

Ode to Typography

Pablo Neruda

Letters, long, severe,
vertical,
made
of pure
line,
erect
like a ship's
mast
in the middle
of the page
filled
with confusion and turbulence;
algebraic
Bodoni,
complete
letters,
lean
as greyhounds,
subject
to the white rectangle
of Geometry;
Elzevirian
vowels
cast
in the minute steel
of the printshop by the water,
in Flanders, in the North
of the canals,
ciphers
of the anchor;
Aldine characters,
firm as
the marine
stature

of Venice,
in whose mother waters,
like a leaning
sail,
navigates the cursive
curving the alphabet:
the air
of the oceanic
discovers
bent down
forever the profile of writing.

From
medieval hands
to your eyes advanced
this
N,
this double
8,
this
J,
this
R
of regal and rain.
There
they were shaped
like
teeth, nails,
metallic hammers
of language.
They beat each letter,
erected it,
a small black statue
on the whiteness,

a petal
or a starry foot
of thought taking the form
of a swollen river,
rushing to a sea of people
with all
the alphabet
illuminating
the outlet.
The hearts, the eyes
of men
became filled with letters,
messages,
words,
and the passing or permanent
wind
raised mad
or sacred
books.
Beneath
the newly written pyramids
the letter
was alive,
the alphabet burning,
the vowels,
the consonants like
curved flowers.
The paper's
eyes, which looked
at men
seeking
their gifts,
their history, their loves;
extending
the accumulated
treasure;
spreading suddenly
the slowness of wisdom
over the printer's word
like a deck of cards;
all
the secret
humus
of the ages,
song, memories,
revolt,

blind parable,
suddenly
were
fecundity,
granary,
letters,
letters
that travelled
and kindled,
letters
that sailed
and conquered,
letters
that awakened
and climbed,
letters
that liberated,
letters
dove-shaped
that flew,
letters
scarlet in the snow;
punctuation,
roads,
buildings
of letters,
and Villon and Berceo,
troubadours
of memory
faintly
written on leather
as on battle
drum,
arrived
at the spacious nave
of books,
at the sailing
typography.

Yet
the letter
was not beauty alone,
but life,
peace for the soldier;
it went down to the solitudes
of the mine,

and the miner
read
the hard and
clandestine leaflet,
hid it in the folds
of the secret
heart
and above,
on earth,
he was different
and different
was his word.
The letter
was the mother
of the new banners;
the letters
begot
the terrestrial
stars
and the song, the ardent hymn
that unites
peoples;
from
one
letter
added
to another
letter
and another,
from people to people went bearing
its sonorous authority,
and welling in the throats of men
it imposed the clarity of the song.

But,
typography,
let me
celebrate you
in the purity
of your
pure profiles,
in the retort
of the letter
O,
in the fresh
flower vase

of the
Greek
Y,
in the
Q
of Quevedo,
(how can my poetry
pass
before that letter
and not feel the ancient shudder
of the dying sage?),
in the lily
multiplied
of the
V
of victory,
in the
E
echeloned
to climb to heaven,
in the
Z
with its thunderbolt face,
in the orange shaped
P.

Love,
I love
the letters
of your hair,
the
U
of your glance,
the
S
of your figure.
In the leaves
of the young springtime
sparkles the diamantine
alphabet;
emeralds
write your name
with the fresh initials of dew.
My love,
your hair
profound

as jungle or dictionary
covers me
with its totality
of red
language.
In everything,
in the wake
of the worm,
one reads,
in the rose, one reads,
the roots
are filled with letters
twisted
by the dampness of the forest
and in the heavens
of the Black Isle, in the night,
I read,
read
in
the cold firmament
of the coast,
intense
diaphanous with beauty
unfurled,
with capital
and lower case stars
and exclamations
of frozen diamond;
I read, read
in the night of austral
Chile, lost
in the celestial solitudes
of heaven,
as in a book
I read
all
the adventures
and in the grass
I read,
read
the green, the sandy
typography
of the rustic earth,
I read
the ships, the faces
and the hands,

I read
your heart
where
live
entwined
the provincial
initial
of your name
and
the
reef
of my surnames.
I read
your forehead,
I read
your hair
and in the jasmine
the hidden
letters
elevate
the unceasing
springtime
until I decipher
the buried
punctuation
the poppy
and the scarlet
letter
of summer:
they are
the exact flowers of my song.
But,
when
writing
unfolds
its roses,
and the letter
its essential
gardening,
when you read
the old and the new
words, the truths
and the explorations,
I beg
a thought
for the one who orders

and raises them,
for the one who sets
type,
for the linotypist
and his lamp
like a pilot
over
the waves of language
ordering
winds and foam,
shadow and stars
in the book:
man
and steel
once more united
against the nocturnal wing
of mystery,
sailing,
perforating
composing.
Typography,
I am
only a poet
and you are
the flowery
play of reason,
the movement
of the chess bishops
of intelligence.
You rest
neither night
nor winter,
you circulate
in the veins
of our
anatomy
and if you sleep,
flying
during

some night or strike
or fatigue or break
of linotype,
you go down anew to the book
or newspaper
like a cloud
of birds to their nest.
You return
to the system,
to the unappealable
order
of intelligence.
Letters,
continue to fall
like precise rain
along my way.
Oh, letters of all
that lives
and dies,
letters of light, of moon,
of silence,
of water,
I love you,
and in you
I gather
not only thought
and combat,
but your dress,
senses,
and sounds:
A
of glorious avena,
T
of trigo and tower,
and
M
like your name
of manzana.

Pablo Neruda, a native of Chile, can fairly be called one of the most influential living men of letters. His poem is translated from the Spanish by Carlos Lozano and appeared in the *Chicago Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1964). It is reprinted here with kind permission of the publishers.