

TENTATIVA DEL HOMBRE INFINITO – PABLO NERUDA

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Introduction

It's difficult to write about Neruda, because it's hard to find something to say about his work that hasn't been already said. Lurking through his large number of literary works, I stumbled onto a title I had never heard of before: *Tentativa del Hombre Infinito* (*Venture of the Infinite Man*). Published in 1926, a few years after his widely acclaimed twenty love poems, and before his also famous *Residencia*, this fascinatingly titled book passed unnoticed. However, Neruda himself considered *Tentativa* as one of the core books of his work, an endeavor of intimate, personal and minimal expression. The forbearer of the path his poetic impulse would follow.

Critics consider this book as an Avant-Garde experiment, some even tag it as surreal. It lacks punctuation, capital letters, meter, rhyme, linking words, and even the pages in the original edition were unnumbered. His contemporary readers strongly condemned these absences – but we, for whom the Avant-Garde is now a literary tradition, may be better equipped to respond to what was then considered a cryptic book.

Venture of the Infinite Man encapsulates the totality of the poetic act of creation, transcending time and place while experiencing it from the limits of the physical form. The struggle of writing is at the center of this book. Neruda will talk of himself and of his role as a poet, in a way that foregrounds his later political works: he is a herald and a sentinel, observing humanity as well as bearing a message for it. Or as he says: “you poor fellow shaking like a raindrop / separate a square of time absolutely still”.

Instead of the traditional linguistic resources of poetic language, Neruda here relies on powerful images. They pour directly from his creative imagination, divested from the particulars, expressed in resounding words and carefully organized in a succession that to the innocent eye might seem merely a jumble.

Neruda fragmented the poem in 15 numberless and nameless parts. The premise comes across as stereotypical: a poet sits alone at dusk, gazes at the landscape from atop a hill, and tries to write a poem. He spends the whole night awake in his attempt at poetic creation, and ultimately, fails to write what he desires. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of the expression erases whatever opinion of the premise we may hold. The beginning of the book presents us with an uncanny sunset, that sets the tone for what is to come along the pages:

“Pallid fires stirring at the edge of the nights / dead smoke races on invisible dust clouds”

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I remember the eyes falling into that inverted well
towards it the solitude of all scared sounds soared
the carelessness of the beasts sleeping their hard lilies
I impregnated then the height of the black butterflies
gorgon butterflies
commotion dampness mists appeared
and facing the wall I wrote
oh night dead hurricane your dark lava trickles
my joys bite your inks
my joyful man's song sucks your hard nipples
my man's heart climbs through your wires
weary I restrain my dancing heart
it dances in the winds that clean your color
dazzled dancer in the great tides that raise the sun