

**Political Modernity Revisited:  
The Skeptical Liberalism of Octavio Paz  
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*La excentricidad de América Latina consiste en ser una excentricidad europea; quiero decir, es otra manera de ser occidental. Una manera no-europea. Dentro y fuera, al mismo tiempo, de la tradición europea, el latinoamericano puede ver a Occidente como una totalidad y no con la visión, fatalmente provinciana, de un francés, un alemán, un inglés o un italiano.*

Octavio Paz, 1994, vol.3:216

*If liberalism is, as I believe it to be, a large tendency rather than a concise body of doctrine, then, as that large tendency makes itself explicit, certain of its particular expressions are bound to be relatively weaker than others, and some even useless and mistaken. If this is so, then for liberalism to be aware of the weak or wrong expressions of itself would seem to be an advantage to the tendency as a whole.*

Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination, Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: The Viking Press, 1951), xi.

Liberalism went from being an Anglo-Saxon eccentricity to triumphing, at the end of this century, as the dominant political ideology in the world. And yet, once discarded the globalization of capitalism--arguably a consequence, as opposed to core value or norm, of liberalism--it appears that support for the philosophical and political building blocs of liberalism is perfunctory at best. That indicates a rather fragile victory for liberalism--arguably, the last truly modern overarching set of political and philosophical beliefs, or "grand narrative", in the Western world.

I assume that this political incongruity--widespread but perfunctory espousal of liberalism--divulges an interesting episode in the history of our political modernity. That is, not the redundant *malaise*, but a sort of disconnection between the core practices of liberalism (Shumpeter's democratic "mechanic," capitalism, civil and political liberties), which are now accepted, and its core values (progress, equality, liberty, universalism), which are increasingly challenged, even rejected.

### *Paz's Skeptical Liberalism*

To approach this problem in an original and hopefully fruitful way, I turn to the thoughts of a renowned “intellectual-artist”: Octavio Paz. The advantages of focusing on Paz could be summed up in one major point: he is one of the last “intellectuals”<sup>1</sup>; that is, a “generalist” in matters of culture, an informed “amateur”<sup>2</sup> who bridges the gap between aesthetics and morals; someone who attempts to shape the *Res Publica* through intellectual means.<sup>3</sup> In short, an individual who can, and does, question the foundations of the established order. What is more, he is truly cosmopolitan, a citizen of his century but who thinks and writes from a “modernizing” country (Mexico), one that experiences the creative tensions arising from the conjugation of modern and pre-modern social patterns, transition and stability. Since many, perhaps most of the weaknesses of liberalism are to be found in its moral and ethical foundations (or relative absence thereof), not *directly* in its procedures, it seems useful to look at what philosophers and artists have to say about the matter, especially if, as Paz, they are ready to revisit and criticize the ideology “from within” (outright anti-liberal ideologies are well known and predictable).

Octavio Paz is widely considered as a “liberal” intellectual--a rather uncommon persuasion in Latin America. He's been one of the very few intellectuals denouncing “real socialism” and Castroism, while presenting pluralism and

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<sup>1</sup>. Claude Roy wrote: “On a toujours peur de louer les grands esprits avec de trop grands mots, et on hésite un instant à dire d'Octavio Paz qu'il s'agit d'un des esprits universels de ce temps. C'est pourtant vrai. Il n'a pas le savoir “encyclopédique”, il a la sagesse intériorisée de celui qui des cultures d'Amérique, d'Europe, d'Asie et de la poésie du monde a fait la chair de la chair, le mouvement même de sa vie.” In *Le Nouvel Observateur* (July 1996), p.56.

<sup>2</sup>. Edward Said would be more convincing in his advocacy of “amateurism” as a central feature of the genuine intellectual if he wasn't dressing up his subjective views on public affairs (eg. force shouldn't have been used to dissuade Saddam Hussein) as The Truth. This Truth is uttered by a sort of “amateur”, true, but one whose immoderate mission commands no less extraordinary insights into what is *really* going on out there. One more time, a discussion on the definition of intellectual--that is, a self-definition--turns into an insolent exercise of self-promotion. See Said, 1996.

<sup>3</sup>. For a critical look at the present condition of intellectuals in the Americas, see Grenier, 1995.

democracy (without adjective) as an imperative for Mexico and Latin America.<sup>4</sup> For most of his peers, this was more than enough to labeling him “conservative” (or worse!). Nevertheless, his obvious departure from traditional conservatism, especially in its Latin American version (clericalism, national self-centeredness, organic conception of society), makes him, for a minimally sophisticated observer, a natural exponent of liberalism.

Few peers have missed opportunities to chastise Paz “and friends” (most of them writing in Paz’s magazine *Vuelta*) for heaping too much contempt on communism and not enough on much needier (and numerous) Latin American capitalist dictatorships.<sup>5</sup> By and large, Paz’s tormentors are right. But they miss an important point: Paz’s politics is primarily an intellectual exercise, in which the ideological correlation of force within the intelligentsia, not the immediate magnitude of the problem in the world at large, is what really matters. And the intelligentsia in Latin America was overwhelmingly Leninist until recently.

The likes of Pinochet are supported by people who have “interests”, not ideas. Paz discusses politics with people of his milieu first and foremost. In his writing, Paz denounces totalitarianism and democratic capitalism--though he does not fail to appreciate the dissimilarity between the two--but rarely pays specific attention to right-wing, military or caudillo-like dictatorships.

This being said, Paz’s espousal of liberalism is not as comprehensive and “deep” as it might seem at first glance. In fact, the case is made here that Paz is superficially liberal at best. When he seems to be acknowledging “modernity”, it is usually as some fatality. He considers his most famous book, *El Labirinto de la soledad*, as “una apasionada denuncia de la sociedad moderna en sus dos

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<sup>4</sup>. Or more precisely: *more* pluralism and democracy in Mexico, for the PRI hegemony, according to Paz, does not amount to a dictatorship (let alone a “perfect” one, as Mario Vargas Llosa once suggested), but to a very unique type of regime: “. . . puede hablarse de un monopolio del PRI pero no de una dictadura. Varias veces he dicho que vivimos en un régimen peculiar, un régimen *hacia la democracia*” (Paz, 1993, vol.8:388). Our emphasis.

<sup>5</sup>. See many references to Paz’s enemies and competitors in Toledo and Jiménez Trejo, 1994, as well as in Oppenheimer, 1996.

versiones, la capitalista y la totalitaria" (Paz, 1993:41). His assaults on materialism and the civilization of technology are relentless. Core elements of both liberalism and the enlightenment, such as the idea of linear time and progress, are the subjects of invariable opprobrium.<sup>6</sup> For him, we are living "el crepúsculo de muchos de los supuestos que fundaron hace dos siglos a la modernidad. Entre ellos dos básicos: el culto al futuro y la idea de progreso, en sus dos vertientes, la evolucionista y la revolucionaria."<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, Paz longs for some obscure traditional and communitarian values, rooted in his country's past and in the cradle of our civilization. His philosophical debts go to Kant,<sup>8</sup> but also to the usual turbulent sons of modernity: Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. His ideas on art and culture have been shaped by different currents and sub-currents of romanticism, from the English and German (including perhaps Marx and Freud) to the Latin American *Vanguardia* and of course Surrealism. Poetry, for him, is "un alimento que la burguesía--como clase--ha sido incapáz de digerir," this explaining why "la poesía moderna se ha convertido en el alimento de los disidentes y desterrados del mundo burgués (Paz, 1994, vol.1:66). Is the Mexican bourgeoisie incapable to digest Paz? Maybe not, because the bourgeoisie deals with the present and the short term (where Paz proves to be more conciliatory), and could probably not care much less if for Paz, "la historia de Occidente puede verse como la historia de un error, un extravío, en el doble sentido de la palabra: nos hemos alejado de nosotros mismos al perdernos en el mundo. Hay que empezar de nuevo" (Paz, 1994, vol.1:117).

With Liberals like these, arguably, Mexico does not need many more anti-liberals.

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<sup>6</sup> . Gabriel Zaïd, Paz's very close collaborator in *Vuelta*, has written a book on the issue that Paz cites and praises abundantly (see Zaid, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> . "Fui uno de los primeros que se ocuparon de estos asuntos. Ahora se han popularizado y hoy circula una abundante literatura, a veces aguda y otras indigesta, sobre lo que se ha llamado la 'post-modernidad'" (Paz, 1994, vol.1:25).

<sup>8</sup> . See his interview with Juan Cruz in *Vuelta*, no.192 (November 1992), pp.14-18.

And then again, Paz is first and foremost a practitioner of modern art. And modern art is modern not in spite of its unmerciful criticism of modernity but, as Paz repeats over and over again, *because* of it. Paz criticizes modernity, and yet he is part of it--he fortifies it. According to his own premises, he is as much of a liberal as an artist could be. Which makes his contribution unique and very interesting to understand the current crisis of liberal values.

To be sure, Paz's views are often contradictory. This stems largely from his intent to reject the either/or frames of argument, which triumphs in the realms of ideology. Paz is *tout-à-tour* a conservative liberal, a socialist liberal, a romantic liberal, a spiritual liberal. More precisely: he is an *anti-liberal liberal*. His contradictions may indicate a *maximum possible* of liberalism in a country that is not,<sup>9</sup> in a period of Western history when attachment to liberal values is superficial at best. In short, Paz's political contradictions are not only his: they are the contradictions of our time.<sup>10</sup>

### 1/ From Liberty to Liberalism, and back

Las aventuras del arte han sido las aventuras de la libertad

Octavio Paz, 1994, vol.7:213.

Isaiah Berlin once presented his intellectual attachment to liberalism as "inevitable," given his "interest for individual liberty" as well as his "total opposition" to the idea of a "final solution" of whatever sort.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, one could

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<sup>9</sup>. "Salvo durante los interregnos de anarquía y guerra civil, los mexicanos hemos vivido a la sombra de gobiernos alternativamente despóticos o paternales pero siempre fuertes: el rey-sacerdote azteca, el virrey, el dictador, el señor presidente. La excepción es el corto periodo que Cosío Villegas llama la República Restaurada y durante el cual los liberales trataron de limar las garras del Estado heredado de Nueva España" (Paz, 1993, vol.8:337).

<sup>10</sup>. I am paraphrasing Paz who said: "Recuerdo que en 1935, cuando lo conocí, Jorge Cuesta me señaló la disparidad entre mis simpatías comunistas y mis gustos e ideas estéticas y filosóficas. Tenía razón pero el mismo reproche se podía haber hecho, en esos años, a Gide, Breton y otros muchos, entre ellos al mismo Walter Benjamin. Si los surrealistas franceses se habían declarado comunistas sin renegar de sus principios y si el católico Bergamín proclamaba su adhesión a la revolución sin renunciar a la cruz, ¿cómo no perdonar nuestras contradicciones? No eran nuestras: eran de la época" (Paz, 1993: 50-51).

<sup>11</sup>. *The Observer*, 14 Octubre 1990, quoted in Leca, 1995: 371

stray away from peripheral values and practices of liberalism (as Berlin did with his communitarianism and perhaps his Zionism), but a celebration of liberty for the individuals, and by extension, a mistrust of supra-individual, monistic authorities (the Church, the State, the Party), is a sort of litmus test.

Paz does not fail it. In fact, liberty is at the center of Paz's vision of the world in general and theory of art in particular. Liberty is conceived as a possibility to say *no*, to change one's mind, to improvise, to reject established norms.<sup>12</sup> It is neither a political agenda geared toward the future, nor a myth, or "sacred history of the origins" (M. Eliade). Liberty isn't, and shouldn't become, an *ideology*. It is the pivotal principle of his "philosophy of the present".

In his acceptance speech of the *premio Cervantes*, aptly entitled "the liberal tradition", he states this position forcefully:

Apenas la libertad se convierte en un absoluto, deja de ser libertad: su verdadero nombre es despotismo. La libertad no es un sistema de explicación general del universo y del hombre. Tampoco es una filosofía: es un acto, a un tiempo irrevocable e instantáneo, que consiste en elegir una posibilidad entre otras. No hay ni puede haber una teoría general de la libertad porque es la afirmación de aquello que, en cada uno de nosotros, es singular y particular, irreductible a toda generalización. Mejor dicho: cada uno de nosotros es una criatura singular y particular. La libertad se vuelve tiranía en cuanto pretendemos imponerla a los otros (Paz, 1994, vol.3:306--my emphasis).

Liberty and even liberalism, for Paz, preceded and extend beyond the political ideology of liberalism pioneered by the Scottish philosophers of the enlightenment. For Paz, Cervantes, the inventor of modern novel, is "el escritor nuestro que encarna mas completamente los distintos sentidos de la palabra liberal". And this, obviously, because he was one of the first and most powerful advocate of *critical thinking*; not by reason of Cervantes' espousal of liberalism in the modern sense of the term:

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<sup>12</sup>. For instance: "la libertad no es una filosofía y ni siquiera es una idea: es un movimiento de la conciencia que nos lleva, en ciertos momentos, a pronunciar dos monosílabos: Sí o No" (Paz, 1994, vol.1:522).

Con Cervantes comienza la crítica de los absolutos: comienza la libertad. Y comienza con una sonrisa, no de placer sino de sabiduría. El hombre es un ser precario, complejo, doble o triple, habitado por fantasmas, espoleado por los apetitos, roído por el deseo: espectáculo prodigioso y lamentable. Cada hombre es único y cada hombre es muchos hombres que él no conoce: el yo es plural. Cervantes sonrío: aprender a ser libre es aprender a sonreír (Paz, 1994, vol.3:307).<sup>13</sup>

From his advocacy of liberty derives his rejection of absolutism and centralism and, by extension, his support for pluralist democracy.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, "debemos defender esas instituciones y defender los germenés de libertad que contienen, no anularlos" (Paz, 1993:110-111). This prudence is often spent sparingly when he set out to chastise the "liberal democratic societies" as a whole. For instance: "Ayer dijimos el horror que sentíamos ante las injusticias del sistema totalitario comunista; *con el mismo rigor* debemos ver ahora a las sociedades democráticas liberales" (Paz, 1993:124).

In short, Paz appreciates the virtues political liberalism and pluralist democracy, but does not seem to care for any of the social, economic and historical conditions that probably made the realization of these virtues feasible.

## 2/ The Fatal Attraction of Modernity

La modernidad es una palabra en busca de su significado: ¿es una idea, un espejismo o un momento de la historia? ¿Somos hijos de la modernidad o ella es nuestra creación? Nadie lo sabe a ciencia cierta. Poco importa: la seguimos, la perseguimos. Para mí, en aquellos años, la modernidad se confundía con el presente o, más bien, lo producía: el presente era su flor extrema y última.

Octavio Paz, 1994, vol.3:36.

<sup>13</sup>. On the complementarity of critical thought and political democracy, Paz asserts that they are "los dos elementos centrales que conforman lo que llamamos modernidad" (Paz, 1993, vol.8:301). Numerous times he deplored the relative absence of the former in the luso-iberian world: "En otras ocasiones me he referido a nuestra carencia mayor: la ausencia de una tradición de pensamiento crítico como la que existe, desde el fin del siglo XVII, en el resto de Occidente. Es una carencia que compartimos con España y Portugal y, en el otro extremo de nuestro mundo, con Rusia. Nuestros países no tuvieron siglo XVIII y nuestra modernidad es incompleta" (Paz, 1994, vol.3:56).

<sup>14</sup>. "El centralismo--económico, político, cultural--no es sino una forma más perfecta y terrible del monopolio, es decir, del absolutismo" (Paz, 1994, vol.8:376). Likewise, "the greatest threat to freedom, all liberals agree, is the concentration of power. *This is true whether power is concentrated in the public or in the private realm*" (Holmes, 1994:11).



Paz's positions on modernity are many. Modernity is connected to many interlaced phenomena: first, the values of Enlightenment and liberalism (equality, liberty, progress, universalism), and then in their wakes, occurrences such as revolution ("the public religion of modernity"), technology, science, capitalism, urbanization, individualism, and secularization. At times Paz finds ways of welcoming either some of these occurrences, or some of their repercussions. At the end, it appears difficult to escape the conclusion that for all its horrors, modernity is seen by Paz as the adventure of our time, one in which Mexico should participate in full; hopefully, in a critical and constructive way.

### *Modernity as an Aspiration*

Definitions of modernity are many in Paz's work. First and foremost, it is a timeless "aspiration", a projection into the future.<sup>15</sup> What matters here is not the future itself, never attainable, but the very aspiration itself--the "incesante advenimiento del ahora" (Paz, 1994, vol.3:144). Modernity is an endless, utopian, perhaps fundamentally religious *quest* but, unlike Christianity, it comes with no end, no eternity.

This aspiration has a long history, and could henceforth be presented as a "tradition". Tradition of *ruptura*, which in the realms of arts often means a return to the origins, conceived not as something that belongs to the past but rather, something that is perennial, archetypal. A past that lives and shape the only time that matters: the present time.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>. "Cada época, cada generación, cada año y aun cada día tienen su modernidad: nunca la misma. No obstante, todas se parecen en algo: el querer ser modernas. La modernidad no es un estado sino una aspiración. Un amor inmoderado por lo que está pasando, no tanto por lo que es como por lo que va a ser" (Paz, 1994, vol.3:281).

<sup>16</sup>. "La búsqueda de la modernidad poética fue una verdadera *quête*, en el sentido alegórico y caballeresco que tenía esa palabra en el siglo XII. No rescate ningún Grial, aunque recorrí varias *waste lands*, visité castillos de espejos y acampé entre tribus fantasmales. Pero descubrí a la tradición moderna. Porque la modernidad no es una escuela poética sino un linaje, una familia esparcida en varios continentes y que durante dos siglos ha sobrevivido a muchas vicisitudes y desdichas: la indiferencia pública, la soledad y los tribunales de la

In presenting his own attempt to grasp modernity, Paz recalls the following: “Mi búsqueda no fue quimérica, aunque la idea de modernidad sea un espejismo, un haz de reflejos. Un día descubrí que no avanzaba sino que volvía al punto de partida: la búsqueda de la modernidad era un descenso a los orígenes. La modernidad me condujo a mi comienzo, a mi antigüedad. La ruptura se volvió reconciliación” (Paz, 1994, vol.3:37). Past and future matter as long as they are part of the present moment, the moment of liberty when human beings reinvent themselves:

Volví a mi origen y descubrí que la modernidad no está afuera sino adentro de nosotros. Es hoy y es la antigüedad más antigua, es mañana y es el comienzo del mundo, tiene mil años y acaba de nacer. Habla en náhuatl, traza ideogramas chinos del siglo IX y aparece en la pantalla de televisión. Presente intacto, recién desenterrado, que se sacude el polvo de siglos, sonrío y, de pronto, se echa a volar y desaparece por la ventana. Simultaneidad de tiempos y de presencias: la modernidad rompe con el pasado inmediato solo para rescatar al pasado milenario y convertir a una figurilla de fertilidad del neolítico en nuestra contemporánea. Perseguimos a la modernidad en sus incesantes metamorfosis y nunca logramos asirla. Se escapa siempre: cada encuentro es una fuga. La abrazamos y al punto se disipa: sólo era un poco de aire. Es el instante, ese pájaro que esta en todas partes y en ninguna. Queremos asirlo vivo pero abre las alas y se desvanece, vuelto un puñado de sílabas. Nos quedamos con las manos vacías. Entonces las puertas de la percepción se entreabren y aparece el *otro tiempo*, el verdadero, el que buscábamos sin saberlo: el presente, la presencia (Paz, 1994, vol.3:41).

More than in any other human activity, modernity was so much understood as an aspiration than in the world of art. Here, Paz’s assessment of modernity is comparatively positive, for modernity in art means a critical disposition toward society at large *and* toward art itself. Even when he announces the death of modern art as a *tradición de ruptura*,<sup>17</sup> he is in fact repeating what virtually all

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ortodoxias religiosas, políticas, académicas y sexuales. Ser una tradición y no una doctrina le ha permitido, simultáneamente, permanecer y cambiar” (Paz, 1994, vol.3:37).

<sup>17</sup>. “Hoy somos testigos de otra mutación: el arte moderno comienza a perder sus poderes de negación. Desde hace años sus negaciones son repeticiones rituales: la rebeldía convertida en procedimiento, la crítica en retórica, la transgresión en ceremonia. La negación ha dejado de

great artists have said and done over the past two centuries. Supreme cunning of history: criticizing modernity is participating to its renewal.

Modernity in the art celebrates cosmopolitanism, for the artistic creation is an exchange to which participate whole generations of artists, from all over the world. There is no such thing as a "periphery" nowadays because there is no "center". As he points out: "Los estilos son temporales; no pertenecen a los suelos sino a los siglos" (Paz, 1994, vol.7:268). National identities are always somewhat dubious, but even more so when referring to great artists.

For instance, talking about the *modernistas* at the turn of the century (especially Rubén Darío), he states:

Los modernistas no querían ser franceses: querían ser modernos. El progreso técnico había suprimido parcialmente la distancia geográfica entre América y Europa. Esa cercanía hizo mas viva y sensible nuestra lejanía histórica. Ir a Paris o a Londres no era visitar otro continente sino saltar a otro siglo. Se ha dicho que el modernismo fue una evasión de la realidad americana. Más cierto sería decir que fue una fuga de la actualidad local--que era, a sus ojos, un anacronismo--en busca de una actualidad universal, la única y verdadera actualidad. En labios de Rubén Darío y sus amigos, modernidad y cosmopolitismo eran términos sinónimos. No fueron antiamericanos; querían una América contemporánea de París y Londres (Paz, 1994, vol.3:142).

Interestingly enough, one finds the same kind of comment on the famous Mexican muralists (Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros), elevated to the status of official painters of the Revolution by the Mexican government and, in contrast with the *modernistas*, generally considered as genuinely "nationals": "La pintura mexicana moderna es el resultado de la confluencia, como en el caso del descubrimiento del arte prehispánico, de dos revoluciones: la social de México y la *artística de Occidente*" (Paz, 1994, vol.7:87).<sup>18</sup> Incidentally, Latin America

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ser creadora. No digo que vivimos el fin del arte: vivimos el fin de la *idea de arte moderno*" (Paz, 1994, vol.1:463).

<sup>18</sup>. Diego Rivera, perhaps the best known of the three, is a particularly telling example. For Paz: "El cubismo mostró a Rivera la vía de la comprensión de la escultura mesoamericana y otros artistas, como Gauguin, le revelaron la magia de una naturaleza y una vida ajenas a la

does not permanently find itself at the receiving end of this cross-national dialogue between artists: Latin American artists have had a significant influence in Spain<sup>19</sup> and their contribution to modern art is evident.

In short, modernity understood as an aspiration does seem to be highly compatible not only with tremendous creativity, but also with a certain universalism expressed in the cosmopolitanism of modern artists and certainly celebrated in both liberalism and the philosophy of the enlightenment.

### *Modernity as a Project*

In addition to being an aspiration, modernity is often confounded with the different *projects of society* that have been dominant in the West since the French Revolution. Paz assails all of them with gusto, though not always with the finesse of judgment that one could expect from him.

At the root of his roaring charge against these projects, one finds a dispraise of their common philosophical denominators: Reason, and the utopia of progress. Here Paz is clearly showing his debts to the Romantics, inventors of modern poetry and most underestimated inspirators not only of Marx, Freud, and Neitzsche, but arguably, of most contemporary critiques of liberalism. Reason leads to "la crítica de todo sustancialismo" (Paz, 1994, vol.1:303), to agnosticism and by extension, to liberalism. It dissociates the individual from one's real essence as human being, and failed to fill the void created by what Neitzsche called the "death of God":

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moderna civilización urbana. El camino de regreso a Mexico pasó por París y por la experiencia de la vanguardia cosmopolita del siglo XX" (Paz, 1994, vol.7:64).

<sup>19</sup>. "El modernismo (1890) y la vanguardia (1920) nacieron en Hispanoamérica y de allí fueron trasplantados a España. En los dos casos los españoles acogieron con reticencia esas revoluciones, aunque terminaron por adoptarlas, las modificaron con genio y les dieron un baño de tradicionalismo (Unamuno, Machado y Jiménez en el primer cuarto del siglo; Gerardo Diego, Lorca, Cernuda y Alberti en el segundo). Así, la primera nota distintiva de la poesía hispanoamericana, por oposición a la española, es su sensibilidad frente a lo temporal, su decisión de afrontar la modernidad y fundirse con ella. Su nostalgia de futuro, diría. La otra: su curiosidad, su cosmopolitismo" (Paz, 1994, vol.3:72-73).

El liberalismo democrático es un modo civilizado de convivencia. Para mí es el mejor entre todos los que ha concebido la filosofía política. No obstante, deja sin respuesta a la mitad de las preguntas que los hombres nos hacemos: la fraternidad, la cuestión del origen y la del fin, la del sentido y el valor de la existencia. La edad moderna ha exaltado al individualismo y ha sido, así, el período de la dispersión de las conciencias. Los poetas han sido particularmente sensibles a este vacío (Paz, 1994, vol.1:527).

Vivimos un vacío histórico. El mercado libre probó ser mas eficaz que la economía estatal, pero el mercado no es una respuesta a las necesidades mas profundas del hombre. *En nuestros espíritus y en nuestros corazones hay un hueco*, una sed que no pueden satisfacer las democracias capitalistas ni la técnica (Paz, 1993:233-234).

Liberals are the first to blame for this dismaying situation. For they first embraced Reason as the new Supreme Being--followed by positivists and socialists: "los tres proyectos--el liberal, el positivista y el revolucionario--son variantes de la misma idea. Los une el mismo propósito y los anima la misma voluntad: convertir a México en una nación moderna. Así, el fracaso de estas tres tentativas es el fracaso del proyecto liberal original" (Paz, 1994, vol.8:360). He is particularly harsh on what Tocqueville, a liberal but still an (enlightened) aristocrat, identified as the main threats facing democratic societies: the uniformity of taste, the massification of society, the comfortable mediocrity:

En nuestro mundo la conformidad y la pasividad conviven con el egoísmo mas despiadado y el individualismo más obtuso. La técnica ha uniformado los gustos y las costumbres pero no ha extirpado a las pasiones que dividen a los hombres: la envidia, las rivalidades, el horror o el desprecio a los extraños (Paz, 1993:160).

Curious how artists, who benefit the most from living in societies where social communion is optional (as opposed to mandatory), are also the ones who seem to be suffering the most from the relative absence of a social "foundation". It also remains equivocal how, according to Paz, societies that have elevated the principle of self-criticism to a *modus vivendi* could have possibly degenerated into brainless, shallow, consumerist societies.

This being said, Paz is clearly aware, unlike most Romantics, that reason can also be a liberating instrument, *if used also against itself*. Reason is worthy if used to criticize and learn, not if erected as a God, a Supreme Being to be worshipped: "La única cura del nihilismo es la crítica de la razón. Por eso es útil volver a Kant; no para repetirlo sino para continuarlo. La razón no es una diosa sino un método, no es un conocimiento sino un camino hacia el conocimiento" (Paz, 1993:208).

Paz sometimes deplores the fact that Mexico, along with the rest of the Hispanic world, opted out of the adventures of the enlightenment in the 18th century (Paz, 1994, vol.3:62). This deprived these countries of a tradition of criticism, one that has enriched and strengthened the most "modern" countries of the North.<sup>20</sup> If one has to suffer the drawbacks of modernity, at least one should have access to its most redeeming feature: self-criticism.

### **3/ Down with Homo Economicus and Progress**

El mercado ha minado todas las antiguas creencias--muchas de ellas, lo acepto, nefastas--pero en su lugar no ha instalado sino una pasión: la de comprar cosas y consumir este o aquel objeto. Nuestro hedonismo no es una filosofía del placer sino una abdicación del albedrío y habría escandalizado, por igual, al dulce Epicuro y al frenético Donatien de Sade. El hedonismo no es el pecado de las democracias modernas: su pecado es su conformismo, la vulgaridad de sus pasiones, la uniformidad de sus gustos, ideas y convicciones.

Octavio Paz, 1993:132

Throughout his life, Paz has denounced the market and capitalism--perhaps less so in recent years--though not from a bona fide socialist point of view like most Latin American intellectuals. Paz attaches some importance to the problem of

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<sup>20</sup>. "No creo que la pobreza de nuestra crítica se deba a una incapacidad para juzgar. Al contrario, juzgamos con gran facilidad y siempre de manera inapelable. Nuestro infierno no está empedrado de buenas intenciones sino de juicios temerarios. Pero ni los españoles ni los hispanoamericanos somos capaces de *relacionar*. No es una falla intelectual sino moral. Llamela usted individualismo, envidia, orgullo, sentimiento de inferioridad--como quiera. No cultivamos nuestras diferencias--eso se llama erotismo--sino que nos instalamos en ellas como en cerradas fortalezas" (Paz, 1994, vol.3:289).

social inequality, but arguably, more as a matter of citizenship (equality before the law, equality of opportunity, political equality) than as a matter of equality of results.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Paz is relentless in his attacks against the “*adoradores de la estúpida y suicida religión del progreso infinito*,” whom include, needless to say, the socialists and communists (Paz, 1993:240).

His denunciation is predicated on an ill-defined perspective, drawing upon ideas and beliefs such as Romanticism (the dehumanizing reason), Toryism (the misadventures of rugged individualism), perhaps Christianity (the merchants out of the temple!), as well as what could be called “skeptical liberalism” à *la Tocqueville* (societies leveled to their lowest common denominator, the *bêtise* of commercial republics, and so on).<sup>22</sup> One might add traces of thinly-veiled *aristocratism*, which invariably informs the artists’ perception of modern rulers (they have no taste, they are no philosopher-kings, they ignore or belittle us), as well as something typical of the French intelligentsia since World War Two (Paz calls France his second *patria intelectual*): a tenacious irritation with all the popular toys and entertainment of post-industrial societies (television, technological gadgets, fast-food, and so on). The result is still a sweeping denunciation of capitalism and productivism, though predicated on rather vague philosophical and historical assumptions:

. . . el triunfo de la economía de mercado--un triunfo por *défait* del adversario--no pudo ser únicamente motivo de regocijo. El mercado es un mecanismo eficaz pero, como todos los mecanismos, *no tiene conciencia y tampoco misericordia*. Hay que encontrar la manera de insertarlo en la sociedad para que sea la expresión del pacto social y un instrumento de justicia y equidad (Paz, 1994, vol.3:40).

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<sup>21</sup>. As Stephen Holmes points out: "Inequality of wealth itself, however, *when detached from problems of dependency, poverty, and corruption*, is not viewed by most liberals as an unacceptable social evil. [...] Our ideal-typical liberal accepts inequality of resources, in fact, because he sees it as the inevitable side effect of a productive economy. [...] Collective ownership, aimed at equalizing conditions, is not only economically inefficient, it also destroys the independent and decentralized resources on which political opposition is based" (Holmes, 1994:17).

<sup>22</sup>. Paz was honored with the Alexis de Tocqueville Award from the President of France François Mitterrand in 1989.

Ante una sociedad que ha perdido la noción misma de significado--el mercado es la expresión mas acabada del nihilismo--el artista ha de preguntarse *para qué* escribe o pinta. No pretendo conocer la respuesta. Afirmo que es la única pregunta que cuenta (Paz, 1994, vol.7:337).

La frase de Marx es, en español, un alejandrino perfecto: *En las aguas heladas del cálculo egoísta*. Eso es la sociedad. Por eso el amor y la poesía son marginales (Paz, 1994, vol.8:260).

A nosotros el mercado nos condena a desechar lo que compramos ayer y, por la boca ubicua de la publicidad, nos intoxica con la droga infernal de la novedad. Idolatría del siglo XX: la adoración de las cosas nuevas que duran lo que dura un parpadeo. Gran enganifa del mercado, servidor de la nada, rival de Satanás (Paz, 1993:120).

Paz routinely accuses the market for all the ills associated with industrialization (capitalist or not) and the *falaz civilización tecnológica*: e.g. the "masificación de los individuos y los pueblos", destruction of the environment, productivism, and materialism:

El mercado no se detiene nunca y cubre la tierra con gigantescas pirámides de basura y desperdicios; envenena los ríos y los lagos; vuelve desiertos las selvas; saquea las cimas de los montes y las entrañas del planeta; corrompe el aire, la tierra y el agua; amenaza la vida de los hombres y la de los animales y las plantas (Paz, 1993:120-121).

El tema del mercado tiene una relación muy estrecha con el deterioro del medio ambiente. La contaminación no sólo infesta al aire, a los ríos y a los bosques sino a las almas. Una sociedad poseída por el frenesí de producir más para consumir más tiende a convertir las ideas, los sentimientos, el arte, el amor, la amistad y las personas mismas en objetos de consumo. Todo se vuelve cosa que se compra, se usa y se tira al basurero. Ninguna sociedad había producido tantos desechos como la uestra. Desechos materiales y morales (Paz, 1994, vol.3:40).

Olvidemos por un momento los crímenes y las estupideces que se han cometido en nombre del desarrollo, de la Rusia comunista a la India socialista y de la Argentina peronista al Egipto nasserista, y veamos lo que pasa en los Estados Unidos y en Europa occidental: la destrucción del equilibrio ecológico, la contaminación de los espíritus y de los pulmones, las aglomeraciones y los miasmas en los suburbios infernales, los estragos psíquicos en la adolescencia, el abandono de los viejos, la erosión de la sensibilidad, la corrupción de la imaginación, el envilecimiento de Eros, la acumulación de los desperdicios, la explosión



del odio. . . Ante esta visión, ¿cómo no retroceder y buscar otro modelo de desarrollo ? Se trata de una tarea urgente y que requiere por igual la ciencia y la imaginación, la honestidad y la sensibilidad; una tarea sin precedentes porque todos los modelos de desarrollo que conocemos, vengan del Oeste o del Este, conducen al desastre (Paz, 1994, vol.8:292).

Likewise, in the world of art, the market's influence is deemed as uniformly negative, for it subjects creation and imagination to the double hazard of esthetically challenged rulers and totally impersonal, merciless and shallow economic laws:

El mercado suprime la imaginación: es la muerte del espíritu. El mecenas obtuso o inteligente, el burgués sensible o grosero, el Estado, el Partido y la Iglesia eran, y son, patrones difíciles y que no siempre han mostrado buen gusto. El mercado no tiene ni siquiera mal gusto. Es impersonal; es un mecanismo que transforma en objetos a las obras y a los objetos en valores de cambio: los cuadros son acciones, cheques al portador. Los Estados y las Iglesias exigían que el artista sirviese a su causa y legislaban sobre su moral, su estética y sus intenciones. Sabían que las obras humanas poseen un significado y que, por eso, podían perforar todas las ortodoxias. Para el mercado las obras sólo tienen precio y, así, no impone ninguna estética, ninguna moral. El mercado no tiene principios; tampoco preferencias: acepta todas las obras, todos los estilos. No se trata de una imposición. El mercado no tiene voluntad: es un proceso ciego, cuya esencia es la circulación de objetos que el precio vuelve homogéneos. En virtud del principio que lo mueve, el mercado suprime automáticamente toda significación: lo que define a las obras no es lo que dicen sino lo que cuestan (Paz, 1994, vol.7:335).

While this comment is certainly applicable to works of art that cannot possibly be reproduced to satisfy an increasing demand (for instance painting and sculpture), it rings aristocratic when applied to categories of art that easily lend themselves to reproduction, marketization, and ultimately, democratization (for instance printed material, and music). Were the marketisation of audio technology so bad for the people's access to the masterpieces of Mozart, John Coltrane, and the Beatles?

*Mexico in late Twentieth Century*

And then again, progress and economic growth are good for Mexico *now* ! It is one thing to criticize the market and capitalism and industrialization and consumerism in general, as trademarks of a civilization; it is quite another to say that Mexico should turn its back to this civilization, for no clear and immediate benefit. For the alternative to democratic capitalism is nowhere to be found, and it is much more interesting to join the "first world" before, and in order to be, participating to its transformation, than to lag behind and still cope with some of the liabilities of modernity. Hence Paz's support for the neo-liberal reforms brought about by the former president of Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gortari.<sup>23</sup>

In a book published in 1993, Paz asserts that ". . . han sido decisivas las reformas económicas y políticas realizadas por Carlos Salinas y su equipo" (Paz, 1993:252). On economic growth, Paz suddenly sounds like a bona fide Reaganite: ". . . estoy seguro de que, si el crecimiento económico continua, los beneficios de la reforma de la economía alcanzarán a la mayoría" (Paz, 1993:253). In all fairness, it must be added that the economic reforms are mostly praised for their *political* consequences, not as economic feats per se. Hence, ". . . las privatizaciones, aparte de vitalizar a la economía, han contribuido indirectamente al proceso de democratización" (Paz, 1993:253). Why? Because "las reformas que ha llevado a cabo el gobierno de Salinas rompen, *definitivamente a mi juicio*, con el patrimonialismo tradicional de México" (Paz, 1993:254--my emphasis). Paz considers as a statement of fact that without economic development, it is difficult, perhaps impossible to attain democratization (see for instance Paz, 1994, vol.8:359); that the emphasis on money and self-interest is less detrimental to democracy than its pre-modern predecessor, the emphasis on power and status; that the lack of economic development condemns developing countries to forego both democracy and

revolution, having to satisfy themselves with democratic facade on one hand, and with noisy but mostly sterile *revueltas* on the other. As he points out:

Como en el caso de los nacionalismos, no propongo la supresión del mercado: el remedio sería peor que la enfermedad. El mercado es necesario; es el corazón de la actividad económica y es uno de los motores de la historia. El intercambio de cosas y productos es un lazo poderoso de unión entre los hombres; ha sido creador de culturas y vehículo de idea, hombres y civilizaciones (Paz, 1993:121).

Contradictory? Or rather, typical self-consciousness of a bourgeois culture, that sees its limitation while remaining certain that its fundamentals are probably the worst minus all of the alternatives. Modernity is not only a *tradición de la ruptura*: it is also a tradition in which self-criticism is an engine of change *and* a legitimizing practice that, by constantly promising reforms and improvements, provide some stability for the institutions and arrangements in place. The future buys time for the present.

#### **4/ Farewell to *The Project***

En primer término: está en entredicho la concepción de un proceso abierto hacia el infinito y sinónimo de progreso continuo [. . .] En segundo término: la suerte del sujeto histórico, es decir, de la colectividad humana, en el siglo XX [. . .] En tercer término: la creencia en el progreso necesario [. . .] Y para terminar esta apresurada enumeración: la ruina de todas esas hipótesis filosóficas e históricas que pretendían conocer las leyes del desarrollo histórico.

Octavio Paz, 1994, vol.3:38-39.

End of the idea of historical transcendence, end of the utopias (*cárceles de conceptos*), end of the ideology of progress, end of meta-history: all of these “ends” disclose the consummation of one major component of modernity: the myth of rational social engineering, supported by an integrated set of beliefs.

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<sup>23</sup>. For a scathing critique of Paz's *liaison dangereuse* with Salinismo, see Enrique González Rojo, *Cuando el rey se hace cortesano: Octavio Paz y el salinismo* (Mexico, D.F.: Posada, 1990).

El verdadero cadaver intelectual de nuestro tiempo no es el del marxismo sino el de la idea de la historia como depositaria de una mítica trascendencia (Paz, 1993:162).

[. . .] el mundo vive, desde hace ya años, no las consecuencias de la muerte de Dios sino de la muerte del Proyecto. Ese proyecto se llamó a veces Progreso, otras Revolución (Paz, 1994, vol.8:380-381).

[. . .] asistimos al ocaso de las utopías, lo mismo las capitalistas que las socialistas. Unas y otras estaban basadas en la creencia en el progreso infinito que, a su vez, había engendrado la ilusión del desarrollo continuo. Hemos descubierto que vivimos en un planeta finito y con recursos finitos. La crisis de los energéticos y el futuro y previsible agotamiento de los recursos naturales ponen un hasta aquí al optimismo de la filosofías del siglo pasado (Paz, 1994, vol.8:381).

¿Fin de las utopías? Más bien: fin de la idea de la historia como un fenomeno cuyo desarrollo se conoce de antemano. El determinismo historico ha sido una costosa y sangrienta fantasia. La historia es imprevisible porque su agente, el hombre, es la indeterminación en persona (Paz, 1994, vol.3:39).

[. . .] muy probablemente, estamos al fin de un período histórico y al comienzo de otro. ¿Fin y mutación de la Edad Moderna? Es difícil saberlo. De todos modos, el derrumbe de las utopías ha dejado un gran vacío, no en los países en donde esa ideología ha hecho sus pruebas y ha fallado sino en aquellos en los que muchos la abrazaron con entusiasmo y esperanza (Paz, 1994, vol.3:39).

The signs of this collapse of one central pillar of modernity have already been mentioned: disenchantment with revolution, progress (*“la colonización del futuro”*), and productivism. The only ideology that has weathered the storm is liberalism; but then again, liberalism “privatized” some of the linkages that used to cement communities and societies. Liberalism is largely empty of moral and ethical foundations. That incites Paz to deplore the fading away of religion-- though not to the point of regretting its separation from politics, or the decline of clericalism:

La democracia moderna postula una prudente neutralidad en materia de fe y de creencias. Sin embargo, no es posible ni prudente ignorar a las religiones ni recluirlas en el dominio reservado de la conciencia individual. Las religiones poseen un aspecto publico que es esencial,

como se ve en una de sus expresiones mas perfectas: el rito de la misa (Paz, 1993:135).

La separacion entre religion y politica es saludable y debe continuar. Pero la religion puede mostrarnos nuestras carencias y ayudarnos a redescubrir y recuperar ciertos valores (Paz, 1993:135).

The price for the liberation of the individuals and the “privatization” of values might end up being excessive, according to Paz:

Las sociedades son históricas pero todas han vivido guiadas e inspiradas por un conjunto de creencias e ideas metahistóricas. La nuestra es la primera que se apresta a vivir sin una doctrina metahistorica; nuestros absolutos--religiosos o filosóficos, éticos o estéticos--no son colectivos sino privados. La experiencia es arriesgada. Es imposible saber si las tensiones y conflictos de esta privatización de ideas, prácticas y creencias que tradicionalmente pertenecían a la vida pública no terminara por quebrantar la fábrica social. Los hombres podrían ser poseídos nuevamente por las antiguas furias religiosas y por los fanatismos nacionalistas. Sería terrible que la caída del ídolo abstracto de la ideología anunciase la resurrección de las pasiones enterradas de la tribus, las sectas y las Iglesias. Por desgracia, los signos son inquietantes (Paz, 1994, vol.3:40).

What is more, liberalism *is* an ideology, and ideology is alternatively “la enemiga del verdadero saber” (Paz, 1994, vol.7: 218), “formas inferiores del instinto religioso” (Paz, 1994, vol.3:65), and “fe mundial” (Paz, 1994, vol.8:363). Paz announces the end of the idea of a social project, and at the same time fears the consequences of this twilight. He supports some core values and practices of liberalism, but has serious misgivings about the ideology as an *ensemble*, as Braudel would say. Ironically, renouncing to The Project and even to the idea of ideology might be the surest way to *exacerbate* the poverty of substance that already characterizes--and for Paz, imperils--liberal societies.

## **5/ A Challenge for the Next Century: Recycling Community and Tradition**

En el fondo, el gran debate de la historia moderna de Mexico, desde el siglo XVIII, es el de la modernización. [. . .] Muy pocos intelectuales han hecho la crítica de la modernización. La crítica la ha hecho el tradicionalismo del pueblo

mexicano, algunos poetas [. . .] y, a veces, como en la época de Zapata, el pueblo pobre en armas. [. . .] Pienso que en ese sueño de nuestros campesinos hay una semilla de verdad. ¿Por que no poner en entredicho los proyectos ruinosos que nos han llevado a la desolación que es el mundo moderno y diseñar otro proyecto, más humilde pero más humano y más justo?

Octavio Paz, 1994, vol.8:382.

Desvanecidas las crueles utopías que han ensangrentado a nuestro siglo, ha llegado, al fin, la hora de comenzar una reforma radical, más sabia y humana, de las sociedades capitalistas liberales

Octavio Paz, 1994, vol.1:583.

If several aspects of Paz's political and philosophical positions aren't very clear, his promotion of popular and ancestral traditions as a Muse for the renewal of social, economic and political institutions of Mexico is the foggiest of all. Not that the idea is not interesting: quite the contrary; the reader wants to follow Paz down this road, rediscovering some neglected wisdom buried in the past and carved by commonsensical ordinary people. But it appears that the road is rather short. It is hard to avoid the impression that Paz's reference to these popular traditions is incantatory rather than based on a fairly systematic assessment of their value and adaptability to the present time.

Of course, Paz is primarily a poet and an artist. He is no required to back up his positions with a solid package of evidence. But then again, it is interesting to note that according to him, the renewal of politics must seek *inspiration* from, arguably, pre-liberal experiences, traditional and communitarian, in order to find, or discover, some universal values that, like poetry itself, defy the turbulence of history. Since they existed *before* liberalism, one can conclude that 1) the renewal to which Paz invites his readers to participate could have arguably happened at any time over the past century and a half, and 2) the inspiration has to be found in the past; or more precisely, in that fragment of the past that is still present in our civilization.

*Toward a Philosophy of the Present*

The challenge of our time can be summarized as follows: we need to find a new philosophy of the present that *transcends* liberalism and socialism, one that *return* to the third element of the famous triad “liberty, equality, and *fraternity*” and reconcile ourselves with the others and ourselves.

For Paz: “Así como hemos tenido filosofías del pasado y del futuro, de la eternidad y de la nada, mañana tendremos una filosofía del presente” (Paz, 1994, vol.3:41). Neither pre-modern (philosophy of the past) nor essentially modern (philosophy of the future), the typical philosophy of the present is one that abandon the linear time and seeks a reconciliation between what our culture has framed as opposit: I and you, tradition and modernity, reason and nature, life and death, being and nothingness, subject and object, poetry and reason, center and periphery.

He also claims that “la experiencia poética puede ser una de sus bases” (Paz, 1994, vol.3:41). Art is after all the “emblema de la perdida comunidad (Paz, 1994, vol.1:538). Poetry is *la otra voz*, the possibility to re-create the “original instant”, the moment before it was separated “by an act of rational violence” from ideas and reason (Paz, 1994, vol.3:301).<sup>24</sup> It is “irreductible a las ideas y a los sistemas [. . .] No la palabra de la historia ni la de la antihistoria sino la voz que, en la historia, dice siempre *otra cosa*--la misma desde el principio” (Paz, 1994, vol.3:78-79). The poetic revelation is “revolutionary,” as André Breton suggested, but not in the sense of an overarching utopian project that purports to reorganize society. This form of revolution is obsolete. It is revolutionary because it is permanently critical of the social and political foundations--myths, religions, ideologies--of *any* society, as well as critical of itself. For poetry is made of words, and language is *ultimately* unsuccessful in its attempt to bridge the gap between the human being and the external world. Language is a

compromise, a sort of original sin that is partaken by all poets and artists. It enshrines both the possible and the impossible of the human condition.

How exactly can poetry--defined broadly--contribute to the renewal of our civilization? For Paz:

Ya he indicado que si naciese un nuevo pensamiento político, la influencia de la poesía sería indirecta: *recordar ciertas realidades enterradas, resucitarlas y presentarlas*. Ante la cuestión de la supervivencia del género humano en una tierra envenenada y asolada, la respuesta no puede ser distinta. Su influencia sería indirecta: sugerir, inspirar e insinuar. No demostrar sino mostrar (Paz, 1994, vol.1:591).

To resuscitate buried realities: that's clearly Paz's key advise to his contemporaries. In his essays on poetry, the arts, philosophy, politics and history, one always finds a relentless call for a *vuelta a las origenes*, and all the positive comments that Paz suggest on any of these subjects focus on this *vuelta*.<sup>25</sup> Not surprisingly, the current crisis of western culture, epitomized by the death of modern art understood as a central participant of the *tradición de ruptura*, manifests itself by inviting "la revuelta de las realidades suprimidas" (Paz, 1994, vol.1:314). In fact, "no asistimos al fin de la historia, como ha dicho un profesor norteamericano, sino a un recomienzo. Resurrección de realidades enterradas, reaparición de lo olvidado y lo reprimido que, como otras veces en la historia, puede desembocar en una regeneración. Las vueltas al origen son casi siempre revueltas: renovaciones, renacimientos" (Paz, 1994, vol.1:584).

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<sup>24</sup>. Also: ". . . al extirpar la noción de divinidad el racionalismo reduce al hombre" (Paz, 1994, vol.1:259).

<sup>25</sup>. The revolutions of independence in Latin America were "una rectificación de la historia americana y, por tanto, es el restablecimiento de la realidad original" (Paz, 1994, vol.1:287); the Mexican Revolution "fue un sacudimiento popular que mostró a la luz lo que estaba escondido. Por esto mismo fue, tanto o más que una revolución, una revelación" (Paz, 1994, vol.3:36).



In a way, we are living the philosophy of Present, for both the past and the future are “una invención del presente” (Paz, 1994, vol.1:27).<sup>26</sup> The innovation would be to fully recognize it, and to draw lessons from this recognition.

### *Fraternity*

Paz routinely recognizes his intellectual debts to both liberalism and socialism. But when he is talking about the necessity to find in these twin ideologies the inspiration for the creation of a third one, more human and respectful of nature, he refers to the third element of the French revolutionary triad: liberty, equality, and *fraternity*. Fraternity, for Paz, is “el gran ausente en las sociedades democráticas capitalistas. La fraternidad es el valor que nos hace falta, el eje de una sociedad mejor. Nuestra obligación es redescubrirla y ejercitarla” (Paz, 1993:194). Typically, Paz elects a value that is at the very root of our civilization, one that has arguably been buried by humans’ obsession with either an immobile and rigid past or a quest for endless material improvements in the future. As he points out:

[. . .] su otro nombre es solidaridad, herencia viva del cristianismo, versión moderna de la antigua caridad. Una virtud que no conocieron ni los griegos ni los romanos, enamorados de la libertad pero ignorantes de la verdadera compasión. Dadas las diferencias naturales entre los hombres, la igualdad es una aspiración ética que no puede realizarse sin recurrir al despotismo o a la acción de la fraternidad. [. . .] Advierto que no hago sino imaginar o, más exactamente, entrever, ese pensamiento. Lo veo como el heredero de la doble tradición de la modernidad: la liberal y la socialista. No creo que deba repetirlas sino trascenderlas. Sería una verdadera renovación (Paz, 1994, vol.1:585-6).

Between liberty and fraternity, according to him, “no hay contradicción sino distancia--una distancia que el liberalismo no ha podido anular” (Paz, 1994, vol.1:526). Nor do we find contradiction between fraternity and equality, which is

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<sup>26</sup>. That reminds a passage in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Penguin Books, 1972): “Then she remembers the time of her childhood and mine, if I was ever a child. The past is consumed in the present and the present is living only because it brings forth the future” (p.251).

obvious enough, but with the following proviso: the modern ideology that made equality its central value--socialism--must be pruned of both its unparalleled cult of progress and authoritarian dispositions. As Paz states clearly: ". . . no se trata de renunciar al socialismo como *libre eleccion* ética y política, sino a la idea del socialismo como un *producto necesario* del proceso histórico" (Paz, 1994, vol.1:465).

The reconciliation of socialism and liberalism is far from being a novel objective: from John Stuart Mill to the Reform Liberals and the advocates of the Welfare State, not to mention the misadventures of the "third ways" (right wing Catholics and Fascists), the reconciliation of liberty and equality has been the central theme of almost all advocates of reforms in the past two centuries. As François Furet demonstrates in a recent book, self-consciousness, especially about the reality of inequality in modern capitalist societies, has been for the first time an essential ingredient of a dominant culture, under the bourgeois domination (Furet, 1995). What is perhaps more original is the intuition--not yet an idea, let alone an ideology--that beyond, or underneath, the political institutions of democracy, it is still possible to find *an idea of human beings* (as opposed to a "conception of the world") that will transcend historical boundaries; that is, the type of archetypal idea that preceded religions (mere rationalization of that original idea) and that has survived in the arts throughout the ages.

### **Conclusion: Social Foundations in a God-less Society**

¿Que puede hacer realmente por su pais un escritor mexicano? Yo no creo que los escritores tenan deberes especificos con su pais. Los tienen con el lenguaje-- y con su conciencia.

Octavio Paz, 1994, vol.8:378

Quien quiera encontrar sistemas establecidos y definitivos en la obra crítica de Octavio Paz se equivoca de medio a medio. No existe nada de eso. Las revelaciones, o iluminaciones, que nos hace siguen siempre abiertas.

Jorge Rodríguez, 1975:.59

This overview highlights several elements that constitute the cornerstones of what I have called Octavio Paz's skeptical liberalism:

- 1) a vigorous defense of liberty in arts and politics;
- 2) a prudent defense of pluralist democratic institutions;
- 3) a forceful condemnation of virtually everything associated with modernity, except the twin principles of criticism and self-criticism and, by extension, their political and institutional expression (i.e. assertion no.2);
- 4) a circumscribed defense of liberalism, i.e. insofar as it directly concerns assertion no.1;
- 5) a call for rediscovering our essence as human beings through a return to the values of community and fraternity.

All of this is very contemporary. For the institutions of democracy are currently the only legitimate political option available and capitalism is spreading the world over, whereas the central tenets of modernity and liberalism find very few advocates. The world looks increasingly like an empty armor.

In one of his many comments on the Marquis de Sade, Paz asserts the following: "[. . .] que yo sepa, nadie se ha atrevido a describir una sociedad atea. Falta algo en la obra de nuestros contemporáneos: *no Dios sino los hombres sin Dios*" (Paz, 1994, vol.3:229). He points out in this sentence *the* thorniest problem of modern liberal societies, masterfully perceived by *Le Divin Marquis*: how does one build a society with a material such as the free and reasonable Individual, and live with oneself and the others without a solid, common ethical foundation? Living a more peaceful life, a socially meaningful life where people help each others and place human solidarity beyond any other values; a life where material well-being is not nearly as important to humans as it is today; all of these

changes would not come even close to solving the enigma of the ultimate meaning of life.

The significant imbalance between Octavio Paz's insights on the meaning of art and his political solutions to contemporary problems hinges not only on his particular expertise as an artist: it also stems from the fact that nowadays, only art could still be presented as a path to redemption. The message is that politics can find inspiration in the arts (which is not the same as to say "inspiration in the political stands of artists"), although the exact nature of this inspiration is still to be discovered.

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