NERUDA’S CANTO GENERAL

With the publication of Canto General, Neruda established himself as one of the world’s leading poets. For many literary critics, this is one of Neruda’s greatest works and one of the greatest works of poetry ever published in Latin America. A complete departure from the introspection that characterized his first self-referential poems, Canto General stands out for its encyclopedic scope that, creatively combining literature and history, manages to reconstruct and evoke the vicissitudes of Latin Americans by portraying the achievement of their collective destiny of liberation and plenitude.

Originally, Canto General had been conceived as a national “song”, dedicated to the poetic exploration of episodes in Chilean history. Nevertheless, as Neruda himself came to recognize, his travels throughout the Americas radically modified his vision.

“I came to understand that we walked on the same hereditary earth, that we had something to do with those great efforts of the Latin American community, that we couldn’t ignore it, that our ignorance or silence was not just a crime, but the continuation of a defeat.” In particular, his visit to Macchu Picchu was an extraordinary inspiration: “There is where my idea for a general song of the Americas began to germinate. Before then, I had persisted in my idea of a general song of Chile, in the form of a chronicle. That visit changed my perspective. Now I was seeing all of America from the heights of Macchu Picchu.” On September 15, 1945, two years after his visit to the Inca citadel, Neruda finished writing “Heights of Macchu Picchu”, one of the most famed poems of the Canto General.

Canto General was published in Mexico City in 1950 by the publishers Océano and Comité Auspiciador. Both entities included in this first edition illustrations by David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera. At almost the same time, in Chile “a clandestine edition, with fictitious information about the supposed publisher (Canto general, Juárez Printers, 75 Reforma Avenue, Mexico City) mocked the censorship and momentary misfortunes of the times” (Quezada, Jaime, “Neruda y su Canto general. Algunas referencias elementales,” Alforja: Revista de Poesía (23), 2004). Its publication, under the direction of the Chilean Communist Party, was undertaken by a team composed of, among others, the printer Américo Zorrilla and the artist José Venturelli, who not only illustrated the edition with his drawings, but also the layout and formatting of the book.

Printing the book was a complicated and laborious endeavor that required innumerable precautions in order to avoid detection by the police of the government of González Videla, the authoritarian president who had
outlawed the Communist Party in Chile. Every stage of the process was given to a different operative and carried out in a different place. The decision was made to use everyday paper, available in any commercial establishment, in order not to leave a trail by placing a special order to a stationer. In addition, they used discarded linotype matrices that the intelligence apparatus of the state would be unable to trace. The result was 5,000 copies of a 468 page book, whose format was quite audacious for an illegal publication: 27 x 19 centimeters (11 x 8 inches).

**Source:** Memoria Chilena, National Library of Chile, 2013. Available online at [http://www.memoriachilena.cl/602/w3-article-92668.html](http://www.memoriachilena.cl/602/w3-article-92668.html). English translation by David Spener.