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The Politics of Writing in Octavio Paz's El mono gramático

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In this essay[1], I situate El mono gramático alongside Édouard Glissant's Poetics of Relation, and all of those texts (both literary and scholarly) in which, as Glissant would say, "errantry and Relation are at play" (21). My purpose for doing so is not to trace the genealogy of Paz's text. Nor do I propose to claim that El mono gramático is either a precursor or a prime example of what one might call "literature of relation." Rather, I situate Paz's text in the context of Glissant's poetics of relation in order to more closely examine one of the most problematic issues that Glissant's poetics raises but leaves unresolved, namely, the politics of writing under the aegis of relation.

According to Glissant, the poetics of relation "presupposes no ideological stability" (32). In other words, what texts of relation have in common with one another is not a similar political, ethical, or aesthetic design, but the fact that they are all "latent, open, multilingual in intention, [and] directly in contact with everything possible" (32). This is not to suggest that the poetics of relation is either apolitical, or politically ambiguous. On the contrary, it endeavors to be resolutely progressive. If it accommodates or generates ideologically contradictory elements, it is because this poetics fully embraces the contingency of relation. As Glissant points out, the elements of literature of relation "do not add up to anything clear-cut or easily perceptible with any certainty. The relinked (relayed), the related, cannot be combined conclusively" (173).

But, surely, Glissant would not invest his faith in relation if he did not believe that it is intrinsically a major catalyst of social, cultural, and political change. His underlying assumption is that the whole of this poetics is supposed to be greater, and more ideologically sound, than the sum of its parts. Because of this, he maintains a celebratory tone of the endless virtues of relation throughout his essay, and fails or refuses to adopt a more critical position toward it. In his dualistic analysis, he reserves all the hard punches for anything that opposes relation and its many relatives (errantry, donner avec, écho-monde, expanse, creolization, repetition, difference, contingency, opacity, etc.). My reading of El mono gramático is intended to show that it is crucial to maintain a more critical attitude toward texts that one way or another fit into, or participate in a poetics of relation.

Glissant's argument for multi-genre, multilingual, multicultural, trans-disciplinary, and anti-disciplinary writing in Poetics of Relation is most welcome. However, one cannot pretend that this strategy is in and of itself politically progressive and unproblematic. El mono gramático is a case in point. While this text successfully crosses many disciplinary and cultural borders, and effectively transgresses a number of key customary distinctions (such as that between literature, criticism, and theory), the way that the narrator craftily cannibalizes, suppresses, and even silences the discourses and voices of his many interlocutors is essentially totalitarian in spirit. Paz's text shows that the mere fact that a poet's word is driven by relation, that it negates every metropolis (geopolitical, disciplinary, epistemological), or that it roams freely around the world following every conceivable

trajectory (from center to center, from center to periphery, from periphery to center, from periphery to periphery) does not necessarily imply that that word will oppose what Glissant calls "the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent" (19). In a dictator's domain, errantry and relation can also be allowed to take place, but only when they are thoroughly and constantly checked. This hardly has the emancipatory effect that Glissant implies poetics of relation possesses inherently.

1

In Poetics of Relation Glissant makes one of the most compelling arguments for the significance and value in poetry of recent years. His text points in the right direction as to how to go about reconnecting the two orders of knowledge (the poetic and the scientific), which modern hegemonic accounts of Western reason have portrayed as belonging to two entirely different, and intrinsically incompatible realms. His fundamental proposition is that all peoples, cultural traditions, and spheres of knowledge should enter into relation. A poet of relation (i.e., one who practices "the thinking of errantry"), as Glissant points out, "conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it" (21). Relation is thus simultaneously an ethical, aesthetic, political, and epistemological project that is at odds with traditional hegemonic conceptions of thinking (i.e., those that define it as an essentially calculating, synthesizing, ap-prehending, or com-prehending endeavor).[2]

According to Glissant, relation realizes itself by way of "the other of Thought" (154). The latter alludes to poetic thought, which has been regarded, throughout the history of Western philosophy, as being incompatible with and beyond the domain of "pure" logical reasoning. Glissant proposes that "the other of Thought" is ineffectual without "thought of the Other" (154). The latter basically means engaging with those with whom, because of racial, gender, sexuality, class, linguistic, and/or religious prejudices, the writer does not usually engage. It implies being guided by the ethics of relation, which is first and foremost a transformational ethics.

In the domain of relation, "thought of the Other" changes writing. But "thought of the Other" does not occur due to the writer's generosity, or sense of moral duty. The writer acts in his or her own self-interest, driven by an aesthetic impulse. In Glissant's view,

[Victor] Segalen's crucial idea was that encountering the Other superactivates poetic imagination and understanding. Of course, from that moment on there could be no question of hierarchy in pursuit of relations with the other. [. . .] Segalen does not merely describe recognition of the other as a moral obligation (which would be a banality), but he considers it an aesthetic constituent, the first edict of a real poetics of Relation. (29)

The act of encountering the others[3] fully awakens the "world's poetic force" that lies half-dormant within the writer. But this encounter is in itself sterile, in terms of a poetics of relation, if it does not lead the writer to recognize, that is, to engage, with the others. Recognition of the others, as Glissant indicates, is the defining factor in the unfolding of a genuine poetics of relation. Therefore, what ultimately matters is how the writer engages with the others in and outside the text, and whether or not his or her writing is transformed as a result of such engagement.

In my critique of *El mono gramático*, I will concentrate on exploring what Glissant calls "the first edict of a real poetics of relation," that is, the question of "recognition of the other" (*Poetics of Relation* 29). This particular question has been crucial for the development of the three "trajectories" that the poetics of relation has followed during its history: the one that goes "from the Center toward the peripheries," the one that goes "from peripheries toward the Center," and the one in which "the poet's word leads from periphery to periphery" (39). According to Glissant, in the third mode of poetics of relation the notion of "trajectory," and the distinction between "center" and "periphery" are abolished (29). However, contrary to what one might hope or expect, the hegemony that the authorial voice exercises over the voices of the others in the text is not questioned, problematized, interrupted, or reversed in the literature of relation. In the case of *El mono gramático*, for example, a text that takes all three "trajectories" with equal familiarity and ease, the hierarchy that is established between the voice of the narrator and the oral and written narratives of "the others" in the text is unmistakable. The narrator exerts tight hegemonic control over

these voices. Therefore, even when moving from periphery to periphery, and putting one's text in the presence of others, an engagement with others, and reflection on that engagement, are not guaranteed in the literature of relation.

Below, I will first provide a brief description of Paz's El mono gramático to familiarize the reader with its multiple genre techniques of exploring questions of language and thought. Secondly, I will explore Paz's politics of writing at the dialogical level by examining the relationships between the different voices and discourses that appear in the text. Thirdly, I will put Paz's text into an historical context in order to examine the general political scope of the text. This will allow me to show that Paz's text is poetic, philosophical, and political. At the same time, I will show how these different tasks of the text are intimately bound to his choices in employing a multiplicity of speaking voices without ever ceding space to those voices that are frozen at the enchanted margins of the author's single-minded purpose. Language, and its contingent unruliness, is itself at the heart of Paz's struggle with words, voices, and discourses in this text. These insights will help me analyze both the logical and political implications of Paz's discourse on language. From this analysis, I will present a critique of the ways in which Paz's deployment of different speaking voices and writing techniques ultimately desires to disenchant the world in the manner of philosophers and critics, as opposed to re-enchanting the world in the manner of poets.

2

El mono gramático is a tale of errantry, and a poem of relation. It tells the story of a wayfarer who strays outside the beaten path and strolls aimlessly in Galta (India), and of a writer who plunges freely into the fathomless opacities of language that he chances upon in his Cambridge (England) writing exercise. El mono gramático brings into relation a variety of poems, myths, theories, paintings, photographs, experiences, fantasies, etc. without submitting them to the "genetic" test of filiation, and without processing them in the dialectical mill. Rather, each of its heterogeneous elements diffracts and changes as it enters into relation with the others.

El mono gramático is inspired by the ethos of reconciliation. It brings into relation, with the intention of harmonizing, Galta and Cambridge, Valmiki and Wittgenstein, Hanuman and the Darwinian homo sapiens, visual and written texts, poetry and philosophy, myth, and criticism.[4] This text assembles an intricate variety of divergent and seemingly antithetical elements, creating a polyphony of images, words, concepts, textures, and sounds that do not resolve into an organic whole, but that form what Glissant would call an "écho-monde." [5] El mono gramático constitutes a composite unity that is attained by way of counterpoint, contrast, fragmentation, discontinuity, dissonance, and repetition. Similar to what Theodor Adorno says of Arnold Schoenberg's music, one might also say that "[w]hile all its elements interpenetrate, they also remain distinct, and the unity comes into being only through the function each of them has by virtue of which it influences the others" (129).

But, in spite of the text's multiple genre technique, there are two unifying forces that connect its heterogeneous pieces into an artistically coherent, but politically problematic whole. The first one is the underlying theme of the narrative. Although Paz explores a myriad of topics, his text can be best described as a meditation on language. Each narration gradually becomes, implicitly and explicitly, a thinking experience with language. Together the narrations become a reflection on the meaning of words and expressions, on the relationship between words and things, on the being of words and things, and on the acts of naming, poetizing, thinking, writing, and reading.

The second unifying force of the text is the direct authorial voice of the narrator. In fact, he is the only speaking voice in the text. He interprets, translates, shapes, and suppresses the voices of the different characters that he encounters throughout his writing journey. For instance, the narrator's discourse on language echoes the arguments of a variety of authors (poets, philosophers, linguists, anthropologists) whose identity and discourse remains veiled in the text, even though it is clear that he is having an "interior dialogue" with them. The texts from which the narrator gleans his stories are not directly cited (except in the titles in some cases). Secondly, none of the characters whose stories are retold in the text has a voice. The reader's only knowledge of the stories from which Paz's narrations are drawn is derived solely through his lyrical interpretation. A similar situation occurs with the many people who the narrator encounters in his strolls along the path of Galta. To be sure, Paz is

unable to record their words, or engage them in dialogue, due to his inability to speak their language. Nonetheless, he frequently interprets their words, and even utilizes them as source of philosophical speculation. Moreover, he systematically refuses to have any form of exchange with anyone, even though he is constantly being addressed by people and, sometimes, even invited by some to join them and participate in their festivities. Significantly, the only person with whom he wishes to speak is a sadhu, a Hindu mendicant ascetic who cultivates the art of silence. Finally, although we know that, as Jason Wilson remarks, "on a realistic level Paz writes about a journey that he and his wife made to visit the ruins of Galta" (130-31), her presence in the text is only acknowledged in the dedication, and in a picture of her that is included in the text.

The narrator thus appears in the text as the sole possessor of the word. His monological discourse problematically incorporates the multiplicity of voices that are present in the text, and creates a seemingly unitary and undisputed discourse. Of course, if one accepts Bakhtin's contention that the fundamental characteristic of all works of poetry is precisely the presence of "a unitary and indisputable discourse," there would be no reason to single out Paz's text and present his essentially totalitarian discourse as politically significant (The Dialogical Imagination 286).[6] However, Paz's text is more than straightforward poetry. It is prose poetry. Thus, one should be clear that, as Jonathan Monroe argues, prose poetry breaks with the so-called unitary and indisputable model of language in the poem. As Monroe explains "one major aspect of the prose poem's literary historical importance is precisely that in shifting poetry's locus of struggle from verse to prose, the genre dramatizes and thematizes the lyric's repression of its own dialogicity, and opens poetry onto a more intense dialogical interaction with other modes of discourse" (35).

Paz goes against the historical grain of prose poetry, and instead uses the voice of the narrator to systematically repress the voices of the different characters that appear in the text, ostensibly in the interest of the text's aesthetic and ideological cohesiveness. Nevertheless, the repression of dialogicity in El mono gramático should be read as an implicit political move to exert ideological hegemony over the heterogeneous voices and discourses that coalesce in the text. Below I will explore this point in a close reading of how Paz's text ignores the social-historical grounding of the world he chooses to occupy and

recreate. To do this, I will first need to give the reader a sense of the place in which Paz's text takes place.

3

Paz begins his Mono gramático writing excursion remembering his walks along the path of Galta. Galta is the name of a famous gorge located on the summit of a range of hills a few miles east of the city of Jaipur, India. It is a religious resort with a variety of temples and pools that devotees and pilgrims visit in significant numbers, especially on Tuesdays, when it is Hanuman's day, and on weekends. To reach Galta from Jaipur, one takes the road to Agra. Hanuman temple is located at the bottom of the steep hill where the famous Sun Portal is located. One may reach the Sun Portal from the temple, but the path of Galta is less exhausting if one starts it from the opposite end. The path of Galta is paved with stones, and goes in zigzag up the range. The gorge is populated heavily by black and red-faced monkeys, as well as cows, goats, and other animals. Since people usually bring food to them, or buy it from the few vendors that install themselves sparsely along the path, the animals often follow you, either at a distance or very closely. Sometimes they wait for you to give them their share and leave contently, but sometimes they snatch the food away from you.

Paz begins his writing journey not with an acknowledgement of this place, but in medias res, as follows,

lo mejor será escoger el camino de Galta, recorrerlo de nuevo (inventarlo a medida que lo recorro) y sin darme cuenta, casi insensiblemente, ir hasta el fin--sin preocuparme por saber qué quiere decir "ir hasta el fin" ni qué es lo que he querido decir al escribir esa frase. (El mono gramático 11)

Paz's walking excursion takes place mostly around the temple of Hanuman, and along some marginal segments of the path of Galta. Unlike those who visit Galta for religious reasons, or to enjoy the natural beauty of its gorge, Paz goes to meditate upon the myriad of things that he encounters there, including Galta's rugged natural, and deteriorated urban landscape. In this sense, the place that Paz draws into his text is a place disembodied from its cultural, social, and political significance.

Cuando caminaba por el sendero de Galta, ya lejos de la carretera, una vez pasado el paraje de los banianos y los charcos de agua podrida, traspuesto el Portal en ruinas, al penetrar en la plazuela rodeada de casas desmoronadas, precisamente al comenzar la caminata, tampoco sabía adonde iba ni me preocupaba saberlo. No me hacía preguntas: caminaba, nada más caminaba, sin rumbo fijo. Iba al encuentro... (sic) ¿de qué iba al encuentro? Entonces no lo sabía y no lo sé ahora. (11)

Like his strolls in Galta, Paz conceives his writing of El mono gramático as a path that he traverses in a desultory, non-assiduous manner. The path is both off the road, and off the main route followed by the wayfarers visiting the area. Unlike them, he neither follows a mapped out course nor seeks a concrete destination. His sole task is to make the journey itself, and reach "the end" without much concern or intentness for what is around him.

Paz does not errantly[7] inhabit the social space that his text references. Rather, he exercises a hegemonic appropriation more similar to what Glissant calls métissage, or a mixing that aims to domesticate and suppress both difference and the clash of places and world views that Galta represents and assembles. Galta is a place for contemplative, but strangely disembodied meditation for Paz. As he crosses the Portal, he seems to access a different sort of realm where he is capable of disengaging himself from the world. Paz's meditative concern is not with the spatial or temporal immediacy of his situation, but with what lies far beyond his field of vision. Galta opens up to him the possibility of reaching a transcendental realm of knowledge. Paz's Galta is in this sense not a destination in and for itself:

Cuando caminaba por el sendero de Galta [. . .] caminaba, nada más caminaba, sin rumbo fijo. Iba al encuentro... (sic) ¿de qué iba al encuentro? Entonces no lo sabía y no lo sé ahora. Tal vez por eso escribí "ir hasta el fin:" para saberlo, para saber qué hay detrás del fin. Una trampa verbal; después del fin no hay nada pues si algo hubiese el fin no sería fin. Y, no obstante, siempre caminamos al encuentro de..., (sic) aunque sepamos que nada ni nadie nos aguarda. (11)

Paz's walks along the path of Galta were filled excitingly with uncertainty, but tainted disappointingly with expectation or desire for resolution or overcoming. In the first sentence Paz writes that his aim is to "go to the end" without worrying about the meaning of those words. The fact that he does not capitalize the first letter of that sentence suggests

that his quest began elsewhere and, therefore, that this writing journey is but a continuation of some other journey. Perhaps it began in Galta, perhaps not. What is clear is that Paz thinks that the best way to reach his goal is by choosing the path of Galta that exists in his mind. From such a premise, he will not, or cannot, give into the place, specificity, and contingency of Galta. By re-traversing the path of Galta, Paz hopes to reach some already imagined "end" of that journey. However, as he names this hope and task, Paz also becomes aware of its meaning and reaches an impasse--the realization of the impossibility of such an end. While wandering the path of Galta, he could go on without asking or being aware of his intentions. But, in his writing excursion, he realizes that he cannot designate with an accurate name that which he is hoping to encounter in order to reach "the end." Paz's reflexive consciousness takes over and interrupts his unmindful wayfaring and questioning. The phrase "going to the end," he says, "is a verbal trap." The inattentive relationship with language that he attempts to establish in this text is soon shattered. If, when he first spelled out the phrase "going to the end," the latter felt appropriate and transparent, as soon as he reflects on its meaning he realizes its inefficacy and senselessness.

Paz's writing excursion in El mono gramático is characterized by, on the one hand, an attempt to give way to the unfolding of language as he makes his way through the text and, on the other hand, an impossibility of taking his way to "the end" as he tries to work his way out of the labyrinths of language. The "end" of his journey becomes language itself. Hence, although at the beginning of his journey he sets forth to meet something that he is unable to name, and that seems unnameable, from the very outset his quest evolves into a meditation on language itself.

Therefore, even if throughout this text Paz journeys to a variety of places and meditates upon a wide variety of topics, the text's underlying object of analysis is nonetheless language. The same might also be said for many of Paz's poetic works, particularly Blanco.^[8] However, El mono gramático is undeniably a different kind of literary exploration than any of his previous works, because it develops a more heterogeneous approach to language by exploring a variety of genres and literary spaces. As José Miguel Oviedo observes, in El Mono Gramático "Paz wished to produce a text which would be an intersection of poetry,

narrative and essay, thus putting into practice his famous assertion that poetry is always a sort of 'critical poetry,' a reflection of itself" (617).

While, as Manuel Durán points out, it is in Blanco where "Paz reaches his highest level as a philosophical poet" (593), it is in El mono gramático where he reaches his peak as a theorist of language. To be sure, Paz does not approach language as an analyst who methodically describes and explains language's properties, or hidden, or intrinsic structure, etc. Unlike other philosophers and theorists, he does not set out to make a set of propositions that allegedly explain the elements or principles of language, but, as Heidegger might say, Paz "lets himself be properly concerned by the claim of language by entering it" (On the Way to Language 57).

Nevertheless, in his concern for language and its heterogeneity, Paz has difficulty fully entering and submitting to language as a historically, culturally specific set of practices. This is because he still wants to control and domesticate the many speech genres, discursive practices, and cultural traditions that he brings into his text. This he does in order to get lost in (the abstract concept of) language, but not in the worldviews of the languages and traditions with which he engages. Putting aside their differences and particularities, Paz does not embrace the contingency introduced by the clashes of worldviews that these languages and traditions open up.

4

In order to understand the politics of writing of Paz's text it is important to note not only the politics that take place on a discursive level within the text, but also those that take place at the level of the historical moment in which Paz is writing. He wrote El mono gramático in the Summer of 1970, less than two years after the 1968 student revolutionary movements erupted throughout the Western hemisphere, including Mexico City. These events affected Paz in a very direct way. In response to the Tlatelolco massacre, where hundreds of students and other demonstrators were assassinated by the Mexican armed forces, Paz resigned from his post as Ambassador of India. In this period, he also wrote Posdata where he analyzed

the 1968 movement in Mexico in the context of the modern Mexican political and economic system.

With this in mind, I wish to propose that this text represents Paz's most ambitious poetic-philosophical-political project. However, because of its marginally explicit political content, the latter can only be understood in light of the above historical events. Unlike other political essays that he wrote fulfilling his role as a public intellectual in Mexico, Paz was fulfilling his role as a writer when he wrote El Mono Gramático. As he says in a 1968 speech at the Colegio de México, "the writer is not the servant of the Church, the State, the Party, the people, or moral society: [he] is the servant of language. But he really serves [language] only when he puts it into question. Modern literature is first and foremost criticism of language" (Pasión crítica 7).

For this reason, Paz's criticism of language in this text should be interpreted as an eminently political endeavor. This is particularly the case given that, according to Paz, the ultimate political issue throughout history is the "loss of faith in the efficacy of the word." As he points out in El arco y la lira,

La historia del hombre podría reducirse a la de las relaciones entre las palabras y el pensamiento. Todo periodo de crisis se inicia o coincide con una crítica del lenguaje. De pronto se pierde la fe en la eficacia del vocablo [. . .]. Todas las sociedades han atravesado por estas crisis de sus fundamentos que son, asimismo y sobre todo, crisis del sentido de ciertas palabras. Se olvida con frecuencia que, como todas las otras creaciones humanas, los Imperios y los Estados están hechos de palabras: son hechos verbales. (29)

At the heart of Paz's conception of his role as writer is the task of critiquing language. According to him, critiquing language is an historical act, capable of moving mountains. El mono gramático can thus be regarded as a political text in that it is an effort to critique language through poetry. True, in parts of this text the narrator appears to assume the role of reformer or restorer of the purity and meaning of everyday language. Nonetheless, overwhelmingly the role he assumes is that of the critic of language. In El mono gramático, he asserts that it is impossible to reestablish the lost unity of words and things because he

feels language is ultimately and essentially self-referential and, thus, not capable of actually signifying anything other than itself. But such a conclusion is only possible because he fails, or refuses, to submit to the contingent, and contradictory historic trajectories and social relations that are nonetheless present in the myths and languages he evokes and invokes.

The following quote from El mono gramático illustrates vividly the implicit dialogue that takes place in the text between different conflicting views on language. In this case, the narrator is placing in dialogue the perspectives of an implied "purist reformer-ruler" of language, and a "skeptical critic/advisor" (in parentheses).

Deberíamos someter el lenguaje a un régimen de pan y agua, si queremos que no se corrompa y nos corrompa. (Lo malo es que régimen-de-pan-y-agua es una expresión figurada como lo es la corrupción-del-lenguaje-y-sus-contagios.) Hay que destejer (otra metáfora) inclusive las frases más simples para averiguar qué es lo que encierran (más expresiones figuradas) y de qué y cómo están hechas (¿de qué está hecho el lenguaje? y, sobre todo, ¿está hecho o es algo que perpetuamente se está haciendo?). Destejer el tejido verbal: la realidad aparecerá. (Dos metáforas). (25-26)

The main text in this quote suggests the utterances of a "naïve" ruler who wants to carry out a reform to purify language. The comments in parentheses voice the words of a skeptical critic/advisor who puts in evidence the inherent figurative nature of language. However, ultimately the "critic" prevails over the "ruler." Instead of a reform of language, the text deconstructs language, shows the impossibility of pure representation of things, and the impossibility of the existence of things outside language.

El mono gramático thus undertakes a poetic-philosophical-political critique of language. Paz's ultimate political task is to find out whether it is at all possible to rely upon language as a genuinely revolutionary practice in the writing of poetry. His quest is to ask whether one can use language as a means to endow things with their actual being. Not surprisingly, Paz finds it impossible to attain such a utopian condition in any lasting way. Language to him is fundamentally incapable of disclosing things in themselves. According to him, the true identity and unity of words and things is the forbidden fruit of human language. Identity and unity of words and things are qualities that only divine languages possess.

Nevertheless, instead of turning away from the goal of disclosing the actuality of things, Paz earnestly invests his faith in the idea that poetry ought to effect a critique of everyday language in order to disclose for an instant the "true" being of things. This is an anti-historical move, a move that Glissant (for one) would emphatically disapprove of due to its tendency to deny and suppress the heterogeneity and contingency of the world around us. Such a move can only appeal to some universal truth; a truth that crushes the contingent, contradictory worldviews, and experiences of language one necessarily encounters in the practice of speaking and listening.

Instead of turning away from truth as universal and language as representation, Paz insists that:

El poeta no es el que nombra las cosas, sino el que disuelve sus nombres, el que descubre que las cosas no tienen nombre y que los nombres con que las llamamos no son suyos. La crítica del paraíso se llama lenguaje: abolición de los nombres propios; la crítica del lenguaje se llama poesía: los nombres se adelgazan hasta la transparencia, la evaporación. En el primer caso, el mundo se vuelve lenguaje; en el segundo, el lenguaje se convierte en mundo. Gracias al poeta el mundo se queda sin nombres. Entonces, por un instante, podemos verlo tal cual es--en azul adorable. Y esa visión nos abate, nos enloquece; si las cosas son pero no tienen nombre: sobre la tierra no hay medida alguna. (96-97; emphasis in the original)

In this way, Paz regards the poet as a larger-than-life mythological figure who single handedly destroys appearances, and restores for an instant the "true" nature of things. The political task of poetry for Paz is, thus, to critique language and overcome language's reified state in order to present things as they "truly" are. However, such an unveiling of "the true nature of things," as Paz realizes, does not make us at home in the world; rather, it imposes upon us a home that incarcerates. Although Paz's momentary truth-disclosing is supposed to be a liberating act, his approach does not set anyone free. In fact, it re-delivers us into the clutches of universal thought. It binds us to a repressive regime that refuses the multiplicity of language experiences we undergo simultaneously as we inhabit multiple and varyingly constructed worlds--worlds constructed in place-history-specific languages that make things and concepts particular and peculiar, and never universal and knowable.

Paz's meditations on language in El mono gramático ultimately disclose a poetics of despair that radically relativizes the critical endeavor to the point of making it radically uncritical. Politically speaking, Paz's poetics become a mock subversiveness that leaves the world utterly unchanged. If the task of poetry is to dissolve the world's names, and if things can exist outside of languages, histories, and their differential metaphors, then the task of dissolving the names of things undertaken in poetry can have no other effect in the "real" world than to re-inscribe a universality that represses and crushes.

In the attempt to overcome the reification of language by making language the object of criticism, Paz reifies language once more. Ultimately, by aiming to momentarily disenchant the world of its metaphors and language, splitting away words from "truth" and "actuality," Paz strips his critical practice of its social and historical component and inadvertently places criticism at the service of the status quo. In Paz's poetics, language is made artificially autonomous from its social and historical processes. However, language is first and foremost a means of symbolic exchange between human beings in order to construct and negotiate the worlds in which we live. Therefore, Paz's treatment of language as a relation between words is a reactionary attempt to divest language of its home(s) in its many worlds (the worlds of human beings).

To conclude, Paz's meditation on language is a quest for an "originary," unhistorical language that restores to human language its ability to present the world as it "is" in actuality. According to him, the task of poetry is precisely to accomplish this endeavor through a critique of language. Paz claims that, at its best, poetry can fulfill this mission, but only for a fleeting epiphanic moment. Paz's poetics assigns the poet the mission of disenchanting the world from the spell of history in a single-handed stroke. The poet thus assumes the role of mythological figure who, like the monkey God Hanuman, fights and kills the Rakshasas, the Gandharvas, and the Kalanemis that make human language an opaque and petrified being. However, in advocating this mythological-heroic role for the poet, Paz effaces the historical and social-collective content and form of language. By treating language as an autonomous entity that poets can "dissolve," Paz attempts to restore language's mythical transparency, as well as its primordial unity without regard for its embedment in the social and historical

world. In this manner, Paz implies that the crisis of language, i.e., the devaluation of the meaning of words like freedom, democracy, justice, revolution, utopia, truth, etc. in the contemporary world is somehow independent from the historical and social processes that have endowed this crisis.

The result of Paz's language politics in El mono gramático is the establishment of a Republic (definitely not an imagined community, or heterotopy) where the poet occupies the top of the social pyramid, and where his is the only voice that will be allowed to speak. In Paz's quest for a "transparent" language he, the poet-king, silences the voices of everyone else gathered into the Republic for the sake of the poetic beauty and harmonious resonance of the text. In this way, Paz's chosen language experience cannibalizes the discourses of the others in order to present a unitary text where free reign can be given to the contemplation of language--as if language no longer came from and spoke for specific places in the world.

Notes

[1] This essay is a revised version of chapter four of my Ph.D. thesis. I want to especially thank Sandra Comstock for her numerous suggestions. Her insightful comments helped me push further my critique of Paz's writing and language politics.

[2] Martin Heidegger, What is Called Thinking?, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper, 1968) 113-71.

[3] Even though Glissant uses the term "the other," I prefer to say "the others" because this term acknowledges the multiplicity and complexity of those who are regarded as being different from the hegemonic Western self. Moreover, in the particular case of El mono gramático "the others" include not only people from Galta, but also a good number of white, male, European intellectual icons, such as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Lévi-Strauss.

[4] Manuel Ulacia, El árbol milenario: Un recorrido por la obra de Octavio Paz (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 1999) 365-87.

[5] As Glissant points out, "William Faulkner's work, Bob Marley's song, and the theories of Benoit Mandelbrot are all *échos-monde*. Wilfredo Lam's painting (flowing together), or that of Roberto Matta (tearing apart); the architecture of Chicago and just as easily the shantytowns of Rio or Caracas; Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, but also the marching of schoolchildren in Soweto are *échos-monde*. *Finnegan's Wake* was an *écho-monde* that was prophetic and consequently absolute (without admission into the real)" (*Poetics of Relation* 93).

[6] According to Bakhtin, "The world of poetry, no matter how many contradictions and insoluble conflicts the poet develops within it, is always illumined by one unitary and indisputable discourse" (*The Dialogical Imagination* 286).

[7] In Glissant's sense of a Creole practice of *errantry*, or dwelling in strange lands and with strange languages.

[8] According to Manuel Durán, "Ultimately Paz as a poet is a master of language, yet one who recognizes that language is also our shaper and ruler [. . .]. It is through language that Paz faces the world, sees the world as a unity, confronts the diversities of culture, and explains their apparent oppositions and contradictions, their conjunctions and disjunctions, as different responses to the same identical question" (592).

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