

PAZ / HAIKU / DIALECTIC

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Poetry is in love with the instant and seeks to relive it in the poem, thus separating it from sequential time and turning it into a fixed Present.

—Octavio Paz, Nobel Prize lecture

I

There is not one big Latin American literature. That of each nation is distinct, just as the cultures of each country in the region are different. Mexico's literature is one of the most important in the region, which is understandable if only because of the country's size. Within Mexican literature, poetry is a major genre, and Octavio Paz (1914–1998), one of its top poets, was awarded the 1990 Nobel Prize for Literature. Paz was also one of the best essayists and critics in Latin America, and he was a diplomat as well. In 1952 he was posted to Tokyo, where he became familiar with Japanese culture and society. Already a famous author, from 1962 to 1968 Paz served as Mexican ambassador to India, but he resigned in protest when the autocratic government of Pres. Gustavo Díaz Ordaz massacred hundreds or thousands of protesting students in Mexico City.

In 1957, Paz, with Prof. Eikichi Hayashiya, published the first translation into Spanish of Bashō's *Oku no hosomichi* (*Narrow Road to the Far North*). The introduction to this translation, titled "The Poetry of Matsuo Bashō," comprises a short essay on Bashō's poetry. *Las sendas del Oku*, as the title of Bashō's work is rendered in Spanish, is just one of Paz's publications on Japanese literature; another is his long essay called "The Tradition of Haiku" (1973), in which he brings Japanese and Mexican poetic forms together and focuses on specific poets, including José Juan Tablada, a transitional figure between Symbolism and the avant-garde, who promoted the haiku form in Mexico. Paz also created a book of renga — the American edition from 1971 is called *Renga: A Chain of Poems* — in which he and three other poets, a Frenchman, an

Italian, and an Englishman, collaborated. Paz himself wrote only a few haiku, however, for example, a series in homage to his favorite *haijin*, called “Bashō an.” Three examples:

The world fits
into seventeen syllables:
you in this hut.

Mud in the quiet puddle:
tomorrow dust
dancing in the street.

DAWN

On the beach,
bird-foot writing:
the wind’s memoirs.

II

Paz was not only a word artist, he was also an intellectual who absorbed ideas and all forms/genres of music, art, history, and philosophy, as well as an acute observer of human society. From his own background, he learned of Hispanic literature and European culture early, then also the many facets of Mexican history, indigenous cultures, and art. He was a polyglot, an all-around Renaissance man, who synthesized everything of worth and interest with which he came into contact. The key word to describe Paz’s intelligence is “synthesis,” but the term also has a wider application to Paz and his work. Synthesis is a union of opposites that brings together disparate elements into a new understanding of a subject (as opposed to analysis, which is a rationalist process of disassembling the parts in order to understand the whole). Our two-lobe brain comprises one part that tends to intuitive perception and another that tends to rational understanding; that is, one is oriented toward synthesis and the other analysis.

Early in his career Paz was familiar with Hegelian and Marxist thought. He met and joined with André Breton and the Surrealists in France, hobnobbed with top writers in Spain, came under the influence of Freud and Jung (and later, Existentialism), and studied Asian philosophies, art, and literatures. He attended the World Congress of

Writers (Madrid, 1937) organized by Pablo Neruda to support the Spanish republic against the fascist uprising of Gen. Francisco Franco. Paz subsequently rejected communism while taking parts of Marxism into his ideas. From all of these experiences he developed his own philosophy, worldview, and aesthetic—even an approach to creation itself. These were, of course, synthetic. How his interest in haiku and other Japanese artistic endeavors developed out of this personal philosophy is the focus of this essay.

Paz brought mind and body together: the corporeal/physical and the artistic/intellectual are joined in his philosophy, also space (interior/exterior) and time (linear/historical and circular/mythic), all subsumed into the psychic structures he creates with words—that is, “poems.” Hegel’s dialectic comprises a thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, the joining of opposites into a hybrid, which then breaks into the same pattern again, recapitulating *ad infinitum*.

Without this dialectical model there is no way to describe the nature of history in a progressive way. This is why for centuries the general view was of a pendulum in which human activity swung one way, then the opposite, back and forth, only thesis/antithesis or action/reaction in perpetual lock-step. In other words, the concept was that there can be no forward motion in life, that everything remains the same. The Hegelian dialectic is a sort of pyramid. The thesis and antithesis (the opposites) form the base, and they resolve into a combination/synthesis at the top. To such a dialectic Paz assigns his most important values, those that define the process of perception itself (intuitive vs. rational perception; right vs. left lobe—as they relate to creativity).

For Paz the moment of creative synthesis is equivalent to that of artistic insight or sexual orgasm (not, of course, experienced in the same way), a moment of ecstasy in which humans are beyond themselves, transcending their consciousness, at the apex of sexual explosion or implosion, which is the *instante resplandeciente* (“resplendant instant”), a momentary physical and mental place beyond life and death, a momentary source of creation, past linear time in the *presente perpetuo* joining the circle and the line, female and male, rational and intuitive, the two lobes in unison. It is the moment of perception. Or the

moment of conception. Or the moment of inspiration. Or the moment of centering oneself in communion with another. Or a moment of pleasure that can have later consequences. This moment can also be that instantaneous, intuitive, non-rational perception that is a focus in Zen Buddhism as manifested in classical haiku, in the Japan before the arrival of Westerners and their rationalism. In fact it may be that classical haiku as a synthesis of intuitional perception was perhaps expressed in seventeen syllables because, beyond a few syllables, the human mind will revert to the lobe that generates rational analysis.

Critic Martin Stabb says of Paz's views that "physical fusion ... leads to—or is itself—a communion, ... a way back to the primordial, ... a temporal ground of Being." And further, "In love the couple endeavors to participate once again in the state in which life and death, need and satisfaction, sleep and action, words and images, time and space ... are all fused into one reality" (199). In terms of Paz's focus on the circle (the feminine) and the line (the masculine), which can give transcendent meaning to simple form, history is the line of historical events that stretches from the past to the future. The circle is mythic time related to synthesis, which makes us think of the DNA double helix or the circular sunstone calendar of the Aztecs (the focus of Paz's long, circular-structured poem *Sunstone*). The dialectic, which can take a triangular form (thesis/antithesis/synthesis), suggests the pyramids of Teotihuacán, Yucatán, or Egypt. However, the tip of the pyramid could perhaps be interpreted as an equivalent place of transcendence, symbolically or poetically, indicating the moment of transcendence, the "resplendent instant" as if at that moment we are dancing on the head of a pin, or the pinnacle of a pyramid, in an emotional moment that changes our body chemistry at the instant of transcendence. As opposites are joined in this instant, this place we inhabit beyond self, the instant becomes a fixed and timeless present, mutable time becomes a transcendent location that lasts only for the creative moment but also forever in the high noon or midnight in the perpetual present of creation. This transcendent moment is not every moment we live, only those moments of enlightenment and perception, when we go beyond ourselves:

here is nowhere, little by little I have been closing up
 and find no exit that doesn't open onto the instant,
 I am this instant, I suddenly left myself,
 I have neither name nor face,
 I am here, thrown at my feet, watching myself
 watching him watching me being watched.

(Paz, *Libertad bajo palabra*, 229)

While Paz was brought up in the Western rationalist tradition, this quote shows how he gets beyond that focus, influenced by non-rationalist Surrealism, Zen, and other non-European literary traditions. He turns the rational inside out as he becomes both subject and object of his own perception, each joined to the other. The end of that moment is like this:

On the peak of the instant
 I said to myself: "I am eternal
 in the plenitude of time."
 And the instant falls
 into another timeless abyss.

Literary critic Rachel Phillips suggests that the following poem by Paz is a haiku, though I'm not sure I would agree:

Light doesn't flicker
 time empties itself of minutes,
 a bird has stopped in the air.

This bird, its forward movement suspended, is an indication that this image is in the perpetual present, a Pazian place where time is detained for the millennium of an instant, in which reality is beyond time in an interior/exterior landscape of this place beyond place. As Phillips says: "Myth is the form by which the mind seeks to order its own timelessness" (85). Likewise, she notes that almost all religions, and the myths of "primitive" beliefs, refer to a "realm beyond," that is, a paradise, eternity, Eden, etc. So this momentary transcendence of the "resplendent instant," in its fixed, perpetual present is perhaps the

attainment of a small slice of paradise. (Maybe even a nanosecond of the generally unattainable perfection, the only glimpse we'll get of it). Is what we call "paradise" simply a collection of various moments of creative transcendence that link humans with mythic (collective) creation within the context of the only type of "perfection" attainable? Perhaps as opposed to an infinite but unattainable paradise after death? When a reader engages the psychic structure of a poem as part of the experience of entering the poet's perception, the reader can "see" the "landscape" in the resultant words and images.

In early European literature, there was the *topoi* (Greek: "recurrent theme") of the *locus amoenus* (Latin: "pleasant place"), which was an idealized landscape that was often appreciated as an interior landscape (on the individual level) or a manifestation of an allegorical Eden/paradise (on an individual *or* collective level). The difference between the European *locus amoenus* and landscapes in classical Japanese haiku is that often the latter referred to actual places of symbolic meaning in Japan's culture, while the European landscapes were idealized places that did not actually exist except in the artist's mind. Is the *locus amoenus* an idealized equivalency of places like Lake Biwa that appear in Japanese haiku and literature?

When a landscape is a combination of interior and exterior, it is, Marshall McLuhan says: "an arrested moment of aesthetic consciousness, a moment in and out of time," and "A Zen moment is reputed to present us in an instant of time of our being ... in the landscape of our birthplace." Gaston Bachelard writes that "language bears within itself the dialectics of open and closed. Through *meaning* it encloses, while through poetic expression, it opens up" (222). This sounds like the rational-intuitive opposition, i.e., "meaning vs. expression."

As Paz notes in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, his most important book of essays, humans are the only beings who know they will die, who know they are alone, and in their solitude seek out communion, since the solitude comes from being expelled from the center of the world at birth and leads to the desire of recovering the place, in the union of desire, of opposites, that brings the transcendence of the moment. As Paz says: "The feeling of solitude, which is a nostalgic longing for the

body from which we were cast out, is a longing for a place.” And such a place is that instant of momentary escape into transcendence in the communion, beyond time and space, or in a combination of both interior and exterior space, mental and physical realities, linear and mythic time, a primordial, mythic place as in his poem called “Here”:

My steps in this street
resound
 in another street
in which
 I hear my steps
pass in this street
where

And, here’s the last line of the poem, the “synthesis” where two opposites come together (the entire poem is also a spatial description of the synthesis as place), where “reality” is linked to something (fog) that makes clarity unclear and “reality” “unreal,” an iconic village from which perception labors to exist in the transcendence of the joining of opposites:

only the fog is real

Echoes of his own footsteps are markers of time in the reverberation of sound in this place beyond place, that is both an interior landscape and an exterior one. That is: time and space are equivalent in this timeless place that is, perhaps, the location, poetically, of the “resplendent instant” of Paz’s synthesis. Time and place are fused. It’s obviously not a “real” place, since only the fog is real, he says. On the other hand, fog is real, though it seems unreal since it appears tangible and is, but only to a limited extent, unlike the solidity of most tangible objects. We feel its sensorial tangibility on our skin and its effects on our vision, but we can pass through it. And perhaps the mist we pass through is the veil between the instant and “reality,” that time/place of climax, perception, inspiration, after which we come out on the other side of consciousness. Passing through with the other, with our other, with an/other. We always move through Paz’s “labyrinth of solitude” to find communion if we can, and there transcend for

intermittent instants. It is then that poets (known in one historic role as *vates* = “seer,” in Western societies) must *see* and write what inspired him/her at that moment, in the linear alphabet, an experience that comes from the synthesis, from the circle of perception, creation.

One hears the footsteps in “here” described by Paz’s “poetic I” (the speaker in the poem) echo through the streets of the place, in this poem which is not a haiku but is the place where haiku come from. The ripples in Bashō’s pond spread out from where the frog jumped into this primordial pool, like wavelets of thought and perception. Paz’s “village” and Bashō’s pond poeticize places where, as Gaston Bachelard has noted, “Time is movement in space,” the temporal is heard: Footstep echoes and the sound of the frog’s splash are equivalent. Both sounds show temporal progression: footsteps move along a street, redoubling themselves in echo, while in our mind we perceive the frog arrives at the pond, then jumps in. In each case, there has been movement through space—the steps, the jump. But in Paz’s poem, the auditory confusion of echoes dovetails with the visual uncertainty of the fog, the only “real” thing in this “village of the mind.” Paz puts you in the middle of the “resplendent instant” of transcendence, in this place where time is space. In Bashō’s haiku, the frog shows you where to go for perception: When your mind follows the frog into the water, it is a dive into consciousness. Paz’s “village” is, perhaps, located at the bottom of Bashō’s “pond.” But there is one difference between the two poems: Bashō’s verse is a haiku while Paz’s is haiku-like, in its nature if not in form.

From the Zen angle, here is R.G.H. Siu: “In their efforts to pass beyond the intellect ... Zen Buddhists have emphasized the experience of the moment. Deliberation should not be permitted to interfere with the immediacy of the response” (308). Siu goes on to say that knowledge obtained from other than rational sources is not irrational but extra-rational. He notes that intuitive understanding is “grasped as an immediate total apprehension.” He also explains that rational knowledge separates humans from nature because of the subject-object distance, while with intuitional knowledge humans become a participant in nature. And as we know, nature is a basic element in classical Japanese haiku, with humans as a part of it.

Siu likewise explains that both types of knowledge are needed to work together, no matter where one starts. He proposes a “no knowledge” category in between the rational and the intuitive, which could also be interpreted perhaps as an equivalent in Paz’s writings as that union of opposites. Classical haiku is a result of acquiring intuitional perspective and transforming it into, say, seventeen syllables, which at its best actually implies or tells an entire story as the context surrounds the image. A clear poetic surface with many currents beneath resonate in the psychic structure of the poem and the reader’s mind. The best haiku also allow the reader to, in some sense, recreate that Pazian “resplendent instant” that was the experiential basis of the poem, working backward from the surface image. And, of course, in Bashō’s *Oku-no-hosomichi* the two poets, Bashō and Sora, give you all the context you need during their journey on the Tōkaidō, on their voyage through life, on their travels inside and out. They become part of nature, leaving culture behind—at least to some extent. This is the place of the perpetual present in Paz’s ideology, the place where the frog’s splash is heard, the place where you hear your footsteps resound from one street into another, the place where Bashō and Sora saw the moon over Lake Biwa—forever.

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