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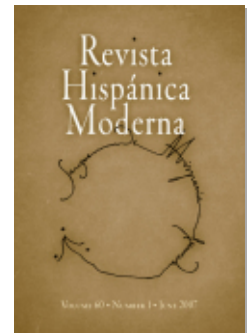
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# Technologies of the Self and the Body in Octavio Paz's "The Works of the Poet"

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The collection of prose poems "The Works of the Poet" included in Octavio Paz's seminal book *Libertad bajo palabra* represents the first sustained effort, across several texts, to grapple with the complexities of the "mission" of the modern poet through meta-poetry in contemporary Mexican literature. Paz's critics have overlooked the singularity of this collection of poems as a system of aesthetic and discursive devices of experimental character.<sup>1</sup> The combined qualities of experimental, meta-discursive, and playful expressions are conveyed through the invention of a poetic self that manipulates representations of the world and the body in the text as if they were malleable materials. In the following pages I explain, in reference to socio-historical context and philosophical ideas, how certain angst before modernity is the apparent motivation for such experiments. I also aim to demonstrate how the social and aesthetic preoccupations of the first half of the twentieth century are central to the discourse of the late Latin American avant-garde and especially important in Paz's literary work.<sup>2</sup>

## I

The poetic discourse of the late avant-garde does not bear the signs of liberation, but of a profound pessimism where the possible unity of the self in the world has become devaluated and has lost ground. The poetic self is perceived as insignificant, compressed by the ideological and institutional arrangements of society. Here, a new hermeneutic conception of the body is at work. Since the material

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<sup>1</sup> Even though Wilson (108), Philips (97–101), Schärer-Nussberger (48–54), and Quiroga (42) have devoted some comments to the collection, their discussions are general at best. They aim to account for the variety and complexity in *Libertad bajo palabra* rather than attempting to pin down the philosophical and poetic challenges deployed by these texts vis-à-vis Western thought and the practice of the prose poem in Mexico.

<sup>2</sup> I borrow and stretch here the classification proposed by Paz himself, who placed Vicente Huidobro, Macedonio Fernández and Carlos Pellicer in a first moment of the avant-garde and then he recognizes "two bright zeniths" of the movement. The first comprises Neruda and Vallejo, while the second includes, among others, José Lezama Lima, Alberto Girri, Nicanor Parra, Cintio Vitier, and Paz himself ("Los nuevos acólitos" 38). I include Gironde in the final list and identify the latter group as the "late Latin American avant-garde."

world under the instrumental reason of modernity exerts a power of destruction and violence against the body, the theoretical reason accompanying the former must be exposed and disarticulated.<sup>3</sup> To that effect, the poetic voice in late avant-garde poetry acquires a performative character and invents a persona dissociated from the Romantic-Symbolist self and other poetic constructions of the past. At the same time, this poetic actor turns language into a weapon against past notions of the relationship of the body to the soul.

To follow closer these transformations in some of the sixteen prose poems of Paz's collection, I borrow Michel Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self," which permits individuals:

By their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality. (18)

One can argue that in many ways late avant-garde poetry is exploring this possibility of transforming the self in response to the changing conditions imposed by modern societies. The poem is often looking for a new state of wisdom, purity or perfection by exerting a series of imaginary operations on the body represented in the text. In this sense "The Works of the Poet" proposes some technologies of its own, including:

- a) The evaporation of the self in the poetic voice. This allows for the poetic discourse to approach material and abstract entities as if they were equivalent. However, this apparent dissolution or evaporation also reflects the fragmentary and dissociated character of the self under the aporias of modernity.<sup>4</sup>
- b) The body is referenced or perceived as a site for the possible reconstruction of a unified self against the failed philosophical assumptions of modernity.
- c) The self is represented as an entity desperately trying to get closer to the

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<sup>3</sup> I use the concepts of "instrumental" and "theoretical" reason from the "Critical theory" of the Frankfurt School because I feel the challenges posed by "The Works of the Poet" to the ideas of Enlightenment and Western philosophy in general follow the parameters of the "negative thought" as deployed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) and *The Eclipse of Reason* (1947). Even if Martín Hopenhyn believes the writings of the Frankfurt School circulated little in Latin America before the 1960s some of its concepts seem to be already in use by members of the philosophical community in Mexico (cf. Hopenhyn 62). This is not surprising since German philosophy was frequently studied in these circles in Mexico and also discussed in Ortega y Gasset's *Revista de Occidente*, a common reading on both sides of the Atlantic (Serrano Migallón 33). For instance, in 1934 Samuel Ramos sees the new educational programs in Mexico as oriented by an "instrumental conception of man" and gives to this idea very similar parameters to those used by Horkheimer to define "instrumental reason" in his writings (see Ramos 81).

<sup>4</sup> I am using the concept of modernity in its philosophical and historical sense in relation to what Enrique Dussel calls "Second modernity," which incorporates the ideas of Enlightenment, the tenets of individualism, the capitalist system and the material transformations of the Industrial Revolution of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Dussel 13–14).

materiality of the body. But this quest, carried by means of linguistic and poetic devices, tends to fail and therefore language is denounced as an inadequate and repressive system of signs, unsuitable for the reunification of the self.

While displaying these “technologies of the self,” the poem falls into innumerable contradictions that confirm its modern ethos. It is precisely when the poetic self discovers and strives to circumvent such contradictions, however, that the lucidity of the poetic discourse is attained. I will explain how some of these transformations can be viewed as mechanisms of symbolic reaction or compensation vis-à-vis the historical and material conditions prevalent in the first fifty years of the twentieth century in Latin America.

After the First World War the hegemonic groups of many Latin American nations imposed on their societies a series of accelerated changes in order to implement the ideas of the Enlightenment and modernity as scientific and governmental practices. For their part, Latin American poets shared the anxieties and desires of the governmental elites to modernize their own aesthetic practice. This explains in part the commitment to innovation and transformation of poetic discourse, and the interest of Latin American aesthetic movements in the appropriation and challenging of the literary production coming from the other side of the Atlantic.<sup>5</sup> If the avant-garde movement was relatively successful in its endeavor, the desire for modernity was not as easy to realize at the economic and social level.<sup>6</sup> The material conditions of Latin American countries revealed a different rhythm of change. Societies also had a distinct internal logic in terms of political organization and economic destiny.<sup>7</sup>

With the impulse of industrialization, the international division of labor accentuated these differences, especially in the aftermath of the Second World War (Halperín Donghi 249–50). It was amid this dislocated history, this differential “speed” with which center and periphery aim toward modernity, that Latin American societies were re-inserted into the world economy under neocolonial conditions. The hopes and frustrations raised by these profound social and political changes urged a reconsideration of the philosophical and ideological assumptions of the Western tradition among the intellectual elites of the Hispanic world (cf. Roig 58; Bosch García 258).

In Mexico one of the first attempts to rethink the role of national history and

<sup>5</sup> The proliferation of “isms” and schools of the avant-garde in Latin America is as prevalent as it was in Europe between 1916 and 1935. Combining their knowledge of Western aesthetics and their desire for affirming their own national identity and historical circumstance Estridentismo appears in Mexico, O Modernismo in Brazil, Ultraísmo in Argentina, and Creacionismo in Chile, among others (see Verani, *Vanguardias* 11; Torre, “Ultraísmo” 204, 260–64).

<sup>6</sup> García Canclini asserts that by the third decade of the twentieth century many Latin American countries displayed an “exuberant modernism with a deficient modernization” (*Hybrid Cultures*, 41).

<sup>7</sup> The Mexican recourse to violent confrontation in order to establish a modern form of relationship among the State and the masses was strikingly different to the reformist and *caudillista* solutions implemented in many countries of the Southern Cone like Argentina and Uruguay (see Halperín Donghi 186, 188).

culture in relation to the philosophical ideas of the West was the ontological quest to define Mexicanness (Mexicanidad) (cf. Beuchot 111). Following the tradition of philosophical and political thinking inaugurated by Bolívar, Martí, and continued by Rodó to determine the identity and destiny of “our America,” Samuel Ramos published in 1934 *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México*. With a mix of psychological observations, historical, and phenomenological discussions, Ramos attempts to find the concrete and historical forces shaping the experience of being Mexican. His critique of an artificial Europeaness and of an uncritical romanticizing of the indigenous past practiced by the hegemonic classes was polemically received by the public, but also inspired the formation of the philosophical research group “Hiperión” (Hyperion) in 1949 (Ramos 83–84; Zea ix-x). The members of the group, Leopoldo Zea, Luis Villoro, Salvador Reyes Navares, and Jorge Portilla among others, became leading figures of post-revolutionary Mexican thought.<sup>8</sup> Between 1950 and 1952, the authors of Hyperion and Octavio Paz—even though the poet was not a member of the group—published studies considering the same problem: what it really meant to be Mexican in a world in which technology, tradition, and modernity are contradictory yet inescapable forces (cf. Vizcaíno 88–89).

“Los trabajos del poeta” (The Works of the Poet) appear in the Argentinean magazine *Sur* in 1949 (Paz, *Libertad* 225). *¿Águila o sol?*, the original book of poems in which this collection of prose poems was first included, is published in 1951, while Paz resided in Paris in a self-imposed exile lasting from 1944 to 1953 (Santí, “Introducción” 31, 36). *El laberinto de la soledad* appears in Mexico in 1950 and, given this timetable, it is fair to assume that the book of essays and the prose poems respond to the same critical impulse (cf. Verani, *Bibliografía* 11; Santí, “Introducción” 36 and *Acto* 152, 180). Paz was trying to delimit and/or conjure the forces struggling in a modern mind, a mind torn between the desire for revolution, the aesthetic pleasure of creation, the marvels and horrors of modern technology, and its economic concomitant: war. *El laberinto de la soledad* seems to be the historically based, rational attempt to deal with the angst of modernity, whereas “The Works of the Poet,” its mirror image, is a Dionysian critique of Western philosophy through poetry. Furthermore, *El laberinto* responds to the quests posed by the Mexican circumstance of the poet viewed from afar. The prose poems represent an immersion into the aesthetic and philosophical challenges of the international avant-garde.

In *El laberinto*, as in the works of the Hyperion group, there is an attempt to reassess the effects of modernity on Mexican society.<sup>9</sup> The horrors of the World

<sup>8</sup> Villoro’s *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo en México* (1950), Reyes Navares’s *El amor y la amistad en el mexicano* (1952), Zea’s *Conciencia y posibilidad del mexicano* (1952), and Portilla’s *Fenomenología del relajo* (1966) are not the only examples in the effort to redefine the experience of a Latin American people. José Carlos Mariátegui’s *Siete ensayos sobre la realidad peruana* (1934) and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada’s reflections on Argentina in his *Radiografía de la pampa* (1945) are also attempts, with different ideological and methodological resources, to ascertain the specificity of the culture and identity of the peoples of the Americas.

<sup>9</sup> The publication of *El laberinto de la soledad* in 1950 marks the beginning of a long discussion with several members of the Hyperion group who systematically attacked but also commented and reacted vis-à-vis Paz’s work. Santí analyzes the details of such discussion in his introduction to *El laberinto* (*Acto* 154–58).

Wars made clear that Europe, the region touted as the apex of civilization in the Hegelian system of history, was also vulnerable to barbarism. The postcolonial habit of Latin American intellectuals to always look toward Europe for models for historical research or philosophical investigation came to be seriously questioned (cf. Ramos 79). Although the actual suffering of the Spanish conflict and the European wars was only directly experienced by a limited number of Latin American poets and artists, the ethical consequences of the Holocaust and the dangers of the Cold War were not ignored by philosophers and thinkers from the region (cf. Magis 200).<sup>10</sup> For their part, the analysis and understanding of everyday life, along with the demands of producing a relevant corpus amid the violence and poverty of Latin America, appeared very problematic as well. This sense of crisis made all the more urgent the call for changes in the aesthetic re-conceptualization of reality.

By 1949, Brazil, Argentina, most of Central America, and a good number of other countries in the continent had endured the recurrent eruption of military rule, or some other form of authoritarian regime.<sup>11</sup> If at this time Mexico briefly enjoys an economic miracle due to the early implementation of an economic model of import substitution industrialization, the pains of development can be traced back to the exponential growth of urban centers, especially Mexico City, and to increasing disparities among social classes (Meyer 885). Although the mythic space of the Mexican metropolis—“la región más transparente del aire”—witnesses the emergence of an incipient middle class, the city will lose its transparency at an alarming pace.<sup>12</sup> While class contrasts intensify, the urban landscape acquires the external signs of architectural modernity through the intense activity of the muralists and the governmental obsession for making every public project into a monument to progress.

Octavio Paz’s poetry collection “The Works of the Poet” and *Libertad bajo palabra*, the book compiling the works of those years, appear amid these material and ideological circumstances, commenting on the achievements and shortcomings of the aesthetic projects from the first half of the century.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Among the recognized literary figures participating in European conflicts I should mention Nicaraguan poet Salomón de la Selva who served in the British army during the First World War. Octavio Paz, César Vallejo, Vicente Huidobro, Pablo Neruda and Nicolás Guillén traveled to Europe in the 1930s and were present in Spain during the Civil War. Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros was an officer of the Republican armed forces. Huidobro worked as radio journalist in Paris during World War II. Aside from the individual participation of Latin American poets and artists in different European conflicts, the influence of the Spanish Republic expatriates in Mexico, Argentina and other countries was seminal for educational institutions from elementary schools to universities (see Cruz Orozco 41,46; Marqués 84)

<sup>11</sup> Maximiliano Hernández Martínez installed himself as the ruling authority of El Salvador from 1935 to 1944. In Nicaragua, the Somoza family still enjoyed the power built by the founder of the dynasty since 1937. Getulio Vargas in Brazil and Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina exerted their influence on the politics of their respective countries until the first half of the 1950s. Since 1929 Mexico’s system of a single strong party (PRI), is rapidly consolidating the authoritarian character of its regimes.

<sup>12</sup> The epithet for Mexico City as the “most transparent region of the air” was introduced by Alfonso Reyes although it was Carlos Fuentes who gave this title to a novel in 1956.

<sup>13</sup> *Libertad bajo palabra* appears originally in 1949. After several editions with poems added and suppressed, in 1960 the volume is re-edited containing the collected works from 1935 to

## II

After Julián del Casal, Rubén Darío, and José Martí introduced the prose poem to the Americas, Mexican Modernists adopted the form and made it part of their repertoire. Justo Sierra, Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, and Ramón López Velarde are precursors of the prose poem, before the two intellectual groups of the beginning of the century, Ateneo and Contemporáneos, made it a poetic form of choice (Helguera 19–23).<sup>14</sup> Julio Torri, a member of Ateneo, and Gilberto Owen, from Contemporáneos, are perhaps the truest practitioners of the ironic, festive, and suggestive possibilities of the prose poem.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, the impulse to use this form for a sustained thematic investigation of the conditions of the poet as a struggling being—suffering the anxiety of a fast changing society and responding violently against the modern world—is Paz’s most important contribution to the history of the genre in Mexico. “The Works of the Poet” applies and displays the catalogue of poetic devices of the European and Latin American movements to systematically question the conditions of possibility for the construction of a modern subjectivity within the parameters of Western philosophy.<sup>16</sup> The critical stance of the collection exemplifies the dialectical relation of the aesthetic practices of the 1940s and 50s with modernity, as experienced within Latin America and other societies of the economic periphery.

Despite the fascination Paz’s poetry and essays evince toward the concept of modernity, the embracing of “the modern” is also a source of unsettling discoveries. In his reflective prose, long gone is the bourgeois lust for life of the Symbolists and Parnassians (Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine) celebrated by Darío. Lost also are the songs of prophetic faith in instrumental reason, supporting the idea of progress based on the magnificence of the machine. Paz’s reflective prose differs from the poetry of Apollinaire and from the poetic and artistic movements in the style of Futurism and Constructivism in that Paz regards the emblems of modernity (airplanes, trains stations, skyscrapers) as meaningless irradiations of power (cf. Raymond 185; Scharf 160; Torre, “Futurismo” 91).

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1957. The editions of 1960 and beyond include “Los trabajos del poeta” as part of the section “¿Águila o sol?” (see Verani, *Bibliografía* 12; Paz, *Poemas 1935–1975* 11). For a detailed account of the editorial transformations of the book, see Santí, *El acto de las palabras* 79–122.

<sup>14</sup> The Ateneo group included José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso, Alfonso Reyes, Julio Torri, Julio Jiménez Rueda, and Martín Luis Guzmán among others (Monsiváis 969). Their work could be seen as the bridge between the aesthetic of Modernismo and that of the avant-garde. The Contemporáneos group was more interested in the experimental possibilities of literature and included poets and dramatists such as Xavier Villaurrutia, Carlos Pellicer, José Gorostiza, Salvador Novo, Gilberto Owen, and Genaro Estrada, among others (Monsiváis 998).

<sup>15</sup> Helguera describes two moments of apogee for the prose poem before Octavio Paz undertook the writing of “The Works of the Poet.” As mentioned before, the first important period for this poetic form is related to the activity of the Ateneo group 1914–1924. The second moment of a lesser intensity is due to the activity of the Contemporáneos 1925–1930 (Helguera 33).

<sup>16</sup> Maya Schärer-Nussberger finds echoes of Mallarmé, Micheaux, Breton and others in this collection. Paz characterizes his poetry as a product of a third moment of the Latin American avant-garde, recognizing the influence and precedence of Huidobro, Neruda, and Vallejo among others (*Corriente alterna* 38).



La tierra y el cielo que la filosofía había despoblado de dioses se cubren paulatinamente con las formidables construcciones de la técnica. Sólo que esas obras no representan nada y, en rigor nada dicen. Las iglesias románicas, las estupas budistas y las pirámides mesoamericanas se asentaban sobre una idea del tiempo y sus formas eran una representación del mundo: la arquitectura como doble simbólico del cosmos [. . .]

¿Qué dicen nuestros hangares, estaciones de ferrocarril, edificios de oficinas, fábricas y monumentos públicos? No dicen: son funciones, no significaciones. Son centros de energía, monumentos de la voluntad, signos que irradian poder, no sentido. Las obras antiguas eran una representación de la realidad, la real y la imaginaria; las de la técnica son una operación sobre la realidad. (Paz, *El signo y el garabato* 13)<sup>17</sup>

It is precisely this irradiating power of the machine that poetry challenges. By recuperating the agency of human imagination, poetry strives to question the logic of a material world in which the instrumentalization of life threatens to homogenize all the spheres of human existence. Therefore Paz, although weary of the cult of the “tradition of rupture” founded by modern art, embraces what he calls the critical passion that defines modernity, a passion that he recognizes as encouraging criticism of the system inside the system:<sup>18</sup>

Pasión crítica: amor inmoderado, pasional, por la crítica y sus precisos mecanismos de deconstrucción, pero también crítica enamorada de su objeto, crítica apasionada por aquello mismo que niega. Enamorada de sí misma y siempre en guerra consigo misma, no afirma nada permanente ni se funda en ningún principio: la negación de todos los principios, el cambio perpetuo, es su principio. (*Los hijos del limo* 20)

Despite this endorsement for continuous change in modern art, the idea of an authentic social revolution in our times was becoming less and less attractive to Paz by 1949. He participated in, observed, and criticized the political process in Mexico. He also visited Spain in 1937, before the fall of the Republic (Guibert 27; Vizcaíno 68). In Mexico he later supported, collaborated, and then broke with some of the political exiles of the international left who had taken up residence in the country during President Cárdenas’s regime, 1936–1940 (Vizcaíno

<sup>17</sup> This excerpt comes from Paz’s lecture for the induction as a member of “El Colegio Nacional” pronounced in 1967. The text was published in *El signo y el garabato* in 1973. I cite the excerpt because it explains how modernity was viewed by Paz in many of his essays even if they were written after “The Works of the Poet” was composed. As is frequently the case, and Paz insisted on this, poetic intuition antecedes philosophical pondering.

<sup>18</sup> “Tradición de la ruptura” is perhaps the oxymoron of choice Paz used most frequently to describe the *modus operandi* of modern art and the avant-garde movement. Among other books and articles is used in the prologue to the anthology *Poesía en movimiento* and in the book of essays discussing the Latin American and international avant-garde *Los hijos del limo* (see “Poesía en movimiento” 145)

73).<sup>19</sup> In the following years Paz adamantly voiced his disappointment with Communism and would frequently criticize the USSR, prophesizing its ultimate demise from that moment on (see “Memento” *Hombres en su siglo* 114; Vizcaíno 98).

At any rate, “The Works of the Poet” matters less as a psychographic work defining the mental state of the poet in those years, but rather as an example of the culmination of a process of exploration and experimentation of the avant-garde movements. This new era of Latin American poetry saw significant change within the search for the lost unity of the self. A unity once thought to be symbolically attainable through the production and reading of the poetic text since the Romantic era. In contrast, for the poets of this generation the instrumental reason posed by the modern ideals of individualism, secularism, and faith in the objectivity and infallibility of science, became the basis for the violent practices of governments. Modern states invariably imposed their economic interests on the most vulnerable members of the international community and inside national societies. The general human and material progress promised by the first waves of mechanization was irremediably transformed into a war machine reaffirming the supremacy of a powerful few over the lives and resources of many (cf. Grenier 84).

The theoretical and ethical reasons propounded by the continental schools of philosophy, especially by German idealism, were unable to conjure the madness and savagery of genocide. The twentieth century had shown its tragic character and evinced no sign of hopeful resolution. The urgency to pick up the pieces of the shattered self in the midst of the general disillusionment of the post-world-war era led to a tremendous anxiety. The poet seemed to impose on him/herself the task of delving into the gap left by the impossibility of reconciling theoretical and practical reason. This was the most important symbolic mission for poetry at that time, a challenge foregrounded in Paz’s poems and essays.

The Cold War confirmed that massive destruction had made humankind vulnerable to extinction for the first time. The body acquires a special signification in this context and the manifest fragility of life seems to have a profound impact on the poetic imagination. For the poetry of this time the body becomes the receptacle, the symbolic site for the recuperation of the totalizing unity lost to the aporias left by the discredited philosophical systems of modernity. Due to the strong sense of vulnerability felt by the poet, and responding to the new

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<sup>19</sup> National and international events of those years deeply affected Paz’s convictions. The Stalinist pact with Nazi Germany, the assassination of Trotsky in Mexico, and the atrocities of the communist regime in the USSR contributed to Paz’s break with the communists. In 1941, on account of literary and political disagreements, Paz broke his friendship with Pablo Neruda, who was the Chilean consul in Mexico (Vizcaíno 72–75). However, this rupture with Mexican and international communism did not entail a total rejection of socialist thought. In many ways Paz remained an intellectual of a democratic left, despised by the communists for his support for democratic liberties. Paz was also adamantly opposed to any form of totalitarianism. A good example of his political allegiances can be seen in Paz’s criticism of Pinochet’s coup in *El ogro filantrópico*. For detailed analyses of Paz’s political evolution see Yvon Grenier’s *From Art to Politics: Octavio Paz and the Pursuit of Freedom*, Rodríguez Ledesma *El pensamiento político de Octavio Paz*, and especially Fernando Vizcaíno’s *Biografía política de Octavio Paz o la razón ardiente*.

symbolic charge imposed on the body, the poetry of the avant-garde redirects its experimental drive from a playful reconfiguration and instrumentalization of linguistic codes (as in Huidobro's *Altazor* and Vallejo's *Trilce*) toward an identification of the self with the body. The poetic text becomes the springboard for the representation and manipulation of an imaginary body. This process is not without precursors. The poetic voice in Huidobro—member of the first generation of the Latin American avant-garde—corresponded to a “re-humanized body,” a body with more than human characteristics that epitomized the poetic imaginary of the time. This conceptualization sets the tone for the transformations presented by Paz in “The Works of the Poet” (1949) almost thirty years later. However, the textual representation of this imaginary body in Paz's poetry accentuates the vulnerability of the self.<sup>20</sup>

This socio-historical introduction is necessary given the parallel development of Paz's essayistic and poetic work. Both literary practices complement and dialogue with each other, sometimes referring to similar phenomena, and often proposing concurrent aesthetic and ideological solutions. In any case, Paz's own literary criticism always avoided a strict social determinism but insisted on a historically grounded rumination on poetry and the arts, an effort I endeavor to reproduce here.

### III

In the aesthetics of Romanticism, the poetic self organized the emotions and perceptions of the world to the point of identifying the political ideals of the author with the representation of her/his emotions. This was the case with many poets of the late nineteenth-century Latin American wars of liberation—for instance, José María Heredia and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, in avant-garde poetry the social function called “poet” and the textual representation of her/himself in the poem, experience a complete dissociation.<sup>22</sup> The process which Ortega y Gasset refers to as the “dehumanization of the arts” is identified primarily with the transgression of human limits by the poetic voice, which temporally and spatially becomes irreducible to the representations of human dimensions (Ortega y Gasset 35).

If on the other hand the human voice exists without reference to the body, it

<sup>20</sup> This tendency to imagine the body as a failing unity in the poetry of the late avant-garde can also be found in Oliverio Girondo's final work *Persuasión de los días* (1968) in poems like “Ejecutoria del miasma” and “Comunión Plenaria.”

<sup>21</sup> In fact, it was Heredia, poet of Cuban origin but prominently active in the first Republican governments in Mexico, who encouraged young writers to embrace Romanticism, sustaining that to participate in the spirit of the movement indulging on sentimentality, melancholy, and introspection would suffice. His figure is paradigmatic in identifying the poetic emotion and the political ideals of the author (see Martínez 722). For a detailed discussion on the poetic self of Latin American Romanticism see Andrew Bush's *The Routes of Modernity*, specially the sections on Heredia 260–72 and Gómez de Avellaneda 308–29.

<sup>22</sup> Roman Jakobson observed already the peculiarity of this phenomenon of dissociation of the self in the work of Mayakovsky (1893–1930) whose poetry expressed a profound despair in a world that refuses to change at the pace of the Revolution (Jakobson 279).

can be argued that language was the most important constituent and actor of the text of the early avant-garde. Signs of the importance accorded to language appear in the recurrent usage of meta-linguistic devices. Initially, the most relevant transformations of the self operate at the grammatical or syntactical level. For instance, this poetry often delves into plays with linguistic shifters. Critics contend that the primary dissociative paradigm between the social image of the poet and her/his representation in the text is the evaporation of the self. In this procedure, behind the pronoun of the first person singular or the possessive case, the self of the poet does not correspond to a person, but to a voice whose material referentiality becomes impossible (cf. Mignolo 67). The poem dismantles the consistency of the self and makes a feast out of this illusory character, as in Paz's poem number VI:

Y luego te vacías de ti mismo, porque tú—lo que llamamos yo o persona—también es imagen, también es Otro, también es nadería. Vaciado, limpiado de la nada purulenta del yo, vaciado de tu imagen, ya no eres sino espera y aguardar. (VI 231)

Here the act of emptying the “tú” from the self (yo) has cancelled the possibility of a representable image. The “yo” is recognized as a vestigial substance of organic origin because of the adjective “purulenta.” Also, since it was already a “nothing” (nadería), the utterance of the poetic voice is just effecting a clean slate to give way to time, to allow for the temporal becoming of a detached but indefinite self. However, the segment says nothing about the body; thus, it seems possible to think the self is an anonymous accident, even as the corporality of its origin remains. In this case, the self has evaporated completely from the body.

In other examples of avant-garde poetry, there is a parallel between the self-dissociative process and that of the transgressions of the anthropomorphic ergonomy. The certainties of the modern philosophical dualities objectivity/subjectivity or body/soul are fragmented into multiple representations of the self. As the self ceases to be conceived as a unity, its multiplicity is introduced in different forms. One of these possible forms includes the alternate inhabiting of fictional modes of narration or representation where the net “I/you/s/he” was to hold the threading of language in the text, allowing for the unambiguous production of sense in the process of communication (cf. Kristeva 318). This allowed the poem to hold a scalpel to inspect closely the functions of the linguistic shifters. Excised and dissociated from a unified perspective, the pronouns “yo/tú/él/ella” became prime suspects of fragmentation. Thus, the self is exposed as an incomplete conglomerate unable to contain the unity of being.

The avant-garde text not only serves as a platform for the exposure of the incomplete/fragmented self but also as a dissecting table where the historical models for the constitutions of the self, according to different philosophical systems, are parodied through meta-discursive devices. Tacit references or textual re-enactments of the ideas by Hegel, Nietzsche, and other philosophers of modernity are the subtext for some of these prestidigitations, as I demonstrate below.

If the poetic self in the poem is fragmented or evaporated, who then continues

the poem? Is there an uttering voice that is neither the self nor its reflection: “you”? Many times, that voice does not have apparent body. In other instances the Other—which in the avant-garde poem is only a temporary invention of the self fabricated with the sole purpose of sustaining itself—ceases to fulfill its mirroring function and fights back. This is an attempt of the Other to separate from its origin and become a different entity, or worse yet, it strives to cancel its origin:

A las tres y veinte como a las nueve y cuarenta y cuatro, desgredados al alba y pálidos a medianoche, pero siempre puntualmente inesperados, sin trompetas, calzados de silencio, en general de negro, dientes feroces, voces roncas, todos ojos de boca, se presentan Tedevaro y Tevomito, Tli, Mundoinmundo, Carnaza, Carroña y Escarnio. Ninguno y los otros, que son mil y nadie, un minuto y jamás. (I 225)

[. . .]

Mis ojos palpan inútilmente el ropero, la silla, la mesa, objetos que me deben la vida pero que se niegan a reconocirme y compartir conmigo estas horas. (VIII 232)

Once these objects or beings become independent, they enter into a dialectic relation that mimics the moment of the rising of consciousness in the Hegelian Master-Slave metaphor in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Hegel 113). However, instead of bringing to fruition the realization of the self for itself with the recognition of the other, these creatures or ex-objects come to the encounter of the poetic self, not as romantic, inspirational or mysterious forces from nature, but with a strong antagonistic drive against the individual. The first two word-actors (“Tedevaro” “Tevomito”) are nominalized verbal constructions whose first syllable “te” corresponds to the direct object pronoun of the second person. Though a second person or “tú” is presupposed, the noun is produced from the nominalization of an action directed against the poetic self. It is clear that “Tedevaro” (Idevouryou) and “Tevomito” (Ipukeyou) are enacting a digestive attack the self must escape or endure.

These word-creatures, the “tú” being the derivative image of the self, function simultaneously as a reflection and as a negation of the positional relation between “yo” and “tú.” The customary reflecting activity of the self has turned against itself showing a profound discomfort with this state of lost unity. The violent threat of the word-actors is posed through bodily actions of ingestion and vomit, establishing a metonymic link with the other four names: /Mundoinmundo/, /Carnaza/, /Carroña/, /Escarnio/. The two in the middle have a direct association to living matter or its secretions. The words at both ends of the series convey a sense of moral degradation and relate to the other two by connoting decay. Thus, the arrangement of these words implies that moral decay begets material decay. If we are looking for a common field of connotation we can assume a paradigm of animosity, rejection and vilification (mockery) against the self and having as its center an apparently non-significant syllable /Tli/. This syllable redirects the group to the absurd, or to the disruption of the sense-making activity, which demonstrates the instability of language in this process.

Schärer-Nussberger characterizes the particle /Tli/ also as a disruptive element for language signification, however, she insists in identifying its emergence in the poem as a sign of the creative power of the self (52). Although I agree with her on the syntactic “dis-function” of the particle, I think the “self-poet” is not using it as a way to reaffirm her/his creative power but rather to show the fragility of his position before the materials (words) with which s/he has to wrestle. Finally, the porosity and fluidity of these creatures “Ninguno y los otros, que son mil y nadie” cancels any possibility of a process of identification and/or reaffirmation.

This sense of philosophical wrestling with the self stems from the very title of Paz’s collection. The phrase “the works of the poet” conveys at least two possible meanings. First, since the subject of the phrase “works” could be taken as the recompilation of writings of an author, this reading renders a very literary and genre-specific meaning: the product of the aesthetic labor of poet “x.” The labor of the poet in the poems, however, is the critique of the categories sustaining the modern self in search of its reconfiguration. Given that poetry in the capitalist system is dismissed as an irrelevant activity for its non-productive character, the practice of poetry is a provocation to the system of assumptions sustaining the world of materiality. Aesthetic activity is, therefore, in direct opposition to the sheer instrumentality and alienation produced by the modern conception of labor in general. Second, the word “works” recalls the “Herculean” tasks the poet as “hero” undertakes through her/his creative activity (cf. Schärer-Nussberger 49).<sup>23</sup> We should recall that the craft of the poet used to share the aura of the religious myths in Ancient Greece, the power of clairvoyance in Rimbaud, and made the poet aspire to divinity in Huidobro (“el poeta es un pequeño dios”). In contrast, the activity of the poet in Paz’s collection is a parody of those past qualities. If Huidobro’s poetry rebelled against the mimetic impositions of Romanticism by creating poetic objects and neologisms in *Altazor*, Paz’s poems suggest these “Creationist” powers came back to haunt the self highlighting its fragmented quality and isolating it further. Moreover, given the state of disarray of the self as represented in the text, it is a daunting task for such a frail entity to perform any kind of work. The posture of the hero is therefore unsustainable.

These ironic twists in the title are symptoms of the diminished condition of the poet in modernity, a condition that underscores the degradation of the task of the artist in general, and the disempowerment of poetry in particular. From this perspective, the use value of the poetic labor resides in its capacity to expose and negate the limitations imposed by the instrumentalization and commodification of the work of art. This stance is very close to the criticisms of modern cultural industries and consumerism in Adorno and Horkheimer’s the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

#### IV

As has been discussed above, the technologies of the self in the arts of modernity primarily convey disruption and dissociation, and are actualized by the alteration

<sup>23</sup> Phillips considers that the main themes of poems I–VII are the pains and ordeals of those who chose to serve poetry (99). Her reading confirms the interpretation of the title

or cancellation of the pair body/self. Sometimes, the tools for such work are provided by the structural elements of language:

La nube preñada de palabras viene, dócil y sombría, a suspenderse  
sobre mi cabeza, balanceándose, mugiendo como un animal herido.  
Hundo la mano en ese saco caliginoso y extraigo lo que encuentro:  
un cuerno astillado, un rayo enmohecido, un hueso mondo. Con  
esos trastos me defiendo, apaleo a los visitantes, corto orejas, com-  
bato a brazo partido largas horas de silencio al raso. (I 225)

For Max Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School, the instrumentalization of reason has as one of its direct consequences the fact that “language has been reduced to just another tool in the gigantic apparatus of production in modern society” (Horkheimer 22). In tune with this idea, words as tools in the hands of the self become the defensive device against the bodily attacks of the reflections of the self (Tedeoro, Tevomito). Momentarily, in this defensive action, the agency of the poetic self seems to be restored. If the modern world has fetishized language and emptied it of its meaning, then the poetic self can combat the machinery of production with the same instruments that it has re-appropriated. These word-tools are concrete vestiges of what they were. With a tactic of *reductio ad absurdum*, the poem seems to “avenge” the degradation of the poetic word. Nevertheless, the confrontation does not acquire an epic dimension, since the last lines redirect the passage toward a playful exercise:

Crujir de dientes, huesos rotos, un miembro de menos, uno de más,  
en suma un juego—si logro tener los ojos bien abiertos y la cabeza  
fría. Pero no hay que mostrar demasiada habilidad: una superioridad  
manifiesta los desanima. Y tampoco excesiva confianza; podrían ap-  
rovecharse, y entonces ¿quién responde de las consecuencias? (I 227)

The preservation of the conditions of the game is central to the confrontation. Whatever the outcome, the poetic voice knows there is nothing definitive; therefore, a cathartic and final reconstitution of the self does not seem likely. In the second poem of the collection, the creatures are associated with a code of colors and a catalog of physical forms. The poetic self is perplexed with their resurgence and their transient form, and wonders who sent them:

También debo decir que ciertos días arden, brillan, ondulan, se des-  
pliegan o repliegan (como una capa de torear), se afilan:  
los azules, que florecen en la punta del tallo de la corriente eléctrica:  
los rojos, que vibran o se expanden o chisporrotean;  
[. . .]  
¿Son los enviados de Alguien que no se atreve a presentarse o vienen  
simplemente por su voluntad, porque les nace? (II 228)

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“works of the poet” as a commentary on the Herculean tasks confronted by the self in the collection.

Nobody is responsible for the emergence of these entities. Since they derive from the dismantled self, however, this repertoire of presences underscores the existence of multiple constituencies and appearances of the self that become a nebulous conglomerate of characters. Other poems offer a hint on the origin of such entities as “illusions” sustained by human consciousness in its relation with the material world according to modern philosophical systems.

## V

The rationality propounded by the Enlightenment extended the certainties of the scientific method to the study of society. Seemingly the material and social world can be objectively studied by a rational subject. Paz’s prose poems problematize those certainties by dissolving the clean-cut separation between subject and object or by fusing the subject with the observed object. That is to say, Paz’s texts play with the conceptual possibility of acquiring knowledge from the observation of human consciousness:

Soy una plaza donde embisto capas ilusorias que me tienden toreros enlutados. Don Tancredo se yergue en el centro, relámpago de yeso. Lo ataco, mas cuando estoy a punto de derribarlo siempre hay alguien que llega al quite. Embisto de nuevo, bajo la rechifla de mis labios inmensos, que ocupan todos los tendidos. Ah, nunca acabo de matar al toro, nunca acabo de ser arrastrado por esas mulas tristes que dan vueltas y vueltas al ruedo, bajo el ala fría de ese silbido que decapita la tarde como una navaja inexorable. (VIII 232)

This quasi-Buñuelian “scene,” with its Surrealist evocations, has the effect of dissolving the tenets of the modern episteme.<sup>24</sup> The uttering subject that happens to be first an “arena,” through metonymy is suddenly decomposed in the objects contained in such a place: public, matador, and bull. Moreover, the presence of Don Tancredo could be perceived as both, the matador and/or the bull: there is no disambiguation. Also, the public is condensed into a single pair of lips that belongs to the uttering voice, and whistles to the spectacle given by the other elements of the self.

The fluctuation in points of view renders a paragraph mired in inconsistent possibilities. The self-matador never finishes the “faena” (bullfight), and at the same time, remains dead in the arena (self-bull), while the whistling of the public (self-lips) becomes a razor. Notice here how the last element (the public-lips-self) is represented by metonymy as a pair of “giant” dismembered lips, which in turn, are transformed into an object that decapitates the afternoon. The violence against the body is returned as violence against the world. Unfortunately, when the self attacks the world it is simultaneously wounding itself, thus making more difficult the conciliation of matter and thought.

<sup>24</sup> José Gabriel Sánchez sees in “The Works of the Poet” a perfect example of a surrealist “narration” where the poet not only imagines the surreal world but is immersed and surrounded by it (148).



Once the episteme of Enlightenment has served as a scenario for the absurd, the ideas of the Romantic movement become the target. In the poetry of the latter period the vastness and power of nature were akin to the emotions and creations of the self which strived to identify with the “soul of the world” as in Rousseau’s conceptions (Solomon 48; Abrams 181). Following these ideas the body of the poet is inflated to the same proportions of the Romantic-Symbolist self.

Me incorporo: apenas es la una. Me estiro, mis pies salen de mi cuarto, mi cabeza horada las paredes. Me extiendo por lo inmenso como las raíces de un árbol sagrado, como la música, como el mar. La noche se llena de patas, dientes, garras, ventosas. ¿Cómo defender este cuerpo demasiado grande? ¿Qué harán, a kilómetros de distancia, los dedos de mis pies, los de mis manos, mis orejas? Me encojo lentamente. (VIII 232)

This paragraph applies a playful solution to the concept of a unified self by aggrandizing the body of the poet to match the ambitious proportions of the self in the poetics of Romanticism. That is to say, Heredia’s pretensions of equating emotions with the force of a storm or the power of the Niagara Falls are rejected in a grotesque way, exposing the assumed unity of the self with the world as a postposterous exaggeration (cf. Bush 260–65).<sup>25</sup>

## VI

The last transformation I would like to analyze has to do with the nihilistic stance adopted by the self against language in poems IX and X. In the very first poem of the collection, the “cloud of language” provided the tools to tame the aggressive aims of the reflections of the self. In contrast, in poem IX the words become material entities manipulated by the nihilistic drives of the self against language:

Lo más fácil es quebrar una palabra en dos. A veces los fragmentos siguen viviendo, con vida frenética, feroz, monosilábica [. . .] (IX 233)

A la palabra torre le abro un agujero rojo en la frente. A la palabra odio la alimento con basuras durante años, hasta que estalla en una hermosa explosión purulenta, que infecta por un siglo el lenguaje. Mato de hambre al amor, para que devore lo que encuentre. A la hermosura le sale una joroba en la u. Y la palabra talón, al fin en libertad, aplasta cabezas con una alegría regular, mecánica. Lleno de arena la boca de las exclamaciones. Suelto a las remilgadas en la cueva donde gruñen los pedos. (IX 234)

<sup>25</sup> Compare this parodic burst of the immense body of the poetic self to the ambitious identification of the “yo” with the forces of nature in Heredia’s “En una tempestad” or “Niágara.”

The self has the power to poke, reap, sew, screw, glue, match, and remake words. The selection of words chosen to be dismantled is very significant. /Hate/ love/ and /beauty/ are not personified as Symbolist entities; on the contrary, in their quality as material objects they are desecrated and become as common as the rest of the words.<sup>26</sup> The materialized signifier “heel” becomes a smashing tool for the self to destroy other sacred words common to philosophical and religious discourse. This situation reverts to the procedure of the first poem where the words of bodily functions turned against the self. Moreover, the desacralization of conceptual words such as the ones torn apart in this poem, pits the self against the morals of the herd, a situation with Nietzschean implications of deliberate and playful rejection of the idols of the past. As the texts of the German philosopher brandished a hammer in the air in the *Twilight of the Idols* against Christian ideals, Paz’s poem enters in an internal battle against values and beliefs:<sup>27</sup>

Devuelvo todas las palabras, todas las creencias, toda esa comida fría  
con que desde el principio nos atragantan.  
Hubo un tiempo en que me preguntaban: ¿dónde está el mal?  
¿dónde empezó la infección, en la palabra o en la cosa? (X 235)

For all the violence effected by instrumental reason on the body, the poetic self, despite its fragility and the undefined multiplicity of its identity, denounces and enacts the destruction of the basic concepts of theoretical reason of the Western tradition.

This Nietzschean stance of the poetic self seems justified because language is perceived as a system of signifiers that has failed to offer a sense of rootedness. However, this war against language cancels the possibility of communion through communication, and hinders all possibilities to reconstitute a unified self:

Hoy sueño un lenguaje de cuchillos y picos, de ácidos y llamas [. . .]  
un lenguaje de aceros exactos, de relámpagos afilados, de esdrújulos  
y agudos, incansables, relucientes, metódicas navajas. Un lenguaje  
guillotina. Una dentadura trituradora, que haga una masa del yotúélnos-  
sotrosvosotrosellos. (X 235).

The dialectic cycle concludes with the invention of this aggressive language of knives. The first poems narrated the attacks of objects and word-beings against

<sup>26</sup> Rimbaud’s “Une saison en enfer” personified “beauty” to sit her on his lap but then the poetic self rejects her due to its “bitter taste” (141). Desecration in Paz’s poem seems more perverse by making of the word itself an object with physical deformities therefore rendering it closer to its antonyms “ugliness,” “repulsiveness.”

<sup>27</sup> In the second paragraph of the *Anti-Christ* Nietzsche poses this precise question “What is god?” (127). Poem XI makes a tongue twister out of Christ’s name. Evidently, the presence of the “hunter-fisher” (Christ) has lost its central character in human psyche. Paz’s poetic rejection of the certainties of Western philosophy, and specially the manifest desire for the re-affirmation of life beyond Western morality echo the proposals of the philosopher.

the self. After that, the self attacked language by reproducing, mortifying, and smashing words. Finally, the self dreams a new language capable of violence against the world but also against the self. Beating to a pulp “yotúélnosotrosvosotroellos” leaves no place for agency or action from a verbal subject. There is no shifter left to personify communication or volition. This dreamed language is invested with the desire to overcome the previous phase of thesis—antithesis, although the synthesis is impossible.

In the final poems of “The Works of the Poet” the dictum of modernity to criticize everything, even the system inside the system, is realized by the technologies of the modern self. This aim for criticism and disruption of the modern episteme is taken to its ultimate consequences, however, leaving unresolved the most important questions for the poetic self: What form of unity is still possible in the modern world? And, since all historical teleologies are revealed as fragile fictions of an unstable self, how should the past and the future be assumed? What is the path for the reconciliation of theoretical and practical reason? If in past epistemic formations contradictions could be resolved symbolically through aesthetic practice—literary or otherwise—the “work” of this isolated and anguished self is not only insufficient but futile. The new state of knowledge achieved by applying these poetic technologies render the self perplexed and anxious.

Many of the contradictions explored and represented in “The Works of the Poet” became the central focus of post-structuralist and postmodern philosophical criticism in the decades following the publication of *Libertad bajo palabra*. In 1949 the crisis of the modern could not be presented yet in terms of a relation between the desiring machine and the multimodal logic of the body without organs as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in the 1970s (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 149–66). Even if the fragmented and multiple ways in which the body and the self relate to the world of production in the “The Works of the Poet” can be studied under the tenets of the schizoanalysis inaugurated by the French philosophers, Paz devised a different way out. In subsequent books he continued his aesthetic and philosophical investigations on the self through an approach to the philosophical and symbolic systems of India and China.<sup>28</sup>

In this sense, Paz’s interest in the tantric tradition and the *I Ching*—already present in *Libertad bajo palabra* but only fully realized as strong influence in *Blanco* (1967) and *Ladera Este* (1969)—is all but surprising. This diverging path should not be viewed as a sudden turn in the aesthetic practice of the Mexican poet, but rather as a way out and beyond the aporias produced by the historical and philosophical crisis of Western modernity.

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<sup>28</sup> In the turn for the exploration of Indian philosophy through his poetry, Paz seems to follow certain passages from Nietzsche where the philosopher values Buddhism as “a religion for the end and fatigue of civilization” (*The Anti-Christ* 144).

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