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**BETWEEN THE YOGI AND THE COMMISSAR:  
OCTAVIO PAZ AND THE BOW AND THE LYRE**

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BETWEEN THE YOGI AND THE COMMISSAR:  
OCTAVIO PAZ AND THE BOW AND THE LYRE<sup>1</sup>

Paz published El arco y la lira (The Bow and the Lyre) in 1956, three years after returning to Mexico. In 1954, and for little more than a year, he had worked on the book while holding a fellowship at the prestigious Colegio de México. In securing this fellowship he was probably aided by Alfonso Reyes, President of the Colegio, whom Paz had been telling about the book, at least since 1951, in their frequent correspondence while Paz was away, first in Paris, and later in New Delhi and Tokyo. The earliest mention of the book, or its germ, comes in a letter from Paris of 24 May 1951 where he describes the collection of essays that eventually would become Las peras del olmo (1955). In its manuscript, he said then, was "a 60-page essay about poetry in the modern world." Less than a year later, in another letter to Reyes (26 March 1952), Paz included a lengthier description of the project:

I have finished a small book about poetry. I wouldn't dare call it a Poetics--actually, it isn't one--but neither is it a Rhetoric. It's a manuscript of 120 pages: four chapters and one appendix that illustrate, with examples, the struggle within every language between prose and poetry, rhyme and reason, sentence and image. The book still has no title. I don't know where I could publish it. I dare not ask you find it a charitable publisher....

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<sup>1</sup> Enrico Santí was a Fellow at the Wilson Center from September 1, 1989-Mat 31, 1990. This working paper is part of a larger work to be published by Harvard University Press.

The hints asking for Reyes's help were obvious: it was he, after all, who two years before had helped Paz get Libertad bajo palabra published. Paz's appeal for sympathy could not have been better targetted. Reyes himself was a literary theorist of sorts, having published in 1944 El deslinde, a dense tome on literary theory that drew heavily upon his readings of the classics. Reyes had followed this volume with several collections of essays on literature, notably La experiencia literaria, an anthology of short pieces from 1952, as Paz was writing Reyes for renewed help. Paz's preface to the first edition of El arco acknowledges Reyes's personal help and the affinity of these two books with his. In a letter dated 2 April 1952, asking Paz to send him the manuscript, Reyes gives his pledge to help get it published.

Whatever plans Paz may have had to send the small manuscript then were delayed by his transfer to New Delhi and his imminent change to Tokyo. As he was about to depart from Delhi he again wrote Reyes about the book (27 January 1952):

I've had to delay work on it. I think I'll be able to work on it some more in Tokyo, once I've settled there. There's something against this book. I've thought it through for years. Slowly, it's been writing itself inside me. I wrote it first last year--a first draft scribbled by the sea in Corsica. (There I felt nostalgia for the Greeks.) No sooner did I start to write a second draft than I was transferred to India. And once here, half-done, I have to change again. All these delays will allow me to revise it a little and rethink it. But maybe it will decrease its unity. I'm afraid it will be too heavily a fabricated book [*un libro demasiado fabricado*]. And yet it coincides--I noticed it yesterday, when I made the vain mistake of rereading some of my poems--with what I have already said in my verse. But maybe it's bad for a poet to explain,

justify or defend his findings, and to handle ideas, books and quotations. The myth of the Adamic poet is, in the end, quite just. Or should be. One should write naked and defenseless. Poetry is either combat or love--full-bodied activity. Don't you think?

The last reference to the book appears in a letter of 25 July 1953, once Paz had returned to Europe from Tokyo and settled in Geneva. "That booklet on poetry," he writes Reyes then, "has now turned into a book of almost three-hundred pages. I never thought I'd be able to write so much. Now it rests in my desk. In August, if I have time, I'll revise it and find it both a title and a publisher. It's occurred to me to call it "The Other Shore,"--an allusion to knowledge, or better said: to being in knowledge [ *al saber, o mejor dicho: al estar en el saber* ] of the Buddhists. Prajna paramita means, apparently, 'to know (or to be in) the other shore.' In sum, poetry as a death jump."

Thus, begining in the summer of 1951 and over the course of five years, The Bow and the Lyre developed from an essay on "poetry in the modern world" to one about the polar tensions that make up poetic discourse--"the struggle within every language between prose and poetry, rhyme and reason, sentence and image," and from there to a full-length book that "explains, justifies or defends" the findings of Paz's own poetry. As is well known, there are two, and quite different, editions of the book: the first 1956 edition and a second one from 1967, which Paz undertook on the occasion of its 1965 French translation. In what I consider to be one of the truly ground-breaking essays in Paz studies, Emir Rodriguez Monegal studied the differences between the two books. Whereas the first edition, for Monegal, "reflects the Mexican Paz, a traveller of universal

culture through its reflection of Western books, rooted within both the Hispanic and the French traditions," the second revised edition reflects Paz's periods of residence in both France and India. In the same essay, Monegal went on to study the different contents of both books: whereas the first edition was grounded in Hispanic and French sources that highlighted the importance of Existentialism, the second edition reflects the impact of both Structuralism and a deeper understanding of the Orient. The intellectual shift from Existentialism to Structuralism, from Heidegger to Levi-Strauss, so to speak, can be summarized in Monegal's useful short list: "The existentialist interpretation of Being that Paz gathers through Antonio Machado and Bergamin," and supported in the reading of certain texts of Heidegger, "the (very Bretonian) conviction of the links between poetry and revolution."

I have shown elsewhere, taking the cue from Monegal's essay, that this particular intellectual shift is complicated by Paz's insistence, in the first edition, on the affinities between Surrealism and Existentialism. While Surrealism serves Paz in order to identify poetry as an epistemological revolution, what is essentially a revolt of the means of knowledge that are available to mankind, Existentialism helps him interpret life as sense-giving and temporality. It is significant that in a 1954 interview in Geneva, as Paz was about to return to Mexico and begin work on the last draft of The Bow and the Lyre, he pointed to the useful conceptual parallels between Surrealism and "Heidegger's metaphysics of freedom." According to Paz then, such parallels suggested the need to "meditate, as a point of departure of such confrontation, on the meaning of words like inspiration and projection." It was not so much a matter, Paz

went on to say in the same interview, "of creating a synthesis of such words" as to find "a coincidence in certain fundamental points ... poetic creation and philosophical reflection mutually illuminating each other." This was, then, the tall order that Paz gave himself as he was about to finish drafting the book.

It is little wonder that, once published, the first edition should have raised so many eyebrows concerning its rather rhapsodic treatment of philosophical systems and historical concepts. In one of the few reviews of the book that appeared in Mexico, Tomás Segovia, a Mexican-Spanish poet and friend of Paz's, would go so far as to mark the incongruence of this enterprise, as he underscored "how Paz's very relative automatic writing would reveal the real functions of thought, not of existence." Segovia was of course, right: in The Bow and the Lyre Paz preserves the basic tenet of Surrealism--automatic writing (what Paz calls "inspiration") is a form of revelation, but he substitutes psychic revelation for ontological revelation. He is interested in poetry as a revelation of Being, not as a revelation of the subconscious. I have shown elsewhere that the reason for Paz's dislocation, to put it mildly, of these two conceptual systems--Surrealism and Existentialism--has to do with a certain Romantic reading of Heidegger--whose roots are perhaps in Sartre--that took hold in Mexico in the late 1930s, with the arrival in Mexico of Spanish exiles like José Gaos, who translated Sein und Zeit into Spanish.

I would argue that despite the radical changes that the argument of The Bow and the Lyre underwent from the first 1956 edition to the second one in 1967, the book preserved this previous and fundamental

"coincidence," to use Paz's own word, between poetic creation and philosophical reflection. Paz himself, in the preface to the second edition, pointed out those passages of the book where the revisions were most evident--the fourth chapter on "Verse and Prose" and the new Epilogue, titled "Signs in Rotation"--and went so far as to show some of its new sources, such as the essay "Recapitulations" from 1965 and "The New Analogy: Poetry and Technology" from 1967. Faced with the need to account for the permanence of this argument throughout the two editions, I would rather take a step backward and examine not so much the differences between the two book-length editions as the sources of the first 1956 edition, which Paz himself points to in its Foreword.

For Paz, publishing *The Bow and the Lyre* in Mexico was obviously a splash of sorts. Between 1949 and 1951, he had published three books: Libertad bajo palabra (1949), El laberinto de la soledad (1950) and ¿Aguila o sol? (1951). He had written all three during a seven-year hiatus and a lengthy period abroad, which in many ways was a self-imposed exile. None of the three books brought Paz the recognition he wished from his Mexican peers; considering their relative importance, barely any reviews of them were published in Mexico, a fact that must have saddened their author given his insistence that the books be published there. In 1953, after a ten-year absence (he had left Mexico in January 1943 and returned in September 1953), Paz returned to Mexico a changed man. So great has become Paz's perception (or memory) of the changes he underwent during this first period abroad, that in some essays where he talks about the period he changes its length from ten to nine years so as to give it a symbolic sense. "I repeat that number with reverence: it was a true



gestation. Only a gestation in reverse: not within but outside my native land. During those years everything changed: my ideas, my likes and dislikes, my loves and hatreds--but I was loyal to poetry."

Not only was Paz different from when he had left--in 1943, he was 29, and returned upon turning 38; so was Mexico and its growing capital. The country had been thoroughly transformed by the successive administrations of presidents Alemán and Ruiz Cortines, bent as they were on industrial development and what Alan Riding has called a "strategy of growth". As the city grew, so did the Mexican government and its bureaucracy, increasingly conservative in its petrifying nationalist rhetoric. The Mexican Revolution had finally become "institutionalized." As an officer in the Mexican Foreign Service, Paz himself was a member of that bureaucracy. Yet one would not exaggerate in calling Paz's reentry into Mexico a double life: as both a bureaucrat and a writer, he began to give equal time to government work and the Mexican cultural context; he both represented and criticized the establishment. "In 1955 Mexico," he recalled in one of his 1975 memoir-lectures, "contentment was common among politicians, bankers, labor and farm leaders. Even intellectuals were contaminated by that optimism. But the younger people were healthier. The new generation had a decidedly critical attitude. Their critique was not ideological but artistic, literary and poetic.... They, too, had to face nationalism and art with an ideological message."

With time, these young writers would earn names: Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes, Juan José Arreola, to mention just three whose works began to appear in magazines like Universidad de Mexico, Mexico en la cultura

and Revista mexicana de literatura. My point is that after his arrival from Europe it took Paz little time to become a leader within this new Mexican context. He was not an outright cultural commissar, to be sure, but he certainly became an important cultural patron of sorts. He became, for example, a mentor to the younger writers, endorsing their works to foreign publishers; he began defending the work of younger painters like Rufino Tamayo, Pedro Coronel and Remedios Varo whose own works clearly opposed the muralists'; Paz even founded a theater group called *Poesia en voz alta* for which he wrote a play, Rappaccini's Daughter, based on the famous Hawthorne story.

So highly regarded was Paz at this time that Emmanuel Carballo, who with Carlos Fuentes was one of the two editors of Revista mexicana de literatura, called him "one of our two masters [*maestros* ] (the other one was Alfonso Reyes)." Indeed, Paz's "El cántaro roto" ["The Broken Jar"], an indignant long poem about poverty and social oppression in the north of Mexico, was the opening text of the Revista's first issue in September 1955. "Evil here," Paz would say to Carballo himself, in an interview from the time, "comes from two sources: in historical succession, it's the Indian chieftain, the bishop, the general, the banker; and then there's plain oppression: the drought, isolation and loneliness." The published poem shook up the contented Mexican society Paz had found upon his return from Europe and made him a decided maverick of Mexican culture. If eventually Paz would characterize these years as "an unsettled period of Mexican arts and letters: nationalism, social art, the solitary efforts of a few poets and painters," it may be because his work itself may have been unsettled. So successful was Paz at shaking up Mexican society with his

poetry that barely a year later (early 1956) he charged again with a new version of Entre la piedra y la flor [Between Stone and Flower], the long poem about life in the desolate Yucatán peninsula that he had first written in the early forties in response to a brief period of residence there. A synthesis of Marxism and T.S. Eliot's The Wasteland, the poem's new version replaced the earlier version's abstract discourse about the Mexican farmer with a poignant dialogue with him, and gave a decidedly new twist to what was then called committed poetry.

Within this context, one therefore cannot help but see the first edition of The Bow and the Lyre as a multiple defense of poetry. It is a defense not only against the skeptical arguments about poetry of a Sartre in What is Literature (1947)--Sartre, if you recall, regarded poets like Baudelaire and Mallarmé as little more than bourgeois nihilists; it is also a defense against the twin enemies of nationalist insensitivity and the indifference toward poetry of a rising middle class like the Mexican. "I wrote The Bow and the Lyre," said Paz two years ago at a conference in France on his work, "in order to justify myself and to justify poetry in the modern world." In this defense or justification, the moral lessons of French Surrealism, to which Paz was exposed during his near-decade in Paris, were, as we shall see, crucial. "There was a morality in the modern world of Surrealism that I made mine," Paz said then. "Surrealism has always been a moral culture, a moral position before the world. I became a surrealist not only because of André Breton [whom Paz had befriended in Paris in the late forties], but because I had found that poetry was the center of his activity. And for me, too, poetry is the secret center, the core of the true life."

Indeed, Paz's preface to the first edition underscores precisely this justification or defense aspect of his book. "Perhaps the only justification for writing," says its first sentence, "is that it tries to answer the question we asked ourselves one day, which will not let us rest until it receives an answer." For Paz, the question, as he goes on to say, was the following: "Would it not be better to transform life into poetry than to make poetry from life?" The statement echoes the 1952 letter to Alfonso Reyes where the burgeoning book is seen to provide an explanation of his own poetry's findings: "it coincides...with what I have said in my verse." Paz does not tell us in his preface that the question he was asking was also, of course, the Surrealist question--Surrealism sought to locate poetic evidence (such as instances of the Marvelous) in material daily life; instead, he does point to an earlier essay of his, "Poetry of Solitude and Poetry of Communion" (1942), as his own first sketch of an answer to the same obsessive question. Indeed, Paz goes so far as to claim that "the present book is merely the maturing, the development and, here and there, the correction of that distant text." Yet what was so important about that early text that made Paz feel compelled to mature, develop and correct it nearly twenty years after he had written it?

"Poetry of Solitude and Poetry of Communion" was first delivered as a lecture by Paz in a 1942 conference on Saint John of the Cross, the Spanish mystic. The conference was organized by José Bergamin, a well-known Spanish neo-Catholic writer who was then living in exile in Mexico City. Paz's lecture dealt with Saint John only incidentally, for his real subject was, to paraphrase William James, "the varieties of poetic

experience." If we trace back the driving question that was to be formulated years later in the preface to The Bow and the Lyre--"Would it not be better to transform life into poetry?"-- we find that it is posed only indirectly in the lecture's overall driving analogy of poetry and religion. And yet the thrust of the lecture is to search for a method, so to speak, that would allow for such transformation to take place.

In outlining two broad attitudes toward objective reality--those of power or worship, which belong to magic and religion, respectively--Paz claims, as a first step, that the poet's attitude is closer to the mystic's than to the magician's; closer to religion, that is, than to magic. The poet, he says, "never intends to utilize [its object] like the magician, but rather to become one with it like the mystic." Both religion and poetry establish a loving, worshipful dialogue with their objects; and like religion, too, it unfolds a structure of withdrawal and return, what Paz calls poetry of solitude and poetry of communion: "El poeta parte de la soledad, unido por el deseo, hacia la comuni3n." Poetry, like religion, is disinterested, but of the two poetry is the least interested; unlike religion, it has no social or institutional pretensions. Whereas religion is public, conservative and orthodox, poetry is private, dissident and heterodox, a "personal and irregular form of worship." This crucial difference determines, in turn, their radically different functions, not to mention their consequent rivalry: whereas poetry is witness to "the innate innocence of man," religion witnesses the loss of that same innocence; religion affirms sin, poetry denies it. "But the poet's testimony," Paz goes on to say, "is valid only if it succeeds in transforming experience into expression, that is, words." More than bearing witness to human innocence, poetry reveals it through love,

thus turning its testimony into a secular theodicy, so to speak: "the revelation of an experience in which all men participate," "though it is concealed by routine and everyday bitterness." "Routine and everyday bitterness" is of course the young Paz's phrase for modern alienation, which poetry is of course seen to overcome, provided that conditions allow for a reconciliation of what he calls the "contradictory forces" that divide man from himself, those forces being "reason and inspiration, society and the individual, rational and individual piety."

For the young Paz of this lecture, Saint John the mystic and Francisco de Quevedo, the Spanish baroque poet of *desengaño*, both embody this reconciliation, though in far different ways. Saint John both experienced union with God and explained it lucidly in his poems: "he is conscious of his innocence" even if that consciousness in itself "does not make him a better poet." Quevedo, similarly, though conscious of his evil self, reconciles himself through an extreme self-consciousness that results in the stoic's serenity. Be it the case of Quevedo's solitude or of Saint John's communion, such reconciliations do not appear available in the examples that Paz draws from modern poetry. In a transparent jab at Surrealist automatic writing, for example, he belies that "the mere participation of the unconscious in a poem turns it into a psychological document"; and in alluding to the pure poetry of a Paul Valéry or Juan Ramón Jiménez, he similarly chides that "the mere presence of thought, often empty or speculative, dehumanizes it." And so, Paz concludes, in order to reconcile all of these forces the poet ought to aspire to a dual state of dream and vigilance: "In order to reveal man's dream it is essential not to renounce consciousness."

It should be clear after reading this essay, then, that Paz viewed the possibility of reconciling unconscious creation with conscious direction as the means to transform life into poetry. Such reconciliation would therefore be the one that The Bow and the Lyre attempts to explore in greater detail in its separate chapters on the various aspects of poetic creation--such as language, rhythm, the relations between verse and prose, and the image. Achieving such reconciliation would not only determine a means of equivalence between, say, ontology and aesthetics, life and creativity, so as to make either a more creative life or a richer poetry; one could add that it is also, more pointedly, a formula for aesthetic creation itself--by which I broadly mean the creation of both poetry and criticism. Briefly put, the formula could be restated thus: if the unexamined poem is not worth experiencing, the unexperienced criticism is not worth examining. Poetry and criticism, or poetry and poetics, would thereby become each other's testing ground, so to speak, in a dialectical flight that would seem to insure for the poet a more comprehensive and authentic relationship with the creative experience. "We want a superior form of sincerity: authenticity," says Paz in the last paragraph of his lecture.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Paz should have told Reyes that the ideas of his prose manuscript coincided "with what I have already said in my verse." Readers of poets who also happen to be critics--Coleridge, Baudelaire, Eliot, Borges, Paz, Lezama Lima, Stevens--often read the criticism in order to use the ideas contained there as the key to interpret the poetry; such a complementary reading, so to speak, may indeed "coincide" with some aspects of the poetry, and yet it is a reading

condemned to partial blindness, given the temporal structure of the attendant text. Another way to say this is that Paz's insights about poetry in The Bow and the Lyre are based, of course, on the insights he gathered from his own poems as he wrote them earlier; yet the discursive explanation of those very insights, "with ideas, books and quotations" as Paz remarks to Reyes, seems to be a means of "reconciling" with what in effect appears to be an inevitable rupture or break opened up by the knowledge afforded by those very poems. Criticism or poetics is condemned to play "catch" with the poems that precede it.

An even clearer restatement of this very dialectics appears in a little-known text of Paz's, the second chapter of his Vigils: Diary of a Dreamer (a title which itself contains the whole program) from 1939, now collected in my edition of Primeras letras, along with the lecture we have just glossed. Much as Dante does in La vita nuova, Paz's poetic diary includes poems that he then goes on to analyze for the hidden knowledge of the self that they contain. Moreover, the author goes so far as to analyze the very nature of the diary and the critical conscience that moves it: "we take recourse in reason because it is the only thing that, even dryly, substitutes for the ancient water, the true bread of forgiveness." "Poetry is forgiveness," he says elsewhere, 'but the poet is not innocent. Hence his anguish. Poetry is a grace, a gift, but it is also a thirst and a suffering.... Poetry is a consciousness: Baudelairean consciousness of sin,' the consciousness of drunkenness, the reflection over vertigo."

Such formulas as "consciousness of drunkenness," "reflection over vertigo," are, like the very title "Diary of a Dreamer," examples of the



balanced contradictions, so to speak, that Paz's creative enterprise attempts to explore. The exploration culminates in the early 1950s with Paz's stock-taking of his poetic experience up to then. The very title he chooses for his book, The Bow and the Lyre--based on one of Heraclitus's better-known fragments: "We do not notice how opposing forces agree. Look at the bow and the lyre"--is itself one more example of this balanced contradiction. Whatever version of the Heraclitus fragment we end up choosing, the truth remains that Paz chose it as the emblem of his readings into what he described to Alfonso Reyes as "the struggle within every language between prose and poetry, rhyme and reason, sentence and image." At the end of the last chapter of the book, Paz returns to that image in an effort to sum up his argument throughout the previous twelve chapters: "the lyre, which consecrates man and thus gives him a place in the cosmos; the bow, which shoots him beyond himself." In Paz's restatement, that is, the fragment itself could not be any more Heraclitean, as it were: an image of harmonized stasis and movement, similar to the river into whose sameness we cannot plunge twice. "All poetic creation," Paz goes on to derive from this insight, "is historical; every poem is a longing to deny succession and to establish an enduring realm.... Our poetry is consciousness of the separation and attempt to unite with that which was separated.... Poetry, momentary reconciliation."

It would take longer than we have here to demonstrate how each of the six chapters of The Bow and the Lyre sets up a reconciling reading, so to speak, of each of the different aspects of poetic creation. The conclusion one reaches after going through each of these readings is that more than a course on poetic technique, Paz is after a form of wisdom based purely on

irreducible poetic phenomena. The conceptual core of that wisdom is summarized in the one word that recurs throughout Paz's early writings and the first edition of The Bow and the Lyre: "reconciliation." Two separate, though interrelated questions remain to be examined in relation to the study of The Bow and the Lyre. The first question is how in the 1967 edition of The Bow and the Lyre, which shows the influence of the Orient--particularly the Buddhist questioning of the subject-object dichotomy--the matter of "reconciliation," in the Western sense that Paz poses it in the first edition, is rendered either moot or in direct contradiction with the stated aims of his philosophical project. The second, more crucial, and certainly more arduous question is how The Bow and the Lyre is made up of the complex interrelation between Paz's own poetic practice and his retrospective reflections of that practice. To answer this question it appears indispensable to examine, in particular, both Libertad bajo palabra and ¿Aguila o sol?, the two poetry collections that preceded immediately the initial draft of The Bow and the Lyre. For if Octavio Paz, like any other poet, is after the wisdom that poetry grants, then the ground of that wisdom will be none other than the poem's irreducible poetic language.