

Clefts and Bridges of Eros: East and West Side Story of the Poetry of Octavio Paz

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Eyes that can see Oh what a rarity.

—William Carlos Williams

Towards the end of the forties, Octavio Paz (b. 1914), who was already then considered one of the most distinguished Mexican writers, entered his “violent season:” turning his back on the cherished mentors from the *Contemporáneos* group, he abandoned their brand of “pure poetry”—following the postsymbolist line of Paul Valéry and Juan Ramon Jiménez—for one of the most virulent and daring movements of the avant-garde: surrealism.¹ Actually, what is surprising is that it took him so long: as he himself recalls it to Guibert (213), he came in contact with surrealists as early as 1938; during the war (*Búsqueda* 63), he established close friendship with their “colony” in Mexico and, when the war ended, he associated himself with their group in France.

This was not the first time that surrealism was used by a leading Hispanic poet to exorcise a diehard tradition. In the late twenties, some of the brightest members of the so-called “Generation of 1927”—like Federico García Lorca, Vicente Aleixandre, Luis Cernuda or Rafael Alberti—took up its challenge and exploded the very same tradition of “pure poetry” which had shaped their poetic beginnings. In either case, the aesthetic lesson of “pure poetry” was not completely forgotten and left its imprint on the following surrealist phase.² However, the historical parallel ends here: while in Spain the surrealist craze was thwarted by the oncoming cataclysms of the thirties, for Paz, the “violent season” of the fifties was but a way-station towards an even more experimental and explosive period of the sixties and seventies.

The cycles *Aguila o sol* (1951; *Eagle or Sun*), *La estación violenta* (1958; *Violent Season*), and the essay “El arco y la lira” (1956; *The Bow and the Lyre*) probably offer the best of Pazian poetry and criticism from the surrealist decade. In the Mexican writer, both of these activities go hand in hand, as in so many cases of the post symbolist literature, and together advance one of the most ambitious and self-conscious literary projects in Spanish America.

Arco is the first sustained attempt of Paz to formulate a kind of philosophy of modern poetry.³ Romantic speculation, surrealist concept of art and its political stance combine under the Heideggerian umbrella. Poetry is viewed as an inquiry into being effected

through language. But more specifically—more romantically—it is a search for transcendence, for the “other shore” (*la otra orilla*), and for the other. It is a mythical quest in which and through which fragmented man is reunited with his “other self” and, together, the splinters recover their original nature. Thus, leading man back to his lost paradise, poetry, as envisioned by Paz, transcends language and history (13).

Fortunately, this somewhat exalted dream of art is revitalized by a parallel drawn between poetry and *eros*, and, above all, by the mythology surrounding sexual union. The two emplotments mirror each other: *eros* is charted as an allegory—as a metaphoric incarnation—of poetry. Erotic love is the ecstatic moment in which man communicates with his original nature, with his lost self, alienated from him by the drudgery of everyday life and the repression imposed by his heritage. Like in poetry-making, *eros* extends a bridge to the other and, through it, man achieves fulfillment and transcendence. Love can transcend, continues this poetic vision, only if it liberates, to the point of transgression and illicitness. In “Piedra de sol” ‘Sun Stone,’ which is one of the most spectacular poems of *Estación violenta*, romantic mysticism and surrealist erotic revolution combine to give us the whole range of this liberating love. However, at this point of confluence of surrealism and mysticism, *eros* overflows the crystalline boundaries of allegory and manages to infuse the metaphysical skeleton with considerable flesh and blood. Indeed, this “surplus” rivals the eroticism of the major contemporary Hispanic poets, like Vicente Aleixandre or Pablo Neruda, who were also “liberated” by surrealism.

It will be interesting to observe how both emplotments will change and, especially, how the poetic discourse itself will begin to explore the possibilities obscurely plotted by the latter: how a metaphoric ploy will become a dynamic force shaping the very letter, the very textuality of Pazian discourse. One of the seminal passages of *Arco* will set us on the track to start following that change:

... in the amorous act consciousness is like the wave that, after overcoming the obstacle, before breaking rises to a crest in which everything-form and movement, upward thrust and force of gravity-achieves a balance without support, sustained by itself. Quietude of movement. And just as we glimpse a fuller life, more life than life, through a beloved body, we discern the fixed beam of poetry through the poem. That instant contains every instant. Without ceasing to flow, time stops, overflowing itself. (14)

This formulation is well worth underscoring as a kind of paradigm that will help us to highlight the subsequent changes. The resolution given here to the quest for the reunion with the other—suspension of the flux of things by the poetic and erotic ecstasies—is distinctly mystical and Schopenhauerian. This seems to be the earliest layer of mythologies framing Pazian philosophy of modern poetry, and corresponds to the “season” of “Poesía de soledad y poesía de communion” ‘Poetry of Solitude and Poetry of Communion’ of the forties (*Peras* 117-31). In other parts of *Arco*, especially in its version from 1967 which

spans the fifties and sixties,⁴ and in his subsequent major critical contributions, this resolution is fulfilled by different philosophical concepts. A kind of “vertical,” paradigmatic reading of Paz’s critical work—similar to the Proppian approach to the corpus of Russian fairy tales—uncovers, provisionally, the following framing myths that supersede one another: the Heideggerian trinity of Poetry, Language, and Being (*Arco*); the ahistorical, near Platonic structures fathered by Claude Lévi-Strauss (the eponymous book); the empty plenitude of Buddhist *nirvana* (*Conjunciones*); and the vacuousness and dispersion of textual meaning preached by the post-structuralist semiology of Derrida (*Mono gram tico*). This shifting fulfillment of the quest keeps pace remarkably with Western intellectual developments as they swept through Europe from the forties to the early seventies; even the biography of the poet—his long diplomatic service in India in the sixties—coincides with the new upsurge of Western fascination with the East.

On the other hand, all these elements together sustain still another frame of Pazian thinking: his prophetic critique of the modern Western concept of History—of History as a lineal, teleological path of Progress and Perfection—as envisioned by Enlightened Reason.⁵ Unlike many of his Spanish-American contemporaries, he does not stop at the comfortable criticism of the “bourgeois heritage” and the evils of capitalism, nor does he refrain from calling into question the sacred superstition of our times, the “scientific” Marxism—also an off-shoot of the Enlightenment. What is so interesting and radical about him is that he goes on to question the very “roots” of Western tradition. Criticism, of course, at least implicitly, calls for other options. In Paz, the “West side” story will be checked and balanced by the “East side.” We will turn to it in more detail shortly. Beneath Pazian work, there lies yet another quest by Western man: a search for alternatives to the burden of his own tradition. The poet finds them in poetry, in love, in the rebellion of the body, in the dissolution of time, and the East will add some spice of its own, too.

All this may not supply nor replace a strong philosophy, but this intellectual and poetic vision certainly is a powerful *mythopoeia*, a necessary springboard towards any poetic and critical creation. Even the plight of contemporary philosophy, her Sisyphean task of demolishing the structures and traces left behind by mythology and by ideology in our social ritual and discourse, cannot fail to be transformed into such a *mythopoeia*, although negative and seemingly enjoying its “nihilism.” Pazian critique of Western modernity and his poetic quest for alternatives not only creates the third emplotment of his universe, which will be fraught with as many myths and metaphors as the other ones, but it actually turns him into the most typical Western man.

The ecstatic moment of love, “the time fulfilled in itself” (*Arco* 14; our trans.), also harbors an implicit denial of Time and of History. The momentary arresting of the metaphysical “will to life,” invented for aesthetic purposes by Schopenhauer, is turned against their modern ideations. Violent shifts of time and space in “El himno entre ruinas” ‘Hymn Among Ruins’ and the cyclical universe of “Piedra de sol” reflect this criticism.

The poetic philosophy or philosophical poetics of love will be radically questioned in the sixties.

II

Paz took full advantage of the possibilities that opened up to him in the early sixties, those delayed "happy years" after all sorts of wars and before others could break out with full force again. First came his close encounter with the East during the time, between 1962 and 1968 that he served as the Mexican ambassador to India.⁶ He was not the only major Spanish-American writer to be exposed directly to the East. One would have to name at least one other Mexican, José Juan Tablada, as well as Pablo Neruda, the Ecuatorian Jorge Carrera Andrade or the Cuban Severo Sarduy; it would be a fascinating study to compare their experiences (see Durán for some hints). But, among all of them, he penetrated deepest into the web of Oriental thought and integrated it most intimately into his own literary and critical project. Even so, one can only wonder about the depth of his understanding. For example, *Conjunciones y disyunciones* (1969; Conjunctions and Disjunctions), which is the critical counterpart to the poems of *Ladera Este* (1969; East Side), is both dazzling and puzzling. It is even more so if we consider that, as Said or Todorov have shown, the Western "dialogue" with the "other" has not been precisely a history of success. *Conjunciones* displays erudition quite uncommon for a Western intellectual; but it also baffles one because all that knowledge and all the bridges opened toward the East follow the neat-all too neat-structuralist matrices of symmetries and inversions introduced by Livi-Strauss.

One is tempted to paraphrase Borges and ask, if it is doubtful that history makes any sense, is it not even more so to have it draw, in the East and in the West, these rigorous calligraphic patterns? It might appear that the critic of the Western *telos* has been caught in another teleological trap. We could go one step further and question not only the methods of organizing that knowledge but the very attitude towards the East that transpires through *Conjunciones*. For example, to what degree does Paz succumb to the so-called "Eurocentrism"? Guided by his "natural" sense of centrality, Western man has imposed his views and disseminated his visions all around the globe. But there were differences: while in the New World his fantasy blended with Utopia, in the East, in the luxurious and sensual East, he deposited his libidinous dreams, his desire for individual fulfillment, and, later, his search for values that might bolster his own faltering tradition. This seems to be exactly what the poet is seeking and what he finds on the East side. As he himself lucidly says elsewhere, "It would be a mistake to believe that we are looking to Buddhism for a truth that is foreign to our tradition; what we are seeking is a confirmation of a truth we already know" (*Corriente* 102).

Whatever the value of the bridges that Paz engineered between East and West, the East influenced some of the key elements of his *mythopoeia*. Buddhist pantheism and Tantrist eroticism left the deepest imprint upon him. Buddhism subverted the concept of transcendence, of the "other shore": romantic mysticism had to yield to the empty plenitude and to the transcendence-in-the-presence of *nirvana*. Tantrism, in its turn, stressed in Paz the cosmic and violent dimension of erotic love; in this tradition, he found the surrealist subconscious and the experiments of Marquis de Sade elevated to and socialized by ritual.

The sixties were also the hey-day of the structuralist, semiological, and linguistic carnival which focused anew on social communication, on its codes, and on the semiotics of its messages. Paz was especially attracted to the work of Lévi-Strauss. He was fascinated by the latter's formulation of the latent structures of myths in terms of binary oppositions permitting him to put in order—perhaps all too rigorous—the storehouse of world mythologies, and welcomed the concept of structures (in French structuralism equivalent to codes) that seemed to defy, encompass, and annihilate History. In the volume dedicated to the French ethnologist, Buddhism surprisingly appears as a version of and as a complement to this structuralism, and *vice versa*. Through the fragile bridge built by the poet, they converge as critiques of the modern Western concept of History as Progress and, supposedly abolish its very possibility. Here the poetic mythology becomes ritual exorcism. Of course, this plot is too neat—too “Classical”—to effectively model any referential, historical reality—whatever semiotic or ideological values we may ascribe to this concept—especially when both Buddhism and structuralism are accepted for their face value, without any criticism.⁷

The East thus turns into the fourth emplotment of the Pazian *mythopoeia*. It is the mirror image of the West in the sense that it supplements the deficiencies of the latter and ends up as the allegorical incarnation of alternatives sought by Paz, typically, outside and yet within his own tradition. It is even “read” through the eyes of surrealism and of structuralism. But, similar to the relation of *eros* and mysticism, the East overflows this allegory; its flesh and spice give a special touch to the fragile plots and, together with the structuralist connection, also furnish them with attractive makeup. All these allegorical, mythical, and modish frames and frame-ups that we have been joyfully excavating from the plot of his developing literary and critical project, should not mislead us; it is both with them and yet in spite of them—thanks to the overflowing of metaphysical emplotments and exorcistic drives—that Paz becomes a genuinely interesting and original thinker, not only of Mexican and Hispanic culture and tradition, but of contemporary Western culture at large.

III

Structuralism had yet more impulses in store for the Pazian literary enterprise. It is instructive to recall that in all its phases—from Russian Formalism to the present—structuralism has always been related to the successive faces of the avant-garde. For example, Formalism was stimulated by the futurism of Mayakovski and Khlebnikov (Pomorska); the Prague school was more “academic,” but still entertained a close dialogue with the Czech avant-garde of the late twenties and thirties; or, among the French structuralists, the semiologists around Barthes helped to lay the ground rules for some neoavant-gardist experimentation of the “nouveauroman” in the sixties; in France this collaboration led its participants into “post-structuralism.” The other side of the coin is that the antimimetic ideology of avant-garde—as we show in our *Metastructuralismo*

(85-92)—has molded in its own image even the alleged scientific projects of structuralist aesthetics, poetics, and semiotics. Indeed, it might now seem that, in “deconstruction,” the expanding waves of the avant-garde have finally reached philosophy and have turned its discourse into one of the avant-garde’s playful antimimetic literary genres. The *aporia* of “antimimetic metadiscourse,” embraced by “deconstructive” criticism, has been both its driving and undermining force.

The neoavant-gardist experimentation and the structuralist and post-structuralist semiology set “in rotation” Pazian poetic and critical discourse. The manifesto “Signos en rotacion” ‘Signs in Rotation,’ published in 1965 and then added—as an “epilogue”—to the second edition of *Arco*, in 1967, conceptualizes this new face of his literary universe. In spite of quite an extensive rewriting of *Arco*, “Signos” does not blend with it easily (see also Santi), but is, so to speak, grafted on it. This concept of ‘grafting’ leads us to Derrida, who has shown how the “logic of the supplement” plays havoc with the assumed closure and unity of the “principal” text (144-45). On the one hand, the epilogue of *Arco* seems only to radicalize some of the earlier concepts and obsessions of Paz, for example, his modern preoccupation with “silence” as a part of poetic discourse;⁸ on the other hand, it not only reopens the earlier conceptual framework and reveals it to be lacking, but it actually explodes it.

According to our “archeology,” semiological experiment creates the fifth emplotment of the developing Pazian *mythopoeia*. In this new framework, the word defies the traditional assumptions that “‘language’ has no exterior because it is not in space” (Lyotard 17), and becomes incarnate. The discourse attempts to empty its referential dimension and focuses more on itself. Instead of the “world,” “feelings,” “topics,” or “transparent meanings,” it highlights its own structure and material qualities. It stops being an allegory of the world and becomes a brave new playground of semiosis.⁹ Unfortunately, as has already been said, this semiosis is firmly embedded in/with the ideology of the avant-garde which has followed the Kantian siren or Mallarméan advice, “Exclus-en .../Le réel parce que vil” ‘Cut the real out /... for it is cheap’ (182-83). In *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973; *The Pleasure of the Text*), Barthes ponders the *aporias* of this concept of discourse (50-53) and comes to the sad conclusion that it is not at all easy to exorcise the “world,” the “outside”; “some” of it is even necessary because, otherwise, the text would be sterile. At least he inverts the terms: now it is the letter that views the world as its shadow (53). Just how this “shadow” should penetrate the virginal closure of the neoavant-gardist text remains the mystery of Barthesian *jouissance*.¹⁰

The sixties play havoc with Pazian *mythopoeia*: while he plots the East side of his story of the West, his semiological attachment explodes these emplotments. However, similar to the surrealist season which shattered “pure poetry” and yet continued to be influenced by it, the debris of these emplotments flows in and overflows the semiological experiment, becoming that “something” needed for its fruitful, productive play.

The critical reflection in “Signos” turns on the famous Mallarmian poem “Un Coup de dés” ‘A Dice Throw’ (1897), and shows through its example how the “semiological mode,” initiated *avant la lettre* by the French symbolist poet, has changed literary space and poetic language. Once again, without any visible anxiety, Paz faithfully misreads his subject, looking as he is for a confirmation of his latest poetic vision. Thus, the semiological conceptualization of “Un Coup” is faithful, but the ideology behind it, with all of its idealistic and somewhat esoteric metaphysics of “negativity,” is completely disregarded:

Space has lost, as it were, its passivity: it is not that which contains things but rather, in perpetual movement, it alters their course and intervenes actively in their transformations. It is the agent of mutations, it is energy. ... The change affects the page and the structure.

... Between the page and the writing is established a relation, new in the West and traditional in Far Eastern and Arabic poetry, which consists in their mutual interpretation. Space becomes writing: the blank spaces (which represent silence, and perhaps for that very reason) say something that signs do not say. ... The poet makes word of everything he touches, not excluding silence and the blanks in the text. (*Arco* 258-60)

In other words, modern poetry has transformed the typographic page into a kind of Einsteinian “timespace.” The page has stopped being a mere simulacrum of virtual space, used—as if from outside—for conventional recording of speech that, as Lyotard or Wellek and Warren point out, “must be conceived as existing elsewhere” (*Theory* 142), and has no longer been left to chance, mitigated only by aesthetic touch-ups. Now it has become a concrete, protean, part of the new poetic semiosis, of the new, translinguistic poetic discourse.

In one of the games played in this broader playground, verbal text acquires the quality of pictorial sign: it symbolizes visually what it means verbally. Its limits are painting and pictographic or ideographic writing. Some of Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes*—like “Paysage” ‘Landscape,’ “Lettre-Océan” ‘Ocean-Letter,’ “Il Pleut” ‘It’s Raining, to name just a few—exploit its mimetic potential. A host of cubo-futurists together with such master-poets as Pound, Cummings, Williams or the Chilean Huidobro, follow this path.¹¹

In another game, it is the blank space that is, so to speak, drawn into the text; it becomes a special sign among verbal signs and acquires both its signifying form and meaning from their formal and semantic constellation.¹² “Un Coup de dés” sets out to explore the potential of this more abstract type. Some more involved examples of this game rely heavily on elaborate commentaries (in the case of Mallarmé, the preface to this poem and other “variations on a subject” serve this need). Barthes’ differentiation between *representation* and *figuration* (*Plaisir* 88-90) may help us to better understand this second type. The abstract visual use of space does not put before our eyes specific objects

created or recreated after “reality;” in contrast, it only plays with diverse figurative values of visual constellations. Abstract painting or collage come to mind first. The ornamental use of writing in Islamic architecture is another example. However, the effects are not only pictorial or sculptural. Thus, typographic “blow up” can influence the very literary semiotics of the text, and the “larger” volume experienced by the reader may enable it to make larger claims—i.e., a poem may appear as a book, or a short story may sell as a novel.¹³ Another case of the abstract figuration is that of the plurality of consciousness and of language—i.e., of the paradigms of the language code—which Blanchot glimpsed in the “new concept of literary space” of “Un Coup” (*Siren* 237-42).¹⁴ Or Pazian *Blanco* (1967; *Blanco*) splendidly incarnates yet another figuration, that of Barthes’ own understanding of this concept as “the way in which the erotic body appears ... in the profile of the text ... cleft into fetish objects, into erotic sites” (*Plaisir* 88-89; our adapt.). Among Paz’s more experimental exercises, *Topoemas* (1968; *Topoemas*) belong to the mimetic type; *Discos visuales* (1968; *Visual Discs*), to the abstract type. Yet, at the same time, the first edition of *Blanco*, *Topoemas*, and *Discos* all play with different values conferred upon them by the typographic “blow up.”

Modern poetry most frequently uses both games simultaneously in order to generate an infinite variety of poetic “topograms.” Some may show only a light trace of this new concept of literary space; others are more elaborate. But it would seem wrong to dismiss this whole poetic mode as though it were merely some “rare extra-vaganza” or “a fascinating historical curiosity”—which are the characterizations that can be found, for example, in such discriminate authorities as Wellek and Warren (144) or Frank (13-14). It is also amusing to observe—even within the limited scope of our study—the contradictory moves of modern literature: how it exposes and subverts the forgery of traditional mimesis, especially that of the “realistic” art of the last century—and yet how this alleged “antimimetic” art explores and forges other possibilities of imitation by words; how it questions and breaks up language, meaning, reference, and communication—and, nevertheless, how it goes on to uncover new dimensions of verbal and topogrammatic semiosis.

If we now return to the critical vision of “Un Coup” by Paz, we note still another aspect: as he attempts to explain the significance of the Mallarméan experiment, he catches the first glimpse of the post-structuralist semiology in the making. On the other hand, this shows us how closely this semiology is related to the avant-garde experiments and ideology:

There is no final interpretation for *Un Coup de dés* because its last word is not a final word. ... at the end of the journey the poet does not contemplate the idea, symbol or archetype, but a space in which a constellation appears: his poem. It is not an image or an essence; it is an account being calculated, a handful of signs that are drawn, effaced, and drawn again. Thus, this poem that denies the possibility of saying

Poetry

Is the cleft

The space

Between one word and another

Configuration of the unending

(131-33; our adapt.)

“La poesía / Es la hendidura” ‘Poetry / Is the cleft:’ ‘hendidura’ (cleft, crack, fissure, rift, split) is undoubtedly the key concept of this passage. But what is it? What does it stand for? The poem “Vrindaban” (the title comes from one of the holy cities of Hinduism) gives us the first hint:

Tal vez en una piedra hendida

Palpo la forma femenina

Y su desgarradura (61)

Perhaps in a cleft stone

He touched the feminine form

And its rift

(147; our adapt.)

The author’s footnote to this place is more explicit: “certain stones are signs of the great goddess, especially if their form alludes to the sexual cleft (*yoni*)” (178; our trans.). Like Goya playing games with his gorgeous *maja*—now dressed, now not—, *Conjunciones* removes the last, albeit transparent, metaphorical veil of *maya* from ‘hendidura’ as ‘yoni.’ Describing the Tantric mandala of the human body,¹⁵ Paz writes: “The two veins start at the sacred plexus, in which the penis (*linga*) and the vulva (*yoni*) are located” (76). In his inaugural lecture as a member of El Colegio Nacional de México (Mexican Academy of the Arts), entitled “La nueva analogía” ‘New Analogy,’ from 1967, he calls Hindu temples “a sexual vegetation in stone, the copula of the elements, the dialogue between *lingam* and *yoni*” (*Signo* 13; our trans.). ‘Hendidura’ ‘Cleft’ thus comes to symbolize, through the metaphor of vulva, one of the key sacred centers (*cakras*) of the Tantric mandala of the human body.

Another text from the same period, “La semilla” ‘The Seed,’ relates the erotic concept of ‘hendidura’ to the earlier metaphysical and critical concerns of the poet:

... human time will then appear to be a divided present. Separation, a sharp break [*ruptura*]: now falls into *before* and *after*. This fissure [*hendidura*] in time announces the advent of the kingdom of man... As man’s history unfolds, the fissure becomes broader and broader... But primitive man is a creature who is less defenseless spiritually than we are. The moment the seed falls into a crack, it fills it and swells with life. Its fall is a resurrection: the gash [*desgarradura*] is a scar; and separation is reunion. (*Corriente* 23-24)

This visionary text, roaming freely through art, time, history, and myth, sheds new light on one of the quoted passages from “Carta a Leon Felipe.”

However, beyond the sexual metaphor of “hendidura” and its esoteric and mystical symbolism, what is actually new in the Pazian erotic concept of poetry of the sixties? It is the fact that the former romantic mysticism establishes a surprising bridgehead on typographic page: now, the blank page and the blank space between words open up into a kind of erotic cleft and dialogue. In “Carta a Leon Felipe,” ‘hendidura’—identified with poetry—is transformed, figuratively, into an image and a powerful symbol of the new literary space.¹⁶

In *Ladera*, ‘hendidura’ fuses a double heritage into a striking whole. In the first place, it assumes the image contexts developed earlier around ‘herida’ ‘wound’ and its synonyms. For example, in the last sequel of “Diario de un soñador” ‘Diary of a Dreamer,’ from 1945, the young poet raves: “You are ... like a wound from which I drink the lost substance of creation, an imprevisible revelation...” (147; our trans.). The desired woman, compared to a wound, becomes a symbol of transcendence. At the end of his first surrealist text, “Trabajos del poeta” ‘The Poet’s Works,’ the wound is identified with the woman’s sexual organ and the orgasmic moment becomes a symbol of poetic expression; both love and poetry resound with cosmic projection: “...pico que desgarrar y entreabre al fin el fruto!, tú, mi Grito, surtidor de plumas de fuego, herida resonante y vasta como el desprendimiento de un planeta del cuerpo de una estrella” ‘beak that tears and at last cracks open the fruit! You my cry, fountain of feathers of fire, wound resounding and vast like the ripping out of a planet from the body of a star’ (*Aguila* 26-27). “Mutra,” from *Estación violenta*, adds a telluric dimension through the metamorphosis of the split stone into a vulva. “Entrada en material” ‘Entrance Into Matter,’ from *Salamandra* (1962; Salamander), powerfully sums up all the pieces of this strand, and introduces ‘hendidura’ as an equivalent of ‘herida:’

Ciudad

.....
Un reflector palpa tus plazas más secretas
El sagrario del cuerpo
El arca del espíritu
Los labios de la herida la herida de los labios
La boscosa hendidura de la profecía
.....
Y la juntura ciega de la piedra
Entre tus muslos ...

(9-10)

City

.....

A searchlight touches your most secret sites
 The sacred place of the body
 Ark of the sprit
 Labia of the wound wound of the labia
 Wooded cleft of the prophecy

 Blind junction of the stone
 Between your thighs ...

(Our trans.)

In turn, *Ladera* raises these images to a higher power by giving them, through the meeting with the East, a distinct symbolic closure (cleft stone/vulva as a symbol of the Great Goddess; the key center of the Tantric mandala of human body; Buddhist sculpture, *linga*, and *yoni* as indexes of Buddhist culture, philosophy, and values). The emplotment of the image complex built around 'hendidura' in the Pazian work of the sixties becomes manifest in yet another way. Using the framework developed by Lévi-Strauss for the study of world mythologies, we can formulate the myth underlying this complex as follows:



Together, "feminine cleft" and "eros" mediate between Nature (the given, *fatum*) and Culture (the creation of man; freedom, although restrained here by "transcendence"). Through this mediation and closure, the myth also becomes mythos: a story, a tight plot.

But let us not repeat the mistake of structuralism—which was to become too absorbed by symmetries, binary oppositions, and inversions to notice all the multifarious realities overflowing its strait, all too straight, generative *logos*—and see in the mythic schema what it is not. It is not some latent, immutable mold of meaning that would, magically, hold in check the play of Pazian discourse and the metamorphoses of his *mythopoeia*. This mythic scheme is just one powerful and felicitous formulation of one facet of that play and of one moment of that flow. If we go back to the earlier stages, the terms change ('hendidura'/'herida') or disappear (cleft stone); if we go forward, poetry radically invades space and becomes material object, almost a part of Nature, and transcendence itself is challenged by Buddhism and changes its content. The East, paradoxically, grounds, enriches, and subverts different elements of the myth. Semiology, in turn, will explode it, but will retain its "shadow" as enrichment of its own game.

In this way, the context of *Ladera*—and, more broadly, the whole Pazian work—fulfills the Mallarméan vision of poetic discourse postulating, in the summary of Paz himself, "an ideal writing in which the phrases and words would reflect each other and, in some measure, contemplate or read one another" (*Arco* 251). Love and eros, once elements of the

metaphysical *mythopoeia* or poetic themes, invade the typographic page and are dramatized, figuratively, in and through this new literary space. Literary discourse—the semiotic dialogue or writing, print, and space—acquires a body; and it is an erotic one.

V

The erotization of literary space in Paz affects his very concept of poetry. The quest for transcendence, that characterized the earlier phase of his *mythopoeia* and is still fully present in the second edition of *Arco*, is now *textualized*. Transcendence is no longer a kind of meaning, reality or substance beyond the text: it becomes one of the shadows cast by the latter—figured by the letter—within the reading-spectacle. In this, the ideology of the avant-gardist text blends with and is reinforced by the interpretation given to the *aporia* of “immanent transcendence” by Tantrism: “Everything is real in Tantrism—and everything is symbolic. Phenomenal reality is more than the symbol of the other reality: we touch symbols when we think we are touching bodies and material objects, and vice versa” (*Conjunciones* 68-69).

The long experimental poem *Blanco*, with its even visual textual labyrinths and erotic sites, powerfully develops this new concept of poetic space and of poetry itself. *Blanco* is a visionary poem and a visual play, a poetic speculation on love, language, reality and unreality of the world, all transposed into the textual metamorphoses on/of the page.¹⁷ Among the types of erotic figuration of space pointed out in this study, it is the closest to the Barthesian concept of erotic figuration. As already in Tantrism, “scripture is *lived* as a body that is an analogue of the physical body—and the body is *read* as a scripture” (*Conjunciones* 79). Once again, the light come to Paz from the East and makes it possible for him to anticipate movement in the West.

In *Blanco*, according to the poet’s introduction, “the space flows, engendering and dissipating the text” (*Ladera* 145).¹⁸ Woman’s body is transformed metaphorically into writing and writing plays with the figurative values of spatial erotic body. The textualized meaning and “transcendence,” arising and vanishing in the act of reading, “make real the vision” only in the instant of contemplation. Poetic text becomes a correlate of the paradoxical plenitude and emptiness of *nirvana*. Tantric Buddhism, ideology of the avant-garde, and post-structuralist semiology all blend into a dazzling *bricolage*; in *Mono gramático*, Paz has formulated it in the following way:

... the path of poetic writing leads to the abolition of writing: at the end of it we are confronted with an inexpressible reality. ... As I write, I journey toward meaning: as I read what I write, I blot it out, I dissolve the path. Each attempt I make ends up the same way: the dissolution of the text in the reading of it, the expulsion of the meaning through writing. ... the vision that poetic writing offers us is that of its dissolution. Poetry is empty, like the clearing in the forest... it is nothing but the *place* of the apparition which is, at the same time, that of its disappearance. (132-34)

When we read this, we can almost hear through it an echo of the earlier quoted passage from “Signos en rotación” (*Arco* 252). The theory developed there around “Un Coup de dés” is transposed here into a distinctly poetic and prophetic discourse, which is an integral part of a long experimental poem in prose. In *Mono gramático*, the theoretical strand becomes an incarnation of the agonizing self-consciousness of the modern literary text reaching, as it assumes, in vain, for any kind of saving transcendence in/from the outside.¹⁹

Various claims of this visionary semiology of *nirvāṇa* call for a closer scrutiny. Let us point to at least some of the issues involved. For example, if we take the quoted assertion in its broadest sense, it holds true of any text: all texts “flow,” appear and disappear, before the reader’s eyes, and no reading—unless by some magic—can transform the vision into a material world, only into another text. The difference between the traditional and the avant-gardist works lies, then, in how they use the media of transmission and by what *mythopoeia* they motivate that use. Beyond that, both the *mythopoeia* of the 19th century “realism” and that of the 20th century “avant-garde” are but two ideological forgeries—to a great degree symmetrical and inverse—which are “authenticated” only by the models and the molds they have forged to their image. In the beginning, it was useful for criticism to follow the avant-garde because its experimental character made it easier to rock the boat of traditional poetics; but, in the end, the privilege of one over the other is misleading because the “scientific” projects of contemporary poetics have become so irreparably entangled in the very ideological web of the avant-garde. Criticism cannot exist but in constant struggle with and as erosion of the entrapments of ideologies and of myths.

On the other hand, if these Pazian claims should represent a specific theory of textual meaning and of reading, present-day poetics would have to reject the metaphor of *nirvana* as another myth and mystification. For example, the text is a complex semiotic inscription: it is already filled with signs, verbal and non-verbal, alphabetic and non-alphabetic, coming in a certain order or configuration (this is, after all, what makes possible decipherment of unknown or coded scripts). The blank space itself is culturally—i.e., semiotically—conditioned: blank page or canvas are not “empty” but are “oriented”—“read”—differently in the West and in the East. Therefore, contrary to Barthes (*Critique* 57) and post-structuralists, the sense of a text is never empty; it is, so to speak, *preempted* in a certain way. Neither does the reading come close to the absoluteness, closure, and introvertedness of *nirvāṇa*. Rather, supplementing the text by social norms, values, conventions, and by the intertextual ties highlighted by its times, reading closes but temporarily and tentatively its horizon of meaning, and always leaves the door open for future readings and supplements.²⁰ The concept of “empty sense” can be salvaged only as a vague expression of the fact that there is no fixed, absolute meaning behind the text, guaranteed by some Guardian Angel. What is important to note is that the realization of this lack of transcendence,²¹ which slowly worked its way from philosophy to hermeneutics,

was cheerfully embraced by the avant-garde and was put to use through its will-known concept of art as “intranscendent playing.”

Those poets!, swearing on intranscendence, conjuring emptiness, and promising silence; and yet they continue to obscurely plot new works, new challenges, and new glorious shipwrecks in their—declared and undeclared—war on the absolute, that ever receding ritual horizon before the avant-garde literature. In the end, all this purported nihilism seems to be but a defamiliarizing—polarizing and agonizing—*ploy* of their literary game: of their ultimate quest for a new transcendence in and through artistic creation.

In the case of Paz, this struggle gives rise to yet another dazzling and puzzling literary and critical universe, comparable only to the most radical projects born out of the Spanish-American avant-garde, such as those of Vicente Huidobro, César Vallejo, Pablo Neruda or Jorge Luis Borges.²²

Notes

¹ *Contemporáneos* (1928-1931; Contemporaries) emerged as one of the principal literary journals of the Mexican avant-garde.

² So far, Wilson's is the best account of the Pazian surrealist connection, although some of his information concerning the reception of surrealism in Mexico needs to be corrected; see, e.g., the special issue of *Artes Visuales* entitled *Surrealismo en México* (1974; Surrealism in Mexico).

³ Paz understands the concept the concept of literary modernity rather traditionally, as spanning the period roughly from romanticism to the end of the “historical” avant-garde of the twenties. In this way, he tacitly identifies *literary* modernity with the strand of our *historical* modernity extending from the Enlightenment. This is probably one of the intrinsic reasons why he has recently joined the clamor for the “end of modernity”—modernity reduced, for the convenience of its “postmodern” critics, to one of its threads—and why his criticism of this “Western modernity” has become more and more apocalyptic and exorcistic (*Hijos, Signo*). For a different approach see our *Cuatro claves* (9-17).

⁴ The second edition of *Arco* attempts to bridge the gap between this mystical vision and the technical and ideological input of French structuralism of the sixties. The two versions of *Arco* were aptly compared by Rodríguez Monegal. Rewriting—the overt and covert updating and “polishing”—of his texts is an obsession in Paz, and a possible nightmare for his critics (see Santí for some incisive remarks in this regard).

⁵ Goya, who saw considerable Napoleonic “progress” in his time, used an ambiguous phrase as a part of and also as a title for his engraving “The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters” (from *Caprichos*). Did he actually foresee that both the absence and the presence of *logos* produce monsters, only different kinds of them? Borges would say that our choice is purely aesthetic. On the other hand, Jung might remark that this invention of Enlightenment fits remarkably well into the Western pattern of extroverted tradition characterized by the need of Salvation from the outside: Utopia, Jesus, Progress, light from the East, the Red Army—all the armies of the night of salvation.

⁶ He resigned that post after the October 2 Tlatelolco massacre and broke with the Government of PRI—the Institutional Revolutionary Party—and with its mask of “institutionalized” revolution.

⁷ In Western tradition, this kind of closure has occupied a pivotal position. According to Aristotle, through the closure of *mythos* (plot), dramatic art does not merely imitate the appearance but captures the “essence” of things; hence, it is more “philosophical,” “universal,” and “valuable” than,

e.g., historiography, factography, or science, as far as they are able to resist the irresistible temptation of some totalizing ideology. Logocentrism here turns Aristotelian *mythos* into a myth (see our *Metaestructuralismo* 161-82). In Western tradition, myth and *mythos* are inextricably intertwined.

⁸ See the subtle reading of this strand in Paz by Alazraki.

⁹ Our *Metaestructuralismo* (68-71, 238-39, 251-54) charts the avant-garde background as well as some semiotic presuppositions of this process.

¹⁰ 'Sensual pleasure, enjoyment.' The English translation uses alternately 'pleasure' and 'bliss.' The ideology of the neoavant-gardist 'text' is summed up by Barthes in his post-structuralist manifesto "From Work to Text," written in 1971.

¹¹ The semiotic play highlighted in the so-called "concrete poetry," which emerged from all these experiments in the 1950s, is even more complex and, in some cases, it abandons verbal discourse to turn into semiotics or painting *tout court* (for a perspicacious account see Steiner 197-218).

¹² The "empty" space, the typographic "silence," has a value of "zero sign." According to Jakobson, this is a special kind of sign which signifies precisely through the absence of the usual or expected "full" signs or as a "zero" part of the economy of some paradigms. "Zero sign" is thus a kind of "maverick" sign: it is "in" by being "out;" but it also is a "joker" sign because it fills the gaps of the system as the player needs it. E.g., in Sternian jokes, a "zero discourse" is pitted against the expectations raised in the reader and derives its significance, in each case, from its particular "environment" created by "full" discourse. "Zero sign" is one of those little "tricksters" that "lay bare" and explode the whole industry of "semiotic" trivia which flooded the academic market-place in the wake of the structuralist "revolution."

¹³ E.g., since fewer language elements fill the slots of lines and pages, their "weight" and "visibility" are enhanced; attention is drawn to more of their significant details (somewhat like the well known Jakobsonian microscopic analyses of poetic texts); this slows down the tempo and forces us to put greater effort into the reading; etc.

¹⁴ One could add to this interior polyphony yet another plural dimension, that of the dialogic polyphony of discourse, studied by Bakhtin, which is also reflected in the constellation of Mallarmé's poem.

¹⁵ This picture is missing in the English edition.

¹⁶ Other poems from *Ladera*, like "El día en Udaipur" 'The Day in Udaipur' or "Custodia" 'Monstrance,' would lead us further in our search for other possible textual veils and unveils of 'hendidura.' The limits imposed on our study by the readers' endurance force us to forgo this path here.

¹⁷ See Ortega for one of the best commentaries on this involved poem.

¹⁸ Omitted from *Configurations*.

¹⁹ See Alazraki for an incisive commentary on this text.

²⁰ This point is made by the contemporary "reader-oriented" criticism.

²¹ 'Leere Transzendenz/leere Idealitat' 'empty transcendence/ideality' are the key concepts advanced as characteristics of literature from romanticism to present by Friedrich (*passim*).

²² We would like to thank Prof. Maureen Ahern and Miss Eileen Mahoney for their generous and repeated help with the English version of this study; and the former for the thorough discussion of our translations and adaptations.

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