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OCTAVIO PAZ, 100 YEARS

This past February the Mexican Chamber of Deputies declared that 2014 will be commemorated as the Year of Octavio Paz. One of Latin America's most prominent poets, he is one of six Hispanic American writers to have won the Nobel Prize for Literature: Gabriela Mistral (Chile, 1945), Miguel Angel Asturias (Guatemala, 1967), Pablo Neruda (Chile, 1971), Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia, 1982), Octavio Paz (Mexico, 1990), Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru, 2010).

Upon reading the congressional declaration, it reminded me that 20 years ago exactly I graduated from the same Facultad de Filosofía y Letras where Paz was a student 60 years previously. For homework we, in turn, studied a number of his books and articles beginning with the celebrated study *Laberinto de la Soledad* [Labyrinth of Solitude](1950). I went to retrieve the books from the shelf, to look through them again and read the still legible margin notes. I had recently started classes when news came of Mexico's first Nobel Prize in Letters, and remember the commotion and excitement on campus.

Among his Latin American colleagues, Paz attended more than almost any other poet to the problems of verbal art (aside from his creative work, the poetry itself), writing extensively on central questions in poetics and literary analysis. He followed closely the writings of Roman Jakobson and cited them often, engaging him directly on important concepts under discussion then and still not well understood today. For this reason, it's timely that those of us who do research in the different sub-fields of linguistics recover some of the discussion from his essays and books. The study of literature from a cognitive science perspective, the analysis of literary-related discourse, and the underlying competence structures that subserve poetic ability in particular have expanded greatly in recent years, contributing to our understanding of the design features of the faculty of language ("broadly" viewed). Considering the reflections of active creative

writers on these (for researchers) empirical questions can serve to enrich hypotheses and methods of investigation because writers like Octavio Paz take very seriously the study of the historical and philosophical antecedents to current work, and bring it forward for us to take into account. One case in point is the recuperation of the contribution of the early Russian Formalists to a scientific approach for the study of language and language-related competencies in the domain of literary creation (and more broadly, verbal artistic sensibility and discourse processing of works of literature).

For our purposes in this summary invitation to his theoretical reflection on poetics, three studies stand out as especially pertinent: *El Arco y la Lira* (1956), *Corriente Alterna* (1967) and *Claude Lévi-Strauss o el Nuevo Festín de Esopo* (1984).[1] These weren't the only occasions in which the problems of poetic language were addressed. But they serve as a fair introduction to the main themes, four of which I will touch on (there are others that I won't get to):

(1) Origins of poetic sensibility, and essential properties of language use for aesthetic purpose,
(2) Sonorous (oral language) properties of poetry and its relation to music, especially aspects of rhythm,
(3) How poetry expresses meaning linguistically and how to understand the prosaic-artistic distinction in general, and
(4) The concept of transgression/defamiliarization of language in verbal art.

Thinking about foundational and essential aspects of language (and by extension, poetic uses of language), in a review of Rousseau and Breton, Paz (1967: 66—68) begins by recognizing the exceptionality of human language, an exceptional achievement that at the same time flows from and is part of the natural world. This thread of speculation on origins again finds wide interest among linguists today who have taken up the debate from the early evolutionary biologists, to mention just one of the scientific and philosophical precursors to the current discussion. The complexity of language is testimony to the qualitative advance over all the other natural expressive capacities. Thus, language finds itself at the frontier between nature and culture, with linguistics occupying

a point of union between the exact sciences and the human sciences, between cybernetics (in biological systems, and even beyond biology) and anthropology (1956: 31—34). Here the idea is introduced that poetic forms are closer to (depend more on) spoken language, and depend on aspects of language in its primitive emergence more generally. Orality was primary in the evolution of the poetic competencies, and therefore still characterizes the essential nature of poetry as a human mental capacity. For this reason, in the oral tradition, verse forms emerge spontaneously in the non-poetic genres, crossing over, when they do, into full-fledged poetic forms, an idea, by the way, discussed by Jakobson (1975) in his study of literary discourse in non-literate performers. Paz made this connection explicit, connecting the dots, so to speak, more clearly.

In *El Arco y la Lira* (1956) and in the review of the theories of Levi-Strauss (1984), we find an extensive treatment of sound pattern in poetry and its relationship to musical pattern. The link goes much deeper than simple inclusion of both poetry and music under the larger category of temporal art. Paz saw the beginnings of a convergence in our understanding of this link, evidenced in new developments in contemporary music and in a renaissance of oral poetry. At first glance paradoxical, the parallel (contact, overlap and sharing of resources) between poetry and music is based on the **extra-linguistic features** of music that poetry inherently exploits. Music is sometimes referred to as a kind of language, but this way of thinking about the comparison should be taken only metaphorically. Neither does music "transcend" language because music would have to in some sense "pass through" it and "go beyond." In contrast, poetry does transcend language (1984: 54) by recourse to (the "exploitation" of) extra-linguistic musical pattern. This patterning consists primarily in rhythm (of the non-prosaic kind). Such dependence of poetry on the vocal sonorous qualities (including but not restricted to rhythm, and we now could add: the grammatical features that are language-specific) makes verse "untranslatable" (p. 55). Surely intending this proposal not to be taken in the absolute sense (resorting to a figure of speech himself), the suggestion addresses the distinction between poetry and prose, revealed in this case in the problems of translation:

> The translation of a poem is always the creation of another poem; it is not a reproduction but rather a metaphor equivalent to the original…Touched by

> poetry, language is more completely language and, simultaneously, ceases to be language: it becomes poem. Object consisting of words, the poem enters into a region inaccessible to words: sense is dissolved; being and sensibility are the same" (p. 55).

As a way of summing up this idea, returning to an observation of Jakobson, the **poetic function** can be thought of in terms of "communication" of a kind where attention is allowed to temporarily and provisionally shift away from the dimensions of human emitter, receptor, content, context, and so forth, toward the message itself (1984: 53—67). This proposal is related to our third theme: How poetry expresses meaning. Another way to present this aspect of the idea of poetic function, for purposes of greater clarity, might be then to substitute "communication" with "expression and experience." Specifying the proposal here, Paz asserts that the core of a poem is the poetic phrase, and what constitutes its integral quality is not meaning but rhythmic pattern (1956: 51). As in musical phrasing, the poet creates verse passages by applying the "magnetic-like" forces of repelling (a rise in tension) and attraction. For example, rhythm (not an external "measure" imposed on the passive listener) participates in the provoking of expectation (rise in tension). Its resolution would then be what he had in mind in the idea: "force of attraction." All of the above in this section of *El Arco y la Lira* (pp. 49—67) leads to examining the fundamental distinction between the poetic and prosaic discourses.

As a way of getting into the problem of understanding the distinction between poetry and prose, Paz returns to the question of origins. Rhythm is not only among the most ancient elements of language, but plausibly it is a primitive antecedent (a hypothesis, parenthetically, that Darwin entertained in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*). Spontaneously present in all verbal expression, only in poetry is rhythm fully manifested; in prose it is present but non-essentially (p. 68). From this point of view, prose would be a late-emerging language genre in evolutionary/historical terms.

Here it is important to distinguish between rhythm and meter, the latter considered as a subset of the former: "At first, the boundary between one and the other appears undefined. Subsequently, meter crystalizes into fixed forms…Meter is measure that tends to diverge from language; rhythm never diverges from speech because it is

speech itself…Meters are historic, while rhythm is integral to [*se confunde con*] language itself " (70—72). The distinction is easier to hear in contemporary free verse. The rebellion against established styles can present itself as a revalorization of popular (traditional) poetic forms independent of the written domain, in this case perhaps forecasting the late-20th century international wave of hip-hop genres.

A unifying theme that runs through all three of the studies on poetics turns on the concept of defamiliarization, as presented most completely by Eichenbaum (1970[1926]) and Shklovski (1970[1917]), although, interestingly, Paz doesn't make reference to it directly. He introduces this concept (indirectly) by invoking the stark figurative portrayal that: "poetic creation begins as violence upon language" (1956: 36). After getting our attention, the idea of verbal art as based on transmutation and **making strange** is developed part by part. Ten years later, we understand "the [poet's] temptation to destroy language," by means of language, as an experiencing of wonder in "the no-meaning or the no less frightening unspeakable meaning" (1967: 74); that "poetry is the permanent struggle against signification" (p. 72). The Russian Futurists, early 20th century off-and-on collaborators of the Formalists, had already carried out this radical but important experiment (the controversial *zaum* poetry). For the author of *Alternating Current*, how meaning is expressed in poetry (denied, separated and broken up, dissolved and then reconstructed) is one of the main ways how obscurity and artful distortion can be achieved. In the last citation of Jakobson (1984: 61), the aesthetic purpose of undermining familiarity is explained. Artful effect, pleasure even, in part comes from being taken by the unexpected. A deviation, distortion or mutation holds the listener or reader's attention, even very briefly and in the absence of awareness – attention and awareness are not the same thing. This is the idea that Paz had in mind in the figure "violence upon language." The distortion that creates the unexpected break in processing has the effect of slowing down normally automatic perception. This is the intention of the artist whose purpose is to prompt reflection upon, appreciation of, or just attention to a form or pattern. The reflection, appreciation or attention might be directed to the form or pattern for itself, or in how the unexpected break in processing may interact with a pattern of meaning. Recall that this is our third theme. Analogous to the cycle of repulsion and attraction in which rhythm participates in the construction of verse lines, an

alternation between "separation" and "recovery (return)" marks the patterns of unexpected and expected (1956: 39). The slowing down, the moment of contemplation, recovery from a garden path, or surprise can occur at any level or in interaction among levels: phonological pattern, intonational contour, syntax, how meaning is expressed by words, phrases and constructions, and so on.

An implicit suggestion emerges in the three studies that is relevant to our interest in understanding literary language from the perspective of linguistic science. The suggestion consists in how the discussion on:

- the musical properties of rhythm, and
- meaning in poetry could be tied to
- the concept of defamiliarization,

a conceptual link that the Russian Formalists never had the opportunity to consider fully. The three studies only indirectly suggest this topic of further investigation. Linguists and other students in cognitive science will find the exposition in these books very different from what we are used to in the research reports we read. This is one good reason to spend some time with them. In addition, the observations of artists and practitioners, who work in the different realms of creative language use, are interesting because they are a source of new ways of thinking about hard problems.

Notes

1. Translations to English:
The Labyrinth of Solitude (1980) Random House
The Bow and the Lyre (2009) University of Texas Press
Alternating Current (1973) Viking
Claude Levi-Strauss: An Introduction (1970) Cornell University Press

2. Conversely, Vygotsky emphasized the qualities of prosaic/expository discourse, hallmark of academic literacy, precisely in how they **omit** the musical component of expression. Inner speech in the service of metacognition, planning of expository text, analysis, and so forth, strips these away even more deeply (pp. 136—139, 174—191).

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