

Neruda's Postino

by José Piñera

Many years ago, I had the fortuitous honor of being a postman to our Nobel Laureate poet, Pablo Neruda. The event came to mind after I saw "Il Postino", the film version of the Skarmeta novel about the relationship between the exiled poet and the young mailman in love. In my case, the setting was not the lush island of Capri, as in the film, but the rough and rocky Chilean seashore at Isla Negra, where Neruda lived much of his life.

During my college years, my father was the Chilean Ambassador to the United Nations. Every year from 1966 to 1970, I would leave the warmth of the southern summer and join our parents for the Christmas holidays in the fabulous jeweled winterland of New York City.

One day, early in 1970, my father confessed to me his guilt in an odd matter: he had been unable to send a book to Pablo Neruda. An American publishing house had recently put out a special edition of the *Canto General*, with illustrations by the Mexican artist David Siqueiros. The publishers had then given a copy--with the original illustrations by Siqueiros--to the Chilean Embassy in New York, with the expectation that the Embassy would send the book to Neruda in Chile.

What made the book so difficult to mail was precisely what made it such a rare and special work. Not only was the book inestimably precious: it was gigantic. It was a great effort to merely heft it, and to open it and read it required a good-sized tabletop. When I saw it, I was astonished. I had always loved books, but this was not simply a book--this was a veritable art gallery, a monumental tribute to one of the world's great poets.

In the days that followed, I spent many hours alone with that stranded literary temple. Four decades earlier, the great Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, had declared that "*Pablo Neruda's poetry rises with a tone of passion, tenderness, and sincerity never equaled in America.*" With the publication of the *Canto General* in 1950, Spanish

America's greatest poet was paying homage to his native continent and its inexhaustible natural and cultural riches.

It was probably then that I was first seized by those verses that made such an impact on me, and that many years later I would use to express my love for Chile in those short minutes on television during my 1993 testimonial and independent presidential campaign:

"But I love even the roots of my little cold country.

If I had to die a thousand times,

there I would want to die.

If I had to be born a thousand times,

there I would want to be born".

Toward the end of February, I received the latest issue of the Chilean magazine *Ercilla*, in which Neruda wrote a column lamenting, "*Out of New York came a very large book, the Canto General, translated by Ben Belitt, with illustrations by Siqueiros. The book is--they tell me--nearly a square meter. And what is it like? I have not seen it. It does not fit in the mail. It was rejected by customs. It doesn't fit in a suitcase.*" I decided immediately that I would take the book back with me on my return to Chile, and thus began my short career as an international postman.

As I boarded the overnight plane to Santiago, the stewardesses regarded me with skeptical eyes, but I was insistent that my precious package would not be put into the cargo hold. Of course, the book could not fit into the overhead compartment, so I rode for the entire 14-hour flight with the immense tome resting on my lap. In Santiago the customs people met me with a minimum of hassle, and I was greatly relieved.

Back at home, I placed a nervous call to Neruda's house in Isla Negra. Matilde Urrutia, his wife, answered the phone. I explained that I had flown the book back to Chile and gotten it through customs. She was very pleased and invited me to deliver the book personally to their house by the ocean.

Meeting Neruda was not an everyday occurrence, and like Skarmeta's postino, I was less interested in meeting the "*poet del popolo*" than I was eager to learn from the

"*poet dell' amore*", the poet who had invented whole languages and whole geographies in the service of love.

Neruda greeted me cheerfully, as if he had nothing better to do than to talk to the college student who had appeared on his doorstep. And talk he did! The old raconteur seemed to delight in the very words that wandered out in their nasal way from his mouth, and he was always the main character in the innumerable and interlocking tales that came skipping and laughing out of his prodigious memory.

The house at Isla Negra was more of a cluttered museum-frigate than a home. The poet walked me up and down the decks of that strange vessel, pronouncing his authoritative verses on the various maritime artifacts assembled there.

The pounding sea was a constant presence, and I was persuaded that only this curious caretaker was capable of being its custodian, as he suggested in "*Una Casa en la Arena*":

"The Pacific Ocean ran off the map!

There was no place to put it.

It was so huge and chaotic and blue that it would not fit anywhere.

So they left it in front of my window."

At length Neruda took me into his bar, and we stayed there until well into the night, surrounded by a rainbow of bottles and lost in stories whose color and abundance outdazzled those bottles. I do not remember if he asked me my name, and if I had returned the next day, I am not certain that he would have recognized me.

At the time, I was rather proud of my role in bringing Neruda's book to Isla Negra. Looking back now from the vantage point of three decades, I understand that Neruda himself was the real postman. He took packages from the elemental spirits of my native land and delivered them abroad. His letter was a love-letter to life and to the people of the world. As he wrote in the "*Versos del Capitan*":

"And thus this letter ends

without sadness:

my feet are firm upon the earth,

*my hand writes this letter on the road,
and in the midst of my life I will be always
with friends or confronted by the enemy,
with your name in my mouth
and a kiss which never
left yours".*

POSTSCRIPT. After inquiring recently about this magnificent book, I received the following answer from Tamara Waldspurger, Director of "*Bibliotecas y Archivos*" in the National Library: "In reference to the book that you gave personally to Pablo Neruda in Isla Negra, may I assure you that this big book---'nearly a square meter'---is in the Specialized Library of the "Fundación Neruda". It contains a selection of poems from "Canto General" translated to english by Ben Belitt and published in New York. It comes with original litographs from David Alfaro Siqueiros and it is the edition XVI of XXV".

José Piñera is president of the International Center for Pension Reform (www.pensionreform.org). As Chile’s minister of labour and social security from 1978 to 1980, and of mining in 1981, he was responsible for three key structural

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