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# Honoring Everyday Alimentation: The Case of Pablo Neruda's Odas elementales and Food

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Pablo Neruda, the Nobelist and Chilean poet, is well known for treating a wide variety of themes in a long and multifaceted literary career. Some of the themes most studied include early vanguard elements, politics, history, nature, and love. However, one frequently read and widely distributed collection, the *Odas elementales*, published in 1958, contains a number of formally simple odes to everyday objects, as well as different people, concepts and geographical locations. Among the objects treated in the *Odas elementales* is food, and a number of different food items (along with beverages, to a lesser extent). The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which Neruda poeticizes and celebrates different foodstuffs and to connect these ways to the larger themes present in his general corpus of work. It will be shown that these odes, which ennoble and glorify everyday food and drink items, are treated as animate, living entities, and are at times frequently linked to a political or social cause as well.

The first food item to be examined in this alphabetically-organized collection is the artichoke, in “Oda a la alcachofa” (1985: 17-19). The poem, structured like all other odes in this collection as a deceptively long poem with unusually brief and non-rhyming lines, begins with a description of the artichoke as not only human but also militant and soldier-like. It stands out as such among its fellow vegetable compatriots:

La alcachofa  
de tierno corazón  
se vistió de guerrero,  
erecta, construyó  
una pequeña cúpula,  
se mantuvo  
impermeable  
bajo  
sus escamas,  
a su lado  
los vegetales locos  
se encresparon. . .

Neruda continues the ode by highlighting the artichoke's self-generated task of military service, and its relationship to real human beings surrounding it:

. . . y la dulce  
alcachofa  
allí en el huerto,  
vestida de guerrero,  
bruñida  
como una granada,  
orgullosa,  
y un día  
una con otra  
en grandes cestos  
de mimbre, caminó  
por el mercado  
a realizar su sueño:  
la milicia.  
En hileras  
nunca fue tan marcial  
como en la feria,  
los hombres  
entre las legumbres  
con sus camisas blancas  
eran  
mariscales  
de las alcachofas. . .

The ode is not without its ironic turning point, however, any less than it is without its sense of humor. A

Woman, María (the Spanish female first name par excellence, as Neruda uses it), comes by and decides to purchase it. Yet, the artichoke does not end its “life” in vain; as María cooks the artichoke, the element of “we” is present in Neruda’s choice of words to describe man’s benefit from eating the vegetable.

Así termina  
en paz  
esta carrera  
del vegetal armado  
que se llama alcachofa,  
luego  
escama por escama  
desvestimos  
la delicia  
y comemos  
la pacífica pasta  
de su corazón verde.

As will be seen elsewhere, the simple food item serves the needs of the masses—with whom Neruda identifies by using the “nosotros” form of the verb for eating, “comemos” —and the poem ends on a calm and happy note.

“Oda al caldillo de congrio” (37-38) glorifies a soup made principally with the conger eel, a seafood item native to the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Chile. This rugged and lively geographical setting—a locus which infuses so much of Neruda’s work throughout decades of literary production—is visible in the poem, as is the glorification of everyday alimentation. With this process of poetic glorification, it becomes clear to the reader that Neruda grants all of these items a noble and special status, paradoxically removing them from the plane of everyday existence yet placing them squarely in the middle of such an existence at the same time.

En el mar  
tormentoso  
de Chile  
vive el rosado congrio,  
gigante anguila  
de nevada carne.  
Y en las ollas  
chilenas,  
en la costa,  
nació el caldillo  
grávido y succulento,  
provechoso.

Of note is the animate nature of the eel, along with the delightful addition of accompanying food items and spices to complete the stew:

Ahora  
recoges  
ajos,  
acaricia primero  
ese marfil  
precioso,  
huele  
su fragancia iracunda,  
entonces  
deja el ajo picado  
caer con la cebolla  
y el tomate  
hasta que la cebolla  
tenga color de oro.

In this instance, Neruda utilizes the pronoun “tú”, the second-person pronoun for familiar address, in advising the reader on how to properly prepare this dish. The “odas” under study, as this example shows, take on a personal and direct note for the public with whom Neruda engages, yet without condescension or negativity.



Neruda returns to his native land at the end of the poem, never neglecting the relationship between nature and the masses:

Ya sólo es necesario  
dejar en el manjar  
caer la crema  
como una rosa espesa,  
y al fuego  
lentamente  
entregar el tesoro  
hasta que en el caldillo  
se calienten  
las esencias de Chile,  
y a la mesa  
lleguen recién casados  
los sabores  
del mar y de la tierra  
para que en ese plato  
tú conozcas el cielo.

All of Chile is conjoined with the eel dish, along with the generalized “tú” whom Neruda identifies as his literary partner in this cooking and eating session. A displacement occurs as well, as the poem’s focus shifts from the earthly sphere on which the poem’s foundation rests to the heavens, as evidenced in the last line. Earth (“tierra”), water (“mar”, the sea), and wind/skies/heavens (“cielo”) are brought into this cosmic poem, along with the implied fire necessary to cook the food. In this manner, the four classical elements of space are made present; the simple has become universal.

“Oda a la cebolla” (41-43) focuses more on the title’s object, the onion, than on culinary preparation, although that too is visible towards the end of the poem as Neruda again brings in the element of an unnamed cook. The poem begins with the characterization of the onion as an object of beauty, and specifically as one of female beauty, ready to become the nourishment of the poor.

Cebolla,  
luminosa redoma,  
pétalo a pétalo  
se formó tu hermosura,  
escamas de cristal te acrecentaron  
y en el secreto de la tierra oscura  
se redondeó tu vientre de rocío.

[ . . . ] y nacieron  
tus hojas como espadas en el huerto,  
la tierra acumuló su poderío  
mostrando tu desnuda transparencia...

Neruda notes how this simple vegetable formed in the earth (“Bajo la tierra / fue el milagro”), as the onion quite literally becomes a symbol of autochthonous creation. In other collections of poetry, Neruda often characterizes man as autochthonous, having been formed from earth itself, in order to provide a sense of solidarity between mankind and nature. (The collection *Canto general* does this frequently, especially in its beginning sections detailing the advent of Native Latin American cultures.) On this occasion, it is the humble onion which partakes in a cosmic union with the world. Luis Enrique Delano’s summary of the *Odas elementales* is particularly useful in understanding not only this poem but also the others accompanying it. The *Odas* are poems

dedicados a los temas más variados, a las concepciones más diversas, a los objetos más encontrados, al aire y a la cebolla, a una ciudad y al caldillo de congrio, a un poeta y al musgo de una roca. Unen a estas odas la simplificación de los temas tratados, la claridad, la ternura por el hombre y por las cosas, y un metro corto, con la renuncia al endecasílabo, que ha sido siempre el verso preferido de Neruda. Allí está todo cuanto un hombre pudiera imaginar, el cielo como la tierra y los elementos del mundo que se quieran. (86)

Later, it is a union with people in which the onion will share. In addition to metaphorizing the onion as a

“redonda rosa de agua” to be placed on “la mesa / de las pobres gentes”, Neruda again adds other references to the preparatory process which common people undertake in order to find nourishment. In this process, the onion is lovingly placed alongside the tomato, and the two items are granted a certain kinship found only in a salad as made by man:

También recordaré cómo fecunda  
tu influencia el amor de la ensalada,  
y parece que el cielo contribuye  
dándote fina forma de granizo  
a celebrar tu claridad picada  
sobre los hemisferios de un tomate.

A brief dialectic of “yo” (the pronoun “I”) and “tú” is set up, in which Neruda’s poetic voice plays the former and the onion itself becomes the second-person interlocutor. This vegetable addressee is always “al alcance / de las manos del pueblo”—within the grasp of everyone—and satisfies the hunger of the “jornalero en el duro camino”. It is at once the “Estrella de los pobres” and the “semilla del astro”, a “globo celeste” and “copa de platino”—images of both earthly and celestial richness alongside people who are not rich. A simple yet animate entity such as an onion is partly responsible for feeding an entire population.

“Oda al pan” (151-154) glorifies bread, perhaps the most common foodstuff in literature, religious expressions and everyday sayings. Like the preceding odes, this one also conjoins natural growth and productive human activity as seen through the food-making process, and treats bread as a living organism which can sustain large number of people. To this end, the poem serves as another clarification of Neruda’s social and political aims, and the poem concludes on an implicitly Marxist tone. At first, however, the reader simply notes the bread as the poet’s living conversant:

[. . .] y de pronto,  
la ola  
de la vida,  
la conjunción del germen  
y del fuego,  
creces, creces  
de pronto  
como  
cintura, boca, senos,  
colinas de la tierra,  
vidas,  
sube el calor, te inunda  
la plenitud, el viento  
de la fecundidad,  
y entonces  
se inmoviliza tu color de oro. . .

Notable are such elements as the bread’s aforementioned “cintura, boca, senos”, along with its “pequeños vientres”, as bread is likened to a pregnant woman.

The “we” mentioned earlier becomes salient once again, as Neruda acts as the spokesperson for all people in the acts of cooking and growth:

del mar y de la tierra  
haremos pan,  
plantaremos de trigo  
la tierra y los planetas,  
el pan de cada boca,  
de cada hombre,  
en cada día,  
llegará porque fuimos  
a sembrarlo  
y a hacerlo,  
no para un hombre sino  
para todos,  
el pan, el pan



para todos los pueblos  
y con él lo que tiene  
forma y sabor de pan  
repartiremos. . .

The fight for freedom is no less evident than food preparation, and a more overtly militant tone is observable:

lucharemos por ti con otros hombres,  
con todos los hambrientos,  
por todos los ríos y el aire  
iremos a buscarte,  
toda la tierra la repartiremos  
para que tú germines,  
y con nosotros  
avanzará la tierra:  
el agua, el fuego, el hombre  
lucharán con nosotros.

The Marxist overtones mentioned above can be found in verses shortly thereafter, as Neruda declares his political philosophy and the role which bread plays in it.

Todos los seres  
tendrán derecho  
a la tierra y la vida,  
y así será el pan de mañana,  
el pan de cada boca,  
sagrado,  
consagrado,  
porque será el producto  
de la más larga y dura  
lucha humana.

Thus “lucha humana”, the struggle for freedom and equality (at least as how Neruda very generally defines it), can only be achieved when there is an even distribution of wealth and necessary goods, including food. It is appropriate, therefore, that such a staple as bread should be the item which is lauded in an ode that also contains an exhortation to continue the Nerudian political cause. Again Delano’s commentary offers the reader insight into Neruda’s wider view of the world:

El mensaje de Pablo Neruda fue caudaloso y su riqueza se ha extendido sobre la superficie de la tierra, llevando a cada ser humano algo de lo que éste necesitaba: pudo ser la amistad, la solidaridad, el sentido del amor, la hermosura y el papel de la naturaleza, la lucha por los bienes que el hombre más aprecia: la libertad y el pan. Puede ser muchas otras cosas, pues la poesía nerudiana es rica y en su reparto nadie se quedará con las manos vacías. (96)

“Oda al tomate” (198-201) is perhaps the poem with the strongest effect on the reader in terms of making one want to eat, as this time it is a tomato whose brilliant appearance and delectable insides Neruda chooses to exemplify. Though less overtly political in tone, this poem is perhaps the most sensorial of all examined so far, in its treatment of its object.

En diciembre  
se desata  
el tomate,  
invade  
las cocinas,  
entra por los almuerzos,  
se sienta  
reposado  
en los aparadores,  
entre los vasos,  
las mantequilleras,

los saleros azules.

This tomato-personage, which gleefully enters the lives and living spaces of nameless people, is, however, simultaneously the “victim” of people who need to figuratively “kill” it in order to eat. The passage below suggests images which do not make it hard for the reader to feel pleasantly hungry while reading the making of a salad:

Debemos, por desgracia,  
asesinarlo:  
se hunde  
el cuchillo  
en su pulpa viviente,  
en una roja  
víscera,  
un sol  
fresco,  
profundo,  
inagotable,  
llena las ensaladas  
de Chile. . .

Neruda intentionally uses once more the pronoun “we” (as seen in the verb, “Debemos”) to indicate the common route which he shares with anyone else who needs to prepare food. The poem ends by showing the tomato’s observers its fullness and wholesomeness (“sus circunvoluciones” and “la abundancia / sin hueso”), and it gives them a sensorial gift: “el regalo / de su color fogoso / y la totalidad de su frescura”.

Finally, it will be an ode to a common beverage which will close this study, complementing the odes to food. “Oda al vino” (223-225) celebrates the wine which not so much nourishes mankind as it makes people interact socially and amicably, and engage in friendly relations. This facilitator of pleasant times comes in many forms, both light and dark in color (“color de día” and “color de noche”), and, like the other items examined previously, rooted in nature (“estrellado hijo / de la tierra”). Luxurious and luminescent images abound, as seen in the similes “como una espada de oro” and “como un desordenado terciopelo”. However, this enjoyable libation cannot be measured; Neruda directly addresses it and proclaims, “nunca has cabido en una copa, / en un canto, en un hombre”. Appropriately, the drink accompanies people throughout their everyday existence, and adds good feeling when people come into contact with negative emotions:

A veces  
te nutres de recuerdos  
mortales,  
en tu ola  
vamos de tumba en tumba,  
picapedrero de sepulcro helado,  
y lloramos  
lágrimas transitorias,  
pero  
tu hermoso  
traje de primavera  
es diferente...  
...  
El vino  
mueve la primavera,  
crece como una planta de alegría,  
caen muros,  
peñascos,  
se cierran los abismos,  
nace el canto.

Wine will always be by man’s side, and Neruda emphasizes this near-sacred partnership in pleasant terms.

At the same time, wine is granted bodily characteristics, and again it is the characteristics of the female body which Neruda ascribes to the drink. The familiar association of femininity with water and curved shapes is evident, as is a certain sensuality which underscores Neruda’s attraction—and people’s attraction in general—to this eternal beverage.



Amor mío, de pronto  
tu cadera  
es la curva colmada  
de la copa,  
tu pecho es el racimo,  
la luz del alcohol tu cabellera,  
las uvas tus pezones,  
tu ombligo sello puro  
estampado en tu vientre de vasija,  
y tu amor la cascada  
de vino inextinguible,  
la claridad que cae en mis sentidos,  
el esplendor terrestre de la vida.

The conclusion reminds the reader of happy times as wine makes people recall them, at the same time that it includes a reference to the labor of both man and nature to produce the wine.

Que lo beban,  
que recuerden en cada  
gota de oro  
o copa de topacio  
o cuchara de púrpura  
que trabajó el otoño  
hasta llenar de vino las vasijas  
y aprenda el hombre oscuro,  
en el ceremonial de su negocio,  
a recordar la tierra y sus deberes,  
a propagar el cántico del fruto.

In the end, wine nourishes people in a way complementary to food: though wine may not fill people's stomachs and provide basic nutrition, it does provide mankind with a spiritual and social nourishment which helps it to move forward and enjoy life while it is still possible to do so. In this manner, as this is the last poem of the *Odas elementales*, Neruda gleefully concludes his work with an implicit echo of the familiar "carpe diem" and "tempus fugit" topoi which have been literary staples for millennia—and, just as implicitly, with a inversion of the saying "in vino, veritas" to "in vino, felicitas", without resorting to simplistic impulses as personified by Bacchus.

In conclusion, all of the odes maintain a simplicity of both form and function, for their objects are fittingly simple yet highly important for humankind. For Neruda, food is what keeps his *pueblo*, the people of both Chile and the wider world, alive and happy. As a result, food is accorded a poetic status equal to the other elements in his poetry mentioned above; it is no less important than topics such as nature itself or wider political and social movements. Perhaps this is what can be best gleaned from this and future studies of food in Neruda's poetry, and in literature in general: without food, there would not be anyone to advocate social concerns, or to contemplate the natural environment, or to remember the past, or to even write.

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