

BOOK REVIEW:

PABLO NERUDA, *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*. Edited, with an introduction, critical analysis, notes and vocabulary by Dominic Moran. Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press. 2007. xiv + 189 pp.

Neruda's *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* is the most popular collection of poetry ever written in Spanish and one of the most studied in academia. Given this prominence it is somewhat perplexing that there has been no one critical edition of the work which has either been totally satisfactory from a scholarly perspective or which has assumed the position of 'standard' edition for use at university level. This new edition by Dominic Moran promises to correct these anomalies.

The driving force behind Moran's presentation of the poems is the desire to focus attention squarely on the words on the page. As he points out both in the preface and in the perceptive and wide-ranging introduction, critical study of Neruda's *Veinte poemas* has been largely content to focus on themes, attitude, and poetic traditions. In particular, Moran singles out both the concern for the identification of biographical details in the poems and the more recent attention given by gender theorists to the collection's apparently sexist terms and attitudes. Moran clearly has little time for such approaches, seeing them as frameworks which overlook the rhetorical prowess and subtleties of the poems. Setting himself up against such critical currents, Moran shifts attention towards the poetics of the collection, arguing persuasively that an adequate understanding of the poems and of their evident popularity can only be gained by examining how they work on the level of semantics, poetic technique, and structure.

The sustained interest in how the poems work on a formal and technical level does not mean that the thematic concerns of the collection are overlooked, not least because the analyses offered here are concerned with how the poetic techniques on display inform and contribute to the unfolding of those themes. In addition, the introduction provides a useful and illuminating discussion of the origins of the collection's primary areas of thematic interest (the female love object, sex, suffering-through-love, nature, a general bleakness), tracing these elements back to their earlier guises in Neruda's verse and to the poetic and philosophical influences which ultimately lay behind them (Bécquer, Schopenhauer, for example). Likewise, the origins and influences of many elements of Neruda's poetic technique and style here are also detailed informatively. The most engaging and original aspect of the introduction, however, is its underscoring of the importance of the relationship between *Veinte poemas* and other early works by Neruda, particularly *El hondero entusiasta*. Providing detailed references to the traces of subject, image, and expression which unite the two collections, Moran correctly observes that 'if the new-found subtleties and intricacies of the VPA [*Veinte poemas*] are to be fully appreciated, detailed knowledge of HE [*El hondero entusiasta*] is absolutely essential' (13).

Following the critical introduction, Moran provides a detailed analysis of each of the twenty-one poems. After a general commentary presenting an overview of the poem in question and discussing any earlier versions (the primary versions used are those from the 1932 edition), Moran takes a stanza, or group of lines, at a time and offers a

perceptive and clear analysis which builds on and exemplifies the concerns and aspects of the poetry outlined in the introduction. Once again, the contextualising of the poems within Neruda's wider work, particularly his earlier collections, but with some reference to later poems, is a real strength. Moran also highlights resonances, images, and themes which are found across the poems of *Veinte poemas*, thus constructing a sense of how the collection deals in often shifting and sometimes contradictory ways with certain common threads.

Throughout the analyses, it is heartening to see the detailed discussion of the formal aspects of the poems being carried out using the relevant poetic and rhetorical terminology. This is very welcome given the primary target audience of undergraduate students, since it familiarises them with terms and ways of writing about poetry which are often undervalued. Furthermore, the inclusion of a glossary of such terms, together with a short glossary of the most difficult vocabulary from the poems themselves, helps make both the verse and the critical commentaries as accessible as possible. However, whilst the primary envisaged readership may be undergraduate students (as is also shown by the inclusion of a selection of essay-type questions in Spanish), it would be erroneous to think of this work as being of interest purely to the undergraduate student of Neruda's work. With its illuminating introduction and its clear, detailed, and insightful commentaries, Moran's edition of the *Veinte poemas* serves as an important shift of focus in the study of this iconic collection towards the sort of detailed formal and rhetorical approach which the texts themselves so richly deserve, and should become the standard edition for use by undergraduates, graduates, and researchers alike.

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