



Bulletin of Spanish Studies

Hispanic Studies and Researches on Spain, Portugal and Latin America

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cbhs20

Why Brussels? Neruda's 'título absolutamente enigmático'

Dominic Moran

To cite this article: Dominic Moran (2024) Why Brussels? Neruda's 'título absolutamente enigmático', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 101:8, 1227-1249, DOI: [10.1080/14753820.2024.2398847](https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2024.2398847)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2024.2398847>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 10 Oct 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 126



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Why Brussels? Neruda's 'título absolutamente enigmático'

DOMINIC MORAN

University of Oxford

La littérature, recommençant le travail défait de l'illusion amoureuse, donne une sorte de survie à des sentiments qui n'existaient plus. Certes nous sommes obligés de revivre notre souffrance particulière [...] Mais en même temps il nous faut la penser sous une forme générale qui nous fait dans une certaine mesure échapper à son étreinte, qui fait de tous les copartageants de notre peine [...] Rien ne peut durer qu'en devenant général. — Marcel Proust¹

'Bruselas'

De todo lo que he hecho, de todo lo que he perdido,
de todo lo que he ganado sobresaltadamente,
en hierro amargo, en hojas, puedo ofrecer un poco.
Un sabor asustado, un río que las plumas
5 de las quemantes águilas van cubriendo, un sulfúrico
retroceso de pétalos.

1 'Literature, reconstructing the demolished work of amorous illusion, gives a sort of afterlife to feelings which were no longer in existence. It is true, then, that we are obliged to relive our private suffering [...] At the same time, though, we have to think about it in its general form, which enables us to some extent to escape its grasp, makes everybody sharers in our pain [...] Nothing can last unless it is generalized' (Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, dir. Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols [Paris: Gallimard, 1987–1989 (1st ed. 1913–1927)], IV [1989], *Le Temps retrouvé*, 483–84; translation taken from *In Search of Lost Time*, ed. Christopher Prendergast, trans. Lydia Davis *et al.*, 6 vols [London: Penguin, 2002], VI, *Finding Time Again*, trans. with notes by Ian Patterson, 214).

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

No me perdona ya la sal entera,
ni el pan continuo, ni la pequeña iglesia devorada
por la lluvia marina, ni el carbón mordido
10 por la espuma secreta.

He buscado y hallado, pesadamente,
bajo la tierra, entre los cuerpos temibles,
como un diente de pálida madera
llegando y yendo bajo el ácido duro,
15 junto a los materiales
de la agonía, entre luna y cuchillos,
muriendo de nocturno.

Ahora, en medio
de la velocidad desestimada, al lado
20 de los muros sin hilos,
en el fondo cortado por los términos,
aquí estoy con aquello que pierde estrellas,
vegetalmente, solo.

The poems that make up the opening section of Pablo Neruda's *Tercera residencia* (1947) have, for a variety of reasons, received relatively little critical attention. A partial exception is 'Bruselas', though the only response it tends to elicit from commentators is one of exasperated bemusement at what appears to the complete lack of correspondence between the title of the poem and its subject matter—insofar as the latter can be discerned at all.² It was Amado Alonso, in his pioneering study of the *Residencia* poetry, who referred to it as a 'título absolutamente

2 See 'Bruselas', in *Tercera residencia [1934–1945]*, in *Obras completas*, ed. & notas de Hernán Loyola, intro. general de Saúl Yurkievich con prólogo de Enrico Mario Santí, 5 vols (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 1999–2002), I (1999), *De 'Crepusculario' a 'Las uvas y el viento', 1923–1954*, 347–413 (pp. 352–53). Further references to the *Obras completas* (hereafter *OC*) are to these editions and will be given in parentheses in the main text. The others are 'La ahogada del cielo' (*OC*, I, 349), 'Alianza (sonata)' (*OC*, I, 349–51), 'Vals' (*OC*, I, 351–52), 'El abandonado' (*OC*, I, 353–56) and 'Naciendo en los bosques' (*OC*, I, 354–56). Some have proved difficult to date and thus contextualize (knowledge of the circumstances of composition often provides a useful point of entry to the *Residencia* poems) whilst others, not least 'El abandonado', despite its relatively identifiable central theme, are amongst the most disconcertingly opaque that Neruda ever wrote.

enigmático', adding perplexedly, '[q]uizá se escribió en Bruselas, pero no hay conexión alguna con el contenido'.³ Hernán Loyola, who shares this latter conviction, is more expansive, though ultimately no more illuminating:

Creo intencionada la particular condición críptica—no frecuente en Neruda—de los títulos de este poema y del precedente ['Vals']. Leo en ella un modo de enmascaramiento de la íntima dificultad del sujeto frente a una solicitud (externa) al mismo tiempo atractiva y temible. No creo que el título 'Bruselas' tenga nada que ver con la ciudad sino, muy probablemente, con algún elemento desconocido de alguna situación que para el poeta era representativa del (o vinculada al) conflicto en curso. (*OC*, I, 1197–98, note)

He offers no evidence as to why this latter hypothesis is very probable, and in any case it remains hopelessly vague—'algún elemento desconocido de alguna situación' hardly pins matters down. In his English translation of the poem, meanwhile, Andrew Kerrigan *et al.* attempt to sidestep the problem by suggesting an alternative meaning for the title, which he renders, perhaps not altogether felicitously, as 'Brussels: Jeweller's Pincers of Cupellation'.⁴ The desire to reinterpret is understandable in the context (or lack of one), and yet the poem, however imaginatively we read it, would seem to have as little to do with specialist silversmith's equipment as it does with the Belgian capital.⁵ By drawing on and interrelating a broad and varied range of previously unconnected sources and references, both literary and biographical, this essay attempts to show that there *is* a fundamental link, albeit an extravagantly disguised one, between Neruda's seemingly arbitrary title and the city to which it alludes, and that understanding the source and nature of that link illuminates many of the poem's more cryptic images, references and turns of phrase. Despite all appearances to the contrary, once we are in possession of the pertinent contextual and intertextual details, the title turns out to be meaningfully and indeed poignantly reflected in the content. However, my study is not simply an exercise in literary code-breaking, and, in the light of my findings, I go on to consider wider aesthetic and interpretive issues

3 Amado Alonso, *Poesía y estilo de Pablo Neruda: interpretación de una poesía hermética* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1968 [1st ed. 1940]), 344.

4 See Pablo Neruda, 'Brussels: Jeweller's Pincers of Cupellation', in *Selected Poems*, ed. Nathaniel Tarn, trans. Andrew Kerrigan *et al.* with an intro. by Jean Franco (London: Penguin, 1992 [1st ed. 1970]), 85. The *DRAE* defines *bruselas* as 'Pinzas anchas que usan los plateros para arrancar los pallones de oro o plata que quedan en las copelas al hacer los ensayos', <<https://dle.rae.es/bruselas>> (accessed 16 June 2024).

5 Perhaps the translator thought that the subsequent reference to a 'diente' suggested the tooth of a jeweller's saw or similar instrument, but in fact cupellation pincers have no teeth. Besides, it seems unlikely that Neruda would have been familiar with the term in this rare technical sense.

concerning readerly competence when we are confronted by consciously difficult poems such as ‘Bruselas’ which, as we shall see, draw extensively and deeply on specific personal experience and are crammed with intensely private allusion. How much reliance on such extra-literary sources might be deemed too much? How is the reader to respond to and make sense of the text in their absence? Such questions are particularly relevant in the context of Neruda’s *Residencia* poetry and its sometimes questionable and often highly selective critical reception and treatment, which frequently skirts around its many enduring difficulties.

Background

It was Edmundo Olivares Briones who adumbrated a solution to the mystery when he referred, almost in passing, to ‘Bruselas’ as ‘un tardío poema de su estancia en Ceilán, que fantasmalmente evoca a esa Albertina que no pudo o no supo responder a su amor’.⁶ Olivares’ dating of the poem is questionable (I shall return to this in some detail), but his identification of Albertina (i.e., Albertina Rosa Azócar, the great love of Neruda’s adolescent years and implicit dedicatee of many of the *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* [1924]) as the presence which haunts it is much less so. At first glance this assertion may seem to be as abstruse as Kerrigan’s translation, but in fact he has a solid contextual basis for the claim, albeit one that requires considerable elucidation.⁷ Adam Feinstein, Loyola and Olivares himself all recount at some length the episode to which the latter refers, so here I shall confine myself to the essential details.⁸ After almost five years of silence between them, and in the immediate wake of his calamitous affair with the woman he named Josie Bliss, in late 1929 Neruda unexpectedly received a brief card or letter from Albertina, prompting him to pen a volley of increasingly febrile and recriminatory replies in which he begged her (to the point of emotional blackmail) to join him in Ceylon and marry him. She did not respond. Crucially, that initial communiqué was sent not from their native Chile but from Brussels, where

6 Edmundo Olivares Briones, *Tras las huellas de un poeta itinerante*, 3 vols (Santiago de Chile: LOM Ediciones, 2000–2004), III (2004), *Los caminos de América*, 501.

7 Whilst the bewilderment of the critics is understandable, it remains somewhat surprising that none, including Olivares, has suggested another, albeit ancillary reason why Neruda may have chosen the title—namely that his idol Jean-Arthur Rimbaud, a decisive influence on the *Residencia* poetry, had used it for one of his own notoriously difficult later poems, ‘Bruxelles’ (1872). See Jean-Arthur Rimbaud, *Oeuvres complètes*, éd. établie, présentée & annotée par Antoine Adam (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 82–83.

8 See Adam Feinstein, *Pablo Neruda: A Passion for Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 69–73; Hernán Loyola, *Neruda: La biografía literaria* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Seix Barral, 2006), 432–40; and Olivares Briones, *Tras las huellas de un poeta itinerante*, I (2000) *Los caminos de oriente*, 221–29 & 237–39.

Albertina had been sent by the University of Concepción to study the Decroly system for teaching French to children. She never received most of Neruda's letters (of which eight, sent between 17 December 1929 and mid January 1930, remain, though in them Neruda himself refers to others, now lost), as she spent Christmas of that year in London without leaving a forwarding address. As he attests in an angry letter of 12 January 1930, at least one was returned to him directly from her lodgings on the Rue Jourdain.⁹ For Olivares, I assume (he provides no explanation), it was this romantic debacle that inspired the poem and accounts for its otherwise nonsensical title: Brussels comes to represent a painful and irreversible parting of the ways between the poet and his former love, the stark demarcation of a before, when reconciliation still seemed possible, and an after, when all such hopes had to be abandoned. His basic contention is surely right, yet there is a good deal more to the story. As indicated above, Olivares seems to believe that the poem was written shortly after the episode itself, as a sort of epitaph to a love which the poet now recognized was lost forever, but this assumption is suspect on a number of grounds, both contextual and more specifically literary. In the first place, Neruda elected to include other poems composed in the aftermath to the affair (and which allude obliquely to it), such as 'Lamento lento' and 'Cantares', in the first volume of *Residencia en la tierra* (1933). It might be objected that initially he may have been unsure of the quality of 'Bruselas' and therefore elected to withhold it, but the fact that he published it at all strongly suggests otherwise.¹⁰ Moreover, the exceedingly lengthy interlude between the alleged date of composition and the poem's eventual appearance in print deviates markedly from Neruda's customary practice at the time, when his unbending determination to establish himself internationally as a major new voice in Hispanic poetry generally led him to seek a public outlet for his poems shortly after he had written them. This applies not only to many of the poems which made it into the final version of *Residencia I*, but also to lesser pieces such as 'Oda tórrida' and 'Número y nombre', which, at least in the first instance, he originally elected to exclude but published independently.¹¹ The same is true of almost all the poems in *Tercera*

9 OC, V (2002), *Nerudiana dispersa II, 1922–1973*, 922–23.

10 The point may appear tautological, but as Jorge Edwards remarks in a dismayed riposte to the publication of *Tus pies toco en la sombra y otros poemas inéditos* (Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, 2015), a collection of what are essentially discarded fragments and drafts, even later in life, when many critics claim that he was far less rigorous when it came to the quality of what he published than he had been in his youth, '[Neruda] escogía bien los poemas que publicaba y olvidaba los que merecían ser olvidados'. See Jorge Edwards, 'Retazos nerudianos', *El País*, 28 January 2015, n.p.; available online at <https://elpais.com/cultura/2015/01/20/babelia/1421774563_424719.html> (accessed 26 June 2024).

11 Of the twenty-eight poems in verse in *Residencia I* (there are also five prose poems), thirteen appeared in journals or newspapers prior to the publication of the collection as whole.

residencia itself, the only exceptions being ‘Vals’, ‘El abandonado’, ‘Naciendo en los bosques’ and ‘Canto a los ríos de Alemania’, which was republished independently just after the book appeared. The long poem ‘Las furias y las penas’ (*OC*, I, 357–63), avowedly composed in 1934, first published as a free-standing piece in two separate editions in 1939 and later included in *Tercera residencia*, may appear to be an exception to this general tendency, but in that particular case Neruda had overriding personal reasons for delaying its publication, and even here the lapse between composition and publication was five years, not thirteen—i.e., he published it as soon as he thought it politic to do so.¹² It would seem odd, then, that a potentially much less scandalous and far more hermetic poem should have had to wait so long to see the light of day, and thus it is surely worth recalling that ‘Bruselas’ too was originally published prior to its inclusion in *Tercera residencia*, in an anthology compiled by Arturo Aldunate Phillips in 1943.¹³ The implication, *if* Neruda was following his usual *modus operandi* in this instance, is that it had been composed not long before.

Form and Expression

I shall endeavour to shed some light on the internal workings of ‘Bruselas’ and certain of its more esoteric allusions presently, but a number of its formal and expressive features also belie Olivares’ early dating. Most obviously, all the other poems written wholly or partially for or about Albertina in *Residencia I* (‘Madrigal escrito en invierno’, ‘Fantasma’, ‘Lamento lento’, ‘Cantares’) are composed of quatrains made up of

‘Oda tórrida’ was composed in Java in 1931 and published in Chile in 1935, whilst ‘Número y nombre’, published in Chile in late February, 1933 (two months before *Residencia I* itself), seems to have been written after his return home in 1932. By then it may have been too late to include it in the book, or perhaps Neruda thought that its unusual form, expression and subject matter made it appear anomalous. See the poems in *OC*, IV (2001), *Nerudiana dispersa I, 1915–1964*, 363–64 (‘Oda tórrida’), 365–68 (‘Número y nombre’) & 1246, note.

12 According to Loyola, Neruda revealed to him in the 1960s that the real-life inspiration for the addressee in the poem was Eva Fréjaville, later the first wife of Alejo Carpentier. He seems to have met her in Madrid in 1934, and the two began a tumultuous affair when she was with Carpentier and the poet was still married to Maruca but already involved with Delia del Carril. Loyola’s speculative dating of their liaison suggests that Neruda’s recollection of the year of composition is almost certainly wrong, and even his own proposed alternative of mid 1935 may be too early. Either way, he could hardly have published the poem at the time. See Hernán Loyola, *El joven Neruda 1904–1935* (Santiago de Chile: Lumen, 2014), 439–82.

13 Pablo Neruda, *Pablo Neruda: selección, compilación*, ed. Arturo Aldunate Phillips (Santiago de Chile: Nascimento, 1949 [1st ed. 1943]), 138–39. Here the opening stanza of the poem appears divided into two three-line stanzas, but in all the editions of the *Obras completas* it appears as a single, six-line block of text.

generally short lines of varying length.¹⁴ This more traditional form (when compared to that of most of the other *Residencia I* poems) reflects what Neruda described in a letter to Héctor Eandi from Jakarta on 5 September 1931, as his 'viejo deseo de hacer una poesía del corazón, que consuele aficciones, como las canciones y tonadas populares [...] pero sin elementos populares' (*OC*, V, 959–63 [p. 963]). 'Bruselas', on the other hand, is considerably more intricate in both formal and metrical terms. Stanza lengths differ, and much of the poem consists of heptasyllables (every stanza ends with one), hendecasyllables, and alexandrines or near alexandrines. Whilst these staples of Spanish verse also figure, albeit less prominently, in a number of other poems from *Residencia I* (especially, but not exclusively, those written before Neruda left Chile), the handful he wrote in Ceylon, heavily influenced by D. H. Lawrence, tend to feature much longer lines. Neruda only began to redeploy them systematically, especially in combination, after meeting Lorca in Buenos Aires in 1933 and the technically brilliant Spanish poets of the Generation of 1927 in Spain the following year. Even more revealingly, the poem also contains a number of broken or staggered lines (read together, ll. 6–7 and 17–18 form hendecasyllables) which are to be found nowhere in Neruda's poetry prior to the publication of *España en el corazón* (1937) but are a regular feature of that collection as well as of many of the poems he composed in the late 1930s and early 1940s, including almost all those which make up Section I of *Tercera residencia* ('Vals' being the one exception) and most of those which would eventually comprise the 'Canto general de Chile', later the seventh section of the *Canto general* (1950). A significant number of these were gathered in the Aldunate Phillips anthology.¹⁵

We also find in 'Bruselas' a number of specific terms or turns of phrase that are new, or relatively new, in Neruda's verse. In particular, the word

14 The minor exception is 'Cantares', which (like 'Lamento lento', written shortly before) consists almost entirely of enneasyllables and is made up of five quatrains preceded by what is in effect a seven-line prelude. 'Ángela adónica', meanwhile, possibly written in the wake of a fleeting and shameful encounter with a local girl in Ceylon, but a copy of which Neruda may later have sent to Albertina (!), is written, with minor variants, in Sapphic stanzas. See 'Lamento lento', 'Ángela adónica' & 'Cantares', in *Residencia en la tierra I [1925–1932]* (*OC*, I, 252–95 [pp. 265–66, 275–76, 293–94]), 275–76 & 293–94).

15 For his *Canto general [1938–1949]* see *OC*, I, 415–837. The anthologized poems (I refer here only to those which contain staggered/indented lines and are also collected in Loyola's *OC* edition [volume I] to which the page references here refer) are 'Reunión bajo las nuevas banderas' (364–65 [1940]), 'Canto a Stalingrado' (393–95 [1943]), '7 de noviembre. Oda a un día de victorias' (401–03 [1943]), 'Dura elegía' (409–11 [1943]), 'Oda de invierno al río Mapocho' (661–62 [1938]), 'Himno y regreso' (638–39 [1940]), 'Océano' (643–44 [1940]), 'Tocopilla' (647–49 [1941]), 'Quiero volver al sur' (639–40 [1941]) and 'Melancolía cerca de Orizaba' (640–43 [1943]) (dates in square brackets are those of original publication). The same technique can be found in the poems dedicated to his friends, 'Rubén Azocar' and 'Junvencio Valle', also from the 'Canto general de Chile' (*OC*, I, 637–62 [pp. 656–57 & 657]).

'retroceso' first appeared in 'La calle destruida' (likely penned in Spain in 1934/1935) and also features in the near contemporary 'Melancolía en las familias' (*OC*, I, 313–14), another disconcertingly oblique poem at least partly inspired by Albertina, where it is used metaphorically, as it seems to be in 'Bruselas', to describe a sounding of the hiddenmost substrata of the poet's experience (*OC*, I, 313–14). The lexis employed in this latter poem to illustrate this inner katabasis is geological ('grandes extensiones hundidas', 'cuarzo en lingotes', 'vetas de retrocesos' [ll. 8, 9 & 13, p. 313]) and in 'Bruselas', too, the poet's descent eventually leads him 'bajo la tierra /.../ junto a los materiales / de la agonía' (ll. 12 & 15–16, p. 352).¹⁶ Whilst in 'Melancolía en las familias' the plunge into the subsoil of the psyche is spontaneous and strikingly Proustian, other late poems from *Residencia II [1933–1935]* (*OC*, I, 298–346), not least 'Estatuto del vino' (1934/1935) include sometimes lengthy passages ('Estoy en medio de este canto /.../ Recordando noches, navíos, sementeras' etc.) in which the speaker consciously revisits and sifts through his past in an attempt to understand his present situation (327–30 [ll. 63 & 69, p. 329]). This sense of more measured, purposeful exploration is also present in 'Bruselas', signalled by the recapitulatory 'He buscado y hallado' at the start of stanza 3. Regarding peculiarities of expression, the terse phrase 'entre luna y cuchillos' has a notably Lorcan ring.¹⁷ Certainly, we find nothing akin to it in *Residencia I* where the sole, literal reference to a 'cuchillo' occurs in the poem 'Tango del viudo' (*OC*, I, 291–92 [l. 24, p. 291]), and, as I have remarked elsewhere, knives and daggers start to appear regularly in Neruda's poetry only after his encounter with Lorca.¹⁸ The same is true of the word 'agonía', which is equally redolent of the Spaniard's lexicon.¹⁹ Indeed, it is surely telling that

16 Perhaps the most remarkable example of this type of visionary disinterment is 'El desenterrado' (1935) (*OC*, I, 338–40), Neruda's homage to the Conde de Villamediana, in which the speaker figuratively (though in strikingly graphic fashion) resurrects the Spanish poet from the depths of the earth and oblivion. Here too geological imagery abounds, and some of the specific terms used ('tierra', 'azufre', 'carbón', 'dientes de la tierra dura', 'cadáveres amargos', 'maderas nocturnas', 'secreto de la espuma') seem to foreshadow those found in 'Bruselas'.

17 One thinks immediately of the Moon's statement in *Bodas de sangre* (1932), '[l]a luna deja un cuchillo / abandonado en el aire', but Lorca's poetry, especially that of the *Romancero gitano* (1928) and the *Poema del cante jondo* (1931), is overflowing with similar references. See *Bodas de sangre*, ed. Allen Josephs & Juan Caballero (Madrid: Cátedra, 1988), 144.

18 See Dominic Moran, 'Neruda's "Walking Around"—Origins and Influences', *Cantalao*, 1:1 (2013), 26–37 (pp. 32 & 34). There are various references to knives and/or daggers in 'Walking Around' (*OC*, I, 308–09), 'La calle destruida' (*OC*, I, 311–12), 'Material nupcial' (*OC*, I, 320–21), 'Agua sexual' (*OC*, I, 321–23), 'Estatuto del vino', 'Oda a Federico García Lorca' (*OC*, I, 331–34) and 'El desenterrado', but none in the *Residencia II* poems composed before Neruda met Lorca.

19 Again, one could cite any number of examples, only the most obvious being the famous lines from the 'Oda a Walt Whitman': 'Agonía, agonía, sueño, fermento y sueño. / Éste es el

the first time the latter word occurs in *any* form in Neruda's poetry is in the 'Oda a Federico García Lorca' (1935), in the phrase 'muchas personas de traje agonizante' (*OC*, I, l. 59, p. 332). It subsequently features in two poems from *España en el corazón* (1937), but perhaps its most noteworthy use for the purposes of the present study is to be found in 'Naciendo en los bosques' (*OC*, I, 354–56), one of the first poems in which Neruda attempts to extricate himself from the existential malaise in which he considered both himself and his poetry to have been mired since the mid 1920s:

No tiemblo en la comarca de los agonizantes despojos,
no despierto en el golpe de las tinieblas asustadas.²⁰

(*OC*, I, ll. 10–11, p. 355)

These lines recall and may even be intended as a palinode to the darkling lines 11–17 of 'Bruselas', and Neruda's grouping of the poems in the volume reinforces that impression.²¹ Another, seemingly unexceptional reference in 'Bruselas' to the 'río que las plumas / de las quemantes águilas van cubriendo' (ll. 4–5, p. 352) also merits comment. Surprisingly, given his provenance, this is only the second mention of the iconic Chilean bird in Neruda's verse since 'El estribillo del turco' from *Crepusculario* (1923), though in that much earlier poem the allusion is purely metaphorical.²² Here I read it as the first in a series of strategically veiled references to his homeland, to which I shall return below. Its emblematic function in this instance is perhaps intimated by the speaker's address to his 'patria' in 'Himno y regreso' ('En ti se junta el águila al azufre' [l. 26, p. 639]) which also includes a reference to sulphur, commonly mined in Chile and also perhaps suggestive of its countless volcanoes. This latter poem, later included in the *Canto general*, was composed in 1939 and originally

mundo, amigo, agonía, agonía' (Federico García Lorca, *Poeta en Nueva York*, ed. Andrew A. Anderson [Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2015], ll. 81–82, p. 268).

20 The two poems from *España en el corazón* (included in its entirety in *Tercera residencia* [*OC*, I, 366–92]) are 'Llegada a Madrid de la Brigada Internacional' ('un mes agonizante' [*OC*, I, 376–78 (l. 2, p. 376)]) and 'El general Franco en los infiernos' ('un agonizante río de ojos cortados' [*OC*, I, 381–83 (l. 69, p. 383)]). We additionally find it in 'Canto al Ejército Rojo a su llegada a las puertas de Prusia' ('las palabras que empuñaron lo agónico'), also from *Tercera residencia* but first published in 1944 (*OC*, I, 411–13 [l. 6, p. 411] & 1200–01, note).

21 There is a remarkably similar reference to and still more categorical rejection of this funereal, subterranean groping in the most famous of Neruda's poems of personal and aesthetic reorientation, 'Reunión bajo las nuevas banderas' (1940): 'Fundé mi pecho en esto, escuché / toda la sal funesta: de noche / fui a plantar mis raíces: / averigüé lo amargo de la tierra / ... / Y para qué busqué este pulso frío / sino para una muerte? / Y qué instrumento perdí en las tinieblas / desamparadas?' (ll. 7–10 & 14–17, p. 364; my emphasis).

22 See Pablo Neruda, 'El estribillo del turco', in *Crepusculario* (*OC*, I, 109–55 [pp. 118–20]). The second instance occurs in the specifically Spanish setting of 'Cómo era España', from *España en el corazón* (*OC*, I, 373–76).

published in 1940 to mark Neruda's return home after he had secured the safe passage to Chile of two thousand Spanish refugees on the *Winnipeg*, an undertaking alluded to explicitly in the text itself (*OC*, I, 638–39).²³ The image of the sudden, violent shedding of feathers, meanwhile, often linked to loss or destruction of one sort or another, only starts to appear in Neruda's poetry from the mid 1930s.²⁴ There is also a further, albeit more circuitous link with 'Himno y regreso' that may be of significance. In the final stanza of 'Bruselas' the poet describes himself as being alongside unspecified 'muros sin hilos' (l. 20, p. 352). As we shall see presently, there may well be a specific biographical experience lurking behind this generic phrase, which, in purely textual terms, intimates both the starkness of the setting and a dawning sense that all ties with the past have been irrevocably cut. However, a less recondite literary analogue is provided by 'Vals', which immediately precedes 'Bruselas' in *Tercera residencia*. The forlorn conclusion to that poem, so similar to that of 'Bruselas' itself, reads:

No me busquéis entonces describiendo
el habitual hilo salvaje o la
sangrienta enredadera.

No me llaméis: mi ocupación es esa.
No me preguntéis mi nombre ni mi estado.
Dejadme en medio de mi propia luna,
en mi territorio herido. (ll. 19–25, p. 352)

Both the dating of 'Vals' and the sense of these particular lines have been disputed, but one possible interpretation is that the poet is instructing his readers not to demand that he keep spinning out ('describiendo [...] hilo') more of the 'savage' poetry (i.e., that of *Residencia en la tierra*) they have come to expect of him (hence 'habitual') and going so far as to describe or even dismiss the writing of such seemingly visceral, compulsive verse as no

23 We find references to eagles in an explicitly Chilean context in 'Océano' and 'Oda de invierno al río Mapocho' (*OC*, I, l. 12, p. 643 & l. 5, p. 661), poems also included in the 'Canto general de Chile' but whose composition may be near contemporary with that of 'Bruselas' (see note 15 above).

24 There are various instances in the later poems of *Residencia II*. In 'Enfermedades en mi casa' (*OC*, I, 316–18) the speaker evokes 'ese instante en que el día se cae con las plumas deshechas' (l. 14, p. 316), whilst he commences his elegy for his friend Alberto Rojas Jiménez (*OC*, I, 335–38) by announcing: 'Entre plumas que asustan / ... / vienes volando' (ll. 1–4, p. 335). 'Estatuto del vino', meanwhile, includes scattered feathers in a cluster of references similar to those found in 'Bruselas': 'Y el vino huye por las carreteras, / por las iglesias, entre los carbones, / y se caen sus plumas de amaranto, / y se disfraza de azufre su boca' (ll. 100–03, p. 330; my emphasis). Conversely, the fantasized reconstitution of the Conde de Villamediana's decomposed body is compared to the return of 'la pluma a su pájaro suave' (l. 35, p. 339).

more than his 'ocupación'—i.e., what he does for a living.²⁵ What he craves instead is to be left entirely alone, free from all official obligation and expectation, whether civic ('nombre', 'estado') or artistic. This is precisely how he ends 'Bruselas'—bereft of any connection with his surroundings ('sin hilos'), isolated from the futile commotion ('velocidad desestimada' [l. 19, p. 352]) of everyday life, 'vegetalmente solo' (l. 23, p. 353). It is perhaps noteworthy, then, that in 'Himno y regreso' we find him employing the same metaphor but now in an unequivocally affirmative sense:

Voy a escoger la flor delgada del nitrato,
 voy a *hilar* el estambre glacial de la campana,
 y mirando tu ilustre y solitaria espuma
 un ramo litoral *tejeré* a tu belleza. (ll. 19–22, p. 639; my emphasis)

It is as if returning to Chile inspired him to pick up the thread of his poetry once again, and this makes it tempting to see both 'Bruselas' and 'Vals' as poems written while Neruda was in Europe in 1939, acting principally as an official representative of his country and thus constantly engaged in the wearying and often fraught bureaucracy and politicking necessary to secure the safe passage of the Spanish refugees to Chile.²⁶

There would, then, appear to be compelling textual and associated evidence to suggest that, far from being a poem left over from Neruda's time in Ceylon, 'Bruselas' was composed at some point in the late 1930s or early 1940s—not long, that is, before its publication in 1943.²⁷ Two final

25 For a summary of the principal critical positions, see Hernán Loyola, 'De cómo Neruda devino comunista (sin "conversión poética")', *A Contracorriente. Una Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos*, 8:2 (2011), 173–96 (pp. 184–85); available at <<https://acontracorriente.chass.ncsu.edu/index.php/acontracorriente/article/view/419>> (accessed 8 July 2024). Loyola himself reads the poem quite differently, seeing it as a steadfast refusal on Neruda's part to churn out the sort of politically committed protest poetry being pedalled by many of his contemporaries (this is how he interprets the 'habitual hilo salvaje' and 'sangrienta enredadera') and dates it as early as 1935. Reaching such a conclusion requires disregarding or tacitly deeming irrelevant a good deal of the text.

26 The same may also be true of 'El abandonado', by far the most obscure of the poems in Section I of *Tercera residencia* (OC, I, 349–56), but within whose dense metaphorical thicket one can, *perhaps*, discern oblique references to the passage of the refugees (alluded to as nameless individuals in the title) from the Northern hemisphere of Europe ('los últimos clavos boreales') to the distant south of Chile ('la tierra final'), where the poet will eventually be reunited with them ('nos hallaremos') (ll. 30, 52 & 51, p. 354). Perhaps, even more so than 'Bruselas' itself, 'El abandonado' remains in need of rigorous, line-by-line textual analysis.

27 The only pieces of (con)textual evidence which *might* point an earlier date of composition are the inclusion of several long adverbs in the form *-mente* and a stanza from 'Lamento lento' (which undoubtedly was composed—though in Indonesia, not Ceylon—as an epilogue to the epistolary drama with Albertina) which reads 'La espesa rueda de la tierra / su llanta húmeda de olvido / hace rodar, *cortando el tiempo en mitades inaccesibles*' (ll. 13–16, p. 266; my emphasis). Certainly, we find a profusion (some might argue an abuse) of

pieces of biographical information, not cited by any of the poem's critics, further bolster this hypothesis. Firstly, in 1937 Albertina had married Neruda's friend and fellow poet Ángel Cruchaga Santa María, consigning their own amorous history definitively to the past. Then, in autumn 1939, Neruda himself visited Brussels for the first time in order to deal with what he refers to in his memoirs as an urgent matter relating to the Spanish *émigrés* who had by that time arrived in Chile on the *Winnipeg*.²⁸ Given his Proustian inclinations and the bitterly ironic coincidence that his own lost love was called Albertina, that visit alone might have prompted him to mull despairingly over a now irrecoverable past (so that the 'muros sin hilos', for the poet at least, would, quite concretely, have been those of the Belgian city), but during his time in Europe (April to late December) he also travelled twice to The Hague to see his estranged wife Maruca, the woman he had married in an ill-considered and ultimately self-sabotaging act of retribution for what he saw as his heartless abandonment by Albertina.²⁹ In other words, all the scattered elements of, and/or participants in, the emotional drama(s) of 1929–1931 had suddenly and unexpectedly reconfigured. Being forced to spend time with a woman he had never loved but whom he had rashly substituted for one he had adored, in conjunction with setting foot in the city which he associated with the definitive loss of the latter and the beginning of his disastrous

polysyllabic adverbs in poems written in the Far East such as 'Arte poética', 'Sistema sombrío' and (especially) 'Significa sombras' (*OC*, I, 274, 275 & 295 respectively) but, despite figuring far less prominently in the early poems of *Residencia II*, they by no means disappear altogether and return as a central stylistic feature/rhythmic device in the much later 'Oda a Federico García Lorca', where there are no fewer than nine, of between four and seven syllables. Likewise, references to the separation or severing of different epochs or elements of the poet's life are to be found in poems written during his years away from Chile both well in advance of the episode involving Albertina ('Sonata y destrucciones' [*OC*, I, 276–77], 'Diurno doliente' [*OC*, I, 272–73], 'Monzón de mayo' [*OC*, I, 273–74] etc.) and years afterwards ('Agua sexual' and 'Melancolía en las familias').

28 Pablo Neruda, *Confieso que he vivido. Memorias (1933–1973)* (*OC*, V, 395–789 [p. 552]). He was trying to obtain the money which the Chilean government had requested as a condition for the admission of the refugees to Chile but also, amidst the mayhem caused by the outbreak of the Second World War, seeking to secure his own wage. In his exhaustive combing of the Chilean diplomatic archives David Schidlowsky uncovered a telegram sent from Brussels on 30 October 1939 containing the instruction 'petición Cónsul Neruda ordenar sueldo Bruselas causa dificultad cambio francés' (David Schidlowsky, *Las furias y las penas: Pablo Neruda y su tiempo*, 2 vols [Santiago de Chile: RiL Editores, 2008], I, 1904–1949, 448).

29 See Schidlowsky, *Las furias y las penas*, I, 440 & 450. Maruca was seeking assurances that he would continue to provide financial support for her and their critically ill daughter, Malva Marina. In one of his first letters to Albertina from Ceylon (dated 17 December 1929), he warns her, '[m]e estoy cansando de la soledad, y si tú no vienes, trataré de casarme con alguna otra' (*OC*, V, 916–17 [p. 916]). He would pay a heavy emotional price for making good on that petulant threat.

acquaintance with the former, would have provided him with more than sufficient stimuli to pen one of his most desolate poems.

But Where Is She?

Yet even if we are willing to grant provisional validity to these claims regarding the timing and circumstances of its composition, a fundamental question remains: where in 'Bruselas' do we find reference to Albertina herself? Is she in *any* way 'present', even 'fantasmalmente', or does the poem simply register the speaker's bleak mood upon finding himself alone and adrift in a place he associated so painfully with her? Before proceeding, it is worth recalling that Neruda had a penchant for writing about Albertina using extravagant circumlocution and/or a sometimes barely fathomable poetic 'code' which often involved transformations of her name. His primary reason for doing so seems to have been aesthetic, the excising or camouflaging of narrowly anecdotal material lending the poems greater resonance or mystery, albeit on occasion at the expense of intelligibility. There may also have been an element of discretion at work. Thus 'Cantares' (probably written in 1931, after his marriage to Maruca) opens with the seemingly nonsensical formulation:

La parracial rosa devora
y sube a la cima del santo. (ll. 1–2, p. 293)

According to Loyola, 'parracial' is a neologism in the form of a portmanteau word which fuses 'parra' and perhaps 'glacial' (he mentions 'torrencial' and 'demencial' as other possibilities), indicating, along with the accompanying verb 'devora', both the poet's all-consuming passion ('parra', argues Loyola, is suggestive of grapes, so often a symbol of both sensuous and sexual pleasure in Neruda's verse) and his former love's cold-heartedness. Her name is allegedly encrypted in the reference to 'rosa'. The speaker's styling of himself as a saint would, as consequence, constitute an 'autoalusión irónica, referida a la condición actual del poeta: hombre casado y asentado (sexo, corazón y cabeza en paz)'.³⁰ In 1932 Neruda added a new,

30 Pablo Neruda, 'Cantares', in *Residencia en la tierra* ed. Hernán Loyola (Madrid: Cátedra, 2015), 185–87 (p. 185), note to ll. 1–2. There may also be a literary precedent for the speaker's self-designation as a 'santo' in the work of Arthur Rimbaud, a key source (along with Gérard de Nerval) for Neruda's practice of systematically distorting or blurring personal references in order to produce autobiographical poetry 'que no suene autobiográfica o autorreferencial' (Loyola, *Neruda: La biografía literaria*, 427). Thus in 'Mauvais sang' (from *Une Saison en enfer*) the speaker implores '[s]i Dieu m'accordait le calme céleste, aérien, la prière,—comme les anciens saints.—Les saints! des forts! les anachorètes, des artistes comme il n'en faut plus!' ('If only God would grant me celestial calm, ethereal calm, prayer,—like the old saints.—The saints! strong men! anchorites, artists such as we no longer need!'), whilst in section 4 of 'Enfance' (from *Illuminations*) we read '[j]e suis le saint,

replacement Poem 9 to the revised second edition of the *Veinte poemas de amor*, which begins in similarly inscrutable mode:

Ebrio de trementina y largos besos,
estival, el velero de las rosas dirijo. (*OC*, I, 185–86 [ll. 1–2, p. 185])

Here, Loyola has argued, there is a ‘*secrta consonancia*’ between ‘*trementina*’ and the absent but implied ‘*Albertina*’, whilst once again ‘*rosas*’ acts as a cyphered allusion to her name, later picked up in the otherwise mystifying, strategically pluralized description of ‘*embriagadoras rosas practicándose en mí*’ (l. 16, p. 185).³¹ The closest we get to such onomastic punning in ‘*Bruselas*’ may be the reference to the ‘*sulfúrico / retroceso de pétalos*’ (ll. 5–6, p. 349), where the petals perhaps serve as a synecdoche for the absent ‘*rosa*’, the whole syntagm metaphorically evoking the sudden, searing return of the past. However, it is primarily in the bewildering second stanza, universally passed over by the poem’s critics, that the ultimate object of the poet’s musings lies hidden. The decisive reference, which at first glance appears figurative and hermetic but turns out to be surprisingly concrete in origin, is to the ‘*carbón mordido / por la espuma secrta*’ (ll. 9–10, p. 349). *Albertina* was from Lota Alto in Concepción, an important coal-mining centre where, crucially, the seams extended out to sea beneath the ocean bed. Neruda would subsequently make multiple references to this phenomenon, in both his poetry and a significant number of prose texts, after President González Videla had a 1947 miners’ strike in Lota brutally crushed. The earliest examples are to be found in ‘*Grecia*’ (*OC*, I, 619–20) and ‘*Tormentos*’ (*OC*, I, 620–21), two poems from ‘*Crónica de 1948 (América)*’, the fourth section of Canto V of the *Canto general* (‘*La arena traicionada*’):

En Lota están las bajas minas
del carbón: es un puerto frío,
del grave invierno austral, la lluvia

en prière sur la terrasse’ (‘I am the saint, at prayer on the terrace’). See Rimbaud, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Adam, 91–97 (*Une Saison en enfer* [‘Mauvais Sang’, pp. 94–99 (p. 99)], & 119–55 (*Illuminations* [‘Enfance’, pp. 122–25 (p. 124)])); translations both taken from Arthur Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, trans. Martin Sorrell (Oxford : Oxford U. P., 2015 [1st ed. 2001]), 201–55 (*A Season in Hell* [‘Bad Blood’, pp. 210–22 (p. 221)]) & 256–311 (*Illuminations* [‘Childhood’, pp. 258–62 (p. 261)]).

31 See *OC*, I, 1153, note; and Pablo Neruda, *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*, ed., with an intro., critical analysis, notes & vocabulary by Dominic Moran (Manchester: Manchester U. P., 2007), 94–95. Aside from their common theme and its metaphorical depiction (the poet/lover as storm-tossed sailor), the poem shares a good deal of vocabulary and specific expressive characteristics (not least the many paradoxes and antitheses reminiscent of courtly love poetry) with ‘*Cantares*’, suggesting a kinship between the two.

*cae y cae sobre los techos, alas
de gaviotas color de niebla,
y bajo el mar sombrío el hombre
cava y cava el recinto negro.* (ll. 17–23, p. 620; my emphasis)

Es la huelga
de los que bajo el mar excavaron,
tendidos en la cueva húmeda,
y extrajeron con sangre y fuerza
el terrón negro de las minas. (ll. 6–10, p. 620; my emphasis)

Note, too, in the first extract the reference to the torrential rain that we also find in 'Bruselas'.³² In his memoirs, meanwhile, when he recalls reciting 'Nuevo canto de amor a Stalingrado' to a gathering of the strikers in Lota, Neruda sets the scene as follows:

Flotaba en el aire caliente del mediodía un olor a *carbón* y a *sal marina*. Muy cercano estaba *el océano, bajo cuyas aguas se extienden por más de diez kilómetros los túneles sombríos en que aquellos hombres cavaban el carbón.* (OC, V, 683; my emphasis)³³

This passage further intimates that the phrase 'la sal entera' (l. 7, p. 352) functions as poetic shorthand for the vast ocean that surrounds the Lota peninsula. The syntactically identical phrase 'el pan continuo' (l. 8, p. 352) seems to act in a similar way, alluding perhaps to the endless wheat fields which characterize the Biobío region where Lota is situated. More explicit references to the crop in a number of other poems about the south of the country, especially those of the 'Canto general de Chile', may support such a reading.³⁴ From a purely aesthetic standpoint, the concentrated expansiveness ('entera', 'continuo') of these parallel expressions provides a painful measure of the speaker's loss. More circumscribed, and consequently more puzzling, is the relatively detailed description of the 'pequeña iglesia

32 The deep-seated association of Lota with the rain recurs in the much later 'Cuando en Chile', from Section XI of *Las uvas y el viento [1950–1953]* (OC I, 909–1128): 'Pero si llueve en Lota / sobre mí cae la lluvia' (1037–41 [ll. 19–20, p. 1038]). It is noteworthy that, even in the 1950s, Lota remains one of the handful of places for which Neruda, writing the poem somewhere on the Great Steppe, recalls most fondly.

33 See also the sardonically titled 'Carta íntima para millones de hombres' (1948) (OC, IV, 681–703) and the speech 'El esplendor de la tierra' (1950) (OC, IV, 777–98), both of which contain similar references to the distinctive configuration of the mines in Lota (pp. 692 & 780 respectively).

34 See for example 'Quiero volver al sur' and 'Melancolía cerca de Orizaba'. In fact, as early as 'Naciendo en los bosques' we find wheat associated with 'el mar innumerable / de lo que continúa' (ll. 6–7, p. 355; my emphasis).

devorada por / la lluvia marina' (ll. 8–9, p. 352). What church is this, and why does it merit inclusion in the poem? I have no clear answer to these questions and can only speculate that it is a place which had some particular but here unspecified significance for or role in his earlier relationship with Albertina. There may be some modest contextual evidence for this conjecture. Churches barely figure in Neruda's early poetry, but where we do find them the subject or implied addressee of the poem is almost always Albertina. Three poems written in between 1925 and 1932 seem to form a cluster in this respect: the revised Poem 2 of the *Veinte poemas de amor* (OC, I, 179–80), Poem 7 ('Torciendo hacia ese lado ...') of *Tentativa del hombre infinito* (1926) (OC, I, 206–07) and 'Alianza (sonata)', from *Residencia I*. They share a common fund of imagery and allusions, all related to a twilight scene in which the speaker's lover is pictured against the fading light.³⁵ The latter two include references to eventide church services:

Muda, mi amiga,
sola en lo solitario de esta hora de muertes
y llena de las vidas del fuego,
pura heredera del día destruido. (ll. 5–8, p. 180)

radiantes ruedas de piedra sostienen el día mientras tanto
después colgado en la horca del crepúsculo
pisa en los campanarios y en las mujeres de los pueblos.

(ll. 12–14, pp. 206–07)

Tú guardabas la estela de luz, de seres rotos
que el sol abandonado, atardeciendo, arroja a las iglesias.
Teñida con miradas, con objeto de abejas,
tu material de inesperada llama huyendo
precede y sigue al día y a su familia de oro. (ll. 7–11, p. 258)

There is also a reference to 'agrias iglesias a medio destruir' in 'Las furias y las penas' (l. 40, p. 358), and whilst the principal extra-textual addressee of that poem is not Albertina (see above note 12), the phrase cited appears in a long passage in which the speaker expresses his appalled wonderment at his lover's capacity to penetrate and haunt every level and facet of his experience—including, perhaps, precious memories of a past in which she

35 Cedomil Goic has drawn attention to the similarities between *Veinte poemas de amor* Poem 2 and 'Alianza (sonata)' in his 'La amante invisible en Pablo Neruda: "Poema 2" y "Alianza (sonata)"', *Atenea*, 489 (2004), 37–49. Both Jaime Concha and Hernán Loyola have argued persuasively that the feminine addressee of 'Alianza (sonata)' is not the poet's lover but rather the night, though it is a night so heavily eroticized as to render it all but indistinguishable from a female body. See Jaime Concha, 'Interpretación de *Residencia en la tierra* de Pablo Neruda', *Mapocho*, 2 (1963), 5–39 (p. 8); 'Alianza (sonata)', in *Residencia en la tierra*, ed. Loyola, 95–96 (p. 95), note to ll. 1–4; and *Neruda: La biografía literaria*, 218–19

played no part.³⁶ Finally, in a much later, wistfully retrospective poem ('Cayendo', from *Fin de mundo* [1969]), in which he recalls the erotic transports of his now distant youth, the speaker describes himself in the present as a 'desnudo peregrino / viajando a la iglesia del mar'.³⁷ The metaphor may appear to be purely generic but, intriguingly, the poem commences with what looks like yet another coded reference to Albertina and their adolescent affair:

Yo te llamo, *rosa de leche*,
 duplicada paloma de agua,
 ven desde aquella primavera
 a resucitar en las sábanas,
 a encender detrás del invierno
 el sol erótico del día. (ll. 1–6, p. 417; my emphasis)³⁸

The stock poetic scenario (of the sailor/pilgrim), then, may again have a particular personal significance. The implication in all the above cases is of a concrete scene that has acquired a special import for the speaker by dint of its association with his lover, and it may be that he is recalling that same setting in 'Bruselas'. What is indisputable in purely textual terms, and regardless of any extra-literary origins or referents for the various elements mentioned in Bruselas' ll. 7–10, is that this is a world in which the speaker is no longer welcome, as the phrase 'No me perdona ya', placed at the head of the line, makes clear. That sense of irremediable exclusion from some cherished realm of experience is later echoed in and amplified by the expression 'en el fondo cortado por los términos' (l. 21, p. 352), whose finality suggests a definitive rift with the past.

36 This may also be implied in the phrase 'rompes a cuchilladas la madera y la plata' (l. 43, p. 358), the two nouns (but particularly the former) referring metonymically to his childhood and his homeland (the southern forests, Chile's wealth of precious metals). Besides, Loyola has argued that Albertina herself *is* present in a lengthy retrospective passage of 'Las furias y las penas', in which the speaker reconsiders earlier erotic experiences in the light of his present suffering, in the (dis)guise of 'una mujer llamada Rosalía' (l. 116, p. 361) (note again the play on her name) (Loyola, *El joven Neruda 1904–1935*, 463).

37 Pablo Neruda, 'Cayendo', in *Fin de mundo*, in *OC*, III (2000), *De 'Arte de pájaros' a 'El mar y las campanas' 1966–1973*, 393–505 (p. 417 [ll. 8–9]).

38 The phrase 'rosa de leche' itself presumably refers to Albertina's unusually fair complexion, which is alluded to most famously in the first of the *Veinte poemas de amor* ('Cuerpo de mujer'), as well as Poem 9, but also in poems such as 'Fantasma' from *Residencia I*. Some of the other terms and tropes used in 'Cayendo' (especially the reference to 'sábanas' and the self-portrait of the poet as a storm-tossed sailor) seem consciously to echo those of earlier poems dedicated to her, such as 'La estudiante', from *Canto general* (*OC*, I, 811–12), and especially 'Amores: Rosaura (I)' from *Memorial de Isla Negra* (*OC*, II, 1139–330 [pp. 1186–90]).

There is one further image in the poem which, whilst not related specifically to Albertina, seems to originate in Neruda's formative years in the Chilean south and may thus be indicative of the broad temporal and experiential sweep which the speaker's reflections encompass and within which his love for her occupied such a prominent place. I am referring to the figurative 'diente de pálida madera' (l. 13, p. 352) whose doleful workings, foreshadowed in the references to the 'iglesia *devorada*' and the 'carbón *mordido*', are charted in graphic detail in the third stanza. Clearly, the poet is comparing his own imaginative plumbing of what lies buried within him to the actions of a tooth gnawing away deep beneath the everyday surface of things, but it is the designation of that tooth as wooden which links it to his native Chile, and in particular to the Valdivian forests that he would roam as a child and which left an indelible mark on both himself and his verse. The term 'madera' becomes emblematic in his work of (a yearning for) home (houses in Temuco were commonly made of wood), rootedness, maternal succour, a visceral sense of inhering and belonging, so likening himself to an enfeebled 'diente de *pálida* madera' (my emphasis) suggests a diminution of vital and creative energies occasioned by the depredations of time, growing personal disillusionment and, more prosaically, by his physical distance from his country, where he had barely set foot in more than a decade.³⁹ We find related sentiments, couched in similar terms, at the start of 'Vals':

Yo toco el odio como pecho diurno,
yo sin cesar, de ropa en ropa vengo
durmiendo lejos.

No soy, no sirvo, no conozco a nadie,
no tengo armas de mar ni de madera,
no vivo en esta casa. (ll. 1–6, p. 351; my emphasis)

Here 'mar' and 'madera' function as twin totems of his distant homeland and the line in which they feature expresses his feelings of defencelessness while on his extended travels abroad, also manifest in 'de ropa en ropa vengo / durmiendo lejos' and 'no vivo en esta casa', whatever broader existential implications those phrases may also possess. The close referential and symbolic overlap offers further evidence that the two poems may be near contemporaneous.

³⁹ The first major example of this in his poetry is 'Entrada a la madera', one of the three 'Cantos materiales' published in Spain in 1935, which plays on the links between the words *madera*, *materia*, *material* and the unmentioned but implied cognate *madre* (OC, I, 324–25).

The Poem 'Itself'

Yet whatever light the foregoing, necessarily speculative analysis may have thrown on Neruda's 'título absolutamente enigmático' and its relation to the subject matter of 'Bruselas', we are still left with a key aesthetic question, or series of related questions, raised to a greater or lesser extent by many of the *Residencia* poems but in especially acute fashion by this one. There is a long-standing and still prevalent critical assumption, particularly with regard to a certain sort of determinedly gnomic, post-Symbolist lyric poem, that literary meaning is, or ought primarily to be, internal to the work, and is not to be sought in or dependent on extrinsic sources, such as the author's biography or even the realm of conceptual thought.⁴⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, for example, dismisses such readings as naively 'Euhemerist' or reductively 'esoteric', whilst Veronica Forrest-Thompson uses the blanket term 'bad naturalization' to describe (and decry) any attempt to locate the meaning(s) of a consciously 'difficult' poem beyond the text itself, though, tellingly, she repeatedly breaches her own interpretive remit and ultimately has to concede, however reluctantly, that *no* poem, even the most strenuously involuted, can avoid at least some degree of external reference if it is not to implode into inarticulate solipsism.⁴¹ Even for the staunchest advocates of this fundamentally formalist/linguistic approach, then, the relationship between text and context it is necessarily relative rather than absolute, though it tends to remain the case for such critics (Forrest-Thompson is a case in point) that the greater the reliance of either a poem or a reading on biographical, historical or anecdotal material for its intelligibility or coherence, the weaker that poem is.⁴² In the light of these considerations, how 'internally'

40 I am acutely conscious that here and in what follows I am reducing to almost caricatural proportions a complex, highly stratified and still unresolved aesthetic and critical debate which runs from at least the mid eighteenth century to the New Criticism and beyond, and which perhaps has its origins as far back Aristotle's distinction in the *Poetics* between the particular truths of history and the supposedly general ones of poetry. My purpose in doing so is essentially a practical one: to 'test' the autonomy and intelligibility of Neruda's poem, whose sense is so reliant on extra-textual information, against the basic principle.

41 Todorov uses the term 'Euhemerist' to designate a reader who ingenuously assumes that the literary text is no more than a superficially embellished receptacle for pre-existing, extra-literary truths, and 'esoteric' to describe the process of 'translating' obscure textual detail back into the broad, abstract ideas of which it is allegedly the codified expression, in his influential essay 'A Complication of Text: The *Illuminations*', in *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov, trans. R. Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1982), 223–37 (p. 223). For Forrest-Thompson's views, see her recently re-published *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth Century Poetry*, ed. & intro. Gareth Farmer (London: Shearsman Books, 2016 [1st ed. 1978]).

42 For what it itself a somewhat convoluted demonstration of the *a priori* necessity of 'external' reference as a minimal guarantor of intelligibility in *all* lyric poetry, see Jacques

comprehensible *is* ‘Bruselas’, and what type and degree of literary competence might reasonably be expected of a reader endeavouring to make sense of it in the absence of the various contexts on which I have drawn—something which its academic exegetes have signally (if understandably) failed to do? How, moreover, and on what grounds, might we go about evaluating it?

As it happens, ‘Bruselas’ proves to be far from entirely impenetrable if we attempt to read it solely on its ‘own’ terms, even if in this case the title alone immediately blurs the boundary between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the text, since, however it might function poetically, it would remain wholly incomprehensible without a rudimentary knowledge of European geography. The first stanza, for example, and the first three lines in particular, rework the age-old *topos* of poetry as the aesthetic sublimate of extremes of experience (‘todo lo que he perdido, / [...] todo lo que he ganado sobresaltadamente’ [ll. 1–3, p. 352]). Here the statement of intent is a tentative one, suggestive, perhaps, of creative powers compromised or in decline (hence ‘puedo ofrecer *un poco*’ [my emphasis]), a notion subsequently reprised in the reference to the ‘diente de pálida madera’ (l. 13, p. 352). The terms of reference (‘hierro amargo’, ‘hojas’ ‘sabor asustado’ [ll. 3 & 4, p. 352]) are left deliberately vague, and, as is the norm in the *Residencia* poetry (though in this comparison too I am overstepping my self-imposed interpretive remit), likely function more in the manner of objective correlatives than metaphors in the classical sense, but the choice of adjectives makes the tone at least easy enough to grasp. Excepting the hyperbaton of ll. 1–3 and the absence of a verb in ll. 4–6, the syntax is conventional and at times even veers towards the prosaic. Similarly, the third stanza, already analysed at some length, evidently harks back to the first, with l. 11 in particular closely resembling, both syntactically and semantically, ll. 1–2. The sequence *Buscar* [...] *hallar* [...] *pesadamente* clearly and, we might reasonably conclude, consciously echoes that of *perder* [...] *ganar* [...] *sobresaltadamente*. The pairing of antonymic verbs continues with the *llegar/ir* dyad of l. 14, the cumulative effect being to intensify the sense of a poetic self in turmoil, pulled repeatedly in opposing directions. The various syntactical and lexical links between stanzas 1 and 3 further imply that the harrowing investigative process detailed in the latter in effect predates the summative statement made over ll. 1–3, since it accounts for how the speaker came to be able to ‘ofrecer un poco’ (in the form of the poem that we are reading) in the first place. In structural terms, then, it functions in the manner of an explicatory retrospect or

Derrida, ‘Istrice 2: Ick bünn all hier’, in his *Points ... Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed., with an intro., by Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf *et al.* (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1995 [1st French ed. 1992]), 300–26.

'flashback'. I have already commented extensively on the nature and significance of the quest described over ll. 11–17, but is it also worth noting that, whilst that quest is ultimately metaphorical in nature, it is depicted in arrestingly physical terms. The prepositions 'bajo', 'entre' (both used twice in quick succession, perhaps somewhat clumsily [ll. 12 & 14 and 12 & 16 respectively, p. 352]) and 'junto a' (l. 15, p. 352) all suggest a bodily proximity, whilst 'tierra', 'cuerpos temibles', 'ácido duro' and 'materiales de la agonía' (l. 12, 14 & 15–16 respectively, p. 352) are referred to as if they were tangible presences. The effect is to magnify the ghastriness of the poet's inner journey—it is as if salvaging something, even 'un poco', from the wreckage of his past were as repulsive and distressing as rummaging around in the dark amongst actual, rotting corpses.

The final stanza returns us to the poem's point of departure and a benumbed, isolated speaker ('vegetalmente, solo' [l. 23, p. 353]) encircled by the transitory tumult of daily existence ('la velocidad desestimada' [l. 19, p. 352]). That return is signalled by the deictics 'Ahora' (again positioned prominently at the head of l. 18, p. 352) and 'aquí' (l. 23, p. 353) and reinforced by a further, contrasting series of prepositions ('en medio', 'al lado', 'en el fondo', 'con' [ll. 18, 19 & 21 respectively, p. 352]) which provide basic coordinates for his present, desolate situation, though the reader cannot form a precise picture of what that 'situation' is. Are the 'muros' (l. 20, p. 352) those of the city named in the title or others, perhaps metaphorical? In implied contrast to what other walls, real or imaginary, are they specified as being 'sin hilos' (l. 20, p. 352)? Remote contextual sources may provide answers to those questions, but the text itself emphatically does not. The phrase 'aquellos que pierden estrellas' (l. 22, p. 353), perhaps the most memorable in the entire poem, is similarly inexplicit but less of an obstacle for the reader, since, whether or not it conceals some particular extra-textual referent, it is obviously indicative of the creeping, almost cosmic sense of gloom that is enveloping the speaker as the poem draws to its sombre close.

In sum, a strictly text-based reading of 'Bruselas' (insofar as such an operation is possible) gives us a relatively clear overall sense of a drained, disconsolate speaker straining to forge poetry from the death-haunted vestiges of his past, and many of its images and allusions are broadly comprehensible in relation to that core scenario. Formally speaking, it possesses a distinct, internally coherent structure and overall trajectory. And yet, as its various disconcerted commentators have rightly objected, *nothing* within the poem seems to provide the reader with the slightest clue as to why it bears its title. The key to that enigma, it transpires, lies deeply embedded in, or rather hidden behind, the baffling but pivotal second stanza, whose underlying frame of reference is so narrowly and intimately biographical, so dependent for its elucidation on Forrest-

Thompson's much maligned 'bad naturalization', as to remain occluded from even the most subtle and penetrative critical scrutiny. As 'uninformed' readers, we may be able to get by without finding a meaningful analogue or paraphrase for expressions such as 'un río que las plumas / de las quemantes águilas van cubriendo' (ll. 4–5, p. 352) or 'un sulfúrico retroceso de pétalos' (ll. 5–6, p. 352) and our overall interpretation not be fatally compromised as a consequence. Yet if my own reading, so utterly and inescapably dependent on recondite contextual information, is at all valid, then stanza 2 represents an absolute impasse. What, then, are we ultimately to make of a poem whose pivotal lines are also its least decipherable, rendering it all but impossible for the reader, to borrow Proust's terms (terms with which Neruda was almost certainly familiar), to become a *copartageant* in a suffering that remains so tightly confined within its private, circumstantial *étreinte*?⁴³ To what extent can it enjoy that autonomous 'afterlife' which, for Proust, is the aesthetic reward for the writer's creative transmutation of particular personal experiences (in this case the narrator's tormented love affair with and loss of *his* Albertine) into the 'general form' of the literary work, despite the seemingly perverse betrayals or distortions of those experiences which that process necessarily entails? That questions of this sort are hardly new does not render them any less relevant when applied to specific works, especially ones as refractory to elucidation as 'Bruselas'. And yet, despite their struggles to make any sense of the poem, previous critics have not even posed those questions, let alone attempted to address them. One might interpret that reluctance in a number of ways. Perhaps it is simply assumed that its authorship and place within an epoch-making corpus of *avant-garde* poetry are in and of themselves guarantors of artistic quality and import.⁴⁴

43 In a letter to Eandi dated Java, 5 September 1931, Neruda reports '[l]eo Proust por cuarta vez' (*OC*, V, 959–63 [p. 960]), though it is not clear whether at that stage he was referring to the whole of the *Recherche* or some particular volume or volumes. He *may* have had some knowledge of the French writer before leaving Chile in 1927, but only began to read him assiduously in Ceylon as detailed in *Confieso que he vivido* (*OC*, V, 502). It is clear from the poetry written after Neruda's return to Chile in 1932 that by then he had read the entire work, as it contains unmistakable allusions to material included in the later volumes.

44 This is commonly the case with regard to *Residencia en la tierra*. For example, in neither his critical edition of the work nor his two subsequent studies of Neruda's early verse (*La biografía literaria* and *El joven Neruda*), does Loyola entertain the possibility that the *Residencia* poems might vary in quality. Even where poems or significant sections of them prove indecipherable, their greatness seems to be taken on trust. The same is true of most of the now canonical studies of the collection, though, tellingly, the same critics who either withhold judgement when faced with Neruda's most intractable poems or greet them with spontaneous, unsubstantiated praise, do not hesitate to offer their (predominantly negative) views on the far less complex and challenging political poems of *España en el corazón* and the final section of *Tercera residencia*. A classic instance is Emir Rodríguez Monegal's early review of the collection, in which he lauds 'Las furias y las penas' simply on

Conversely, it may indicate that the poem is tacitly viewed as no more than a minor addendum to that corpus, a curio whose principal source of interest is afforded by its seemingly bizarre title. Whatever the case, and at the risk of significantly diminishing that interest, this essay has, *inter alia*, sought to break that critical silence.*

account of its being 'muy representativo de Neruda' but dismisses 'Canto a Stalingrado' as 'mala o nula poesía' and describes much of *España en el corazón* as 'irregular, declamatorio, quintanesco a ratos, hasta grosero'. See Emir Rodríguez Monegal, 'Tercera residencia de Pablo Neruda', *Marcha*, 401, 17 October 1947, p. 15.

* Disclosure Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.