"I live in the shade that determines me..."
El Canto General and Latin American Identity

America, I do not invoke your name in vain.
When I hold the sword to my heart,
when I endure the tears in my soul,
when your new day
penetrates me through the windows,
I'm of and I'm in the light that produces me,
I live in the shade that determines me
I sleep and rise in your essential dawn,
sweet as grapes and terrible,
conductor of sugar and punishment,
soaked in the sperm of your species,
nursed on the blood of your legacy.

from "America, I Do Not Invoke Your Name in Vain"

The quest for an authentic American identity has been part of the dominant discourse in Latin American literature since independence.¹ The Canto General, by Pablo Neruda, is one of the seminal works of Latin American literature and is representative of the direction this discourse took at the midpoint of this century. Quoting Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria, Mario Santi writes that "The forties was a period of search for Latin American consciousness and the formation of a literature of its own, distinct from Europe."² This had been the case in the past, but at the time of the Canto's publication in 1950 "the creation of national cultures and literature...became an obsession."³

Pablo Neruda wrote the Canto General as a poem about origins; in finding one's origins one can better understand who they are and their place in the world. In the introduction to the 1991 English edition Echevarria describes this aspect of the Canto: "At its core it is an effort to create an American myth, a version of American history that can constitute a cipher of American destiny. Because he is a romantic the myth had to have as protagonist his own poetic self, the individual whose suffering and vision the myth will legitimize."⁴ By placing himself as the myth's protagonist, Neruda is performing an act of communion with the Latin American past and present; claiming an identity for Latin America that is not based in time (as in a generational identity) or in space (as in a national identity) but in a shared experience. From this identity of shared experience Neruda derives a set of values and principles, informed by Marxism, tempered with romanticism and taught through poetry.

² Enrico Mario Santi, Pablo Neruda, the Poetics of Prophecy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 113.
³ Ibid., 119
In his essay, "Poetry of Solitude," Octavio Paz describes what possesses a poet to seek communion in this way:

His (the poet's) astonishment in the presence of reality leads him to deify it; fascination and horror move him to become one with his object. Perhaps the root of this attitude is love, which is an instinct to possess the object; a desiring, but also a fervent wish for fusion, forgetfulness, and for the dissolution of the self in "otherness". Silent rapture, vertigo, the seduction of the abyss, the desire to fall infinitely and without rest, each time deeper, and nourished in love, also nostalgia for origins, man's obscure movement toward his roots, toward his own birth.³

It is this love, this desire to claim Latin America's past and become one with it, that inspired Neruda's poetic vision.

Pablo Neruda is "the prime cultivator of a new type of historical poetry which combines an examination of society, its classes and social struggle."⁶ This examination yields a cycle of breaks and restorations that "appear as the fundamental political and poetic acts; it is a rebounding of words and acts and a reconstitution of the collectivity."⁷ Each break symbolizes a betrayal, each reconstitution, hope. The experiences of betrayal and hope in Latin America are the central themes of the Canto and are the focus of this paper. Telling the story of betrayal reveals to Latin Americans their shared experience, affirming their unique reality and identity. "Because there is affirmation there is possibility, and because there is possibility there can be hope."⁸ Neruda maintained hope while other writers succumbed to the existentialist gloom of the post-war years.⁹ Hope makes the Canto not a litany of betrayals and broken promises, but a guide to action. "A type of impassioned evangelism for the salvation of the peoples of America; a relentless denouncement of their enemies, domestic and foreign..."¹⁰

The book itself is a collection of poems or cantos written between 1938 and 1950 and published in Mexico City while the author was in exile from his native Chile. The Canto General was not "conjured in a flash of psychological release or mystical revelation",¹¹ but evolved slowly throughout the writer's career. His experience in Spain during the Civil War, his friendship with Federico García Lorca, his membership in the Communist party and his exile, all played a part in shaping the Canto. These events in the writer's life will be looked at while exploring the themes of betrayal and hope, giving an historical context to the poems.

II

* Echvarria *Canto General* 9.
* Echvarria *Canto General* 1.
* Echvarria *Canto General* 9.
Then I accuse the man
who had strangled hope,
I called out to America's corners
and put his name in the cave
of dishonor
Then they reproached
me for crimes, that pack
of flunkies and hired hoodlums:
the "secretaries of government,"
the police, wrote their murky insult
against me with tar,
but the walls were watching
when the traitors
wrote my name in large letters,
and the night eased,
with its innumerable hands,
hands of the people and the night,
the ignominy that they try
in vain to cast on my song.

from "I Accuse"

In 1946, the Chilean Communist Party backed Radical Party candidate Garcia Videla. Neruda, a national senator, world-renowned poet and communist, gave Videla his full support. By 1948 Videla had betrayed the support of Neruda and the left by instituting a series of economic reforms that led to massive labor unrest in Chile. Videla, losing his communist and socialist allies and faced with increasing labor militancy, declared a state of siege, outlawed the Communist Party and turned loose a wave of fierce police repression.12 Neruda spoke out publicly against Videla, accusing him of betraying the nation. Neruda, still a senator, stood accused of treason by Videla and orders were issued for his arrest, along with that of hundreds of other militants; Chile's greatest poet was forced to flee. He hid throughout Chile for a year, the police on his trail and fake reports of his death released to the world; "Neruda's adventures while hiding, and his escape on horseback through the Andes to Argentina in 1949, became an international intrigue."13 After Argentina he moved on to Europe and eventually Mexico. It was during his flight from Videla that Neruda began assembling his Canto General, putting together poems already published and new ones, written under the direst of circumstances.

Through the dead of night, through my entire
life,
from tear to paper, from clothes to clothes,
I paced these trying days.
I was the fugitive from justice:
and in the crystal hour, in the fastness of solitary stars,
I crossed cities, forests,
small farms, seaports,
from the door of one human being to another

12 Williamson Penguin History 492.
13 Echevarria Canto General 5.
from the hand of one being to another being, and another.

from "The Fugitive (1948)"

The betrayal of Neruda and Chilean workers by the Videla regime can be viewed as "the breaking of the pledge of oneness...a non-coincidence of the self with the self."¹⁴ Videla assigned "otherness" to those that opposed him; calling them traitors, communists, a danger to the general good. Those in power drew a line through Chilean society, and Pablo Neruda was on the other side. This, of course, was not the first time that such actions had occurred. This betrayal merely recalls and brings to the fore the founding treasons of American history: betrayal of the original inhabitants of the New World, a series of repeated assaults against the people, after many broken promises at the time of the conquest (the advent of justice supposedly brought about by Christianity, which was the Europeans' justification for the invasion) and political independence (with its pledges of freedom, equality and democracy).¹⁵

What we see in the Canto is a history of betrayals resulting in divisions, separating Latin Americans from each other, from their lands and from their history.

III

Cortes has no country, he's a chilling Thunderbolt, a cold heart clad in armor. "Fertile lands, my liege and Royal Majesty, temples in which the gold is wrought by the hands of Indians."

Cortes receives a dove,
he receives a pheasant, a zither from the monarch's musicians,
But he wants the chamber of gold, he wants more, and everything falls into the wolves' treasure chests.
The king looks out from the balcony:
"This is my brother," says he. The stones of the people fly back in answer,
and Cortes sharpens daggers on kisses betrayed.

From "Cortes"

America was born out of the contact between two selves. Spain came looking for the "others", to dominate them, to reap their treasures. The indigenous peoples could conceive of the "others" only in the form of gods. It is on this foundation of conflicting identities that America was built. Spain, the Europeans, having had contact and conflict

¹⁴ Ibid., 10.
¹⁵ Ibid., 11.
with Africans and Asians for their entire recorded history gained the upper-hand and a power relationship was established; European identity would rule.

But from this conflict Neruda saw the seeds of hope. The European masses that came, not the conquistadors, brought with them the hope of escaping the system that had marginalized them. Though this hope would also be betrayed, it is part of the Latin American heritage, and so remains a possibility for Neruda.

They did not sail from the seaports of the South to wield the hands of the people in plunder and death:
they see green lands, freedom, broken chains, construction, and from the ship, the waves that expire upon the coasts of compact mystery.

The ancient hunger of Europe, hunger like the tail of a dying comet, filled the ship—hunger was there-stripped, vagabonding cold hatchet, stepmother of nations, hunger throws the dice on the voyage, fills the sails: "Onward, or I'll eat you, onward, or it's back to the homeland, the monk, the Judge and Preist the inquisitors, the inferno, the plague.

from "They Reach the Gulf of Mexico (1519)"

Independence from Spain brought with it a pledge of oneness. The Enlightenment Principles that laid the foundation for independence promised equality under the law and national unity, but this was not to be so. The dominant discourse among Latin American intellectuals turned on the question of civilization versus barbarism. The fear was that lawlessness and barbarism would prevail in independent Latin America. As writers and statesmen looked within their new nations they saw what they considered to be barbarity, gauchos, peasants, Indians. The civilization they sought would be found without; "Almost always the road to Palenque or Buenos Aires went by way of Paris." Intellectual discourse and nation building focused on the modernization of Latin America in France's image. Those that did not fit this image were cast out.

No, the flags had not yet dried, the soldiers had not yet slept when freedom changed clothes, and was turned into a hacienda: a caste system emerged from the newly sown lands, a quadrille of nouveaux riches with coats of arms, with police and with prisons.

They drew a black line: "Here on our side, Mexico's Porfíristas, Chile's 'gentlemen', gentry from

16 Williamson Penguin History 286.
17 Paz Seashell 176.
the Jockey Club of Buenos Aires, Uruguay's slicked freebooters, the Ecuadorian upper crust, clerical dandies everywhere."

"There on your side, rabble, half-breeds, Mexico's down andouters, gauchos heaped together in pigsties, defenseless, tattered bums, vermin, trash, riffraff, derelicts, miserable scum, filthy, shiftless, masses."

Everything was built upon the line. The Archbishop baptized this wall and pronounced incendiary anathemas against the rebel who disregarded the caste wall.

from "The Oligarchies"

Although the caste system had won in America, Neruda saw the possibility for the masses to reclaim the legacy of the liberators. Those that had been cast out represented a majority, those that maintained society through their labor. In their faces, Neruda saw new Tupac Amarus and San Martins.

O homeland born of woodcuters, of unbaptized children, carpenters, those who gave, like a rare bird, a drop of winged blood, today you'll be born harshly, whence the traitor and the jailer believe you're submerged forever.

Today, as then, you'll be born of the people.

from "Insurgent America (1800)"

IV

Neruda's journey of exile through Argentina and then to Mexico was a repetition of a journey he had made some seventeen years earlier, under very different circumstances. Neruda had joined the Chilean Foreign Service upon graduating from the Instituto Pedagogico with a degree in French in 1927. Echevarria attributes this choice in jobs to Neruda "following every young Latin American writer's ambition to travel to Europe." However, his first assignments were in Asia: Rangoon and Singapore. He did much reading there, Walt Whitman in particular, wrote his poetry and got married.

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18 Echevarria Canto General 3.
In 1932 he was named Consul General to Buenos Aires. It was there that he first met and began working with Spanish poet Federico García Lorca. In 1934 he was sent from Argentina to Spain where he continued his work with Lorca and the rest of the Generation of 1927. This group of Spanish writers "sought a revaluation of Hispanic literary traditions, particularly as regards Renaissance and baroque poetry. The evocative imagery and complex metaphors of the period were seen as useful to their modernist work."19 Neruda was heavily influenced by this school of writers, and it is evident in the Canto.20 But, perhaps of greater importance, was his Spanish Civil War experience. It strengthened Neruda's "historical consciousness"21 and placed politics in the center of his life.22

Most of the Generation of 1927 fled Spain, as Franco's victory became imminent. Lorca, however, was not so lucky, he was murdered by fascists in 1936.23 In the wake of this disaster, Neruda was assigned the post of Chilean Consul for Spanish Refugees in 1939. In addition to this work, and his poetry, Neruda organized against fascism among artists and intellectuals in Paris until he was named Consul General to Mexico City. There, Neruda, now heavily politicized, lashed out against Mexican poets for being too concerned with poetic form and lacking the sense of civic duty present among Mexico's painters and novelists. This caused a scandal among Mexico's literary establishment and made clear the direction in which Neruda's poetry would go. In 1943 Neruda resigned from his position after a series of diplomatic scandals, including his public criticism of the Brazilian government, had caused him to lose favor with the Chilean government.24 His return to Chile would include stops in Panama and Peru, where he was honored by both the people and the governments. His journey home would also include the event that crystallized his view of Latin American identity.

V

And so I scaled the ladder of the earth
amid the atrocious maze of lost jungles
up to you, Machu Picchu.
High citadel of terraced stones,
at long last the dwelling of him whom the earth
did not conceal in its slumbering vestments.
In you, as in two parallel lines,
the cradle of lightning and man
was rocked in a wind of thorns.
Mother of stone, sea spray of the condors.
Towering reef of the human dawn.
Spade lost in the primal sand.

19 Williamson Penguin History 518.
20 For more detailed information on the role of this literary style, of which Gongora is the prime example, see Frank Riess, The Word and the Stone. For the purposes of this paper I am focusing on historical issues and not so much on detailed literary analysis.
21 Santi Pablo Neruda 109.
22 Echevarria Canto General 4.
23 The death of Lorca at fascist hands is often compared to Neruda's death in 1973 after Allende's fall. Although he had been in poor health for some time, the coup that brought Pinochet to power undoubtedly took a lot out of Neruda and hastened his death.
This was the dwelling, this is the site:
here the full kernels of corn rose
and fell again like red hailstones

Here the golden fiber emerged from the vicuna
to clothe love, tombs, mothers,
the kings, prayers, warriors.

from "The Heights of Machu Picchu"

"From Neruda's viewpoint the ascent to Machu Picchu was the turning point of his
career as a poet because the experience dispelled his cultural alienation and tempered his
sense of identity as a Latin American."25 In the presence of this awesome testament to the
achievements of indigenous America Neruda found hope. He recognized the special
place Latin America holds in the world and communicated this realization in his poetry.
In a 1954 lecture at the University of Chile he spoke about the effect Machu Picchu had on
him; "After seeing the ruins of Machu Picchu, the fabulous cultures of (foreign) antiquity
seemed made of paper mache. I understood that if we trod the same hereditary ground,
we had something to do with these high efforts of the American community, that we
could no longer ignore them, that our ignorance or silence was not only a crime but the
continuity of a defeat. Aristocratic cosmopolitism had made us revere the past of the
most distant peoples and had blinded us to our own treasures." He published the Heights
of Macchu Picchu in 1944 and included it as part of the Canto because of its promise of
human redemption; "The role of Macchu Picchu in the theology of Saint Pablo is the
same as that of Christ's crucifixion theology of St. Paul."26 But even when surrounded by
the beauty of Macchu Picchu, Neruda could not help but ask of the masses that built it.
Knowing that then too there was exploitation of the many by the few.

Macchu Picchu, did you put
stone upon stone and, at the base, tatters?
Coal upon coal and, at the bottom, tears?
Fire in gold and, within it the trembling
rop of red blood?
Bring me back the slave that you buried!
Shake from the earth the hard bread
of the poor wretch, show me
the slave's clothing and his window.
Tell me how he slept when he lived.
Tell me if his sleep was
harsh, gaping, like a black chasm
worn by fatigue upon the wall.

from "The Heights of Macchu Picchu"

VI

25 Ibid., 119.
26 Villegas Beltran, "Muerte y vida en 'Alturas de Machu-Pichu' en el pensamiento de San Pablo" Escritos
de Teoria, 1 (Dec. 1976), 70.
The *Canto General* is Neruda speaking for those who have no voice, those who are silenced either by time or oppression. "At its etymological root, to prophesy means to speak on behalf of someone or something, be it an inspiring god, nation, or muse. The prophet is the one who speaks, yet his speech derives its authority not from an inner reservoir, but from an outside and sometimes alien source."27 For Pablo Neruda, Latin America was his muse; the people, the land, the history. His prophetic vision has shaped the course of social struggle in Latin America as people look into their past for inspiration - Sandino, Zapata, Marti (Jose and Farabundo). In so doing they have claimed an identity that is based on common struggles and common history.

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Common book of mankind, broken bread
is the geography of my song,
and a community of peasants
will one day harvest its fire
and will again sow its flames
and leaves in the ship of the earth

from "I End Here (1949)"
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27 Santi Pablo Neruda 15-16.