Broken Mirror: A Look into Octavio Paz's "Blanco"

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Abstract

This essay examines one of Octavio Paz's major works: the prose poem "Blanco." The essay juxtaposes several major analyses of "Blanco," and in doing so shows how many critics have been misled by themselves, and Paz, into misreading the poem. The critics thus far have argued that the typography and structure of "Blanco" are intended to draw the reader toward the postmodern notion of Presence: undeniable, unmediated, though ultimately ineffable perception of reality. Whereas they arrive at this conclusion by gaining their insights from theorists who were influential to Paz, this essay differs in that it applies Octavio Paz's own critical theories. In doing so, I argue that the critics did not find this meaning, but rather that the critics have created it. By exploring the naturally reflective typographic structures of "Blanco," I examine the ways in which the text provides mirror images of who gazes into it: the reader.

Octavio Paz spent his life in constant relocation—not just physically, but mentally as well. Never content to stagnate, Paz was a man of incessant reinvention, or as he calls it in his final autobiographical work, *Itinerary*, revolution. Like Paz, his poetry swells with movement across the page—for Paz, the postmodern linguistic whirl was as natural as the swirling of the stars. Despite this fluidity, Paz's poetry also often conveys rupture. At times his poetic persona seeks only to understand itself, at others, to explode into a reunion with the universe. Throughout Paz's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he analyzes the origins of this imagery in his Hispanic roots, noting, "The consciousness of being separate is a constant feature of [Hispanic] spiritual history."[1] This separation is sometimes experienced as a wound that marks an internal division, an anguished awareness that invites self-examination; at other times separation appears as a challenge to actively seek out Otherness. Paz writes in his poetry that this longing for the Other is caused by the separation and perception of "two-syllables in love"—binaries—that exist as a consequence of our perception of reality.[2]

Despite Paz's emphasis on the pursuit of self-knowledge, the overwhelming majority of critics have focused exclusively on external influences on Paz's poetry, such as his interest in the French structuralist movement, surrealism, or Hindu symbolism. The prior critics have sought external theories and perspectives to bring understanding to the poetry of Octavio Paz. This is strange because Paz was heavily

involved as a critical theorist. In this essay, I focus on the theories of the one theorist the critics have avoided—Octavio Paz. In doing so, I show how the majority of Paz's contemporaries had been purposely misled by Paz into misreading his poetry. The most prevalent example of the critical misreading can be seen in the criticism written on Paz's 1968 poem "Blanco." I view "Blanco" through a variety of Paz's theoretical works written across his career and then compare the symbols present in "Blanco" with several of his other poems in order to render an image of Paz's poetry as he would have seen it.

Paz's own critical theories were developed out of the structuralist and poststructuralist movements. The many divisions that Paz uses symbolically, both of subjective and objective reality, stem from the structuralist movement, which gained its momentum shortly before Paz's birth in 1914, and focused heavily on binary understandings of language. The goal of the structuralist movement was to dissolve these binaries and rationalize a greater wholeness from the binary dissolution. While the structuralist movement influenced Paz heavily, he also witnessed and participated in the dawn of the poststructuralist movement. Paz's poststructuralist tendencies can be seen most prevalently in the apparent incompleteness of his works, many of which have no clear beginning or ending. As a movement, poststructuralism is most commonly associated with Jacques Derrida, who emphasized the inherent instability of language brought about by the temporal nature of reading. Due to the temporality of the textual experience, no text ever has a final resolution. So long as there are new readers, there are new possible meanings for a text to take on.

"Blanco" is an intricately designed poem that embodies many postmodern traits, with its typography emphasizing the poem's visual aspects. The poem begins with words spread out in three columns across the page. The text then forms a column that proceeds down the page, with the occasional staggering of lines. The single column then splits into a bold font on the left accompanied by an italicized font on the right. As the poem progresses, this pattern repeats four times, with the bold and italicized verses gradually drifting toward, and ultimately pressing against, one another. Critics such as Ramon Xirau, Manuel Duran, Graciela Palau de Nemes, and Guillermo Sucre have argued that the typography of "Blanco" operates as a vehicle meant to bring readers from their subjective position to a (re)union with the universe. Critics have described this movement as finding the Presence of the universe: an unaltered, undeniable, pure perception of the universe, which is otherwise obscured. Presence can only be found at the extremities of cognition, near the epistemic apex and transcendent knowledge. Before readers get too excited, this transcendent knowledge is beyond language: it is silence. The momentary fixation cannot be said or explained, only understood. A return to the Presence of the universe is symbolic of the readers' death, which, in a particularly postmodern fashion, is ultimately a return to one's Beginning.

Because the critics have misplaced the locus of the Beginning, they ultimately misread "Blanco." For them, the poem is an external experience—a journey *toward* Presence. Paz addresses the typographic movement in the preface to "Blanco," one of the only poems Paz has ever written an introduction for, in a series of peculiar statements: "[Blanco] is something like the motionless voyage offered by a roll of Tantric pictures and emblems: as we unroll it, a ritual is spread out before our eyes, a sort of procession or pilgrimage to—where?"[3] Paz drops a hint as he continues: "The typography and format of . . . *Blanco* were meant to emphasize not so much the presence of the text, but the space that sustains it: that which makes writing and reading possible, that in which all writing and reading end."[4]

Paz uses these bizarre statements to frame a selection of "variant readings" of "Blanco" that provide a roadmap for the poem's typography.[5] Thus far, critics have

been inclined to follow. But Paz's suggestions are inherently misleading, thus resulting in a misreading of the poem. This is most demonstrable in the first of Paz's six suggestions: "Blanco" can be read "in its totality, as a single text."[6] However, as soon as the reader looks at the textual surface of "Blanco," this is obviously impossible: readers' eyes instantly scatter across the poem's typography. It is blatantly fragmented. This can be seen especially in the columned sections of the poem, which can never be read with complete accuracy or totality even at their closest proximity. Paz tells readers that "Blanco" is not about "the presence of the text," and then leads them right to this Presence. When critics find nothing but silence at the end of the line, they are left with the remainder of a deconstructed double negative: Presence. Paz has tricked his early critics into dissecting an absence of meaning—the poem isn't about anything—and twisting a void into nothing. The space that sustains "Blanco" has been misplaced; the reader is lost amid Paz's whirlwind of poetic deconstruction. The critics thus far have failed to realize the inherently reflective nature of "Blanco," and in doing so have gazed upon its surface, but failed to notice their own reflections.

John Fein provides the kind of structural reading Paz leads readers to in *Toward Octavio Paz*, and takes a similar stance as the critics Ruth Needleman and Rachel Phillips. Fein argues, like several other critics, that "Blanco" is much like a riddle or puzzle, which must be meditated upon and solved. However, the poem can only be "understood," not "explained."[7] Citing the overwhelming congruence present in criticism on "Blanco" at the time, Fein notes that the critics "thereby reflect the intention and structure of the poem," which inherently gives way to multiple meanings. Fein emphasizes his point by noting both the multiplicity of meanings generated by the title of the poem and Paz's peculiar introduction. Fein describes "Blanco" as containing "a tone of symmetrical and mathematical logic that is derived from the poem's typographical arrangement."[8]

Fein calls endless possible divisions of "Blanco" "subpoems" that give way to a possible reading and a possible end of the poem to be created by the reader.[9] The subpoems can then be subsequently configured and reconfigured because "all readings of the text as subpoems are predicated on the exclusion of certain sections. The reader's full participation is invited not only to the ordering of reality, but also in the creation of the phenomena and the values which compose it."[10] In concurrence with other critics, Fein argues that the poem oscillates between two polarities. The first polarity is representative of the passionate movement between liberation and entrapment, the second a dialogue between a passionate existence and a dull nothingness. This conversation creates a thematic undertow undulating between

> the continuing movement outward that we have been observing through the poet's work, which turns the reader's attention to ideas that can be reached only through readings outside the poem . . . [which] necessarily lead the reader to philosophical consideration . . . [and] . . . the personal reaction to the poem, both the poet's and the reader's [which] is an inward movement, an emotional reaction that becomes progressively more difficult to generalize on.[11]

Fein likens "Blanco" to the experience of a musical piece or the understanding of a painting, which are "inherently projections of reader reactions that are infinitely varied."[12] The stirring of motion and emotion is never resolved and the riddle is never quite solved. Rather, Fein argues that the ultimate paradox created by "Blanco" serves to "supply [the reader] his own interpretation based on his own feelings rather than those of the poet."[13]

Fein concludes that Paz has not provided "Blanco" with an end or final meaning. Instead, "Paz forcefully invites the reader to continue the poet's task."[14] The reader is

tempted by the notion in Paz's preface that "Blanco" is a complete work that can be divided into a plethora of modes. Readers search to discover them all. However, the discovery of possible division and dimensions is but a fraction of what Paz has in mind for the reader: "Only as he reads the text does he learn that by seeing the relationship between the parts, he does not recreate the poem so much as he creates it. He is, accordingly, invited to write the conclusion that is lacking in the text."[15]

In contrast to Fein's highly structural reading is Sucre's, whose essay "Octavio Paz: Poetics of Vivacity" is similar to criticism provided by Xirau, Duran, and Nemes. For Sucre, the path to the Presence of the text is destructive. Whereas critics like Fein sought to find the text's meaning by analyzing the poem's destruction, Sucre argues that we must destroy the typographic structure to understand the poem. Readers must work their way through the illusory labyrinth of Paz's poem to the unspeakable edifice of reality. This unmediated Presence of reality is representative of what Sucre calls "vivacity," which he argues "is in the very structure of [Paz's] work."[16] The aesthetic moment that brings about this vivacity, Sucre argues, is the same for Paz as it was for Nietzsche—when the thin veneer of language is punctured, the vibrancies of reality shine through.[17] Through this vivacity readers "convert the relative (the *here* and *now*) into an absolute," which is "itself a proof" of the Presence of reality.[18]

Sucre's criticism relies heavily on the works of the twentieth-century linguist Ludwig Wittgenstein. According to Sucre, because "language is use," it consequently poses a "double threat."[19] Sucre argues that language is inherently frail because it is bound by a spatiotemporal context. Furthermore, because language is bound to context, it is constantly moving in and out of senselessness, so "we must return to language the richness and clarity of its origin."[20] For Sucre, this is tantamount to the kind of philosophical treatment Wittgenstein deems necessary for language in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Both want to "show the fly the way out of the bottle" that is language.[21]

However, Sucre begins in the nonsense Wittgenstein hoped to avoid when Sucre notes that because "all language . . . carries within itself its own contradiction," the only way to return language to its original intelligibility is to reconcile the contradictory binaries of language with the original word. Sucre argues that the structure of "Blanco" serves to reconcile the polarities of language. Readers must work through the infinite structural paths "Blanco" offers, until "out of one text there come other texts . . . it becomes an autonomous world independent of the author. In the same way, the reading of the poem approaches the experience of a revelation."[22] The revealed Presence of reality is found by the reader's free will. By deciding which path to follow through the poem and creating a plurality of possible texts, the reader creates a paradox between the possible poem the reader creates and the poem created by Paz. For Sucre, "[Blanco] is an imminence: without ceasing to be what it is, it seems ready to be *something* else."[23] This paradox, again, cannot be expressed linguistically; rather, the now transparent edifice of reality "leads to silence."[24] It is amid this silent Presence that Sucre argues Paz's ultimate aesthetic technique is actualized: it is "the appearance of the world . . . in its complete original state . . . [which] implies the disappearance of language and of poetry. All that's left is to live poetry: to write the world."[25]

That critics have been thus far unable to recognize their reflection in the poem is precisely Paz's point: "For us, the universe has ceased to be a mirror."[26] As language is treated scientifically, humanity loses touch with the interconnectedness of a form by emphasizing the structural details: "Modern age sees not beings, but organs, functions, processes."[27] As Paz writes in "Although It Is Night," our language is "a bloody solipsism that invented the enemy from itself."[28] Gradually, humanity has used

language to separate itself from the universe, and in turn from its individual members. We define ourselves by our external constructions of reality. Paz explains that as language becomes more scientific, humanity thinks of itself more and more as a simple animal—soulless matter—loosely tied to its sensations and perceptions:

> The bridge between eternity and time, stellar space and human space, heaven and history has broken down. We are alone in the universe . . . modern physics postulates an indeterminate universe, and that universe is expanding, dispersing. Modern society is also dispersing. We human beings are wanderers in a wandering world.[29]

Neither "Blanco" nor Paz's poetry can bring readers to the Presence of the universe and it cannot be reached with our thoughts or our hands; our bodies are trapped within themselves as a self-contained totality—a seed. Paz is unconcerned with reuniting readers with the universe because he recognizes that the void of space is unbridgeable. Rather, Paz seeks to guide readers to a point where they can recognize, and then redesign, humanity's current construction of the soul, and in doing so revitalize humanity's spirit. Paz envisions a scientifically cognizant concept of a soul found not through science, but through art. We must not destroy our ego before we find it. For Paz, this will be:

> A vision at once new and old, a vision in which each human being is a unique, unrepeatable, and precious creature. It is incumbent on the creative imagination of our philosophers, artists, and scientists to rediscover not what is most distant but what is most near and every day: the mystery that each one of us is.[30]

Paz works incessantly to show readers themselves by forging a poetic mirror that reflects both readers' solid physical states and their chaotic linguistic souls. Each reader is a paradox, torn in the perpetual wane between birth and death.

To encourage readers to explore their physical constructions, Paz employs two primordial, yet scientifically cognizant, metaphors: the seed and the womb. Prior critics have noted that the first verse of "Blanco" begins with an evocation of a birth ritual. This seems plausible because the first three lines are all states of beginning—*el comienzo* (toward the beginning); *el cimiento* (the foundation); and *la simiente* (the seed):

the beginning
the foundation
a seed
latent
the word at the tip of the tongue
untold unheard
uneven
pregnant void
without age
she who was buried with eyes open
innocent promiscuous
the word
without name without speech
[my translation]

Paz's diction after the first three lines quickly takes a far less fertile turn—the seed exists in a peculiar state between passive latency and wild possibility. The beginning of "Blanco" is an "uneven" state that can be read as both the poem's beginning and end. On one side exists the pregnant womb; on the other is the void. Thus, "the word at the tip of the tongue" could be nameless and unspoken as a fetus or a corpse. However, "the word," is actually in the simultaneous state of both: if it is "without age," it

is ageless. When Paz evokes an image such as a seed, the image is conjured in the permeating light of totality—the seed is not a single state. As Paz writes in *Alternating Current*, it is "the seed within which everything that will later be the plant—roots, stem, leaves, fruit, and its final decay—has been quickened with a life that will unfold only in the future yet is also already present."[31]

Paz demonstrates the paradox of the seed metaphorically in his poem "The Religious Fig." The poem begins before the seed has had any chance to grow, before it is even planted in the ground—the "wind" carries the "entrails" of the "great tree":[32]

> The wind,
> the thieves of fruit
> (monkeys, birds, bats)
> Between the branches of the great tree,
> scatter the seeds.[33]
> [my translation]

Eventually some of these seeds find refuge in fertile soil and "the plant is grounded in the void."[34] It then "spins in its vertigo" and grows in opposing directions: knotted roots and tangled leaves.[35] And after persisting for a thousand years, the tree "knotted in itself . . . rises up and strangles itself."[36] Even after the death of the seed as a tree, it "takes a hundred years to rot."[37] The tree metaphor in Paz is often likened to several other acts of creation: the tree is a goddess, the body of names, and even, as in "The Tree Within," symbolic of the poem itself. For Paz, the act of writing a poem is a natural process filled with echoes, reflections, and growth. "The Tree Within" grows within the mind: "A tree grew inside my head . . . its roots are veins / its branches nerves, thought is tangled foliage."[38] The tree metaphor operates paradoxically: it is not only readers' lives and deaths, but also in and outside of them. Not only are readers' bodies decaying, the world around them, too, is evaporating moment by moment.

As if growing out of his seed metaphor, Paz often employs plants to embody strength and stoicism in the face of impermanence in his poems "A Tale of Two Gardens" and "Quartet." This vegetative persistence is explored in "A Tale of Two Gardens"—the garden silently "await[s] its destruction," which in turn shows readers the "silent construction of [their] ruin."[39] These trees show the poem's narrator (likely Paz himself) that he must engage in an inner dialogue to "wave himself goodbye."[40] The tree/seed imagery of "Quartet" focuses on an encroaching darkness that symbolizes death: "To wait for night I have stretched out in the shade of a tree."[41] This tree—here representative of language—bears fruit that "taste[s] of time," but the taste "has a beginning and end—and is measureless."[42] Death is at all times imminent in the shade of language, and when "night comes in" it "covers us with its tide; the sea repeats its syllables."[43] The metaphor both drowns readers and promises them continuity. Our bodies must return to the universe to give way to new life; in the same way, we must write so that we may give way to new thoughts.

Paz also uses concepts of femininity in a similar fashion to confront the life-death cycle in "A Tale of Two Gardens." The poem's female presence is binary: the Mother, who constructs readers' bodies and in turn destroys them; and the Girl, for whom readers are willing to destroy themselves, thus making readers aware of their own impending mortality.[44] Both symbolize a cut of separation—a cessation from which we are born, a rupture that we mend. For Paz, the maternal cessation is the reason for language, which exists because we appear separate from the universe, and so we search for our origins through language and poetry. Language is the medium between life and death, through which readers seek Otherness.

The Oedipal mystique of Paz's feminine binary metaphor is meditated upon in "Before the Beginning. . . ." The poem starts as "*otro dio comienza*" (another day

begins), and continues with a disorientation that accompanies readers' isolation: "*ruidos confusos, claridad incierta*" (noisy confusions, uncertain reality).[45] There are "two bodies stretched out," and as the poetic voice is lost, along with readers, among its own thoughts, the voice becomes aware of its mortality: "The hours sharpen their blades."[46]

Noisy confusions, uncertain reality.
Another day commences.
A room one-quarter shadow,
and two bodies stretched out.
In my forehead I am lost
through a plain with no one.
The hours sharpen their blades.
But at my side you are breathing;
Lovely and remote
you flow with no movement.[47]
[my translation]

The poetic voice, now aware of its constant cessation, hears the breath of the buried Presence of reality, which Paz refers to in "Blanco" as "she who was buried with open eyes."[48] The feminine Presence is inaccessible, save through confused, synesthetic thoughts—the voice "touches" her with his "eyes" and "watches" her with his "hands."[49] Readers are not entirely anathema to her, as "blood unites us." The river of life flows through readers; our blood is our mothers'. Despite the connection, readers can only be certain of experiencing the feminine Presence: "All that is certain is the heat of [her] skin."[50] In the breath of the feminine presence, Paz and his readers hear "the tide of being, the forgotten syllable of the Beginning."[51]

The syllable of the Beginning is the same "word at the tip of the tongue" in "Blanco," and represents the same feminine Presence: unmediated, bare, *desnuda* reality. In "A Tale of Two Gardens" she is "the other face of being / the feminine void / the fixed featureless splendor."[52] However, the feminine Presence is eternally bifurcated: "*la Madre*" and "*una muchacha*." The maternal Presence is tantamount to the seed metaphor, naturally conjuring images of creation and destruction: we "[watch] the restless construction of [our] ruin" and are brought back to "the beginning of the Beginning."[53] In the tree and seed metaphor, Paz reminds us "that death is expansion, self negation growth."[54] *La Madre* reminds readers that they are, first and foremost, a natural construct. "We are constellations," the stars and atoms that compose us are always drifting apart.[55] Adjoined is *una muchacha*, who is "a follower of acrobats, astronomers, camel drivers," and other metaphors that contain a sense of eternal inertia.[56] *Una muchacha* is "an intrepid sailboat" that keeps readers afloat on the "unraveled rivers" in which "death and life were jumbled."[57] *Una muchacha* is the "ear of flame in the garden of bones," and reminds readers that perpetual movement is an unavoidable exertion of time, but it is only "a passage" and "to pass through is to remain."[58] *Una muchacha*, also called by Paz "the girl of the tale" and "Our Lady of the Other Bank," serves to remind readers they are never alone—"the other bank is here."[59] She is "the empty plentitude, emptiness as round as [her] hips," and so in the wake of her reappearance to readers a new absence is created: language.[60] If readers are ultimately inseparable from the universe, then it must be language that produces our imagined separation from it: "The signs are erased: I watch clarity."[61] And in this clarity readers once again hear "the forgotten syllable of the *Beginning*."[62]

Paz's seed and goddess metaphors operate symbolically as the reader's own mind/body dichotomy. Physically, readers' bodies are seeds—we grow from them, and produce them in a similar manner to most known organic life. Linguistically, the

physical bodies of language—sounds and print—operate in the same fashion. All words are "air nothing," a hollow, feminine space.[63] Paz writes in "Blanco," "The heavens are male and female . . . thought phallus and word womb . . . always two syllables in love."[64] Language and poetry only exist between oppositions: two opposing forces converge, both confirming and contradicting each other. In the margins of a physically determined world and a spirit that possesses free will, language is born. Paz writes in "Blanco" that the physical world is an invention of language: "The world is an invention of the spirit."[65] For Paz, the souls of readers are real; readers' souls are their languages, readers' identities. Paz thus represents the readers' consciousness through *la Madre* and *una muchacha*—uncontrolled creation and desired destruction.

Readers may quickly recognize the physically reflective surfaces of "Blanco" because of its spectacular typography; however, "the image we see refers us to our body; but consciousness has no visible shape or form and therefore cannot refer us to a self."[66] Readers' physical perceptions never quite allow them to experience their souls—it is the one thing we cannot perceive. However, a reader may be coerced into doing so, as Paz writes in *The Double Flame*:

> If I look at myself in a mirror, I see my image; but if I think that I am thinking, or realize what I am doing, I do not see, nor will I ever see, my thoughts. The electrical discharges between the various parts that comprise the mind become invisible, inaudible thoughts that have no location.[67]

The critical response until this point has largely come to a complete stop at this inaudible experience, the silent gaze into nothingness. Yet a significant oversight can be found in Paz's second-to-last work, which suggests that critics have been asking the wrong questions about Paz's work—theirs "is a meaningless question, therefore, the only answer to which is silence . . . which is no answer at all."[68]

If we begin at something like Sucre and other critics' conceptions of Presence, it can be shown quickly how it does not converge with Paz's use. For them Presence is the end, a sudden halt; for Paz it is only a passing moment in language—the space between words. The reader moves from "silence to transparency, [to] waves," which then "whitecap" and return to the placid "water" they began as. This water is left incomplete by a colon, at which point it is reflected on two surfaces.

to the water:

the rivers of your body	*the river of bodies*
land of heartbeats	*stars infusoria reptiles*[69]

The bolded section represents, physically, the rivers of readers' bodies, the "land of pulse beats" that comprises our veins and neurons. These physical rivers contain "water without thoughts."[70] Our bodies are constructed of lifeless corpuscles and when our bodies enter the "land of sleepless mirrors / land of waking water / in the sleeping night" (the mind/soul), they become self-aware. Readers become unknowing voyeurs of their own reflections if they misinterpret the *I* that gazes at itself. The "I" in "Blanco" is the same as it is in "Although It Is Night": "I am your I."[71] As readers fixate on the poem, they begin to align themselves with the "I" of the narration, but in doing so readers examine themselves as if through an "eye more crystal clear."[72] Readers' gazes peer back through the poem, as "what I watch watches me."[73] "Blanco" acts simultaneously as the readers' selves and shadows. The italicized surface reverses the direction of this gaze: readers also create their environment by "conceiving" it through perception.

However, "the water of thoughts"—language—crashes on both shores: the reader is also the creation of "what I see."[74] Present in "Blanco" is a subtle consciousness whose waters permeate the universe. A "surge of genealogies" and a "river of suns" give rise to "tall beasts with shining skins"—human life.[75] This "seminal river" gives life but cannot experience itself. It can only be gazed upon—"the eye that watches it is another river."[76] This brings readers face to face with their cosmic position in the torrential throws of language—**created** *creators*. The "conception" of "perception" is bilateral: it gives birth to thought and breath to matter. As if in a mirror, readers' gazes create and are created by "Blanco": "When we perceive reality, we immediately impose a form on our perception; we construct it. Every perception is an act of creation."[77]

The two surfaces of language begin to press against one another but only converge in the single-columned verses. While the split sections of "Blanco" speak as separate parts of readers' experiences, the bold and italicized function as one voice with two minds. Like a shadow or reflection, the reader and poet speak through one voice:

I. Thus, Paz coerces readers into exploring themselves as they watch Paz explore himself through "Blanco." Paz's "pulse" thirsts, like a drought, for language, and his body is made of "sandcastles, playing cards, and the hieroglyph (water and ember), dropped on the breast of Mexico."[78] Paz's body is made from the "dust of silt" and will be destroyed by the "anonymous conjuration of bones."[79] Paz and his readers' sole atonement for death "is language," an "appeasement" from the speechless edifice of reality.[80]

"Our time," Paz writes in *The Double Flame*, is "simplistic, superficial, merciless. Having fallen into the idolatry of ideological systems, our century has ended by worshipping Things. What place does love have in such a world?"[81] The modern world has objectified even itself. Though written nearly 20 years ago, Paz's question has only become more troublesome, as can be seen in the objectifying images we are bombarded with every day. Humanity is at the apex of its dehumanization: we have used our science to convince ourselves we are nothing but animals. Language—our very soul—has cast a veil over itself, ashamed of what it has become and terrified of what it is becoming. In this confusion we use language to tell us we have no soul. But, as Paz elucidates for us, this is not a logical conclusion. While the traditional Platonic soul is slowly dying, it will be born again in its demise, not in fear of science but in light of it:

> When I speak of the human person, I am not evoking an abstraction but referring to a concrete reality . . . the soul, or whatever one chooses to call the human psyche, is not only reason and intellect, it is also a *sensibility*. The soul is bodily: sensation, which becomes emotion, sentiment, passion.[82]

Language is sensation, a gaze into Otherness. "When we were born, we were torn from wholeness," Paz continues, but this separation gives way to a new hope, "the recovery of wholeness and the discovery of the self as wholeness within the Great Whole."[83] The beloved embrace of self-actualization is "neither great nor small; it is the perception of all times, of all lives, in a single instant."[84] To be human is to be divided: body and soul, masculine and feminine, object and subject. Paz concludes *The Double Flame* with this:

> We are the theater of the embrace of opposites and of their dissolution, resolved in a single note that is not affirmation or negation but acceptance. What does the couple see in the space of an instant, a blink of the eye? The equation of appearance and disappearance, the truth of the body and the nonbody, the vision of the presence that dissolves into splendor: pure vitality, a heartbeat of time.[85]

For Paz language, poetry, and "Blanco" are proof enough of an external, objective world. It is not the universe's Presence and pulse that Paz creates his poetry for readers to experience, but rather their own. The reader does not need to experience the fleeting reality of the objective universe. On the contrary, readers must find the reality they have been unable to see: the Self.

Western discourse, in its pursuit of the objective world, has destroyed humanity's soul and passion by redefining humans as mere animals. In a world claiming that identity is merely a byproduct of society that is constructed for an individual, Octavio Paz stands as a lighthouse to guide readers home from the torrents of science. Our greatest institutions no longer see humans as individuals, but as societal constructions. However, so long as there is poetry, and the humanities to insist upon it, we may again find ourselves in the mirror of language. And if the mirror is too warped, fractured, and cracked, we must reassemble the pieces, forge them back together with the heat of passion, and once again gaze into our lost reflections.

Notes

1. Octavio Paz, *In Search of the Present: 1990 Nobel Lecture*, trans. Anthony Stanton (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 10.
2. Octavio Paz, *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz, 1952–1987*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1990), 325.
3. Ibid., 311.
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12. Ibid., 83.
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20. Ibid., 14.
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23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 20.
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28. Ibid., 525.
29. Ibid., 207.
30. Ibid., 212.
31. Octavio Paz, *Alternating Current*, trans. Helen Lane (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), 23.

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