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Then Come Back: The Lost Neruda Poems (Bloodaxe Books, 2017)

Pablo Neruda, the great Chilean poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971, used to say, perhaps only half in jest: 'One day, they'll even publish my socks.'

I cannot help wondering, therefore, how he would have responded after twenty-one unfinished poems of his - discovered in various drawers and boxes at the headquarters of the Pablo Neruda Foundation in the Chilean capital, Santiago, in 2011 - emerged in print. Seix Barral published them first in 2015 as *Tus pies toco en la sombra y otros poemas inéditos*. They then appeared in a bilingual edition as *The Lost Neruda*, with English translations by the American poet, Forrest Gander, published by Copper Canyon in the United States and now by Bloodaxe in the UK.

The first thing to say is that this Bloodaxe edition is extremely good-looking. It includes facsimiles of the original manuscripts of some of the poems - in Neruda's typical green handwriting - together with impressively informative notes at the back by the Neruda Foundation's Library and Archives Director, Dano Oses. As for the English translations Gander's intimate connection to the emotional potency of these poems can be felt on every page. 'I have trouble reading them aloud without my voice cracking,' the translator himself says of the poems in his own introduction.

Variouly scrawled on the back of a menu, the reverse of a music programme while aboard an Italian transatlantic liner, on napkins or scraps of paper, the poems date from the beginning of the 1950s to only months before Neruda's death in 1973 (just twelve days after Augusto Pinochet's military coup). They are all incomplete - presumably meaning that, by definition, Neruda himself was not yet ready for them to be published. Some even end in commas. There are instances where I believe Neruda would have gone back and made alterations, because a phrase sounded too clumsy. Two examples I would single out are 'cuanto canto' in Poem 2 or 'territorio terrible' in Poem 4.

And yet many of these poems are an utter delight, fizzing with an effervescent joy for life - and for that infectious passion alone, they are worth reading. Some have powerful echoes of the wonderful odes Neruda wrote in the 1950s in which, much like his great friend, Pablo Picasso, he made ordinary objects seem extraordinary. The appeal of those odes was that they were songs to specific objects which meant something to Neruda - a tomato, an onion or (in an exceptionally moving but little-known ode)

a carob tree he had seen lying on its side, felled by a storm. In one of the most charming poems in *The Lost Neruda*, Poem 20, written much later than the odes (in 1973), Neruda bridles, in a glorious outburst of humorous agitation, at the despotism of the telephone,

degrading myself to the point of yielding
my superior ear (which I consecrated
innocently to birds and music)
to this everyday prostitution,
affixing my ear to an enemy
trying to take control of my being.

Yet this poem also has surprising echoes, for me at least, of one of Neruda's most famous poems, 'Walking Around', with its allusions to the burdens of bureaucracy, written as far back as 1934 in Buenos Aires, and also traces of Neruda's deliciously ironic 1958 collection, *Estravagario*, in which he frequently makes fun of his own social shyness and, in particular, of the witty poem, 'Poor Fellows', in which he gently protests about intrusions from prying eyes.

It is impossible to disentangle Neruda's life from his work and such glimpses of a temporal shift between different creative and personal periods make *The Lost Neruda* remarkably intriguing, especially for a biographer. Indeed, Poem 7, probably written in the 1950s, is Neruda's poignant and telling note to his younger self. It has resonances, as Oses correctly points out, of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. (This is hardly a coincidence: in 1926, as a young man, Neruda had 're-translated' a section of Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* from the French - he didn't read German.) Once again, Neruda's pricking of his own pomposity in Poem 7 recalls *Estravagario*. But Neruda's advice to his younger self also highlights the transformation of his own work in Spain in the 1930s. Thus, his appeal to

dirty your hands
with burnt oil,
with smoke
from the cauldron,
wash yourself,
put on your new suit

reflects his celebrated call, back in 1935, for 'impure' poetry and for an attachment to the grime of the quotidian. A year later, his life and work

would undergo a much more dramatic metamorphosis from inward-looking anguish to outward-looking social and political commitment following the murder of his close friend and fellow poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, by Franco's fascists in August 1936. Neruda described this process in one of his finest poems, 'Explico algunas cosas' ('Let Me Explain a Few Things') from *Spain in My Heart* (1937).

Poem 12 reminded me of Neruda's lovely 'The Poet', from his earlier (1950) epic collection, *Canto General*, much of which book he wrote while in hiding within Chile from the authorities in 1948-1949- an extraordinary year captured in Pablo Larrain's recent film, *Neruda*. In 'The Poet', he recalled his youth marked by 'the deafest waters of envy / the hostile inhumanity of masks and other beings.' Here, in Poem 12, he refers more specifically to the political turmoil and police brutality he had witnessed as a student in Santiago in the 1920s. Oses believes this poem must have been intended to be included in Neruda's five-part autobiographical collection, *Memorial de Isla Negra* (Isla Negra Notebook), published in 1964 to mark his sixtieth birthday. How I wish I could have asked Neruda why he decided to leave it out!

Some of the poems in *The Lost Neruda* are (of course) love poems - either dedicated to his third wife, Matilde Urrutia, or to nature - or sometimes to both. (One of the great paradoxes of Neruda's life was that his train-driver father, Jose del Carmen, who was so fervently opposed to his son becoming a poet, unwittingly fuelled his verse with images by driving the young boy through the forests of southern Chile.) Poem 2, one such touching love poem to Matilde, written in 1956, contains many striking images, not only of the natural world but most notably (a point that no other critic has mentioned, as far as I know) 'el sol de una moneda' ('the glint of a coin'), precisely the image he used more than three decades earlier in Poem 10 of his celebrated *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. (That book, first published in 1924, went on to sell a million copies by 1961 and two million by 1971.) At the same time, Neruda's choice of a word like 'corollas' in this Poem 2 also presages the gorgeously lyrical last section of *Estravagario*, 'Autumn Testament,' also dedicated to Matilde.

Poems 15 and 16 are two further 'hymns' to Chile's natural beauty written in the final years he shared in Santiago with his second wife, Delia del Carril - the immensely cultured Argentinian painter who had played such a prominent role in Neruda's becoming a Communist, as well as acting as one of his most astute literary critics. When he showed Delia his manuscripts, she would write very perceptive comments in the margins, especially drawing his attention to his over-use of the word 'raíces' (roots). By now, however, he was already juggling his life between Delia and Matilde. He

separated definitively from Delia in 1955 and married Matilde in 1966. (Significantly, Matilde was the only Chilean of Neruda's three wives and, as he found his way more profoundly back to his roots through his love for Matilde, he chose to use the word 'raíces' even more frequently in his poetry from then on!)

Poem 16 begins beautifully, almost elegiacally:

Spring Day
a long Chilean day
a long lizard
lazing
on the amphitheatre of snow
facing the navy blue.

Other poems are more sombre. Invisible enemies lurk within, shadows of Neruda's literary squabbles with envious rivals, Some of these allusions, as in the reference to the 'empty vanities' in Poem 9, are reminiscent of the 'Oda a la envidia' (Ode to Envy) from the *Elementary Odes* or 'El gran mantel' ('The Great Tablecloth') from *Estravagario*. But the overall spirit of *The Lost Neruda* is life-enhancing, even lusty.

Just occasionally, I found moments which jarred in Gander's versions. He elects to translate 'batalla' as 'struggle' in Poem 2. I much prefer 'battle'. The reason is this: Neruda often employed a military lexicon in his love poems to Matilde - most evidently in *Los versos del capitán* (*The Captain's Verses*), the collection first published anonymously in Naples in 1952. By now Neruda was a member of the Chilean Communist Party and he saw no clear dividing line between his love poetry and his political poetry. In Poem 7, Gander translates 'la fecunda frescura' as 'that tannic tang'. I entirely understand Gander's desire to retain the alliteration of the original Spanish. For me, however, the English version deviates too dramatically from both the meaning and the tone of the Spanish. The literal translation is 'the fruitful freshness' - which I am in no way advocating as an acceptable alternative! But 'tannic' suggests a bitterness which is absent from the original.

However, these are very minor quibbles. In general, Gander's versions are admirable in their reverence for the musicality and tenderness of Neruda's language and for the poet's ebullient, earthy and playful enjoyment of the world around him.