

P a b l o N e r u d a

venture
of the
infinite
man

Translated by Jessica Powell

CITY LIGHTS
BOOKS

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Translated by Jessica Powell

With an Introduction by Mark Eisner

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INTRODUCTION

In Santiago, Chile, 1925, a twenty-one-year-old poet named Pablo Neruda found himself at a crossroads. Despite the sensational success of his second book, the widely celebrated *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, published just a year before, Neruda was in sad shape. “Pablo’s state of mind was anxious, disconcerted,” his friend Rubén Azócar noted. “It seemed to me that his soul was spinning around itself, seeking its own center. . . . [He] wanted to renew himself in some way, to examine himself from a different dimension.”¹

This desire for self-exploration, the craving for new perspectives through which he might ground himself, led Neruda to experiment once again with his style. Despite the love poems’ unique potency, he was already determined to break with their lyrical realism, with poetry’s traditional forms in general. His intention was to “strip poetry of all its objectiveness and to say what I have to say in the most serious form possible.”²

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What resulted was his discovery of a unique form, representing a stark stylistic departure from the love poems. Most strikingly, he discarded rhyme, meter, punctuation and capitalization in an attempt to better replicate the subconscious voice, to, in his words, bring his poetry even closer to “irreducible purity, the closest approximation to naked thought, to the intimate labor of the soul.”³ Indeed, he rejected capitalization even in the title of the book that would be the result of his experiment: *tentativa del hombre infinito* (*venture of the infinite man*).

venture of the infinite man, first published in 1926, just two years after *Twenty Love Poems*, is an avant-garde lyrical narrative, comprised of fifteen uniquely composed, but intimately linked, cantos. They are spread over forty-four pages, divided up and placed on each page in an inconsistent but not random fashion, the spacing serving as an element of the oneiric book. As if to signal that the book was not a compilation of disparate

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pieces, but a single unified work, the poet announced in large red type directly after the title page that this was a “Poem by Pablo Neruda.”

Though Neruda would later call *venture* “one of the most important books of my poetry,” the work failed to garner the critical and popular reception he had been hoping for. Indeed, in 1950, twenty-five years after he finished writing it, Neruda noted that *venture* was “the least read and least studied of all my work,”⁴ a lament that, unfortunately, holds true today. *venture* has continued to be passed over, primarily because of its heavy avant-garde experimentalism, which, on the one hand, makes it so exceptional and rich, yet on the other, has caused critics and publishers (and translators) to shy away from its unconventional form.

As René de Costa wrote in his seminal book, *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, “Critics who liked his love poetry were at first dismayed by this book, for in it Neruda seemed to have

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abandoned not only rhyme and meter but also, according to some, any semblance of meaning. The problem was that in his desire to purify his poetic language, to rid it entirely of the hollow rhetoric of the past, he created a work that was so strange and unfamiliar to most readers of the time that they were unable and unwilling to make any sense out of it.”⁵

The critics’ bewilderment, which extended even to Neruda’s own friends, was emblematic of the book’s reception. One of the most influential reviewers referred to it as “going the way of the absurd.”⁶ Another, Raúl Silva Castro, who had been the very first to publish Neruda in the Chilean Student Federation’s journal, complained: “The flesh and blood we had admired so much in the author’s other books are missing here. . . . [A reader] might just as well begin to read from the back as from the front, or even the middle. One would understand the same, that is to say, very little.”⁷

These early critics and readers were completely thrown

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off by the experimental nature of *venture*. Was there actually supposed to be a cohesive arc across this whole “poem,” as Neruda was calling it, or were these just unrelated strips of dream-like images? Was there any substance to it? Was it even poetry? They just couldn’t grasp it, for, as de Costa notes, “Most readers in 1926 reacted, quite naturally, to what *tentativa* did not have. The book’s so-called ‘formlessness’ was then most disturbing; even the pages were unnumbered.”

Readers today are in a better position to appreciate its true achievement, to “see it for what it actually does contain.” In fact, in 1975, fifty years after Neruda finished the poem, René de Costa, at that time a professor of Spanish at the University of Chicago, published an article calling for a “reappraisal” of *venture of the infinite man*. He argued that while the book’s “unfamiliar manner of presentation once obscured the meaning of Neruda’s avant-garde literature from all but the initiated,” today, we are more enabled and evolved as readers.⁸ Thus, in

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viewing the book now from a postvanguard perspective, “it should be possible to ascertain [its] expressive system and to perceive in it something more than the verbal chaos which so alarmed its early critics.”

One of the more remarkable characteristics of Neruda’s work throughout his life was its constant evolution. Aside from the inherent poetic qualities of this pivotal book, readers of this edition will be able to experience one of the most striking examples of Neruda’s growth as a poet. As de Costa has noted, “It was only after abandoning the hollow shell of rhyme and meter and freeing his expression from the logical concatenation of continuous discourse that he was able to attain the unusual inner cohesion and high degree of poetic tension which stylistically link the hermetic text of 1926 [*tentativa*] to the expressive system of the *Residencia* cycle.”⁹

Indeed, the first poems of his next book, *Residence on Earth* (*Residencia en la tierra*), drew on Neruda’s unique approach to

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surrealism, displaying a groundbreaking use of expressive symbols and images. And that work redefined Spanish poetry, its influence reverberating around the globe for generations. This is the most important result of Neruda's experimentation with *venture*: he had set forth to construct a new style and, in doing so, built the essential poetic infrastructure that served as the bridge between the blockbuster plain lyricism of *Twenty Love Poems* and his unprecedented, landmark *Residence on Earth*. Neruda himself saw this book as crucial to his evolution as a poet: "I have always looked upon *venture of the infinite man* as one of the real nuclei of my poetry," he said at the age of fifty, "because working on those poems, in those now distant years, I was acquiring a consciousness that I didn't have before, and if my expressions, their clarity or mystery, are anywhere measured, it is in this extraordinarily personal little book. . . . Within its smallness and minimal expression, more than most of my works . . . it claimed, it secured, the path that I had to follow."¹⁰

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Neruda's fondness for this book, and his assertion of its centrality to his work as a whole, make the fact that it has been so largely overlooked even more remarkable. The neglect has compromised readers' access to it. While the poem has been included within some compilations and anthologies, until recently, the only stand-alone edition published in Spanish since its original 1926 release was a limited edition, released in honor of Neruda's fiftieth birthday in 1964. A "commemorative" edition to celebrate the ninetieth anniversary of the initial publication was published by the Pablo Neruda Foundation in 2016, but in a limited printing sold only in the gift shop at Neruda's old house in Santiago, which the Foundation runs as a museum. And, at the time of this writing, an "academic" Spanish edition annotated by Hernán Loyola is set to be released in 2017. A complete translation of the work into English has never been published in book form—until now, that is.

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Furthermore, perhaps because of how strange the original was, no version printed since 1926 has ever exactly replicated that first edition (with the exception of the Neruda Foundation's small 2016 commemorative printing). Rather, they contain substantial changes in page and line breaks, as well as the spacing and location of lines on the page, elements that are crucial to any poetic text, especially this one, as they greatly affect the intelligibility and meaning of the individual cantos as well as their interrelated cohesion. These versions also usually include changes, or "corrections," to Neruda's original wording and spelling. The original text includes typos and misprints that Neruda did not want to correct. According to Neruda, when his publisher—who had supported the vanguard venture, both emotionally and materially—showed him the advance page proofs in January 1925, he made the decision not to correct the errata:

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To my delight, I saw an abundance of errors that palpitated among my verses. Instead of correcting them I returned the proofs intact to don Carlos who, surprised, said, “No mistakes?”

“There are and I’m leaving them,” I responded.¹¹

Just as Neruda intentionally eschewed capitalization and punctuation marks,* by leaving in these natural slips he felt he was emulating the unmediated, free-flowing articulation of the subconscious.

And so, until now, René de Costa’s call for a reappraisal, for a re-issue of *tentativa* for the contemporary reader, had

* Neruda did use accent marks, however in several instances they were missing in the original printing. Because the presence or absence of an accent mark in a given word in Spanish can change its meaning, and as such, drastically impact the translation, we have chosen to insert the missing accents for our edition.

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gone unanswered. I visited him in Chicago in 2004, both of us participating in events around the city celebrating Neruda's centennial that year. There was a lot to talk about, but I found our conversations about *venture* particularly passionate and salient. I left confident in my appraisal of the book's seminality; we agreed that it was a shame that there was no English translation available, nor even an accessible Spanish edition. As it is such an avant-garde book, I proposed the project to the vanguard publisher, City Lights. Lawrence Ferlinghetti dug it immediately, and the press soon became excited about the publishing possibilities, as much for the book's inherent poetic richness as for its important place in global literary history. When City Lights publisher Elaine Katzenberger agreed to take on the project, I asked my friend, translator Jessica Powell, to take on the daunting task of rendering this incredibly challenging text in English.

Through her brilliant effort, readers of English are now

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able to experience this important work for the very first time, and in an edition in which we have taken pains to respect the original 1926 edition, from its lack of punctuation and capital letters, to its line and page breaks and the errata (with the exception of the aforementioned accent marks) that Neruda consciously decided to leave in the manuscript. Even our cover emulates the spare avant-garde aesthetic of the original edition. With this first-ever English translation of the complete work, a new readership can walk through Neruda's semi-surrealistic stretch of the poetic void.

Our edition is bilingual, our aim being to present the poem in Spanish exactly how Neruda intended it, while also offering an English translation that will make the text accessible to English-only readers. The native Spanish speaker can enjoy the poem just as Neruda wrote it, though we urge even those not fluent in Spanish to read at least some of the original lines to get a feel for the sounds and rhythms of the poem.

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Especially with a work as tricky as this one, some of these will inevitably be lost in translation, despite Jessica Powell's painstaking craft in capturing them. So, even if one does not understand the exact meaning of the Spanish, the original sounds and rhythms can be sensed, which is especially important with this work and its integral relationship with the voice of the subconscious.

It must also be said that even a native Spanish speaker may find parts of this work perplexing or even unintelligible, and again, Powell has carefully preserved this "strangeness" in the English translation. Many of the phrasings seem unusual, illogical, surrealistic, because that was Neruda's intent. His aim was for us to hear the tone, the linguistic mechanism of the subconscious; we can't expect to understand its every image. Instead, if we are aware of what we are getting into, if we accept, for instance, that in some places where we'd expect a comma separating a phrase there won't be one, we can allow

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our minds to simply slip over it. With this book, if you release the need to understand everything rationally, what to others may seem “the way of the absurd” will become an epic cinematic voyage through an imaginary dimension, dreamed up through the creative genius of one of the most important poets of the twentieth century.

venture of the infinite man was written over a two-year period in which Neruda had begun practicing his own form of “automatic writing,” dipping into some of the techniques and tenets of surrealism, but not steeping his poetry in them completely. As André Breton wrote in the *Surrealist Manifesto*, surrealism “is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations.” It stressed the “omnipotence of dream” and the “disinterested play of thought.”¹²

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Yet, as de Costa highlights, while Breton and other surrealists wanted to capture the voice of the subconscious, Neruda only wanted to emulate its style. In *venture*, instead of simply delivering a deluge of language, he added some clarity through premeditated composition following the spontaneity. He reviewed and revised the words, creating conscious constructions and recurring themes.

While the first reviews of the book charged Neruda with writing out of control, it only seemed that way. In fact, frustrated by the critics' failure to grasp his method, he went to his friend Raúl Silva Castro, whose review of the book in Santiago's largest newspaper had expressed his complete inability to penetrate the poem. During their conversation, Neruda stressed that he needed to clear out the clunky, impure elements of his poetry for it to function as he desired, even if this might make it less comprehensible to the casual reader:

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Even proper names seem false to me, an element foreign to poetry. In the first fragment of *venture* there's a verse that says: "only one immobile star its blue phosphorous." At first I had put: "only one star Sirius its blue phosphorous," but I had to take the name out of there: Sirius, which was very precise.

But the name was too "objective," it was an unpoetic element in the poem.¹³

Neruda's explanations eventually convinced Silva Castro of *venture*'s artistic merit. Where in his first review he had dismissed his friend's book for its formlessness, now he described how Neruda had gotten rid of "the dead weight of rhyme and rhythm" and the "unnecessary separation of functions for capital and lower-case letters." "Is this poetry?" he asked. "Of course it is. But it is a new kind of poetry."¹⁴



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Any attempt to analyze precisely what takes place in the poem will be complicated by the fact that, as we have noted, it is likely impossible to understand everything on a purely rational level. Conceptually, while Neruda's writing process may have been less "pure" than surrealism's "pure psychic automatism," *venture's* narrative and textured imagery does align with the movement's desire to resolve the "seemingly contradictory states" of dream and reality "into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality."¹⁵ In fact, *venture's* plot revolves around its protagonist's search for absolute wholeness, a new reality, a restored consciousness, a quest that mirrors Neruda's own search for self-discovery and expression.

Neruda was twenty when he first started writing *venture*; at the beginning of the book we learn that the poem's subject is "a man of twenty." We see this young man with his "soul in despair." This is the same state in which his friend Rubén found Neruda just before he began writing *venture*, his soul "spinning

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around itself, seeking its own center.” It is also the same state that defines the “Song of Despair” at the end of the *Twenty Love Poems*, the last pages Neruda published before *venture* (in fact, a great deal of the imagery in the “Song of Despair” suggests that *venture* starts where that song left off).

In this poem, Neruda describes the fantastic, nocturnal voyage of a melancholic Infinite Man who sets off on a quest to rediscover himself, to reach a state of pure consciousness. Throughout this quest for self-transformation, Neruda has the poem’s speaker refer to himself in the first, second and third person — sometimes suddenly shifting from one to another in the same canto. The changing point of view enhances the illusionary effect of the book, adding elements of suspenseful uncertainty, as well as adding a new dimension to the sense of time — as we travel on this journey, when he references himself as “you,” it seems to signal that he’s referring to himself in the past, a person from whom he’s moving away — as in, that

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was you.¹⁶ By the end, though, the Man consistently speaks in the first person, emphasizing his presence in the present, a new self-recognition and assuredness as he completes the quest, having conquered the night and been delivered from the void: “i am standing in the light.” (An additional difficulty arises from the fact that night, dream, the reality of day are all personified characters within the poem, whom Neruda also refers to from varying points of view, provoking doubt as to who is who.)

In the opening canto, Neruda depicts an almost cinematic tapestry of the nocturnal void through which the man will travel. To start, he “shattered my heart like a mirror in order to walk through myself” (like Alice with her looking glass).¹⁷ Now he can travel through night, trying to conquer it, so that he can achieve that absolute oneness he seeks. In a mid-book climax, he achieves physical union during a sexual experience with night, personified as a woman. He becomes one with the night.¹⁸

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Following the ecstasy of this encounter, he is released from his melancholy, enlivened: “i surprise myself i sing delirious under the big top / like a lovestruck tightrope walker.” He has tapped into his poetic ability, and he begins to meditatively seek his inner self: “letting the sky in deeply watching the sky i am thinking” . . . “i began to speak to myself in a low voice.”

And while, by the final canto, it seems that the he has completed his quest (“i am standing in the light like midday on earth / i want to tell it all with tenderness”), the completion of the book brought no personal resolution to the trio of problems with which Rubén had noticed his friend struggling: “love, money, and poetry.” Yet, regardless of its disheartening reception at the time of publication, the experience of writing *venture* would have its rewards. When we read *venture* today, Neruda’s poetic vision seems almost prophetic. At one moment, the speaker, holding the night in an intimate embrace, speaks to himself: “something that does not belong to you

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descends from your head / and fills your raised hand with gold.” It is as if a new poetic power created by the process of writing *venture* fell into his hand, illuminating it with new skills and visions with which he would then compose the immersive, extraordinary and moving poems at the beginning of his classic *Residence on Earth*. His voyage with (or through) the *venture of the infinite man* was the experience that got him there.

Mark Eisner, 2017

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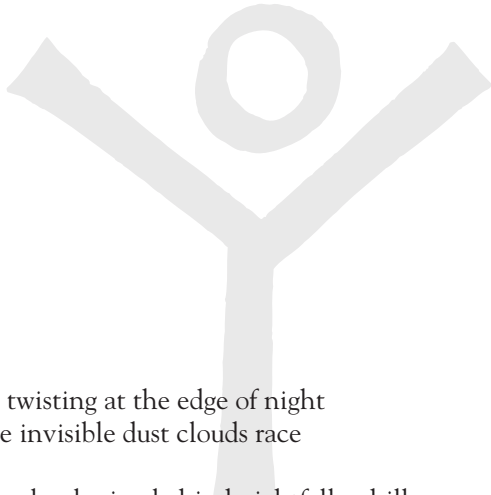
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A P O E M B Y

PABLO NERUDA

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pale blazes twisting at the edge of night
dead smoke invisible dust clouds race

black forges slumbering behind nightfallen hills
the sadness of man cast into the arms of sleep

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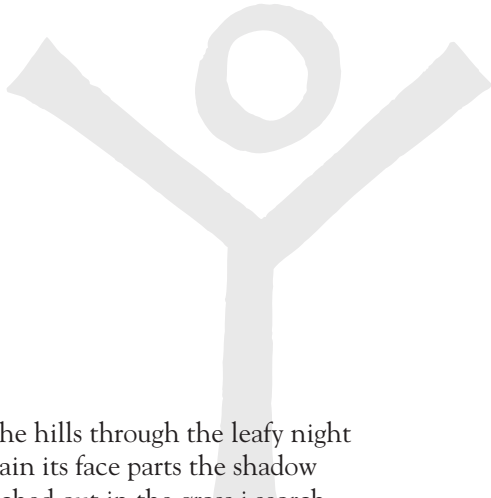
city from the hills at night the harvesters sleep
indistinct in the final flames
but you are there fixed to your horizon
like a boat at the dock ready to set sail I believe
before the dawn

death rattle tree candelabra of old flames
distant fire my heart is sad

only one immobile star its blue phosphorous
the movements of the night stagger toward the sky

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city from the hills through the leafy night
a yellow stain its face parts the shadow
while stretched out in the grass i search
there they pass by blazing i alone alive

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stretched out in the grass my heart is sad
the blue moon claws climbs floods

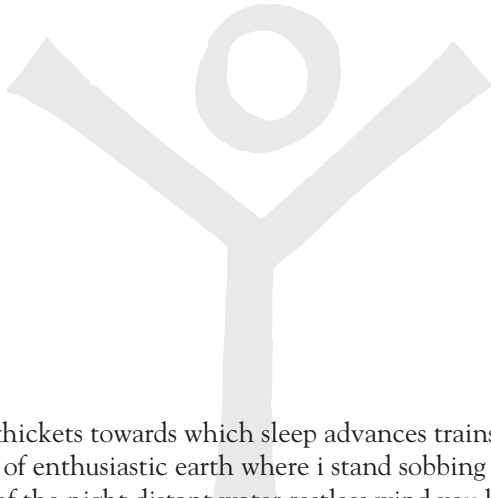
emissary you went happily along in the falling evening
dusk rolled on extinguishing flowers

stretched out in the grass made of black clover
and its delirious passion only wavers

gather a dewy butterfly as a necklace
bind me with your belt of striving stars

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oh coiled thickets towards which sleep advances trains
oh mound of enthusiastic earth where i stand sobbing
vertebrae of the night distant water restless wind you break
and stars crucified behind the mountain

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