Dwelling and Travel: Octavio Paz and El mono gramático

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Introduction

1 Consider the immense sky, the density of vegetation (net of leaf and branch, root and bough), the clarity of the path that stretches through the chaos of the forest and the lone traveler beginning his march to an end that remains unseen.

2 With this image and the words: “lo mejor será escoger el camino de Galta,” Octavio Paz begins one of his most compelling and perplexing works. Published originally in French in 1972 as part of the collection Les Sentiers de la Création (Skira and Pico), El mono gramático is a text that defies easy definitions. By way of explanation Paz offers the following:

   Al escribir estas páginas decidí seguir literalmente la metáfora del título de la colección a que estaban destinadas, Los Caminos de la Creación, y escribir (trazar) un texto que fuese efectivamente un camino y que pudiese ser leído (recorrido) como tal.

3 Paz goes on to clarify that the text, at the moment of its creation, becomes less a study of an actual journey and more an analysis, a careful recording of both the functioning of memory and the process of writing itself. From meticulous descriptions of the landscape around Galta and the rites associated with its shrine, to an astute first person narration of the act of writing and remembering, the text winds like a rarely traveled path to become a metapoetic exploration.

4 Both in form (a wavering narration of associative as well as chronological organization) and content, an exploration of a foreign landscape, I believe the text owes much to the Surrealist tradition. In addition, because the subject is the Far East, the text begs to be considered within the context of Hispanic Orientalism.

5 I am especially interested in Paz’s decision to situate the text within the exotic landscape of India. I would like to consider El mono gramático within the tradition of Surrealist travel...
writings—particularly André Breton’s “Souvenir du Mexique”—that narrate the confrontation with the Other in the context of a spiritual revelation. My aim is not only to highlight certain similarities, but rather to further demonstrate the way in which Paz, while displaying the same interest in the “primitive” as did Breton, complicates our reading of such an exploration, by taking Surrealists techniques, such as automatic writing, to such an extreme that he undermines all narrative authority.

Paz’s historical position, as a poet writing at a moment when post-structural theory questions the functioning of language itself, allows him to interrogate a writer’s ability to fix, define, or recreate a moment. *El monogramático* is not unique in presenting the author’s incertitudes. Poems as diverse as “Fábula” and “Solo a dos voces,” to name just a few, have contemplated such a topic. Yet, the fact that Paz is a Mexican writer confronting the Indian landscape gives greater significance to his own poetic experimentation in *El monogramático*. His linguistic and philosophical explorations serve to undermine his ethnographic authority. Describing his methodology, Paz explains that he seeks to question his discursive practice:

…but by means of a series of patient analyses and in the opposite direction to the activity normal of the speaker, whose function consists in producing and constructing phrases, while here we have to dismantle them and disassemble them—deconstruct them, as it were—we should reverse the current, reverse the way and expression, figurative expression of expression, arrive at the root, the original, primitive word of which all others are metaphors.

He never arrives at the primordial word. Yet by deconstructing language, through the systematic undermining of the discursive act, Paz creates a text that refuses to submit itself to an ethnographic reading in which the writer becomes an authority on the Other. This is no travelogue, as Paz systematically disrupts the authorial power traditionally associated with Orientalist discourse.

As if that were not enough, Paz has further distanced himself from the “strategic location,” or authorial position within a text to use the terminology of Said, traditionally associated with the Orientalist by emphasizing his condition as a Mexican writer (Said 20). In *Vislumbres de la India*, for example, Paz exploits his Mexicanidad to establish himself as a counter authority—as someone more qualified to speak for the East than the traditional Orientalist. He explains: “La extrañeza de la India suscitaba en mi mente la otra extrañeza, la de mi propio país” (“The strangeness India brought to mind that other strangeness: my own country”) and “su exotismo se fundían con mi propio e íntimo exotismo de mexicano” (“their exoticism blended into my own familiar exoticism of being Mexican”). Outside of Indian culture as well as the Western cultures that have traditionally spoken for this country, Paz writes from a position that seeks to simultaneously identify with and seek to differentiate itself from the Indian people.

Thus by situating this inquisition of language within the contemplation of an exotic landscape, Paz achieves what the cultural critic James Clifford would call “a modern ethnography of conjunctures,” a text that constantly moves between the subjective experiences of the writer and the experience of the Other, “a form of both dwelling and travel in a world where the two experiences are less and less distinct.” (Clifford 9)
New World Orientalism and Surrealism

The blood appears to come from the victim’s mouth, a glistening gag that covers the lips, darkens the eyes and pools first below the head (blood confused with matted hair) flowing under the victim’s back and shoulders like a black river pouring out of the photograph’s frame, in a stream that runs perpendicular to the young man’s stiff corpse. The caption for the Manuel Álvarez Bravo photograph reads: “Après l’émeute” (“After the Riots”) and below it a headline bellows: Souvenir du Mexique.

With this gruesome image André Breton begins his consideration of a place he considered the surrealist country par excellence:

Terre rouge, terre vierge tout imprégnée du plus généreux sang, terre où la vie de l’homme est sans prix, toujours prête comme l’agave à perte de vue qui l’exprime à se consumer dans une fleur de désir et de danger!

Under the Surrealist gaze Mexico appeared to be a world of violence and revolution, mysticism and ritual, one of many sites that received the group’s intense focus. As critics Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser explain, Breton’s search for the fixing of “a certain point of the mind” where a series of irreconcilable opposites (life/death, real/imagined, past/future) would be resolved led him to Latin America and sparked his particular interest in Mexico. (102)

For Surrealist writers and artists, the exploration of other cultures became an essential part of a world view that promised a mystic revelation beyond the constraints of “civilization” in the years surrounding the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. They were influenced by such thinkers as the anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Brühl, who distinguished between a ‘civilized’ and ‘primitive’ perspective. Looking for an alternative to civilization, as well as way to regain what had been lost at the cost of progress, the Surrealist turned to non-Western cultures for aesthetic as well as quasi-religious fulfillment.

In broader terms, rather than being considered lesser in regards to human development, the primitive, thus, becomes associated with all those cultural manifestations (Asian, pre-Hispanic, Native American, Oceanic, African) that represent a return to certain modes of human existence that had become subsumed by the rationalism of Western civilization.

Writers such as Apollinaire, Cendrars, Artaud, and Breton all make reference to the power of primitive thought and art in their works. Still, it is not hard to view the appropriation of certain cultural references by Surrealists as misrepresentative, insensitive, or even, exploitative. The issue becomes even more complicated when we place such texts within larger traditions —such as that of Orientalism— and consider these documents as the products of both literary and ethnographic intent.

As critic Marianne de Torgovnick writes in her book-length consideration of primitivism, Primitive Passions:

...Western fascination with the primitive retains a dangerous edge. Perhaps because the correspondences between bodies and things are never complete or permanent, fascination with the primitive can detour, and sometimes has detoured, into violence. (8)

The image of “blood soaked earth” that opens Breton’s essay resonates throughout Surrealist representations of Mexico in their fascination with images of death and
revolution. In “Souvenir du Mexique” we find references to armed men, barefoot rebels, tombs and coffins for children.

Before these fascinations with the primitive, notions of the violence or barbaric are often exemplified by Western stereotypes of the Orient. From as early Marco Polo’s writings about Kubala Khan, we can observe both a fearful, as well as awe-inspiring respect for the Oriental despot. Later, instead of being fascinated, Enlightenment writers would use their notions of the Orient to stand in opposition to civilization and civilized conduct. Said equates these impressions with certain Romantic notions of Orientalism that include: “gothic tales, pseudomedieval idylls, visions of barbaric splendor and cruelty” (118).

In Latin America, an Orientalist tradition begins with Columbus’s initial mistaking of the New World for the Far East. But the overlaying of Eastern characteristics on a Western continent continues long after the epistemological confusion ended. Argentine writer, Domingo Sarmiento would fuse the gaucho with the Bedouin in his classic 19th-century essay against New World barbarism, Facundo.

The Surrealist glorification of societies, such as Mexico, which they associated with a certain barbarism or violence seems to counter this impulse. In actuality, the Surrealists continue to view Latin America through the same filter as someone such as Sarmiento. Mexico is no less barbaric to Breton than the pampas were to the Argentine essayist. Breton simply views such barbarism as a more useful counter to the “civilizing” tendencies of bourgeois society. Sarmiento would paint the barbarism of Facundo as a type of warning, a rallying point, an evil that encroaches upon civilization. Breton envisions Mexican violence as no less opposed or threatening to civilization, but takes this as a positive characteristic. As Baddeley and Fraser write:

> On one side lay the rational, ordered oppression of the established European civilization so hated by the Surrealist, on the other the mysterious chaos of the irrational and the unknown represented by native cultures of America (102)

The distinction between two tendencies that have the potential to coexist simultaneously in Mexico becomes an important link in connecting the Surrealist fascination with Latin America to Orientalist models and discourses. As I have mentioned above, since Columbus, Native American peoples have been “confused” with those of India (thus their misnaming).

At moments, Latin American writers themselves such as Sarmiento, Paz, and the Cuban writer Severo Sarduy will make comparisons between Oriental and American peoples. Interestingly enough Paz writes within this tradition, using images of blood and violence as a way to serve as a link between India and Mexico. One of the rare mentions of Mexico in El mono gramático occurs as puddle and sickly dog on the road to Galta remind Paz of a similar scene in his native land:

> El perro, la calle, el charco: la luz de las tres de la tarde, hace mucho, sobre las piedras de un callejón en un pueblo del Valle de México, el cuerpo tendido de un campesino vestido de manta blanca, el charco de sangre, el perro que la lame…”(75)

I believe it is worth noting that this image eerily coincides with the description of the Álvarez Bravo photograph that Breton chose to open his Mexican memoir, and it seems no less barbaric. Interestingly enough it is one of the few (and one of the most disturbing) images of violence that appear in El mono gramático. (The only other representation of violence is the mention of Richard Dadd, an English painter who murdered his father.) India itself, while certainly not idyllic, is represented as impoverished but rarely barbaric.
Writing more than twenty years later, in *Vislumbres de la India*, Paz’s first reminiscence of Mexico as a new diplomat in India would similarly be one of violence: a railroad journey reminds him of the hanged men he glimpsed from a train travelling from Mexico City to San Antonio. (19) Again it is one of the few images of violence within the text, despite a history of both colonization and religious conflict. Paz’s India appears to be both peaceful and civilized. So the question begs to be asked: how can we define the India that Paz chooses to represent?

**Paz and Primitivism**

For Paz, the term primitivism referred to an alternative reality—a reality in which our modes of thought and perception are challenged—a return to the Edenic site of our origin.

Para las sociedades primitivas: el arquetipo temporal, el modelo del presente y del futuro, es el pasado. No el pasado reciente, sino un pasado inmemorial que está más allá de todos los pasados, en el origen del origen. (...) La vida social no es histórica, sino ritual; no está hecha de cambios sucesivos, sino que consiste en la repetición rítmica del pasado intemporal.” (Hijos del limo 27)

In many of his poems (“Piedra del Sol” or “Himno entre ruinas” to name just a few), Paz returns to the same pre-Hispanic cultural beliefs that attracted Breton as a way to access this reality located “más allá”. In *Los hijos de limo*, we get a sense of why Paz decided to abandon pre-Columbian Mexico and “escoger el camino de Galta”. Paz relates the Hindu belief in a “más allá que no es propiamente tiempo sino su negación,” and “realidad más allá del tiempo y del lenguaje.”

(31) In *El monogramático*, Paz takes up the relation between writing and time against a backdrop of Hindu belief: “Mi frase es un momento, el momento de fijeza, en el monólogo de Zenón de Elea y Hui Shih (<<Hoy salgo hacia Yüeh y llego ayer>>).” (29) The reference to Zeno and Hui Shi becomes important as we notice Paz’s willingness to appropriate Hindu mythology. Their story reaffirms what Paz tells us about Hindu notions of time: “El tiempo es un sueño de Brahma. Es maya, una ilusión.” (“Time is a dream of Brahma. It is maya; an illusion.”) (*Vislumbres* 66)

Not a source of liberating violence or awe-inspiring barbarism, the path to Galta is a mystic destination—a literal and metaphorical pilgrimage to visit the shrine of Hanuman, or the Monkey Grammarian. While violence does not play a role in his representation of India, Paz does not shy away representing the terrible poverty and squalor of India. Describing the road to Galta, Paz presents images of cow dung and filth that give way to a marsh covered with lotuses and butterflies. The scent of incense mingles with the stench of a squatter’s camp. This interest in contradiction also has its Surrealist roots. Like the demolition of language that leads to us to the “primordial” significance of words, the presentation of oppositions creates “a fan of contradictory meanings finally resolved in a unique, ultimate meaning.” Thus, in “Souvenir du Méxique”, we find daisies amid rubbish heaps.

But the road to Galta is more than a touchstone for contradiction. It is a metaphorical journey to a moment passed, relived through the “presente eterno” of poetry. At least it begins that way. And yet as this notion is developed—and unraveled—throughout the course of the essay, it is as if Paz is deconstructing (erasing as much as writing) a very (anti) notion of time with the dizzying leaps of *El monogramático*. 

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TRANS-, 5 | 2008
While his syntactical disruptions allude to a negation of the communicability of time, Paz continues to privilege Hindu cosmology for its interpretation of time as non-progressive:

Todos juntos caminaban a través de los siglos por el mismo camino, el camino que anula a los tiempos y une a los vivos con los muertos. Por ese camino salimos mañana y llegamos ayer; hoy.11 (77)

The road to Galta sounds strikingly similar to images encountered by Breton in Mexico:

….j’ai pu suivre avec les yeux émerveillés de l’enfance la progression concrète de l’homme dans le temps, telle qu’à la fois elle suppose et transcende la progression du temps dans l’homme.12 (39)

The suspension of time marks the return to the primitive for both writers a type of Edenic pre-history that—as Marianne Torgovnick suggests—was assumed to be part of the cosmovision of the Native American peoples (prior to European contact) as well as the Hindu peoples.

Both Paz and Breton refer to the mythic past of India and Mexico respectively. Paz awakens the mythology of Hanuman and refers to works such as Sundara Kund. Breton alludes to Xochipilli and Coatlicue. Again, Said is illuminating on this point: the glorification of a mythic past is commonplace in nineteenth-century Orientalist thought in which: “the ‘good’ Orient was invariably a classic period in a long-gone India, whereas the ‘bad’ Orient lingered in present-day” (99). While neither Paz, nor Breton, condemn contemporary Mexico or India, neither seem particularly sensitive to their respective complexities. Paz fails to mention conflicts between Hindus and Muslims; Breton ignores poverty and racism in Mexico. Both seek the mythic past as the source of knowledge for contemporary Western society. Yet the differences in how they represent the societies that serve as the source of this knowledge marks the greatest divergence between these two writers.

Strategic (Dis)locations

A glance at the opening of each text shows the radical difference in each writer’s approach.

When Breton begins his essay, he assumes the position of one fit to characterize a whole country and the many cultures that constitute it with one sweeping brushstroke of crimson: “Terre rouge, terre vierge tout imprégnée du plus généreux sang…” What’s more, in the very first paragraph Breton attempts to prove himself as an historian of Mexico’s past and prophet of her future:

….un des premiers fantasmes du Mexique est fait d’un de ces cactus géants du type candélabre de derrière lequel surgit, les yeux en feu, un homme tenant un fusil. Il n’y a pas à discuter cette image romantique: des siècles d’oppression et de folle misère lui ont conféré à deux reprises une éclatante réalité et, cette réalité, rien ne peut faire qu’elle ne demeure latente, que ne persiste à la couver l’apparent sommeil des étendues désertiques.”13 (31)

Breton positions himself as one fit to explicate Mexico to the rest of the world based on no other demonstration of expertise beyond that of his presence there. In this Breton, coincides with what Clifford would refer to as the “predominant mode of modern fieldwork authority.” According to Clifford the assertion of authority in early twentieth century ethnography was simply: “You are there.... because I was there.” (Clifford 22)
Beyond establishing the source and the credibility of a text, this authorial discourse has its own political implications. As Said explains:

There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes cannons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces (20).

In another words, authority determines knowledge and thus power.

Paz employs a strikingly different authorial tone than that of Breton's at the opening of El monogramático. Without more introduction than an encyclopedic epigraph explaining the identity of Hanuman, without even the definitive gesture of a capital letter (as if to question, from this abrupt start, the ideas of “beginning,” “middle,” and “end”) Paz writes: “lo mejor será escoger el camino de Galta...” The same hesitation that plagues the first line will mark the entire first paragraph—one could easily argue, the entire text—and present one of Paz's central preoccupations concerning the very notion of progress: lo mejor será escoger el camino de Galta, recorrerlo de nuevo (inventarlo a med ida que lo recorro) y sin darme cuenta, casi insensiblemente, iré hasta el fin—in sin preocuparme por saber qué quiere decir “ir hasta el fin...”(11)

Of course, the joke is that the work itself is a constant debate over what all words—not the least of them “fin”—really have to say. The suspension of a progressive notion of time begins with the act of writing: a thesis that Paz puts forth in much of his poetry and poetics, although one that is not saved from the same scrutiny that many of his ideas will be put through in function of this text: “la fijeza (siempre, nunca, casi siempre, casi nunca, etc.) es momentánea (siempre, nunca, casi si empre, casi nunca, etc.)”(30) This loss of faith in the idea of progress becomes evident grammatically throughout El monogramático as the narration vacillates from a remembered past: “Cuando caminaba por el sendero de Galta...” (“When I walked the path to Galta”) (11); to a (re)created present: “Me detengo junto a un arbolillo, saco mi navaja...” (“I stop to rest alongside a little tree, take out my pocket knife...”) (31); to a future prophesized “Si coninúo, subiré paso a paso...” (“If I go on, I will climb the stairway step by step...”) (34).

But even before this, returning to the start of the text, the pilgrimage to Galta is begun and abandoned only one page and half later as Paz commences to describe the act of writing itself, as well as the view from his Cambridge study where the world of India is being remembered.

When the path to Galta is taken up again, in the text's third section, Paz makes clear his narration will not fall into the category of travel journal. As counterpoint he even cites what appears to be a 1891 travel or explorer narrative:

The way the sandy desert is encroaching in the town should be noticed. It has caused one large suburb to be deserted and the houses and gardens are going to ruin. The sand has even drifted up the ravines of the hills. This evil ought to be arrested at any cost by planting. (20)

Phrases such as “should be noticed” alert the reader that he or she is being guided through the landscape. The fact that Paz has chosen to maintain the quote in English (language of the Indian colonizer) might offer another clue into the way Paz proposes that we should read this quote—as the voice of the Other, the foreigner—, as well as how we are to read his text—as the voice of neither a traveler, nor Western Orientalist, but someone trained to recognize the exoticized within and beyond.

Dwelling and Travel: Octavio Paz and El monogramático

TRANS-, 5 | 2008
Paz’s own description of Galta, which appears on the very same page, provides a provocative counterpoint:

Ante el vacío que produce su nombre siento la misma perplejidad que frente a sus colinas achatadas por siglos de viento y sus llanos amarillentos sobre los que durante los largos meses de sequía, cuando el calor pulveriza a las rocas y el cielo parece que va a agrietarse como la tierra, se levantan tolvaneras.

Instead of offering us the confidence of someone who would tell us what “should be noticed” Paz directs our attention to the words themselves (el vacío que produce su nombre). Even when, like Breton, he begins to speak with an historical knowledge of the place he describes, “siglos de viento” (note he describes India in the same timeless terms Breton would use to describe Mexico), he subverts his authority. The paragraph ends: “También esto que escribo es una ceremonia, girar de una palabra que aparece y desaparece en sus giros. Edifico torres de aire.” (What I am writing is also a ceremony, the whirling of a word that appears and disappears as it circles round and round. I am erecting towers of air.)

To borrow from the terminology of Edward Said, Paz differs strikingly from Breton in terms of his “strategic location” within the text. As Said explains:

Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-à-vis the Orient; translated into his text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text. (20)

Clearly by laying bare the problematics of language as a mediator between reality and its recording, he demonstrates a desire to undercut his authority as interpreter of a foreign reality—going against a current proposed by early ethnographers and taken up by Breton. Instead of adopting a strategic location, Paz cultivates a type of dislocation. Again, Clifford offers us the historical perspective on this phenomenon:

...one must bear in mind the fact that ethnography is, from beginning to end, enmeshed in writing. This writing includes, minimally, a translation of experience into textual form. The process is complicated by the action of multiple subjectivities and political constraints beyond the control of the writer. In response to those forces ethnographic writing enacts a strategy of authority. This strategy has classically involved an unquestioned claim to appear as purveyor of the truth in the text. (25)

Taking his cue from Foucault, Said would qualify that contention by reminding us that this authorial position (or strategic location) allowed Orientalist writers a style for “dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.” Furthermore, Said explains, that for the British and French writers of the nineteenth century, ethnographic studies often became the very foundation for such colonizing tendencies with the Orientalist becoming the indispensable interpreter: “...the Orientalist is necessary because he fishes some useful gems out of the distant Oriental deep [...] the Orient cannot be known without his mediation” (21)

As we shall see, Breton invokes his authority by not only presenting his description of reality, but by offering his interpretation of that reality. As a result, “Souvenir du Mexique,” becomes less an analysis of Mexico and more a demonstration of how such a reality can be put into service of Breton’s political and artistic agenda.

The India that Octavio Paz represents in El monogramático is much more difficult to pin down: it is both mythic and contemporary, ahistorical and actual, in short—ever allusive, as Paz demands that the reader question everything he puts before us.
So convinced that kingdoms of Kubala Khan, if not earthly paradise itself, lay in a temperate region across the ocean, Christopher Columbus learned how to read the signs of the Orient into the nearly indecipherable landscape of the New World:

Y dixo que creía que avía grandíssimas riquezas y piedras preciosas y espejería en ellas. (He said again that he believes there are enormous riches, precious stones and spiceries.) (14/11/1492)

Y yo estaba atento que trabajava de saber si avía oro, y vide que algunos d’ellos traían un pedaçuelo colgado en un agujero que tienen a la nariz. (And I was attent to find out if there was gold, and I saw that some of them had a piece hanging from a hole they had in their noses.) (13/10/1492)

Y después ha árboles de mill maneras y todos <dan> de su manera fruto, y todos güelen qu’es maravilla, que yo estoy, el más penado del mundo de no los conocser, paque soy bien cierto que todos son cosa de valía... (There are also trees of a thousand kinds, all with different fruits and all so fragrant that it is a wonder and I am greatly distressed not to know them, for I am well assured they are of great value.) (21/10/1492)

Notions of both barbaric and Edenic are woven throughout Columbus’s considerations of the New World. In her study of Latin American Orientalism, Julia Kushigian cites Columbus’s as one of the first Latin American texts that would project utopian ideals of the Orient upon the New World. She writes:

...the discovery of the New World brought to mind the already familiar concepts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and from this knowledge they extracted their idea of a New World or paradise on earth, supported by Arab legend. Columbus believed he was in contact with the Other, a figure that combines what he knew of the Moors, what he believed of the Indies, and what could be considered an appreciation of the ‘noble savage’... The New World is a metaphor of utopia, which is also according to Renaissance thought, a metaphor of the Orient (5-6)

Readers of Columbus’s journal with any knowledge of lands he actually encountered are struck by the gaps that exist between his phenomenology (perceptions of the New World) and his epistemology (knowledge of Orient). But Columbus refuses to reconcile what he saw with what he “knew.” Despite the fact that he found no evidence of Khan’s great empire, the explorer insisted upon believing that he had landed in the Far East.

In his study of Christopher Columbus’s journal, Tzvetan Todorov reveals the Italian explorer to be more a man of faith than man of discovery: “He knows in advance what he will find; the concrete experience is there to illustrate a truth already possessed not to be interrogated....” (17)

More than 400 years after Columbus’s encounter with the Americas, Breton seems no less well prepared to “discover” the Surrealist country of Mexico. In “Souvenir du Mexique,” Breton explains that he was first introduced to Mexico as a child in a book Costal l’Indien, a story that awoke in him “l’amour de l’indépendance.” When confronted with the Mexico of the 1940s he exclaims: “Toujours est-il que la fiction et l’histoire s’y épaulent a merveille.” (18) The manner by which Breton establishes his position in relation to other texts on this subject, or what Said would call his “strategic formation,” shares much with an Orientalist tradition as he primarily refers to foreign interpretations of Mexico. (Said 20) Even when presented with a native text that comprised of Manuel Álvarez Bravo’s photographs, Breton tells us how to appreciate them.
Breton consistently positions himself as the interpreter of a Mexican reality, a type of text that exists with its own messages and clé. In a gesture of blatant reification, he explains what Mexico means: “Impérieusement le Mexique nous convie à cette méditation sur les fins de l’activité de l’homme....” (“Mexico imperiously invites us to meditate on the goals of human activity...”) and later “le grand message des tombes...” (“the great message of the tombs”) (10).

As James Clifford has noted, one way the ethnographer approaches the Other involves seeing exotic cultures as texts:

...interpretation based on a philological model of textual “reading” has emerged as a sophisticated alternative to raw, apparently naïve claims for spiritual authority. (38)

Thus the ethnographer presents him or herself as one who possesses the insight necessary to interpret a given culture.

In the case of Breton, this assertion takes its extreme when the Surrealist not only attempts to fix a vision of Mexican reality, but to determine how that reality should best be depicted. After narrating a particularly bizarre encounter he experienced with painter Diego Rivera (while the two went off on the quite “colonial” mission of gathering antiquities), Breton recalls that Rivera suggested that the French Surrealist write a novel about the events. Breton recoils at the idea that such a marvelous occurrence be reduced to such a form and adds:

Diego, mon ami très cher, je comprends si bien votre pensée, j’admets si bien qu’en pareil domaine vous ne puissiez me suivre au coeur de mes résistances.19 (37)

Notice how the possibility of Breton and Rivera seeing things from the same point of view (en pareil domaine) converts itself into Rivera’s following Breton to the heart of his resistance. According to Breton’s view, Rivera’s own position within the culture renders him the least likely to be able to represent it. And yet a Mexican’s own inability to ‘properly’ know how to represent their reality does not stop Breton from later declaring:

Ce sens inné de la poésie, de l’art tels qu’ils devraient, tels qu’ils doivent être faits par tous, pour tous et dont nous recherchons désespérément en Europe le secret perdu.20 (13)

Breton goes on to explain to his “ami” the differences between art and reception in Europe and Mexico and takes the opportunity to praise those Mexican artists whose vision coincides with his own.

This type of interpretation of the Other is one element that marks what contemporary criticism would call “colonial” representation. Clifford explains that one method to combat such a dominating discourse is to construct ethnography as a “negotiation involving at least two, and usually more, conscious, politically significant subjects” (41).

On the surface, Paz seems less convinced of his capabilities to apprehend or speak for Indian reality. El mono gramático itself is consistently littered with Paz’s own investigation of the limits of narration. But the evidence of his attempts to understand such a reality is everywhere as he recounts the erotic tale of Splendor or refers to the myth of Hanuman. Unlike Breton, Paz does not speak for the Other but incorporates documents representative of the Hindu cultural tradition. El mono gramático begins with a citation from John Dawson’s A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology—perhaps the natural starting place for anyone arriving from outside of Indian culture. In the third section, Paz quotes
from an English travel description dated 1891. As I have mentioned elsewhere, Paz appears to refer to it only as a counterpoint to his own narrative strategy.

Yet as the text continues, as the reader-traveler moves further along the path to Galta, these types of references cease and allusions to Indian culture become more predominant. Paz quotes from the Sundara Kund and the Satapatha-Brahmana. He writes in such a way that the reader is never sure whether he is simply translating texts, paraphrasing, or constructing his own interpretations of such myths.

In *El mono gramático*, photographs interspersed throughout the text appear without caption or mention within the sections. (A list of brief captions that identify without explicating these photos appears at the end of the book.) The subjects of many of the photographs only become apparent after reading the text, although their positioning does not always coincide with the passages that surround them. Their lack of identification appears similar to the kind of ethnographic document that reduces the identity of the subject to racial typography. Yet instead of silencing, I believe, this is an attempt to let the photographs speak for themselves. They may offer a secondary narrative or external commentary that has a signifying function beyond illustration.

Thus Paz resists speaking for the Indian peoples, allowing them to speak for themselves through their own cultural documents. Elsewhere in his writing Paz creates moments of identification with India and the Indian people through a series of comparisons between Mexico and India. And yet, perhaps in *El mono gramático* more than in any other text, Paz also displays his awareness of certain essential differences between himself and the Indian people. He utilizes the moment of encounter with the Other as an opportunity to highlight, once again, incommunication.

*A mí me gustaría hablar con el sadhú pero ni él entiende mi lengua ni yo hablo la suya. Así, de vez en cuando me limito a compartir su té, su bhang y su quietud ¿Qué idea se hará de mí? Quizá él se hace ahora la misma pregunta, si es que por casualidad piensa en mí.*

These instances represent what Kushigian would deem the representation of “la otra orilla” an image that frequently appears in Paz’s poetry. Furthermore, while Kushigian allows for those moments when Paz’s poetics seem to flow between two opposing shores—she attributes this moment of reification to his stylistic and ideological coincidences with Surrealist thought. She writes: “La otra orilla does not imply the existence of an opposite shore, but its focus is directed to the other, which is reinforced by Paz’s surrealist gaze (44)”

Even shared experiences along the path to Galta become a site not for identification but rather an opportunity to confirm his position as an outsider and thus his inability to understand the text of Indian reality:

*Los peregrinos sabían algo que yo ignoraba: el ruido de las sílabas humanas era un rumor más entre los otros rumores de aquella tarde. Un rumor diferente, y no obstante, idéntico a los chillidos de los monos, los gritos de los pericos y el mugido del viento. Saberlo era reconciliarse con el tiempo, reconciliar los tiempos.*

Naturally, Paz is both simultaneously displaying his ignorance and his beliefs. What he did not claim to know at the time of the pilgrimage, becomes that which he remembers. Clearly he privileges Hindu cosmology. While he admits he is not one of the Hindu pilgrims, he seeks identification with them, incorporating himself into their mass on the road to Galta (just as the flâneur incorporates himself into the urban masses at just the right distance from them to be able to describe them). On some level, all of *El mono*...
gramático with its multiple points of view (including those of the writer, the pilgrim, the translator of Hindu myths, Hanuman himself) represents an attempt to allow the unified self to be incorporated into the Hindu social being and cosmology. It is the dissolution of the stable poetic “I”.

Still, by attributing this knowledge to the Other, and yet by denying them a direct voice in this text—they only speak through their myths—Paz further mystifies the Indian people. It is hard to be certain that he is not standing before the mass of pilgrims as Columbus stood before a forest of American trees searching for that which he already has decided has been found. The same vestiges of utopia are planted in Paz’s text. Yet their seedlings are hybrid flowers. Where Breton alludes, Paz incorporates. Where Breton deciphers, Paz questions his own ability to read or to depict. While Paz appropriates the myths and memories of the Indian experience, there is no sleight of hand. He leaves us with no doubt that he writes from a garden in Cambridge exiled from Mexico and India, theorizing about language as the cause of our own exile from the world itself.

**Conclusion**

In *The Predicament of Cultures*, James Clifford holds up *Notebook of a Return to a Native Land* by the Martinique writer Aimé Césaire as an example of the combination of Surrealist aesthetics and ethnographic intent. Through the modernist techniques of fragmentation, collage and juxtaposition, Césaire creates what Clifford calls a modern “ethnopoetics”—a document that is both testament to a culture and the creation of a whole new concept of culture with its idea of negritude.

In a similar fashion, I believe that the Surrealist tradition offered Paz the tools with which to describe and explore contemporary Mexican reality. In texts such as “Piedra de Sol,” “Salamandra,” and “Himno entre ruinas,” Paz uses pre-Hispanic culture (a type of Other contained within contemporary Mexican identity) in order to confront and critique the modern age. Beginning with *Ladera este*, Paz turns to the world of the Orient in order to further explore these ideas. In the same way that Breton saw revolution nearly springing from the cactuses in Mexico, Paz saw reconciliation in the Indian landscape. In her study of twentieth-century interest in primitive culture, critic Marianna Torgovnick writes:

> My broadest claim then is this: the primitive is a sign and a symbol of desires the West has sought to repress—desires for direct correspondences between bodies and things, direct correspondences between experience and language, direct correspondences between individual beings and the collective life force. (8)

Paz saw this reconciliation in the Indian landscape but he looked beyond it. Paz looked to the act of writing itself as a way to access reality. Thus, his exploration of the Other becomes a mapping of the self. As critic Eliot Weinberger has written in regards to another collection of poems based on Paz’s experiences in India (*Ladera este*): “The poems are simultaneously located in India and in a not-India, a somewhere else.”

Similarly, after reading *El mono gramático* we are not left with a travelogue of the road to Galta, but rather a map of Paz’s own poetics. This cartography has been plotted across the length and breath of his poetic production, but it is in this piece where those ideas are put to their greatest interrogation, and it is here where Paz’s philosophy on language and poetry becomes a provocative horizon that shimmers, lengthens and disappears throughout our journey.
While Paz’s attitude toward India seems to have remained equally positive, his aesthetic approach has varied somewhat throughout his career. As critic Julia Kushigian has pointed out, and much of Octavio Paz’s own work demonstrates, he felt towards India “a spirit of veneration and respect for the Orient unparalleled by other Western European nations” (23). While Paz’s recollections of Mexico in his writings on India are consistently tinged with a hint of the barbarism and violence, the Indian people are glorified. Despite their own turbulent history they are usually presented as “una multitud pacífica, al mismo tiempo ferverosa y riente. Estaban unidos por un deseo común: llegar allá, ver, palpar” (“a peaceful crowd, at once fervent and goodhumored. They were united by a common desire: simply to get to where they were going, to see, to touch.”) (*El mono gramático* 77). The Indian people are strikingly idealized, united on a spiritual quest with Paz in tow.

In *Vislumbres de la India* Paz’s desire to posit India as a utopia forces him to assume greater narrative authority (knowledge creating power). His own strategic location within the text, as well as his strategic formation, are much more similar to those of the English and French Orientalists who became the subject of Said’s criticism. Yet this same Orientalist tendency in the case of Paz has much less to do with political interest in India, than it seems to be related to his own interest in Mexico. But his personal desire to participate in a Hindu religious experience—through the dissolution of the unified self—allow him to subvert the traditional authorial position within *El mono gramático*.

In this epic poem, poetic essay, unraveling novel, a catalogue becomes a landscape, a landscape becomes the body of the beloved, the act of love becomes an act of poesis, an act of reconciliation between the “I” and the Other, between the word and reality...The path of Galta disappears and reappears; the speaker, the very author himself, dissolves into a peaceful Hindu crowd...

Ahora me doy cuenta de que mi texto no iba a ninguna parte, salvo al encuentro de sí mismo. (Today I realize that my text was not going anywhere—except to meet itself) (136)

Gracias al poeta el mundo se queda sin nombres. (Thanks to the poet, the world is left without names.) (96-97)

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


NOTES

1. Octavio Paz. Notes from *Obras completas de Octavio Paz.* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994) p. 580. “In writing these pages I decided to literally follow the metaphor of the title of the collection for which they were intended, The Paths of Creation, and write (trace) a text that was in essence a path and that could be read (travelled) as such.” Trans. mine.

2. *Paz. El mono gramático.* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1974) p. 27. “…by means of a succession of patient analyses and in a direction that is the opposite of that of the normal activity of a speaker, whose function is to produce and construct phrases, whereas here it is a question of taking them apart (deconstructing them, so to speak) we ought to make our way back upstream against the current, retrace our path and proceeding from one figurative expression to another, arrive back at the root, the original primordial word for which all others are metaphors.” All trans. from *The Monkey Grammarian* by Helen Lane. Further citations will appear in the text.


4. Ibid.


6. “The dog, the street, the puddle: the light of three o’clock in the afternoon, a long time ago, on the cobblestones of a narrow street in a town in the Valley of Mexico, the body of a peasant dressed in white cotton work clothes lying in a pool of blood, the dog that is licking at it…”

7. “For primitive societies: the temporal archetype, the model of present and future, is the past. Not the recent past, but an immemorial past that is beyond all pasts, in the origin of the origin…. Social life is not historical, but rather ritual; it lies not in the fact of successive changes, but rather consists in the rhythmic repetition of an intemporal past.” Trans. mine.

8. “In a beyond that is not time but its negation” and “a reality beyond time and language.” Trans. mine.

9. “My phrase is a moment, the moment of fixity in the monologue of Zeno the Eleatic and Hui Shih ("I leave today for Yüeh and I arrive yesterday").”

11. “They were all walking through the centuries by way of the same path, the path that cancels out the distinction between one time and another, and unites the living with the dead. Following this path we leave tomorrow and arrive yesterday: today.”

12. “I was able to follow with childlike, amazed eyes the concrete progression of man in time such that it also simultaneously supposes and transcends the progression of time in man.”

13. “…one of the first phantoms of Mexico emanates from a giant candelabra cactus: from behind it springs a man pointing a rifle, his eyes on fire. No need to discuss that romantic image: centuries of oppression and insane misery have given it, on two occasions, a blinding reality. Nothing can stop that latent reality from waiting there; the apparent sleepiness of the desert expanses persistently nurtures it.”

14. “The best thing to do will be to choose the path to Galta, traverse it again (invent it as I traverse it), and without realizing it, almost imperceptibly, go to the end—without being concerned about what "going to the end" means….”

15. “fixity (always, never, almost always, almost never, etc.) is momentary (always, never, almost always, almost never, etc.)”

16. “In the face of the emptiness that its name conjures up I feel the same perplexity as when confronted with its hilltops leveled off by centuries of wind and its yellowish plains on which, during the long months of drought, when the heat pulverizes the rocks and the sky looks as though it will crack like the earth, the dust clouds rise.”


18. “Fiction and history always support each other wonderfully.”

19. “Diego, my dear friend, I understand your opinion so well and confess that if we were seeing things from the same point of view you would be able to follow me to the heart of my resistance.”

20. “You [Mexicans] possess the lost secret—which we Europeans desperately seek—of this innate sense of poetry and art as it should be, as it must be: made by everyone, for everyone.”

21. “I should like to speak with the sadhu, but he does not understand my language and I do not speak his. Hence I limit myself to sharing his tea, his bhang, and his tranquility from time to time. What does he think of me, I wonder? Perhaps he is now asking himself the same question, if perchance he thinks of me at all.”

22. “Yet the pilgrims knew something that I did not know: the sound of human syllables was simply one more noise amid other noises of that afternoon. A different sound, yet one identical to the screams of the monkeys, the cries of the parakeets, and the roar of the wind. To know this was to reconcile oneself with time, to reconcile all times with all other times.”

23. These represent Paz’s, Alazraki’s and Weinberger’s classifications for the piece, respectively.

ABSTRACTS

With little more pretext than the words: “lo mejor será escoger el camino de Galta,” Octavio Paz begins one of his most compelling and perplexing works: "El mono gramático." Published originally in French in 1972, the text appears to be a travelogue from Paz’s time in India. But with its meticulous descriptions of Indian landscapes and an astute first person narration, the text winds like a rarely traveled path through metapoetic explorations. This paper considers "El mono gramático" within the tradition of several Surrealist texts-Andre Breton’s "Souvenir du
Mexique,” among them—that narrate the confrontation with the Other in the context of a spiritual revelation. By situating this inquisition of language within the contemplation of an exotic landscape, Paz achieves what the cultural critic James Clifford would call “a modern ethnography of conjunctures.”


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