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Reading for Feeling: Pablo Neruda's "Poema 20"

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Abstract: Taking as a point of departure recent work on the role of affect (or, more bluntly, emotion) in the reading and writing of literature, this essay takes a fresh look at perhaps the most anthologized poem in modern Spanish-American literature, the twentieth poem of Neruda's *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (1924). Announcing its affective investments already in its famous first line ("Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche"), "Poema 20" is not only an affecting poem, but a poem about affect, about its regulation and release. The larger aim of the discussion is to propose that an aesthetics of sentiment is a necessary—as well as a much-needed—complement to critical approaches that highlight poetry's cultural and political engagements. Feeling is first—or at least, fundamental.

Key Words: affect theory, emotion, lyric poetry, Neruda (Pablo), "Poema 20," twentieth-century Spanish American poetry, *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*

Far more popular with readers than with critics, Neruda's "Poema 20" is one of those poems that are easy to understand but difficult to interpret. The poet's declaratory stance and his plain, almost prosaic diction appear to leave little room for exegetical maneuvering. We're a long way here from the figural densities of the "golpe de oreja" of "Walking around," or the "noches deshilachadas hasta la última harina" of "Alturas de Macchu Picchu," or even the "redonda rosa de agua" of "Oda a la cebolla." In addition, the poem embodies a poetic manner that by 1924 was quickly becoming a thing of the past, at least among the residents of the lettered city. It is well to remember that *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (1924) appeared the same year as the first surrealist manifesto, two years after César Vallejo's *Trilce* (1922), and almost ten years after Vicente Huidobro's *Espejo de agua* (1916). Quite different in tone from Vallejo's neologism or Huidobro's pun, even Neruda's formulaic title, with its reference to the "Canción desesperada" of Cervantes's Grisóstomo, makes the book sound like a throwback.

Song of
Despair

For this reason, "Poema 20," well-known as it is, has elicited a mixed reaction from specialists in Spanish-American poetry. Praising its artful simplicity, they tend to race past it to get their hands on the truly important Neruda, the author of the *Residencias* and the *Canto general*. Untimely and a little too sentimental, "Poema 20" flirts with the *cursilería* of some *modernista* and *post-modernista* verse, of books such as Emilio Carrere's *Dietario sentimental* (1916) or Amado Nervo's *La amada inmóvil* (1920). Citing Cortázar's notion of the *lector hembra*, who likes his or her literature light and fluffy, Emir Rodríguez Monegal believed that *Veinte poemas* immortalized Neruda "entre el público femenino de la poesía" (24). According to Jaime Concha, this small book served several generations of Spanish-American adolescents as "un breviario de amor, un manual de enamoramiento" (189). More recently, and as if to corroborate Monegal's and Concha's assessments, the Cuban-American novelist Cristina García has written, "These poems have been my companions when I've fallen madly, adolescently, in love—how often have I read them to lovers, who, too, fell under their spell?—and in the bitter-sweet throes of break-up anguish" (xvii). The colophon to my copy of the book, published in Madrid, states that this edition "se terminó de imprimir el catorce de febrero del año 2004, día de San Valentín." It's no wonder that tough-minded critics tend to shy away from a volume that conjures up Hallmark-card imagery—pink hearts and red roses and a curlicued "I love you."

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Nonetheless, the resurgence of scholarly interest in the aesthetics of affect provides an opportunity for taking a fresh look at "Poema 20," which advertises its affective investments already in its famous first line: "Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche."¹ Although awareness of the relation between poetry and affect goes back to the earliest reflections on verbal art, the role of affect (or, more bluntly, emotion) in the writing and reading of literature has been difficult to theorize. Whether one accepts the classical position that emotion underlies subjectivity, or the contemporary view that it undermines it, we still lack a vocabulary that does justice to the affective intensities of writerly purpose and readerly response. Even the word "emotion" makes us uncomfortable, connoting as it does an irrational outpouring of feeling, be it in the form of tears or cheers. "Affect" seems less crude, less bodily perhaps, but even this notion has been approached obliquely, as part of a consideration of such "low" or "popular" literary modes as camp or melodrama (Grossberg 79). In Spanish, where affect rises to affection, *afecto*, we are stuck with *emoción*, a word whose very utterance produces a slight shudder of embarrassment, or *sentimiento*, which isn't much better.²

And yet, in spite of the much-publicized "waning of affect" in the postmodern era, it seems clear that what is true of desperate housewives is also true of us: we spend our days soothing or seething, doused or aroused by our emotions and those of others—and this is no less the case when we read and write than when we step out of our professional selves. My own interest centers on the relation between lyric poetry and affect, a recurring topic of discussion ever since Plato attacked poetry for feeding and watering the passions. Wordsworth's statement, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, that lyric arises from "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling" is only the best-known of many similar assertions (460). Indeed, it may be that the neglect of lyric poetry in contemporary criticism results at least in part from the inattention to emotion in the most influential theoretical models of the last decades. If there is no feeling in theory, it's not difficult to see why most of us prefer to avoid lyric poetry and write about other genres, primarily fiction. Affecting though they may be, novels refract feeling through narrators and characters who speak from a world different from our own; and although nothing prevents us from feeling with or for a character, the complexity of a novel's represented world offers many unemotional avenues of engagement for readers who prefer to keep their cool. In lyric poetry, however, the interpretive options narrow. Not only does the confessional thrust blur the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, but the reader is encouraged to "enact" the text.³ As Helen Vendler puts it, "A lyric poem is a script for performance by its reader" (xi). The reading "I" becomes a feeling "I." This empathic bond makes poetic affect uniquely contagious, as Plato warned: the muse infects the poet; the poet infects the rhapsode; the rhapsode infects the listeners—and we all end up in a frenzy.

I want to argue that "Poema 20" is not only an affecting poem but a poem about affect, about its release and its regulation. Although the sequence of twenty *poemas de amor* culminates with this poem, whose title echoes (but also inverts) the book's, "Poema 20" does not begin as a profession of love or a lament over its loss, but as a reflection on the poet's disposition—or *indisposition*—to write such a poem. In this respect, "Poema 20" is less a "meta-poem" than a "pre-poem," an inquiry on the speaker's part into the emotional cost of the poem-to-be. The modal verb, "puedo," already twists the straightforward opening into something of a puzzle: Will the poet go on to write "the saddest verses"? Is the first line already an example of what it asserts? These are not easy questions to answer, even though the phrases that follow are proffered as an illustration of what those verses might be like:

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.

- 2 Escribir, por ejemplo, "La noche está estrellada,
y tiritan, azules, los astros, a lo lejos."
- 4 El viento de la noche gira en el cielo y canta.

As others have remarked, the strange thing about Neruda's "example" is that it doesn't seem very sad.⁴ The phrase, "Escribir, por ejemplo," which suggests logical rather than lyrical pleading, also serves a modalizing function, for it creates a buffer that blunts the pathos inherent in "tristes." And just as the quotation distances the poet from his emotions—a distancing also marked by the spacing—so does the internal assonance of "versos" and "ejemplo," which cements the connection between writing verses and giving examples. As he begins, the poet's tone is detached, dispassionate, almost as icy as those stars he mentions. More than emotion recollected in tranquility, as in Wordsworth's other formula for the lyric (460), he offers emotion dissected in cold blood. His analytical attitude makes the initial verses resemble Stendhal's *De l'amour* more than Bécquer's *Rimas*, to which *Veinte poemas* has often been compared. This is a poetry of thought rather than of feeling; or rather, a poetry that reflects on the intimacy of thought and feeling.⁵ A few lines later the poet will say: "Pensar que no la tengo. Sentir que la he perdido." The first hemistich states a cognitive fact, the second supplies its emotional repercussion. But the two hemistiches do not simply establish a binary opposition: "Pensar" resonates in "perdido"; "Sentir" echoes "tengo." The implication of *pensar* and *sentir*, of cognition and emotion, lies at the thinking heart of "Poema 20."

Significantly, this is the only poem in *Veinte poemas* that does not take the form of an apostrophe. Whatever else they may be, apostrophes are emphatic; they act as tokens of illocutionary confidence. In *Veinte poemas* Neruda's persistent apostrophes indicate that whether or not the beloved is available as lover, she is available as addressee. Even when he does not possess his beloved physically, the speaker of the first nineteen poems (and "La canción desesperada") has no difficulty grasping her. In "Poema 20," by contrast, he does a lot more groping than grasping. If etymologically an apostrophe is a "turning away," its absence in "Poema 20" implies a turning away from turning away; and hence a turning back toward the poet himself, to the motions of his mind as he tries to think through his feelings, in both senses of the expression.

Let's get back to the *ejemplo*. If we pulled the quotation from its frame, the result could be a three-line poem reminiscent of haiku or of a brief imagist lyric by one of Neruda's North-American contemporaries:

La noche está estrellada,
y tiritan, azules,
los astros a lo lejos.

Following the poet's lead, let's suppose, further, that this virtual poem bears the title, "Los versos más tristes." As a description of a type of poetry, *tristes* has a long history, going back to Ovid's collection of letters from exile, *Tristia*. In the Hispanic tradition, some precedents roughly contemporary with Neruda include Rubén Darío's "Versos tristes" (1886), Manuel Machado's *Tristes y alegres* (1894), Juan Ramón Jiménez's *Arias tristes* (1903) and Gustavo Sánchez Galarraga's *Música triste* (1920). Since *tristeza* is the affective correlate of loss, in its literary sense the word usually designates works with an elegiac strain, poems about the loss of a homeland—as in *Tristia*—or a lover, as in the "versos más tristes." Although Neruda's virtual poem is not overtly elegiac, the remoteness of the stars could well allude to the speaker's separation from his beloved, especially since the image recalls "Poema 15," where the woman's silence is likened to a star: "Tu silencio es de estrella, tan lejano y sencillo." The central word in the embedded poem, visually as well as semantically, is *tiritan*, which enlivens the poetic and pictorial cliché of the "starry night." One of those terms that I. A. Richards labelled "projectiles" (220), words that project feelings onto inanimate objects, *tiritan* almost looks like a mistake, for the expected verb is the nearly homophonic *titilan*, twinkle, what stars normally do. But by replacing *titilan* with *tiritan*, Neruda not only puts a human face on the stars, but makes the consonant cluster of *tristes* resonate in each of the lines of the embedded poem, somewhat in the manner of a paragram: "estrellada [...] tiritan [...] astros."

The unexpectedness of *tiritan* directs our gaze to those shivering stars. When we look at

they shiver

them, we start to shiver a little ourselves, for projectile words behave like boomerangs; the affect thrown onto the object comes back to the subject. We may then begin to wonder about that starry night, whether a poet as deft as Neruda would repeat such a stale phrase, or whether perhaps there is not something very sad lurking behind "estrellada," which of course also means "smashed" or "shattered."⁶ Having become wary of the stars, we will notice that their synonym, "astros," has an etymological connection with "desastre." The shift from the discursive to the visual in the ejemplo reroutes rather than represses the affective energy of its title. It no longer seems so implausible that these are indeed "los versos más tristes," even if the specific cause of the speaker's grief remains so far unnamed.

But the "torrential" Neruda, who even as a young man wanted to write "una poesía aglomerativa,"⁷ was never much given to understatement, and so the two poems go on. I use the plural because, contrary to typographical appearance, the embedded poem also continues. Although the next line, "El viento de la noche gira en el cielo y canta," falls outside the quotation, it too folds into "Los versos más tristes," since the assonance between "estrellada" and "cantan" links this line to the embedded poem. It has not been noticed that the rhyme scheme divides "Poema 20" into two segments: "a-a" for the first four lines; "i-o" for the remaining distiches. In spite of the irregular spacing, the opening lines coalesce into a two-distich unit that exemplifies the speaker's first, hesitant stab at writing "los versos más tristes." Once the reader hears the echo of "estrellada" in "canta," the example spills out beyond the quotation marks, and the controlling authority of writing is shattered—one might say, *estrellada*—by the swirling song. In figural terms, the tension in the poem will emerge from the dissonance between *escribir* and *cantar*, between a writing that tries to contain and an intrusive song that disrupts this effort.⁸

It's not surprising, then, that immediately after hearing the music of the night, the poet starts all over:

- Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.
 6 Yo la quise, y a veces ella también me quiso.

 En las noches como ésta la tuve entre mis brazos.
 8 La besé tantas veces bajo el cielo infinito.

 Ella me quiso, a veces yo también la quería.
 10 Cómo no haber amado sus grandes ojos fijos.

This repetition of the first line cuts two ways. On the one hand, it reaffirms the authority of the poet, his *poder* or power; but on the other, since iteration is a trope of emphasis, it ratchets up the emotional pitch.⁹ Thus, what follows is not an example but a confession—"Yo la quise, y a veces ella me quiso"—in which the first-person pronoun makes its first appearance (after line 9, it will not appear again until the last line). Even in the midst of his confession, however, the poet cannot help hedging his feelings by the odd use of the qualifier "a veces," which he applies first to her love for him and then to his love for her. But since the "tantas veces" of the middle distich effectively negates the "a veces" that precede and follow it, and since the substitution of the imperfect for the preterit (line 9) raises the possibility that he loves her still, the rush of feeling is not blocked altogether. The sequence rises to a crescendo that culminates in the exclamation of line 10—"Cómo no haber amado sus grandes ojos fijos"—an exclamation typically muffled by the absence of exclamation marks.

After reaching this emotional peak, the speaker draws back once again and begins the poem for the third time:

- Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.
 12 Pensar que no la tengo. Sentir que la he perdido.

 Oír la noche inmensa, más inmensa sin ella.
 14 Y el verso cae al alma como al pasto el rocío.

Qué importa que mi amor no pudiera guardarla.
16 La noche está estrellada y ella no está conmigo.

Like the previous passage, this one also mounts to a hesitant climax. The succession of infinitives in the first two distiches—“escribir [...] pensar [...] sentir [...] oír”—traces an arc of affect that reaches its zenith with another reference to the night’s music—“oír la noche inmensa, más inmensa sin ella.” *Inmensa*, literally, means “without measure,” *sin medida*. And measure—*medida*—is what the poet is after, but what he seems unable to achieve in any durable way. The verse that follows contains the only simile in the poem: “Y el verso cae al alma como al pasto el rocío.” The comparison (whose basis is lyrical rather than logical, since dew doesn’t “fall” on the grass) marks the farthest point from the discursive language that dominates the poem, a language that has sometimes been considered almost unpoetic (de Costa 32). In contrast to his attitude at the beginning, where versifying is portrayed as the writer’s willed activity, here the poet passively receives his dew. Beginning with the feckless “And”—a conjunction that feels like a concession—the whole line reeks of surrender. Underscored by the limping iambic rhythm, that “falling” connotes defeat, a capitulation to his feelings of loss and longing. The first line of the third distich (line 15), another exclamation without exclamation marks, amplifies on his helplessness, for *poder* has given way to impotence, *no poder*—“Qué importa que mi alma *no pudiera guardarla*” (my emphasis). By quoting from the poem in quotations, the following line—“La noche está estrellada y ella no está conmigo”—allows us to understand why the *ejemplo* contained the saddest verses: because the shivering stars function as an objective correlative for his beloved’s absence.¹⁰ Enlightened by starlight, we also see a further motive for the choice of “estrellada”: “ella” abides inside the participle.¹¹

The poem could have ended right here. In fact, the sentence that immediately follows—“Eso es todo”—sounds every bit like a conclusion, except that it appears exactly at the mid-point of the poem:

Eso es todo. A lo lejos alguien canta. A lo lejos.
18 Mi alma no se contenta con haberla perdido.

Even if “Eso es todo” did not bisect the poem, we know enough about the speaker to anticipate that this laconic summation will not be the half of it. Thus far he has resorted to various containing actions: spacing, quotation marks, the modulation in rhyme, the absence of enjambment and, most fundamental, the appeal to the regulatory power of writing. Now he wants to assert, “That’s all,” and be done with it. But the attempt at closure collapses almost as soon as it is uttered. Not only does the line continue—“A lo lejos alguien canta. A lo lejos”—it scans as an alexandrine only by the *sinalefa* of vowels separated by periods. Just as the embedded poem overstepped the quotation marks, here the words threaten to exceed the required syllabic count. Measure holds, but precariously, and at the expense of syntax. For if the synaloephas between “todo” and “A,” and between “canta” and “A,” rescue the alexandrine, they also charge the line with a kinetic energy that erases the first two stops built into it. As Charles Altieri has reminded us, there is always feeling in movement, be it corporal or prosodic (236). In line 17 prosody drives the poem forward, while syntax acts to arrest it, to make the poem reach its terminus, its *punto final*. Once again logic—“Eso es todo”—and lyric—“A los lejos alguien canta”—clash to intermingle. As the line pushes forward, the speaker opens up, vocally and emotionally: closed vowels modulate into open vowels; the will to closure fades before the allure of song.

This surge in feeling spills over into the second line of the distich—“Mi amor no se contenta con haberla perdido”—where the resonance of *canta* in *contenta* confirms the role of music as source and symbol of his lack of contentment, which is at the same time a lack of containment. Besides giving voice to a specific affect—discontent—“No se contenta” reveals the speaker’s temperamental incontinence, his soul’s overflowing (*canta* also echoes in *alma*). The poet thinks that he is writing *versos*—a term inseparable from the history of writing—rather than composing

couplet

my soul is not satisfied that it has lost her
my soul is not content

song

a *canción*. In other words, he regards "Poema 20" as a print-poem, not a song-poem: "literature" rather than "orature."¹² But as this *distich* makes clear (to him, to us), the song cannot be muted. By repeating how distant it is, he brings it closer. By giving it a human author, he makes it all the more plaintive. Who is the "alguien" who sings? Either the poet himself as affective subject (a premonition of "La canción desesperada"), or his beloved, about whom he remarks in "Poema 3": "En ti la tierra canta." An antiphonic (anti-phononic) structure governs the poem: the poet opposes verse and song, writing and voicing; and though he aligns himself with the former, he cannot resist the affect, the effect, of the latter.

After the failed closure, the rest of the poem progresses with fewer impediments. Significantly, the poet will now define himself as a voice rather than as a writer: the word *versos* (or *verso*), which occurs four times in the first half of the poem, will not appear again until the last line. The next four stanzas once again mount toward a climax:

20 Como para acercarla mi mirada la busca.
Mi corazón la busca, y ella no está conmigo.

22 La misma noche que hace blanquear los mismos árboles.
Nosotros, los de entonces, ya no somos los mismos.

24 Ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero cuánto la quise.
Mi voz buscaba el viento para tocar su oído.

26 De otro. Será de otro. Como antes de mis besos.
Su voz, su cuerpo claro. Sus ojos infinitos.

• my sight tries to find her as though to bring her closer.....
Her voice, her bright body. Her infinite eyes

Suddenly shifting to the present tense, as if propelled by the kinesis generated in the previous section, the speaker goes in search of his beloved, a setting-forth that Amado Alonso aptly characterizes as an "anhelo dinámico" (64). Two infinitives chart the speaker's search: *acercar* in line 19—"Como para acercarla mi mirada la busca"—and *tocar* in line 24—"Mi voz buscaba el viento para tocar su oído." If in the first half of the poem he moved closer—from *pensar* to *sentir* to *oír*—now he moves in—from *acercar* to *tocar*. The infinitive that caps the progression signifies on several levels. Although *tocar* lacks the flexibility of its English equivalent, which is used interchangeably for emotional and physical touching, it can also mean to move or affect, as in the idiom "tocar de cerca." Additionally, since the word has a musical meaning, it reprises the song of the earlier stanzas. Lastly, with *tocar* feeling reverts to its material grounding in sensation. The poet wants to move/play/touch her ear with his voice—which means, in part, that he wants to address her, as he does in all the other poems in the book.

But not only that. In the film *Il Postino* (1994), which transports a fictionalized Neruda to the island of Capri, the mother of the postman's girlfriend (after reading one of Neruda's love poems) warns her daughter: "When a man wants to touch you with his words, his hands are not far off." This section of "Poema 20" proves the *signora* right. Initially seized by "mild" emotions such as sadness or discontent, the poet now finds himself in the throes of lust and jealousy. As he recalls their love affair, the first- and third-person singular pronouns of the first half of the poem momentarily join in a "nosotros": "Nosotros, los de entonces, ya no somos los mismos." This "we" cannot be sustained, however; and not only because the lovers have changed, but because the specter of an "otro" shatters the "nosotros": "De otro. Será de otro. Como antes de mis besos." The staggered diction of this line, with its proliferation of sentence fragments each one longer than the last, underscores the speaker's increasing agitation. Only in one other verse (line 17) does he break up or "spring" the traditional *bimembración* of the alexandrine with three syntactical units separated by periods. A metrical symptom of the poet's unrest, this dislocation marks the two moments of greatest emotional turmoil in the poem. As affect grows, so does disaffection.¹³

While giving vent to his jealousy, the poet foregrounds the woman's physical presence for the first and only time. Up to this point she had been a pair of eyes ("sus grandes ojos fijos," line

• we are the same no longer

10); now she also acquires a voice and a body. Were this a different Neruda poem, the evocation of the beloved's body might have inspired a string of ejaculations, as in "Poema 1":

Ah los vasos del pecho! Ah los ojos de ausencia!
Ah las rosas del pubis! Ah tu voz lenta y triste!

But "Poema 20" is meant to be non-exclamatory and anaphrodisiac. That it is the only poem in the collection that does not address the woman is relevant here too, for in rhetorical treatises apostrophe (also called *exclamatio*) was classed among the "pathetic" tropes, which add emotional emphasis (Beristáin 71). Thus, as the poem finally reaches its real conclusion, the speaker turns away from her body, turns down the volume, and returns to hedging:

Ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero tal vez la quiero.
28 Es tan corto el amor, y es tan largo el olvido.

Porque en noches como ésta la tuve entre mis brazos,
30 mi alma no se contenta con haberla perdido.

Aunque éste sea el último dolor que ella me causa,
32 aunque éstos sean los últimos versos que yo le escribo.

The first distich in this sequence includes the second most-quoted line in the poem (line 28), though it's little more than an elegant cliché. Playing with the proverb *ars longa vita brevis*, Neruda substitutes terms but arrives at an equally predictable lesson: love is fleeting. Nonetheless, there is serenity in wisdom, however hackneyed. More important than the lesson of the epigram is its function, to restore the poet's composure long enough for him to bring the longest of the twenty love poems (*ars longa!*) to a conclusion, though not before repeating two earlier verses (lines 7, 18) in the next-to-the-last distich.

The final distich gestures in two directions. In one direction, it keeps the promise of the opening line, since the initial "Puedo escribir" comes to fruition in the poem's last word, "escribo." The reappearance of the "yo" just before the verb suggests that his desiring self has been overridden, or overwritten, by his scriptive self. And the use of the indicative rather than the subjunctive in "escribo" emphasizes his determination to write no more about her. But these finishing touches are, once again, deceptive, since these aren't the last verses he will write. The *punto final* after "escribo" is no more terminal, no less inconclusive or incontinent, than the ones that preceded it: "La canción desesperada," which is nearly twice as long as "Poema 20," follows on the next page.

Although "Poema 20" is regarded as one of the great love poems in the Spanish language, it's not primarily a celebration of love or a lament over its loss. And if it's not quite a love poem, it's not quite a whole poem either, for it begins three times and ends twice.¹⁴ The compulsive repetition of the first line suggests that foremost in the speaker's mind is his *poder*, the empowerment or sense of control attendant to writing. Revisiting the commonplace that "querer es poder," the detours and reversals of his monologue demonstrate, however, that *querer* as willpower is helpless before *querer* as unwilled affect. In spite of his assertions to the contrary, by the end of the poem the poet is no closer to closure than he was at the beginning. He can write, but he can't quite control what he writes.

The cost—or reward—of such control as he does exercise surfaces in the high-strung "song" that finally shuts the book on the affair. Oozing the declamatory emotionalism that "Poema 20" muffles, "La canción desesperada" is the definitive valedictory poem, a work of release rather than containment, one that gives vent to the sentiment pent up in "Poema 20." The spike in affect—from sadness to despair—signals the speaker's inability to restrain himself any longer. His reversion to the apostrophic mode keys this change in attitude:

Oh, carne, carne mía, mujer que amé y perdí,
a ti en esta hora húmeda, evoco y hago canto.

"Hago canto," he says, indicating both that he has transformed the flesh-and-blood woman into the airy stuff of song, and that he is at that moment engaged in lyrical making, in the singing that in "Poema 20" had been heard only in the distance. Assertive as well as passionate, "La canción desesperada" is an "obstinate lament"—the metaphor with which Neruda describes the sea's roar, but one that applies also to his song. Its hyperbolic refrain—"Todo en ti fue naufragio!"—gives the lie to the minimizing "Eso es todo" of "Poema 20." In light of this contrast, the question arises: Which is the truly desperate poem? I find the quiet desperation of "Poema 20" far more affecting than the oohs and aahs of "La canción desesperada," where the dominant sign of pathos is the exclamation mark (I count eleven of them, in addition to three "ah"s and eleven "oh"s). Sometimes there's more feeling in a whisper than in a howl.

It would be unlike Neruda, however, to end with a muted cry of despair. At about the same time that he was writing the *Veinte poemas*, he was also at work on *El hondero entusiasta*;¹⁵ and enthusiasm, whatever its object—a woman, a river, America, Stalin, a pair of socks—is certainly more typical of Neruda's temperament and gift than the tremorous restraint of "Poema 20." Yet one of the most appealing things about the poem is the speaker's obvious discomfort with the limitations that he has set himself. He wants to call out, to emote, to "make song," but he chooses to hold it in, if just barely. The hesitations in the poem, its repetitions and recantations, masterfully capture the awkward economy of feeling, our not-uncommon reluctance to yield to sentimentality. For me, this reluctance is itself full of feeling. When Rodríguez Monegal criticizes the "trasnochado sentimentalismo" of *Veinte poemas* (187), he overlooks that, in "Poema 20" at least, sentimentality arises from complex, labile transactions between distance and intimacy, contraction and expansiveness, indifference and vulnerability. And there is nothing dated about this.

In a well-known passage of *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes points out that in our time it is not the sexual but the sentimental that has become obscene (177). Reading for feeling, by which I mean reading the feeling in poems as well as feeling the poem in our enactment of it, requires that we ignore this tacit but, for this reason, all the more forceful prohibition. In an academic setting, this prohibition takes the form of a reading practice currently more interested in the big picture than in the small one, more attuned to global designs than to shifting tonalities of emotion. I have taught "Poema 20" many times to graduate and undergraduate students, and I have never asked them how the poem makes them feel. But maybe that's the first question I should ask: not "what does it mean?" Or: "What can we say about the style, structure or imagery?" Or: "What are the political, literary and biographical contexts of the poem?" But instead, and not so simply, "How does it feel?"

Years ago Raymond Carver published a book of stories with the wonderful title, *What we talk about when we talk about love*. My impression is that these days what we talk about when we talk about poetry is usually not the affective experience of reading poems, and particularly sentimental poems. We deploy, we intervene, we interrogate. Some of us play bilingual games. Others of us continue to ask whether the subaltern speaks. Still others of us gender, regender or transgender. We read with an eye for the ideological. We write with an ear for *le dernier cri*. What we don't do, at least not often enough, is recognize and celebrate the power of poems to move us, what Vicente Leñero, in a different context, once called, "el derecho de llorar" (271). In this respect, we are not unlike the speaker of "Poema 20." As we enact the poem, we act out our own need for containment, for measure, for keeping the sentimental at bay (a classroom is no place for public displays of affect). No matter: whether we know it or not, whether we are listening or not, *A lo lejos alguien canta. A lo lejos*.

NOTES

¹For recent work on affect theory as it relates to literary study, see Altieri, Hogan, Sedgwick, and Terada. To my knowledge, there is as yet no overview of the sometimes quite heterogenous body of recent theoretical writing on literary affect, some of it inspired by research in cognitive science and the psychology of emotion.

Good starting points are the essays by Miall and Kuiken, and by Kuiken, Miall and Sikora. Also worth noting is Jane Tompkins's "Criticism and Feeling," as relevant today as it was in 1977. I would like to thank Roberta Johnson for bringing some of this material to my attention. Quotations from *Veinte poemas y una canción desesperada* are taken from the Alianza edition. I will identify the quotations by poem rather than page number.

²I will be using "affect," "emotion" and "feeling" interchangeably, though psychologists sometimes distinguish among them. For Silvan Tomkins, emotions arise from the combination of a limited number of primary affects such as shame, surprise, joy, anger or fear (73–74). Others align "affect" with sensation—a physiological response—and place "feeling" on a middle ground between sensation and emotion (Terada 4). Antonio Damasio, for his part, uses "feeling" for private, mental experience and "emotion" for observable responses (42).

³On the concept of "enactment," see Kuiken, Miall, and Sikora.

⁴According to Paul Rogers, lines 2 and 3 are "pretty but rather ordinary lines. The author knows this and puts them in quotation marks" (265). Keith Ellis adds that "As 'los versos más tristes,' the lines appear to be surprising, even paradoxical. They do not, in any case, demonstrate the intention that introduces them. [...] It can hardly be maintained that the verses 'la noche está estrellada / y tiritan, azules, / los astros a lo lejos' are intrinsically sad" (509, 512). Ellis goes on to argue that the "sadness" of the *ejemplo* emerges from its relation to the rest of the poem.

⁵José Miguel Oviedo rightly remarks that "Poema 20" "es un poema que *analiza* el amor y lo interroga infatigablemente; en vez del puro sentimiento amoroso, tenemos un examen del alma y la mente enamoradas" (355). According to René de Costa, "The real subject of this composition is not the speaker's stated sadness but the disparity between this sentiment and the words he can summon to express what he feels" (29).

⁶In his English version of "Poema 20," W. S. Merwin rendered "La noche está estrellada" as "The night is shattered." Although this mistranslation has been corrected in recent editions (such as the one to which Cristina García wrote the Introduction), Timothy Murad has found some justification for Merwin's error, arguing that "the somewhat violent and jarring image of a shattered night—tempered by the concurrent first meaning of the phrase—is congruent with the emotions evoked from the enunciation of the "'ejemplo' (lines 2 and 3)" (17).

⁷Speaking of *Veinte poemas y una canción desesperada* in 1964, Neruda stated: "Este libro no alcanzó para mí, aun en esos años de tan poco conocimiento, el secreto y ambicioso deseo de llegar a una poesía aglomerativa en que todas las fuerzas del mundo se juntaran y se derribaran" (*Obras completas* 3: 711).

⁸One cannot underestimate the importance of song for the author of *Canto general*. Throughout the *Veinte poemas*, and culminating in "La canción desesperada," poetic song will be the medium for the unabashed expression of affect. In "Poema 4," the wind also sings:

Innumerable corazón del viento
latiendo sobre nuestro silencio enamorado.

Zumbando entre los árboles, orquestal y divino,
como una lengua llena de guerras y de cantos.

In "Poema 13," after noting his separation from his beloved, the speaker will find solace in song:

Sin embargo, algo canta entre estas palabras fugaces.
Algo canta, algo sube hasta mi ávida boca.
Oh poder celebrarte con todas las palabras de alegría.
Cantar, arder, huir, como un campanario en las manos de un loco.

On the perennial association of music and emotion, see Budd, and Levinson (90–125).

⁹Chris Perriam perceptively remarks that the repetition of the first line is part of a "continuing dialectic where each phase of sadness is taken therapeutically into the next phase, overcome but also intensified" (96).

¹⁰The conventional association of eyes and stars strengthens the connection, especially since the speaker describes his beloved's eyes with the same adjective that he uses for the sky: "ojos infinitos" (line 26), "cielo infinito" (line 6). Amado Alonso makes a related point when he states that the poet's initial declaration of melancholy "busca objetivarse en estructuras reconocibles, existentes, comprobables. El sentimiento a presión mira hacia el mundo en busca de símbolos adecuados que lo expresen, y se cuida de armonizar los materiales objetivos: la noche con sus astros y su alto viento. La melancolía busca el cielo estrellado para proyectarse en él" (63).

¹¹Since the framing poem glosses the embedded poem, Neruda's *ejemplo* features the bipartite structure—text plus scholium—characteristic of an *exemplum*. One difference, however, is that whereas in the medieval genre the narrative segment occupies most of the text, here the gloss takes up most of the poem, somewhat like a large, heavy frame that is out of all proportion to the picture it encloses.

¹²The term "orature," coined by Honorat d'Aguessy, has been used to refer to various types of oral literature such as folk tales and songs (Mbock 1–5).

¹³Is it a stretch to hear in the "nosotros/otro" opposition a distant echo of the unlucky "astros" of the opening example? In a poem so infused with all kinds of resonances, one which appeals repeatedly to a song uttered at the edge of sound, it may be that "overhearing" is impossible.

¹⁴According to Guillermo Araya, "Poema 20" "es de una gran sencillez. No hay ninguna dificultad expresiva, emotiva ni intelectual" (175). It seems to me that the opposite is the case: the poem's interest arises precisely from the expressive, emotional and intellectual "difficulties" that the speaker is attempting to negotiate.

¹⁵Although *El hondero entusiasta* was not published until 1933, Neruda wrote it in 1923. He did not publish it earlier because he feared that it would be perceived as derivative of the poetry of the Uruguayan Carlos Sabat Erceasty (see Rodríguez Monegal [186–87]; also Neruda, *Obras completas* 3: 709–10).

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