

WHY RESPOND?

(or what might have been called

CHATTING TO PABLO

except that I know a horse called Pablo and felt 'chatting' a little familiar)

A COMMENT ON WRITING 'TALKING TO NERUDA'S QUESTIONS'

by MTC CRONIN

Why my answers are not answers? (I answer with a question an imagined question. Covering my arse because questions are often charges.) Though why should they not be answers, for an answer does not need to be a solution, does not need to be flavoured by finality.

Still, they are responses. *Correspond-ence*, rather than what might be (thought to be) called for. And each 'response' itself reverberates into the infinity drawn by the question mark. They are 'marked' by uncertainty, by endlessness, in the same way as is every question: peace belongs to an infinity of doves; tears join the seven seas; we thank the clouds when we resemble all things; the drop of mercury runs forever downward and forever; to ask a flea a question, your mind must straddle the distance... Where seasons are reminded of their obligations by déjà vu and when leaves are born as a result of the thoughts of the animals with which they shelter, then isn't it better, just never?

My replies to Neruda's questions (and perhaps they are not really questions, but little profound tugs and prods) do not END, but travel towards a new question and who might ask it. Shakespeare uses 'question' as conversation, discussion. Simply, Neruda was speaking to *me*. I heard him and spoke back. We can, if we really listen, recognize when we are being spoken to. We can acknowledge what we know, what we feel, in many ways. Here, I was overtaken by the desire not only to respond but to 'return' to the original 'sound'. I wanted to be in proportion to, or in balance with, a vision and my manuscript is a fulfilment of the (personal?) responsibilities that another's vision places upon you. Luckily, Neruda's demands on me were purely aligned with all those made in life by joy.

And, of course, Neruda, himself, in fact asked nothing of me. And his questions are the questions of Neruda, poet – who knows if they do or do not want answering. Questions need not be rhetorical to make no demands. Yet they remain forever

humanly branded by their 'question marks'. Our minds are set adrift by them and paradoxically are hooked by them and reeled back to see what is caught on the seeker's hook. As pointed out to me in correspondence with William O'Daly who has translated Neruda's *Questions*, among many other of his books), questions may ultimately have a greater level of vulnerability and of wonder than statements which answer them: "It seems to me that, by degrees, statements (& reasons) insist upon the self and lay themselves open to whatever consequences come, whereas questions tend to seek a relation to self, and from self to the other."

The need of the poet then, whether ostensibly answering a question or not, is to keep the conversation going. The poem is not a statement and must never stop with itself; must recognize that the fragment designs itself as broken:

*Its yellow trousers are left hanging
with all summer's bright questions...*

And every speaker in a conversation is a *self*; someone who can only say what that particular someone says. Paul Valéry: "All writing is a fragment of autobiography." Poems are unusual. We tend to think of them as examples of perfect speech, complete within themselves. Yet they are so undeniably fragments. Of ourselves and of the intersection of ourselves with others. Are they also the celebration of the fragments' homeland? (The bridge(s).) Do they *as* fragments tell us the true story: that fragmentation is life and yet the opposite is also true: unity (albeit loose) is life. The fragment if we understand it – or, perhaps, accept it – is the key to our selves. Pointing this way and that. Backwards and forwards. In and out. *I am*. As yesterday which has become today and will be tomorrow: *the surrender / at the heart of each moment*.

This surrender is never-ending for what begins becomes the past giving into the present passing over to what will come. For the North American poet, Louise Glück, "what is wanted, in art, is to harness the power of the unfinished. All earthly experience is partial." Not only experience, though, *we* are partial. The body's 'wholeness' is precisely the wishful thinking of itself. "[L]anguage bears within itself the dialectics of open and closed. Through meaning it encloses, while through poetic expression, it opens up." (Bachelard.) According to Bachelard, "man is half-open being". According to the Yoruba proverb about proverbs, "it's half a word we speak to a well-bred person; when it gets inside it becomes whole".

The hugeness of the fragment. For Octavio Paz, the wormhole within becomes immeasurable space: "The many/few who read poems worm their way into

immeasurable realities, and in the mirrors of words discover their own infinity. The reading of a poem connects the reader with a realm that is transpersonal and, therefore, in the strict sense of the word, immense." The realm that is here and not here. The point of turning and becoming and turning back or, as Anna Seghers has said "The writer is the curious crossing point where object becomes subject and turns back into object."

"We cannot know," Rilke says of the torso of Apollo. Maybe the whole needs to give no directions. To where would it point? Neruda's form, the question, is in and of itself, unfinished, eternally in progress. I have not tried with my responses to 'make whole', to carry out, or to fulfil Neruda's vision, but, for a little while, for an eternity, to 'be with' his words. To extend them not by building upon them, but by gesturing, as they do, but with the added idiosyncrasy and personality of my own hand. Remember though, I could not have made this particular gesture without Neruda. It is the incomplete *we* who point as Anne Carson knows in her discussion of Aristotle's comment 'All men reach out to know.' "As you perceive the edge of yourself at the moment of desire, as you perceive the edges of words from moment to moment in reading or writing, you are stirred to reach beyond perceptible edges – toward something else, something not yet grasped."

In his 'Introduction' to *The Book of Questions*, O'Daly points out that the Anglo-Saxon root of the word 'question' is *kuere*, which meant to ask or seek, hence to gain or win. Perhaps Neruda sought not only the generation of insights (which can come as much from asking as from receiving any answer) but somewhere – and for the poet, that must mean *someone* – in the sense of (*fertile*) *ground, earth, surface, page*, for his words to fall. Regardless, he has gained another reader (and re-writer) who hopes these new poems which grew from his will themselves fly through minds like seeds searching for places to fall and grow...

*Is there a magnet under the earth,
brother magnet of autumn?*

*There is a magnet under the earth.
It attracts the names of life.*