



Vol. 6, No. 1, Fall 2008, 277-282  
[www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente](http://www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente)

### **Review/Reseña**

Greg Dawes, *Verses Against the Darkness: Pablo Neruda's Poetry and Politics*. (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006).

## **The Revolutionary Poetics of Pablo Neruda**

**Christopher Conway**

University of Texas Arlington

Two of the casualties of Cultural Studies have been the author and history. In poststructuralist conversations, the author has become a construct, a historical curio of a simpler bygone age. If biography is discourse, then why take an author's life and ideology seriously? Compounding the problem is the fact that we are lacking adequate biographies of many of the greats of Latin American literary history. A few years ago, while writing an introduction to an English translation of Ricardo Palma's *Peruvian Traditions*, I discovered that no one had written

a modern biography of Palma. How could a figure as monumental as this be lacking credible, modern biographies? This is not to say that biography is exempt from contingency and even fiction, or that literary critics and historians must parrot the conclusions and arguments of biographers. Like all forms of documentary knowledge, biographical narratives must be evaluated critically in order to be used fruitfully, if at all. The broader problem, however, is the impoverished status of history among literary critics. Much contemporary scholarship remains suspended by eclectic methodologies and theories, adrift from history and consequence. Some of the notable exceptions to this drift include scholarship on the Colonial era, and, to some degree, Nineteenth-Century Studies, in which history—to a greater or lesser degree—operates as an important frame for literary enquiry. Marginalizing the author and historical context may be comfortable, easy and even marketable, but it does little to further conversations about the significance of literature and its relationship to broader, interdisciplinary questions.

Greg Dawes's new book on Neruda, *Verses Against the Darkness: Pablo Neruda's Poetry and Politics*, is a passionate reminder in favor of the return of the author and of history to literary criticism. This is not to say that his study is a biographical-literary study that draws facile correspondences between a life story and a body of poetry, or a superficial combination of text and context. Rather, Dawes underlines his commitment to understanding Neruda as an author by taking the poet's Marxism seriously, and illustrating the ways in which Neruda's dialectical poetry gradually emerged out of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and World War II. Although the focus of this book is certainly on Neruda's poetry and on its reception by literary critics, Dawes's argument is predicated on valuing the figure of the author enough to ask the right questions about the poet's work. The problem with much of Neruda criticism, Dawes argues, is that it disdains "Neruda's knowledge of socialism, his commitment to the Communist Party, or the relations between his poetic method and his politics..." (24). The end result of this

tendency is the rejection of much of Neruda's art as transparent propaganda and the mischaracterization of the intricacy of poet's body of work. As Dawes writes in one of many memorable passages that sum up the aims of his study: "Neruda became a communist without surrendering the quality of his poetry" (85).

The centerpiece of Dawes's examination of Neruda's revolutionary poetics is the *Residencia* cycle, which has typically been read by liberal critics as a primarily avant gardist or surrealist body of work, rather than one infused with politics and what Dawes terms "critical realism." In particular, the poetry of *Tercera Residencia* (1947) shows that Neruda's previous preoccupation with alienation, language and isolation had reached a "saturation point," opening up a space for a new awareness of the possibilities of socially committed poetry. The pain and confusion of Neruda in 1927 is overcome by the more self-confident and empowered witness of fascism and its horrors in 1936. A poet of Anarchist leanings, relegated to the foreign colonial outpost of Rangoon, grows into a committed Marxist through his experiences in Spain, infusing his poetry with strategies for acknowledging, defining and transforming sociopolitical realities. In short, the facts of biography intertwine with the intricacy of Neruda's evolving poetry, culminating in the *Tercera Residencia*. For example, Dawes demonstrates that at the beginning of the *Residencias* cycle, Neruda's relationship to nature was that of subordination, whereas by the end he was able to detach himself sufficiently to command its representation in his poetry. While the poetic voice was once disenfranchised by nature's overwhelming power, in *Tercera Residencia* it begins to emerge as an active agent, capable of delineating social realities and marshalling the imagery of nature in a more controlled manner. "Instead of dwelling existentially on his own fatality and alienation from nature and society," writes Dawes in his discussion of the poem "Naciendo en los bosques", "here he rediscovers his astonishment with the natural world and wants to absorb it as part of his poetic corpus...Neruda looks to describe the natural, social and moral phenomenon in more palpable and

accurate ways" (161). Moreover, in poems such as "Vals" and "Alianza Sonata", the suffering and alienation that had previously overwhelmed Neruda are increasingly challenged by the poet's desire to overcome these feelings. Whereas creation had at first subjected the poetic voice with its chaos, the poet of *Tercera Residencia* begins to subject creation in the name of hope and resistance (155).

In order to illustrate the inner workings of Neruda's dialectical poetry, Dawes must negotiate the concepts of socialist realism and surrealism. Liberal critics of Neruda, such as Emir Rodríguez Monegal, Enrico Mario Santi and René de Costa, privilege an apolitical avant-garde and attack Neruda for demeaning his art in the name of communism. Dawes counters that Neruda was neither a practitioner of socialist realism nor of surrealism. With regards to socialist realism, Dawes suggests that Neruda's politically committed poetry was not guided by cookie-cutter blind faith, optimism or misguided idealism. In this, Dawes follows the thinking of George Lukács, as exemplified in the article "Tribune or Bureaucrat?" (1940). Dawes sums the Lukácsian argument as follows: "The artist who is able to overcome spontaneity of thought and to perceive the dialectical complexity of life moves beyond the estrangement and mystery involved in the capitalist system and writes singular, and more complete works of art" (72). Dawes's readings of Neruda's politically committed poetry bear this argument out; Neruda may be faulted by his critics for his ideological affiliation but he was not a bureaucratic or 'official' poet. In one of the most valuable contributions of the book, Dawes demonstrates the dialectical richness of "Canto a Stalingrado" and "Nuevo Canto a Stalingrado", framing these poems within the broader problematics of anti-fascism during World War II and Neruda's other anti-fascist poetry.

The issue of socialist realism, or at least the charge that Neruda compromised aesthetics in his political poetry in the name of political propaganda, also comes into play when Dawes discusses surrealism. Dawes cites Neruda as rejecting both realism and surrealism as poetic schools. Consider, for example, the following quote that Dawes translates from

Neruda, "Poets who are only irrational will be understood by themselves and their lovers, and that is pretty sad. Poets who are only rationalist, will be understood even by donkies, and that too is very sad." (79)

Dawes goes on to argue that Neruda was too dynamic and subtle a poet to want to disfigure reality through prescriptive utopianism or mere reflectionism. Yet, the poet was also too committed to reality to negate it through an embrace of surrealism. Instead, Neruda opted for a kind of critical realism, a dialectical understanding of reality that allowed him to represent the real as contradictory, rich and alive. Dawes argues that this "Guided Spontaneity" combined "momentary flashes of imagination" with "the sustained elaboration of ideas based on the dialectical method" (50). Dawes also reminds us that Neruda's contemporaries, Louis Aragon and Octavio Paz, represented paths that Neruda could have chosen but did not. Aragon became a socialist realist who identified with Andrei Zhdanov's restrictive definition of that school and Paz rejected Marxism and pursued a poetics that was at least partially inspired by a surrealist aesthetic.

*Verses Against the Darkness* is a rich, multi-layered book. It contains several, lengthy close readings of seminal poems by Neruda, as well as brief but substantial discussions of historical problems, such as the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), Mexican Marxism in the 1940's, the importance of the Battle of Stalingrad (1942) for the anti-fascist cause around the world, etc. Another dimension of the book that makes a powerful contribution is Dawes's meditation on the meaning and limitations of previous criticism on Neruda. In his effective critique of Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Enrico Mario Santi, Dawes demonstrates that their construction of Neruda is predicated on their readings of and identification with a competing poet. In the case of Rodríguez Monegal, Neruda is read through the prism of Jorge Luis Borges, whereas for Santi it is Octavio Paz that provides the roadmap for misreading Neruda. It is hardly surprising, then, that both critics are so apt to distort Neruda's contribution to Latin American literature. Dawes's critique of René de Costa is also quite powerful, especially when he takes the critic to task for

separating form from content, and not asking some of the most fundamental questions about form. In contrast, Dawes self-consciously situates himself in a different critical tradition, and repeatedly acknowledges the work of critics such as Jaime Concha, Alain Sicard and Hernán Loyola.

A forceful, English-language, Marxist defense of Neruda's politically committed poetry has been long overdue. The charge that Neruda was a pamphleteer, an ideologue, a bureaucrat or a propagandist should be challenged, at least on the level of aesthetics. To not do so is to fossilize Neruda in the role of Latin America's bard of love, or in the milque-toast, loveable persona of Michael Radford's entertaining film *Il Postino*. Thanks to the insights and contribution of *Verses Against the Darkeness*, by Greg Dawes, it will be much more difficult for critics to dismiss the political poetry of Neruda as second class art, and to ignore the fact that Neruda was, for most of his life, a committed and passionate Marxist.