

**A READING OF OCTAVIO PAZ'S
"HIMNO ENTRE RUINAS" IN LIGHT OF THE
GÓNGORA-SYMBOLIST PARALLEL**

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The revival of Góngora by vanguardist poets in the twentieth century was focused on the perception of a parallel between Góngora and the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé and his disciple, Paul Valéry. Early studies of the parallel cite the analogous positions the two poets occupied with respect to their literary heritage. Both produce a poetry of exhaustion, Góngora writing at the end of the Renaissance and Mallarmé writing after the decline of Romanticism (Milner 286). Various critics have cited technical similarities. By negating, by alluding, by cultivating figures of choice and doubt, in a context of what Beverley has seen as generic and teleological indeterminacy, Góngora achieves a primitive version of that evocative "hovering" or suspension of signification that is characteristic of a Mallarmean poem.

In a more fundamental sense the work of both poets is marked by a common, almost ascetic zeal to create a subjective vision which would attain the stature of the absolute¹. Both evince the same obsessive pattern of aspiration and failure, the same oscillation between the power and the impotence of the human mind and its language. Both create a poetry which is involuted in an effort to "name naming". While Góngora metaphorizes metaphor, Mallarmé seeks to name "fleur", that elusive flower absent from all bouquets. While Góngora employs the technique of self-reference to a lesser degree than does Mallarmé, both produce a poetry which is less concerned with any exoteric result than with its own process.

There are, of course, obvious differences between the two poets.

Góngora never approaches the Symbolists' attempt to escape the denotative function of language. Hugo Friedrich points out further differences. Góngora wrote for a specific class of readers who could, albeit with difficulty, decipher his poetry by referring to a tradition of mythology, symbolism, rhetoric, etc. Mallarmé, on the other hand, wrote for no actual reader, and his symbols are unique and self-sufficient (27). Perhaps the greatest difference between the two poets is their degree of historical consciousness. *Un coup de dés* is a self-conscious, explicit drama of the shipwreck and transposition of the poetic word, incorporating a modern appreciation of the role of chance in the universe, as well as an explicit effort to escape the confines of anthropomorphism in human thought. The *Soledades*, on the other hand, passively reflects the problems of modernity at their earliest stage, responding to the epistemological crisis of the breakdown of the Medieval and renaissance conception of a divinely ordered cosmos: pre-Kant, pre-modern physics. All this is merely another way of stating the obvious fact that the poems are three centuries apart; Mallarmé wrote with the benefit of greater historical experience. In sum, it would prove to be more accurate to view the relationship between Gongorism and Symbolism to be one of trajectory rather than one of comparison *per se*.

While it would be a mistake to consider the relationship between the two poets to be one of comparison, it would be equally mistaken to ignore the parallel. As Sánchez Robayna has pointed out, the parallel between the two poets has been realized creatively. Góngora was only successfully translatable into French after the appearance of Mallarmé's poetry (Pradal 279), and Ungaretti's translations of Góngora were mediated by his reading of Mallarmé.² To this I would add the obverse: Paz has admitted to his reliance on Gongorine language to translate Mallarmé into Spanish ("Stéphane Mallarmé" 25).

Paz's creative appropriation of the Góngora-Symbolist parallel goes beyond his work with translation. Perhaps one of the most interesting expressions of the creative use of the parallel occurs in his poem "Himno entre ruinas", where Paz uses allusions to Góngora's poetry to explore the problems of modernity and to mark a turning point in late

Symbolist poetics. In "Himno entre ruinas" Paz participates in what has come to be called the "neobaroque", incorporating elements of Spanish baroque literature, in this case Góngora's poetry, in order to express aesthetically the problems of the modern. Paz appropriates the topos of the contemplation of ruins, so popular during the baroque period, to offer a meditation on the progress of civilization. In this project he joins a long tradition of utopian poetry, where lamentation over ruins evokes the task of reconstructing a New Jerusalem, a new city of the sun, a future of harmony between humanity, its creations and nature.

"Himno entre ruinas" begins with an epigraph from Góngora 's Polifemo: "donde espumoso el mar siciliano...". Paz uses Góngora's allusion to the Sicilian coast, the site of the war of the Titans, to present a twentieth century landscape of destruction: Naples in ruins after World War II. The destructive potential of human reason which Góngora confronted in the seventeenth century has now come to a horrifying climax in the real spectre of the world's annihilation. Yet the reference to Góngora is not only a statement about the trajectory of human industry; it is also a statement about poetics. Civilization in ruin has produced a poetry of exhaustion, a solipsistic poetry of the mind. Out of the ruins of this poetry of the mind, out of the legacy of Góngora and his Symbolist descendants, Paz will announce a new lyric.

The first stanza begins with midday: Valéry's moment of aesthetic arrest, "Midi le juste". The mind is omnipotent, godlike, presiding over the creation of the world, the laying of the cosmic egg. There is no reality outside the self. This solipsism is identified as both Symbolist and Gongorine. If the the reference to midday is drawn from Valéry, the description of the setting, the boundary of land and sea, is an obvious imitation of the motif of the liminal in the Soledades. The play of mind in Góngora 's poem, his use of "transclemental imagery", is echoed in "un puñado de cabras es un rebano de piedras" or in the description of the trickling seawater as "araña deslumbrante". A glimpse of the pain beneath outer appearances is caught when the gongorine figure of the bleeding jewel surfaces: "la herida cárdena del monte resplandece". Already, the mind's creation is croding. Finally, as in *Le Cimetière*

marin, this privileged moment is decisively undermined by the entry of time; ruins, the memento mori appear⁴.

The second stanza shifts to the ruins of indigenous Mexican civilization, and with these, to the exhaustion of Mexican poetry: "guitaras roncadas". The Mexican lyric has self-destructed like Gongorine fireworks: "El canto mexicano estalla en un carajo / estrella de colores que se apaga". The poet eschews the addictive, escapist quality of the previous poetry and longs for a new, mythic function for the poetic word:

¿Qué yerba, qué agua de vida ha de darnos la vida,
donde desenterrar la palabra,
la proporción que rige al himno y al discurso,
al baile, a la ciudad, y a la balanza?

He seeks to discover a poetry that would reestablish order among the elements of civilization. He condemns the previous poetry for closing off such an integration. Paz, now alluding to Mallarmé,⁵ likens it to a dead star; all that remains of its moment of glory is a "piedra que nos cierra la puerta del contacto".

In the third stanza this "puerta del contacto" becomes the realm of the senses: "los ojos ven, las manos tocan". A list of sacramental objects follow ("uvas con gusto a resurrección", "vino, pan solar") together with objects associated with the female side of eros. The sacred is identified with the erotic; the road to mythic redemption is through otherness. A woman appears: "Desde lo alto de su morenía una isleña me mira...". Then the stanza shifts back again to a Valéryan mode; the solitary play of mind is reasserted in further allusions to *Le Cimetière marin*. Consciousness, "torres de sal", vies with communion.

In stanza four the image of "un mundo de muertos en vida" gains full strength. Paz extrapolates from the immediate situation of Naples in ruins in 1948 and depicts, in John Fein's words, "una visión post-apocalíptica" ("Himno" 168). The world has reached its terminal era, the shadow of war (Xirau, "Himno" 162) spreading over the landscape of post-nuclear cities. Góngora's Polifemo yawns over the ruins as men are dragged off by the handfuls; we witness the mechanical operation

of genocide. Through Góngora's giant, the monstrous potential of the free workings of the mind is evoked: Fuentes' "la imaginación cronófaga", Goya's painting of Saturn devouring his children. The end of time is announced in the flickering of the anemic sun; this dying star, as Xirau observes, is but a reminder of the first, luminous mythic sun ("Himno" 162).

In the fifth stanza Paz offers a positive response to this possibility of the end of time: the infinite expansion of the instant. Time can be consecrated, can acquire an eternal presence, in moments of communion between self and other (Paz, *El arco* 185-97). Midday, rather than being a sterile, motionless time of the mind (as in Valéry's "Midi le juste"), swells: "espiga henchida de minutos, / copa de eternidad". In Xirau's words, "El mediodía empieza a cobrar sentido porque deja de ser un mediodía ensimismado, una conciencia espejeante ("Himno" 163).

The sixth stanza describes one last return to the sterility of the mind with which the poem began. Thought freezes time, hovering godlike over the still water. An impasse is reached: "Y todo ha de parar en este chapoteo de aguas muertas?"; Rimbaud's *Le Bateau ivre* comes to mind. Indeed, as would be consistent with the entire tenor of the poem, this impasse is not only ontological but poetic. In John Fein's words, Paz is describing the moment in which "el poeta se ahoga en el lago de su propio esfuerzo vano" (168).

The final stanza is one of reconciliation. The poem has depicted a struggle (reinforced typographically [Xirau, "Himno" 159]) to create a new poetry of communion out of the legacy of the exhausted poetry of solitude.⁷ Reason is joined with passion; Apollinaire's "temps de la Raison ardent" (which served as an epigraph to the poem) has arrived. The life of the mind is now merged with the life of the body: "La inteligencia al fin encarna, / se reconcilian las dos mitades enemigas." The estrangement between self and other dissolves as "las puertas del contacto" open. As Fein notes, consciousness transcends the barrier of self-contemplation: "la conciencia-espejo se licúa" (169). The moment of communion surpasses temporal divisions; the dead star is transformed into a round, luminous orange whose segments are filled with the same

yellow sweetness. The poetic word is freed to evoke the plenitude of things outside a self-contained world of the mind.

Ramón Xirau has seen "Himno entre ruinas" as a watershed in Paz's poetry; with this poem, in Xirau's words, "Paz termina una primera época y comienza la de sus grandes poemas" ("Himno" 159). He has cited an allusion to Gorostiza's imagery in the poem (the "conciencia-espejo") and has called "Himno entre ruinas" "el más claro antecedente de *Blanco*" ("Himno" 163).¹⁰ Xirau's observations can be expanded. *Muerte sin fin* and *Blanco* can be identified with the "dos mitades enemigas" which divide "Himno entre ruinas". *Blanco* is a fully developed version of the ending of the poem, an elaboration of the new poetry of communion which Paz announces. Conversely, *Muerte sin fin* can be identified with the poetry of solitude, the poetry which Paz defines as both Symbolist and Gongorine. *Muerte sin fin*, as Paz alludes to it, can be seen to embody the Góngora-Symbolist parallel. While Gorostiza's poem contains few, if any, specific Gongorine allusions,¹¹ *Muerte sin fin*, in its portrayal of the crisis of Symbolist poetics, represents the trajectory of the aesthetic and epistemological crisis of early modernity explored in Góngora's masterwork, the *Soledades*.

Muerte sin fin typifies Góngora's poetics of exhaustion in its sterile quest for pure form, in its repeated failure to name the absolute, to transcend the inherent anthropomorphism of human thought and language. As in the *Soledades*, this failure gives rise to time predicaments, self-reflexivity, degradation of woman and the erotic, and to apocalyptic self-destruction. "Blanco" responds to this solipsistic and futile quest for the absolute with a new affirmation of the poetic word, an affirmation which is rooted in the function of language as a bridge between self and other.

In a new evaluation of time, space, and of the erotic which is influenced by Eastern thought, Paz finds a way to use the language of the self to get beyond the self, to undermine the inherent solipsism of language. If language stands as a mirror between self and the phenomenal world, Paz strips this mirror of its silver barrier, imparting to language, within the space of the poem, an ultimate transparency,

an intimation of presence. The ontological shipwreck of the modern, expressed in its earliest moment in Góngora's Baroque poetics and in its ultimate incarnation as Symbolism, is finally transcended in Paz's poetic space.

Paz's poem *Blanco*, in its response to the crisis of the modern, is able to transcend the impasse reached initially in the *Soledades* and later in Symbolist poetry. Yet *Blanco* remains equivocal. The search announced by "Himno entre ruinas", for "la proporción que rige al himno y al curso, / al baile, a la ciudad y a la balanza", as Paz implies in *El arco y la lira*, is ultimately beyond the scope of the written word. Harmony between humanity and its creations is the social goal of the future, and here I will acknowledge the possibilities for a socio-critical (Cros) and postcolonial reading of Paz, with all that that implies regarding the legacy of colonial gongorism (Beverley, "Del Lazarillo" 89, citing Concha)¹¹. Paz in the end embraces the gongorine sublime over the gongorine agonic. In Paz's poetry, a combination of myth, the idealization of indigenous culture, eastern spiritual beliefs and a variant of Western existentialism combine to compensate through art for what Mexican nationalism cannot resolve in social reality: what García Canclini has termed "modernism without modernization" (67-68), the literary expression of the institutionalization and stagnation of the Mexican revolution.

But if harmony between humanity, its creations and nature is a social goal beyond the province of art, poetry, the hymn amid the ruins, can still point the way. In our response as readers we can enjoy the poem announced by "Himno entre ruinas", *Blanco*, one of the great constellation poems after Mallarmé, as a kind of utopian meditation. As Paz wrote in *El mono gramático* (114), language is "[la] consecuencia (o la causa) de nuestro destierro del universo, significa la distancia entre las cosas y nosotros. También es nuestro recurso contra esa distancia" (Alazraki 184). This paradox of language informs the structure of Paz's poetic constellation, flashing in space. Paz announces the ultimate aspiration of the modern poet, who, out of the ontological shipwreck of the modern, a shipwreck heralded by Góngora and celebrated by Mallarmé,

generates a poem which dares to signal, for an instant, an intimation of wholeness, an "inmanencia de presencia" (*El arco* 284).

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NOTAS

¹ This may be what the early critic and poet Francis de Miomandre meant when he claimed, as translated by Alfonso Reyes (161), that "Ambos se hicieron un universo propio."

² Buxó, as cited in Sánchez, *Tres estudios* 84.

³ 28 Cf. especially, with the *Soledades*, II. 304: "de cabras estrellado", and II. 829: "sabandijas de cristal".

⁴ As Xirau, "Himno entre ruinas," 160, writes, "frente a la 180 soledad luminosa, la alteridad de la muerte en vida, frente a la eternidad fantástica, la alteración del tiempo."

⁵ Paz is implicitly referring to Mallarmé's image, "l'astre mùri des lendemains" (from his «Tombeau de Paul Verlaine»). He is simultaneously drawing on imagery from the *Soledades*, as my reference above to "Gongorine fireworks" is meant to suggest; Góngora's description of the bonfire (I.680-86) is also evoked. Like a fire whose source (the logs) also marked its death (they become the fire's tombstones), the poetic word of the "canto mexicano" dies at its inception.

⁶ As Xirau, "Himno" 163, writes of this stanza, "Río de tiempo sin sentido, la existencia pura regresa a la soledad, a la desesperanza, al ensimismamiento."

⁷ See Octavio Paz's essay on these two types of poetry: "Poesía de soledad y poesía de comunión," in *Las peras del olmo* 95-106.

⁸ Pezzoni, in Flores 250, also observes that "Himno entre ruinas" is the precursor of *Blanco*.

⁹ As Pezzoni in Flores 250, implies.

¹⁰ Rubín 198-204, briefly discusses the influence of Góngora's poetry on Gorostiza. Rubín states, "No cabe duda que Gorostiza se inspira en Góngora. El poeta mismo habla con entusiasmo de su admiración por la opulencia, la nobleza y la emoción del lenguaje gongorino (200)."

Rubín sees the relationship between Góngora and Gorostiza's poetry as essentially restricted to certain structural similarities (for example, the complication of syntax). However, as I have shown elsewhere, the parallel between their works is more fundamental.

¹¹ Beverley, *Del Lazarillo* 89, notes:

"A la pregunta de cómo el gongorismo ataeado y censurado como heterodoxo en España durante la vida de Góngora, llegan paradójicamente a ser el discurso estético oficializante de la colonia en el s. 17, podemos entonces responder: representa, en esencia, una nueva modalidad de colonialización por las letras en vez de las armas (aunque, por supuesto, éstas quedan en reserva)."

Citing Concha, *La literatura colonial* 46, he adds:

La memorización de largas tiradas de Góngora hacía que los alumnos coloniales, desde niños, se apartaren de sus circunstancias inmediatas para sumergirse, mediante el espejismo seductor de las palabras, en la distante patria metropolitana."

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