

A Little Beyond the Stones: Moving from Nature to Creation through Pablo Neruda

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Norman Wirzba's *From Nature to Creation* illustrates the problem of idolatry in distorting our ability to rightly perceive Creation. By engaging a close-reading of Pablo Neruda's poem, "Aquí Vivimos," this paper outlines the theological context of Wirzba's project and then proposes Neruda's text as a guide in reorienting our perception. The disciplined and gracious gaze that shines through Neruda's text facilitates the reader's perception and proclamation of Creation as gift.

A great longing is upon us: to live again to a world made of gifts.

"The Gift of Strawberries," Robin Wall Kimmerer

*From bristly foliage
you fell
complete, polished wood, gleaming mahogany,
as perfect
as a violin newly
born of the treetops,
that falling
offers its sealed-in gifts,
the hidden sweetness
that grew in secret
amid birds and leaves,
a model of form,
kin to wood and flour,
an oval instrument
that holds within it
intact delight, an edible rose.*

"Ode To a Chestnut on the Ground," Pablo Neruda

In the first lines of his “Ode To a Chestnut on the Ground,” Pablo Neruda narrates the quotidian epic of a single fallen chestnut. Presumably, Neruda has picked one chestnut of a pile, finding a perfect solitary sphere amid a wash of leaves and roots and dirt. Like chestnuts, nature poems in the canon are a dime a dozen. Pick any facet of the natural world and one may find a host of reflections on its beauty. Yet, Neruda’s ode celebrates more than mere beauty. To Neruda, the single chestnut is a prize, an art form, a secret gift: “That falling / offers its sealed-in gifts, / the hidden sweetness / that grew in secret” (*Selected Odes* 51). Indeed, throughout his vast corpus, Neruda attends to the natural world with persistent awe, crafting texts that marvel at the gift of Creation.

In *From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Loving and Understanding our World*, Norman Wirzba outlines the need for the very kind of perception Neruda’s poetry offers. Wirzba calls for a renewed perception of Creation from within the Christian imagination. His argument finds its place within a long conversation among many like-minded scholars, generally united by their concern with the post-modern relationship between humans and the natural world. Scholars such as Wendell Berry, Rowan Williams, Bruce Foltz, and James K. A. Smith—to name a few—have each published variously on ecological issues in philosophy and theology. Their writings often explore manifestations of a distorted Christian perception of the natural world, explaining what is broken and lost therein. And, indeed, Wirzba also introduces his text from within a modern landscape of loss. From Indonesia to California, from the troposphere to the stratosphere, from the oceans to the poles, we find wreckage. The variety of squandered natural spaces is too vast and overwhelming to relay, and there is little point in its enumeration here. Wendell Berry, in his essay, “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” concisely sums up modern environmental degradation as “the military-industrial conspiracy to murder Creation” (306). In *From Nature to Creation*, Wirzba links the degradation of the natural world to one of humankind’s timeless sins: idolatry. Idolatry,

Wirzba argues, distorts our interaction with the good gifts of this material world. The idolatry that continually destroys the gift is pervasive and inherent. Pursuing a right relationship with the material world comes, instead, from Christ-filled perception and participation. Illuminating these elements within a renewed Christian imagination for Creation drives the remainder of Wirzba’s project. This paper outlines the theological context of Wirzba’s project and offers practical tools for actualizing Wirzba’s Christian imagination through a close-reading of Pablo Neruda’s poetry.

In *From Nature to Creation*, Wirzba delineates the damage of idolatry into two forms. Either humans project themselves onto the natural world and then worship their own reflection, or they worship the natural world as a personal stockpile destined for consumption. Wirzba argues that even modern theological practice is not immune to the first form of idolatry, for “rather than being inspired and informed by the natural or divine reason at work in the world, it [modern theological practice] becomes the manifestation of a self expressing itself in the world” (47). Obviously, Wirzba is not the first to voice these concerns.¹ For, in fashioning ourselves as the ultimate viewer and subject, all we are able to perceive is our own broken reflection in the world around us.

The second form of idolatrous distortion is a consumeristic gaze. According to Wirzba, we idolize things when we assume that they have the power to give us life. This misplaced hope in the material “prompts us to violate the integrity of others because we now make them serve personal insecurities and idolatrous fantasies” (49). Idolizing our own consumption places expectations on the material world that it can never satisfy. As we deplete aquifers and decimate mountaintops to satisfy our persistent cravings, the truth crawls into the spotlight: consumption will never satisfy our deepest longings.

In light of the bleak reality of destructive idolatry, many people, including Christians, have chosen to ignore the material world altogether. This is not a surprising response. Overwhelmed by the vast array of damage and decay in the natural world, one can

¹ St. Augustine, for example, writes extensively on idolatry in his *de Doctrina Christiana*. Wirzba’s definition of idolatry echoes Ludwig Feuerbach’s discussion of “anthropotheism” in the introduction of *The Essence of Christianity* and Karl Barth’s *Dogmatics in Outline*.

easily become disillusioned to the hopelessness of individual action². And yet, ignoring the material world simply because our interaction with it is flawed, is a tragedy. To ignore the natural world is to miss a revelation of God's very nature. To disregard the material world is to waste the gift.

A Biblical model for pursuing right relationship with Creation by perceiving it as a gift can be found in the Old Testament narrative. In Deuteronomy 8:10, Moses instructs the Israelites to remember God's gift in the day-to-day. He tells them, "When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you" (*New International Version*, Deuteronomy 8:10). In this case, the daily necessity of eating parallels the daily necessity of remembering God's gift. Gift-giving operates as a recurrent motif throughout Israel's entire narrative. Perhaps the most salient example within the narrative of Israel is the very land itself that God promises. In "The Gift of Good Land," Berry explains that the Divine gift of the "promised land" to a fallen people comes with "certain rigorous conditions" (297). These conditions (for all of their complexity in the drier books of the Old Testament) sustain a relationship of charity. And "charity by its nature cannot be selective," as Berry explains ("The Gift of Good Land" 298). Berry simply means that it is contradictory to love one part of Creation and not the other part on which the first part depends. Thus, the relationship between the Divine God and fallen people, on whom he still bestows lavish gifts, contains a call to love all of Creation.

In loving all of Creation, it is important to recognize that the material gift holds deep implications for spiritual life on Earth. Through Creation, God imparts a glimpse of himself to us. In his essay "Creation, Creativity, and Creatureliness: The Wisdom of Finite Existence," Rowan Williams posits that Creation itself is a constant expression of God's nature. Williams writes,

Creation as the carrier of wisdom, Creation as 'participant' in some sense in the divine life,

makes sense when we understand our God as a God who makes himself other, who is in a relation of loving difference. . . Creation is a free outpouring of what God is; but that free outpouring makes sense because God simply is the Father of the Son, the breather of the Spirit from all eternity. (27)

If God gives us a chance to see Himself within Creation, we are obviously called to look. More importantly, we are called to examine Creation more deeply than in vague, abstract reverence. Our perception must be nothing less than painstaking, meticulous, and loving.

God's willingness to show himself within Creation is not only a tangible gift and a reflection of himself, but a demonstration of hospitality. Athanasius writes that "He had not hidden himself from the sight of men nor given the knowledge of himself in one way only; but rather He had unfolded it in many forms and in many ways" (39). God makes himself accessible to us through nature, and as nature reaches out to us it illuminates another example of his care.

In a wider sense, understanding Creation as a gift of revelation allows us to perceive Creation as an act of gratuitous love. As Wirzba articulates, "the Creation is an incarnation of God's love" (75). Church father Maximus the Confessor reflects deeply on the gratuitous nature of God's gift in his *Four Hundred Texts on Love*. He writes: "God, full beyond all fullness, brought creatures into being not because he had need of anything, but so that they might participate in Him in proportion to their capacity and that he himself might rejoice in his works, through seeing them joyful and ever filled to overflowing with his inexhaustible gifts" (90). Thus, perceiving Creation as a gift allows us to see more of God's nature—namely, his hospitality and love.

Wirzba moves from his articulation of the problem of idolatry and the potentialities of our loving and careful perception of Creation, to his vision for the Christian calling to learn to receive

² According to two Gallup polls conducted earlier this year, United States citizens' concern over global climate change is the highest it has been in thirty years, and citizens' concerns over water pollution is as high as it has been since 2001. ("Water Pollution Worries"; "Global Warming Concern"). And yet, according to a twenty-year survey completed in 2011, American citizens think less of individual action to effect significant change than they did in 1990 ("The Environment").

the gift. We can only receive the gift if we learn to perceive rightly and defy the idolatrous gaze. We must see the elements of the natural world “in their particularity, their wholeness, and their (often hidden) potential” (Wirzba 4). This kind of perception is challenging at present, for the trajectory of globalization and technological innovation is one of increasing detachment from place (Hervieu-Léger 103). And yet, this kind of perception is the fundamental task of the Christian, according to Wirzba. He coins the term “iconic modality of perception” to describe the means of perceiving that allows Christians to receive the gift.

The iconic modality of perception is defined as a way of seeing that “does not reflect the see-er, but the infinite” (Wirzba 71). In this way, “all perception is an invitation to depth, a call to look with greater patience, attentiveness, and love. . . love is the crucial and most authentic movement of seeing” (Wirzba 71). Seeing with love is to perceive with the kind of humility that Paul describes so iconically in his first letter to the church in Corinth. Seeing with love “does not dishonor others, is not self-seeking . . . it always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (*New International Version*, 1 Corinthians 13:5-7). This method of perception is so revolutionary, and so necessary, because it negates the perceiver’s claim to power. The recipient of the gift cannot claim to own anything. Rather, the recipient of the gift must assume the humble posture that facilitates seeing with love.

This perception is a far cry from our natural idolatrous tendency. It takes discipline. It takes care. It is in pursuit of this disciplined perception that we may look to Neruda’s corpus, and in doing so will find a model for one form of embodied, meticulous, and loving perception.

In an essay published during the second half of his career entitled “Childhood and Poetry,” Neruda tells a story from his youth in Temuco, Chile. While looking around in his backyard, Neruda finds a hole in the fence behind his house. Spurred by the ferocity of a child’s investigative zeal, Neruda looks through the hole and perceives “a landscape . . . uncared for and wild” (*Neruda and Vallejo* 12). Then, suddenly, a tiny hand, from an unknown boy of the same age, pops through the hole in the fence. The

hand leaves a miniature sheep figurine, crafted by leftover sheep wool. Eager to return the goodwill, Neruda runs into his house to retrieve his own offering: “a pinecone, opened, full of odor and resin, which I adored,” (*Neruda and Vallejo* 12). Neruda remarks that he never saw the young boy again, but he accredits this brief moment to the origins of his poetry and his lifelong value of nature and humanity. His journey begins with a careful and loving search of his backyard, and it concludes with a gift. On this note, Neruda concludes his story: “Maybe this small and mysterious exchange of gifts remained inside me also, deep and indestructible, giving my poetry light” (*Neruda and Vallejo* 13).

As in his story, Neruda’s work unfolds in seeing and receiving the gift. His lifelong attention to the natural world becomes the gift that he offers in return. Neruda’s corpus offers a model for how one might learn to attend to the gift of Creation amid the danger of an idolatrous gaze. Many scholars have studied Neruda’s role as nature poet, although it is by no means the most popular lens through which to analyze his work. The term “nature poet” often includes an attention to both nature and matter, for Neruda is an observer of all material, some natural, and some man-made. In this sense, it is helpful to broaden our definition of “nature,” as Manuel Durán and Margery Safir do in *Earth Tones: The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*:

The Nature poet is essentially an observer of his surroundings . . . His musings, his stream of consciousness, his observations are inspired and directed by what he sees in the world outside of his own psyche; and, at the same time this inner world of his own being is often defined in terms of the external world of Nature and matter. (33)

Indeed, Neruda’s attention to the seemingly insignificant objects all around him range from chestnuts to neckties to tunafish. Critic Luis Monguió grounds much of his work on Neruda in the observation of this deeply material instinct (13). Monguió asserts that Neruda’s instinctive and sensory perception of the material world is one of “the soul in its body, heaven on this earth” (Monguió 23).

While his attention to the material world is

pervasive throughout his corpus, Neruda is probably best known as a political poet, steeped in the history and identity of his home country, Chile. As such, Neruda's work is not only grounded in the material, but also operates on a larger scale of abstractions: political themes that intertwine with personal, national, and hemispheric identity in a rapidly changing world. In George Handley's widely read criticism, *New World Poetic: Nature and the Adamic Imagination of Whitman, Neruda, and Walcott*, he emphasizes the relationship between the micro-level natural/material and macro-level political/historical within Neruda's corpus, following Neruda's interaction with environment to point toward Neruda's re-imagining of Adamic imagination. Handley uses the phrase "Adamic imagination" as an expression of the impulse to name the new world of the Americas. Integrating post-colonial criticism and ecocriticism, Handley's text seeks to reframe the "New World" concept that is often written off in post-colonial discourse. According to Handley, in Neruda's poetry, attention to the local particularities of space couples with a "poetic of oblivion" (essentially, the imagination of nature due to our incomplete memory of its history and due to nature's perpetual change) to offer a new vision for the relationship of human beings to one another and to their environments (Handley 41).

From within the rich commentary on Neruda as a nature poet, we may now turn to a tiny poem in Neruda's *Extravagaria* (1958) collection, entitled "Aquí Vivimos," which is translated by Alastair Reid as "This is Where We Live." Investigating this text offers a small glimpse of Neruda's exemplary work of receiving, proclaiming, and honoring the gift of Creation. In this poem, Neruda's craft of paradoxical juxtapositions and recurrent natural symbols offers the reader his or her own tools of perceiving the gift of Creation, a vocation that Neruda articulates in an earlier poem in the collection: "Hagamos profesión terrestre" ["Let us make a profession of being earth-bound"] (*Extravagaria* 156).

First, Neruda juxtaposes concrete and abstract,

Heaven and Earth, and multitude and oneness in "Aquí Vivimos." Each of these juxtapositions in the context of this poem model a way of perceiving and receiving Creation that overlaps with the very lens that Wirzba calls for in his text. In his *Poesía y estilo de Pablo Neruda: interpretación de una poesía hermetica* (1940), Neruda scholar Amado Alonso introduces techniques common to Neruda's poetry, as cited in Durán and Safir³. Alonso describes Neruda's technique as the oscillation from concrete to abstract. Neruda begins in the concrete world and then gestures toward the infinite and back (Durán and Safir 48). In the poem, Neruda begins with a description of his encounter with the sea. This encounter shapes his sense of self and his interaction with his surroundings. In the fourth line, Neruda writes, "Cuando yo vine / y vi lo pasaba, / me decidí de pronto" ["When I came / and saw what was happening / I decided on the spot"] (*Extravagaria* 106). Here, Neruda describes a specific moment in time, an embodied encounter with the sea. The nature of this action is reinforced by verb tense. These stanzas are written in preterite past tense, *el pretérito*, to express completed action, as opposed to the alternate imperfect form, expressing continuing action in the past. Neruda's encounter with the sea is defined by particularity: one moment in one place. From this palpable physical encounter, Neruda moves to an abstracted perspective of self and surroundings. Throughout the remainder of the poem, Neruda's text touches both sides: one foot on tangible Earth and another in abstract imagination. This technique allows Neruda to gesture toward universal themes by remaining rooted in a deeply meaningful and familiar place in nature. Neruda scholar Carrasco Pirard helpfully articulates this phenomenon, as quoted in Handley: "Neruda is never 'a poet' in some abstract sense, he is a poet of a particular [determinado] 'where'" (Handley 159).

Indeed, the seascape that Neruda encounters in "Aquí Vivimos" is deeply familiar to him. As a primarily autobiographical work, *Extravagaria* was written on Isla Negra, a sanctuary for Neruda

³ Alonso's explication as cited here focuses specifically on the first two volumes of Neruda's *Residencia en la Tierra* (volume one published in 1933 and volume two in 1935). These texts are more significantly influenced by the Surrealist movement than Neruda's mature works, such as *Extravagaria*, but Alonso's technique of interpretation offers insight into how to proceed with the series of juxtapositions that Neruda crafts in "Aquí Vivimos."

that figures largely in his later works (*Memoirs* 71). Neruda's deep attachment to the environment of Isla Negra positions him to articulate a more universal perception of Creation. For, as he writes in the last stanza: "Allí vivimos, mi mujer y yo / allí nos quedaremos," ["There we live, my woman and I, / and there we take root."] (*Extravagaria* 106). And while Neruda takes root in a particular place, he simultaneously gestures toward abstract spaces, such as "a medio mar" ["the middle of the sea"], "la soledad abierta" ["all that deserted space"], and "mi casa sin puertas ni número" ["my doorless numberless house"]. This kind of juxtaposition glories in the value of distinct spaces both in themselves and as they gesture toward the infinite.

Another poignant juxtaposition that moves the poem is the mingling of "el cielo" and "el agua y la tierra" ["sky" and "water and sea"]. In Spanish, "el cielo" is not only sky, but Heavens. Therefore, in the line, "Siempre encontré sabor central de cielo, / en el agua, en la tierra" ["I always found the flavor of the sky, / in the water, in the earth,"], Neruda rejoices in the glories of Heaven that he finds within the gifts of this Earth. Monguió's criticism strongly capitalizes on this theme within Neruda's corpus. Referencing another Neruda piece, "The Truth" (1964), Monguió writes: "In this poem in which Neruda seems to embrace idealism together with realism what he really does is to reconfirm his materialistic intuition: it is the real in the end that orders for us what sustains the body *and our spirit* (emphasis added): bread and soul" (23). Monguió goes so far as to say that the material is the sole sustenance for body and soul in Neruda's work. And yet, "Aquí Vivimos" would seem to suggest that the force for perceiving Creation in love is, rather, a bit of both Heaven and Earth. For in the following stanza, Neruda continues with sky and sea imagery. He writes, "a la hora en que el cielo y el océano, / se unen como dos labios" ["when sky and sea came together / like two lips touching"] (*Extravagaria* 106). Two lips, two parts of the whole, unite in this line, and this is what moves Neruda's perception of his home on Isla Negra, his home on Earth.

A final juxtaposition to note in this poem is that of multitude and oneness. At the end of the sixth stanza, Neruda writes: "porque no es poco, no es

así? haber vivido / en una soledad y haber llegado a otra, / sentirse multitud y revivirse solo" ["For that is no small thing, no? -- / to have lived / through one solitude to arrive at another, / to feel oneself many things and recover wholeness."] (*Extravagaria* 107). The Spanish text of these lines offers a compelling juxtaposition while also emphasizing "soledad" (derivatives of this word, meaning solitude, are repeated a total of five times in the brief poem), and using parallelism and connotation to bring further emphasis the meaning of the lines. The parallelism of "sentirse multitud y revivirse solo" is lost in the English translation, but it visually and rhythmically emphasizes the juxtaposition of multitude and singularity.

Traces of Neruda's solitude weave throughout his body of work, and he disparately reflects on both the deep exploration and painful isolation that can come from solitude. In one sense, as Durán and Safir remark, Neruda feels himself forever separated from the natural world by his very self, a "thin veil" he can never step through (49). And yet, Neruda claims to desire solitude above all else at the beginning of *Extravagaria*, writing the second poem of the collection, "Pido Silencio" ["I Ask for Silence"]. In his brief exposition of "Aquí Vivimos," Handley references this poem to characterize Neruda's perception of self. He writes,

Geography's many faces and moods and its multiple personalities taught him [Neruda] the multiplicity of his human being. The lessons of geography are healing even though they do not precipitate a traditional reunion of the self; wholeness becomes instead an awareness of one's permeable boundaries and an extension into the vastness of the physical world. (198)

Thus, Neruda's conception of self is more fully realized with the admission of an interdependence with the natural elements. Rather than perceiving nature as a possession to be consumed, Neruda emphasizes the permeable boundaries between his identity and the natural world. The humility evident in these lines teaches the poem's readers to consider their own identity anew. As a final note, the word "revivirse" that Neruda places at the end of

this pivotal stanza translates to not only “to recover oneself;” but to reincarnate or reawaken. The richness of this choice in diction reflects one final facet of Neruda’s sense of self, one based in communal life and continual newness. As Handley helpfully articulates to this point, “The constitution of his self, then, precisely because nature teaches the lessons of interdependence and regeneration, must necessarily also involve solidarity with his fellow beings, human and non-human” (177). The poem’s readers, too, are called to live lives of communal interdependence and renewal. Berry writes in his essay “People, Land, and Community,” that “A healthy culture holds preserving knowledge *in place* for a *long* time. That is, the essential wisdom accumulates in the community much as fertility builds in the soil. In both, death becomes a potentiality” (189). As both Neruda and Berry convey, a sense of self as interdependent with natural and human communities resists the idolatrous gaze because it requires the humility of community life and an embodied posture within the landscape that remains grounded in a perception of gifts.

Despite his public agnosticism, Neruda draws heavily from biblical imagery throughout his corpus (Monguió 18). Biblical imagery and convention within “Aquí Vivimos” further emphasizes Neruda’s posture toward the environment. For example, the second half of “Aquí Vivimos” could easily be read as a prayer of thanksgiving and petition in response to his encounter with the sea. The second half begins with “Gracias doy a la tierra” [I am grateful to the earth], in which the primacy of thanks in the clause subordinates the speaker to the thanksgiving itself. The final stanza reinforces conventions of prayers of supplication, asking “Auxilio, auxilio! Ayuden!” [“Grant us help then”]⁴. While it is a stretch to say that Neruda offers his prayer to a Judeo-Christian God in faithful expectancy of response, the prayer genre reflects Neruda’s posture toward his environment. Neruda’s gestures towards the infinite, his mingling of Heaven and Earth, and his reawakening of self within nature, craft a way of perceiving that beautifully informs a Christian perception and response to nature.

In addition to the juxtapositions and Biblical imagery within “Aquí Vivimos,” both of which model a method of perceiving, Neruda employs rich natural symbols to convey his wonder at the gift of particular places steeped in history and memory. Neruda’s meticulous attention to the natural and social history of place can be seen from a birds-eye view of his corpus, as he masterfully weaves certain symbols within and throughout his poetry, giving impressive continuity to a body of work fifty years in the making. In “Aquí Vivimos,” coastal stone emerges as one of these super-symbols, carrying the image’s history through the corpus.

In *Canto General*, Neruda writes, “Piedra en la piedra, el hombre, dónde estuvo? / Aire en la aire, el hombre, dónde estuvo? / Tiempo en el tiempo, el hombre, dónde estuvo?” [“Stone upon Stone, and man, where was he? / Air upon air, and man, where was he? / Time upon time, and man, where was he?”] (*The Essential Neruda* 84). Neruda’s allusion to Job 38: 4-7 reflects a common theme found within the various cases of stone imagery throughout Neruda’s corpus (*New International Version*). That is, stone functions as a symbol for the Earth’s history and constancy.

Neruda’s *Las Piedras de Chile* [*Stones of Chile*] (1961) and the sequel, *Las Piedras Del Cielo* [*Stones from the Sky*] (1970) trace the development of this symbol most visibly. In both *Las Piedras* works, Neruda narrates Chilean history through their massive stones. In the preface to *Las Piedra de Chile*, Neruda quotes a friend in describing the stones of Chile as “the skeleton that one sees first of all, the profusion of rocks, mountains, and sand” (Durán and Safir 66). As such, the stones come to symbolize the framework of Chilean history, an earth-bound constancy that persists despite political unrest, shifting identity, drought and plenty.

In “Aquí Vivimos,” the references to stone are limited, but it does not matter. For in these two references to “las piedras,” Neruda summons the symbol from his corpus in all its richness. In this case, the references recognize the importance of historical narrative, and a re-emphasis on the earth’s constancy

⁴ Reid translates this line as “Grant us help then.” despite the more exclamatory tone of the original line, “Auxilio, auxilio! Ayuden!” To preserve the consistency of the use of Reid’s translation, “Grant us help then” is used in the translation brackets. Yet, the subject change and exclamatory tone in this line are important elements of interpretation, warranting an override of Reid’s translation in this case.

amid the violence of time's passing. This emphasis runs parallel to Wirzba's own call to perceive the things of this world "in their particularity, their wholeness" (Wirzba 4). Neruda sets the scene of "Aquí Vivimos" as "A medio mar y cerca del crepúsculo, / Más allá de esas piedras" ["in the middle of the sea and close to the twilight, / a little beyond the stones]. As *Extravagaria* was written on La Isla Negra late in Neruda's career, it is probable that he is referring, at least in part, to his time on the coast in the twilight of his life, "más allá de" his time in central Chile (Durán and Safir 118). The first stanza defines Neruda's work in this stage of life as a product of what has come before it. He writes from the edge of his native Chile, but all is a product of the stones, the history of the Chilean landscape and people. By recognizing the importance of the historical narrative to his being, Neruda shows the reader a method of valuing Creation in its fullness through a deep devotion a place's history.

Additionally, Neruda's mention of stone toward the end of the poem ("allí entre las piedras oscuras / frente al destello / de la sal violenta / allí vivimos. . ." ["there between the dark stones / facing the flash / of the violent salt / there we live . . ."]) illustrates the constancy of stone⁵. Neruda utilizes the image of a rock by the ocean as it absorbs the repeated forces of salt and time, remaining constant despite the threat of weathering. Neruda recognizes that time is constantly changing the earth with a certain beautiful violence, but he knows that the persistence of memory in stone can put up a fight – if not to victory, then at least to longevity. The narrator of "Aquí Vivimos" seems awed by the persistence of the coast, and immediately following this passage he concludes the poem with his prayer of need: "Auxilio, auxilio! Ayuden!". Neruda asks the Earth to do what he cannot, in "crepúsculo," in his life's twilight. He asks to join the Earth so that he too, may somehow persist. The understanding of personal finitude so beautifully rendered in the poem's conclusion, can be found in Wirzba's understanding of "creatureliness" as outlined in *Perceiving Creation*. He writes, "Creatureliness is an understanding of our own limit—life as a gift of God"

(Wirzba 108). A perception of our own creatureliness, the very same posture that Neruda teaches the reader to move toward in "Aquí Vivimos," is the path toward "a loving embrace of the other" because we learn to see ourselves alongside the other of the natural world (Wirzba 119).

Neruda's craft offers a model for how we, as Christians, might learn to perceive the gift of Creation in the way that Wirzba suggests. To overcome our idolatrous gaze by adopting the iconic modality of perception, we can attend to distinct places that gesture toward the infinite and value the present, receiving the goodness of God's gift and by doing so seeing him more rightly and seeing ourselves humbly and holistically.

In this trajectory, however, there is problem: our creaturely perception will always be flawed. Even if we write poetry as brilliantly as Neruda, we will always be bound up in our own short attention spans and distracted by pride. It is in the absence of our perfect virtue that the central player of this narrative comes forward: Christ, through and for whom "all things have been created," for "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (*New International Version*, Colossians 1:16-17). As Athanasius writes, "the renewal of Creation has been wrought by the self-same Word who made it in the beginning" (26). Christ, perfect in his perceiving, renews and heals Creation, and allows us to participate in this work. Because of Christ's work as incarnate Divine, we can look to Neruda as a guide for perceiving and know that Christ is the fullness of our efforts toward love. His love sees Creation for what it is and what it will be; his perception is a gift in itself.

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⁵ In their comprehensive survey of stone and bird imagery in Neruda's work, Russell Salmon and Julia Lesage perform a complex exposition of "Al aire en la Piedra" and several more poems to finally reach the conclusion that "He [Neruda] finds in a huge rock ("A una pena arrugada") an immobile, infinite, purity. It represents the constancy of matter" (232).

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