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## **NAFTA as Rupture and Communion: Neoliberalism in the Poetic Imagination of Octavio Paz**

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### *Introduction*

Designed to integrate the economies of Mexico, the United States, and Canada by eliminating regulations that hindered the cross-border mobility of capital, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1994. For Mexico, the treaty would crown the previous six years of President Carlos Salinas' radical market reforms which, building on those of his predecessor Miguel de la Madrid, had fundamentally restructured the country's economy through privatizations and the deregulation of key industries. Buoyed already by broad public support, Salinas' rightwing legislation was nevertheless injected with a crucial dose of cultural legitimation when Mexico's most celebrated writer, the Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, enthusiastically endorsed it in the days leading up to its enactment. In a late December 1993 interview in *The New Yorker*, Paz adds with his poet's voice a contemplative and even epic tenor to the official optimism surrounding the technocratic treaty:

NAFTA will be important for Mexicans because it is a chance finally to be modern. We have failed to be modern for centuries. We only started trying to be modern at the end of the eighteenth century, and our conscious model of modernity has tended to be the United States. This is the first time in the

histories of our two nations that we are going to be in some way partners with each other [...]. Three words define the United States: 'new,' 'youth,' 'future.' The future is the great common thread tying together Americans. In Mexico, we are obsessed by the past, rather oppressed by the past. Perhaps, after NAFTA, this form of oppression will begin to be lifted. (57-58)

Critics on the Left have been quick to attribute Paz's support for Mexican neoliberalism to an increasingly reactionary tilt in his later years. Yet, the poet argued that bold market reforms like NAFTA could usher in the authentic democratic reform long overdue in a country stifled by a history of patrimonialism. Nevertheless, the language he articulates in *The New Yorker* suggests a justification more profound than ideology or a historically informed calculation. Of the poet's controversial forays into Mexican politics, Yvon Grenier notes that "what Paz proposes [...] is the import of art into politics, [...] not the aestheticization of politics but rather the process by which political thought derives from a reflection on the art, without subjugating one to the other" (20). His endorsement of NAFTA, then, follows the logic of a Romantic vision of reality stemming from his decades-long meditation on poetry and in which an individual might transcend her condition of solitude through rupture and communion.

For Paz, NAFTA offered Mexico the possibility to overcome its historical solitude—uneven development, peripheral status, corruption, and authoritarianism, according to a Eurocentric perspective—through a critique of and rupture with its past of patrimonialism and the discovery of itself as a democratic and modern nation in fusion with the Other, the United States. Borrowing from the poet's Marxist lexicon on the nature of radical critique, to descend "hasta las raíces" (*El laberinto de la soledad* 52) of his endorsement of NAFTA requires an examination of his thought that goes deeper than ideological bashing. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to understand how Paz's Romantic vision of reality coincided with a desire to see Mexico modernize on its own terms, precisely at a moment in history—"the end of history," for the least visionary of rightwing ideologues (Fukuyama)—when too many saw unfettered capitalism as the last remaining path to development.

To support the thesis that Paz's endorsement of neoliberalism in general, and NAFTA in particular, followed the logic of his long-elaborated poetic vision, this essay will be organized according to the following structure. It will begin with a brief commentary on the accusations of conservatism leveled against Paz from the Left, which, while understandable, ultimately fail to explain his support for *salinismo*. This will be followed by an overview of some of the dynamics driving Mexico's political and intellectual debate at the time of NAFTA's enactment. Such an overview will provide

necessary context for the poet's endorsement while revealing why it remained flawed at its foundation. The essay will then explore the notions of solitude, rupture, and communion as developed by Paz over decades in elaborating his Romantic vision for transcendence. The essay will conclude by demonstrating how Paz applied his vision to NAFTA, through which Mexico could exercise critical thought, democracy, and economic integration with the United States in its effort to finally be modern. Finally, the "Postscript" will raise additional questions, both about Paz's endorsement of NAFTA and the nature of his legacy two decades later.

#### *Accusations of Conservatism*

On the surface and as reflected in the essays he collected in *Pequeña crónica de grandes días* (1990), Paz's support for neoliberalism followed his reading of Mexico's recent political and economic history. Romanticizing the standard conservative talking point whereby market liberalization could lead to political reform, the poet placed a certain faith in what he understood as neoliberalism's promise to Mexico: the democratization of a political and economic system shackled by one-party rule and bureaucratic heavy-handedness ever since the dust of the Mexican Revolution had settled in the 1930s. As he notes in 1990, "la reforma económica" spurred by Salinas' privatizations would "devolver a la sociedad la iniciativa económica, limitar el estatismo y, en consecuencia, la proliferación burocrática" (*Pequeña crónica* 59).

Paz also justified his support for neoliberalism by pointing to current geopolitics. In a rapidly shifting world order following the Soviet Union's collapse, regional political and economic partnerships appeared to offer the most peaceful of possible routes out of the Cold War. Furthermore, the US version of market capitalism had proven more dynamic than statism. Accordingly, Paz read in the market integration sanctioned by NAFTA a compelling roadmap for Mexico to follow on its troubled historical march toward modernity.<sup>1</sup>

To the exasperation of many on the Mexican Left, however, Paz had uncritically supported Salinas since 1988, when the *priista* defeated his leftist opponent Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in a presidential election widely contested as fraudulent. In 1990, for example, the poet wrote glowingly of Salinas' "claridad" in expounding his "principios" of just governance to the Mexican people (*Pequeña crónica* 68). For those

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Paz's defense of *salinismo* and his conjectures on Mexico's position in post-Soviet geopolitics, see "México: modernidad y patrimonialismo," "América: ¿comunidad o coto redondo?", and "Panamá y otros palenques" in *Pequeña crónica de grandes días*.

opposed to Salinas, Paz's apparent coziness with the regime represented a renegeing on the intellectual rigor with which he had fashioned his identity as one of Mexico's fiercest critics of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). His 1968 resignation as ambassador to India in protest of his government's massacre of students demanding democratic reform at Tlatelolco, for example, had "placed him in the mold of a leftwing dissident" and, while that was "a position to which he had never aspired," his responses to Salinas' policies were consequently "deemed betrayals of his 'former self'" (Brewster 201). According to Enrique González Rojo, writing of Paz's neoliberal sympathies in 1990, "Es una pena, a decir verdad, que un escritor de la envergadura de Octavio Paz deje de lado sus memorables apologías de la función crítica del intelectual y se haga cómplice de un gobierno que [atropella] los intereses económicos del pueblo y la soberanía de la nación" (20).

For some, Paz's toeing of the official neoliberal line confirmed the long-held suspicions of ideological conservatism of which he had been accused on various occasions and to different degrees ever since his initial foray into politics during the Spanish Civil War initiated a lifelong compulsion to dissent from leftist orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup> Referring to neoliberalism's penchant for privileging the interests of big business over those of the working and middle classes, González Rojo opined that "Paz no es derechista por oponerse al estatismo, sino que lo es por defender, como la derecha estatista, puntos de vista, prácticas e ideales antipopulares" (26). More recently, Rafael Lemus has argued that, after 1968, Paz "es cada vez más conservador;" by the 1980s, "su liberalismo termina por coincidir con el neoliberalismo de los funcionarios en el poder y deviene, por carambola, pensamiento hegemónico" (2014).

According to Enrique Krauze, on the other hand, "decir que Octavio Paz fue un hombre de derechas [por apoyar al neoliberalismo] es una barbaridad" (*El País*, 2 de diciembre de 2014). First, as Krauze notes, Paz would soon express regret for having placed his hopes for a more democratic Mexico in a corporatist program spearheaded by a government whose corruption and disdain for transparency quickly grew too apparent to ignore ("A la búsqueda" 10).<sup>3</sup> And second, according to Krauze, Paz remained until the end of his life "un crítico de la economía del mercado, de Estados

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<sup>2</sup> See Carlos Monsiváis' "Octavio Paz y la izquierda" (1999) for a concise history of Paz's relationship with the Left.

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Watt and Roberto Zepeda's *Drug War Mexico: Politics, Neoliberalism and Violence in the New Narcoeconomy* (2012) for a comprehensive account of the rampant graft in the Salinas government and the concomitant proliferation of drug trafficking and related violence in Mexico.

Unidos, un crítico de los regímenes militares” (*Excelsior*, 2 de abril de 2014). As late as 1994, for example, Paz decried the destructiveness of “la alianza de la técnica y el espíritu del lucro del régimen capitalista” (Peralta 164). Nevertheless, Lemus dismisses as a morally pretentious and hollow exercise in late-life “*self-fashioning*” such denunciations of market capitalism, which Paz made while simultaneously supporting the political forces that enabled its most extreme expression in Mexico.

To bridge the gap between such apparently irreconcilable readings of Paz’s neoliberalism and, more broadly, for any discussion of his political thought, Maarten Van Delden’s objective observation that “conflict and contradiction characterize Paz’s work as much or more than heroic lucidity or simple opportunism” (140) must be assumed as a starting point. No matter how repugnant for the Left, Paz’s sympathy for neoliberalism was the result of his own effort to “elaborar un nuevo pensamiento político” that, in overcoming “la caducidad de los términos ‘izquierda y derecha,’” salvages “las visiones sobre el hombre y la sociedad que nos han dejado nuestros grandes poetas” (Peralta 166).

Accepting the possibility of this link can free critics of the compulsion to compartmentalize the complex thought of a man who defied political labels throughout his life: “No quiero ni puedo definirme,” Paz declared in 1994. “No sé cómo podría hacerlo” (165). While his endorsement of neoliberalism aligned with the free market fundamentalism of the Salinas regime, Paz arrived at his position via extra-ideological means. Therefore, critics attempting to grasp the controversy of his neoliberal proclivities would do well to shift focus to a broader debate on the merits, and especially the dangers, of an artist-intellectual with wide public appeal and political weight applying an abstract and idealized interpretation of reality to matters of concrete politics and socioeconomics. As Paz once freely admitted: “no soy perito en esa materia” (*Posdata* 61).

#### *Neoliberalism: The Debate in Mexico*

With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of really existing communism, the parameters suddenly narrowed for national debates on sustainable economic and political development in the Global South. As Soviet-style statism no longer offered a viable model, the governments and economists of many countries looked to the free market capitalism of the United States as an imitable path to growth. By endorsing NAFTA, Paz threw his cultural capital behind the increasingly

emboldened forces of Mexican neoliberalism as the country negotiated its immediate future in the emerging geopolitical landscape.

Writing in the year preceding its enactment, Jorge Castañeda noted that NAFTA would ratify a century of intimate economic ties through which Mexico had committed between sixty and ninety percent of foreign trade to the United States (*La casa por la ventana* 14). Not only was some version of ratification inevitable—especially in a post-Cold War global order increasingly predicated on regional economic and political integration—, but NAFTA itself was lauded by the Mexican public. As Carlos Fuentes notes, Salinas left office in 1994 riding a seventy-five percent public approval rating with the treaty as his crowning achievement (75). Such a number suggest that the majority of Mexicans, like Paz, placed their hopes in the fresh start promised by the free market.

NAFTA capped the series of reforms implemented in Mexico in the 1980s ostensibly to reverse the effects of a crippling debt crisis resulting from a plunge in oil prices that had left the country reeling. By opening Mexico to direct foreign investment through the elimination of trade tariffs with the United States and Canada, and by privatizing public holdings, NAFTA would foster competition in the lagging industrial and agricultural sectors. The intended results of such competition included export diversification, more jobs, higher wages, and a reduction of poverty (Villarreal and Fergusson). Free trade being, in theory, a positive-sum game wherein all parties involved grow prosperous together as opposed to at one another's expense, NAFTA would eventually help narrow wealth inequality between the United States and Mexico (Fuentes 160).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as the United States sought economic and political integration with its North American counterparts to strengthen its position vis-à-vis emerging blocs of power in Europe and Asia, Salinas gambled that "Mexico's best opportunity lay in having at least a foot [...] in one of these blocs" (163). By entering NAFTA, Salinas demonstrated his faith in the interests of transnational capital to determine Mexico's participation in the global economy.

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<sup>4</sup> Countering the optimism of NAFTA's proponents, several analyses since 1994 have traced Mexico's widening wealth gap, its lackluster agricultural and industrial productivity, and the declining material wellbeing of its labor force to policies set forth by the treaty. See, for example, *Public Citizen's* 2014 report "NAFTA's 20-Year Legacy and the Fate of the Trans-Pacific Partnership," Nathaniel Parish Flannery's 2013 investigation in *Forbes* "What's the Real Story with Modern Mexico's Middle Class?", and Christian Stracke's 2003 article in *World Policy Journal* "Mexico: The Sick Man of NAFTA."

In *El debate político e intelectual en México* (1993), Jaime Sánchez Susarrey explains that, by the 1980s, Mexican political discourse had shifted from a fixation on social revolution to questions of democracy and state patrimonialism. The traditional Left generally equated national sovereignty with state intervention in the development of internal markets and the protection of vulnerable sectors of the economy from an antagonistic and impersonal market. They insisted in patriotic terms that the nationalization of private interests—the enduring legacy of President Lázaro Cárdenas’ nationalization of the oil industry in the 1930s—constituted “una conquista de la nación sobre la economía” (58). Liberals and neoliberals, on the other hand, countered that nationalizations were demagogic acts furthering the anti-democratic nature of the Mexican power structure in which the president enjoyed unchecked strength. They argued that only through the shrinking away of the state in economic matters and the correlative elimination of trade barriers could Mexico stimulate its markets and insert itself in a rapidly globalizing international economy.

While the debate surrounding Mexican neoliberalism coincided with the heyday of Reaganite supply-side economics, Salinas had begun to sow the seeds for his program of reform-from-above in a 1974 article published, not so coincidentally, in the Paz-edited journal *Plural*. In “Tríptico de la dependencia,” Salinas laments Mexico’s repeated failures to modernize. Successive governments, he argues, relied too heavily on foreign capital while prioritizing “estabilidad política” over domestic commercial stimulation, erroneously hoping that the former would lead to the latter. For Salinas the inverse was true: a political system could stabilize only after the economy was left to thrive by the designs of the free market (26-30).

Considering Paz’s career-long fixation on the ideal of democracy, Salinas’ preference for the term “estabilidad política,” and not “democracia,” as the outcome of economic growth renders the poet’s enthusiasm for neoliberalism questionable. In *Posdata* (1970), for example, Paz asserts that, “sin democracia, el desarrollo económico carece de sentido” (30). Two years before Salinas’ *Plural* article, Paz noted in the same publication that many of Mexico’s historical ills had resulted precisely from a tradition of economic modernization at the expense of democratic reform, magnified, for example, during Cárdenas’ tenure (“México: presente y futuro” 4). And as late as 1990, he argued that, “sin una reforma democrática, la de la economía será imposible” (*Pequeña crónica* 64).

Paz’s hope for the democratization of Mexico through market reform, then, remained flawed at its foundation for two fundamental reasons. First, the notion of

democracy figures nowhere in the governing political forces' theoretical lexicon pertaining to their economic policies, as evidenced in Salinas' 1974 article. And second, those same political forces had demonstrated a naked disdain for one of the core pillars of democracy when they spurned free and fair elections in their ascent to power. As former President de la Madrid confirms in his memoir, the PRI declared Salinas President despite clear evidence of victory for his main rival. The Party justified such an unprecedented usurping of democratic norms with the dubious claim that the electronic ballot counting system "había caído" on election night 1988 (*Cambio de rumba* 815-816).

Shortly before NAFTA's ratification, Castañeda noted that a trade pact was the inevitable outcome of more than a century of intimate economic links. But such inevitability was only applicable at the abstract level; the actual shape NAFTA took was anything but predestined. Rather, its radically anti-national character, according to Castañeda, was enabled by a propaganda campaign that, in bad faith, presented the Mexican public with the need to choose between unregulated free trade and autarchy. For Castañeda, however,

la verdadera elección que se le presenta al país consiste en escoger entre el Acuerdo ya negociado, es decir, un Acuerdo de derecha, de corte neoliberal y republicano, y un convenio de otra naturaleza, más bien socialdemócrata, con una fuerte dosis de regulación y de planeación, inspirado en lo que sería un pacto social progresista de la nueva América del Norte. (*La casa por la ventana* 16)<sup>5</sup>

The government's need to present Mexicans with the contrived choice between NAFTA and the status quo reflected "the artificial nature of the free market [in the Mexican context], which in the case of NAFTA was conceived by and for elite business interests" (Watt and Zepeda 124). Far from fostering a trickle-down effect, let alone a revitalized democracy, "Salinas' privatization of the banks, telecommunications and broadcasting" would instead make "an elite circle of supporters extremely wealthy" (110).

In *La otra voz* (1990), Paz had declared with a hint of moral urgency that, upon the collapse of authoritarian communism, "[ha] llegado, al fin, la hora de comenzar una

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<sup>5</sup> Castañeda has since modified his view of NAFTA. While quick to point out some of the treaty's failures—Mexico's inability to diversify its foreign trade, the country's poor annual growth rate of less than 3% and its continued dependence on US markets—he applauds the fact that by 2008 "Mexico had become one of the most commercially open economies in the world, where imports plus exports over GDP reached 55%, twice the US number" (*Mañana Forever?* 156-169).

reforma radical, más sabia y humana, de las sociedades capitalistas liberales” (126). Considering this and Castañeda’s warnings against the anti-national nature of NAFTA, one has to wonder not only why Paz believed he had to choose between neoliberalism and autarchy, but also why he would put so much faith in the version of NAFTA as drawn up by Salinas and his circle of technocrats. In this context, the flawed nature of Paz’s endorsement becomes even more glaring when considering his belief that, in times of political crisis, writers maintain the moral responsibility as social and political critics to “limpiar el idioma y extirpar la ponzoña de la retórica oficial” (*Posdata* 77). Nevertheless, an examination of Paz’s worldview suggests that his endorsement of NAFTA was informed by deeper questions as to what it meant to be modern and how the individual might achieve transcendence over a base condition of solitude.

*Solitude, Rupture, and Communion: A Romantic Vision for Transcendence, from Poetry to History*

At the age of twenty-nine in 1943, Paz published a manifesto-like essay titled “Poesía de soledad y poesía de comunión” in which he defines poetry, among other ways, as “una expresión de lo absoluto o de la desgarrada tentativa para llegar a él” (*Obras completas* 237). Likening poetry to religion precisely for its capacity to operate in the realm of the sacred, Paz writes that both enterprises “tienden a la comunión; las dos parten de la soledad e intentan, mediante el alimento sagrado, romper la soledad y devolver al hombre su inocencia” (237). The poet associates communion with a lost but retrievable innocence and frames it as a form of transcendence over a starting point of solitude, accessible only after a rupture takes place. Paz then offers a totalizing vision of poetry: “entre estos dos polos [...] de soledad y comunión, se mueve toda poesía” (243).

If, according to Xavier Ledesma Rodríguez, “Paz perceived, thought, critiqued and wrote to his world from poetry,” from which he was able to “visualize other meanings, other ways of explaining all reality” (232, 234-235), then Enrico Mario Santí is correct to observe that “soledad y comunión serán, así, dos polos de una percepción única tanto del mundo como del ser, tanto del yo como de su circunstancia” (141). As “poesía e identidad Mexicana habían sido temas consustanciales” from the beginning of his literary trajectory (Santí 141), Paz naturally extends his poetic vision to the topic of *mexicanidad*, most famously in 1950 in *El laberinto de la soledad*, a tour de force on national historical identity that Anthony Stanton regards as “one of the few classic texts of modern Mexican literature” (1).

There, Paz writes that “esa dialéctica de soledad y comunión [...] parece presidir toda nuestra vida histórica” (*El laberinto* 159), and “Soledad y comunión [...] siguen siendo los dos extremos que devoran al mexicano” (175). And between these extremes as they pertain to the national situation, *la ruptura* functions as both an agent of historical change and a precursor to transcendence: “Nuestra historia independiente [...] es ruptura y búsqueda. Ruptura con la tradición, con la Forma. Y búsqueda de una nueva Forma, capaz de contener todas nuestras particularidades y abierta al porvenir” (177). Distilled to its most abstract terms, Paz’s logic reads all of Mexican historical reality—like “toda poesía”—as a fraught drive from solitude to communion punctuated by a series of ruptures.

Paz wrote *El laberinto de la soledad* in the aftermath of World War II while living in Paris, where existentialist sobriety weighed heavily on intellectual discourse. With his solemn reflections on the nature of solitude from early in the text, Paz appears eager to claim a Sartrean anguish reminiscent of *Nausea* (1938) as his guiding tone: “El sentimiento de soledad [...] no es una ilusión [...] sino la expresión de un hecho real: somos, de verdad, distintos. Y, de verdad, estamos solos,” he writes in the book’s opening essay (*El laberinto* 51). For Paz, a subject’s complicity in deepening her own sense of alienation is a particularly devastating effect of the natural condition of solitude: “nos encerramos en nosotros mismos, hacemos más profunda y exacerbada la conciencia de todo lo que nos separa, nos aísla o nos distingue” (50). And following an analysis inspired by the critical legacies of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in which he mines Mexican history for the roots of the neuroses that haunt national character, Paz effectively binds the Mexican problem of being to that of universal man: “La soledad,” he writes, “es el fondo último de la condición humana” (200).

The apparent darkness of a worldview predicated on such a maxim is quickly lightened, however, with the poet’s subsequent mention of “el poder redentor de la soledad” as the second half of what he terms “la dialéctica de la soledad,” conceived in religious terminology: “La soledad es una pena, esto es, una condena y una expiación. Es un castigo, pero también una promesa del fin de nuestro exilio. Toda vida está habitada por esta dialéctica” (200-201). For Christopher Domínguez Michael, “Paz, en el medio siglo, aparece como optimista” (182), perhaps one result of his friendship at the time with the surrealist André Breton, whose “gallant optimism” stood in “sharp contrast to the prevailing stoicism of the postwar existentialist philosophy that dominated [Paris’] literary scene” (Balakian 237, 238). In fact, Paz’s insistence that a promise of transcendence lay embedded in the anguish of solitude bears striking

resemblance to Breton's ability to identify hope in despair. In *Arcanum 17*, published in 1945, Breton writes, "One has to have gone to the bottom of human grief, to have discovered its strange capacities, in order to salute with the same limitless gift of self what is worth living for" (88). As punishment and promise, solitude functions for Paz as the central tension of the human condition. It is the individual subject's response to that universal circumstance, however, that will largely determine her destiny going forward.

Paz then identifies the notions of rupture and communion as the corresponding means by which the individual can attempt to fulfill the promise at the heart of the dialectic of solitude: "Hay en la vida de cada hombre una serie de períodos que son también rupturas y reuniones, separaciones y reconciliaciones. *Cada una de estas etapas es una tentativa por trascender nuestra soledad*, seguida por inmersiones en ambientes extraños" (*El laberinto* 206) (emphasis added). Earlier in the text, he applies similar language and logic to the history of Mexico, which he reads as a series of traumatic breaks with, and redemptive returns to, its authentic traditions, symbolized in the gendered violence of the Conquest or the cathartic explosion of the Revolution: "El mexicano y la mexicanidad se definen como ruptura y negación. Y, asimismo, como búsqueda, como voluntad por trascender ese estado de exilio. En suma, como viva conciencia de la soledad, histórica y personal" (107).

Just as he conceives *la soledad* as "castigo" and "promesa," Paz regards *la ruptura* in dialectical terms, whereby such opposites as "negación" and "búsqueda" reconcile to evoke the emancipatory potential of the act itself, while also pointing to the agency required of the subject. Paz's understanding of *la ruptura* in *El laberinto de la soledad* calls to mind the process known in psychoanalysis as "separation-individuation," whereby the consolidation of a child's autonomy depends on detachment from the mother (Mahler et al. 3-4). As he notes when discussing the liberal constitution of 1857 as a negation of Mexico's indigenous, *mestizo*, Catholic, and colonial traditions, "la Reforma es la gran ruptura con la Madre. Esta separación era un acto fatal y necesario, porque *toda vida verdaderamente autónoma se inicia como ruptura con la familia y el pasado*" (*El laberinto* 107) (emphasis added). (Embedded also in the above quote is another dialectical portrayal of *la ruptura* as "fatal y necesario," which resonates with the terms of his poetic theory of erotic communion as an instant when life and death unite, as will be seen below.) Along the line of rupture as determination of the self, the poet further claims, "cada vez que intentamos expresarnos, necesitamos romper con nosotros mismos" (77).

Twenty-four years later and as part of a meditation on the history of modern poetry, Paz builds on his notion of *la ruptura* as an agent of self-determination. In *Los hijos del limo* (1974), he frames the act in terms of its fundamentally modern nature for its reliance on critique, the intellectual endeavor *par excellence* in the age of reason. From Romanticism through the avant-garde, rupture resulting from critique—or “la destrucción del vínculo que nos une al pasado” (15)—is the essential link between poetic generations. The modernity of a given poem and the generation to which it pertains depends precisely on the fact of its creation as a conscious negation of, and break with, the aesthetic ideals of the immediate past. Based on such a negation and the consequent affirmation of something different, Paz understands poetic rupture as inherently revolutionary because it proposes to transform the very standards of beauty of its day. In this vein, and echoing the dialectical logic observed in *El laberinto de la soledad*, Paz defines artistic modernity as “una suerte de autodestrucción creadora” (*Los hijos* 18). He then elaborates his vision of the radical project of *la ruptura* with language that will resonate with that of his endorsement of NAFTA in *The New Yorker* twenty years later:

[...] lo nuevo no es exactamente lo moderno, salvo si es portador de la doble carga explosiva: ser negación del pasado y ser afirmación de algo distinto. Ese algo [...] es ajeno y extraño a la tradición reinante [...]. No solo es lo diferente sino lo que se opone a los gustos tradicionales: extrañeza polémica, oposición activa. Lo nuevo nos seduce no por nuevo sino por distinto y lo distinto es la negación, el cuchillo que parte en dos al tiempo: antes y ahora. (18-19)

Maneuvering freely between a general philosophic outlook, an analysis of Mexican historical identity, and a meditation on the history of modern poetry, Paz displays a remarkable fluidity of critical thought in defining the concept of *la ruptura*. Such fluidity, in turn, renders all the more plausible the idea that his endorsement of a specific piece of socio-economic legislation could follow a logic that was fundamentally non-political.

Finally, *la comunión* with an Other represents for Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad* the ultimate resolution to a condition of solitude exacerbated by the violence of rupture: “La culpa puede desaparecer, la herida cicatrizar, el exilio resolverse en comunión” (87). Such a resolution ultimately depends on the individual subject’s discovery of self through contact with the Other: “El hombre es el único ser que se siente solo y el único que es búsqueda de otro. Su naturaleza [...] consiste en un aspirar a realizarse en otro” (200). Interestingly, the language of his definition of man’s nature as aspiration for union with an Other echoes that of his definition of love as “un anhelo de fusión, de olvido, de disolución del ser en lo *otro*” in “Poesía de soledad y poesía de comunión”

(*Obras completas* 235) (emphasis in the original). Such a correspondence suggests that Paz's take on *la comunión* remains tied to an attraction—not unlike that of psychoanalysis and surrealism—to the more taboo domains of the human experience, which he defines in conjunction as the other “mitad del hombre: ésa que se expresa en los mitos, la comunión, el festín, el sueño, el erotismo” (*El laberinto* 140).

Celebrating the purifying nature of the Mexican *fiesta* in *El laberinto de la soledad*, for example, Paz writes that “los mexicanos, antiguos ó modernos, creen en la comunión y en la fiesta; no hay salud sin contacto” (54). And echoing the association between communion and a lost innocence that he had posited in defining his guiding dialectic in “Poesía de soledad y poesía de comunión,” he suggests that “la Fiesta mexicana no es nada más un regreso a un estado original de indiferenciación y libertad” (*El laberinto* 76). In his essay from 1943, Paz also writes of the spiritually redemptive potential of erotic communion: “En lo alto de ese contacto y en la profundidad de ese vértigo el hombre y la mujer tocan lo absoluto, el reino en donde los contrarios se reconcilian y la vida y la muerte pactan en unos labios que se funden” (*Obras completas* 238). Predictably, Paz's faith in the reconciliation of opposites through such unmitigated human intimacy is rooted in his understanding of poetry, and particularly his fascination with the Romantic idea of “analogía,” which conceives “al mundo como ritmo: todo se corresponde porque todo ritma y rima” (*Los hijos* 95).

For the Romantics, according to Paz, the notion of analogy remained fundamental to their view of the world as a system of corresponding signs and symbols. Just as a poem is a conjunction of equivalents where rhyme and alliteration are echoes and rhythms are reflections, everything in the world finds its double. The word *como* rules in the analogic system of poetry, reconciling differences and bringing opposing forces into communion (100). Inevitably, the Romantic belief in universal analogy circles back to the erotic, as Paz notes with his usual impulse to frame in dialectical terms: “los cuerpos y las almas se unen y separan regidos por las mismas leyes de atracción y repulsión que gobiernan las conjunciones y disyunciones de los astros y de las sustancias materiales” (101).

By applying his understanding of the poetic and erotic laws of attraction and repulsion to Mexico's socio-political situation at the end of the Cold War, Paz assumes the nineteenth-century French utopist Charles Fourier's belief that desire functions as the natural link between men in a world governed by coercion and lies: “para Fourier, cambiar la sociedad significa liberarla de los obstáculos que impiden la operación de las leyes de la atracción apasionada” (*Los hijos* 102). The elimination of certain obstacles to

clear the way for a natural process of communion, then, represents the final stage required to transcend the condition of solitude. In 1994, Paz saw in NAFTA an opening to such liberation.

One further note regarding Paz's conception of *la comunión* in *El laberinto de la soledad* speaks to the anti-dogmatic nature of his thought in 1950 and throughout his life. At one moment in the text, Paz modifies his assertion to emphasize the subject's *attempt* at communion, and not communion itself, as the key to transcending solitude: "[la] soledad se resuelve en tentativa de comunión" (159). However miniscule, such a distinction half a century prior to his endorsement of NAFTA might help account for the diction of uncertainty he employs when referring to the treaty's potential in *The New Yorker*: NAFTA offers "a *chance* finally to be modern;" Mexico and the United States "are going to be *in some way* partners with each other;" "Perhaps after NAFTA, [the oppression of the past] will begin to be lifted." In effect, Paz's endorsement is an acknowledgement that NAFTA represents a "tentativa"—pregnant with the possibility of failure—more so than a surefire pathway to transcendence.

*NAFTA as Rupture and Communion: Towards Mexican Modernity*

Paz read Mexican history as a long series of ruptures and unions "regido por el ritmo—o la dialéctica—de lo cerrado y lo abierto, de la soledad y la comunión" (*Itinerario* 31). Each successive rupture and union resulted from "el sentirse solo, escindido, y el desear reunirse con los otros" (30). The Conquest, for example, signified a violent rupture with pre-Columbian traditions and resulted in historical isolation, only to be followed by the conversion and union of the natives to the universal faith of Christianity. Likewise, the Mexican Revolution fits the paradigm: if its liberalism was a break with Mexico's Hispanic and indigenous traditions, its agrarian revolt was a reconciliation with Mexico's past of communal landholding. Paz's endorsement of NAFTA also corresponds to such a reading of history: the market-fetishizing free-trade agreement at once represented a rupture with the tradition of patrimonialism that isolated Mexico from the modern world, and a communion, both with itself through the practice of democracy and with the United States through market integration.

The reasoning behind Paz's endorsement of NAFTA in *The New Yorker* can be applied directly to the three-pronged formula for transcendence at the heart of his poetic worldview. By lamenting Mexico's failure "to be modern for centuries," for example, Paz identifies, in Eurocentric historical terms, the source of *la soledad* that his country might overcome. His hope that, "after NAFTA," Mexico might free itself from

the oppression of its past for something “new” corresponds to the “antes y ahora” in his definition of *la ruptura* in *Los hijos del limo*. And his insistence on a partnership with the United States recalls the idea of *la comunión*. Based on conditions in Mexico and around the world in the early 1990s, Paz believed that his country was ready to discover an authentic form of modernity that would deliver it from its long sentence in historical solitude.

For Paz, the modernity that had eluded Mexico for centuries assumed as its foundation the double and complementary tradition of critical thought and political democracy (*Posdata* 96). While he conceived of critical thought as an act of morality that uproots the false absolutes of the governing elites and denounces their abuses, he defined political democracy as the civilized coexistence of “millones de desconocidos” who freely and responsibly decide matters of public interest (*Itinerario* 108, 129-130). Mexico’s solitude at the end of the twentieth century, then, resulted precisely from the repeated suffocation of these vital impulses at different stages throughout national history.

In 1990 the poet traced Mexico’s failure to modernize to the persistent ineffectiveness of governing elites in properly negotiating the tension between progress and tradition. In “México: modernidad y tradición,” he writes:

Nunca he creído que la modernidad consista en renegar de la tradición sino en usarla de un modo creador. La historia de México está llena de modernizadores entusiastas [...]. La falla de muchos de ellos consistió en que echaron por la borda las tradiciones y copiaron sin discernimiento las novedades de fuera. Perdieron el pasado y también el futuro. Modernizar no es copiar sino adaptar; injertar y no transplantar. Es una operación creadora, hecha de conservación, imitación e invención. La relación entre modernidad y tradición ha sido y es capital en la historia de México. [...]. Es el *leitmotiv* de nuestra historia, del siglo XVIII a nuestros días. Hoy es el centro del debate político. (*Pequeña crónica* 57-58).

He first explores this tension in detail in *El laberinto de la soledad*, relying on the trope of the mask to highlight the inauthenticity of many of Mexico’s attempts to modernize. There he meditates on the psychological and social fallout of the successive impositions of foreign versions of modernity at the expense of Mexican historical realities. Such impositions include that of Catholicism on the natives during the Conquest, that of European liberalism in the drafting of the 1857 Constitution, and that of French positivism as a justification for widening social inequality under Porfirio Díaz’s capitalist regime. For ordinary Mexicans, the fallout included political subordination, entrenched poverty, and the explosive impulse toward rebellion represented by the Revolution of

1910. For the Mexican state, it meant political authoritarianism and economic patrimonialism. All together, it added up to a nation stunted in its historical development and increasingly walled up in a self-made labyrinth of solitude.

In *Posdata*, Paz argues that “la imposición de modelos avanzados de desarrollo a sociedades arcaicas tanto como la aceleración forzada del proceso, explican la institución de regímenes de excepción” (96). Mexico’s version of a state of exception would manifest in the authoritarianism of the party that assumed power following the Revolution. In the aftermath of the struggle, the initial function of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, then known as the Partido Revolucionario Nacional, was to “reducir los choques entre las facciones y someter a los levantiscos” (48), and its program of repression would reach a bloody climax at Tlatelolco in 1968. For Paz, such state violence was the tragic but inevitable outcome of the tension at the heart of any revolutionary endeavor, whereby critique drives the initial spirit of revolt but is immediately rendered intolerable upon the triumph of the revolutionary forces (*Pequeña crónica* 103). The symbolism of the PRI’s authoritarianism remains blatantly inscribed in the contradiction of terms that forms its name.

Furthermore, according to the poet, as the Party consolidated its political monopoly, the *presidencialismo* of its internal hierarchy soon infected other sectors of Mexican society, including the economy. While Cárdenas’ nationalizations initially strengthened the public sector, the economic model of the “estado propietario” eventually decayed: “La planificación y el monopolio estatal son dos grilletos que no deja andar a la economía” (*Pequeña crónica* 21). Paz cites waste and bureaucratic corruption as both the products of economic statism and the reasons for the dismal social conditions besetting Mexico.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, the poet observed a disheartening persistence of certain social, economic, and political realities that prevented Mexico from joining the more developed nations of the world at the banquet of modernity. In an essay from 1990, he identifies among the country’s more pressing problems “las desigualdades, la quiebra de la educación, el excesivo crecimiento demográfico y su doble consecuencia, la emigración hacia los Estados Unidos y el hacinamiento en la ciudad de México—castigo de nuestro secular centralismo—, la salud, la contaminación del aire y el agua” (*Pequeña crónica* 59). Resulting from Mexico’s repeated failures to modernize, these were the ultimate symptoms of what he had earlier labeled “una modernidad desconcertante” (*Posdata* 71), a designation that preceded by some eighteen years Beatriz Sarlo’s more widely-cited term “modernidad periférica” (1988).

By the end of the Cold War, Mexico's historical solitude—its continued existence on the periphery of modernity—was acute. At precisely this moment, however, Paz harnessed the optimism he had articulated in 1950 through his belief in the redemptive promise of solitude and, in the depths of Mexico's entrenched socioeconomic and political despair, observed a reason for hope. Following several years of neoliberal reforms, he saw a Mexican civil society ready to forge a path away from the stifling tradition of patrimonialism. Salinas' high approval ratings from 1994 suggest that Paz's hope was based, at least to a degree, in reality: "Somos testigos de una mutación en las actitudes vitales de los mexicanos. No es un cambio de ideas, creencias o mentalidad sino de algo más profundo: la voluntad [...]. La gente reclama la iniciativa y afirma su manera propia de ser" (*Pequeña crónica* 76). Offering even more reason for optimism, the critical thought and democracy required of modernity would depend precisely on such "voluntad" and "iniciativa." For Paz, the moment for Mexican modernity had arrived. To achieve this end, Mexico would have to undergo an act of self-determinative rupture followed by communion with itself and the Other.

While rupture and communion formed the two halves of Paz's formula for transcendence over solitude, critical thought and democracy constituted those of his formula for modernity. As the first halves of these distinct formulas, rupture and critique are explicitly linked in Paz's worldview. As noted above, the poet placed critique at the heart of the modern tradition of rupture. In *Los hijos del limo* he elaborates on this point, noting that, "Por una parte, [la tradición moderna] es una crítica del pasado, una crítica de la tradición; por la otra, es una negativa, repetida una y otra vez a lo largo de los dos últimos siglos, por fundar una tradición en el único principio inmune a la crítica, ya que se confunde con ella misma: el cambio, la historia" (25).

The path toward modernity in the early 1990s would begin with a critical look at and negation of Mexico's immediate political and economic past of inefficient and corrupt state protectionism. In "México: modernidad y patrimonialismo," Paz undertakes, with a triumphalist tone perhaps too dismissive of the Left, a systematic critique of the "Estado propietario." He frames his critique as an example for the rest of Mexico's intellectual class, which he beckons to join him in critical discourse: "La modernización no busca sólo partidarios: también busca interlocutores" (*Pequeña crónica* 78). Placing much of the onus for social change on the intellectuals who serve as "la conciencia crítica de las sociedades," Paz notes that "Los tiempos que vienen nos enfrentan a grandes tareas. El derrumbe del socialismo burocrático vuelve imperativa la crítica de la sociedad" (77).

Beyond the need for critique among intellectuals to effect social attitudes, however, Paz recognizes that political change ultimately remains in the hands of the state—“el proyecto de modernización viene del gobierno” (78)—and that a program of critique, if it is to matter in practical terms, must come from above. He recognizes the value of Salinas’ market reforms precisely because they followed a reasoned critique of Mexico’s tradition of patrimonialism through which the President “rompió con la liturgia oficial”: “Salinas distinguió entre el Estado propietario y el Estado justo. Su crítica del primero fue teórica e histórica” (68). For Paz, Mexican neoliberalism represented a rupture with the past because it had been fundamentally conceived as critique.

Opening Mexican markets to the interests of transnational capital, NAFTA would negate the state’s jealous protection of the economy. As rupture implies both “negación” and “afirmación,” the repudiation of the past was to be followed by the pursuit of a future based not just on the new and different but, recalling his language in *Los hijos del limo*, the “oposición activa” of that past. Reflecting the Cold War binarism from which he could not escape, Paz’s faith in *salinismo*, despite his own simultaneous calls for a more humane capitalism upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, indicates that he viewed the unregulated free market as the clear opposite of *estatismo* to be affirmed. And because “la modernidad nunca es ella misma: siempre es otra” (*Los hijos* 16) (emphasis in the original), the simple act of ratifying NAFTA—regardless of its potential socioeconomic fallout—would constitute a necessary first step toward Mexican modernity.

Here, one might recall Castañeda’s warning against the government’s propaganda campaign in presenting Mexicans with the false choice between NAFTA and autarchy. For Paz, it was not fundamentally a question of the merits of rival economic models. Rather, it was one of life or death, “fatal y necesario,” as he framed the notion of rupture in *El laberinto de la soledad*, where he also wrote that “No hay salida, excepto por la ruptura” (126). Further still, it was a moment of Shakespearean proportions: “No sé si la modernidad es una bendición, una maldición o las dos cosas. Sé que es un destino: si México quiere ser, tendrá que ser moderno” (*Pequeña crónica* 57). And if Mexico wanted to be modern, it would have to be everything it had never been: in this case, a society of limited government and free economic enterprise. To his poet’s eye, what could be more modern than a subject’s exertion of autonomy through a rupture that had followed critique? For its negation of Mexico’s past of *estatismo* and its

affirmation of a future ruled by the unregulated free market, NAFTA functioned perfectly as “el cuchillo que parte en dos al tiempo: antes y ahora.”

Mexican patrimonialism, according to Paz, was the double inheritance of Spanish colonial absolutism and the pre-Columbian popular faith in the *jefe* (“México: presente y futuro” 4). The word “patrimonialismo” derives from *pater*, Latin for father and, as noted, Paz had philosophized in *El laberinto de la soledad* that “toda vida verdaderamente autónoma se inicia como ruptura con la familia y el pasado.” Thus, by breaking free from the yoke of political and economic patrimonialism through the rupture promised by NAFTA, Mexico could exert itself as a nation. An exercise in critique, separation, individuation, and self-determination, Mexico’s rupture with its past was vital to its future, and would clear space for the final step toward transcendence: communion.

The communion Paz envisioned for Mexico through NAFTA was twofold. First, as with rupture and critique, communion and democracy resonate as the second halves of his distinct formulas. Democracy, of course, implies public contact, the health of which the poet had highlighted in *El laberinto de la soledad* when discussing the *fiesta* as an example of communion’s redemptive nature. The notions of democracy and *fiesta* in Paz’s worldview can be justifiably conflated, and this conflation rests on their shared feature of public performativity.

In *El laberinto de la soledad*, the poet is explicit in underscoring the theatricality of the *fiesta*: “El teatro y la épica son también fiestas, ceremonias. En la representación teatral [...] el tiempo ordinario deja de fluir, cede el sitio al tiempo original. Gracias a la participación, ese tiempo [...] coincide con nuestro tiempo interior, subjetivo” (214). Paz’s link between the *fiesta* and the theater relates to his understanding of the role of time in each. Specifically, his language describing the theater’s effect in suspending time echoes that of his description of the *fiesta*, in which “el tiempo deja de ser sucesión y vuelve a ser lo que fue, y es, originalmente: un presente en donde pasado y futuro al fin se reconcilian” (73).

On the performativity of politics, Hannah Arendt remains an authority for her theory of “power and the space of appearance” in *The Human Condition* (1958). There, she writes that “the theater is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into life” (188). Specifically discussing democracy in 1993, Paz channels Arendt: “Siempre hubo una relación entre el teatro y la política: en los dos la acción se despliega en la forma de la representación y del símbolo” (*Itinerario* 131). Going further, Paz characterizes democracy as a public performance in which

se exige como requisito previo al voto de los ciudadanos el debate libre y en público. Gracias a la discusión al aire libre el ciudadano se entera de los asuntos sobre los que debe votar y pesa el pro y el contra. [...]. En las democracias antiguas los métodos de persuasión eran directos: los oradores hablaban ante el pueblo, exponían sus razones y hacían brillar sus planes y promesas. (130)

In 1950, Paz notes that, “El solitario mexicano ama las fiestas y las reuniones públicas. Todo es ocasión para reunirse” (*El laberinto* 72). Based on the context of the chapter in which the above-quoted statement appears, “las reuniones públicas” likely refer to the Mexican calendar’s many public religious rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations. But in light of Paz’s later definition of democracy as an exercise through which individuals unite in the public theater to express themselves within the collective, “las reuniones públicas” can just as easily constitute an example of Paz projecting an early desire for communion through democracy in the Mexican context.

In 1990, Paz wrote that “la necesidad de una reforma democrática [...] se ha convertido desde hace años en una exigencia popular” and, thanks to Salinas’ reforms, “el país comienza a cambiar, no solamente por la acción del gobierno sino porque la sociedad Mexicana recobra más y más iniciativa” (*Pequeña crónica* 60). Thus, the Mexican’s love for “las reuniones públicas” that Paz observed in 1950 finds correspondence in the public’s rediscovered “iniciativa” and “voluntad” as a result of neoliberalism. That initiative and will, Paz hopes, will drive Mexicans to act on their long-held desire for public communion by inspiring the necessary ingredient for “el debate libre y en público”: participation. In another passage from *El laberinto de la soledad* Paz hints at the democratic nature of communion, and “democracia” can easily replace “fiesta”:

Todos forman parte de la Fiesta, todos se disuelven en su torbellino. Cualquiera que sea su índole, su carácter, su significado, la Fiesta es participación. Este rasgo la distingue finalmente de otros fenómenos y ceremonias: laica o religiosa, orgía o saturnal, la Fiesta es un hecho social basado en la activa participación de los asistentes. (77).

Through civic participation in the democratic process, as in the *fiesta*, Mexicans could transcend their solitude to commune with each other. Practicing public and democratic debate, Mexico might finally discover itself as a truly modern society.

Beyond the economic priorities of NAFTA, strengthened ties with the United States would bring Mexico into closer contact with the world’s strongest democracy. If the first form of communion the treaty might inspire would manifest in the discovery of and participation in authentic political democracy within Mexico, the second would be consummated through Mexico’s integration with the United States, “el arquetipo de

la modernidad” (*Tiempo nublado* 52). Discussing his personal process of self-interrogation in *El laberinto de la soledad*, Paz writes that, “cada vez que me inclinaba sobre la vida norteamericana [...] me encontraba con mi imagen interrogante” (46). In 1994, he desires for Mexico to similarly discover the modern version of itself through contact with “la más perfecta expresión de la modernidad” (*Tiempo nublado* 36).

As with the life-or-death approach he applies to Mexico’s need to rupture with its past, Paz sees communion with the United States as the only viable option in a binary quandary: “una posible y todavía nebulosa Comunidad Americana” represents “una posibilidad que podemos aceptar o rechazar. Se trata, literalmente, de una contraposición, es decir, de escoger entre dos cosas distintas y contradictorias. Una es la asociación; la otra es la soledad histórica” (56). As Paz had noted optimistically in *El laberinto de la soledad*, solitude was “una promesa de comunión” (87). Without the willful agency of the solitary subject, however, such a promise remains unfulfilled and, at this juncture in its history, Mexico could not ignore the opportunity that NAFTA offered for immediate communion with the most powerful country in the world.

Paz’s faith in integration as a path to modernity remains tied to his adherence to both the Romantic ideal of *analogía* and Fourier’s notion that ultimate liberation depends on the removal of those barriers inhibiting the natural process of “atracción apasionada.” At the end of the Cold War, *analogía* for Paz meant locating Mexico’s reflection in modernity by bridging the gap with the United States. Just as the word *como* reconciles differences in the Romantic system of analogy, NAFTA would bring the historically opposed forces of Mexico and the United States into communion in a rapidly globalizing international economy. Furthermore, NAFTA’s elimination of trade barriers would signify the removal of those obstacles impeding Mexico’s desire for modernity.

For Paz, the United States’ greatest inherent contradiction was its status as both empire and democracy. Such a contradiction lays bare the laws of attraction and repulsion that guided Mexico’s relationship with its neighbor for over a century: “los profesionales del antiamericanismo, que en México son legión, olvidan tercamente que los Estados Unidos son una gran democracia” (*Pequeña crónica* 54). If North American imperialism had wreaked incalculable havoc on the Mexican psyche, a program of integration between the two countries would help Mexico overcome old wounds: “Asimilar el pasado, inclusive las derrotas, no es olvidarlo: es trascenderlo” (51).

The poet’s hope for such a resolution between often antagonistic partners recalls his faith in erotic communion, in which “los contrarios se reconcilian” when “el

hombre y la mujer tocan lo absoluto,” as he wrote in “Poesía de soledad y poesía de comunión.” Unsurprisingly, Paz likens market integration between the two countries to a romantic relationship, furthering the logic whereby NAFTA might clear the way for Mexico to act on its impulses of attraction: “En las alianzas, como en los amores y las amistades, se corre siempre un riesgo; sin embargo hay ocasiones en que aceptar ese riesgo es menos peligroso que rechazarlo. Ésta es una de ellas” (*Pequeña crónica* 53).

Paz’s use of love as a simile here underscores the Romantic vision he applied to Mexico’s ability, through NAFTA, to discover itself through “fusión” and “disolución del ser en *lo otro*.” As noted, he considers the reciprocal nature of rupture and communion “una tentativa por trascender nuestra soledad, seguida por inmersiones en ambientes extraños.” Following the rupture and communion inscribed in NAFTA, the strange environs in which Mexico would immerse correlate to the very otherness of the modernity represented by the United States as compared to Mexico’s own more familiar “modernidad desconcertante.”

Paz notes that the United States and Mexico each represents a different reflection of Western civilization, a particular result of distinct forms of conquest in the New World. While England and Spain had shared a similar intellectual culture with roots in ancient Greece and Rome, each bequeathed to its colonies the legacies of the Reformation and the Counterreformation, respectively. If the former contributed directly to the development of modern Anglo-Saxon democracy in North America, the latter maintained a less accepting disposition to the sociopolitical currents of modernity: “El contraste con Inglaterra no podía ser mas señalado. La historia de España y la de sus antiguas colonias, desde el siglo XVI, es la de nuestras ambiguas relaciones—atracción y repulsión—con la edad moderna. Ahora mismo, en el crepúsculo de la modernidad, no acabamos de ser modernos” (*Tiempo nublado* 143-44). Despite the countries’ historical divergences, Paz saw their respective trajectories as two sides of the same coin of modernity. NAFTA represented a closing of the circle, a return to beginnings, a communion of lost siblings. In *Posdata*, he writes that,

Si el hombre es doble y triple, también lo son las civilizaciones y las sociedades. Cada pueblo sostiene un dialogo con un interlocutor invisible que es, simultáneamente, el mismo y el otro, su doble. ¿Su doble? ¿Cuál es el original y cuál el fantasma? Como en la banda de Moebius, no hay exterior ni interior y la otredad no está allá, fuera, sino aquí, dentro: la otredad es nosotros mismos. (103).

As the historical Other, the United States held up the mirror through which Mexico could see its own reflection. In communion through NAFTA, Mexico would finally transcend its solitude to discover its own version of modernity.

*Postscript*

More than two decades later, the legacy of NAFTA tells a less Romantic story. Contrary to the optimistic forecasts of the treaty's proponents, for example, the inequality rate in Mexico remains one of the highest in the world ("NAFTA at 20" 23). One reason for sustained inequality is that provisions in the treaty facilitating the influx of cheap North American foodstuffs into Mexican markets have beset Mexico's rural sector with increased poverty and the dislocation of its population (20). To significant and varying degrees, this dislocation has driven factory wages down, fueled the violence of Mexico's drug war, and contributed to a surge of emigration from Mexico to the United States (21-22). A 2008 report drafted for the Pentagon suggested that, due to "the sustained assault and pressure by criminal gangs and drug cartels" on the Mexican government, law enforcement, and judicial infrastructure, Mexico "bear[s] consideration for a rapid and sudden collapse" ("Joint Operating Environment" 36). In addition to the socioeconomic failures resulting from NAFTA's "tentativa de comuni3n," Mexican democracy has also suffered. Since 2000 and as fallout of the country's drug war, there have been more than one hundred murders and disappearances of journalists, arbiters *par excellence* of "el debate libre y en p3blico" in any free society (*The Nation*, 10 May, 2017). Rather than disappear, the conditions of Mexico's historical solitude that Paz observed in 1990 seem to have deepened due precisely to the consequences of NAFTA.

NAFTA's troubling legacy raises important questions about Paz's endorsement. For example, considering his belief that "Modernizar no es copiar sino adaptar; injertar y no transplantar," how did Paz conceive of neoliberalism as a synthesis of Mexican tradition and modernity? In other words, how did the importation of unfettered capitalism through such policies as NAFTA constitute anything other than an imitation of the North American version of modernity? Applying the logic of his Romantic vision to NAFTA, Paz seems to have been blinded to his own very legitimate questions about the nature of an ideal modernization process that respects national historical realities. At the risk of downplaying his sincere desire for Mexican modernization, Paz's projection of the Romantic ideal of love, in which a partner "may constitute a comprehensive answer to the unspoken questions of existence" (de Botton

6), onto Mexico's socioeconomic and political relationship with the United States casts a shadow of shocking naiveté on a man widely celebrated for his intelligence. At the very least, Paz's misguided and public endorsement of NAFTA should serve as an example for other artists eager to enter the political fray by drawing on their creative impulses over reason to guide their worldviews.

While Paz's neoliberalism deserves critique, it does not discount his simultaneous calls for a new political morality, especially in capitalist societies. In 1990 he wrote of the need for "un pensamiento político que recoja la tradición liberal y lo que está vivo aún, las aspiraciones socialistas. Tal vez la conciencia ecológica—el redescubrimiento de nuestra fraternidad con el universo—podría ser el punto de partida de una nueva filosofía política" (*Pequeña crónica* 78).

Such thought deserves acute reconsideration today, not only because of the conditions of crisis in Mexico, but also for the political chaos in Washington, D.C. unleashed by the election of President Donald Trump. Exploiting an ethno-nationalist and reactionary populism, Trump has played into Anglo fears of the Mexican Other in criticizing NAFTA as a bad deal for American workers while vowing to renegotiate it. In light of the treaty's uncertain fate, as well as Trump's shortsighted decision to pull the United States out of the Paris Climate Accord, progressives working toward sustainable social democracy should return to this aspect Paz's thought from the end of the Cold War, when he articulates an incipient grasp of the links between environmentalism and socialism. It is there where his more useful—and liberating—legacy can be found, overshadowed for too long by his flawed enthusiasm for neoliberalism, including NAFTA.

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