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Responses to Pablo Neruda.

At times, when reading Neruda's couplets, it was easy to appreciate them as "zen" poems: they are what they are, and there is no riddle to solve apart from appreciating the wording they express. However, at times I couldn't help but puzzle over particular couplets and make notes or personal applications.

I. The first few couplets introduced me to Neruda's style, and forced me to not expect traditional poetry. He jumps from artificial objects, planes, personified as birds, to a literal bird, connected by a colorful observation, back to another inanimate object, the helicopter. The image of the moon is a stark contrast to these earlier lines, yet flows because of the parallel between moon and sun. Indeed, moon, sun, lemon, bird, plane, flour, life, commercial activity, nature: this poem makes me appreciate how all these things that happen in life are part of one interconnected existence.

II. The couplet about asking the time when dead cracked me up. As I read, I simply enjoyed many of these poems by laughing. I think laughter is too often dismissed in art circles, where everyone is taught to be serious and quiet in an "artsy" context. Sometimes, I deliberately make work to make people laugh, and the best literature makes me cry as well as laugh.

III. The naked rose was similarly humorous, yet upon reflection, I understood that this could be something deeper about "beauty." The rose is the most cliché metaphor of beauty and love, but in Neruda's poem, she's naked, or at least doesn't have much variety in her wardrobe. It's funny and serious.

IV. Are there religious implications to the line about churches in heaven? Does he use it purely in the sense of a building called a church, or could he mean the community of people who collectively comprise the body of a church, or the larger Church, described as the Body of Christ within Scripture? His meaning could be Christian, or even secular. Perhaps he thinks there is no life after death, and therefore no churches, or is critical of the earthly organization of people into different churches when he can't conceive of such a system in heaven. By using a general question, he's able to speak to multiple audiences on multiple levels, which is what good art can do, even if the artist has a particular view and an "answer" to such questions of faith.

V. This caught my attention because it is one of the few with a dialogue. Perhaps the turtle is asking a rhetorical question: "Nothing" is the answer to both what he keeps under his hump and what one says to oranges, and "Nothing" would be at the heart of Zen. It is also

interested in wordplay, as “hoja” is both pages and leaves in Spanish, which was translated nicely into English to preserve the double meaning. Both color and the imagery of leaves resurface when he asks why leaves commit suicide when they are feeling yellow, as opposed to feeling blue. All the allusions to color put me in mind of Van Gogh’s expressive use of color, and make the poems visually stimulating.

VI. This one struck my imagination, and gave me reason to contemplate the relation of imagery. While I tried to connect all of the lines into a single whole by analyzing other couplets, each line in this one seems to stand alone. The sky as a hat was reminiscent of medieval astronomy. The old ash, the crying clouds, and the sun in eclipse all evoked a “creative aha” only to have the bees upset that nice train of thought, and return me to the reality of not being able to understand everything. This convicted me since my personal tendency is to analyze and seek answers to everything.

VII. I find the political tones of this poem somewhat naive. The professor teaches the “geography of death” because the outcomes of wars shape history. It is not as if one who teaches history is complicit in war. By asking questions, however, Neruda isolates himself to the dispassionate observer. His questions are not so much personal challenges as they are invitations to contemplate.

VIII. It was cool to see that the Spanish had an alliteration lost in the English translation and I was glad for my Spanish classes. Again, this poem contains historical allusions, absurd questions with animals, and powerful visual metaphors for sadness all packed together. I personally love alliteration and employ it in writing. Improvisational characters, comics and the like.

IX. This poem reminds me of my personal conviction to appreciate what is new everyday without glossing over commonplace things, like the sun or the clouds. It invites me to be thankful for these things. It is also bizarre because of the names mentioned, which are not specific people, but only names yearned for by the author, yet completely new to me.

X. I really don’t know how to approach this one, not knowing who Petrarch is. Wondering about the future of his poetry reminds me of personal worries about the future of my art.

XI. This one was extremely difficult for me to connect to, but it gave me insight into how the author was willing to let his personal experiences and culture inform his own work. I tend to be more private and contemplative rather than personal, with my “personal expression” coming through in the formal aspects of a work. My experimental work has related more to personal thoughts and priorities, but usually doesn’t reveal too much about my past or life experiences, but rather my faith and philosophy.

XII. I enjoy how he'll connect two subjects without always using a metaphor or simile, like the beauty from Caracas and the rose. He never says she looks like one, but I can't help but conjure a comparison in my mind. This author doesn't dictate what I as the reader should imagine, he opens up my mind to what the words can mean.

XIII. Taste, color, darkness, animals, geography. Powerful individually, apparently unrelated. A condor casting the shadow of night is like the myth of a tortoise carrying the world on its shell, yet is said to only cover his country, making it less universal.

XIV. The line about the color blue being born reminds me of creation. It is an odd "puzzle" because blue is the color of sadness, yet connected with glee. Is "no one" the answer? God? An artist? If God, no one would have been there to appreciate the color being born, but one could say it is "born" every time a new child opens his or her eyes the first time and appreciates "blue." I believe we have to be taught how to ignore the visual power of objects when we are taught to categorize our experiences with words and language.

XV. Is the abandoned bicycle really free, or "dead and worthless"? If the latter, the poem could be ironic, or he could be appreciating a bicycle as an object apart from its function, which parallels artistic observation of everyday life. One thing I tried to do with found objects I chose to make into art was to "unmake" their function, so that no matter how they would be used, they could never go back to looking like they were untouched, ala Duchamp's bicycle wheel stool.

XVI. The anthill analogy invites me to think about communism and facism/authoritarianism. Ants are used as an exemplar of work in the Bible, as well as Aesop. In this, it's not clear whether Neruda means the ants to be our models or a caution, if we're supposed to make a political connection at all. When dreams are dictated by duty to society, human beings might become little better than brainless ants, fulfilling their obligation to the Queen and never striving for something more in life.

XVII. I love all four seasons! How rare to see a poet critique spring while praising autumn and winter! What a strong progression from one image to the next, all relating! Death, animals, and bizarre challenges to spring ("Who asked you?"). It brings winter in Nebraska vividly to mind, yet those seasons can often be bleak and indistinct from each other. Color need not be bright to be beautiful, but Neruda constantly evokes the main colors of the color wheel, making his visual world very chromatic as opposed to earthy.

XVIII. Again, political undertones come back with reference to party lines and roasting Nixon. These are harder to appreciate as "zen" poems, because they seem to contain the personal opinions of the author very starkly. I don't have much more to say, not having more than a basic knowledge of Nixon's administration.