

INTRODUCTION

NERUDA'S *CANTO GENERAL*, THE POETICS OF BETRAYAL

Neruda's *Canto general*, one of the highest poetic achievements of the century, was published in 1950 in a special edition printed in Mexico City, with drawings by the great muralists Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros.¹ The poet was then forty-six and already a much-admired figure of international stature. Like the *Divine Comedy*, Neruda's *Canto general* was a work written in the middle of the poet's life journey, when his personal past and work were already a considerable weight on him and his poetic persona a deep mirror upon which to look at himself. The vast poem was a return to origins and a rebirth, a sweeping recollection dragging, along with the memories of Neruda's intimate and poetic self, the natural and collective history of Latin America. This is the Whitmanian thrust of the *Canto general*. In the poem, Neruda draws a balance of his personal and creative life as well as of the history of the New World at the century's midpoint. He gathers here his *vanguardista* experience, particularly the surrealist, and tempers it with the keen historical awareness forced on him by the political catastrophes of the 1930s and 1940s. It is an awareness that undermined much of the creative élan of the avant-garde, that sobered up artists and intellectuals who felt that art itself could be a salvation for the woes of the modern world.

While these same developments produced an existentialist gloom in post-war Europe and some regions of Latin America and the United States, neither Neruda nor Carpentier (or Borges, for that matter) fell prey to its doleful allure. It was instead a heady *mundonovismo*, based on the New World's ever-

Introduction

renewed promise of a fresh start, that nourished the hope of Neruda and other Latin Americans; the hope that out of the ruins of Europe and Western civilization in general, Latin America would emerge as a new, vital force, untainted by the errors and sins of the Old World. At the core of the *Canto general* is an effort to create an American myth, a version of American history that can constitute the cipher of American destiny; in short, a story about origins which is at the same time about principles, in all of the various meanings of the word: as beginning, as rule, as enduring guide in all orders of life, not the least of which is the ethical and the political. Because Neruda is a romantic, that myth had to have as protagonist his own poetic self, the individual whose suffering and vision the myth will legitimize. Hence, his own journey through life is a foundational story woven into the fabric of the poem, as is the evolution of the poetic voice within its fictive time.

Neruda's life is inscribed throughout the *Canto general*: the poetic voice dates and details what he saw or experienced (e.g., an event as momentous as the ascent to Macchu Picchu) and later becomes the object of the last section of the poem, "I am." Although this prominent presence of the I as agent, and at times victim, is part of the *Canto's* romantic foundation, it is also a component of the real story that is incorporated into the poem's fiction, as Neruda's life was very well known to the public, particularly the Latin American public, by the time he wrote the *Canto general*. Even the process of its writing had become public knowledge. This was not poetry contrived in a garret or ivory tower, away from the pressures of everyday life, but instead one written in the midst of a very dramatic life whose adventures were being closely followed by almost everyone.

A succinct version of Neruda's life—as known by most in Latin America—could be told as follows. He was born in Parral, in southern Chile, on July 12, 1904. His name was Ricardo Eliecer Neftalí Reyes Basoalto. Neruda's father, José del Carmen Reyes Morales, was a railroad worker and his mother, Rosa Basoalto, a primary school teacher. She died of tuberculosis less than two months after the poet was born. In 1906, José married again, this time to Trinidad Candia Marverde, a loving and tender woman who was the only mother Neruda was to know. The family moved to Temuco, set on the verge of the rain forest in southern Chile, where the poet spent his childhood and adolescence. Neruda was writing poetry at an early age, against his father's will, publishing a few poems in local newspapers and student magazines. In October 1920, to conceal his vocation, Ricardo assumed the pseudonym Pablo Neruda. The first name could be a homage to Paul Verlaine; the last was taken from Czechoslovakian writer Jan Neruda. In his memoirs, Neruda claims that he simply picked the name out of a magazine. In 1921, now eighteen, he moved to Santiago, the capital, and enrolled at the Instituto Pedagógico, where he planned to become a French teacher. For the next few years, he wrote for various journals and befriended a number of bohemian poets. He published *Crepusculario*, his first book, in 1923 and *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* in 1924. This was the first time poetry in Spanish celebrated love in the language of everyday life, with unfettered expressions

Introduction

of desire for women whose beauty was not ethereal. *Veinte poemas* would make Neruda famous in the entire Spanish-speaking world. These love poems were and are known by heart by people of all social classes in Latin America and Spain. With very few close rivals, they are the most popular love poems ever written in Spanish.

Following every young Latin American writer's ambition to travel to Europe, Neruda sought a post in Chile's diplomatic corps. When a position finally materialized in 1927, however, it was as Consul *ad honorem* to Rangoon. Neruda had to rush to a map to find out where he was going, but he did accept the post. Between 1927 and 1932, when he returned to Chile, Neruda served as consul in Rangoon, Colombo, and Singapore. In the Orient, Neruda suffered his season in hell. Lonely, displaced, surrounded by the chaos and misery wrought by crumbling European empires, he delved deep into himself and wrote his first major book of poems (although *Veinte poemas* was no small accomplishment), *Residencia en la tierra*. This book revolutionized Spanish-language poetry. The poems, akin in their torrent of images to the surrealist poetry being written in Europe, show that Neruda had been reading Proust, Joyce, and other European "novelties," including perhaps the surrealists, while in the Orient. But the poems of *Residencia* were more powerful than anything the surrealists or any other avant-garde poets ever produced. This is so perhaps because they were closer to the romantic origin of the avant-garde. At the time, Neruda (who communicated mostly in English while in the Orient) had also been reading English romantic poetry and probably Whitman. These poems presented a world in ruins, a "godless apocalypse" as Amado Alonso put it in his fundamental book on Neruda, in a chaotic language that appeared to reflect inchoate passions, fears, and desires.² Only Quevedo, in the seventeenth century, had projected a world of such desolation in such powerful images. *Residencia* did not find a publisher until 1933, though most of the poems had been written in the 1920s.

In 1930, Neruda was married in Java to María Antonieta Haagenar Vogelzanz, a woman of Dutch ancestry, with whom he had a daughter. Their marriage only lasted until 1936, by which time Neruda had found his next great passion, Delia del Carril, an Argentine.

Back in Chile in 1932, Neruda was named consul in Buenos Aires. During the following year, he met Federico García Lorca, who was on tour at the time, and they became close friends and collaborators. But Neruda did not stay long in the Argentinian capital. In 1934, he was named consul in Barcelona, and in 1935, he was transferred to Madrid. The next few years, spent in the Spanish capital in the company of the Spanish poets known as the Generation of '27 (Lorca, Pedro Salinas, Rafael Alberti, Vicente Aleixandre, Luis Cernuda, Manuel Altolaguirre), were among Neruda's happiest and most productive. He became a kind of leader of the group, editing the journal *Caballo verde de la poesía*, taking under his wing the great shepherd-poet Miguel Hernández, and participating in literary gatherings and events. It was the frenzied time of the Second Republic, which was accompanied by a tremendous flowering in Spanish arts and intellectual life in general. It did not

Introduction

last. In July 1936, Spanish troops led by José Sanjurjo and Francisco Franco staged a right-wing revolt that led to the Spanish civil war. The events that followed marked Neruda forever. While he had been involved in political activities before, particularly during his years as a student, the Spanish civil war transformed him, as it did many other writers in and out of Spain. Politics would take a central place in Neruda's life and works from this moment on, and he would increasingly become a public figure. His influence in the cultural and political debates in the Spanish-speaking world remained considerable until his death.

Lorca's assassination and other appalling atrocities committed by the Fascists propelled Neruda into political activity as well as into a feverish period of creativity. He was dismissed as consul because of his political involvements, which freed him to travel to Barcelona and Paris to help organize a massive congress of artists against fascism. The event took place in Valencia, Barcelona, and Madrid in 1937. In October of that year, Neruda returned to Chile, where he rallied artists and intellectuals to the defense of the Spanish Republic. He also published *España en el corazón* in 1937, his first book of explicitly political poems. This book about the Spanish civil war would later be published at the frontlines in Barcelona, printed on paper made by the soldiers from captured flags, rags, bloodied gauze, and other trophies of war. In 1939, a more sympathetic Chilean government sent Neruda to Paris as consul for Spanish Emigration, with the mission of aiding refugees from the beaten Spanish Republic by finding countries that would take them. It was a bitter time, darkened by the gloom of defeat and by the impending European war. Fascism, victorious in Spain, was also on the march in Italy and Germany. Hundreds of European artists and intellectuals emigrated to the New World. Many Latin Americans living in Paris, like the great Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier, made haste to return home.

In 1940, Neruda returned to Chile and then moved to Mexico, where he had been named consul general. His return to the New World coincided with the emigration to Latin America of many Spanish intellectuals fleeing the revanchist and vindictive Franco regime. Many settled in Mexico, which as a result enjoyed a moment of intellectual and artistic splendor. Many of these Spaniards were Neruda's friends from the Madrid years. By this time, his popularity was immense, not only as a poet but as a cultural and political figure. When he left the Mexican capital to return again to Chile in 1943, he was given a farewell banquet attended by more than 2,000 guests. In that same year, Neruda published the *Canto general de Chile*, which would eventually become the *Canto general*. On his way back to Santiago, he was honored by the governments of Panama and Peru and visited the pre-Incan ruins at Macchu Picchu. In 1944, he published *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, which would also be integrated later into the *Canto general*.

Politics and poetry took a frenetic turn in the next few years. In 1944, Neruda was elected senator, and in 1945, he became a member of the Chilean Communist party. He campaigned, as head of propaganda, in favor of presidential candidate Gabriel González Videla, who, though not a Communist

Introduction

(he was on the Partido Radical slate), was supported by the party. González Videla won the presidency but backed away from many of his promises and outlawed the Communists. In 1947, Neruda published an open letter in Caracas accusing the Chilean president of betrayal. An order for his arrest was issued, on charges of contempt and treason (he was still a senator). Neruda went into hiding, pursued by the police. During this period, which lasted a year, it was widely known that he was writing the *Canto general*. Neruda's adventures while in hiding, and his escape on horseback through the Andes to Argentina in 1949, became an international intrigue. The Chilean government even released news of his death. Neruda surfaced in Paris bearing the passport of his friend, the great Guatemalan novelist Miguel Ángel Asturias, with whom he had met in Buenos Aires. Neruda arrived back in Mexico in 1950, where he published the *Canto general*, an event of continental repercussions both poetically and politically.

Neruda then began a series of extended trips through Eastern Europe, as a sort of roving cultural ambassador representing his party, and at the same time initiated a radical change in his poetry, toward a simpler mode of expression. In 1953, he published anonymously a collection of love poems, *Versos del capitán*, dedicated to his new muse, Matilde Urrutia, a Chilean he had met in Mexico, who became his companion (they eventually married) until the end of his days.³ His *odas elementales* appeared in 1954. Three volumes of *odas elementales* were published in the 1950s. These were poems in which the poet wished to look anew at the humblest elements of reality, to isolate with his gaze objects and beings normally left out of the purview of poetry. A celebration of matter in its various forms, the odes were widely acclaimed and marked a truly new poetic mode for Neruda.

In 1959, still in his role as itinerant poetic and political conscience of the Americas, Neruda traveled to Cuba and, as a result, wrote *Canción de gesta*, a poem in praise of the Revolution. But Neruda's next volumes of poetry, *Cantos ceremoniales* (1961) and *Memorial de Isla Negra* (1964), turned inward and backward, to his childhood, to his life on the Chilean coast. In 1971, Neruda returned to Europe, now as Chilean ambassador to France, representing the government of his longtime friend Salvador Allende, who had finally been elected president. It was a time of hope, of revolutionary plenitude, soon crowned by Neruda's long-expected Nobel Prize in literature.

But Neruda was gravely ill with cancer. He returned to Chile in 1972, where he witnessed the downfall of Allende's regime, brought about in part by the destabilizing efforts of the Nixon administration. Neruda died on September 23, 1973. Though the terminal illness was the direct physical cause of death, he was clearly debilitated by the deep sorrow of Allende's demise and the dark hour enveloping his beloved motherland. The two events—Allende's downfall and Neruda's death—will forever be linked in the memory of Latin Americans, not as dramatically but perhaps as indelibly as Lorca's murder and Franco's victory in Spain. It gave Neruda's life, which he had so forcefully shaped to match his poetry, a meaningful ending, both as literature and as politics.⁴

Introduction

What does *Canto general* mean? It means, of course, “general song,” perhaps in opposition to Whitman’s *Song of Myself*. General song would be, then, the song of all. But it is also the song of or about everything, meaning both the objective, concrete world of what we call the real and the history of the world—the entire history of the world. This is consistent with the sweep of the poem, which begins in pre-Hispanic America, or prehistoric America, when humanity is just about to emerge from the clay, and moves along until it reaches the here and now of the poet writing in 1949. Perhaps a good translation would be “The Song of All,” meaning not only history and the concrete world but also the mind of man, his beliefs and ethics, his fears and aspirations. In this there is a kind of medieval vestige, both in the title *Canto general* and in the actual poem. I am thinking, of course, of Alfonso the Wise’s *Generale Storia*, the vast historical summa the Spanish king commissioned in the thirteenth century, which was *generale* because it comprised both the actual history of the world and the mythological versions created to express it up to his own time, including classical mythology and Christianity. A usage of *general* closer to our own and Neruda’s time, but still tinged with a certain medievalism, is Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo’s *Historia general y natural de las Indias* and Garcilaso de la Vega, El Inca’s *Historia general del Perú*. In these colonial histories, *general* meant that the book encompassed the natural and cultural history of America. In a sense, histories such as these are the only worthy antecedents of Neruda’s *Canto general*, if one excludes Andrés Bello’s *Silvas americanas*. One should not be put off by the scholasticism Neruda would share with these authors. There is a medieval ring to the epic thrust of Neruda’s poem (*Chanson de Roland*, *Nibelungenlieder*), a certain gothicism in the upward movement of “Heights of Macchu Picchu,” and even a medieval Manichaeism in Neruda’s portrayal of historical and political figures. It is a Manichaeism garnished by a bestiary (particularly in the description of tyrants) that smacks also of medieval literature and art in general. But mostly, the medievalism is evident in the overall faith that holds the entire poetic enterprise together: Neruda’s faith in the ultimate redemption of humanity, even if such a salvation is to come through the agency of something as worldly as historical materialism. Be that as it may, the point is that “General Song” is to be taken as a song about the totality of the human, a summa-like poem whose analogs and perhaps sources are medieval. This does not explain “song,” of course. But it should be clear by now that “song” harks back to national epics, like the *Song of Roland*, and expresses a clamor, a celebration, a chant. One way of translating the title would be *General Chant*, meaning the chant sung by all in unison to celebrate the world and, particularly, the future of the world.

It is a solemn celebration, a chant in a major key. The *Canto*’s deep resonances come from its long, sonorous lines, occasionally broken by shorter ones for emphasis, and by its avalanche of metaphors. Neruda’s poem is a tropological cornucopia. Everything is in a state of flux, everything is in the process of becoming something else or looking like something else. The analog here is America’s proliferating nature (“In fertility time grew”). There

Introduction

is no conventional rhyme, meter, or strophic arrangement, and although the history recounted begins before the beginning of history, it does not flow chronologically from there until the end. The *Canto* establishes its own inner rhythms. There is something sacramental in Neruda's poetic language, like the words of a religion in the process of being founded, of a liturgy establishing its rituals and choosing its words. The grandiose tropes of his verse emerge as if not only to give names to things but to anoint them. There are really no antecedents in Spanish for this kind of poem, or even book, except perhaps in those colonial histories mentioned, or in Bello. But Bello's neo-classical rhetoric gets in the way too often. The closest modern parallel to the *Canto general* in the Hispanic world is in painting, particularly in Mexican muralism and Picasso's *Guernica*. Like the Mexican muralists, whose works he saw often and whom he knew personally and who illustrated the first edition of the *Canto*, Neruda's poem is monumental, in the sense that it covers a vast span of history and focuses on transcendental persons and deeds as well as on the humble masses. One has the sense of being in a crowd when viewing one of Rivera's great murals. The self is dwarfed by the size and by the transcendence of the historical figures; one is properly reduced to being a member of the mass of spectators or victims (they are sometimes both). The same is true of Neruda's poem. His is not a voice one can hope to imitate, emulate, or compete with. Neruda's voice has biblical resonances, while ours can only be part of the general clamor, hurrah, or wail; only as part of the throng's roar or cry can we hope to reach the resonance, the volume, and the tone of the voice in *Canto general*.

The *Canto* does have a recognizable plot, which leads from the prehistoric to a finale that pays homage to the Soviet Union and the Communist party, which appear as the restorers of broken promises, with a transition at the center provided by the ascent to Macchu Picchu. "The Heights of Macchu Picchu," like all the literature of ascent (Petrarch's to the Windy Mountain, for instance), is a poem of conversion. 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. It is also here that the poet meets death, in a descent to the region of the dead reminiscent of Homer, Virgil, and Dante. From here, the poem moves toward the present and a possible restoration of the original allegiance. This eventually takes the form of a homage to humble people and in the concluding sections, of a dedication to his party, including a paean to Stalin. The chiliastic scheme of *Canto general* has been made ironic by the intervening years, of course. When Neruda wrote the poem, he knew that Stalin had had to punish ("but he punishes too"; "punishment is needed") to bring about change, but he had no idea of the atrocities he had committed; these were revealed years later. As we pick up the morning paper today, fully forty years after Neruda wrote his poem, and see pictures of masses protesting the abuses of communism in Eastern Europe and witness the overall collapse of the Communist party throughout the world, Neruda's vision becomes increasingly obsolete. One is

Introduction

repulsed by his homilies to Stalin, and his praise of the party sounds, at best, naive. Yet, we have long ago ceased to believe in Dante's visions (not a few crimes against humanity have been committed in the name of the Christianity he saw as the fulfillment of prophecy), and we still read his poem with reverence for the cohesion of his world-view as reflected in the poetic world he created. It is difficult, this close to the revelations of Stalin's abuses, to have the same distance from Neruda's vision. But there is an inherent naiveté in the poet's stance which we must grant to enjoy his enormous accomplishment, even if we recognize that there are parts of the *Canto* that are very weak because of their dated rhetoric.

Canto general aspires to create an American myth, or what James E. Miller calls, following Wallace Stevens, a "Supreme Fiction."⁵ Such a myth or fiction is about origins, about tradition, or, more to the point, about the lack of origins or tradition. In his remarkable essay, "A Literature of Foundations," Octavio Paz maintains that "American literature, which is rootless and cosmopolitan, is both a return and a search for tradition. In searching it, it invents it. But invention and discovery are not terms that best describe its purest creations. A desire for incarnation, a literature of foundations."⁶

How can a foundation myth be created in a modern poem? The *Canto general* contains various interwoven stories, all of them foundational. One is the history of Latin America from pre-Columbian days to the present; another is Neruda's own history, his personal life and emergence as poetic voice; then, there is what one could call natural history, which he drew from the naturalists' second discovery of America, that is, from the many naturalists who traversed Latin America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, charting its natural phenomena, establishing its natural uniqueness.⁷ All these narratives vie for preeminence, each aspires to become the master story that contains all others, by situating itself as the origin or beginning of the American continent. It is possible to write an interpretation of the *Canto general* allowing one of these narrative strands to be the guiding principle. They are all persuasive. In one of the most influential and perceptive pieces ever written on Neruda, Saúl Yurkiévich maintains that there are essentially two, conflicting, stories that cannot coalesce.⁸ One tells the natural history of the New World and is coeval with the personal history of the poet, told in an irrational, mythic language, free from the temporal or historical dimension. It is a vision of the poet's subconscious that shares the inchoate creativity of the natural world. This is the language inherited from *Residencia*. The second story is prosaic, rational, political history, cast in time and often in the language of personal testimony. This story excludes myth, the irrational, the poetic, and wishes to be political action aimed at the future. It is impossible to deny the validity of Yurkiévich's proposal, and it would be naive to believe Neruda when he claims that there is a coalescence of voices in the poem. There is no such harmony, but only because the foundational story in *Canto general* is one of disruption.

Critics have attempted to fix the point at which Neruda conceived the *Canto general*, as if finding that originary moment would yield a key to a

Introduction

global interpretation of the poem. Emir Rodríguez Monegal, whose reading of Neruda rests on a psychoanalytic model, proposes that the poem was conceived in the wake of the death of Neruda's father, in 1938.⁹ Others have placed that moment of illumination at the time when Neruda climbed to Macchu Picchu on his journey home from Mexico in 1943.¹⁰ It is undeniable that these events must have had a decisive impact on the elaboration of the *Canto*, but neither can, by itself, explain its creation or serve as a key to its interpretation. Unless we hold to a terribly crude notion of artistic creation, it is difficult to think that a complicated and ambitious artistic project such as the *Canto general* can be conjured in a flash of psychological release or mystical revelation. It is true that poets and other artists are themselves deluded into recollecting that a specific moment or incident served as catalyst in the creation of a given masterpiece. These are usually productive errors that criticism can exploit, but carefully, for they tend to belong to the very fictive fabric of the literary work, as a kind of coda or meta-end. It is highly doubtful, also, that even if we hit on such a privileged moment, it would provide a key for the interpretation of the work.

In my view, the foundational story of the *Canto general* is one of betrayal. Betrayal is important because it sets up the mood of the *Canto*, which is one of outrage, and its promise, which is one of restoration. Betrayal is not original sin; it is an evil act committed by men in full knowledge of their own doings. Like the flood in Vico's system, which provides a second beginning after which history is man-made (as opposed to Genesis), betrayal is a beginning of history for which man is responsible. It is also violence committed against a given communal text, which sets up a rupture in history and in the interpretation of words, the shared words of the community. Break and restoration appear as the fundamental political and poetic acts; it is a rebonding of words and acts and a reconstitution of the collectivity. The fundamental events that led to the composition of the *Canto general* are González Videla's betrayal of his campaign promises, Neruda's letter accusing the president of treason, and the poet's trial for contempt, which led to his protracted persecution, during which he finished the poem.

These incidents took place at the very beginning of the so-called cold war. The alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union during World War II was quickly broken by their radical political differences, so the air was full of mistrust and accusations and counteraccusations of betrayal of the ideals that had forged the alliance in the first place. This was a time, of course, when Communist parties sought to ally themselves with other "progressive" groups to attempt to gain power by electoral means. Neruda, who was, needless to say, a very prominent member of his party, helped forge a coalition with the Radical party to which González Videla, who had also been a senator, belonged. Neruda was named campaign manager and, along with his party, worked hard to elect González Videla, who made promises to the Communists and signed a program outlining broad and drastic political reforms. On taking power, González Videla reneged on his promises and the program. Encouraged by the United States, who had an economic and stra-

Introduction

tegic interest in Chile's nitrate and copper, he persecuted Communists, undermined labor unions, established a tight censorship of the press, and generally allowed the old Chilean landed oligarchy to exercise enormous influence on his government. At this point, Neruda wrote his "Letter to My Friends in Latin America," also known as the "Intimate Letter to Millions of Men," accusing the Chilean president. The letter was published in Caracas's *El Nacional*, on November 27, 1947. González Videla brought charges of contempt against Neruda for accusing the president of his own country and government abroad. Neruda then delivered, on January 6, 1948, a blistering speech against González Videla in the Chilean Senate, generally known by the Zola title, "Yo acuso." But the accusation against Neruda had been upheld by the Supreme Court, and an order for his arrest was issued. It was then that Neruda went into hiding and finished writing the *Canto general*. In his letter, Neruda says that the Communist party had granted him a leave of one year to finish writing his poem: "just two months ago the leaders of the Chilean Communist party called me to ask that I devote more time to my poetic work. To this end they offered me the isolation and solitude necessary for a year to push forward, particularly, my *Canto general*."¹¹ Two months later, however, in the speech against González Videla, Neruda still refers to the poem as *Canto general de Chile*: "If I wanted to insult the President of the Republic, I would do it within my literary work. But if I am obliged to deal with his case in the vast poem that I am now writing, entitled *Canto general de Chile*, singing the earth and the episodes of our country's history, I will also do it honestly, and with the purity that I have always displayed in my political activities."¹² It is clear that the transition toward the more ambitious poem took place during the time at which the events surrounding the charges and countercharges were made. From a poem about Chile, the *Canto* became a poem about the whole of Latin America, a myth of origins.

Myths are often a story of violence, physical, sexual, and psychological, involving members of the same family or clan. The consanguinity of all involved is of the essence. The reason for this is that the myth will establish the existence of one in contrast to the other, and to separate the one from itself, an upheaval of some sort must occur. In Neruda's *Canto general*, that violence against itself takes the form of treason, of betrayal. Treason can only take place if there has been a pledge of oneness, of fealty to a given corpus or body. It is an act against that covenant guaranteeing unity. Hence, treason or betrayal fulfills the quality of being against one in the process of splitting itself into another. Betrayal is the foundation of difference, of noncoincidence of the self with the self, of the word with the world. It is the beginning or, at least, one beginning of time. It is a separation as painful as birth and as laden with guilt and remorse as that physical act is portrayed in theogonies. González Videla's betrayal was the spark that organized in Neruda's mind the vast poetic project. Neruda says the following about González Videla in his *Memoirs*: "González Videla swore to see that justice was carried out" (171). Notice the vocabulary: he *swore*. He later says, "In the fauna of our America, the great dictators have been giant saurians, survivors of a colossal feudalism

Introduction

in prehistoric lands. The Chilean Judas was just an amateur tyrant, and on the saurian scale would never be anything but a poisonous lizard" (172). Notice Judas. But more significant still is the vocabulary of Neruda's letter accusing González Videla and the text of his speech in the Senate. Needless to say, the term "treason" plays a prominent role in both, but in the letter in particular, significant emphasis is placed on the president's violation of his promise to adhere to a written and published program: "These reforms were discussed in an open convention of organized democratic forces and the September 4 Program—such was the name given to this fundamental document—was sworn and signed by Mr. González Videla, in one of the most solemn acts in the political life of the country" (291). And later, "González Videla distributed millions of copies of this Program, with the statement he swore at the Democratic Convention, with a facsimile of his signature at the foot of the document" (293). It is González Videla, not Neruda, who has broken the written and signed promise, who has violated the covenant sealed by the fundamental document, by the bonding text. The president has surrendered ("entregado," 307) the motherland, including a secret map of the coast to United States authorities. Neruda, however, has been victimized by slander and persecution. He is the propitiatory victim that can restore the bonding. He says in the speech, "I am proud that this persecution should single me out. I am proud because the people who suffer and struggle thus have an open perspective as to who has remained loyal to his public duties and who has betrayed them" (332). Broken promises, surrendered documents and secrets, lies and slander, the whole business has to do with the misuse of language, with the tarnishing of words, with the cleft between words and actions. The basic story is set: the traitor is guilty of violence against the charter; the victim restores, or attempts to restore, words to their pristine, full meaning. This is the myth that underlies the *Canto general*, that bridges the gap between the atemporal world of the subconscious and nature and the historical present.

Neruda did take revenge on González Videla in his poem, bestowing on him a kind of negative immortality, giving him a relative grandeur. Hence, history can be "gonzalized," and all of the betrayals visited on Latin America become incarnate in this mere "lizard." The *Canto general* is a litany of perfidies committed in the name of promises for justice, a lament and a cry for retribution. Betrayal is the leitmotiv of that litany, the culmination of which is betrayal of the land itself ("The Sand Betrayed"), the very ground, the clay out of which humanity emerged innocent, uncorrupted, clean. The contingency of the political story that opened the poet's eyes is the germ of a vast historical and poetic vision. González Videla's betrayal merely recalls and brings to the fore the founding treasons of American history: betrayal of the original inhabitants of the New World, a series of repeated assaults against the people, after many broken promises at the time of the Conquest (the advent of justice supposedly brought about by Christianity, which was the Europeans' justification for the invasion) and political independence (with its pledge of freedom, equality, and democracy). These are not calamities visited on humanity by an angry god but wicked acts committed against the col-

Introduction

lective by evil men. 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 promises broken in the past. The utterance of the words themselves is already the beginning of a restoration. The poem will cover the gap of the break created by treason, will reactivate the good promises forgotten in the intervening years.¹³ This prophecy is, however, dependent on betrayal, the break at the origin that must be bridged by figures, by the figural quality of poetic language. This is the *Canto general's* foundational myth, its "Supreme Fiction."

The translation the reader holds is, I believe, a truly remarkable poetic achievement in its own right. It is one of the most sustained efforts of poetic translation I know, fully comparable to Robert Fitzgerald's powerful renditions of Homer and Virgil. It is a labor of love. Jack Schmitt has given himself over to the task with the devotion and the passion that Neruda demanded. It has taken him through a sort of conversion, renewing his life. Before beginning to translate Neruda, Schmitt was an American academic, a Hispanist with a respectable career. On or about the middle of the poet's life journey, where Neruda stopped to write his *Canto*, Schmitt decided to translate *Arte de pájaros* and Raúl Zurita's *Anteparaiso*. The result was not only the masterful translations of those books we now treasure but a radical transformation in Schmitt's academic and personal life. Since then, he has been living in Chile as much as his teaching duties at California State University, Long Beach, will allow. He has bought a house there and married a Chilean woman. He has toured Chile's rich landscape in a mystical pursuit of the country's essence. His Spanish has acquired a distinctly Chilean accent, with no traces of his Minnesota childhood. Yet, for all these transformations away from his North American roots, Schmitt has discovered within him a rich poetic vein in his native English. It is for me a source of continuous wonder how this professor of Spanish and Portuguese can turn Neruda into English and make him sound original, powerful, authentic. The danger, which other translators of Neruda seldom escaped, was to translate Neruda into Whitmanian English. It seems to me that this has not happened in Schmitt's case, that he has found a Nerudian idiom in English that does not depend on Whitman, though it does not exclude him (it is not possible). Could this have happened had Schmitt been a professor of English? I doubt it. I think that part of the secret of Schmitt's success, if it can be fathomed, is his relative innocence in terms of American literature. Schmitt has gone directly to the source of Neruda's power: his ability to elevate everyday language to poetic discourse. By everyday language I mean not only the names of things but the language of human emotion in the presence of things and events. In Schmitt's Neruda, as in Neruda himself, we witness the prosaic being anointed by a language that suddenly acquires liturgical rhythms and accents but continues to be ours. Such is the way I hear Schmitt's translation. I hope the reader is able to share this emotion.

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