

## BRIEF HISTORY OF THE *CANTO GENERAL* MANUSCRIPT

César Soto Gómez

### ONE

How all this did began? I think it was in 1971, at the Catholic University of Chile Writers' Workshop, led by Enrique Lihn. On that occasion, I did the first critical readings of *Canto General*. In the margins of the affordable-priced editions I wrote down some comments. I also read the chronicles of the early historians of the West Indies. I remember Antonio de Herrera and Melchor Jufre del Águila's. I supplemented my work at the workshop with the translation of poems by T.S. Eliot.

After September 1973, when travelling between Santiago and Buenos Aires, I established a relationship with the collector of manuscripts and old books Ludwig Lehmann Mainz, who was living in the Argentine capital. Our philosophy and bibliographic conversations in his library in Quintana Street led me to realise that there was a large map of possibilities in the continual quest for human knowledge. For his library of American manuscripts, Lehman had purchased a chapter of *Canto General: Que despierte el leñador* (Let the woodcutter awaken), the same that, at the end of the 1940s, has been about to be impounded from the Congressman Cesar Godoy Urrutia at the Chilean customs Office after a thorough police search in the late 1940s. Lehmann's collection had, among other treasures, a valuable copy of the first edition of *Don Quixote* (Madrid, 1605), perhaps the only one that has existed in South America (in the first half of the twentieth century, originally, this book belonged to the Chilean bibliophile Matias Errázuriz). Of all the American chronicles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Lehmann only lacked the first edition of *La Argentina*, by the archdeacon Martin del Barco Centenera.

In 1980, I travelled to London. Once there I found myself chatting with one of the greatest bibliophiles in Europe, Dr Robert Pring-Mill, not surprisingly really, thanks to his natural bonhomie. We talked of matters related to Lord Cochrane and his letters, as well as the poetic art of T.S. Eliot and Pablo Neruda, both of whom we admired. Pring-Mill had been a good friend of Neruda's and his efforts were decisive in the awarding of his *honoris causa* doctorate at the University of Oxford.

In these conversations the winds blew in my favour, due to the knowledge I had acquired about the English philosopher Francis Herbert Bradley, decisive in the epistemological formation of T.S. Eliot. It turned out that a teacher of mine in Chile, the philosopher Juan Rivano, had been the only Spanish translator of Bradley's work *Appearance and Reality*, published by *Editorial Universitaria* in Santiago (1961). Pring-Mill suggested that I had a big task ahead of me: finding the lost manuscripts of *Canto General*. As a good disciple of Rivano, with whom I had also discussed Eliot and Neruda at length, I began to compile my notes dealing with my conversations with Pring-Mill.

That is how, with the help of the Dr Pring-Mill (years of inquiries and correspondence forthcoming), we set out to determine the dates and places where, between 1940 and 1950, Neruda finished writing the great American epic chant of the twentieth century. That was no easy matter, because we had to trace the steps of the poet during his political hiding of 1948. That year and under those circumstances, Neruda gave *Canto General* its final shape.

## TWO

During my travels through Europe I read in the American Repertoire magazine (London, 1826), the poem *Silva a la agricultura de la zona tórrida*, fragment of the work *America* by Andrés Bello, ancestor and predecessor of *Canto General*, as said by Neruda himself. In Madrid, I had access to the first editions of Alonso de Ercilla, the poet who inaugurated the American epic. I was also able to lay my hands on a first edition of the second part of *La Araucana*, published in Zaragoza in 1578. That is, my interest was not limited to Neruda, but expanded to his predecessors.

As a member of the Society of Antiquarian Booksellers, I had, in Europe, some missions. In London, I had to search for the lost letters of Lord Cochrane to Bernardo O'Higgins, in the collection of the bibliophile Peter Beal. In Spain I also explored the possibility of seeing some manuscripts of Miguel Hernandez and Federico Garcia Lorca and reach the Huerta de San Vicente in Granada. In Paris, on the other hand, I wanted to meet Raul Ruiz and Waldo Rojas again also visiting Cesar Vallejo (*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*). Likewise I had to find the complete works of Jules Laforgue (because of his relationship with T.S. Eliot).

My trip in Paris suffered an unexpected turn. At the Louvre, I met the Portuguese writer Fatima Murta and I invited her to the theatre to see a play by Jean Paul Sartre. Later, after finding out about my bibliographic cares and my devotion to Fernando Pessoa, she invited me

to Lisbon. I agreed, because I wanted to have a meeting with Alberto Caeiro, Alvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis and Bernardo Soares in the Alfama district or actually, anywhere at all in the city.

In Lisbon, after paying homage at the dos Prazeres cemetery to one of the greatest poets of all time, I visited the antiquarian bookstores of Arthur Tavares de Carvalho and Jose Telles da Sylva. There I inquired about the geographical maps of Rui Faleiro, which Ferdinand Magellan used as a guide to connect the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. I wondered if he could see the galaxies now named after him. Reading the original edition of the chronicle of that journey (by Antonio Pigafetta) and visiting Camões in the Jeronimos Monastery would insufflate an infinite faith in the future of my project.

Fatima Murta, Tavares de Carvalho and Telles da Sylva were excited about my search for American old books. In fact, Fatima's serenity and science paid off and one day, returning from Estoril, after contemplating the colour of the sky in the morning, we found a collection of ancient American works. They were *Le Monde*, by Pierre d'Avity (Paris, 1643), bound with the coat of arms of Louis XIV; and the highly sought *Histórica relación del reyno de Chile*, by Alonso de Ovalle (Rome, 1646); *Historia de Perú*, by Agustín de Zarate (Antwerp, 1555); and *La Argentina*, by Barco Centenera (Lisbon, 1602). My resources allowed me to acquire only the last three.

On my way back to Chile, I called the bibliophile Ludwig Lehmann and told him of my findings. I mentioned that I had in my possession the original copy of *La Argentina* edited by Peter Crasbeck in 1602, the only American item missing in his collection. Immediately he invited me to Buenos Aires to peruse this literary work. After arduous negotiations, in which the difficulty of assigning a price to the historical value of the book became apparent, Lehmann agreed to give me, in exchange, the original copy of *Que despierte el leñador*. It was the first decisive step: the genesis of my collection of manuscripts of *Canto General*.

### **THREE**

The writing of *Canto General* began to take place in September 1947 when Neruda (who by then was a senator from the provinces of Antofagasta and Tarapacá), obtained a special licence from the Chilean Senate to dedicate himself entirely to finishing his book.

Those efforts were temporarily interrupted on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1948, when Senator Neruda in Parliament, delivered his famous speech against President Gabriel Gonzalez Videla, *Yo acuso*

(I accuse). A month later, on February 3<sup>rd</sup>; the senator was stripped of his parliamentary immunity and, after two days, was ordered to be detained. The police launched after him and the poet went underground.

Between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of February, 1948, as newspapers recounted step by step the police hunt (*Neruda wanted throughout the country*), Pablo and Delia del Carril took refuge in the house of Joseph Saitua, on Los Leones Avenue near Plaza de la Alcaldesa. Then they did likewise, setting up house in the apartment of Victor Pey (one of many Spanish refugees who arrived in Chile on board the *Winnipeg*) and his wife, the novelist Marta Jara, where they remained until February 28<sup>th</sup>.

Thereafter, the brother of Marta began to look after them, the historian Alvaro Jara, whose *nom de guerre* was *Ignacio*. First, he took them from Santiago to the country house of Don Julio Vega, in Santa María de Chena, where they stayed until early June; then he returned to the capital, to the apartment of Aida Figueroa and Sergio Insunza in front of the Forest Park. From there, Pablo and Delia often visited the house of Albertina Azócar Soto (who signed bonds to finance his Senate campaign) and her husband, the poet Angel Cruchaga Santa María. In those hectic months, Neruda wrote and finalized the draft of *Antología Popular de la Resistencia* (Popular Anthology of Resistance), *Que despierte el leñador*, *La lámpara en la tierra* (A lamp on earth), and *Chronicle of 1948*.

In June and July 1948, Neruda and Delia took refuge in Valparaíso, protected by Communist Party members, planning an eventual exit from Chile through the Pacific. At the port, the poet writes *El fugitivo* (The fugitive) a large part of *El gran océano* (The great ocean) and the beginning of *Los Conquistadores* (The conquistadors). On July 12<sup>th</sup> he celebrates his birthday. In August, the couple returns to Santiago, to the Perelman family house on Antonio Varas Avenue. During this period Neruda ends *Los conquistadores* and *Los libertadores* (The liberators). And, before moving again, he begins the first section of *La arena Traicionada* (The Sand Betrayed) (*Los verdugos*).

In late September or early October, Pablo and Delia returned to the country house of Don Julio Vega, in Santa María de Chena, where the poet ends *Los verdugos* and the following section of *La arena traicionada* (*Las Oligarquías*). Later he moved to the home of the writer and co-author of *Anillos* (Rings) Tomás Lago, where he finalizes *La arena traicionada*.<sup>1</sup>

---

1.- The life and work of Tomás Lago were stellar help in the task of tracing the footsteps of the fugitive Neruda in 1948. Lago was commissioned by petition of the poet, for the overall coordination of the clandestine edition of *Canto General*. It is no coincidence that in one of the most important chapters of the work, Neruda dedicated a poem to him.

In November, the couple spend at least one month with Francisco Cuevas Mackenna, in Los Vilos, where the poet is dedicated to ending *El gran océano*. Once, Ignacio had the need to get them out abruptly in the middle of the night to return to Santiago, back to the home of Luis Enrique Delano and Lola Falcon, in Ñuñoa. In those days the poet begins to write *Carta a Miguel Otero Silva* (Letter to Miguel Otero Silva) and *Coral de Año Nuevo para la patria en tinieblas* (New Year's chorale for the country in darkness).

In December 1948 we had Neruda writing in San Juan de Pirque, in the home of Julia Mackenna (sister of Francisco, who protected him in Los Vilos). There he wrote the letter *A Rafael Alberti* and the famous clandestine edition of *Coral de Año Nuevo para la patria en tinieblas* in mimeographed form, illustrated by the Venezuelan artist Carlos Bracho, is launched. By Christmas, *Ignacio* moved Delia and the poet back to Santiago, now to the flat of the Insunza-Figueroa family in the Forest Park, where they spend the holidays.

In January and February of 1949, Neruda and Delia returned to the house of Don Julio Vega, where Neruda wrote and ended *Yo soy* (I am), ending the last poem of *Canto General*, as outlined in *Termino aquí* (I end here).

Así termina este libro, aquí dejo  
mi *Canto general* escrito  
en la persecución, cantando bajo  
las alas clandestinas de mi patria.  
Hoy 5 de febrero, en este año  
de 1949, en Chile, en “Godomar  
de Chena”, algunos meses antes  
de los cuarenta y cinco años de mi edad. <sup>2</sup>

Thus ends this book, here I leave  
my *Canto General* written  
under persecution singing beneath  
the clandestine wings of my country.  
Today February 5, in this year  
1949, in Chile, in *Godomar  
de Chena*, several months before  
the forty-fifth year of my life.

After this landmark -the culmination of the book- Neruda and his wife returned to Santiago, seeking asylum in the home of Graciela Matte (at Providencia Avenue corner of Pedro de Valdivia Street). At this point the poet Neruda and Delia part ways and Neruda moved to the south of Chile with Manuel Solimano and Jorge Bellet.

---

<sup>2</sup>- *Canto General* XV, XXVIII. The *Godomar de Chena* of these verses correspond to a version disguised as Santa Maria de Chena, where Don Julio Vega lived.

With the help of the bibliophile José Rodríguez, accompanied by Victor Bianchi, Jorge Bellet and three muleteers, Neruda crosses the mountains on horseback, at the height of Ranco and Maihue lakes. In early March he arrives at San Martín de los Andes, Argentina. On a sheet bearing the letterhead of the Hotel Los Andes, he writes to Delia: *Mi amor: Víctor le explicará todas las angustias. Todo va bien* (My love: Victor will explain all the troubles. All is fine). Neruda signs as Antonio, because the poet's secret identity was Antonio Ruiz, an alleged ornithologist. Thus he puts an end to his clandestine year in Chile.

#### FOUR

Crossing the mountains meant for Neruda to begin weaving the legend of the great epic poet of the Americas. That odyssey was the beginning of the work that the reader has in his hands. The historical and bibliographic itinerary that guided the chapter of searching for the *Canto General* also received contributions from the bibliophiles Juan Guillermo Levine, Exequiel Lira Ibáñez and the poets Adam Méndez Rozas and Bernardo Reyes Herrera. In my research, I sometimes found single pages, other times, whole chapters and other documents that were not included in the work but they belonged to the period of gestation in the underground. So I found the genesis of many poems, photographs, unknown fragments and unpublished texts that were not included in the book, like one written on the back of the chapter *El Fugitivo* which was a lecture by Neruda in 1947 called *Viaje alrededor de mi poesía* (Journey around my poetry). I also found the manuscript of the unpublished book *Louis Aragon*, patriot and poet and also over a dozen letters to Delia del Carril. One is the aforementioned, that Neruda sends after crossing the Andes, from San Martín de los Andes; another, the letter where he communicates the reasons for ending the relationship, which lasted more than twenty years.

Completing this collection took us more than three decades.

The Chapters *América, no invoco tu nombre en vano* (America, I do not invoke your name in vain), *Las flores de Punitaqui* (The flowers of Punitaqui) and *Yo soy* (I am) were part of the family legacy in the library of the writer Javier Echeverría Prieto.

In London the final version of *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* (The heights of Macchu Picchu) which was sent to England by a nephew in law of Laura Reyes, sister of Neruda, was auctioned. The poet had given it to her on one of her birthdays. In Buenos Aires, an old Bibliographic Studio, owned by the family Breitfeld, auctioned *Los ríos del canto* (The Rivers of Song).

*El gran océano* was found in the library of a family close to Neruda, who has lived for many years in Spain. The acquisition of these pages was largely thanks to the invaluable help of the poet Guillermo Escoda Sirvent. Two trips to Madrid in 1989 and 1990 sealed the agreements, because, if they had been auctioned in London, the price would have risen.<sup>3</sup>

In order to find the original copies of *Yo acuso* and *Los Libertadores*, as well as photographs and documents of the 1940-1950 decade, the cooperation and experience of the playwright and novelist Luis Rivano Sandoval and the historian Victor Manuel Avilés were of fundamental.

I must express the same for the Perelman family, that I reached through the help of the bookseller Ricardo Bravo Murua. They were the owners of *Los conquistadores*, the last part that was missing from the collection. The final transfer agreement was signed on July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005, on the 101<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the birth of Neruda. That was how, for the first time all these manuscripts have come together. The whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Due to the multiple drafts that the poet made writing *Canto General*, we know that there are other manuscript versions of two or three chapters. It is the case of a copy of *Los libertadores* found in the collection of the Taylor Institution Library, of the University of Oxford. The versions presented here in facsimile are those published in the first Mexican edition of 1950. When contrasting successive editions, we have discovered that some short fragments were incorporated into the work subsequent to the first editions.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the Spanish poet Santiago Vivanco Sáenz, for his collaboration in the conservation and maintenance of this poetic corpus and to my son Cesar Soto Guzmán for helping me with my work during the difficult years that Chile lived in the XX century.

I have an indelible memory of Pring-Mill and the last verses of the first of the Four Quartets by T.S. Eliot, when he recited them at the exit of Westminster in that distant autumn of another century, “What might have been and what has been point to one end which is always present.”

---

<sup>3</sup> · On those trips, I researched in the Spanish National Library certain files related to the missions of the Society of Jesus in the Guarani populations. I also took advantage to know the only original copy of *De la diferencia entre lo temporal y eterno* (*The difference between the temporal and the eternal*) which is kept full, by Juan Eusebio Nieremberg. The volume is a true typographic miracle that reveals the infinite possibilities that managed the development of the press in South America in the eighteenth century. I could also see a manuscript file of the death sentence of the leader of the rebellion in the Viceroyalty of Peru in 1780, Jose Gabriel Tupac Amaru.