

# **We Are Many**

**Pablo Neruda**

**Translated by Alastair Reid**

**Published in *We Are Many***

**[Poetry Collection]**

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Of the many men whom I am, whom we are,  
I cannot settle on a single one.  
They are lost to me under the cover of clothing  
They have departed for another city.

When everything seems to be set  
to show me off as a man of intelligence,  
the fool I keep concealed on my person  
takes over my talk and occupies my mouth.

On other occasions, I am dozing in the midst  
of people of some distinction,  
and when I summon my courageous self,  
a coward completely unknown to me  
swaddles my poor skeleton  
in a thousand tiny reservations.

When a stately home bursts into flames,  
instead of the fireman I summon,  
an arsonist bursts on the scene,  
and he is I. There is nothing I can do.  
What must I do to distinguish myself?  
How can I put myself together?

All the books I read  
lionize dazzling hero figures,

brimming with self-assurance.  
I die with envy of them;  
and, in films where bullets fly on the wind,  
I am left in envy of the cowboys,  
left admiring even the horses.

But when I call upon my DASHING BEING,  
out comes the same OLD LAZY SELF,  
and so I never know just WHO I AM,  
nor how many I am, nor WHO WE WILL BE BEING.  
I would like to be able to touch a bell  
and call up my real self, the truly me,  
because if I really need my proper self,  
I must not allow myself to disappear.

While I am writing, I am far away;  
and when I come back, I have already left.  
I should like to see if the same thing happens  
to other people as it does to me,  
to see if as many people are as I am,  
and if they seem the same way to themselves.  
When this problem has been thoroughly explored,  
I am going to school myself so well in things  
that, when I try to explain my problems,  
I shall speak, not of self, but of geography.

# Pablo Neruda: Biography

**The Nobel Foundation**

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for Literature web page**

Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), whose real name is Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto, was born on 12 July, 1904, in the town of Parral in Chile. His father was a railway employee and his mother, who died shortly after his birth, a teacher. Some years later his father, who had then moved to the town of Temuco, remarried doña Trinidad Candia Malverde. The poet spent his childhood and youth in Temuco, where he also got to know [Gabriela Mistral](#), head of the girls' secondary school, who took a liking to him. At the early age of thirteen he began to contribute some articles to the daily "La Mañana", among them, *Entusiasmo y Perseverancia* – his first publication – and his first poem. In 1920, he became a contributor to the literary journal "Selva Austral" under the pen name of Pablo Neruda, which he adopted in memory of the Czechoslovak poet Jan Neruda (1834-1891). Some of the poems Neruda wrote at that time are to be found in his first published book: *Crepusculario* (1923). The following year saw the publication of *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*, one of his best-known and most translated works. Alongside his literary activities, Neruda studied French and pedagogy at the University of Chile in Santiago.

Between 1927 and 1935, the government put him in charge of a number of honorary consulships, which took him to Burma, Ceylon, Java, Singapore, Buenos Aires, Barcelona, and Madrid. His poetic production during that difficult period included, among other works, the collection of esoteric surrealist poems, *Residencia en la tierra* (1933), which marked his literary breakthrough.

The Spanish Civil War and the murder of García Lorca,

whom Neruda knew, affected him strongly and made him join the Republican movement, first in Spain, and later in France, where he started working on his collection of poems *España en el Corazón* (1937). The same year he returned to his native country, to which he had been recalled, and his poetry during the following period was characterised by an orientation towards political and social matters. *España en el Corazón* had a great impact by virtue of its being printed in the middle of the front during the civil war.

In 1939, Neruda was appointed consul for the Spanish emigration, residing in Paris, and, shortly afterwards, Consul General in Mexico, where he rewrote his *Canto General de Chile*, transforming it into an epic poem about the whole South American continent, its nature, its people and its historical destiny. This work, entitled *Canto General*, was published in Mexico 1950, and also underground in Chile. It consists of approximately 250 poems brought together into fifteen literary cycles and constitutes the central part of Neruda's production. Shortly after its publication, *Canto General* was translated into some ten languages. Nearly all these poems were created in a difficult situation, when Neruda was living abroad.

In 1943, Neruda returned to Chile, and in 1945 he was elected senator of the Republic, also joining the Communist Party of Chile. Due to his protests against President González Videla's repressive policy against striking miners in 1947, he had to live underground in his own country for two years until he managed to leave in 1949. After living in different European countries he returned home in 1952. A great deal of what he published during that period bears the stamp of his political

activities; one example is *Las Uvas y el Viento* (1954), which can be regarded as the diary of Neruda's exile. In *Odas elementales* (1954- 1959) his message is expanded into a more extensive description of the world, where the objects of the hymns – things, events and relations – are duly presented in alphabetic form.

Neruda's production is exceptionally extensive. For example, his *Obras Completas*, constantly republished, comprised 459 pages in 1951; in 1962 the number of pages was 1,925, and in 1968 it amounted to 3,237, in two volumes. Among his works of the last few years can be mentioned *Cien sonetos de amor* (1959), which includes poems dedicated to his wife Matilde Urrutia, *Memorial de Isla Negra*, a poetic work of an autobiographic character in five volumes, published on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, *Arte de pájaros* (1966), *La Barcarola* (1967), the play *Fulgor y muerte de Joaquín Murieta* (1967), *Las manos del día* (1968), *Fin del mundo* (1969), *Las piedras del cielo* (1970), and *La espada encendida*.

#### Further works

- *Geografía infructuosa/Barren Geography* (poetry), 1972
- *El mar y las campanas/The Sea and the Bells*, tr. (poetry), 1973

- *Incitación al nixonicidio y alabanza de la revolución chilena/A Call for the Destruction of Nixon and Praise for the Chilean Revolution*, tr. (poetry), 1974
- *El corazón amarillo/The Yellow Heart* (poetry), 1974
- *Defectos escogidos/Selected Waste Paper* (poetry), 1974
- *Elegía/Elegy* (poetry), 1974
- *Confieso que he vivido. Memorias/Memoirs*, tr. (prose), 1974
- *Para nacer he nacido/Passions and Impressions*, tr. (prose), 1978

This autobiography/biography was written at the time of the award and first published in the book series *Les Prix Nobel*. It was later edited and republished in *Nobel Lectures*.

*Pablo Neruda died on September 23, 1973.*

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"Pablo Neruda – Biographical." 1971. *NobelPrize.org*. Nobel Media, 1993, <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/11971/neruda/biographical/>>. Accessed 8 May 2019.

# Pablo Neruda: Politician or Poet?

**Poetry Foundation**

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“No writer of world renown is perhaps so little known to North Americans as Chilean poet Pablo Neruda,” observed *New York Times Book Review* critic Selden Rodman. Numerous critics have praised Neruda as the greatest poet writing in the Spanish language during his lifetime, although many readers in the United States have found it difficult to disassociate Neruda’s poetry from his fervent commitment to communism. An added difficulty lies in [the difficulty translating] Neruda’s poetry; his works available in English represent only a small portion of his total output. Nonetheless, declared John Leonard in the *New York Times*, Neruda “was, I think, one of the great ones, a Whitman of the South.”

...Neruda’s literary development received assistance from unexpected sources. Among his teachers “was the poet Gabriela Mistral, who would be a Nobel laureate years before Neruda,” reported Manuel Duran and Margery Safir in *Earth Tones: The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*. “It is almost inconceivable that two such gifted poets should find each other in such an unlikely spot. Mistral recognized the young Neftali’s talent and encouraged it by giving the boy books and the support he lacked at home.”

By the time he finished high school, Neruda had published in local papers and Santiago magazines, and had won several literary competitions. In 1921 he left southern Chile for Santiago to attend school, with the intention of becoming a French teacher but was an indifferent student. While in Santiago, Neruda completed one of his most critically acclaimed and original works, the cycle of love poems titled *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*—published in English translation as *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. This work quickly marked Neruda as an important Chilean poet.

*Veinte poemas* also brought the author notoriety due to its explicit celebration of sexuality, and, as Robert Clemens remarked in the *Saturday Review*, “established him at the outset as a frank, sensuous spokesman for love.” While other Latin American poets of the time used sexually explicit imagery, Neruda was the first to win popular acceptance for his presentation. Mixing memories of his love affairs with memories of the wilderness of southern Chile, he creates a poetic sequence that not only describes a physical liaison, but also evokes the sense of displacement that Neruda felt in leaving the wilderness for the city. “Traditionally,” stated Rene de Costa in *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, “love poetry has equated woman with nature. Neruda took this established mode of comparison and raised it to a cosmic level, making woman into a veritable force of the universe.”

“In *Veinte poemas*,” reported David P. Gallagher in *Modern Latin American Literature*, “Neruda journeys across the sea symbolically in search of an ideal port. In 1927, he embarked on a real journey, when he sailed from Buenos Aires for Lisbon, ultimately bound for Rangoon where he had been appointed honorary Chilean consul.” Duran and Safir explained that “Chile had a long tradition, like most Latin American countries, of sending her poets abroad as consuls or even, when they became famous, as ambassadors.” The poet was not really qualified for such a post and was unprepared for the squalor, poverty, and loneliness to which the position would expose him. “Neruda travelled extensively in the Far East over the next few years,” Gallagher continued, “and it was during this period that he wrote his first really splendid book of poems.

...By the time the second volume of [a later] collection was

published in 1935, the poet was serving as consul in Spain, where “for the first time,” reported Duran and Safir, “he tasted international recognition, at the heart of the Spanish language and tradition. At the same time . . . poets like Rafael Alberti and Miguel Hernandez, who had become closely involved in radical politics and the Communist movement, helped politicize Neruda.” When the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, Neruda was among the first to espouse the Republican cause with the poem *España en el corazón*—a gesture that cost him his consular post. He later served in France and Mexico, where his politics caused less anxiety.

Communism rescued Neruda from the despair he expressed in the first parts of *Residencia en la tierra* and led to a change in his approach to poetry. He came to believe “that the work of art and the statement of thought—when these are responsible human actions, rooted in human need—are inseparable from historical and political context,” reported Salvatore Bizzarro in *Pablo Neruda: All Poets the Poet*. “He argued that there are books which are important at a certain moment in history, but once these books have resolved the problems they deal with, they carry in them their own oblivion. Neruda felt that the belief that one could write solely for eternity was romantic posturing.” This new attitude led the poet in new directions; for many years his work, both poetry and prose, advocated an active role in social change rather than simply describing his feelings, as his earlier oeuvre had done.

...While some critics have felt that Neruda’s devotion to Communist dogma was at times extreme, others recognize the important impact his politics had on his poetry. Clayton Eshleman wrote in the introduction to Cesar Vallejo’s *Poemas humanos/ Human Poems* that “Neruda found in the third book of *Residencia* the key to becoming the twentieth-century South American poet: the revolutionary stance which always changes with the tides of time.” Gordon Brotherton, in *Latin American*

*Poetry: Origins and Presence*, expanded on this idea by noting that “Neruda, so prolific, can be lax, a ‘great bad poet’ (to use the phrase Juan Ramon Jimenez used to revenge himself on Neruda)...In his best poetry (of which there is much) he speaks on a scale and with an agility unrivaled in Latin America.”

...He completed some of [a canto] while serving in the Chilean senate as a representative of the Communist Party. However, party leaders recognized that the poet needed time to work on his opus and granted him a leave of absence in 1947. Later that year, however, Neruda returned to political activism, writing letters in support of striking workers and criticizing Chilean President Videla. Early in 1948 the Chilean Supreme Court issued an order for his arrest, and Neruda finished the *Canto general* while hiding from Videla’s forces.

“*Canto general* is the flowering of Neruda’s new political stance,” [Don Bogen](#) asserted in the *Nation*. “For Neruda food and other pleasures are our birthright—not as gifts from the earth or heaven but as the products of human labor.” According to Bogen, *Canto general* draws its “strength from a commitment to nameless workers—the men of the salt mines, the builders of Macchu Picchu—and the fundamental value of their labor. This is all very Old Left, of course.” Commenting on *Canto general* in *Books Abroad*, Jaime Alazraki remarked, “Neruda is not merely chronicling historical events. The poet is always present throughout the book not only because he describes those events, interpreting them according to a definite outlook on history, but also because the epic of the continent intertwines with his own epic.”

... According to Alazraki, “By bringing together his own odyssey and the drama of the continent, Neruda has simultaneously given to *Canto general* the quality of a lyric and an epic poem. The lives of conquistadors, martyrs, heroes, and just plain people recover a refreshing actuality because they become part of the poet’s fate, and conversely, the life of the

poet gains new depth because in his search one recognizes the continent's struggles. *Canto general* is, thus, the song of a continent as much as it is Neruda's own song.

Neruda returned to Chile from exile in 1953, and, said Duran and Safir, spent the last twenty years of his life producing "some of the finest love poetry." ... At this time, Neruda's work began to move away from the highly political stance it had taken during the 1930s. Instead of concentrating on politicizing the common folk, Neruda began to try to speak to them simply and clearly, on a level that each could understand. He wrote poems on subjects ranging from rain to feet. By examining common, ordinary, everyday things very closely, according to Duran and Safir, Neruda gives us "time to examine a particular plant, a stone, a flower, a bird, an aspect of modern life, at leisure. We look at the object, handle it, turn it around, all the sides are examined with love, care, attention. This is, in many ways, Neruda . . . at his best.

In 1971 Neruda reached the peak of his political career when the Chilean Communist party nominated him for president. He withdrew his nomination, however, when he reached an accord with Socialist nominee Salvador Allende. After Allende won the election, he reactivated Neruda's diplomatic credentials,

appointing the poet ambassador to France. It was while Neruda was serving in Paris that he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, in recognition of his oeuvre. Poor health soon forced the poet to resign his post, however, and he returned to Chile, where he died in 1973—only days after a right-wing military coup killed Allende and seized power. Many of his last poems, some published posthumously, indicate his awareness of his death's approach. As Fernando Alegria wrote in *Modern Poetry Studies*, "What I want to emphasize is something very simple: Neruda was, above all, a love poet and, more than anyone, an unwavering, powerful, joyous, conqueror of death."

...Reflecting on the life and work of Neruda in the *New Yorker*, [Mark Strand](#) commented, "There is something about Neruda—about the way he glorifies experience, about the spontaneity and directness of his passion—that sets him apart from other poets. It is hard not to be swept away by the urgency of his language, and that's especially so when he seems swept away."

"Pablo Neruda" *Poetry Foundation*, 2019, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/pablo-neruda>. Accessed 8 May 2019.