5009-2

Pablo Neruda

A Passion for Life

ADAM FEINSTEIN

Bloomsbury USA, \$32.50 cloth, ISBN 1-58234-410-8

The centennial of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda's birth gives lovers of poetry, political enthusiasts, and all students of passion, character, and life a perfect opportunity to cast renewed interest on one of the 20th century's most prolific figures. Neruda transcended the standard classifications of "poet," "artist," and "political devotee" in ways almost unfathomable in the contemporary United States. In terms of his reach and ability as both poet and person, Neruda's closest North American reflection is the legendary Walt Whitman, a giant in both letters and life whom Neruda lauded in his own verse.

There are really two Nerudas to study: Neruda the artist and Neruda the man. To comprehensively understand the poet's magnitude, though, is to fuse typically dichotomous elements. In an era when artists of all kinds tend to occupy the margins of society, existing only peripherally to the core political concerns of the day, it is difficult to imagine a poet of the people as ambassador and statesman of a nation. Chile is incarnated in Neruda's life and work, the soul and aspirations of a people represented in his almost mythical existence. His ominous death only days after the military coup that ended the democratic rule of Salvador Allende in 1973 is for many directly linked to the repression and destruction of the Chilean people that began with the arrival of Augusto Pinochet.

With these four new titles there are multiple ways to indulge in Neruda's legacy. While each work stands firmly on its own merit, to consult them all provides a more complete understanding of the poet and creates a thirst for more. Perhaps best is to begin with *The House in the Sand*, read in conjunction with Luis Poirrot's *Pablo Neruda: Absence and Presence*.

Although Neruda's best and most ubiquitous works, *Residencia en la tierra* [*Residence on Earth*] (1925-1935) and *Canto general* (1943-1948), are necessary material for any serious interest in his oeuvre, the 38 prose poems of *The House in the Sand* are highly accessible and present the reader with some

of Neruda's most passionate subjects. Here he entrusts to poetic text his famed house in the fishing hamlet of Isla Negra in southern Chile, its eclectic contents, and above all the nature and sea that surround it.

A fervent collector of oddities, Neruda filled the house with innumerable objects of interest to him, including figureheads from old ships, shells, ships in a bottle, and even a giant wooden shoe purchased after much negotiation from a cobbler in Temuco. In simple, meditative prose he explores these items and his surroundings, the sea being the dominant theme, providing the title and impetus for 11 of the book's poems.

Beyond these useless bars, the sea, which really doesn't know it is circumscribed, and doesn't recognize it, is singing. Its violence is bitter; its song is a crashing sound. Its revolutionary foam speaks to me and explodes, speaks to me and collapses, calls to me and is already gone.

("The Sea")

Neruda also memorializes his countless companions, in poetry and otherwise. The names of many poets, among them Federico García Lorca, Paul Éluard, and Miguel Hernández are carved into the beams supporting the roof. The craftsman responsible for much of the construction of the house, Rafita, "the poet of carpentry" as Neruda sees him, is studied here, as is Don Eladio, the adventurer who first made building the house possible.

Here, said Don Eladio Sobrino (a seafarer), and here we remained. Later the house began to grow, like people, like the trees. Later Don Eladio died. ... On the very day in which he stopped singing and sailing forever, I climbed the ladder, and on the great sailing schooner that hangs suspended over the fireplace, I wrote his name in capital letters.

Neruda owned three houses in Chile at the time of his death, but the house at Isla Negra was the only one not destroyed by Pinochet's henchmen. It was, however, condemned and closed by the government, a hastily scribbled sign and a wooden fence discouraging the many pilgrims who came in homage to Neruda, their national voice. In *The House in the Sand* the property lives, bearing for the reader the inspiration it once gave its owner. The English translations read very well and are set opposite the original Spanish for the student of the language. While reading poetry in a second language is a difficult skill to master, the ease of the prose poems reproduced here also makes this edition an excellent learning tool.

Digesting this remarkable poetry of place and object, as opposed to the seemingly omnipresent self-produced poetry today, stimulates one to see with one's own eyes what so moved the poet, to visit the vital landscape. Luis Poirrot's photography gives the reader this opportunity.

In *Pablo Neruda: Absence and Presence*, Poirrot begins with an exploration of the house at Isla Negra. Somber and mysterious black-and-white images depict in large 8x8-inch format much of what so fascinated Neruda. Shots of his many collections, the home's living spaces, and his writing desk overlooking the Pacific place the poems and their subjects in close proximity. Selections from Neruda's work translated by the very capable Alastair Reid accompany the photographs. Notably, Poirrot's

examination illustrates that the house, like its celebrated inhabitant, is pervaded with a legendary, almost imaginary quality.

From here the book adopts a substantially more serious tone as it turns to investigate the effect of Pinochet's dictatorship on the house, and by association on Neruda himself, for years a devout and outspoken communist. On the fence constructed to seal the property, in order to secure its "dangerous" contents, are many scrawled messages of support and longing carved there by the faithful during the darkest years of military rule. There is also visual evidence of the looting and ruin that befell Neruda's other houses in Valparaiso and Santiago. This section closes with a tightly cropped image of Neruda's humble grave, adorned with flowers and scribbled upon by adoring visitors.

The remainder of *Pablo Neruda: Absence and Presence* is dedicated to his remembrance and, finally, his "presence." Short recollections from 21 individuals and couples are reproduced alongside their portraits. Rafael Alberti, José Donoso, Julio Cortázar, and Nicanor Parra are a few of the more celebrated contributors. In the final chapter, entitled "Presence," Poirot's work closes in heartening fashion with depictions of a lively if sometimes pensive Neruda, still years removed from his tragic last days.

The images, both poetic and visual, of these first two books are replaced in *My Life With Pablo Neruda* and *Pablo Neruda: A Passion for Life* with informal memoir and hard-nosed scholarship. Where art fittingly represents Neruda's resounding life in the previous titles, Matilde Urrutia offers, in her unassuming and conversational first-person account, a glimpse of his private side. Though often more a story of herself than of her professed subject and at times significantly lacking stylistic appeal, Urrutia's memories portray Neruda as an ordinary man seized with extraordinary passion for life, love, and art. Not a particularly literary person herself, Urrutia is drawn to the poet not for his evident talent but for the sheer magnitude and mirth of his everyday existence, a characteristic infectious to all those surrounding him.

The memoir does not aspire to offer a unique, coveted, or confidential view of an international luminary. It instead recounts Pablo Neruda as known to his friends and loved ones, eliminating his frequent indiscretions and infidelities and muting his personal faults and eccentricities. Perhaps the finest section of the work is the first chapter in which Urrutia describes a moribund Neruda, passing from life at the same time his maternal Chile suffers its own defeat. Urrutia's emotions during those days are a clear manifestation of the loss felt by an entire nation. Risking their lives in a public display of solidarity, thousands of Chileans processed through the streets of Santiago bearing the casket of their beloved poet.

If these initial three selections have stirred interest in further investigation of the deeper minutiae of Neruda's life, Adam Feinstein's *Pablo Neruda: A Passion for Life* is perfectly suited to the detail-oriented admirer. In extremely organized fashion, Feinstein moves chronologically from Neruda's ancestors to the aftermath of his death, stopping to carefully illuminate seemingly every significant event and encounter. More a personal biography than a literary one, the study uses

Neruda's poetry only as a touchstone to explore a peripatetic and social life.

Ample notes, a comprehensive bibliography, and an accessible index allow the reader to use the book thoroughly and indicate avenues of further research. There is well-developed information about Neruda's controversial politics here as well, something lacking in the other three titles. Feinstein has also done a commendable job of unearthing and employing a colossal number of interviews and first-person accounts from those close to the poet. For every aspect of Neruda's life there seem to be two or three primary sources quoted to enhance understanding. While an excellent and inclusive resource, the text is decidedly academic. Few paragraphs are free of citations and notes on source material, making it a slow read perhaps best suited to the true Neruda enthusiast.

Pablo Neruda is one of the world's most widely read and translated authors, and the diversity of these four selections is a testament to the broad range of interest that he still inspires on his 100th birthday. Readers are drawn to his unique legacy for his poetry, politics, various storied refuges, and above all, dedication to life. Few, if any, individuals of his prominence are so multifaceted yet approachable. There may never be a more fervent and complete defender of the world's people, or a greater champion of living ardently. Neruda has left in his wake an infinite landscape of passions to contemplate. ■

REVIEWER: **Tyler Jones** is a writer, carpenter, and editorial assistant at *The Bloomsbury Review*. He lives in Denver, CO.

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