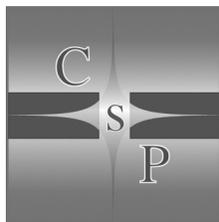


Alternative Orientalisms in Latin America and Beyond

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Edited by

Ignacio López-Calvo



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TO MY DAUGHTER, SOFÍA LÓPEZ-CRAIG

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INTRODUCTION

IGNACIO LÓPEZ-CALVO

Orientalism, as a theoretical perspective, has regained its centrality in recent years, particularly after the increased animosity and resentment between Western and Islamic countries as a result of the two Gulf Wars, the terrorist suicide attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York, the controversial publication on September 30, 2005 of twelve cartoons featuring the Islamic prophet Mohammed in several European newspapers, and the new position of the People's Republic of China as the next military, economic, and technological superpower. Orientalism is widely known as the study of Eastern (Near, Middle, and Far East) cultures by Western intellectuals. Yet most people would associate this term with scholars from France, England, Germany, and the United States. The purpose of this study is to present, along with new essays dealing with the United States, the Islamic world and the Far East, alternative views on Orientalism, this time also coming from Latin America and other regions. Some of the essays were written by authors who are of Asian origin: Yrmina Gloria Eng Menéndez (Chinese Cuban), Evelyn Hu-deHart (Chinese), Hwei Lan "Lourdes" Yen (Taiwanese), Jongsoo Lee (Korean), and Xinyu "Cindy" Yu (Chinese). The rest of the essays, however, were written by non-Asian critics. In some cases, while still dealing with interpretations of the East by Western outsiders, the cultural production analyzed (as well as many of the critics) comes from Latin America. The fact that this region has also been affected by European and U.S. imperialism and colonialism brings new light to the traditionally negative connotations ascribed to the term, mainly since the publication of the controversial and seminal book *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978), by the U.S.-based Palestinian literary and cultural critic Edward W. Said (1935-2003). Despite the numerous pages of criticism of Said's arguments, his book continues to be an important point of departure. As will be demonstrated, although prejudice and racism are still prevalent in many Orientalist aesthetic practices coming from Latin America and other world regions, the perspective can also be radically different, as Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo astutely pointed out in his prologue to the Spanish version of Said's *Orientalism*.

The stereotypical ideas of Oriental exoticism, corruption and despotism, the notions of cultural inferiority, endemic passivity and stagnancy, a

libidized Orient of sensual odalisques and harems, a homogenized Asian continent, multiple types of *Chinoiseries* and *Japonaiseries*, among many other topics, are thus explored in *Alternative Orientalisms* from a very different perspective: in some of the essays, the Orient becomes the “Other” of countries with a colonial past themselves which are also trying to define themselves as culturally independent nations. In the case of Asian critics, of course, the analysis comes from “within” the culture. From this perspective, rather than constructing the Orient as the West’s alien and inferior Other, the mirror image that appears in this book constitutes an attempt at understanding the Asian within us (within the Western world). The postcolonial approach of many of these essays is the theoretical framework that prevents (or, at least, tries to prevent) paternalistic or hegemonic representations of the Asian subject. As a result, the emphasis, rather than on political propaganda, exoticism or homogenizing views, is often placed on transculturation, hybridity, liminality, double consciousness, and cultural identity. In a way, this book is an attempt to correct the academic misunderstanding that Said criticized so vehemently, by presenting scholarship that clearly tries to avoid the racist, reductionist, essentialist, and prejudicial approaches that (at least according to Said) legitimized Western colonial projects.

While Said’s seminal book concentrates mostly on Islam and the Arab world, only three essays in *Alternative Orientalisms in Latin America and Beyond* deal with the Islamic world: two with the Maghrebian presence in Europe and one with the representation of Islam by an Iranian-American artist. The rest of the book deals for the most part with the Chinese presence in the Americas, although there are also three essays dealing with the Philippines, one with the Mayan perception of Japanese soap operas, and two with Jewish identity in China and in New York. While the book follows an interdisciplinary approach, most of the essays deal with literary studies. However, five of them present an anthropological (also sociological and cultural) approach, one deals with multimedia art, and another one with classical music.

The first chapter of *Alternative Orientalisms*, which is devoted to Mexico, includes four essays. While one of them is an anthropological study of Mayan perceptions of the Other through their interpretation of a Japanese soap opera, the other three are literary studies on the works of Octavio Paz and Elena Poniatowska. Roberto Cantú proposes a study of Octavio Paz’s translations of Chinese poetry in the context of his theory of modernity, therefore with an implied synchrony or historical contiguity at work: on the one hand, ancient China; on the other, the modern China that emerged with Mao Zedong. Three points of convergence are emphasized in his argument based on Octavio Paz’s theoretical definition of modernity as a *response* to the historical present, as a temporal incarnation of Otherness, and as the reclaiming of humanity’s plurality

of pasts. This way, he clarifies Octavio Paz's transition from a "Cold War" era to a world grown more complex but homologous to one of his recurrent images: rotating signs. To continue with the analysis of Paz's *oeuvre*, Jongsoo Lee analyzes Aztec time and history in his poem "Piedra del sol." According to Lee, Paz took advantage of the concepts of time and history manifested in the Aztec monument *Sun Stone* to reconstruct his idea of a universal time and history in "Piedra del sol." By doing this, he ignored the colonial suffering that the monument itself explicitly demonstrates.

Mark Anderson concentrates on the work of another of the canonical names in contemporary Mexican literature. In his contextualization of Elena Poniatowska's novel *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* with Modernity and Orientalism, he analyzes the way in which, following the Revolution, the Mexican government undertook a comprehensive plan to rewrite Mexican nationalism. From this perspective, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* dismantles the Mexican government's rhetoric about the creation of a modern nation-state based on racial, ideological, and economic homogeneity, by narrating the failure of modernity to benefit the masses. In addition, it gives a positive view of the "Chino" as a beneficial, working-class modernizing influence, and complements and contradicts the government's discourse of racial homogeneity, revealing the persistence of a caste system used for identity and identification that is based on gradations of skin color. The narrator, Jesusa Palancares, inserts the "chino" into this system through an exclusive focus on physical characteristics, while she ignores the cultural differences that form the basis for the Orientalism of Western intellectuals, which is echoed by Vasconcelos and other Mexican ideologues of the nation. Alicia ReCruz closes the chapter with her analysis of the influence of the popular Japanese soap opera *Oshin* on the Mayan worldview. In addition, she points out the similarities in epistemological postulates between Oriental and Mesoamerican worldviews, as well as the Mayans' representations of the Other through their impressions of this soap opera.

The second chapter is dedicated to Cuba and includes five essays: one of them deals with the Chinese presence on the island from an historical perspective, another from an anthropological one, and the other three concentrate on their literary representation. Evelyn Hu-DeHart studies the topic of racial identity among the Chinese coolies in nineteenth-century Cuba as well as their relationship with blacks in the sugar plantations. More specifically, she concentrates on the liminal situation of the Chinese, who were neither black nor white, neither slave nor free. Ignacio López-Calvo suggests, in the second essay, that a sort of "Chinesist" mini-boom has taken place in the Cuban novel at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, and explores the reasons behind the sudden Sinophilia and literary interest in the Chinese

indentured workers and their descendents. In his view, the recent political Sinophilia in Cuba, together with the sinicization of Cuban and Cuban American aesthetic practices responds in part to a project of national consolidation under the flag of a harmonic process of *mestizaje*. He also proposes, as additional influences, the rise of the People's Republic of China as an economic and geopolitical superpower, the "trend" of multiculturalism, and the international success of novels dealing with the Chinese in the Americas. As he points out, these newfound literary respect for and interest in Chinese culture and Afro-Cuban religions have also coincided with the government-backed commodification of Chinese and African religious practices for the benefit of the tourist industry.

Xiomara Campilongo applies Fernando Ortiz's notion of transculturation to *Monkey Hunting*, the novel by the Cuban-American writer Cristina García. She argues that the intentional use of History in the narration of this fictional story, confers the novel authenticity and it is a tribute to the undeniably presence of the Chinese population in Cuba. Lancelot Cowie, in turn, focuses on the stereotypical images of the Chinese in Cuba that appear in several Latin American works. In his view, a general evaluation of the literature consulted reveals a superficial approach to the Chinese diaspora to the Americas, as well as to their psychology and philosophy, which, on the other hand, is better treated in recent documentaries on the subject. However, Zoé Valdés's *La eternidad del instante* stands out for its intimate lyrical treatment and profound characterization of Chinese who attempted to improve their lives in an alien society. Yrmina Gloria Eng Menéndez's essay on the auto-recovery of Havana's Chinatown closes the first chapter. Eng Menéndez clarifies the situational panorama of Havana's Chinatown from its origin in the 1850s to its point of maximum decline during the 1980s. In particular, she studies the factors that conditioned a peculiar process of re-exclusion of the Chinese and the new projects to revive the Chinatown.

Moving south, the three essays included in the third chapter focus on cultural production from Peru and Chile. Huei Lan (Lourdes) Yen applies the concept of transculturation to issues dealing with the cultural identity and adaptation of the Chinese community in Lima during the 1970s and 1980s as seen in two short stories by Siu Kam Wen, included in *El tramo final* (1985). Of particular importance to this analysis is the implication of home language proficiency in the protection of the cultural identity. In his essay, Isaac Rivera studies different Orientalist aspects in Isabel Allende's novel *Daughter of Fortune* (1999). In his view, the West's speech power not only portrays the Asian as the Other of the westerner, but also creates different levels of subalternity, which constantly fight to conquer agency within the embodied Western hegemony.

Chapter 4 includes one essay dealing with Brazilian literature and another one with Argentine literature. In the first one, Lizbeth Souza-Fuertes studies Orientalist aspects in Brazilian *haikai* poetry as well as in the *oeuvre* of several Brazilian writers, including Cecília Meireles, Jorge Amado, Nélida Piñón, Malba Tahan, Teruko Oda, and Paulo Coelho. Julie Spence's essay deals with Orientalism, scientific racism, and environmental determinism in Domingo F. Sarmiento's *Facundo, or Civilization and Barbarism*. In order to further his nationalist projects, Spence argues, Sarmiento reinforces the idea of the gaucho as barbaric by linking him and his environment to the Arabic Bedouin and the Orient.

The art of the Iranian-American Shirin Neshat is analyzed in the essay that opens the fifth chapter, which is devoted to the Islamic world. From the perspective of self-orientalization, Tonya López-Craig explains the ambivalence and the multiculturalist perspective of Neshat's photographs and video montages. By romanticizing the image of the Iranian woman and pointing out certain rebellious nuances, Neshat's art blurs the limited agency and the inner exile of many other non-militant women kept in the shadows after Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution. The other two essays in the chapter also deal with the Islamic world, but this time concentrating on the Maghrebian presence in France and Spain. From Iran, in the next two essays we travel to the Maghreb and Europe. Thus, Cristián Ricci analyzes the way in which Moroccan authors who write in Spanish articulate what Enrique Dussel calls the "cultural alterity from the post-colonization," by developing a multicultural literature in intercultural, critical dialogue with other post-colonialist manifestations. As Ricci explains, the narratives by Ahmed Ararou, Ahmed El Gamoun, and Larbi El Harti propose both a "selective rejection" of westernization (which is typical of postcolonial literature) and a strong emphasis on the philosophy of liberation. However, they neither fight for the beginning of history in the future, nor mystify the national emancipation against Spain, nor deny the history after the French and Spanish invasions. In Ricci's view, their works represent a peripheral dialogue "South-South" with Asian, Latin American, indigenous North American, and Chicano thinkers who face imperialistic cultures. In turn, Marie-Christine Koop focuses on the patterns of social integration followed by children of immigrants from North Africa in France, particularly in the areas of education, the work force, and housing, where discrimination is rampant. Her essay examines the factors that have caused the situation to reach such a climactic point and then addresses the various measures taken by the French government to improve the situation.

The sixth chapter, titled "Far East," includes an essay dealing with the Jewish presence in China, one with a Spaniard's perception of China, and three with the Philippines. It begins with Manuel García-Castellón's essay, which

studies a case of reverse Orientalism in the travel narrative *Hacia la tierra del Zar* (Bound to the Czar's Lands), by Teodoro Kálaw, a young Filipino journalist, who traveled throughout Eastern Asia. As García-Castellón elucidates, Kálaw's interpretation of the Orient reflects his double consciousness. His condescending compassion, even his manifest repulsion for the backwardness of the people he visited, seemed to ignore the fact that exploitation had played an important role in the misery of the colonized masses. For Kálaw, indebted to a positivist philosophy, progress had the right to obliterate any native culture. The interest in Kálaw's narrative, García-Castellón explains, lies in the possibility of observing the mind of a member of the emerging "comprador" class who, colonized by consent and therefore enjoying suffraganeous power, was in denial of its own Asianness. He also represents an obstacle in the shaping of a true Filipino nationhood. Still within the field of Filipino literature written in Spanish, Roberto Fuertes-Manjón concentrates on the works by another Filipino author: José Rizal. Fuertes-Manjón studies the ideological support behind Rizal's novels: on the one hand, it establishes the opposition between East and West, and, on the other, it deepens the reaffirmation of what is specifically Filipino by identifying the traits that define the nation and support their right to independence. According to Fuertes-Manjón, at the same time that José Rizal's novels portray a colonial system that was in full decline, they are also a perfect example of a new revolutionary spirit, in which nationalist Philippine aspirations joined the demands of the people and those of their national identity. Araceli Tinajero, in turn, discusses the way in which the Manila Galleon, its artifacts and its legacy are portrayed in Latin American literature. The Manila Galleons or China Ships, she points out, carried cultural artifacts and all sorts of merchandise from several parts of Asia from Manila to Acapulco for three centuries, thus providing a valuable contact between America and Asia. These artifacts were sold not only in Mexico but in Peru and other parts of Latin America as well. For example, Mexican potters learned from Chinese potters and produced artifacts that were eclectic and original at the same time.

To return to travel literature, Santiago García-Castañón studies the 1575 expedition from the Philippines to China by the Spanish soldier Miguel de Luarca, who, carrying credential letters from the Spanish governor of the Philippines, became the *de facto* first Spanish ambassador to China. Luarca wrote a detailed account of his journey in a manuscript titled *Verdadera relación de la grandeza del Reino de China* (*True Account of the Grandeur of the Kingdom of China*; edited by García-Castañón in 2002). Gustavo Perednik closes the chapter with his study of the descendents of Jews in the city of Kaifeng. As Perednik reveals, in 1163 Jews built a synagogue in the city of Central China. This unique community was discovered by Europe only on June

24, 1605, and by 1860 it had disappeared. Today, some people in Kaifeng claim Jewish ancestry and wish to preserve some sort of Jewishness. However, their current situation is complex because while traditional Judaism recognizes only matrilineal transmission of Jewishness, Chinese only recognize patrilineal descent. Therefore, according to Jewish law the Kaifeng descendants are not Jews. Moreover they do not belong to any of the five religions officially allowed in China.

The last chapter, dedicated to the United States, opens with Elvia Puccinelli's essay, which demonstrates how two classical composers used "Orientalisms" to find their American voice. By studying the cycles "Watercolors" and "Five Poems of the Ancient Far East," she reveals how two of the foremost American art song composers of the early twentieth century, John Alden Carpenter (1876-1951) and Charles Griffes (1884-1920), imagined Asian music, and were transformed in the process. As Puccinelli explains, while Griffes adheres nearly exclusively to the use of five or six note scales, Carpenter incorporates an "Oriental feel" into his lyrical style through the use of open intervals, parallelism, and some use of pentatonicism. In addition to being the first use of authentic Asian materials in American art song, these cycles represent an important movement in the style of each composer. Carpenter's use of "Orientalisms" signals a transition to a more slender musical style. For Griffes, on the other hand, his use of pentatonic scales forms part of a larger reworking of his harmonic language, moving away from late-romantic, Germanic harmonies. In the second essay, we return to literary studies: Xinyu (Cindy) Yu studies the role of Chinese American writers in carving the image of Chinese Americans and in compiling their history. With Edward Said's idea of Orientalism as a theoretical framework, the author analyzes the role of Chinese American literature in combating stereotypes about Asian people and their environment. Kenya Dworkin y Méndez closes the book with an essay that explores the cultural identity and history of twentieth-century, New York Sephardim not so much as Jews, but as Jewish *Hispanics* who had to deal with the application of Orientalist criteria to their community by Ashkenazi Jews and non-Jews alike.

In all, if it's true that as Michel Foucault (one of Said's main sources of inspiration) pointed out, academic disciplines are not only sources of knowledge but also of political power, we hope that *Alternative Orientalisms* will contribute to the on-going deconstruction of colonial discourses and to more progressive, anti-ethnocentric, anti-hegemonic, and anti-imperialist world relations.

PART ONE:

MEXICO

POINTS OF CONVERGENCE: ANCIENT CHINA, MODERNITY, AND TRANSLATION IN THE POETRY AND ESSAYS OF OCTAVIO PAZ, 1956-1996

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I. Orientalism and Octavio Paz

Octavio Paz devoted many years of his life to the study of Asian civilizations. Although India remains the unequivocal cornerstone in Paz's work on Asian history and cultures, ancient China and Japan play a no less significant role. In relation to China, Eliot Weinberger has claimed that no other Western poet since Victor Segalen has been "so expert on, experienced in, and written so extensively about, a cultural *other*" as Octavio Paz (11). This assertion by one of Paz's translators could easily be judged as tainted by its assumed partiality, and yet its insinuating range has served as a point of departure for the pages that follow.

Paz discovered Chinese and Japanese poetry in 1952 during a brief assignment in Tokyo, Japan, as under-secretary of the Mexican Ambassador (*In Light of India* 20). This initial contact with the Far East became a life-changing experience for Paz and the beginning of his long-term study and translations of ancient Chinese and Japanese poetry. Paz's translation of Matsuo Basho's travel diary *Oku no Hosomichi* (*Oku's Paths*) was published in 1957 in collaboration with Japanese scholars Eikichi Hayashiya and Eiji Matsuda, the latter a professor in Mexico's National University (UNAM) (Paz, *Versiones* 591). Ancient China, on the other hand, turned into a constant source of literary allusions in Paz's critical essays, and an inspiration to translate poems and essays of Chinese masters between 1957 and 1996, hence over a span of four decades.

In a commentary to his 1987 translation of Wang Wei's poem "Lu zhai" (In the Deer Park Hermitage), Paz regretted the relative inexistence of Spanish translations of Chinese poetry. He observed that the translations by Ezra Pound, Arthur Waley, and Claude Roy (among others) have enriched

modern poetry in the West with “poetic visions of China,” therefore with other classicisms that differ from the Greco-Roman; in Spanish, however, “this lack has impoverished us” (*19 Ways* 47). How is one to understand Paz’s argument that the absence of Chinese translations and their poetic visions of this ancient civilization have impoverished the Spanish-speaking world? I hold that the answer to this question can be reasoned only after taking into account Paz’s theory of modernity.

Octavio Paz expounded and later amplified his theory of modernity in four seminal essays: *The Bow and the Lyre* (1956), “Signs in Rotation” (1965), *Conjunctions and Disjunctions* (1969), and *Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde* (1974). Viewed as a unified theoretical model—thus emphasizing only the constants and dominant directions—one could study Paz’s conceptualization of modernity along three points of convergence: (1) as a personal response to the historical present (e.g., the unresolved contradictions of the liberal and Marxist traditions); (2) as a critique of orthodoxies in their liberal, Marxist, or religious variants; and (3) as a temporal incarnation of Otherness, that is to say, as the reclaiming of humanity’s history in classicisms other than the Greco-Roman. The first two points can be treated as one on condition that we distinguish between Paz’s life-phases and situations between 1956-1974, and his poetic and theoretical writings of the same period; the third point, on the other hand, corresponds to Paz’s anti-modern stance, namely: his critique of a “project of Enlightenment” that finds its historical fulfillment in Western civilization. The notion of the modern as a temporal modality shaped by a plurality of pasts of pasts and futures is illustrated by Paz in relation to the poetics and politics of Simultaneism, particularly as expressed in 20th century aesthetic experimentations in avant-garde art and cinema:

Eisenstein discovered predecessors of the use of simultaneity in the art of the East: Japanese theater, Chinese ideography [...] In the second decade of the twentieth century there appeared in painting, poetry, and the novel an art of temporal and spatial conjunctions that both dissolved and juxtaposed the dichotomies of before and after, front and back, internal and external. This art had many names; the best of them, the most descriptive, was Simultaneism (*The Other Voice* 48).

The aesthetic principles determining Paz’s choice of translations result in temporal correspondences between the far and the near, opening possibilities for questioning political and religious orthodoxies. Paz’s theory of modernity, consequently, determines the synchronous overlapping of the ancient and the contemporary: at one level, ancient China; at another, the modern China that emerged with Mao Zedong. Thus, Paz’s selection of Chinese poets and writers

for Spanish translation, although initially appreciated for their aesthetic sophistication and wisdom, did not have mere poetic or antiquarian motives.

One of the arguments in this study is the fact that the poetry and criticism of Octavio Paz are seldom studied in unison, either because of the critics' avowed preferences for the former, or the tendency to ignore Paz's political and theoretical essays. There are other, less sympathetic views that admit of neither Paz's poetry nor his politics. Ilan Stavans declares, for instance, that Paz's poetry does not spark his interest ("His poetry is too loose, too mystical for my taste" [5]), contending that Paz was a tyrant and an "unprogressive patriarch" in his political views (79). Jason Wilson thinks differently in his afterword to *Itinerary*, Paz's political memoir: "what counts is how Paz worked at his political insights within his poems" (116). Given the embattled situation in today's world, a re-reading of Paz's poetry and essays is not only necessary but overdue.

Because of space limitations, I can only propose a plan of study that must remain for the time being a mere outline. I believe that the poetry, the theoretical writings, and the implicit politics in Octavio Paz's work must be examined not only as inseparable but as mutually intelligible, particularly if one is to understand Paz's selection of Asian classical texts that, in his opinion, should be translated. In other words, it is time to reread Octavio Paz in the context of contemporary conflicts between the West and the East (that is, the "Orient"), particularly in the latter's immense cultural terrain which ranges from Islamic countries to a previous and vast multi-ethnic confederation of republics straddling both the East and the West (the former Soviet Union), the People's Republic of China, and North Korea, among others.

Shortly before his death, Edward W. Said wrote these revealing words: "My idea in *Orientalism* is to use humanistic critique to open up the fields of struggle, to introduce a longer sequence of thought and analysis to replace the short bursts of polemical, thought-stopping fury that so imprison us in labels and antagonistic debate" (xxii). In what follows I intend to examine how Octavio Paz draws on translations of ancient Chinese poetry, on modernity, and criticism to introduce a longer sequence of thought and analysis on the relations between the West and the (Far) East.

II. Modernity's Modes

In theoretical and philosophical commentaries one frequently reads a variety of competing definitions of "modernity": for example, as a decadent literary phase that follows a vigorous realism (Lukács), a protofascist aesthetic (Jameson), a revolutionary formal device in art (Shklovsky), or as the age of anarchy, "when 'principles' expire" (Schürman), and so forth. The different and competing

definitions are generally examined in relation to modernity's emergent epochal stage in the nineteenth century and its "post-modern" phase after the Second World War. Jürgen Habermas analyzes modernity somewhat differently, namely: as the central theme of the Enlightenment, composed of two overlapping discourses: the philosophical and the aesthetic (ix). More specifically, Habermas aligns the two discourses of modernity on a historical continuum that reaches its first epochal maturity in German Romanticism then branches out to France and England:

The problem of grounding modernity out of itself first comes to consciousness in the realm of aesthetic criticism [...] This explains why *Moderne* and *Modernität*, *modernité* and *modernity* have until our own day a core aesthetic meaning fashioned by the self-understanding of avant-garde art. (8)

Octavio Paz wrote along these same lines in *The Bow* (1956), but with the *political* and the *poetic* as overlapping discourses, thus positing a tacit discrepancy with Habermas in relation to the idea of modernity as an *unfinished project*. Both Habermas and Paz, however, would ultimately agree that at the global level the libertarian legacy of the Enlightenment is the only viable project. I will return to this point. For now, let's recall that *The Bow* consists of two parts: the book in its original form, and "Signs in Rotation," a poetic manifesto published in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1965, included as a new epilogue in the 1967 revised edition.

The changes in poetic direction between the year of publication of *The Bow* and that of the manifesto are partly clarified when one takes into account the world's historical crisis during this period: from the "heating up" of the Cold War in the Korean conflict (1950-1953) that flared while Paz served on his first assignment in India and Japan, to the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Within a decade, Mao's China had not only confronted the United States in the Korean conflict, but would also expand its geographical frontiers to include both Tibet in 1950 and 43,000 square kilometers of Indian territory after the 1962 war. This is the India that Octavio Paz returned to after his appointment as Mexico's Ambassador in New Delhi (1962-1968), with additional diplomatic duties in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan (*Itinerary* 69). On the other side of the Pacific, the United States and the Soviet Union threatened to go to war over Cuba, thus escalating the Cold War to an unprecedented critical point. Paz's affiliations in the Mexican embassies during the 1950s and the 1960s must have given him access to international information that partly but significantly influenced his poetry and essays of this period. In other words, Paz's critical stand on the former Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, North Korea, and Cuba should be considered in relation to events taking place during a decade of global conflict and turmoil.

One would be mistaken, however, to interpret the beginning of Paz's anti-communist views as a sign of Cold War partisanship; in other words, of taking sides with socialism's *Other*: the United States. Paz has left an autobiographical record where he traces his growing apprehension and disaffection from Marxism, beginning with the 1939 German-Soviet pact and, after the war, the David Rousset's Affair. Paz recalls that he and Mexican novelist José Revueltas had been urged to publish articles in the radical magazine *Futuro* denouncing "Trotsky as a friend of Hitler's"; however, to Paz's consternation he later learned that Stalin had signed a pact with Hitler (*Itinerary* 47). The political confusion and disappointment to which Paz succumbed during these years was a condition shared by others:

Critical Theory was initially developed in Horkheimer's circle to think through political disappointments at the absence of revolution in the West, the development of Stalinism in Soviet Russia, and the victory of fascism in Germany. It was supposed to explain mistaken Marxist prognoses, but without breaking with Marxist intentions. (Habermas 116)

After the war, David Rousset revealed the fact of Stalin's concentration camps where millions of political dissidents, intellectuals, former communists, and other "deviationists" were kept under lock and key. "Their number approached millions," stated Paz (*Itinerary* 66). The communist press, according to Paz, denounced Rousset as an agent of U.S. imperialism. Paz compiled documents related to Stalin's concentration camps and, with an introductory note of his own, saw to their publication in 1951 in the journal *Sur*, edited by Victoria Ocampo in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the same journal where Paz would publish in 1965 his poetic manifesto, "Signs in Rotation." The years in which Paz worked as an under-secretary in the Mexican embassy in India and in Japan were, consequently, a time of self-questioning and reinvention. "I was worried by my psychological frame of mind," Paz remembers,

[O]r, to put it in a more antiquated and exact way: the state of my soul anguished me. I had not only lost several friends but my previous certainties. I was floating adrift. The disintoxication therapy had not completely ended; I still had a lot to learn, and more than anything, to unlearn [...] In brief texts in prose—poems or explosions?—I tried to grasp myself. I set sail in each word like in a nutshell (*Itinerary* 68).

For our present purposes, it should be brought to mind that *The Bow*, besides being a long reflection on poetry and the poet's critical and oppositional role in modern society, is also a literary history conceived trans-nationally, from the drama of ancient Athens and Renaissance Neo-Platonism, to German and English Romanticism, French Symbolism, and Surrealism. The connecting

thread, according to Paz, is the role of poets and visionaries—from Euripides to Breton—who believed that human freedom becomes a possibility only when a critique of language is introduced into a culture. Interpreted in the context of the 1950s, with its growing fears of a nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States, such poetics and politics were far from being merely literary. As a way out of the historical impasse, both for modern poetry and revolutionary movements, Paz proposed the following:

Indeed, if a new revolutionary thought is to emerge, it will have to absorb two traditions scorned by Marx and his heirs: the libertarian and the poetic traditions, the latter being understood as the experience of *otherness*; and it is no less certain that this thought, as Marxism was, will be critical and creative; knowledge that embraces society in its concrete reality and in its general movement—and changes it. (*The Bow* 239)

This passage allows for two observations: on the one hand, Paz's conditional argument ("if a new revolutionary thought is to emerge") turns out to be a political constant throughout his essays, including *Itinerary* (1993). On the other hand, it is evident that Paz is being critical of the repressive authoritarianism of both the West and the Eastern socialist countries that stood for the Cold War.

In the initial chapter of *The Bow* Paz presents the question of Otherness in the form of rival entities facing each other in a polemical encounter. It is significant that instead of beginning with Socrates as the embodiment of the art of thinking and a critique of language, Paz selects another point of departure: a dialogue between Tzu-Lu and Confucius. Paz emphasizes one feature: the question of an administrator's first edict when invited to govern a country. According to Paz, Confucius responded that the administrator's first edict should be "the reform of language" (*The Bow* 20). Paz agrees that such a reform must take place in the language of bureaucrats and the vernacular of everyday use so as to revive a poetic language that resonates with multiple echoes and repressed voices; and this can only take place in the poetic image, "a word that expresses the inexpressible" (90). The problem of representation is hereby introduced as an essential dimension of communication and, therefore, of *meaning*, a problematic that, according to Schürman, derives from an Indo-European etymology that refers "to travel, to follow a path" (13), therefore the multiple echoes of the word "sentido" in Spanish, namely: meaning, direction, sensed, to list the more obvious. Alluding next to Chuang-Tzu (or Zhuang Zi, ca. 369-286 B.C.), Paz insists that a reform of language could be a path toward an Otherness that awaits us:

Taoist, Hindu, and Buddhist thought becomes comprehensible. When Chuang-Tzu explains that the *experience of Tao involves a turning back* to a kind of

elemental or original consciousness where the relative meanings of language are inoperative, he resorts to a play on words that is a poetic enigma. He says that this experience of *returning to what we are originally* is “to enter the bird cage without making the birds sing” (*The Bow* 91, my emphasis).

III. The Consecration of the Instant

Octavio Paz’s idea of the *consecration of the instant* can be interpreted as a reading experience: the poem is the mediating text where past, present, and future achieve their consecration in the reader’s *conscience of self*. In his 1964 article on Spanish poet Luis Cernuda, Paz explains this point:

The tension between a life ignorant of itself and conscience of self is resolved in the transparent word. Not in an impossible beyond, but here, in the instant of the poem, reality and desire reach an accord. And that embrace is so intense that it not only evokes the image of love but also that of death. (*On Poets* 205)

The idea of the instant’s consecration is introduced by Paz in *The Bow* as the result of a mediating process or interplay of two kinds of human experience: the original and the subsequent cluster of “acts and experiences” (*The Bow* 169). According to Paz, such experiences are made possible through the mediation of the poem, the language of *Otherness*, declaring that for a personal experience to have any meaning it must be mediated by a poem that re-appropriates an experience that is *anterior* and original in the sense of being “inaugural” or new but not comprehended during its actuality. In other words, the experience’s meaning is brought to light *retrospectively*. The poem’s internal problematic, therefore, is composed of ambiguity and conflict; this twofold dynamic of poetry, according to Paz, is a “transmutation of historical time into archetypal time and incarnation of that archetype in a determinate and historical now” (*The Bow* 171).

In his essay on Baudelaire, written in Delhi, India, in December 1967, Octavio Paz reflects on painting and the problem of translation in Baudelaire, on modernity, and the images of ancient China in Arthur Waley’s translations. In this essay, Paz writes the following passage:

Baudelaire’s attitude once again implies an inversion of the traditional perspective. Before, the past, taken to be the repository of the eternal, defined the present [...] Now the eternal depends upon the present: on the one hand, the present is the criticism of tradition, so that each moment is, at the same time, a refutation of eternity [...] on the other hand, the eternal is not single but manifold and there are as many beauties as there are races, ages, and civilizations. (*On Poets* 55)

Baudelaire's views on modernity, art, and temporality are different and yet the Romantic lineage embraced by Paz is evident. Baudelaire's idea of aesthetic beauty rests on the intersection of the transient and the permanent, the actual and the eternal; as a result, "the authentic work [for Baudelaire] is radically bound to the moment of its emergence" (Habermas 8). Much has been written on Baudelaire's "melancholic" attack on classical beauty because of its inherent illusion and deception: after all, death is its twin sister. But what could be interpreted as a decadent symptom, Barbara Wright displaces it to other levels where the exotic, the alien, and the Romantic longing for the far-away become poetic constants in Baudelaire: "Beauty, for Baudelaire, is always strange" (34), and such strangeness or Otherness, Wright adds, shapes the opening pages of *Les fleurs du mal* (1857, expanded 1861) with poems inspired by Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire's black mistress (35). Baudelaire's interests in the exotic and alien launch him on an Asian journey when he is twenty years old: he reaches midway then returns home. Paz will also return home, but only after having lived in India all together for about eight years.

Criticism of tradition: this "attitude," central to modernity (and to Baudelaire), runs through Paz's poem "Piedra de Sol" ("Sunstone"), published in 1957 in what would appear to be a poetic homage to the first centennial of Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* (1857), and a forceful development of the themes that Romantics and Surrealists will turn into a poetics: the journey, mad love, and the surreal imagery that combines the historical with the unconscious and dreamlike. Paz originally asked André Breton to write a preface for the 1958 French translation of "Sunstone"; although Breton's promise was not kept (Polizzotti 648), there is in the Baudelaire-Breton-Paz triad a poetic affiliation that is unnecessary to insist on.

"Sunstone" is a major work valued for its poetic diction, its hermetic structure, and as one of Paz's major love poems. It has also been acknowledged for its originality of composition. Ricardo Gullón, for instance, claims that Paz reinvents time "in order to transform the instant into the eternal," and adds: "Never more so than in *Piedra de sol* ["Sunstone"], but with this addition: in the time and space of transfiguration. Slowly experience emerges in form; that is, form is the form of experience which goes on inventing itself in the poem" (186). I would add that "Sunstone" is also a critical poem where a non-European civilization—Ancient Mexico—is examined under the light of modernity and with the political atmosphere of the Cold War in mind.

Paz added a prefatory note to the first Mexican edition of "Sunstone" that reveals the depth of his understanding of Mesoamerican civilization, one that includes both Nahua and Maya peoples. In this note, Paz establishes a system of correspondences between Mesoamerica and other world civilizations, from Greece to ancient China (*Obra poética* 776-7). Regrettably, this note does

not appear in its complete form in *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz*, nonetheless the note's translation includes Paz's commentary regarding the significance of the poem's 584 lines, with an exact symmetry to the Venus' synodical period of 584 days (*Collected Poems* 637). Also not included in the English translation of Paz's note is his observation that "Sunstone" contains an extra six lines (a repetition of the poem's initial six), thus resulting in a total of 590 lines.

The poetic composition of "Sunstone" is organized according to archetypal Mesoamerican features: trees, wind, spring and—as synecdoches of Quetzalcoatl—jade and water, a snake-like "river that turns, moves on, doubles back" (*Collected Poems* 3). On the other hand, the metaphors of movement appear as central elements in a creation myth: the emergence of Woman (described by a male poetic voice in the present tense), followed by the protracted birth of the male consort ("setting out from my forehead, I search" [7], "wake me up, I've already been born" [31]), all set within the poem's recurring imagery of rock-mountains, blood, and fire: a tripartite figuration of the Nahuatl image of the *altepetl* (city), blood sacrifice, and a *pyramid on fire* (conventional Mesoamerican iconography for military defeat), therefore as a textual analog of the poem's oppositional and yet circular poetic structure.

Popularly known as the "Aztec calendar" (but note that Paz does not use this term in his prefatory note, much less in the poem's title), the Sun Stone is a monument of Mexica art that is associated with human sacrifice and the Sun's rotation (or movement) through the heavens and the underworld. Conceived as a 'geocentric' system, the Mesoamerican sun enjoyed analogies with a hunter god who descended to the nine levels of the Underworld of night only to ascend gloriously to the heavens as a triumphant divinity, with obvious war, agricultural, and "resurrection" symbolism. The Sun Stone was, as a result, a "codex" in its own right, with a mythical system that spread out throughout Mesoamerica—including the Maya region—in the form of variants. Consider, for instance, the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Quiché, and its hero twins Hunahpu and Ixbalanqué as the divinities who, after a descent to Xibalba (the Maya Underworld), later ascend to their own cosmic apotheosis as the Sun and the Moon, respectively.

From these summary points, we can draw a significant inference in relation to "Sunstone": given that the poetic voice, in the first person ("I travel my way through galleries of sound" [*Collected Poems* 5]), addresses a *primordial female* ("the world is visible through your body" [*Collected Poems* 3]), Paz is clearly emphasizing an ancient Mesoamerican mythical source that centers on *primeval couples* (e.g., Oxomoco and Cipactonal), and not the Mexica myth in which the main divinity was a male sun god (Huitzilopochtli)

who decapitated and mutilated the body of Coyolxauhqui, his own sister (the Moon).

Paz knew his national history and claimed his right to be critical of it. In Ancient Mexico the Otomí were moon worshipers, and, interestingly, the moon and the lake of the moon are frequent images in Paz's poems. In his footnote to the poem "Petrificada petrificante" ("The Petrifying Petrified," 1975), Paz includes a revealing comment: "Mexico is a word composed of *metzli* (moon), *xictli* (navel), and *co* (place): the place of the navel of the moon; that is, in the navel of the Lake of the Moon, as the Lake of Mexico was called" (*Collected Poems* 650). "Sunstone," therefore, may be interpreted both poetically and politically as the Mexica myth of rival siblings (older sister, younger brother) that contains a "rationalization" of war against an earlier ethnic group in the form of a *conquest narrative*. In the Mexica myth, the young sun god (Huitzilopochtli) *mutilates* the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui, thus encoding the political and territorial dispersal of the native settlers. Recent Mesoamerican scholars have examined the importance of Teotihuacan's Great Goddess and its fate in subsequent cultures, from the Toltec to the Nahuatl. Janet Catherine Berlo's study concludes with the following argument: "The ancestral Great Goddess of Central Mexico, whose strongest manifestations were at the metropolis of Teotihuacan, diminished in importance during the Postclassic era and was firmly deposed by Huitzilopochtli's rise to power" (159).

In his essay "Primitives and Barbarians," published in *Alternating Current* (1973), Paz distinguishes between three cultural categories: the barbaric, the primitive, and the classic. According to Paz, Coatlicue is barbarous because "it does not possess the unity of the primitive artifact, which puts the contradictions of reality before us in the form of an instantaneous totality [...] What distinguishes classic art from primitive art is the intuition of time not as an instant but as succession" (26). In terms of the Mexica's Earth Goddess Coatlicue, Paz observes that it "is not an object but a concept in stone, an awesome idea of an awesome divinity. I realize that it is barbarous, but I also appreciate its power. Its richness strikes me as uneven and almost formless, but it is a genuine richness. It is a goddess, a great goddess" (27, my emphasis). Having understood Paz's argument, we realize that it is only a premise, an introduction, or a metaphorical bridge of sorts to a more significant argument, namely: a critique of modern times and (more specifically) of modern art, driven by the market and profiteering. Note Paz's question after his "awesome" admiration of Coatlicue: "Can we escape barbarism?" (27).

Paz's poem "Sunstone" can thus be read as a reference to a "gender war" in the Mesoamerican pantheon (with Huitzilopochtli as the winner), and as a poem critical of expansionist wars against native peoples. The directionality of the poem's political discourse, consequently, is more than just the end of

time, or reduced to the conflict, conquest, and colonization of non-European peoples that became a global concern in the Columbian year of 1992. Read from this perspective, “Sunstone” is a poetic meditation on the ancient cultures of Central Mexico *displaced* by conquest: from the Olmeca-Xicallanca and the Otomí, to Chichimec latecomers such as the Mexica, followed by the Spanish conquest of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in 1521. The sequence of “conquering” peoples who arrive and settle in Central Mexico form a telling and coincidental “triad” of sun gods: Mixcoatl (an Otomí god of fire); Huitzilopochtli (the Mexica “twin” by appropriation of the defeated Mixcoatl’s “essence”); and the Spanish *conquistador* Pedro de Alvarado (Tonatiuh, so named because of his blond hair). The tripartite poetic image is congruent with Paz’s poetics and politics, namely: to revive a poetic language that resonates with multiple echoes and repressed voices.

Mixcoatl, an Otomí god but undoubtedly a deified ruler, is often presented as the male companion of Quilaztli (the Great Goddess of Xochimilco), also known as “the Deer of Mixcoatl” (Davis 140). Mixcoatl’s symbol was “the two-headed deer” (Davies 93), and he was the father of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, also associated with a “double” or twin (explained by Paz in his note to the Spanish edition) in his cosmic role as Venus (morning star/evening star). There are allusions in “Sunstone” to a female that could be identified with Quilaztli-like features (“the Deer of Mixcoatl”): “space encircled, dressed her in a skin/ even more golden and more transparent/ tiger the color of light, brown deer/ on the outskirts of night, girl glimpsed/ leaning over green balconies of rain” (*Collected Poems* 9). In the quoted lines, the images of war are implicit but in the language of erotic desire for the *first woman*, “mutilated” in time (in other words, erased from memory) nonetheless recalled by the poetic voice: *fire* (“tiger,” obviously the native jaguar), *water* (“balconies of rain”), and the *moon* (“space encircled”).

Arguably a desired kinship connection to Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl through their own male divinity, the Otomi got ahead of the Mexica in the resolve to “burn” their codices to reclaim the Toltec heritage as their own (Mixcoatl as Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl’s father). In any case, the iconographic pattern of twins and primordial couples is repeated in the two-headed Quetzalcoatl that emerges, like two serpents of blood, from the shoulders of a decapitated Coatlicue, the Mexica Earth Goddess and mother of Huitzilopochtli. The Mixcoatl-Quilaztli couple could therefore represent a “marriage” of two ethnic groups prior to the Mexica arrival, one with a patriarchal god, the other worshipping a Great Goddess. Variations of this union were intrinsic to the “Mesoamericanization” of Chichimec groups who arrived at various times in Central Mexico.

Miguel León-Portilla has proposed a similar argument. He has claimed that there was a conflict between Tezcoco and Tenochtitlan during the last stages of the Triple Alliance (formed by the conquerors of Azcapozalco: Tezcoco, Tenochtitlan, and Tacuba), which coincided with the reign of Nezahualcoyotl (1402-1472), Lord of Tezcoco. León-Portilla notes that while Nezahualcoyotl incorporated the millenarian tradition of the Toltecs (art, philosophy, poetry, innovative engineering, and so forth), the Mexica chose a path of militaristic expansionism, leading to their *misunderstanding* of a Toltec heritage that in turn owed much of its legacy to Teotihuacan:

The myths, traditions, and rites of Chichimec origin had not disappeared entirely. Their remnants are found in the texts, but they were undergoing cultural and religious fusion as both Mexica and Tezcocans were in the process of assimilating and enriching the institutions of Toltec origin. The Mexica later transformed these into instruments for their own ideas and ambitions, converting themselves into the People of the Sun with a new mystic-militaristic world view that was the basis for their conquests throughout ancient Mexico. (73)

A similar but more direct critique is proposed by Paz in *Posdata (The Other Mexico)*, written after handing in his resignation as Mexico's ambassador to India due to the violent response of Mexico's ruling party to student protests in 1968. In *The Other Mexico* (1970), Paz traces a totalitarian and repressive lineage that (in Paz's view) connects the Aztec tlatoani (great speaker or lord) to the Mexican presidents who stood for decades at the top of the pyramid of Mexico's *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* [Institutional Revolutionary Party]. Mexico's "invisible" history is one that, in Paz's view, connects the Aztec tlatoani with the Spanish viceroy, the nineteenth-century liberal politician and the modern party's president in Mexico. Paz argues as follows: "[T]here is an invisible thread of continuity between the ancient society and the new Spanish order: the thread of domination. That thread has not been broken: the Spanish viceroy and the Mexican presidents are the successors of the Aztec rulers" (*The Labyrinth of Solitude* 298). Paz then goes on to discuss what happened in Mexico during the colonial era in terms of serious study and understanding of Mesoamerican history:

Tlatelolco is one of Mexico's roots: there the missionaries taught classical literature, Spanish literature, rhetoric, philosophy, and theology to the Aztec nobles; there Sahagun founded the study of pre-Hispanic history. The crown and the church brutally interrupted these studies, and both Mexicans and Spaniards are still paying the consequences of that deadly interruption: Spain isolated us from our Indian past and thus isolated herself from us. (319)

In *The Other Mexico*, Paz proposes his critique of Mexico's National Museum on the grounds that it displaces Aztec (Mexica) culture not only as the

zenith of Mesoamerican civilization, but as the official nationalist version of Mexico's "authentic" cultural origin. Mesoamerican studies in the past thirty years have underscored the cultural importance of Teotihuacan to post-Classic Mesoamericans, including the Aztecs, thus obliquely agreeing with Paz's critique of Mexico's National Museum and the centrality it gives to the Aztecs in Mexico's ancient history. For instance, René Millon, who has contributed to our knowledge of ancient Teotihuacan, notes the absence of representation in the rulership of this Mesoamerican metropolis; Millon makes a claim that Paz would have recognized as strangely familiar:

[N]o representations of rulers are known in public contexts, and no obvious representations are known from private contexts. This is in sharp contrast to the ancient Maya and to ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. It may have been a pre-Hispanic central Mexican approximation of post-revolutionary Mexico's maxim—"No reelección" (No re-election)—from presidents on down. Effective means were institutionalized by a collective leadership to prevent rulers from transforming executive authority into personal rule. (400).

Paz comments on the importance of Mixcoatl in his work on several occasions. This young fire god revered by a people who were *moon worshippers*, is associated with Asian divinities (Krishna, *Collected Poems* 644), or with peoples who migrated to India in ancient times (e.g. the Parsis, *Collected Poems* 642). Mixcoatl again appears in *Itinerary*, where Paz remembers that near his grandfather's house in Mixcoac (where Paz lived during his youth), he visited what was probably "a shrine dedicated to Mixcoatl, the god who gave his name to our village before the Conquest. Mixcoatl is a celestial warrior god; he appears in codices with his body painted blue with white spots (the stars) and a black mask: the face of the night sky" (107). In terms of war symbolism, Paz explains in a note to his poem "Vuelta" ("Return," 1975) that war in Mesoamerica was often depicted through images of *fire*, *water*, and the *moon*, and that these elemental and cosmic figurations gave expression to native notions of "total" or "sacred war": *atl tlachinolli* or "burnt water" (*Collected Poems* 649). There were other images of war, such as the *war serpent* (Quetzalcoatl, hence the "Venus wars"), and the "war of the flowers" (*xochiyaoyotl* in Nahuatl), a ritualistic form of war organized in mutual accord to obtain captives for sacrifice.

A refutation of linear time, "Sunstone" pulsates with circles and revolts: its structural *return to origins* embodies the image of Ouroboros, of a serpent biting its own tail, of cosmic renewal, and of seasonal rotation, therefore with Mixcoatl ("Cloud Serpent") as a poetic model. My interest for now is on the manner in which "Sunstone" functions as an example of a Mesoamerican classicism deployed by Paz in a relation of temporal juxtapositions with the