

IDEOGRAMS OF THE EAST AND THE WEST: OCTAVIO PAZ, BLANCO, AND THE TRADITIONS OF MODERN POETRY

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Abstract: This essay engages two questions: first, it is a response to current attempts to make sense of various literary traditions in an era associated with postmodernity and globalization. I argue for a global but period-specific approach to the study of literary history. Secondly, this essay applies the period-specific theoretical model to the study of one poem: Octavio Paz's Blanco (1967), known for its global reach and complex structure, but often read as solely focused on India's ancient past, thus antiquarian and with no relation to our present era. On the contrary, I argue that Blanco can only make sense in the history of conflicts between the East and the West, better known to Paz as the Cold War, a global conflict that involved the former U.S.S.R. and the United States. The multiple and therefore confusing meanings of "East" and "West" best define, I would argue, the need to understand the history of its various connotations from Herodotus and the Crusades, to the Cold War and the current conflicts between the West and the (Islamic) East. Thus, any attempt to define globalization and postmodernity as an age in which all cultural differences and Otherness find their happy resolution can only be read as part of the marketing system of globalization itself, and not as a serious attempt to make sense of literary history at a transnational or global level.

A RECENT ANTHOLOGY of world literature places Octavio Paz in an unexpected literary affiliation: not Mexican or Latin American, but in the section "Crossing Cultures: The Example of India." This correlation is not surprising given that Octavio Paz devoted more than 40 years of his life to the study of the poetry and civilizations of China, India, and Japan, and published poems and essays specifically on India during and after his years of service as Mexico's ambassador in New Delhi (1962-1968). The editors of this anthology claim that a writer's ability to dwell in a transnational, global culture is a sign of an emergent "postmodern consciousness" that has allowed writers such as Octavio Paz, Salman Rushdie and, among others, Bahrati Mukherjee, to connect, integrate, and thus reconcile the East and the West.¹

This judgment no doubt would have pleased Paz, in spite of the different historical meanings assigned to the terms "East" and "West" by Paz's generation. In a Babel-like era in which the (Middle) East and the West have been unable to reach any level of reasonable understanding, bristling instead with fears of terrorist attacks and wars of occupation, the global range of the editors' argument and their insinuating use of language ("a citizen of many cultures," "postmodernism," "an emerging global consciousness," and so forth) would seem to obstruct or nullify the possibility of a productive critique. Nonetheless, to

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¹See "Octavio Paz," in *The Bedford Anthology of World Literature, The Twentieth Century, 1900-The Present, Book 6*, ed., Paul Davis et al. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003): 1292.

question said “fusion” of generations and political differences is a choice that grounds itself on the ambiguity in meaning and loose definition of a postmodern condition that has been defined in plural ways, among them the alleged incredulity toward metanarratives (Jean François Lyotard), or an age in which the sense of history has been repressed or diverted (Fredric Jameson).²

Current and conflicting postmodernist models can be useful on condition that one situates a writer such as Octavio Paz in his own era and according to the poet’s generational poetics and politics. Paz’s poems and essays were explicit attempts to understand the Other as *already one’s own*, and not the result of a multicultural process that would lead to a resolution of contradictions, conflicts, and to an East-West synthesis. As Paz affirmed in his book *In Light of India* (1995): “I can understand what it means to be Indian because I am Mexican” (81). What he meant is that, in terms of Paz’s proposed syntax of civilizations, (1) India and the West emerged from the same Indo-European origins; and, in terms of modern times, that (2) Mexico’s and India’s colonial histories raise similar questions regarding nation-building in an age of globalization.³

Globalization, according to Liu Kong, demands that one conceive it as both an idea and a concrete historical situation, associated respectively with global capitalism and a world-system that includes alternate “modernities” that best represent how developing nations, such as China, have responded to capitalism on a global scale. Kong explains the defining “break” with the past or point of emergence of globalization as follows:

Globalization is generally perceived as the result of the collapse of Soviet-style socialism, as well as the unprecedented expansion of transnational capitalism. While avowedly Eurocentric in its hegemonic formations, globalization also sets up an indispensable structural context for analyzing what happens in the world today (164).

² See Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press: 1984), p. 37. See also the opening line in Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke UP, 1991): “It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (p. ix). Interestingly, the postmodern is defined by Jameson as the “first specifically North American global style” (p. xx), hence a global consciousness associated with U.S. interests.

³ Octavio Paz developed the notion of a “universal syntax of civilizations” in *Conjunctions and Disjunctions*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), pp. 35-41. This book was published as *Conjunciones y disyunciones* in 1967, thus only one year after the poem *Blanco*. Paz’s views on India’s civilization are congruent with his universal syntax of civilizations in which ancient cultures—prostrated and fossilized through centuries of exhaustion—serve only as sources of a new redemption myth that would lead world nations to independently resolve and thus transcend the Western-Eastern conflict that created the Cold War: “Inside India, Hinduism and Buddhism were the protagonists of a dialogue. This dialogue was Indian civilization. The fact that it has now ended helps explain the prostration of this civilization for over eight centuries, and its inability to renew itself and change. The dialogue degenerated into the monologue of Hinduism, a monologue that soon assumed the form of repetition and mannerism until, finally, ossification set in. Islam, appearing just as Buddhism disappears in India, failed to take its place” (*Conjunctions and Disjunctions*, p. 31).

Paz's understanding of the world was inextricably tied to his generation's critical engagements with fascism during the Second World War and its global aftermath: the Cold War.⁴ As Paz proposed in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), the East (the former U.S.S.R.) and the West (USA) were the wayward offspring of one civilization and one single historical orientation: the Enlightenment and industrialization. Paz considered both superpowers to have declined as a civilizational force during the Cold War; thus, instead of Third World countries siding with one or the other, Paz pointed to the necessity of a "redemption myth" that would be the originary principle from which would emerge an *other* civilization on a global scale.⁵

Octavio Paz's idea of history during the Cold War, nourished by the revolutionary avant-gardes of the 1940s, led to his own critical judgment regarding the hostile relations between the East and the West, and of modernity's relation with ancient civilizations. Paz's poetics of history, conceptualized in theoretical essays published from 1950 through 1974, turn on cycles and spirals:

Cyclic time is another way toward absorption, transformation, and sublimation. The date that recurs is a return of previous time, an immersion in a past which is at once that of each individual and that of the group. As the wheel of time revolves, it allows the society to recover buried, or repressed, psychic structures so as to reincorporate them in a present that is also a past. It is not only the return of the ancients and antiquity: it is the possibility that each individual possesses of recovering his living portion of the past.⁶

As an illustration of the above premises, I will propose a reading of *Blanco* (1967), a poem considered to be Paz's most difficult to interpret and deeply "Indian" in inspiration. I propose that this complexity, however, is not the result of Paz's appropriation of India's classical heritage; this long poem, on the contrary, displays Paz's reflections on ancient civilizations (hence not limited to India's), the project of recovering *living* portions of the past, and of his critique of modernity—above all of the East-West global polarization and hostilities—during the peak years of the Cold War, an age in which—according to Paz—love was

⁴For a more detailed discussion, see Cantú, 2007: 24-26.

⁵See *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, trans. Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1985): for the same historical origins of the USA and the USSR, pp. 67-68; for the redemption myth, pp. 211-212. Paz's ideas and reflections on the Cold War—constant throughout his essays and poetry, but with critical variants due to historical changes from 1945-1991—is an area of study beyond the scope of this article. I should add, however, that Paz's anti-nuclear age discourse is a constant theme as of *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, where he addresses the crisis of modernity as follows: "[I]t is not Western civilization that is in danger of being destroyed tomorrow, as the cultures of the Greeks and the Arabs, the Aztecs and the Egyptians were destroyed in the past: it is man himself [...] The contemporary crisis is not a struggle between two diverse cultures, as the conservatives would have us believe, but rather an internal quarrel in a civilization that no longer has any rivals [...] The past has left us orphans, as it has the rest of the planet, and we must join together in inventing our common future" (pp. 172-173).

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 10. The "date that recurs" in India's historical cycles is the Bhakti movement in the 15th century (*In Light of India*, pp. 43-44), when a "new India" could have emerged. Conversely, in Mexico's history the "date that recurs" is the 1521 Conquest and Spain's inability to build a "new Spain" without ethnic and religious divisions (see *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, chapter "The Sons of La Malinche," pp. 65-88).

almost an impossibility, a human condition with its own date that recurs, mostly as missed opportunities but sometimes with promises of fulfillment as “a revelation of two solitary beings who create their own world, a world that rejects society’s lies, abolishes time and work, and declares itself to be self-sufficient.”⁷ This, in a nutshell, comprises the poetic core of *Blanco* (1967).

I. *Blanco* and Octavio Paz

Blanco opens with two epigraphs, one taken from *The Hevajra-Tantra* (“By passion the world is bound, by passion too it is released”), and the second from a sonnet by French poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), with an emphasis on the eighth line in “*Ses purs ongles*” (her pure fingernails). The reader’s first attempt to make sense of these epigraphs lead the interpretive act in the direction of three different traditions: (1) the literature of Western Hermeticism; (2) Tantric Buddhism—its art, its eroticism, and its doctrine—and (3) the literary inheritance claimed by Paz: that of modern poetry, with aesthetic affiliations to German Romanticism, French Symbolism and Surrealism, and to modern Anglo-American poetry (T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, among others).

In the notes that Paz added to the publication of *Blanco*, he describes the poem as a blend of spatial and temporal categories that turn the poem into an extended metaphor of a ritual, a pilgrimage, a river, a mandala, and a human body; or, to an ancient book of pictures and emblems, like a scroll from ancient China or Egypt or, among other possibilities, a Mesoamerican codex.⁸ Paz’s labyrinthine description, written as a procession of analogies and correspondences that are implicitly trans-historical, concludes with an emphasis on writing and reading as fundamental activities. *Blanco*’s initial commentary and reading instructions thus underscore a triangular field of relations: poet, poem, and the reader.

In the authorial notes, Octavio Paz explains *Blanco*’s tripartite composition, its chromatic stages (yellow, red, green, and blue), its four human faculties (sensation, perception, imagination, and understanding), and the possibility of “variant readings” of the poem (i.e., reading *Blanco* in its totality, hence as a poetic unity; reading only the central column, etc.). Paz’s reference to the possibility of “variant readings” of *Blanco*, however, transcends the limits of a mere aesthetic experience, leading instead to a structuralist notion of “literature” in which texts are viewed as fragments of a larger system. The search for meaning, therefore, shifts from the text to the system that establishes its conditions of possibility. As such, Paz’s reading instructions are only a reminder that *Blanco* is a game with its own rules: since meaning is produced in a system

⁷See *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, p. 200.

⁸See Paz’s explanatory notes on *Blanco* in *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz, 1957-1987*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 1987), p. 311. The poem *Blanco* can be read in Spanish and in its English translation on pages 312-331. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to *Blanco* have been taken from this bilingual edition. At the end of *Blanco*, Paz includes the place and dates of its composition: Delhi, July 23-September 25, 1966 (p. 331). A brief search of the Cold War during 1966 will bring up the Dominican Republic and Vietnam as two instances of the United States’ fears of a communist global take-over. As Mexico’s ambassador in India, Paz could not ignore international political conditions.

of relations, the operating *ars poetica* is really an *ars combinatoria*, with structural relations governed by metonymy, synecdoche, and metaphor. Fated to remain incomplete, interpretation nonetheless is always initiating other readings and generating new meanings. This will explain the fascination Octavio Paz has with the fragment as a synecdoche of the mutilated body (*sparagmos*), ritual dismemberment, the cult of Osiris, and Mesoamerican ritual sacrifices. The reader of *Blanco* thus turns into Isis: in reading the poem, s/he gathers the scattered limbs of Osiris, resuscitates the body, and makes it our contemporary.

A close reading of *Blanco*, consequently, must *re-member* the poem's fragments into one unified "book" but with attention to its parts or rotating members that seek their own reconfiguration. In other words, from *Blanco*'s opening lines to its conclusion the reading must be structural, not linear: as such, one must read simultaneously and in succession the poem's 14 fragments (4 + 6 + 4), clustered in the axes of three columns. With this goal or *blanco* (target) in mind, I will begin by charting the poem's full structural composition. To visualize *Blanco*'s internal organization, let us note its poetic configuration in terms of sections, lines, and functions:

<u>Section</u>	<u>Lines</u>	<u>Verse-hinges with an Iterative Function</u>
1:	lines 1-13	"la enterrada con los ojos abiertos"
2:	lines 14-52	"la pasión de la brasa compasiva"
3:	lines 53-110	"la transparencia es todo lo que queda"
4:	lines 111-161	"el mundo haz de tus imágenes"
5:	lines 162-224	"da realidad a la mirada"
6:	lines 225-317	"da realidad a la mirada"

Blanco is composed of six central poetic sections that connect poems on the left and right columns—therefore in the tradition of the pictorial triptych—and with the scrolling of the poem marked by a concluding phrase or verse-hinge that signals a stop in each strophic section with an iterative function that is recognizable in *Blanco*'s last lines (6: 76-94). As we will note shortly, the hinge-like structural model serves a twofold purpose: horizontally, the relations are with the lateral eight poems; vertically, with the central six poems. The poems adjacent to the central column tell two stories: to the left, it is a tale of love and its images according to the four elements; to the right, it records the spiral unfolding of the soul's faculties, from the senses and perception to imagination and understanding. Due to space limitations, my analysis of *Blanco* will be focalized on parts 2, 3, and 5.⁹

II. *Blanco* and the Reader

The strophic structure of the second part (2: 14-52) introduces for the first time the lateral poems that represent, according to Paz's notes, a love vignette, the element of fire, and sensation. The second strophe thus corresponds to the

⁹This chapter completes my previous study of *Blanco* where I analyze parts 1, 4, and 6, published under the title "Octavio Paz and India: *Blanco*, Modernity, and the Poetics of Simultaneism," in *One World Periphery Reads the Other: Knowing the "Oriental" in the Americas and the Iberian Peninsula*. Ed. Ignacio López-Calvo (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 56-81.

allegorization of a hermaphroditic organism, a brother and sister in an earthly womb but already stamped in its androgynous origin with sexuality, eroticism, and the possibility of love. The strophe's composition classifies senses as gradually developing ("not seen nor imagined: heard" ([*ni vista ni pensada: oída*"]), and defamiliarizes situations ("A lamp beats beneath / penumbra skin" [*Bajo la piel de la penumbra/ late una lámpara*"]), so as to suggest a figurative reading of these lines: *inside the womb's penumbra, the life [light] that will come forth is already pulsating*. The couple represents the union of lovers, but as a simultaneous synchronic vision of different but paired ages: *as unborn*, on the earth's womb-like cave; *as adults*, near a lamp's penumbra. The lamp is a frequent motif in Octavio Paz's poetry, playing an important function in *The Monkey Grammarian* as it casts a dance of light and shadows over a couple of lovers oblivious to their surroundings while joined in and by their own love-making. The key to this poetic code is given by Octavio Paz while writing *In Light of India*:

One of the tirelessly repeated motifs of the Palatine Anthology is that of the flickering lamp that illuminates the lovers' bedroom. The same motif appears in Sanskrit poetry. I particularly like this ingenious variation that combines the religious notion of *nirvāna*, which is extinction, with the quenching of the bright and blushing light. (155)

The motif of the flickering lamp plays a deliberately ambiguous function in this line, first associated with the gestating twin fetuses inside a womb, followed by the image of a couple in a lovers' embrace. The ambiguity can be resolved if one interprets the passage as representing an instant in which the couple's past, present, and future converge on a vanishing point: the fourth dimension. I will discuss this point shortly. For now, let us read both senses simultaneously, certain that the motif of the lamp serves as a connotative link between the central column and the initial lateral poems where the human senses and faculties of the soul begin to manifest themselves as the figurations of two lovers who are about to be born into their own Garden: on the left, the interplay of fire, a wall, and the shadow of two lovers' swaying in the flames; on the poem to the right, the fire that is felt for the first time by a newly formed sensorium: "the senses open" (*los sentidos se abren*"), hence anterior to perception, imagination, and understanding.¹⁰

As if to cancel the Judeo-Christian idea of Paradise, Octavio Paz portrays a variant of Eve in a garden consumed by fire, a non-Western primal garden with the unfamiliar features of flower and song: *copper stalk, leaves of clarity, a sunflower, a yellow chalice of consonants and vowels* (lines 21-41), followed by the female lover as "Girl/ you laugh—naked / in the gardens of the flame"

¹⁰The question of the unity of the senses in Mesoamerican civilization is studied by David Carrasco as *synesthesia* and in a manner that adds an appropriate dimension to our reading of *Blanco*: "There is no doubt that all the senses were alert and tuned to the ritual expressions in Tenochtitlan's great ceremonial landscape. The songs were heard, the beat was pounded with feet and interpreted with muscular movements, the blood was smelled, and the gods were touched, and sometimes eaten [...] 'synesthesia' or the unity of the senses, was the avenue through which knowledge about the cosmos or unity of the world was communicated" (*City of Sacrifice*, 122).

(“*Muchacha/ tú ríes—desnuda/ en los jardines de la llama*”, lines 49-51). The conventional Catholic association between carnal sin and the fires of hell are thus erased in favor of the purifying fire of an erotic embrace. The second strophe closes with a line in the center column that seems to express the essence of the entire section: “La pasión de la brasa compasiva” (strophe 2, line 52: “The passion of compassionate coals”), a line that will reappear as the “date that recurs”—and as all the poem’s hinge-like junctural lines do eventually—in *Blanco*’s concluding sixth section.

Blanco begins and unfolds, therefore, with shifting metaphors and analogies—as the birth of language, a descending river, a screenfold codex, as a column of changing colors, a serpent of fire (*kundalini*), and as two lovers in the womb of creation about to be born. In the third strophic section, the active faculty is perception, the focal element is water, and its central trope the rivers and lakes of the world: the Ganges, the Nile, and Mexico’s Lake of Texcoco: the *axis mundi* of the world, according to the Aztecs.

Considered by people in India as a holy river, the Ganges originates in a glacier in the Himalayas and is formed by the confluence of six rivers (therefore as an analog of the central column in *Blanco* with its six internal and cascading poems) that flow toward the Ganges’ destination: the Bay of Bengal. It is known that this bay was the last stronghold of Indian Buddhism against the crushing Islamic attack in the 12th century (Snellgrove 1), and, according to Octavio Paz, the place where “modern India begins” (*In Light of India* 103). Through its tributary known as the Jamuna river (found often in the poetry of Octavio Paz), the Ganges crosses Bangladesh, a predominantly Islamic state, which adds a political dimension to *Blanco*: the conflicts between Hinduism and Islam.

India’s internal religious conflicts are examined in detail by Octavio Paz in his book *In Light of India*; similarly, the political implications of wars of conquest and colonization in ancient India gain thematic primacy in *Blanco*’s third poetic section (3:53-110). Its composition is parallel to *Blanco*’s second section, with the perspective in the opening central poem given to an *unborn* first-person narrator (“Sin decir palabra / oscurece mi frente / un presentimiento de lenguaje,” [“Without saying a word / my forehead grows dark / a presentiment of language”]), followed by two lateral poems that chart the poetic space of the narrator’s interlocution with its (also unborn) female consort: “*los ríos de tu cuerpo/ país de latidos*,” (“the rivers of your body / land of pulse-beats”), and concluding with a hinge-like sentence that underscores *perception*: “La transparencia es todo lo que queda” (“Transparency is all that remains”).

The initial lines in the third section contain a premonition of civilized life through visions of wars of conquest, colonization, and the role language will play in human history:

el lenguaje
 es una expiación,
 propiciación
 al que no habla,
 emparedado,
 cada día
 asesinado,

el muerto innumerable ¹¹

In full agreement with the trope of the world's lakes and rivers, the *river of blood* of the unborn narrator functions as a variant of the *trompe-l'oeil* tradition with its own deception of the eye and meaning:

*El mío es rojo y se agosta
entre sableras llameantes:
Castillas de arena, naipes rotos
y el jeroglífico (agua y brasa)
en el pecho de México caído.
Polvo soy de aquellos lodos.
Río de sangre,
Río de historias de sangre.* ¹²

These nine lines (61-69) correspond to what Elizabeth Hill Boone calls “cells” in Mesoamerican codices (boxes in red ink with calendrical information), “characteristic of preconquest Nahua cosmology, land allocation, oracular expression, and even grammar” (66). The metaphor of the *red river* opens and closes the poetic cell formed by these seven lines which can be reduced to six if one considers how the opening line echoes redundantly but significantly the closing image of a *river of blood*. Since the implied red river (“Mine is red”) of the *unborn* male must be interpreted as a metaphor for an umbilical cord, the entrance of Octavio Paz into his own poem is made clear in this specific poetic cell, both at the level of history (Spanish Conquest of Mexico in 1521), an avowed origin (“*Polvo soy de aquellos lodos*” [I am the dust of that silt]), and a global history of violence (“river of histories of blood”). Poem and poetics thus give way to autobiography and politics: the self as history in three lines (64-66). The Castiles of sand are none other than the Spanish monarchical dream in the New World: built on sand. The hieroglyph on the chest of the “fallen Mexico” (“*México caído*”) tells of water and fire (*brasa* as metonymy for fire), therefore alluding to the Nahuatl *atl tlachinolli* (fire and water), a *difrasismo* or conceptual couplet meaning *total war*. The poetic voice identifies the “mud” or clay of such red river as his own origin, therefore marking this historical event, place of conflict, and total war as the poet’s vital source, shaping trauma, and birthplace.

The direct quotation of Livingstone’s diary (“*Patience patience/ river rising a little*”) is an intertextual device that parallels the collage technique invented by Picasso and later used by T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, a poem much admired by Paz. ¹³ In *Blanco*, Paz also inserts a verse from a sonnet by Quevedo (identified by the line “*las altas fieras de la piel luciente*” [“the tall beasts with shining skins”]). Octavio Paz thus “glues” lines authored by Livingstone and Quevedo so as to stress imperial moments in the history of European global expansion from the 16th-19th centuries, resulting in a poetic reflection on the riparian origin of

¹¹In English: “language / is atonement, / an appeasement / of the speechless, / the entombed, / the daily / assassinated, / the countless dead,” in *The Collected Poems*, 316.

¹²In English: “Mine is red and scorches / in the flaming dunes: / Castiles [sic] of sand, / shredded playing cards / and the hieroglyph (water and ember). / Dropped on the chest of Mexico. / I am the dust of that silt. / River of blood.” *Collected Poems*, p. 316.

¹³For the references to Livingstone and Quevedo, see Eliot Weinberger, *The Collected Poems*, p. 648.

civilizations and the legacy of European/Aryan colonialism in Mesoamerica, Africa, and India.¹⁴ In terms of David Livingstone (1813-1873), he is generally associated not only with medicine and missionary work in Africa, but also with the search for the origin of the Nile river. There might be, however, a more personal connection to Livingstone: he and Octavio Paz were born in March (with coincidental numerological permutations in the number 13), and while the former launched his search for the Nile in 1866, the latter set out to write *Blanco* exactly a century later.

The sonnet by Quevedo is well known: it refers to a beloved who finds herself enclosed in a “picture”: what the Nile will be for one, the Ganges will be for the other in the way Spain held the New World and Asia (“all the Indies”)—clashed in its fist (“traigo todas las Indias en mi mano” [“I carry all the Indies in my hand”]). *Blanco*’s anti-imperialist subtext, written along the lines of a European construct of “love” (and the inevitable associations with aggressive desire and libertinage), achieves its poetic representation in a cubist-like canvas that defies a hermeneutic based on one’s accustomed method of reading.

The third strophic section is evidently organized around an explorer (Livingstone) and a poet (Quevedo) who represent two world imperial forces, with specific colonial sites identified in *Blanco* as Egypt and the Indies. The poetic cluster at the end of this third section presents a view of the primal couple in a womb-like aquatic environment fed by a seminal river (“*rueda el río seminal de los mundos*” [“seminal river of the worlds wheeling”]) in a universe which is the sum of all worlds, from the near and minuscule organism to the most distant and enormous star (“*astros, infusorios, reptiles*” [“stars infusoria reptiles”]).

This poetic cluster—the last section in which both left and right poems will be facing each other before they fuse and blend in a lover’s embrace—privileges the sense of vision in a shared mode: both lovers are seeing each other for the first time inside the cosmic womb (“*es mi creación esto que veo...soy la creación de lo que veo*” [“what I see is my creation...I am the creation of what I see”], lines 104-107), but written as a tacit riposte to Marcel Duchamp’s well-known claim: “The spectator makes the picture” (*Marcel Duchamp* 85). As an acknowledgment of one of the mantras of Cubism, Octavio Paz adds a line: “*la percepción es concepción*” (“perception is conception,” line 105), thus punning on an avant-garde aesthetic and the condition of the two gestating lovers. It is in this third section of *Blanco*—and in its center—that one hears echoes from distant poems by Octavio Paz, such as “Cuerpo a la vista” (from *El girasol*, 1943-1948), where Paz describes the nude female body in its plural associations with a womb, a geography of the homeland, and the cosmos, recapitulated in the concluding four lines “*Patria de sangre/ única tierra que conozco y me conoce,/ única patria en la que creo,/ única puerta al infinito*”).¹⁵

¹⁴In other words, this is Octavio Paz’s own collage. In the history of Cubism, Picasso’s pasted newspaper clippings in *Glass and Bottle of Suze* (1912) represent a departure from the hermetic Cubism of 1907-1910. Cottington observes that Picasso turned into an art the glued newspaper “reports from the battlefield and an account of a demonstration against the war held in Paris by the Socialists,” with oil cloths and chair patterns that introduced for the first time “the technique of collage” (*Cubism* 69, 70).

¹⁵“My blood’s homeland, /the only land that I know and knows me, /the only land that I believe in, / the only door to infinity” (my translation). The theme of two homelands—woman and infinity—in which the nation plays only an ambiguous part, is found

The birth of the two lovers is near and described as a delta, therefore as a river's end, as the lovers' bed, as well as a bright star in the universe: from a mountain cave to a constellation, the near and the distant are revealed by the same numinous moment. The closing line functions as a telling strophic hinge: "*La transparencia es todo lo que queda*" ("Transparency is all that remains," line 110).

In terms of poetic function, *Blanco*'s fifth section (5: 162-224) is divided into two levels of communication: the expressive or conative (the first person narrative voice describing what he sees, lines 162-195, 223-224), and the inter-subjective (the first person narrator addressing the female consort, lines 196-222). Although his mind is "blank," the visual memory of the narrative voice brings forth a recapitulation of language's uterine life ("*la palabra*" as the primal word) at the level of colors, followed by the language of amazement and vertigo, a clear indication of the narrator's bewildered response to his first retinal impressions of life and, by logical Adam-like inference, a paradigmatic garden: no doubt made of clay, but born from the earth, in a womb-like cave. According to the combinatorial possibility of this reading, the first ten lines can be read as the account of the couple's last stage in their uterine journey through the earth canal and their sudden emergence, like the sprouting of sacred corn:

Del amarillo al rojo al verde,
peregrinación hacia las claridades,
la palabra se asoma a remolinos
azules.
Gira el anillo beodo,
giran los cinco sentidos
alrededor de la amatista /ensimismada.
Traslumbramiento:
no pienso, veo.¹⁶

The language is suggestive of a birth in its references to uterine contractions followed by the internal rotations of the head and shoulders of the newly born: *peregrinación hacia las claridades, la palabra se asoma a remolinos, gira el anillo, giran los cinco sentidos* ("pilgrimage to the clarities, ring spins, the five senses spin," lines 163-167). The actual birth is registered as a blinding light ("*Traslumbramiento*"), and as the poetic image of a child's first visual impressions: *no pienso, veo*. The narrative quality of these lines thus traces the language of pregnancies ("*traslumbramiento*" puns with "dar a luz" ["to give light" as in "giving birth"]), as well as the primal portrait of the Edenic narrator who can't distinguish between the womb left behind and the wonders of the brave new world he glimpses for the first time.

The entry into human reality in *Blanco* is marked by verbs of motion which range from the sacred to the groping walk (*peregrinación hacia las claridades...*

frequently in Octavio Paz's poetry as his own Trojan Horse against modern Mexican nationalism.

¹⁶ "From yellow to red to green, / pilgrimage to the clarities, / the word peers out from blue /whirls. / The drunk ring spins, / the five senses spin / around the centripetal / amethyst. / Dazzle: /I don't think, I see." (Lines 162-171), *Collected Poems*, p. 323.

avanzo...avanzo ["pilgrimage to to the clarities...I walk... I walk"], lines 163, 186, 191). Where is he going? We are not told, but no doubt the journey is now heading toward another end ("blanco"): toward death. Life on earth has been an "ultrapid exposure" (*Duchamp* 141). This reading possibility of *Blanco* does not spring from Tantrism, but from Octavio Paz's analysis of Duchamp's avant-garde art and a sustained study of Martin Heidegger whose philosophical discourse shapes much Paz's *The Bow and the Lyre* (1956):

I aspire to being, to the being that changes, not to the salvation of the self. I am not concerned about the *other life* elsewhere but here. The experience of *otherness* is, here and now, the *other life*. Poetry does not seek to console man for death but to make him see that life and death are inseparable: they are the totality. To recuperate the concrete life means to unite the pair life-death, to reconquer the one in the other, the you in the I, and thus *to discover the shape of the world in the dispersion of its fragments*. (148-149, my italics)

If we return to lines 162-169, one notices that the reference to the "spellbound" or "wrapped up" amethyst ("centripetal" in Weinberger's translation does not quite correspond to "ensimismada" in this line), might be a poetic reference to the semi-precious stone, either quartz or rock-crystal of a "clear purple or a bluish violet colour of different degrees of intensity," believed to be "a preventive against intoxication" and with its finest samples brought from India (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In the language of myth, the amethyst is associated with Dionysus, the metamorphosis of a maiden into white quartz, and the colors it acquired through Dionysus and his mourning after the maiden's death—thus a variant of the Isis and Osiris myth. "The most famous part of [Dionysus] wanderings in Asia," writes William Smith, "is his expedition to India, which is said to have lasted several years" (148).¹⁷

Beyond this intricate weaving of possible hermetic associations and numerological symbols (a game loved by Octavio Paz), one point is clear: the inebriated ring (*anillo beodo*) is a metaphor for the rotating and spinning of the child's five senses around the quadrature of the semi-precious amethyst, hence the quincunx or cosmic-center image of the womb whose constant whirl marks the beginning of mortal time and the centering of space, transforming the amethyst into a stone that absorbs all the colors of the spectrum. Since the amethyst is the *Rose de France*, its association with Robert Delaunay's painting "Windows Open Simultaneously" (1912) is inevitable if one considers that such a painting resembles a semi-precious stone that refracts and splinters into small kinetic cubes one's view of the Eiffel Tower and the Pyramids of Giza, two

¹⁷It is generally known that Octavio Paz's essays often turn to Isis, the consort and sister of Osiris, and to themes of life, death by dismemberment, and number 14 as the symbol of Osiris's resurrection as a unified body. A repressed source in our reading of *Blanco* has been Euripides, close to Octavio Paz's poetics and a center piece in *The Bow and the Lyre*. In a longer study, one would have to consider Euripides' play *Bakkhai*, with the image of the young Dionysus reaching the West (Thebes) from India, thus as an exile returning to his western home. In Euripides' play we find the same images that interest Paz in *Blanco*: earth goddesses, lunar cults, erotic rites, homecoming, women who in a frenzy slay their loved ones, the dismembered bodies (*sparagmos*), the loving assembling of the limbs, and so on. See Euripides, *Bakkhai*, trans. Reginald Gibbons (New York: Oxford UP, 2001).

matrices of ancient and modern metropolitan centers.¹⁸ Cubism's obsession with the representation of movement was a sign of its hermetic fascination with the fourth dimension, proposed by Octavio Paz in his book *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare* (1973, but published in Spanish in 1968, thus in close proximity to *Blanco*'s publication): "It was an interest [Duchamp] shared with most of the poets and artists of his time, as we see in the 'simultaneism' of Barzun, Delaunay, Cendrars, Apollinaire, and others" (130).¹⁹

With an important stage in the couple's journey completed, the fundamental elements, colors, senses, and human faculties begin to reach a stage of individuation, culminating not only in the couple's birth but also with an allusion to a calendrical marker: the infant couple is born on two ancient Mexican day signs, "wind" (*viento*), coupled with "house" (*casa del viento*, line 222b). Octavio Paz writes what appears to be a neologism: *Aerofanía*, as if to insinuate the "hierophany" or manifestation of the sacred, in this case the god of wind (Quetzalcoatl) in a native Mexican setting. Elizabeth Hill Boone explains the ancient calendrical significance of births that take place under the day signs of house and wind as follows:

For anyone born on one of the first four day signs (Crocodile, Wind, House, Lizard), the maize/flower/solar lords Centeotl or Xochipilli would control the birth [...] A theme of vegetation and abundance thus governs the birth process for those fortunate to have these day signs. (141)

In the second part of section five (lines 196-215) one could read an inter-subjective level of communication in which the first person narrator (now appearing implicitly as Osiris) addresses Isis, the young sister/wife. This is the more developed and hermetic part of *Blanco*, with a constant word-play ("*testigos los testículos solares*" ["testimony of solar testicles"]), alliteration ("*cielo y suelo se juntan*" ["sky and earth joining"]), and the poetic ingenuity in the synesthesia of the closing lines: "olida por mis ojos/ puente hung from color to smell"). The central features, however, allude to a "falling" from the consort's body to her shadow, and from her shadow to her name (thus from birth to social or mythic identity), then back to her body and its origin: a downward flow of disarray and dismemberment: "caes de tu cuerpo a tu sombra [...] caes de tu sombra a tu nombre [...] caes de tu nombre a tu cuerpo [...] caes en tu comienzo [...] tú te repartes como el lenguaje / *espacio dios descuartizado*."²⁰ Just born, both are already on their circular *nostos* or return to the origin: toward the world of sacrifice ("*dios descuartizado*")

¹⁸See Cantú, 2010: 57-58.

¹⁹In his book *The Other Voice*, published in 1990, Paz returns to this point and expands: "Cubism, and above all the Orphism of Delaunay, inspired the first experiments by Cendrars and Apollinaire, with whom Simultaneism truly began. In the case of Cendrars especially, the influence of film techniques—montage flashback—was decisive. The use of cinematographic devices shattered syntax and the linear, successive nature of traditional poetry" (50).

²⁰"[Y]ou fall from your body to your shadow [...] you fall from your shadow to your name [...] you fall from your name to your body [...] you fall to your beginning [...] you divide me [sic] like parts of speech / *space quartered god*," lines 196-204, *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz*, p. 325.

[“quartered god”]), shadows, and death. The weight of fate on the young couple is evident in the determinism that shapes their brief lives coded in the language of riddles, hence of a Kali-like Sphinx: “*siempre dos sílabas enamoradas / los labios negros de la profetisa / A d i v i n a n z a*” (“*always two syllables in love / the black lips of the oracle / P r o p h e c y*,” lines 211-212).

Eliot Weinberger translates “*adivinanza*” as “prophecy,” no doubt because of the association with the oracle (“*profetisa*”). But *riddle* is a better word since the intent is not to foretell the future, but to solve a puzzle or mystery.²¹ As expected, Octavio Paz includes possible answers on the word’s lateral phrases: “*siempre dos sílabas enamoradas*” (“always two syllables in love”), and “*entera en cada parte te repartes*” (“Whole in each part you divide yourself,” line 213). The first phrase is explained through another poem, the *Topoema* which plays with the words *sí*, *no* (yes, no), and *sino*, a word meaning “destiny” or “fate.”²² The second phrase is a pun on *parte* (“in each part”) and *repartes* which more so than meaning “divide yourself” (as in the translation), should be read as “you give yourself” (from *repartir*, that is, to give or hand out equal portions). As such, *sílabas enamoradas* are the dispersed but matching syllables in a discourse of love that signify “destiny” or fate in Spanish (“*sino*”).

The sixth section marks *Blanco*’s “epilogue,” one which dramatizes a couple’s metaphysical pilgrimage that leads to incarnation, followed by a journey back to primal matter. The simultaneous representation of a pilgrimage toward incarnation and back to the origin illustrates what has been a recurring pattern in *Blanco*, with different stages and ages spinning and spiralling in a temporality that includes past, present, and future: in other words, the “date that recurs,” an eternal present in constant rotation.²³

III. *Blanco*, Octavio Paz, and the Tradition of Modern Poetry

As observed at the beginning of this essay, Octavio Paz defined modernity by its otherness: to be modern means to reject the present tradition in favour of an anterior age which, once life is breathed into it, returns with the renewed force of its own passion for contradiction and re-creation--the true mission of an avant-garde. Paz’s poetics and politics thus call for a return (*vuelta*, one of Paz’s favorite words) from which a model of a trans-national literary history would offer a better vantage point to understand the efforts of Latin American writers during the 1940s to naturalize the avant-garde in native lands. Paz’s critical views on the East and the West can now be envisaged as an aesthetic horizon for a new poetry: neither a hemispheric project nor destruction of meaning, but a search for otherness and an attempt to make sense in a world that had lost it:

[T]he invention of weapons for total annihilation interdicts every hypothesis or theory about the meaning of history and the supposed reason inherent in the movements and struggles of nations and classes [...] Indeed, in proportion as

²¹Thus translated by G. Aroul and Charles Tomlinson in their English version of *Blanco*, published in *Configurations*, p. 189.

²²Read this example of Paz’s concrete poem in *Collected Poems*, p. 337. Also, the poem “*Adivinanza en forma de octagón*”, which Weinberger aptly translates as “*Riddle in the Shape of an Octagon*,” *Ibid.*, p. 361.

²³For an expanded analysis of sections 1, 4, and 6, see Cantú, 2010.

the future it builds is less and less imaginable and appears devoid of meaning, it ceases to be a future: it is the unknown that intrudes on us [...] So it is: everything that once seemed loaded with meaning now appears before our eyes as a series of efforts and creations that are a non-sense.²⁴

Blanco's structural composition, with an initial and concluding rotating chaos and maelstrom of fragments, can now be read as a poem composed during the Cold War in the form of a myth of origins, a metaphor for writing, and as an ideogram of the world seconds after the detonation of a hydrogen bomb. To write and read poetry, according to Paz, is "to discover the shape of the world in the dispersion of its fragments."²⁵ Inspired by Buddhism, the poet imagines Nothingness. Thus read, *Blanco*'s epigraphs from *The Hevajra Tantra* ("By passion the world is bound, by passion too it is released"), and Stéphane Mallarmé ("*Ses purs ongles*") with its reference to the Master's departure and the nobility in Nothingness—reveal an appropriateness beyond the literary. On the same line of reasoning, the reader's attempts to clarify allusions to ancient civilizations (Egypt, India, Mesoamerica) could have formalized the reading of *Blanco* as a proposed cultural syncretism or collage. There is truth to the fact that the poem's fractured syntax, its obscure references (highly condensed or ambiguous), the absence of punctuation, and frequent defamiliarized contexts validate Manuel Durán's reading of *Blanco*: "More than once we feel we are drowning in a sea of intoxicating sensations" (180).

Evidently, *Blanco*'s emphasis on ancient civilizations is not meant as a proposed "multicultural syncretism" that would be a remedy to global conflicts; read in the context of Paz's writings from 1950-1970, *Blanco* is a series of "ultrarapid exposures" of appearances (the worldly shadows, replicas) and apparitions (the archetypes) with a fugue-like representation, synchronous and contrapuntal: "For a mere instant we are the oculist witnesses" (*Duchamp* 141). As a way of closing, let us examine two questions: What does *Blanco*—as a poetic text that belongs to this stage in Paz's writings-- break away from and, Janus-like, anticipate?

In his book *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith* (1982), Octavio Paz devotes a chapter to the study of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's hermetic poem *First Dream*. The analysis is systematic and a scholarly feat in the best sense of the term: it is a study of the sources, an exegesis of the poem, and a literary history with Sor Juana, Mexico's colonial era, and modern poetry as major vantage points. It is also a most revealing chapter about Paz's own poetry, especially *Blanco*, in spite of the fact that this poem is not mentioned once.

After establishing the contrasts between Sor Juana's poetics and Luis de Góngora's, Paz turns his attention to Sor Juana's poem ("*First Dream* is strangely prophetic of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*," 358), explaining the trope that guides it—the spiritual journey of the soul during a dream—and the literary tradition that she embraces and simultaneously breaks with. It soon becomes evident that Octavio Paz is proposing more than just an analysis of *First Dream*: Sor Juana and Mallarmé turn into important synchronic moments in the literary and artistic history that Paz had conceptualized in works such as *The Bow and the Lyre*, and

²⁴Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre*. Trans. Ruth L.C. Simms. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973. Pp. 243-244.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 149.

Children of the Mire, a history noted for its trans-national range and emphasis on contradiction and negation, not on presumed resolutions or syntheses. Before he enters into his critical reading of *First Dream*, Octavio Paz writes a commentary which merits quoting in its entirety:

First Dream is the first example of an attitude—the solitary soul confronting the universe—that later, beginning with romanticism, would be the spiritual axis of Western poetry. The solitary confrontation is a religious theme, like that of the voyage of the soul, but religious in a negative way: it denies revelation. More precisely, it is a revelation of the fact that we are alone and that the world of the supernatural has dissipated. In one way or another, all modern poets have lived, relived, and re-created the double negation of *First Dream*: the silence of space, and the vision of non-vision. The great and until now unrecognized originality of Sor Juana's poem resides in this fact. And this is the basis for its unique place in the history of modern poetry. (367)

Sor Juana and Mallarmé are studied as poets who look retrospectively and forward in history: Janus-like poets who represent thresholds and liminal transitions, the beginning and the end, dawn and dusk, the sun and the moon: Janus and Diana (*Duchamp* 129). Sor Juana, says Paz, was fascinated with the goddess Isis, the inventor of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, thus the mother of writing. We are told that etymologically Isis means “twice a man,” thus “a great sexual mystery” that intrigued Sor Juana in spite of its unorthodoxy (*Sor Juana* 170). Sor Juana's interest in Isis and in Egypt, claims Paz, is an intellectual rebellion against Catholicism's ideas regarding women, and yet it is more: “Sor Juana believed that the Mexican pyramids were derived from those of Egypt, origin of all the arts and philosophies of the ancient world [...] The Egyptian pyramids appear as allegories of the soul and of its rise toward the light” (*Sor Juana* 373). Clearly then, the spiritual journey in *First Dream* (as well as in Mallarmé's poem and, by extension, in *Blanco*) ends without a revelation for obvious reasons: the Catholicism in Colonial Mexico lacked the depth, mystery and sacredness of ancient Egypt, the mother of all civilizations in Sor Juana's view. Her break with tradition, according to Paz, corresponds to a modern critique of the present and an alternating return to ancient civilizations that retain their aura of the sacred. Modernity's chance encounter with the date that recurs, and our only possibility of recovering the living portion of humanity's past.

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