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and the Ancient Quarrel  
between Poets and  
Philosophers*

*Jason Wilson*



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Detail from Gustave Moreau, *Salome Dancing before Herod*, 1876, Oil on Canvas, 56-1/2 x 41-1/16 inches. The Armand Hammer Collection, UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California.



# Darío, Borges, Neruda and the Ancient Quarrel between Poets and Philosophers\*

'Qui suis-je?'

André Breton, *Nadja*

Lionel Trilling's essay 'On the Teaching of Modern Literature', written in 1961,<sup>1</sup> pursued his worry that the study of literature could not improve his students, make them better citizens and patriots; quite the opposite, modern literature is 'shockingly personal'<sup>2</sup> and seduces with a dangerous, dissolving freedom, a 'surrendering oneself to experience without regard to self-interest or conventional morality, of escaping wholly from the societal bonds'.<sup>3</sup> Trilling deliberately echoed Nietzsche's defence of the Dionysiac, that self-forgetting in the 'mysterious primal Oneness' where 'the spell of individuation is broken',<sup>4</sup> a path of excess reined in by the Apolline, or societal moderation. Nietzsche particularly attacked the Socratic, the 'theoretical man',<sup>5</sup> the rational optimist, blinded by faith in the explicability of being. As a university teacher, Trilling was a Janus-figure, looking one way towards the anarchic thrill of creativity and the other towards Socratic policing and censoring of Dionysiac enchantment. This is the paradox of teaching subversive literature: we are funded by society and impose on Dionysiac trances a culture of examinations and a comforting rationality. From within the safe institutional framework of the university, we constantly implement Plato's expulsion of the poets from the public arena because they arouse and confuse our minds.<sup>6</sup>

This analysis will explore this Nietzschean conflict in three Spanish American poets and simultaneously outline and defend the excessive way poets read other texts as they re-enact this 'ancient' quarrel between

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<sup>1</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture. Essays on Literature and Learning* (Harmondsworth, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, translated by Shaun Whiteside (Harmondsworth, 1993), pp. 17 and 52.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, translated with an introduction by Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth, 1987), p. 98. I have consulted Iris Murdoch, 'The Fire and the Sun: why Plato banished the Artist' in Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics. Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, with a preface by Peter Conradi (London, 1997) and E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, [1951] (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1973). Professor Jack Sage referred me to a lucid analysis of Plato's expulsion of certain kinds of poets from his state in M.F. Burnyeat, 'Art and Mimesis in Plato's *Republic*', *London Review of Books*, 21 May 1998, pp. 3-9, where Burnyeat equates Plato with 'Soviet-style control from above', and examines 'the menace of poetic mimesis', to conclude that 'Plato's problem is still with us' (p. 9), as I do in the Latin American context of a writer's social responsibility.

poetry and philosophy, in terms of the imperative, or social burden, of having to be responsibly 'Latin American'.<sup>7</sup>

### Rubén Darío (1867–1916)

My first example represents a landmark in Spanish American literature, and grapples with the function of the poet in neo-colonialist societies. One of Latin America's foremost critics, the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó, dismissed the poetry of Rubén Darío,<sup>8</sup> the Nicaraguan, who at that time — 1899 — was making his name as icon in Buenos Aires, was rejected as 'not being the poet of America'.<sup>9</sup> For Rodó, Darío indulged in 'the facile giddiness of a lark' ['el mareo fácil de la alondra'];<sup>10</sup> and wrote a dangerously frivolous and capricious poetry that was 'entirely irresponsible'. Rodó's metaphor for these poems was a 'wine-glass filled with lyrical foam' (a kind of mental champagne). Rodó brushed aside Darío's exploration of the thrill of creativity, the sensations that freed the mind and promised momentary paradises, in the name of social and civic responsibility. With newish nations to form in Spanish America, why gush operatically about 'sacred sperm', 'immortal females', 'hot burning kisses', etc.

Rodó was particularly irked by Darío's bad example, by the legion of imitators who swallowed the poet's bohemian message of excess (lust, booze, pleasure, idleness) and by the elevation of the *poète maudit* (the 'damned' poet, Edgar Allan Poe, Verlaine) into a role model.<sup>11</sup> Rodó cursed the way readers read Darío uncritically as no way to become citizens of an *América* dominated by the United States and without clear national projects. As is obvious, Rodó's objections to Darío's readers echo what Plato put in Socrates's mouth about gullible readers. A quick summary: poetry's 'terrible power to corrupt' stirs up strong feelings that carry us away; the poet 'gratifies and indulges the instinctive desires' that obscure common sense and truth. Thanks to these poets 'desires control us'. An image of this Dionysiac poetry (i.e. Rubén Darío's) comes in Plato's views on dreams where he says 'our fierce bestial nature' is awoken and 'pleasure and desires are lawless and violent'. No wonder Rodó refused to condone Darío's

<sup>7</sup> 'Let us add that there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry', Plato, *The Republic*, p. 376.

<sup>8</sup> José Enrique Rodó, *Hombres de América (Montalvo – Bolívar – Rubén Darío)* (Barcelona, 1931). These ideas were first explored in my 'Replay of Plato: Rodó, Darío and Poetry' read at the Institute of Latin American Studies at the conference 'Rodó Revisited: 100 years after *Ariel*', held on 12 November 1999 and organised by Dr Gustavo San Román (to be published by the Institute of Latin American Studies in 2001). All translations in the rest of this paper are mine, unless otherwise stated, and the references given are to the Spanish originals.

<sup>9</sup> Rodó, *Hombres de América*, p. 118

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> See Paul Verlaine's 1884 work, *Les poètes maudits* (repr. New York, 1977). Rubén Darío published his essays on Edgar Allan Poe, Paul Verlaine and Lautréamont, among other writers, as *Los raros* in 1896. He described Poe as a 'soñador infeliz, príncipe de los poetas malditos' (*Los raros*, Buenos Aires, 1952), p. 20.

lawless verse, especially when admired by readers. To counter the poet's corrupting power, the philosopher Socrates (like all critics) planned to 'break the enchantment' by reading poetry critically: 'so great is the natural magic of poetry. Strip it of its poetic colouring, reduce it to plain prose, and I think you know how little it amounts to.'<sup>12</sup> However, to muddle things, at the heart of this deconstructive and moral task lies Socrates's confession that 'we know their fascination only too well ourselves'.<sup>13</sup> In fact, just before he died, a dream urged Socrates to compose poems for the first time in his life (a hymn to the gods).<sup>14</sup> Here we have the university teacher's and critic's dilemma in a nutshell; Rodó adored Darío's daring poetry, but resented its spell on readers (like Socrates before him).

The word 'lawless', the mindless sensations induced by the trance of music, of poetry, of lust, lead to Rubén Darío who often tapped into these 'lawless' mysteries, and returned dazed as Socrates had predicted, for poets write many fine things 'but understand nothing of what they say'.<sup>15</sup> In the wake of Rodó's public rebuke about not being socially responsible, Darío, in his *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905) tried to write sensible civic and public poems defending Latinity, attacking Roosevelt, celebrating the quatercentenary of the discovery of América, but by then he had paid the price for his lawless *poesía maldita* and, despite his immense social prestige in the Hispanic world, his last sad years were dogged by continuous nightmares and alcoholic depressions, finally dying of cirrhosis of the liver in 1916.

In 1905 Darío published a laconic poem that touched on this ambiguous experience, and that offers a model of a special kind of reading.<sup>16</sup> The poem opens with Salome forever dancing in the present tense in front of Herod ('En el país de las Alegorías / Salomé siempre danza'). She is not a historical figure, safe and locked up in the past, but an allegory of a taboo desire. Frank Kermode once warned us that the figure of Salome was 'a curiously complicated subject',<sup>17</sup> explored by Mario Praz before him as a variant of the Fatal Woman.<sup>18</sup> Here in the poem, despite John the Baptist's power (lions tremble in his presence), the axe falls and blood flows ('cae al hachazo. Sangre llueve'). Then the poem shifts from a representation of this biblical scene with a curt 'Pues' and leaps away from Salome and the severed head to offer a disturbing amalgam of meanings:

*Pues la rosa sexual  
al entreabrirse*

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, p. 367.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 376.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, translated by F. J. Church, in *The Trial and Death of Socrates* (London, 1920), pp. 110-1. Socrates illustrated what he meant by appropriate, civic poetry; that he knew its power himself is crucial.

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> Rubén Darío, *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905) (repr. Madrid, 1964).

<sup>17</sup> Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (1957) (London, 1971), p. 87.

<sup>18</sup> Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (1937), with a forward by Frank Kermode (Oxford, 1970). Praz associates Salome with Lilith, Cleopatra and the Praying Mantis, who all kill the men they love.

*conmueve todo lo que existe  
con su efluvio carnal  
y con su enigma espiritual.*

[the sexual rose  
as it half opens  
affects all that exists  
with its carnal effluvium  
and its spiritual enigma]

We know that Salome was the ‘Goddess of the Decadence’;<sup>19</sup> that, in Huysmans’ words, she was ‘the symbolic incarnation of undying lust’, recreated around the globe from Oscar Wilde and Gustave Moreau in Paris to Julián del Casal in Cuba, but why this half-opening sexual rose? Unlike some of his European contemporaries, Darío showed no fear confronting a Salome who danced so erotically that Herod offered any reward she wanted, and after consulting Herodias, her mother, had asked for John the Baptist’s head; for many of the decadent poets and painters this girl’s whim of pleasure induced panic, the terrible mother, a naked Kali trampling men,<sup>20</sup> carrying out some obscure revenge ... For Darío, though, Salome was more a capricious, sensuous muse, for we have this strange visual yoking of a severed head (a bloody flower) with a sexual rose (a vulva flower), that moves the cosmos with its carnal ‘effluvium’, a stench and scent capturing the frightening enigma of birth and death and sexuality, and enigma etymologically means poetic riddle; so Darío — shockingly personal and confrontational in terms of his reader in Lionel Trilling’s sense — stews together blood, stench, vulva, death, cosmic sympathy and lust, maybe even alluding to menstruation, but whatever, the poet asks the reader to contemplate this source of life, and poet and reader struggle with this riddle.

A clue to Darío’s presentation of Salome emerges from Huysmans’ novel *A rebours* (1884).<sup>21</sup> Through the protagonist Des Esseintes, we learn that the vertigo of art must ‘throw you into an unknown world’, beyond time, society and country. Huysmans’ example of this powerful art is the French painter Gustave Moreau’s painting ‘Salomé dansant’;<sup>22</sup> her ‘lascivious dance’, with nipples erect, and diamonds covering her naked, sweating body ‘crachant des étincelles’;<sup>23</sup> transformed the chaste biblical girl into ‘the symbolic deity of indestructible “Luxure” [Lewdness] ... la beauté maudite [damned Beauty]’;<sup>24</sup> this metamorphosed Salome, like Medusa, poisons

<sup>19</sup> Philippe Jullian, *Dreamers of Decadence. Symbolist Painters of the 1890s*, translated by Robert Baldick (London, 1969), p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> Kali, a Hindu goddess, enchantress, destroyer, the ‘terrible mother’, is often portrayed dancing on a naked man, with a necklace of human heads and a sword. See Ajit Mookerjee, *Ritual Art of India* (London, 1998), p. 128.

<sup>21</sup> J.-K. Huysmans, *A rebours* (Paris, 1968).

<sup>22</sup> ‘Salomé dansant devant Hérode’ (1876). See Pierre-Louis Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau. Complete Edition of the Finished Paintings, Watercolours and Drawings* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 121–4 and 322.

<sup>23</sup> Huysmans, *A rebours*, p. 113.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

all who approach her with her hysteria. Huysmans linked Salome with Kali, across cultures, as avenging women, and this primal panic she induced ('la terreur de l'être humain') stirred up Huysmans' guts, made him giddy ('pris de vertige'). Darío read and absorbed Huysmans' panic about the 'bloody enigmas' by linking severed head with sexual mysteries (and carrying over Huysmans' exact words into his poem). In another incantatory poem celebrating Darío's pansexuality, 'Carne, celeste carne de la mujer' [Flesh, Celestial Woman's Flesh], illustrating what Octavio Paz called the 'great sexual wave' soaking all Darío's work,<sup>25</sup> we read: 'In her flesh is the lyre / in her flesh is the rose / in her flesh is the science of harmony / in her flesh we breathe / the vital perfume in everything',<sup>26</sup> where the 'effluvium' of the Salome poem doubles as perfume and the sexual rose is source of all art and knowledge. The Darío poem challenges the reader: to be a poet you must interrogate Salome, goddess of birth and death. Octavio Paz, reading Darío's reading of Huysmans' reading of Moreau's reading of Flaubert's reading of the Biblical Salome, found that Darío's Salome 'embodies the deep, sacred, cosmic amorality',<sup>27</sup> outside law and society.

Darío's compressed Salome poem closes with 'Enigma espiritual';<sup>28</sup> and proposes an alternative identity to a social and civic one, based on a lawless experience, outside time, place and history; the poem itself dispenses with the poet's 'yo' which art's intensity has dissolved. The sexual passage to understanding half-opens and gut-understanding is mindlessly experiential (there is no self). Despite Rodó's Socratic attempt at censoring him, Darío creatively read Gustave Moreau's painting depicting a somnambulistic, bejewelled Salome so that this painting spoke through him, became him. Nietzsche's version of the Dionysiac proposed that the poet became a work of art,<sup>29</sup> that art carried out an inner transformation in the artist that was worth more than any poem. In Rodó's terms, Darío's dangerous identification-reading of Huysmans shows how, when a poet reads, there is, in Socrates's terms, a kind of moral pollution; Darío didn't read Moreau and Huysmans, he was possessed by them, thus contradicting the Socratic refusal of the trance

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<sup>25</sup> Octavio Paz, 'El caracol y la sirena: Rubén Darío', in *Obras completas*, vol. 3 (Mexico, 1994), p. 165. Frank Kermode is vaguer, quotes Yeats about Salome / Herodias 'doubtless taking the place of some old goddess' and through a 'complex association of ideas' represents the 'emblem of the perfect work of art' (p. 90) rather than concentrating on the effect of this art on a reader / viewer.

<sup>26</sup> Darío, *Cantos de vida y esperanza*, vol. 3, p. 61.

<sup>27</sup> Paz, 'El caracol y la sirena', p. 167. Critics have paid little attention to this poem. A typical gesture towards its meaning would be Jaime Giordano's 'el sentido terriblemente enigmático de la "rosa sexual"' in *La edad del ensueño. Sobre la imaginación poética de Rubén Darío* (Santiago de Chile, 1971), p. 39. Arturo Marasso, in his *Rubén Darío y su creación poética* (Buenos Aires, 1954), referred to Flaubert and a tympanum, or stone carving, in Rouen cathedral, pp. 260–2.

<sup>28</sup> Paz has 'estigma espiritual' in his quotation. See footnote 25.

<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 18.

of art. In terms of the ancient quarrel of my title, Darío sided with the Dionysiac poets, the *maudits*; he quipped in a poem: 'Verlaine is better than Socrates'. Salome danced so erotically that Darío willingly lost his head. Striving to be the poet of *América* was an irrelevancy.

### Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986)

My second, briefer, example is Jorge Luis Borges; the echo of Rodó's 1899 public taunt that Darío was not the poet of *América* still rang in Borges's ears when he returned to his native city, Buenos Aires, in 1921 as a young 22 year-old poet, after seven years in Europe, like a prodigal son to an unimaginable, mutating city, bursting at the seams with massive immigration and fabulous wealth. Borges envisioned his poetic duty (as a close reader of Walt Whitman) as being to sing of himself and his American city. His first collection of poems, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), expounds his patriotic passion. Borges, all eyes, and tingling with curiosity, walked his city as a *flâneur*, absorbing what was new to him, what was at odds with European cities (and, atypically for an Argentine, dismissing the Europeanising mimicry of his very urban city) and instead mythified the empty backstreets, the suburbs and *barrios*, the patios and doorways, the railway sidings, the sunsets, the local thugs; and all this in the poetic guise of a recently acquired and quickly discarded avant-garde mode.

After a brief return to Europe, Borges wrote two further books of poems celebrating his city, and then he suffered a poet's block that lasted 31 years; instead he turned to prose, and made his name with his stunning 'fictions' in the 1940s. Only when blind did he return to publishing poetry, his first love, with *El hacedor* in 1960. His last collection of the 1920s, *Cuaderno San Martín* (1929), closed with his farewell poem to poetry titled 'El Paseo de Julio', a reference to a street today renamed Calle Reconquista. It was the red-light district, the brothel quarter of a city famed for its white slave trade when even Evelyn Waugh's *Lady Metroland* earned her fortune from getting girls for her brothels in Buenos Aires.<sup>30</sup> Borges described this street as one of 'prostitution concealed by what is most different: music',<sup>31</sup> a strange line pitting prostitution against music; perhaps tango, the brothel music danced by men waiting for the girls. Music becomes corrupted by the sexual market; art cannot remain pure. Borges boasts of his 'stunning ignorance' of this street and cannot imagine it as part of his country: 'nunca te sentí patria'. A double failure lurks behind this line; the first is sexual, the enigma of Borges's sexuality which has biographers in a tizz; the second is that he was not the Latin Walt Whitman, facing every aspect of his city. The poem piles up references to this street being a nightmare, a distorting mirror, pure ugliness, his ruin, chaos, hell. In another strange

<sup>30</sup> See my exploration of this poet's block and references to Waugh in 'Borges and Buenos Aires (and brothels)', *Donaire*, no. 13, Dec. 1999, pp. 47-54.

<sup>31</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires, 1974), p. 95.

line Borges writes: 'and the mermaid promised by that advertisement is dead, made of wax'.<sup>32</sup> Life for the 30-year-old Borges promised not mermaids but wax-like whores calling him to the hell of loveless sex. Sirens ('sirenas') lure him to ask: 'what god, what idol, what veneration is yours, Paseo de Julio?'<sup>33</sup> The last lines of the poem give Borges his answer: your idol is death, and once Borges knows this sordid truth he ends this version of the poem with 'just by existing, all happiness is hostile to you' [the street].<sup>34</sup> What to make of this cryptic swan-song?

That sex without love, brothel sex, is hellish; that love without sex (mermaids) cannot exist; that Borges often fell in love, but always avoided sex, and more crucially, that a poet who is unable to face up to 'hell', the experience of a loveless but sexually-driven urban world, cannot call himself a poet. We can forget Borges's sex-life, but cannot ignore his flinching away from 'reality', and nor did he. He stopped writing poems. Later Borges would make 'cowardice' one of his main self-accusations in stories and verse. In terms of his patriotic song of *América*, Borges could not hold in his mind both the hellish and heavenly city of Buenos Aires; he could no longer map *América*.

The ties between meat, flesh, whores, tango, death and sex that this poem knots together to form an obscure biographic constellation echo an earlier poem from *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), tellingly titled 'Carnicería' (meaning both butcher's shop and carnage). This poem opens with a surprising comparison: 'Más vil que un lupanar',<sup>35</sup> more vile than a brothel.<sup>36</sup> In curious ways both meat and whores stood for Buenos Aires; in Spanish 'carne' means meat and flesh. For Borges, the butcher's shop and the brothel are identical, displaying cold, dead flesh; and now not an erotic Salome, but the severed head lurks in this butcher's window that is 'an insult' ['una afrenta'] to the street, to civic wellbeing. In this window Borges describes a blind cow's head as part of an 'aquestrarre', an obscure Basque word for witches' sabbath, that is, window-meat is given feminine, orgiastic associations (i.e. a brothel) that disgust Borges. The clue to Borges's disgust is the bizarre word 'aquestrarre' that repeats the title to a Goya painting showing witches offering emaciated babies to a goat-headed god.<sup>37</sup> In his poem the meat is called 'carne charra', in bad taste, lying on marble, a tombstone bed; the short poem ends by comparing the dead head to 'the remote majesty of an idol',<sup>38</sup> Borges's hint that he had read Goya's depiction of the goat-

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.96

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31

<sup>36</sup> The word 'lupanar' derives, according to Juan Corominas, from the latin 'lupa' for courtesan, itself from *loba*, she-wolf. See *Breve diccionario etimológico de la lengua castellana* (Madrid, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> This Goya painting, 'El aquestrarre', c. 1795–98, is now held in the Fundación Lázaro Galdiano in Madrid, but once belonged to the Duke of Osuna's country palace, La Alameda. See Pierre Gassier and Juliet Wilson, *Goya. His Life and Work* (London, 1971), p. 122.

<sup>38</sup> Borges, *Obras Completas*, p. 31.

headed devil Dionysus. The remote idol presiding lewdly in this butcher's is this god of sexual excess.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the dead animal-head also conjures up pagan Salome's decapitated trophy; for she, 'luxure', presides over brothels and will chop off his head, 'carnage'. Venting his personal and civic disgust, Borges sided with Rodó and Socrates; his poet's block a gesture to save himself and his readers from corruption.

### Pablo Neruda (1904–73)

My final example is the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who came to stand, in the world's eyes, as *the* Latin American Poet; from working-class origins in Temuco, southern Chile, to winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971 was a long journey, that included five lonely years (1927–32) as honorary consul for Chile in British Burma and Ceylon and Dutch Indonesia. Neruda began writing early; his second collection of poems, *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*, published in 1924, when he was 20, caught the public's imagination, by 1972 reaching sales of over two million copies. However, a sixth sense told Neruda that he had to travel, know the world, experience more, if he was to be a great poet. The Latin American journey to literary fame culminated in Paris, cultural Mecca; Darío, also from a poor background, had travelled from Metapa in Nicaragua via Paris to Buenos Aires, where he lived for six years in the 1890s, as he became the leading poet-icon of his generation. Borges had also gone abroad to Europe for seven years (Geneva rather than Paris). Neruda, however, was forced to accept what came along and, passing through Paris, found himself in Rangoon, Burma in October 1927. He remained in that region for five years, with long stays in Wellawata, Colombo and Batavia, Indonesia, returning to Chile in 1932 with a wonderfully different book of poems called *Residencia en la tierra* (1933); republished in augmented form in Madrid where he was consul in 1935. Neruda has always been a dauntingly prolific poet, his complete works number three fat volumes, 3,522 pages. Yet in the Far East, over a period of five years, Neruda wrote only 19 poems.<sup>40</sup>

1927–28 are his crisis years; in a letter of 1928 he described Rangoon as an oven, a hell, a terrible exile; he couldn't write or read, he felt like a ghost, dressed in his white suit and white cork hat. He was not English, was not even European, but was white, despite his miserable, irregular salary. The 'horror of these abandoned colonies' drove most Europeans to drink, the *chota peg*, the 'terrible tropical whisky'. Neruda's bizarre social position ensured that he was not fascinated by Eastern glamour, did not become a spiritual tourist; he mingled with the dispossessed crowds, 'the street was my religion ... real life'.<sup>41</sup> What Neruda did find

<sup>39</sup> For the links between Dionysus and the Goat, see the entry on 'Bouc' in Jean Chevalier (ed.), *Dictionnaire des Symboles* (Paris, 1969).

<sup>40</sup> Héctor Eandi, in Margarita Aguirre, *Genio y figura de Pablo Neruda* (Buenos Aires, 1967), p. 114; later published as *Pablo Neruda – Héctor Eandi. Correspondencia durante 'Residencia en la tierra'* (Buenos Aires, 1980).

<sup>41</sup> Pablo Neruda, *Confieso que he vivido. Memorias* (Buenos Aires, 1964), p. 119.

were 'girls with young eyes and hips' with flowers in their hair and rings on their toes and ankles, and one of these girls became his lover. Her name was Josie Bliss, though that was not her Burmese name, which Neruda never revealed, if he remembered it at all, or could spell it. They communicated in English, and she lived out her name to the full; it could even have been his nickname for her for, over those years of exile from Chile, Neruda devoured writers like James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence; bliss in his English meant sexual, not religious bliss.

That Josie Bliss was crucial to his poetry as a real-life muse simply confirms Neruda's romantic view that experience, the more intense the better, informs his poetry. The last, culminating poem of his *Residencia en la tierra I y II* (1935), is titled 'Josie Bliss' as recognition of her muse-like status, but the gently nostalgic poem conceals her reality; however, she surfaced, namelessly, in several earlier poems in the collection and she haunted his memory for the rest of his life. All we know of Josie Bliss is what Neruda tells us. In his memoirs Neruda recreated this affair in this British colony run along caste lines, the Burma George Orwell hated where 'you see the dirty work of Europe at close quarters' and where Orwell learnt that 'imperialism was an evil thing'.<sup>42</sup> Neruda was boycotted by the English and their Strand Hotel, clubbish life because he lived with a native. Josie Bliss was forced to dress like an English woman, but in his house threw off her shoes, put on a sarong and used her Burmese name, though they spoke English to each other. As their free relationship flourished, she became intensely jealous, would stalk Neruda's mosquito-netted bed with a long knife, threatening to kill him, until Neruda could take this passionate jealousy no more and escaped to Ceylon without telling her, leaving everything behind, his clothes, his shoes, his books.<sup>43</sup> Later she followed him out to Ceylon, moved in next door playing the Paul Robeson records they both loved, insulting the women who visited him, until she was persuaded to leave. At the port in Colombo Neruda fixes Josie Bliss, 'amorous terrorist', in an unforgettable image; she had bent down and kissed his chalked shoes, then stood up with tears running down her chalk-smudged face. He confessed that after she left 'my heart acquired a scar that has not healed'.<sup>44</sup> The vivid way in these later memoirs that Neruda turns this love-story into an adventure-abroad belies this scar.

Reading Neruda's poems as scars reveals another story. This secondary story does not focus on the kitchen knife or the coconut palm, on castration fears and jealousy, but on a sexual relationship where Neruda contacted a mystery, Darío's enigma, a powerful energy that panicked him, literally, forced him to run away. Neruda boasted that his path to knowledge, both of

<sup>42</sup> George Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth, 1981), p. 91.

<sup>43</sup> Neruda mythified this incident; in fact he was transferred to Colombo as consul. The withholding of this move from Josie Bliss was the same, though. For more details, see Adam Feinstein's forthcoming biography of Neruda (London: Bloomsbury).

<sup>44</sup> Neruda, *Memorias*, p. 133.

the self and the world, was not through bookish culture. In 1926 he wrote, 'I hold a dramatic and romantic concept of life; what doesn't deeply touch my senses means nothing to me'; he evoked his 'physical absorption' in brute life; criticising Jorge Luis Borges in 1929 (Borges was then only a poet), he admitted to a 'scorn for culture as an interpretation of life' and sought 'a knowledge without antecedents'. In the prologue to his sole novel, *El habitante y su esperanza* (1926), Neruda outlined his *poète maudit* pose as being 'an enemy of laws, governments and established institutions. I am disgusted by the bourgeois and I like the life of dissatisfied and restless people, whether they're artists or criminals'.<sup>45</sup> In a 1928 letter he evoked his poetic credo: 'poetry should be charged with passions and things'.<sup>46</sup> This lawless position was tested to the full by Josie Bliss, his Burmese muse. My question is: Why did Neruda refuse to live out his literary fantasies?

The poem 'Tango del viudo' (Widower's Tango), written in 1928 after fleeing Josie Bliss, recreates the dramatic mosquito-net, knife incident in Dalhousie Street, Rangoon and is one of Neruda's greatest poems. Let us examine the fertile title: first, tangos. From being brothel music without words in Buenos Aires, the tango had been taken up in fashionable Paris in the 1920s and made respectable. Its words tended to be a man's lament at being betrayed by his woman, often taking his revenge with a knife. The brothel origins of immigrant men waiting for whores, whom they could never trust or love, are implicit in the very melodies of the music; an Argentine critic typified the dance as 'stylised copulation';<sup>47</sup> it is metonymically South American. Tango melody contaminated the way Neruda read his poetry; a biographer, Volodia Teitelboim, once recorded Neruda reading from these *Residencia* poems in these words: 'he murmured, without inflections, in a monochord, moaning manner',<sup>48</sup> without making the obvious association with tango.

The 'viudo' ('widower') of the title is equally rich in echoes;<sup>49</sup> Neruda was not married to Josie Bliss, but was tempted to settle with her. According to Norman Lewis, sexual moeurs were extremely lax in Burma ('marriage is considered to exist, without further ceremony, when a

<sup>45</sup> Pablo Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. I (Buenos Aires, 1967), p. 121.

<sup>46</sup> Eandi, in Aguirre, *Genio y figura*, p. 116.

<sup>47</sup> Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, *Radiografía de la pampa* (Buenos Aires, 1942), p. 221.

<sup>48</sup> Volodia Teitelboim, *Neruda* (Madrid, 1984), p. 140.

<sup>49</sup> That self-characterisation as *viudo* surfaces in another crucial *Residencia en la tierra* poem, Neruda's 'Arte poética', which reiterates the poet's grief in the line 'y con luto de viudo furioso por cada día de vida' (*Obras Completas*, vol. 1, p.188) ['and with the rage of a furious widower for each day of life'] where Josie Bliss is hidden under male domestic despair as 'hay un olor de ropa tirada al suelo, y una ausencia de flores' (*ibid.*, p. 189) ['there's a smell of clothes thrown on the floor and an absence of flowers']; that Josie is subsumed as an absence of flowers leads to rediscovered strengths as a poet 'me piden lo profético que hay en mí, con melancolía' ['they demand the prophetic in me, with melancholy'], the widower's melancholy that is his best poetry. This interpretation differs from the one I published in the *Reference Guide to World Literature* (London, 1994), pp. 870-1, where I saw it more as a poem about vulnerability, psychic invasion and the inevitable approximations of language, rather than about his real-life enemy-muse.

couple are seen to eat together ... an extraordinary sexual freedom').<sup>50</sup> Confirming this sexual laxity, Neruda, in a short prose poem, 'The Young Monarch', wrote:

*Sí, quiero casarme con la más bella de Mandalay, quiero encomendar mi envoltura terrestre a ese ruido de la mujer cocinando, a ese aleteo de falda y pie desnudo.*<sup>51</sup>

[Yes, I want to marry the most beautiful girl in Mandalay, I want to commend my terrestrial wrapping to that noise of a woman cooking, to that rustle of dress and naked foot.]

And he calls this Mandalay woman 'my Burmese wife'. Now, Neruda wrote this prose poem *after* abandoning his 'wife', Josie Bliss, for it closes with the poet crying her absence. Thus, the title 'Tango del viudo' asserts that Josie Bliss left Neruda a widower, she 'died'; the poem deceitfully reverses the biographical situation, for in fact he 'killed' her, to extend the death metaphors, by running off. The reference to 'Mandalay' immediately evokes (for any Anglo reader, that is) Kipling's cocknified poem of that name where a Burmese girl (let's call her Josie Bliss) under a palm-tree summons her fugitive lover 'come you back to Mandalay'.<sup>52</sup> But Neruda ignored this plea, pretended to be a 'widower'. More, *le veuf*, in poetic terms immediately recalls Gérard de Nerval's famous sonnet 'El desdichado', with its Spanish title meaning he who lost his *dicha* or happiness, an elegy to loss and melancholy, with references to Mélusine and Orpheus. Nerval's sonnet opens: 'Je suis le ténébreux, — le veuf — l'inconsolé / Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie' ['I am the brooding shadow — the bereaved — the unconsolated / Aquitaine's prince of the doomed tower']; his star is dead, and his lute 'bears the black sun of melancholy'.<sup>53</sup> Nerval laments the loss of his muse, given mythic reverberations through naming Lusignan and Orphée who both were the active agents of this loss of a muse; Lusignan by spying on Mélusine when she had her day off, and thus condemning her to revert to her scaly tail, and losing her as she screams in outrage and disappears, and Orpheus by turning round to see if Eurydice is following him and thus breaking his word and losing her too. If we read this sonnet as written by Neruda, that he was 'le veuf', then we have both a confession of his active rejection of Josie and the subsequent bleakness and melancholy. Thirty years later in his collection *Estravagario* (1958), Neruda changed the gender of Nerval's sonnet to 'La desdichada'; it opens laconically: 'I left her in the harbour waiting / and I went to never return'; time and the Second World War have blotted out his presence on his verandah, with his hammock, his

<sup>50</sup> Norman Lewis, *Golden Earth. Travels in Burma* (London, 1954), pp. 52-3.

<sup>51</sup> *Obras completas*, vol. 1, p. 196.

<sup>52</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Selected Poems*, edited by Craig Raine (Harmondsworth, 1992), p. 182.

<sup>53</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Les Chimères*, bilingual edition, translated by William Stone (London, 1999), p. 28. The second line is quoted in French by T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* (1922), *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London, 1963), p. 79.

plants, and 'that woman waiting'.<sup>54</sup> Neruda still suffered guiltily for having abandoned Josie Bliss; in fact, he is the one still waiting, he is the 'desdichado'. In 1964, in a poem called 'Amores: Josie Bliss II' we read: 'I wanted to tell her that I too / suffered: / it's not enough: / he who wounds is wounded himself until death'.<sup>55</sup> Now we move beyond psychology, for Neruda wanted to abandon his muse in order to write, his consolation would be his poems. Neruda's real predicament: in order to write poems he, like Nerval, had to reject his muse, become a *viudo*; a poet cannot write and live the poem. In Yeats's terms, he must chose; either perfect the work or the life, not both.<sup>56</sup> The real decision: Neruda preferred to *write about* Josie Bliss than live intensely with her. That is, he chose to be a poet, not live poetically. He confessed as much in a letter of 1928 after bolting from her: 'yes, that depressing moment, disastrous for many, was noble matter for me'.<sup>57</sup> Melancholy, widower's grief, is the real muse. Josie is secretly present in his mind as 'an extreme bee [that] burns without truce' ([*'una abeja extremada arde sin tregua'*]) from another poem 'Diurno doliente'), as she managed to 'apaga mi poder y propaga mi duelo' [quench my strength and spread my grief].<sup>58</sup>

The 1928 poem 'Tango del viudo' opens as a verse-letter written to Josie in the intimate *tú* address from on board the ship as the poet escapes, and vividly evokes Josie and Neruda's domestic life together:

*Oh Maligna, ya habrás hallado la carta, ya habrás llorado de furia,  
y habrás insultado el recuerdo de mi madre  
llamándola perra podrida y madre de perros,  
ya habrás bebido sola, solitaria, el té del atardecer  
mirando mis viejos zapatos vacíos para siempre,  
y ya no podrás recordar mis enfermedades,  
mis sueños nocturnos, mis comidas  
sin maldecirme en voz alta como si estuviera allí aún,  
quejándome del trópico, de los coolíes corringhis,  
de las venenosas fiebres que me hicieron tanto daño  
y de los espantosos ingleses que odio todavía.*<sup>59</sup>

[Oh Evil Woman, by now you will have found the letter,  
by now you will have cried with rage  
and you will have insulted the memory of my mother  
calling her a rotten bitch and a mother of dogs,  
by now you will have drunk alone, all by yourself, your afternoon tea  
with your eyes on my old shoes which are empty forever,  
and by now you will not be able to recall my illnesses,

<sup>54</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. II, pp. 109–10.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 580.

<sup>56</sup> From W.B. Yeats, 'The Choice': 'The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life, or of the Work, / And if it take the second must refuse / A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark', in *Collected Poems* (London, 1961), p. 278.

<sup>57</sup> Eandi, in Aguirre, 112.

<sup>58</sup> Neruda, *Obras Completas*, vol. I, p. 187.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

my dreams at night, my meals  
 without cursing me out loud as though I were still there  
 complaining of the tropics, of the *Corringhis coolies*,  
 of the poisonous fevers which did me such harm,  
 and of the horrendous English whom I still hate]<sup>60</sup>

The syncopation of the temporal adverb 'ahora' sharpens painfully in memory the explicit references, especially hating English colonial arrogance, as much as Orwell had.

The poem's second stanza evokes Neruda's return to what he loathes most but has cunningly chosen, loneliness, the absence of his lover; he is back to eating cold food alone in restaurants, living without coathangers or portraits on the wall, and missing Josie: 'How much of the shadow that is in my soul would I give to have you back'. But it was too late; Neruda, as befits a Lusignan and an Orpheus, would write an extraordinary poem like 'Caballero solo', with a 'necklace of throbbing sexual oysters' surrounding his 'solitary residence',<sup>61</sup> in Ceylon about the grief of sexual loneliness.

The third stanza of 'Tango del viudo' returns to Josie in Rangoon and the famous knife which Neruda feared would kill him which he buried under a coconut tree; but memory transformed this metal knife into a mental fetish:

*y ahora repentinamente quisiera oler su acero de cocina  
 acostumbrado al peso de tu mano y al brillo de tu pie:  
 bajo la humedad de la tierra, entre las sordas raíces,  
 de los lenguajes humanos el pobre sólo sabría tu nombre,  
 y la espesa tierra no comprende tu nombre  
 hecho de impenetrables sustancias divinas*<sup>62</sup>

[and now suddenly I would be glad to smell its kitchen steel  
 used to the weight of your hand, the shine of your foot:  
 under the dampness of the ground, among the deaf roots,  
 in all the languages of men only the poor will know your name,  
 and the dense earth does not understand your name  
 made of impenetrable substances]

*Knife*, then, like *cadera* (hip), is synecdoche for Josie, her touch, her smell; she is danger; her real Burmese name never explicitly mentioned by Neruda is the only word worth repeating, hoarded by him as a talisman. That Josie Bliss is *knife* is repeated metaphorically in all the later poems alluding to her; she is not only 'evil woman', but often the 'enemy', the 'wide-hipped enemy', the 'pursuer', the 'panther' and 'tiger' with claw-knives out to hunt him like a harpy.<sup>63</sup> Josie Bliss as

<sup>60</sup> I have slightly modified W.S. Merwin's translation in Pablo Neruda, *Selected Poems*, edited by Nathaniel Tarn (London, 1970), p. 81, as he has kept 'Maligna' in Spanish as a name, rather than adjective.

<sup>61</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. I, pp. 198–9.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>63</sup> It's tempting to frame Josie Bliss as 'enemy' in a Jungian gloss, as a latterday Lilith, as Ean Begg has shown in his *Myth and Today's Consciousness* (London, 1986), pp. 79–96, echoing an archetype of wisdom embodied in the Summerian Queen of the Underworld,

'enemiga', in the poem 'El abandonado' where Neruda continued to invert the facts as if he had been abandoned by her, is the oracle, the enigma, the Kali / Salome, he didn't dare face up to (unlike Darío): 'I don't know who you are but I owe you so much / that the earth is filled with my bitter treasure'.<sup>64</sup> Josie, the hostile muse who provoked the poet to be himself and choose what kind of poet to be, spoke a forgotten language, 'los más dulces / suspiros' ['the sweetest sighs'],<sup>65</sup> perhaps her Burmese name, buried deep inside her, a 'hidden fire' ['fuego oculto'].

In the third stanza of 'Tango del viudo' Neruda recreates Josie Bliss in his memory in cosmic and telluric metaphors; her legs 'stilled and hard solar waters', her eyes 'swallows', her heart 'a dog of fury'. Josie Bliss as *dog of fury* ['perro de furia'] awakens a mythical resonance and alludes to another of Neruda's great Josie-love-poems, 'Las furias y las penas' [Furies and Heartaches] (written in 1934, but not published until 1947),<sup>66</sup> for Josie, the enemy, literally reincarnated the Erinnyes or Furies, the angry ones who, according to Robert Graves, 'avenge crimes of parricide and perjury', induce remorse and bad faith, 'punish such crimes by hounding the culprits relentlessly from city to city and from country to country',<sup>67</sup> with their snake-hair, coal-black bodies and blood-shot eyes. Neruda's melancholia is Josie, the dog of fury, hounding him in his heart, dictating poems to her fearful power, her 'rencor de puñal' [dagger rancour].<sup>68</sup>

The last stanza of 'Tango del viudo' suggests a Faustian exchange: Neruda would give everything to hear Josie's 'abrupt breathing', that *brusca* ['abrupt'] making her so suddenly there in his mind, suggesting lover's panting. But more extraordinarily, for Neruda withholds this detail to the poem's end, he would give everything in his soul:

*Y por oírte orinar, en la oscuridad, en el fondo de la casa.  
como vertiendo una miel delgada, trémula, argentina, obstinada*<sup>69</sup>

[... to hear you pee in the dark, at the end of the house,  
as though you were pouring a thin, tremulous, silvery and obstinate honey]

Neruda condensed the thrill of Josie in his memory into this aural image of a woman 'peeing' at night in the silent house. Neruda has accepted everything in Josie as divine and poetic, down to her excretory functions. His lover's acceptance turns ordinary *orina* into *miel* and four incantatory adjectives; that is, her 'urine' triggered off his poetic fancy, made him a

Ereshkigal, with her uninhibited female sexuality, but Neruda's poetic power comes from *not* conceptualising his encounter with Salome / Kali / Josie Bliss. A detailed account of this Summerian goddess is in Sylvia Brinton Perera, *Descent to the Goddess. A Way of Initiation for Women* (Toronto, 1981).

<sup>64</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. I, pp. 261–2

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>66</sup> Neruda, *Residencia en la tierra III*, 1947, in his *Obras completas*, vol. I, pp. 264–9.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth, 1955), p. 122.

<sup>68</sup> Neruda, *Obras Completas*, vol. II, p. 580.

<sup>69</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. I, p. 204.

poet. Josie freed Neruda's unconscious, vividly depicted by him as 'lo sonoro' (an untranslatable onomatopoeia, perhaps 'resonance' or 'sonority' explored in the poem 'Un día sobresale'),<sup>70</sup> the grounding metaphor a silent house at night, where poetry emerges freely, truthfully, as 'sounds'. He wrote: 'De lo sonoro salen números, / números moribundos y cifras con estiércol, / rayos humedecidos y relámpagos sucios' ['From resonance come numbers / dying numbers and dung-covered ciphers, / dampened thunderbolts and dirty lightningflashes'];<sup>71</sup> later in the same poem we read 'Falling from dreams, my soul rolls down into sonority' ['A lo sonoro el alma rueda / cayendo desde sueños']. Neruda located the Dionysiac source of poetry in incantatory sound, thanks to Josie. In this 'lo sonoro' *les mots font l'amour*, in André Breton's phrase,<sup>72</sup> for only when the poet Neruda breaks the sexual taboos can his inner poetic language break linguistic taboos, a clear link between experience and creativity that Neruda learned from Josie ('pues ella era el sonido que me hería')<sup>73</sup> [for she was the sound that wounded me]. In a 1936 manifesto Neruda advocated a poetry that excluded nothing, that accepted everything, without moral discriminations, a penetration into matter 'in an act of "arrebatao amor"' [ecstatic love] that was Josie's lesson;<sup>74</sup> in 1964 in the poem 'Rangoon 1927' Neruda evoked this 'arrebatao' love as 'desmedido' (beyond measure) submerging the lovers in the 'placer amargo de los desesperados'.<sup>75</sup>

Urine transformed erotically into honey brings us back to the 'Song of Songs', as if written by Neruda: 'Thy lips, o my spouse, drop as the honey comb: honey and milk are under thy tongue: and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon',<sup>76</sup> echoed in his line 'ay, grandes muslos llenos de miel verde'<sup>77</sup> ['ay, your great thighs coated with green honey']. The transformation of urine to honey, mimicking the transformatory power of poetry itself (a kind of mental honey), leads us to the final clue as to why Neruda backed away and cowardly wrote about Josie as melancholic memory.

Neruda's long, 1934 love-lament 'Furies and Heartache' refers, as I've hinted, to Josie as a dog of fury and to his own 'penas de amor' [heartache]; the poem's title, as the epigraph reveals, evokes a sonnet by the Spanish Golden-Age poet Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645). Quevedo's mocking sonnet has a long title, which if we read as Neruda's own becomes a bizarre confession. The sonnet's title: 'He pretends in himself to suffer a hell, whose heartache he tries to mitigate, like Orpheus,

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211–12.

<sup>71</sup> Translated by Donald D. Walsh in Pablo Neruda, *Residence on Earth* (London, 1973), p. 97.

<sup>72</sup> From 'Les mots sans rides' in *Les pas perdus* (Paris, 1949), p. 171.

<sup>73</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. I, p. 268.

<sup>74</sup> Manifesto cited in E. Rodríguez Monegal, *El viajero inmóvil. Introducción a Pablo Neruda* (Buenos Aires, 1966), p. 89.

<sup>75</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. II, pp. 546–7.

<sup>76</sup> *The Holy Bible*, King James Version (London, 1946).

<sup>77</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. II, p. 266.

with the music of his song, but without managing to do it'.<sup>78</sup> This ironic title suggests the question: did Neruda pretend passion or is his poetry the failure to quench it? In Quevedo's case, given church censorship, you could argue that he pretends to pretend, and is sincere by lying. In Neruda's case sincerity underscores his romantic poetics, so this Quevedo sonnet consciously confesses his duplicity. What Quevedo / Neruda assert is that art is no compensation for the kind of love Josie offered him. Quevedo / Neruda see themselves as threatened by the 'burning flame' of love, so they pretend to be Orpheus ('pruebo a ser Orfeo') but cannot really become Orpheus as trapped in their heart are 'furies and heartaches'; love remains an inner tyrant. The sonnet ends:

*Y yo padezco en mí la culpa mía,  
oh dueño sin piedad, que tal ordenas!  
Pues del castigo de enemiga mano  
no es preciso, ni rescate l' armonía*

[And I suffer in myself my own guilt,  
oh pitiless master, who has ordered this.  
For with this punishment from an enemy's hand,  
harmony is impossible, cannot rescue me.]

We can now read, through Neruda / Quevedo, that he accepts the blame, that even if he were a poet like Orpheus he could never compensate his abandonment of Josie – Eurydice, for writing verse is no 'rescate'.

Now we can explore the paradoxes of trying to abandon an inner enemy-muse. Josie embodied an asocial, inner knowledge imparted by Dionysus, as freedom from rules and law and bourgeois life that Neruda wanted but couldn't actually handle. The poem 'Furies and Heartache' narrates this infernal journey into her inner depths, into a 'cañaveral' (reedbed), with tigers and dangers where the lovers 'con la boca olfateando sudor y venas verdes / nos encontramos en la húmeda sombra que deja caer besos'<sup>79</sup> ['with our mouths scenting sweat and green veins / we meet in the damp shade that kisses let fall']. Neruda insinuates this vertiginous inner experience through metaphor and image, the dissolving zone explored by George Bataille.<sup>80</sup> Josie Bliss is the 'enemiga de grandes caderas que mi pelo

<sup>78</sup> Francisco de Quevedo, 'Finge dentro de sí un infierno, cuyas penas procura mitigar, como Orfeo, con la música de su canto, pero sin provecho', *Obra poética I*, edited by José Manuel Blecua (Madrid, 1969), pp. 489–90. The sonnet was first published in *El Parnaso Español ... 1648*. See D. Gareth Walters on its 'expressive denial of the musical quality of Orphean music and the consequent impossibility for any alleviation of the burden of suffering' in *Francisco de Quevedo, Love Poet* (Cardiff, 1985), p. 52. Professor Angel García raised the possibility that the long title was not Quevedo's, but his 1648 editor's, J.A. González de Salas, and referred me to R.M. Price's *An Anthology of Quevedo's Poetry* (Manchester, 1969), pp. 31–2; if not Quevedo's, it remains a masterly synthesis of the poem.

<sup>79</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. I, p. 264.

<sup>80</sup> Bataille, *L'érotisme* (Paris, 1957). 'Ce qui est en jeu dans l'érotisme est toujours une dissolution...', p. 23; Bataille links this dissolution with the effects of poetry; 'La poésie mène au même point que chaque forme de l'érotisme, à l'indistinction, à la confusion...', p. 30.

han tocado / con un ronco rocío, con una lengua de agua'<sup>81</sup> ['enemy with great hips that touched my hair / with guttural dew, with a tongue of water'], who granted Neruda rebirth into an asocial, alternative self, baptised with the waters of his lover, in a new bodily configuration. She helps him pass through a wall to find himself at 'the centre of some sweet limbs' where he (and she) can 'y muerde cada hoja de un bosque dando gritos'<sup>82</sup> ['bite every leaf of the forest, letting out screams']; the same convulsive love that André Breton evoked in his narrative of male cowardice, his abandoning of his Melusine, or *Nadja*, written in 1928.<sup>83</sup> Gut-knowledge of self is tested and proved as intense sensations, as intense metaphors; biting every leaf in the forest, screaming. Josie taught the poet 'divination' ('adivinas los cuerpos' is repeated twice), a new way of being, through her legs 'las piernas que te guían'<sup>84</sup> ['that guide you']; for she, guided by her body, initiated Neruda into the sexual enigma.

In this 1934 poem, Neruda's evocation of Josie's ritual skills is extraordinary; she throws off her clothes, her keys, her coins, and is naked; she rolls on the floor where 'el viejo olor del semen como una enredadera / de cenicienta harina se desliza a tu boca'<sup>85</sup> ['the old smell of semen like a creeper / of ash-like flour glides to your mouth']. The poet touched raw life that 'throbs from the sweet navel to the roses'; mindless brute life:

*nada sino esa pulpa de los seres,  
nada sino esa copa de raíces*<sup>86</sup>

[nothing but this pulp of beings,  
nothing but that crown of roots.]

Neruda characterised this poetic wisdom as:

*... una sorda ciencia con cabello y cavernas  
y machacando puntas de médula y dulzura  
he rodado a las grandes coronas genitales*<sup>87</sup>

[... a dumb science of hair and caverns  
and pounding piths and sweetnesses,  
I rolled into great genital wreaths.]

This extraordinary liberational poem of 1934 echoed the poem 'Nuptial material' of the same year, which also posits knowledge through her

<sup>81</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. I, p. 264.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>83</sup> André Breton, *Nadja* (Paris [1928], 1964), which ends 'La beauté sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas', p. 187. The Josie Bliss echo is evoked by Roger Shattuck who argued that Nadja became Breton's victim, 'his encounter with himself in her resembles a battle he wins and that leaves her the disabled and plundered vestige of herself in 'The *Nadja* File', *Cahiers Dada Surréalisme*, vol. 1 (1966), p. 56.

<sup>84</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. I, p. 265.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>87</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. I, p. 268.

'sexo de pestañas nocturnas [que] parpadea'<sup>88</sup> ['sex of nocturnal eyelashes [that] blinks']. The knowledge gained is a death-like sensation: 'Abriré hasta la muerte sus piernas temerosas'<sup>89</sup> ['I will open your fearful legs as far as death']; the poet would drown her in 'un espeso río de semen verde'<sup>90</sup> ['a thick river of green semen']; because his exploration led 'hacia nunca, hacia nada' ['towards never, towards nothing'].

That dangerous experiential knowledge of 'nada' and 'nunca' confirmed Neruda's writing, his grief, as quite at odds with what was being written in Spanish,<sup>91</sup> and no wonder, for in his grief, hounded by his dog of fury, his enemy-muse, Neruda read D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce (whom he translated) and T.S. Eliot,<sup>92</sup> in English, lent to him by an English poet called Andrew Boyd (a 'true friend', his first translator into English)<sup>93</sup> after he had abandoned Josie, while living alone in exile in Wellawata, Ceylon. Reading Lawrence, in particular, allowed Neruda to pen frank and free-flowing poems evoking his discovery of self through passion-suffering for Josie, a materialist metaphysics, for, in Coleridge's defence of this kind of thinking, 'sensation itself is but vision nascent';<sup>94</sup> that intense sensation is epistemologically the sole starting point. Neruda chanced to read the 1928 privately-printed Florence edition of Lawrence's banned *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and read the book as if he were Mellors and Josie were Connie. Only the roles are reversed, and Connie-Josie teaches Neruda. When Mellors explains in his dialect that 'if tha shits an' if tha pisses I'm glad. I don't want a woman as couldna shit nor piss',<sup>95</sup> Neruda hears Josie 'pee' in the silent house of primal sounds and knows that nothing in her is taboo, and later when Connie feels reborn, that 'she had come to the real bed-rock of her nature, and was essentially shameless. She was her sensual self, naked and unashamed ... That was life!'<sup>96</sup> we can hear Neruda's relief that he too had found his own bed-rock, his life, liberated from his Catholic and Chilean shame and taboos (his national formation). Josie taught Neruda freedom. There is no doubt in my mind, now, that Neruda nicknamed Josie 'Bliss' in honour of D.H. Lawrence, whose *Women in Love* has bliss as the code-word for this new knowledge of self: 'In the new, superfine bliss, a peace

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>91</sup> Eulogio Suárez quotes Rafael Alberti on Neruda's difference in his *Neruda total* (Santiago, 1994): 'Desde su primera lectura me sorprendieron y admiraron aquellos poemas, tan lejos del acento y el clima de nuestra poesía', p. 56.

<sup>92</sup> Traces of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* have been recognised by many critics; see Gordon Brotherston, *Latin American Poetry. Origins and Presence* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 117-8. Neruda's translations of Blake and Joyce have been collected in his *Obras completas*, vol 2.

<sup>93</sup> Andrew Boyd translated Neruda's already English-titled 'Walking Around', from *Residencia en la tierra*, in 1939 in Geoffrey Grigson's anthology *New Verse* (London, 1939), p. 183. Angel Flores translated the whole of *Residencia en la tierra*, Neruda's first book into English, in *New Directions* in 1946.

<sup>94</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (London, 1967), p. 148.

<sup>95</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Harmondsworth, 1993), p. 232.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

superseding knowledge, there was no I and you ... a new, paradisaic unit';<sup>97</sup> and again: 'she was such bliss of release, that he would have suffered a whole eternity of torture rather than forego one second of this pang of unsurpassable bliss'.<sup>98</sup> Bliss as shattering knowledge, Nietzsche's Dionysiac intoxication, a surrender of self through 'extravagant lack of sexual discipline',<sup>99</sup> had a crucial spin-off, for we are dealing with a poet's way of writing new kinds of poems where Neruda could 'relate directly, with a kind of virility and scorn for formal concerns' that liberated him from his Hispanic worries about the primacy of poetic *form*,<sup>100</sup> where craft and formal skills override real meaning. In the poem 'Agua sexual' ['Sexual Water'] Neruda defined this vertiginous vision of the poet breaking societal and linguistic taboos as his conscious poet's task: 'como un párpado atrocemente levantado a la fuerza / estoy mirando'<sup>101</sup> ['like an eyelid atrociously, forcibly lifted / I am watching']; this watching has pierced into an unexplored zone beyond ethics and aesthetics.<sup>102</sup>

Neruda abandoned Josie in another way by publicly denouncing his collection of Josie-Bliss-obsessed poems, *Residencia en la tierra I & II* (1935), that closes and culminates with the poem 'Josie Bliss'. He had discovered, through his cowardice, that he was not a lawless poet, for, as he noted later in his memoirs, 'we poets have the right to be contented'<sup>103</sup> and contentment meant moderation, marriage, obeying civic and patriotic rules, the Appoline, accepting becoming the Poet of *América*. He rejected what he deceitfully called the dense pessimism of the collection when he heard that a young Chilean had killed himself with a copy open on a poem, but the poems are not pessimistic, simply grieving. Neruda told an interviewer that he was tempted to 'forbid the reading of that book' and 'arrange never to have it printed again'.<sup>104</sup> Neruda also refused permission for these *Residencia* poems to be translated in the Communist bloc, so violently did he try to exorcise Josie Bliss's knowledge; and he never recorded them. He once characterised his *Residencia* poems as a 'tormented dictionary of my personal investigations',<sup>105</sup> and wrote to the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti in the 1930s that 'I do not understand anything about politics, I'm an

<sup>97</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, (1921) (London, 1945), p. 309.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336

<sup>99</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 17 and 19.

<sup>100</sup> A 1930 letter of Héctor Eandi, Aguirre, 118.

<sup>101</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. I, p. 232.

<sup>102</sup> Sylvia Brinto Perera illuminates this Nerudan 'look' as a 'seeing not what might be good or bad, but what exists before judgement, which is always messy and full of affect and of the preverbal percepts of the near senses (touch, smell, taste). This implies not caring first and foremost about relatedness to an outer other, nor to a collective gestalt or imperative...' *Descent to the Goddess*, pp. 32–3, although she links this cold look to a woman's individuation journey, mapped on to the Summerian Inanna / Ereshkigal underworld ritual.

<sup>103</sup> Neruda, *Memorias*, p. 358.

<sup>104</sup> Rita Guibert, Interview with Pablo Neruda, *Paris Review*, no. 51, Winter 1971, p. 174

<sup>105</sup> Volodia Teitelboim, *Neruda* (Madrid, 1984), p. 137,

anarchist and want to do what pleases me'.<sup>106</sup> But by 1954, a paid-up member of the Chilean Communist Party, he could assure his readers that a poet 'should be deliberately national, reflexively national, maturely patriotic'.<sup>107</sup> Over the 1930s and 1940s Neruda slowly returned to the fold, albeit a republican and Marxist one, but acceptably didactic in Socrates's ideal state, identifiably a poet of *América*. The official Neruda story has it that the Spanish Civil War had changed Neruda's poetics as it did that of so many other poets,<sup>108</sup> but I have insinuated that it was Josie Bliss who forced Neruda to flee from the dangerous knowledge that she offered him; his writing a vain exorcism. A biographer, without mentioning Salome or Kali or Josie Bliss, reckoned that 'a deep sexual horror and fascination' crosses Neruda's *Residencia* poems.<sup>109</sup> I would like to frame that perception with this last choice that Josie Bliss provoked Neruda to make.

In a short prose poem already cited, 'The Young Monarch', Neruda described his affair with Josie alone in their 'amorous territory' as a 'patria limitada por dos largos brazos cálidos, de larga pasión paralela'<sup>110</sup> ['homeland limited by two long, warm arms, by a long parallel passion']; implying that his love affair had created an alternative 'patria' bounded by mutual physical passion, his identity no longer that of a Chilean poet in exile in Rangoon, but that of a lover with a real woman who taught him elemental freedom from all social taboos,<sup>111</sup> but he fled Josie to reassert the older 'patria' that is Chile, accepting the muse of 'American' patriotism, and reams of responsible, didactic, civic poetry. In Rangoon, through Josie, Neruda chose not to be the *poète maudit*, not to be excluded from the republic; he wanted to belong and be its official poet.

As a traveller in the Far East and far from home, but without a wife waiting and weaving, I can read Neruda as the wandering Ulysses (Neruda had read Joyce's *Ulysses*) who in book ten of Homer's *The Odyssey* reaches Circe's island; with a little help from Hermes, Ulysses avoided being turned into a tame animal and lived as Circe's lover for a year until he yearned to return home, to his *patria*. Now, Circe's drug, according to Homer, made men *lose all memory of their native land*; Hermes had warned Ulysses that he would 'never see your home again'.<sup>112</sup> This incident illustrates Neruda's rejection of Circe's, or Josie's, love, for such love offered an alternative home, deeper roots, a private, asocial space living in the present tense of sensations, without future

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>107</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. II, p. 1080.

<sup>108</sup> In 1939 Neruda added a note to his love poem 'Las furias y las penas' (1934), stating that poetry and love had been made impotent by the evil of the world at war and the only moral attitude came from 'la lucha y el corazón resuelto', *Obras completas*, vol. I, p. 264.

<sup>109</sup> Monegal, p. 226.

<sup>110</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. I, p. 196.

<sup>111</sup> Loyola: 'la única verdadera tentación de arraigo que el poeta vivió en Oriente', in his edition of Neruda, *Residencia en la tierra* (Madrid, 1987), p. 319.

<sup>112</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by E.V. Rieu (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 163.

civic projects. Challenged by Josie Bliss, Neruda opted for a less intoxicated, ecstatic version of home; rather than Josie he wanted a socially acceptable and public position, and so left Circe-Josie. By rejecting Josie, enemy of his peace of mind, Neruda endorsed the conventional male-view of Circe, in Eliphás Lévi's words: 'Circe is the vicious female who bewitches and debases her lovers', who 'inspires nothing but brutal passions; they exhaust and disdain you ... They are beautiful, heartless monsters ...'.<sup>113</sup>

I can read Neruda's secret story into one last wandering literary hero's plight to make his inner decision to reject Salome/Circe/Josie quite clear, and to insinuate Josie's inner response to Neruda's cowardice. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Queen Dido of Carthage, a widow, succumbs to Aeneas and hopes to live with him, but the gods oblige him to leave her bed and found Rome. She catches him trying to escape. He, 'duty-bound', like Neruda, stands mute 'held fast his eyes, / And fought down the emotion in his heart', but still left her. Queen Dido cursed Aeneas, now her 'enemy': 'I shall be everywhere / A shade to haunt you! You will pay for this, unconscionable!', but she refused to follow him 'like a slave', and having lost her integrity, 'in bitter mourning', killed herself. Queen Dido was the one woman who stirred him to 'simple human emotion'. How tempting to read Josie Bliss into Queen Dido's fate, for the silent, excluded Burmese Josie Bliss never left Neruda alone, and their agon endured in his tantalizing memory.<sup>114</sup> The penultimate poem of Neruda's *Residencia* collection is titled 'No hay olvido (Sonata)' ['There's no Forgetting (Sonata)']; no river of Lethe to release Neruda's 'acongojado corazón'<sup>115</sup> ['grieving heart'] from memories of Josie Bliss. Social duty, becoming a public poet, beckoned Neruda / Aeneas, their grief imprisoned deep inside.<sup>116</sup>

Three Spanish-American errant poets replay the ancient quarrel between the insights gained from poetic intoxication and philosophic knowledge, between the Dionysiac and the Appoline, between breaking taboos and searching for freedom, within the continuing Socratic debate about civic responsibilities. Darío accepted the challenge of Salome's dance as omen about some obscure bedrock of life; young Borges

<sup>113</sup> Eliphás Lévi, *The History of Magic*, (1913), translated by A.E. Waite (London, 1969), p. 91.

<sup>114</sup> The sole critic I found who sought out some mythic pattern behind the Josie Bliss poems was Enrico Mario Santí who noted both that 'Josie Bliss is the woman most often thought of in connection with Neruda' (p. 90) and that 'no overt mythological overtones ... [but] Josie Bliss is a kind of Medusa is obvious' (p. 96) in *Pablo Neruda. The Poetics of Prophecy* (Ithaca and London, 1982). Hernán Loyola also approaches my explorations in his introduction to his edition of *Residencia en la tierra* by suggesting a 'desarrollo inconsciente de un modo terrible hacia la propia sexualidad realmente entrevistada', (p. 32); however, he denies Neruda the understanding I have discerned in him.

<sup>115</sup> Neruda, *Obras completas*, vol. I, p. 251.

<sup>116</sup> The Aeneas / Dido parallel was suggested by a reading of Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry. Psychological Studies of Imagination* (Oxford [1934], 1971), pp. 195-6. See Robert Fitzgerald's translation of Virgil, *The Aeneid* (London, 1996).

thought he might be able to hold all the extremes of reality and himself together in the freedom of street life, but was routed by his own disgust; and Neruda experienced this turbulent inner freedom, but wilfully and self-torturingly rejoined the tribe. The ancient quarrel, then, surfaces as the collision inside poems between safe, codifiable knowledge and a deeper, murkier experience that cannot be contained in literary studies, for the study of poetry leads each reader to this same experiential ambivalence between the risk of gut-truths and the reading of reasonable and explainable poems. Neruda, with Josie Bliss as enemy-muse, for the brief period of his great *Residencia* poems, was trapped in dual knowledge. Trilling, at odds with today's academic consensus by suggesting direct contact with confusing and crucial texts, insisted that literature teachers (and readers) had to put freedom and gut-understanding 'in the conscious forefront of [their] thought',<sup>117</sup> and nobody escapes that exposure even if we usually opt for safety.

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<sup>117</sup> Trilling, *Beyond Culture*, p. 41.

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