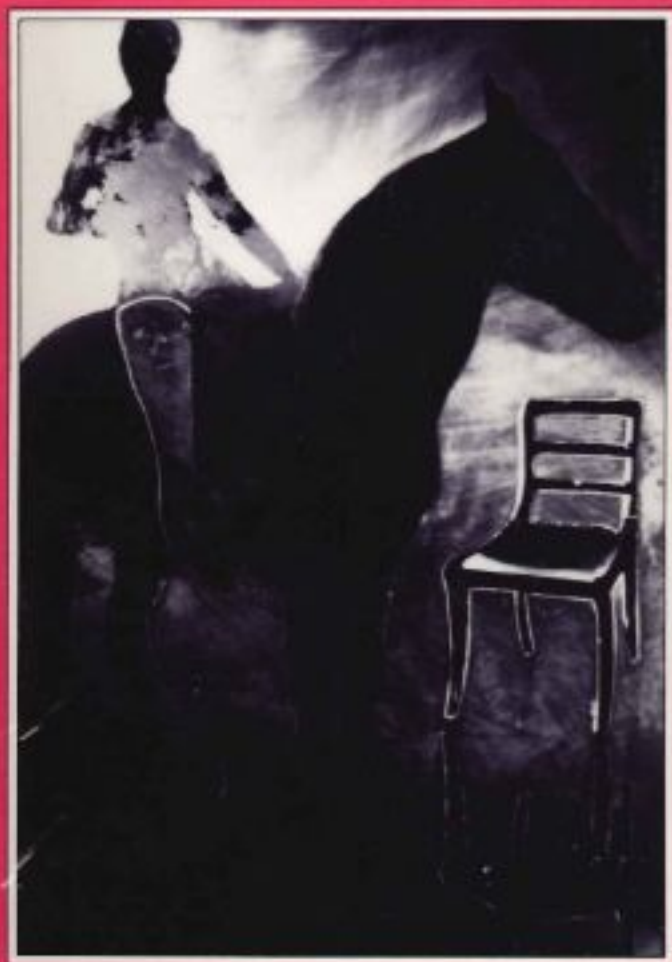


NERUDA

THE BOOK OF QUESTIONS



TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM O'DALY

P A B L O N E R U D A

The Book of Questions

TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM O'DALY

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*With this sixth and final volume
of my translation of Neruda's late and posthumous poetry
I dedicate this body of work*

TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER

INTRODUCTION

“The only true thoughts are those
which do not grasp their own meaning.”

ADORNO, from *Minima Moralia*

Pablo Neruda finished *The Book of Questions* (*El libro de las preguntas*) only months before his death in September 1973. With its composition, he comes full circle as a human being and an artist. The 69-year-old poet drinks from the common source of all his essential work, revisiting that “deep well of perpetuity”: the imagination of regeneration and vision. These brief poems, composed entirely of questions, express his dedication to what Hayden Carruth calls the “structure of feeling” underlying experience. Neruda explored many schools of thought, poetic styles, and voices, but his passion lay in finding and improvising upon basic rhythms of perception to reveal unspoken and unspeakable truths.

From *Crepusculario* and *Venture of the Infinite Man*, two of his earliest and lesser known works, to the books that form this series of late and posthumous poetry, Neruda developed a radical trust in the quest to know himself. He also trusted the process of setting aside what he knew long enough to rediscover the secret in another cadence and through other eyes. His imagination never surrendered to familiar patterns and, especially in the later poetry, rarely sought refuge in political or artistic programs. Neruda continued to challenge himself as a human being and an artist, until he became “the astute hunter,” according to Marjorie Agosin, one who by *vocation* seeks “the roots of belonging” wherever he finds himself.

In *The Book of Questions*, Neruda achieves a deeper vulnerability and vision than in his earlier work. These poems integrate the wonder of a child with the experience of an

adult. An adult usually grapples with a child's "irrational" questions solely with the resources of the rational mind. While Neruda craves the clarity rendered from an examined life, he refuses to be corralled by his rational mind. To the 316 questions that compose the 74 poems of this sequence, no rational answers exist. These questions present a reflective surface, in which only one's own face is discerned.

If all rivers are sweet
where does the sea get its salt?

One must allow images of rivers, sea, sweetness and salt to reverberate more deeply than their literal meanings. One must be patient, instead of rushing to confront the question with a reasoning mind.

Gazing into the night sky from a ship's deck or the desert floor, we glimpse the most distant stars out of the corners of our eyes. When we stare directly at them, they fade from our view. Like those stars, these questions reveal themselves more completely to a receptive mind, a mind engaged in intuitive and emotional perception.

Neruda composes his questions mostly of natural objects—clouds, bread, lemons, camels, friends and enemies. Those substances and forms are intertwined in our daily lives; dying and being born, their tangible limits shine outward to refer to the larger world. They are mysterious because, though they are physical and "real," in themselves they cannot be decided or solved. Rather, Neruda's questions reveal new mysteries linking physical truth to metaphysical truth. Allowing the questions to light the way, we arrive at previously uncharted places.

These poems, however, cannot be considered "road-maps" for the intuitive, emotional, or spiritual paths. They lead a double life: they cast nets of words into our psyches so we might gain understanding, and yet they clearly reside in the Unknown where the answers have no names. In this, Neruda's questions are close to the spirit of the kōan. A kōan is a question (or a question disguised as a statement) in the form of a paradox, which aids students of Zen in the

practice of zazen. An illustration of this paradox can be found in a poem by Zen master Mumon, commenting on two monks arguing with the sixth patriarch about which is actually moving—the wind, a flag, or the mind.

Wind, flag, mind moves,
the same understanding.
When the mouth opens
All are wrong.

That's the way it goes: the mind becomes its own trap and the mouth its darkness. When one is rid of the hypotheses and certainties that haunt the daydreams of past and future, the mind is freed to listen and exist where it is. One then might come to know the value of a question posed by the Sufi poet Jelaluddin Rumi in the thirteenth century: "How far is the light of the moon/ from the moon?" And why he, after receiving no answer, turned to the moon itself and asked, "Where is God?"

The Anglo-Saxon root of the word "question" is *kuere*, which meant to ask or seek, hence to gain or win. In Latin, it was *quaerere* and *questum*; in English it became *quaestor* and later "quest," "inquest," and "question." Other offshoots of the root became "conquest," "inquire," and "acquire."

Neruda is interested in inquiring about the nature of things, a process initiated by asking questions rooted in experience, offering us what he intuits as true and does not understand. Rather than remain in control, he submerges himself in not-knowing, in the unknowable questions that enter the imagination. The poet is intent on distinguishing between what he believes in his heart and soul (*gnosis*), and received patterns of thinking and feeling that limit imagination and growth.

The Book of Questions fulfills a traditional role of all the best poetry. Its greatest gift is to assist us in teaching ourselves how to see, partly by helping to inspire and focus the inner quest. We participate best in responding to Neruda's questions by "running in place" with the images (to borrow

a phrase from Roshi Charlotte Joko Beck), rather than by fleeing to the rational mind. These poems are the lyrical notations of the poet's imagination; they reveal their truths only when we live with them and experience them as they are. When we do this, we reawaken the imagination to the quiet possibilities of wonder and awe. In this state, we ask our own unanswerable questions. And we might come to perceive, reflected within us, the nature of the world beyond mind and sight.

This unique book is a testament to everything that made Neruda an artist. He cannot be labeled a political poet or a love poet, a confessional poet or a nature poet, and only he can rightly accuse himself of being many men, of never knowing "who I am, nor how many I am or will be." To understand this poet's range, it is necessary to listen to him in his more vulnerable moments. These poems contain much of the purity of heart that Neruda's work is known for.

Which yellow bird
fills its nest with lemons?

Those who have read his poems about the suffering of others at the hands of political and social pathologies, will not be surprised by the lines:

What forced labor
does Hitler do in hell?

Neruda was a complicated artist who integrated the dark with the light, and who responded to the full array of experiences available to a human being. He recognized his contradictions, embraced them, and eventually freed his work from the confines, the dangerous simplifications, of ideological programs and egotism. By doing so, he created a beautifully interwoven, expansive body of work.

This book is the last in the Copper Canyon Press late and posthumous Neruda series, carrying between its covers the knowledge that the quest continues: what was learned is forgotten, so it can be learned again.

In an earlier book, *Extravagaria*, the poet wonders:

The sons of the sons of the son—
what will they make of the world?
Will they turn out good or bad?
Worth flies or worth wheat?

You don't want to answer me.

But the questions do not die.

WILLIAM O'DALY
Winter 1991

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El libro de las preguntas