

PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS AND THE CONCEPT OF LITERARY ART IN MEXICO

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*This essay deals with two poetics of distinctly different traditions that arrived at the same concept of literary art, one in which the reader of, or listener to, a poem shares in the creative process with the poet. The first tradition I will examine is the that of the pre-Hispanic Mexican poets of the Cantares mexicanos and the 20th-century appropriation of their work by two of Mexico's most distinguished poets, Octavio Paz (1914–1998) and José Emilio Pacheco (1939–2014), both awarded the Premio Cervantes, and Paz, the Nobel Prize. The second part of this essay examines the contemporary Continental tradition of philosophical hermeneutics that began with Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2001) and culminated in the work of Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005). Although Heidegger is now well known among philosophers throughout the world, it should be noted that José Gaos of the National University of Mexico, an exile from Spain, completed the first translation of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* in 1951, more than a decade before the English and French translations appeared.*

I. The Mexican Tradition of Metaphorical Thinking

Nahuatl philosophy has been available in Spanish translations since the 1950s. Angel María Garibay (1892–1967) and Miguel León-Portilla (1926–) have given us excellent translations and extensive interpretations, such as *La filosofía Nahuatl estudiada en sus fuentes*, *El destino de la palabra*, and, in English, *The Language of Kings*.

Octavio Paz was the first major poet in Mexican literature to identify with his pre-Hispanic cultural legacy. He did much more than pay homage to the past; he wrote poetry imbued with the Nahuatl philosophy of the fifteenth century and developed a poetics with roots in the *Cantares mexicanos* (1965). Paz published the first edition of his collected poetry in 1960. The last of the five sections in that collection contains the poems he wrote between 1948 and 1957. These are the years when he studied the work of Garibay and León-Portilla. The section titled "*La estación violenta*" contains his poetic

appropriation of Nahuatl philosophy. The relevant poems are “*Himno entre ruinas*,” “*Máscaras del alba*,” “*Fuente*,” “*Repaso nocturno*,” “*Mutra*,” “*¿No hay salida?*,” “*El río*,” “*El cántaro roto*,” and the poem that is widely regarded as his masterpiece, “*Piedra de sol*.” First published in Mexico City by the *Fondo de Cultura Económica*, in an edition of 300 copies, later that year (1957), Paz made “*Piedra de sol*” the conclusion to his book, *Libertad bajo palabra* (1970).¹

In this essay, I propose to do a hermeneutic reading of the poem as a means of presenting Paz’s poetics. The lyric preface to the book indicates where he is going and where he is taking his reader: “*Invento al amigo que me inventa, mi semejante* [I invent my friend who invents me, my other].”² The I–other relationship is slowly developed in “*Piedra de sol*” as an ontological foundation: I am myself when I am you, my other. In the second part of this essay we will explore the philosophical concept of oneself as another with Paul Ricoeur’s philosophical hermeneutics.

“*Piedra de sol*” takes its name from the monolithic Aztec calendar stone; the poem has 584 verses, plus a coda, which repeats the first six verses. The number 584 corresponds to the days of the combined orbit of Venus and the Earth around the Sun. The Nahuatl people considered Venus as the representation of Quetzalcoatl, who was a Toltec king and reformer as well as a divinity subject to the main Aztec god, the Sun. In the estimation of distinguished critics like Ramón Xirau, Rachel Phillips, Carlos Magis and Jason Wilson, this poem, which has the structure of a quest for self-discovery, is the most important work of literature on the shelf in the Spanish language. I must add that it also sets forth the timeless poetics of Mexican culture.

My reading of the poem distinguishes twelve phases of the lyric voice’s search for himself. In my hermeneutic reading of parts of the poem, I propose to ask four questions: Who is speaking? Who is acting in the text? Whose story is being told? Who is responsible for the action? I will attempt to answer these questions by focussing on selected parts of the twelve sections of the poem. I will reserve my last comment for the six verses that begin and end the poem.

¹ Octavio Paz, *Libertad bajo palabra. Obra poética (1935–1957)* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1970). All poems in this essay are in my own translation.

² *Ibid.*, 10.

(1) Lines 7–15:

The calm unanimous green domain of a universe without life is full of prophecies and anticipations of the life that is to come. Birds figure markedly in opening this phase as omens of a lyric consciousness that for the moment is content to describe this empty universe:

*un caminar tranquilo
de estrella o primavera sin premura,
agua que con los párpados cerrados
mana todas las noches profecías
unánime presencia en oleaje,
ola tras ola hasta cubrirlo todo,
verde soberanía sin ocaso
como el deslumbramiento de las alas
cuando se abren en mitad del cielo*

the calm course
of stars or an unhurried Spring,
water with eyes closed welling over
brings forth prophecies all night long,
unanimous presence in a surge of waves,
wave after wave until all is covered,
green domain that knows no limit
like a blinding flash of wings
when they unfold in mid-sky

(2) Lines 24–28:

This short transitional second phase features the crucial entry of presence, which is at first only heard, but then imposes its gaze. A bird whose song turns the forest to stone points to a presence in Phase Two. At this early point in the poem, we have only enunciation and no action. The lyric voice presents a depersonalized description of an unlimited vastness with no life. The other questions of human interaction cannot be asked because, since there are no actors, there is as yet no action. Although the enunciating lyric voice is still depersonalized, it is significant that its first act is to gaze at what will emerge as the body of the female other.

*una presencia como un canto súbito,
como el viento cantando en el incendio,
una mirada que sostiene en vilo
al mundo con sus mares y sus montes
cuerpo de luz filtrada por un ágata*

a sudden presence like a burst of song,

like the wind singing in the fire
a gaze that holds the world and
all its seas and mountains hanging,
body of Light filtered through an agate

(3) Lines 29–34:

Phase Two continues in these lines, but now the gaze of the speaker is fully engaged with the body of the female other. This body has, however, brought much more than itself into view. The sensual world is now felt through the body of the female. The male gaze on the female body constitutes the imagined action of engagement by the male speaker with the material world; he is conscious of her body and then of his own body and the material world.

The lyric voice enters the poem as a first-person enunciation of himself. It is his own story in the making and he is enacting it through his enunciation. As the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor writes, “We must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form as a quest.”³

(4) Lines 35–41:

*voy entre galerías de sonidos,
fluyo entre las presencias resonantes,
voy por las transparencias como un ciego,
un reflejo me borra, nazco en otro,
oh bosque de pilares encantados,
bajo los arcos de la luz penetro
los corredores de un otoño diáfano*

I make my way through galleries of sound,
I flow among echoing presences
I move through transparencies like a blindman
a reflection erases me, I’m born in another
oh forest of enchanted pillars
through arches of light I penetrate
corridors of a diaphanous Fall

(5) Lines 42–51:

The lyric voice returns to the female body (see line 42) of Phase Three and now obsessively concentrates on her as his way of entry into the world; but he is still not able to reach self-constitution: “*Voy*

³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 52.

por tu cuerpo como por el mundo [I move through your body, like the world]." (line 42)

(6) Lines 52–74:

Slowly the female other becomes the earth mother, but the hummingbird of redemption burns in the very flames of his own sexual desire and ultimately the lyric voice fails in this first attempt to constitute himself. The story is now very much his own story and the lyric voice is now clearly the pilgrim in search of himself. The repeated failures will take their toll on the lyric voice, but they will also make him feel responsible for his failure.

(7) Lines 75–79:

The significant event in this phase is that the lyric voice has now gone beyond the elementary sexual gaze at the female other and has turned to the will to remember her, not one woman in particular, but any woman, in his search for the other.

*a la salida de mi frente busco,
busco sin encontrar, busco un instante,
un rostro de relámpago y tormenta
corriendo entre los árboles nocturnos
rostro de lluvia en un jardín a oscuras,*

at the threshold of my forehead, I search,
I search without finding, search for a moment,
a countenance of storm and lightning
racing through the trees of night
a countenance of rain in a darkened garden

The Nahuatl concept of countenance (the expression of selfhood) has now emerged, albeit as what is sought. The action verbs will begin to mount up, beginning with "I search" and ending with "I fall" because the countenance of the other cannot yet be found.

(8) Lines 504–508:

These lines represent the culmination of the search for an understanding of the self and its relation to the other. It is here that the dialectic of sameness and individuality comes to its explosive climax. The lyric voice asks:

*¿la vida, cuándo fue de veras nuestra?,
¿cuándo somos de veras lo que somos?,
bien mirado no somos, nunca somos*

*a solas sino vértigo y vacío,
muecas en el espejo, horror y vómito,*

when was life ever truly ours?
when are we ever what we are?
if we think about it we are not, we never are
more than vertigo and emptiness
gestures in a mirror, horror and vomit

The response to the lyric voice's own question is immediate: if we think about our own being, we are not, we never are, more than vertigo and emptiness.

(9) Lines 509–19:

*nunca la vida es nuestra, es de los otros,
la vida no es de nadie, todos somos
la vida—pan de sol para los otros,
los otros todos que nosotros somos—,
soy otro cuando soy, los actos míos
son más míos si son también de todos,
para que pueda ser he de ser otro,
salir de mí, buscarme entre los otros,
los otros que no son si yo no existo,
los otros que me dan plena existencia,
no soy, no hay yo, siempre somos nosotros*

life is never ours, it belongs to others,
life is no one's, we all are life
bread of the sun for others,
the others, all, that we are,
I am another when I am, my acts
are more mine if they are also the acts of everyone
in order to be, I must be another
leave myself, search for myself in others
the others that don't exist, if I don't exist,
the others that give me full existence,
I am not, there is no I, we are always us

The cumulative experience of our life, Paz is saying, following the Nahuatl *Cantares mexicanos*, shapes our human conscience, our countenance, but life also wears it down through adversity.

(10) Lines 572–84:

The final twelve lines of the poem move the plurality from the abstract realm where it has been hovering and bring it home to the Mexican people. The I, which is a we, wants to go on but cannot because of his prison beneath the earth that covers him until the sun stone is unearthed in the main plaza:

*Y el sol entraba a saco por mi frente,
despegaba mis párpados cerrados
desprendía mi ser de su envoltura,
me arrancaba de mí, me separaba
de mi bruto dormir siglos de piedra
y su magia de espejos revivia*

and the sun came bursting out on my forehead
it tore open my closed eyelids
cut loose my being from its enclosure
and pulled me out of myself to wake me
from this animal sleep and its centuries of stone
and the sun's magic of mirrors revived

The lyric self has been liberated from the I and has now awakened to “the sun's magic of mirrors” in the we who are the Mexican people, a living dialectic of pre-Hispanic and Hispanic cultures, and the coda repeats the poem's first six lines and consequently opens it again:

*un sauce de cristal, un chopo de agua,
un alto surtidor que el viento arquea,
un árbol bien plantado mas danzante,
un caminar de río que se curva,
avanza, retrocede, da un rodeo
y llega siempre*

a crystal willow, a poplar of water
a tall fountain the wind arches over,
a tree deep-rooted yet dancing
a course of a river that turns, moves on
doubles back and comes full circle
forever arriving

The open dialectic that is the space-time continuum of life is seen as process rather than static representation.

The Nahuatl concept of self was highly developed in philosophy and poetry in the fourteenth century and it was this legacy that Octavio Paz rediscovered in the 1950s. In 1960, he published his

collected poetry from 1935 to 1957. In the poems written between 1948 and 1957, there is overwhelming evidence of this turn to pre-Hispanic civilization in his poetry. At first, Paz only evokes the pre-Hispanic sites, as in "*Himno entre ruinas*," where the pyramids of Teotihuacan are mentioned, but then, in "*El cántaro roto*" the full pre-Hispanic influence is asserted.⁴ In the latter poem the lyric voice asks: Are the gods of corn, flowers, water and blood all dead? The lyric voice then points to man who falls, gets up again, eats dust and drags himself forward. "*El cántaro roto*" then anticipates "*Piedra de sol*": "*hay que desenterrar la palabra perdida, soñar hacia dentro y también hacia afuera* [one must disinter our lost word, dream toward the inside but also toward the outside]." (lines 129-30)

Paz only needs a clearly recognizable Mexican image on which to focus. The sculptured Aztec calendar brings all the elements together. It is disinterred at the end of the "*El cántaro roto*" poem and the last word of belonging, forever arriving, is rediscovered. Just what do I mean by the last word? I refer to pre-Hispanic poetry, which had always been there, always slightly covered over. Here are a few lines of these poets.

I quote Nezahualcóyotl (1402-1472) from the *Cantares mexicanos*:

Ye nonnocuiltonohua

*Ye nonnocuiltonohua
on nitepiltzin, Nezahualcoyotl.
Nichechico cozcatl,
In quetzalin patlahuac
ye nonicyximatin chalchihuitl
in tepilhuan!
Yxco nontlatlachia
nepapan quauhtlin, ocelotl...*

I Nezahualcoyotl
have the necklace
with the quetzal plumage
and from life I know
the jade stones
They are the princes my friends!
I look into their countenance
and from life I know the jade stones

⁴ Paz, *Libertad bajo palabra*, 232-36.

precious stones...⁵

The key phrase here is to “look into their countenance;” here the lyric voice contemplates his others, the knightly Orders of Eagle and Tiger, and, most of all, the jade stone of the soul.

The idea of countenance or soul can be clearly found in the *Cantares mexicanos*, in the poem “In xochitl, in cuicatl” by Ayocuan Cuetzpaltzin

*Yn zan cuel achitzincan tlalticpac,
¿Oc no iuhcan quenonamican?
¿Cuix oc pocohua?
¿Icniuhthua?
¿Aub yn amo Zanio nicon
tontiximatico in tlalticpac?*

Earth is the region of the fleeting moment
Is it also like in the other place where one goes?
Can one be happy there?
Are there friendships there?
Or is it only here on earth that we have got
to know our countenance?⁶

The poet values self-knowledge above all else and consequently finds that the primary value of life on earth is one’s ethical comportment.

Finally, I would also like to cite the poem, “*Antocnihuane, namechtetemohua*,” by the poet Xayacamach de Tizatlan (1451–1498?). The fourth stanza has an intertextual connection to the first stanzas of Paz’s “*Piedra de sol*,” especially with regard to the metaphor of the opening of wings and birdsong.

*Ay topan huitz
nitemoc, in nixopanquechol,
in tlalpan nacico, ninozozohua,
xochihuehuetitlan.
Nocuicehuallo tlalpan
on quiza.*

⁵ A. M. Garibay (ed.), *Poesía náhuatl: Cantares mexicanos*. Manuscrito de la Biblioteca Nacional de México. Paleografía (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1965), 58–59 (folio 16v), Miguel León Portilla, *Quince poetas del mundo náhuatl* (Mexico City: Editorial Diana, 1994), 111.

⁶ Garibay, *Poesía náhuatl*, folio 10r (see also Miguel León-Portilla, *Quince poetas del mundo náhuatl* (Mexico City: Editorial Diana, 1994), 247.

I come upon the people,
Bird of Spring, I have descended
I approach earth and extend my wings,
In the place of flowering vastness.
Over the land my song
Bursts forth and rises.⁷

Octavio Paz was the first major poet in Mexican literature to draw from pre-Hispanic sources directly. Paz makes reference in "*Piedra de sol*" to Coatlicue, the goddess of the serpent skirt, who as earth mother gives and takes life; the *colibrí* or hummingbird signifies the spirit of the warriors killed in the wars of Huitzilopochtli, the knightly order of the Eagles, and the Mexican Tiger or ocelot. However, beyond imagery, there is the Nahuatl philosophy of self-discipline and self-discovery in the flowering war. What Paz has added is a remarkable identification of self-other relationship as the tensional source of the Mexican people who are awakened from centuries of sleep to partake of their *mestizo* heritage—neither Aztec nor Spanish, but a union of these historical opposites.

Paz's greatest achievement in this, his masterpiece, is what Wolfgang Iser called the play of the text: "Authors play games with readers and the text is the playground."⁸ A quest narrative with an apparently linear trajectory progressively warps and develops into a circle. A disembodied lyric voice narrating presence soon becomes a narrator searching for himself in his other. After multiple failures, the narrating lyric voice finds his identity in his others and this appears to culminate in the collective others of the Mexican people. But the long journey of the poem ends where it began with the coda. Are we the readers back where we began? Have we moved from a search for personal identity to a collective identity or have we gained something in the journey? The constant and multiple references to pre-Hispanic Mexican culture have had an unexpected result. For the Mexican reader, the poem becomes an individual discovery of identity. For the non-Mexican reader, it has arrived at a more profound appreciation of the Mexican other as his or her other. If we read the *Cantares mexicanos* attentively, as León-Portilla has done, we recognize that the poems are intimate invitations to a special relationship with the lyric voice, a relationship we can only characterize as the I-other.

⁷ Garibay, *Poesía náhuatl*, folio 12r. See also León-Portilla, *Quince poetas*, 256–57.

⁸ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 327.

The self–other relationship that is so central to “*Piedra de sol*” has yet another dimension, namely, and this is the victory over the alienation of the reader, an other with his or her own world view, who necessarily resists the lyric voice’s domination. The victory over difference, which is known as the union of opposites, or *la guerra florida*, the flowering war, has been fundamental to Nahuatl philosophy since the classical period of Teotihuacan. Just as the metaphor will have meaning through the reader or listener’s creative participation in the making of poetic sense, so will the individual gain self-identity through the tensional relationship with his or her other. Contemporary philosophical hermeneutics brings a universal appreciation to this most Mexican of Mexican symbols, the flowering war and the image of burnt water—*agua quemada*. During the rainy season in Mexico’s Valley of Anahuac, it pours every afternoon for an hour or two; then the bright sun re-emerges and dries the land. The symbol of burnt water is the gift of the sun that makes the corn multiply. Corn has been the staple food of Mexicans since prehistoric times.

José Emilio Pacheco is twenty-five years younger than his mentor, Octavio Paz and, though this rarely happens with great poets, the younger poet absorbs the images and ideas of the older poet and then complements this legacy by taking the aesthetic insight of Paz to new levels of metaphorical creation. I shall next comment on five poems by Pacheco that clearly develop the aesthetic principles of Octavio Paz.

(1) “*Oficio de poeta*” (The Poet’s Craft), from *Irás y no volverás*⁹:

*Ara en el mar
Escribe sobre el agua*

Ploughs the sea
Writes on water

Writing poetry appears to be an endeavour of utter futility, but on reflection, an image of idealistic dedication emerges. Because the semantic impertinence of ploughing the sea or writing on water is so obvious, the question arises of why the poet does not abandon his craft. This question is ultimately directed at the reader: Why bother with poetry?

⁹ José Emilio Pacheco, *Tarde o temprano. Poemas 1958–2000* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000), 153.

(2) “*Contra los recitales*” (Against Public Readings), also from *Irás y no volverás*:

*Si leo mis poemas en público
le quito su único sentido a la poesía:
hacer que mis palabras sean tu voz,
por un instante al menos.*

If I read my poems in public
I deprive poetry of its only purpose:
that my words become your voice
even if it is only for a moment.¹⁰

This poem is the answer to the open question implicit in “*Oficio de poeta*.” Writing poetry is the art of eliciting a response from the reader so that the poem will become the reader’s unique and personal metaphoric response.

(3) “*Al terminar la clase*” (On Finishing the Lesson), also from *Irás y no volverás*:

*Más temprano que tarde la poesía
llega a los claustros.
Bibliotecas que no consulta nadie,
opiniones de cuarta o quinta mano,
comentarios triviales, haz de anécdotas
en el salón de clase
(auditorio cautivo indiferente).
“Cultura” en fin y “tradición.”
Es triste.
Sin embargo la llama no se extingue.
Sólo duerme,
prensada y seca flor en un libro,
que de repente
puede encenderse
viva.*

Sooner or later poetry
reaches the classrooms.
Libraries that no one consults,
fourth- or fifth-hand opinions,
trivial commentaries, sheaf of anecdotes

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

in the classroom
(captive indifferent audience).
"Culture," that is to say, "tradition."
It is sad.
Nevertheless the flame is not extinguished.
It sleeps,
pressed like a dry flower in a book,
which suddenly
can flame up
alive.¹¹

In this poem, written in 1972, Pacheco points toward the basic concept of the "live metaphor," which was described by Paul Ricoeur in *La métaphore vive*: "Metaphor is living [*vive*] not only to the extent that it vivifies a constituted language. Metaphor is living by virtue of the fact that it introduces the spark [*l'élán*] of imagination into a 'thinking more' at the conceptual level."¹²

Pacheco's poem laments the layers of institutional readings of poetry that have the result of distancing the poem from the captive audience of the classroom. The reader must be able to read the poem as a partner with the poet, appropriating the words and making them his or her own.

(4) "*Carta a George B. Moore: En defensa del anonimato*" (Letter to George B. Moore: In Defence of the Anonymous), from *Los trabajos del mar*. Here is the third strophe of the poem:

*Para empezar a no responderle,
no tengo nada que añadir a lo que está en mis poemas,
dejo a otros el comentario, no me preocupa
(si alguno tengo) mi lugar en la historia.
(Tarde o temprano a todos nos espera el naufragio.)
Escribo y eso es todo. Escribo:
doy la mitad del poema.
Poesía no es signos negros en la página blanca.
Llamo poesía a ese lugar del encuentro
con la experiencia ajena. El lector, la lectora
harán o no el poema que tan sólo he esbozado.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies in the Creation of Meaning in Language*, (tr.) R. Czerny with K. McLaughlin and J. Costello (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 303.

In order to begin to *not* answer you,
I have nothing to add to what is in my poems,
I leave it to others to comment, it does not
concern me (if I have any) what my place is in history.
(Sooner or later, failure awaits us all.)
I write and that is all. I write
I give half of the poem.
Poetry is not black signs on a blank page.
I call poetry that place of meeting
with another's experience. Readers
will make or not make the poem I have
only sketched.¹³

This is a declaration of aesthetic principles that came into prominence in the last decades of the 20th century throughout Latin America and throughout the world. There is, however, a long and profound tradition going back to Juan Luis Vives, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Giambattista Vico and, especially, Paul Ricoeur today. The poetic antecedents in Latin America are exceptional, including Haroldo de Campos, Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz. The contribution of José Emilio Pacheco is of great importance not only for his belief in the creative participation of the reader, but also because of his designation of the poetic text as that place where the poet's images meet up with the reader's appropriation into his or her own world.

The fourth strophe of the poem reads:

*No leemos a otros: nos leemos en ellos.
Me parece un milagro
que algún desconocido pueda verse
en mi espejo.
Si hay un mérito en esto—dijo Pessoa—
corresponde a los versos, no al
autor de los versos.
Si de casualidad es un gran poeta
dejará cuatro o cinco poemas válidos
rodeados de fracasos y borradores.
Sus opiniones personales
son de verdad muy poco interesantes.*

We do not read others: *we read ourselves* in them.
It's a miracle
that a person unknown to me can see himself

¹³ Pacheco, *Tarde o temprano*, 303.

in my mirror.
If there be any merit in this—said Pessoa—
it belongs to the verses and not to
the author of the verses.
If by chance he is a great poet
he will leave four or five poems of value
surrounded by failures and rough outlines.
His personal opinions
are in truth of little interest.¹⁴

In *Interpretation Theory*, Paul Ricoeur provides the basis for a philosophical appreciation of poetry and indirectly of Pacheco's aesthetics:

The sense of a text is not behind the text, but in front of it. It is not something hidden, but something disclosed. What has to be understood is not the initial situation of discourse, but what points towards a possible world, thanks to the non-ostensive reference of the text. Understanding has less than ever to do with the author and his situation.... It [the text] goes beyond the mere function of pointing out and showing what already exists and, in this sense, transcends the function of ostensive reference linked to spoken language. Here showing is at the same time creating a new mode of being.¹⁵

(5) "Contra Harold Bloom" (Against Harold Bloom) from *Siglo pasado: Desenlace*:

*Al doctor Harold Bloom lamento decirle
que repudio lo que él llama "la ansiedad de las influencias."
Yo no quiero matar a López Velarde, ni
a Gorostiza, ni a Paz, ni a Sabines.
Por el contrario,
no podría escribir ni sabría qué hacer
en el caso imposible de que no existieran
Zozobra, Muerte sin fin, "Piedra de sol,"
Recuento de poemas.*

I regret to tell doctor Harold Bloom
that I repudiate what he calls "the anxiety of influences."
I do not want to kill López Velarde, nor

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, (tr.) David Pellauer (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 87–88.

Gorostiza, nor Paz, nor Sabines.
On the contrary,
I would not be able to write nor would I
know what to do in the impossible case that
Zozobra, Muerte sin fin, "Piedra de sol,"
Recuento de poemas did not exist.¹⁶

In Pacheco's aesthetics, not making the texts of other poets his own would be tantamount to killing them, for they live in the poems the reader makes his or her own. The authors may be dead, but their poetry lives as long as there are readers prepared to do their part in its making. A good example of what Pacheco calls making other poets' verses his own may be found in his *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo* (1964-1968) (Do not ask me how time goes by). The poem is "*Manuscrito de Tlatelolco (2 de octubre 1968)*" (Manuscript of Tlatelolco (2 August 1968)), a profound memorial to the victims of the massacre of university students by the Olimpia Battalion of the Mexican army following presidential orders. To the astonishment of many, this poem was almost entirely made up of borrowed lines. Pacheco's sources are the "*Cantares mexicanos*," specifically what has come to be known as *Visión de los vencidos*, a poem of lamentation for the destruction of Tenochtitlan by the Spaniards. Pacheco takes two verses of the translation from the Nahuatl by Angel Garibay and Miguel León-Portilla, and makes them part of his poem:

Golpeamos los muros de adobe.
Es toda nuestra herencia una red de agujeros.

We beat against the adobe walls.
Our entire legacy is a net of holes.¹⁷

The recontextualizations of Pacheco are in effect a tribute to the power of the other's words and the power they have to give life to the new context.

¹⁶ José Emilio Pacheco, *Siglo pasado: Desenlace: Poemas 1999-2000* (Mexico City: Biblioteca Era, 2000), 602.

¹⁷ Pacheco, *Tarde o temprano*, 68.

II. Philosophical Hermeneutics in Latin America and the Elaboration of the Mexican Poetics of Paz and Pacheco

The fact that Latin American literary culture responded so rapidly to philosophical hermeneutics was due in no small part to the intellectual relations Latin American scholars had with Continental philosophy before the Second World War. To give only a few of the most distinguished examples: in Mexico, Antonio Caso (1885–1946) and Alfonso Reyes (1899–1959) welcomed the exiled Spanish philosophers of 1939 and created the Colegio de México as an institutional base for them; in Chile, the great educator Andrés Bello (1781–1865) was a forerunner of a closer tie between philosophy and literary history, anticipating our work of the 1990s, *Literary Cultures of Latin America* (2004); the Dominican Pedro Henríquez Ureña (1884–1946) gave us the concept of a literary culture that introduced spatial considerations to literary history; in Argentina, Alejandro Korn (1860–1936) argued for a dialectic methodology which, as we will see, is fundamental to the work of Paul Ricoeur and Miguel de Unamuno. Among our contemporaries, Rafael Gutiérrez Girardot (1928–2005) from Colombia is a prime example of the influence of German philosophy in Latin America. He studied with Heidegger and Hugo Friedrich and in the 1960s introduced Hans-Georg Gadamer to Latin American scholars. These contacts, which existed from the beginning of the 20th century, were therefore greatly expanded with the influx of European scholars after 1939. Latin America in general, and Mexico in particular, were the recipients of a rich input of Continental philosophy in mid-20th century because of the European academic exiles. Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela and Colombia all engaged in a lively philosophical debate with the works of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger. In Mexico, the destination of the largest number of exiles from fascist Spain, the effect was immediately felt. Beginning in 1939, a new philosophical orientation emerged, which in time would become philosophical hermeneutics. The intellectual ferment brought by the Spanish philosophers cannot be overestimated. They not only introduced Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (in Gaos' translation), but as a group they created a bridge to German philosophy for all of Latin America. Besides José Gaos, there was Eduardo Nicol, Juan David García Bacca, José Medina Echavarría and Juan Larrea, to mention only the most active members of this generation of intellectuals who transplanted their community of inquiry and created a new one.

I do not have the space to engage in a historical presentation of this conjunction of Continental philosophy and Latin American

poetics, but I can refer the interested reader to the texts by José Gaos¹⁸ and Arturo Casas.¹⁹ This legacy created fertile ground for the next generation of Continental European philosophers. Most notable among those whose work appeared in translation long before they were known in English North America was Paul Ricoeur. As early as 1960, Ricoeur's essays began to be published in Argentina and Chile. His philosophy has been discussed in special seminars in the Colegio de México (1988), Universidad de Puebla (1988), Universidad de Veracruz (1990), Universidad Autónoma de México (1990, 1991, 1992, 2003) and Universidad Iberoamericana (1991, 2003).

The significance of Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics for the understanding and debate on the interpretation of literature and cultural history in Latin America is profound and this appreciation is only the beginning. The major breakthrough for this movement was the Spanish translation of *La métaphore vive* as *La metáfora viva*. This book was a sustained philosophical argument that began with poetry but eventually led to the human capacity to create new meaning and different worldviews out of the conflict between the literal meaning of words in context and the incompatible semantic impertinence of the metaphor's statement. The conflict between the literal and metaphorical meanings is described as a dialectic, in which the tension between the two kinds of meanings is the force that moves the reader to create new meanings. When the text does not make sense, the reader must either stop reading or enter into the metaphorical game of creation. This is the power to create new images, a new sense of reality, which Ricoeur would say is redescribed by the metaphorical imagination. Of course, not all writing is metaphorical, nor are all metaphors creative. Some metaphors are merely decorative, but the creative metaphor abounds in the work of great poets and in the language itself that has been nourished by poetry. Ricoeur argues that the referential power of poetic discourse is linked to the eclipse of ordinary meaning, the creation of a heuristic fiction, and to the redescribed reality produced by the reader. This concept, now known as *reader-reception theory*, was later developed in Constance, Germany by Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss. In 1979, José Emilio Pacheco turned it into poetry in the last two lines of his "*Carta a George B. Moore*": "*En realidad los poemas que leyó son de usted:/*

¹⁸ José Gaos, "Pensamiento de lengua española," in *Obras completas*, vol. 6 (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1990), 31–107.

¹⁹ Arturo Casas, "El eje local-mundial como reto para Historia Literaria," in *Homenaje a Mario J. Valdés. Tropelias*, vols. 15–17 (Zaragoza, Spain: Departamento de Lingüística General e Hispánica, Universidad de Zaragoza, 2004–2006).

usted, su autor, que los inventa al leerlos [In reality the poems you read are yours,/ you, the author, who makes them when you read them].”²⁰

The fourth section of the concluding chapter of Ricoeur’s *La métaphore vive* brings the argument to fruition and indicates the future course of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. The gain in meaning in poetic discourse is inseparable from the tension generated, not just between the terms of a metaphorical statement, but also between two levels of interpretation, namely the literal meaning, which is restricted to the established value of words in the lexicon, and the metaphorical meaning, which results from innovation thrust by the semantic impertinence upon the reader. The resulting gain in meaning is not yet the conceptual gain of interpretation; it is a kind of semantic shock, which brings about the need for reflection and interpretation. Because the gain in meaning is caught in the conflict of the same and the different, it is unstable and volatile.²¹

The creative tension of the metaphor is located in the tension between the terms of the statement, the tension between literal interpretation and metaphorical interpretation, and the tension in the reference between what is and what is not but could be. The creative metaphor thus operates on two referential levels at the same time. We can perhaps better understand this phenomenon through the analogy of the convergence of two force fields:

Two energies converge here: the gravitational pull exerted by the second referential field on meaning, giving it the force to leave its place of origin; and the dynamism of meaning itself as the inductive principle of sense.... On the one hand, as regards its sense, the metaphorical utterance reproduces the form of a movement in a portion of the trajectory of meaning that goes beyond the familiar referential field where the meaning is already constituted. On the other hand, it brings an unknown referential field towards language, and within the ambit of this field the semantic aim functions and unfolds.²²

For example, in the poem “*Árbol adentro*” (“A Tree Within”) by Octavio Paz, we read:

*Creció en mi frente un árbol.
Creció hacia adentro.*

²⁰ Pacheco, *Tarde o temprano*, 304.

²¹ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 295-303.

²² *Ibid.*, 299.

*Sus raíces son venas,
nervios sus ramas,
sus confusos follajes pensamientos.*

A tree grew inside my head.
A tree grew in.
Its roots are veins,
Its branches nerves,
Thoughts its tangled foliage.²³

The familiar referential field of botany and physiology clashes because of the incompatibility and takes the language to a new level of meaning, that of an idea growing within one. I can propose the following considerations for literary criticism: (1) the question of meaning is the fundamental presupposition of critical commentary; (2) the experience mediated by texts becomes the reader's present drawn from the historical past; (3) the literary statement is engaged in a struggle of redescription between the text and the reader; (4) the role of literary criticism is to concentrate on the reading experience and facilitate the necessary discussion of differences in interpretations.

Ricoeur conceives of literature as texts with the capacity to redescribe reality, and literary criticism as a mediation between diverse interpretations and the critic's own understanding of the intention of the text. The latter may have little or no relation to the presumed intention of the author, because it is a meaning that did not exist before the critic engaged the text.

In the conclusion to *La métaphore vive*, Ricoeur writes: "[P]oetry, in itself and by itself, sketches a 'tensional' conception of truth for thought. Here are summed up all the forms of 'tensions' brought to light by semantics: tension between subject and predicate, between literal interpretation and metaphorical interpretation, between identity and difference."²⁴

Ricoeur argues that the interpretation of poetry, as of all human activities, carries the person to the highest point of reflection on the world he or she envisages every day. The reader, in his engagement with the poetic text, creates the metaphorical meaning and thereby opens up the experience of belonging to his world. The tensional truth produced by the reader's response to the metaphor is a pri-

²³ Octavio Paz, *Árbol adentro* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1987), 137.

²⁴ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 313.

mordial human experience, which spreads out into a reflection of all aspects of life. This is what Ricoeur calls redescribing the world.

At the very heart of Ricoeur's hermeneutics is the concept of figuration. When a reader interprets a literary text, the act of reading becomes a process of grasping together its multiple images, concepts and details. This process is an act of intense participation and interaction between the reader and the text. This process is what Ricoeur calls configuration.

José Emilio Pacheco gives his version of figuration in poetry in "*Chapultepec: La calzada de los poetas*" (Chapultepec: The Avenue of the Poets):

*(No para estar en bronce escribieron.)
Extraña sensación esta vida inmóvil
que sólo se reanima cuando alguien los lee.
¿Qué leemos
cuando leemos?
¿Qué invocamos
al decirnos por dentro
lo que está escrito por ellos
en otro tiempo, incapaz
de imaginar el mundo como es ahora?
Algo muy diferente sin duda alguna.
Se gastan las palabras, cambia el sentido.*

*(They wrote, not to be set in bronze.)
Strange sensation this unmovable life
which only comes to life when someone reads them.
What do we read
when we read?
What do we invoke
when we tell ourselves
what was written
in another time, impossible
to imagine the world as it is today?
Something very different without doubt.
Words wear out, meaning changes.²⁵*

But configuration is merely the beginning. Once the reader has an understanding of the text, the most obvious next step is to share it with someone else. Sharing an interpretation involves giving an explanation based on the reader's understanding. In the ensuing

²⁵ Pacheco, *Tarde o temprano*, 436.

exchange, there will be a refiguration of the text, as another interpretation enters into the conflict of interpretations in the community of commentators. If configuration is the essence of the act of reading, refiguration is the basis of literary criticism. However, this process of interpretation is only possible because of the pre-understanding of the world that is general among readers and is also the individual's repertoire drawn from the common pre-understanding, since each reader interprets different things and has different cultural experiences. Ricoeur constitutes the wellspring of figuration as prefiguration. The process is a continuing spiral, since the conflict of interpretations of the critical act or literary criticism adds to the collective richness of texts and touches on the individual's repertoire. Prefiguration is the cultural archive on which readers draw for the configuration of the text and it is refiguration, in turn, that adds to the archive. Ricoeur writes that it is "the reader who completes the work, inasmuch as...the written work is a sketch for reading. Indeed, it consists of holes, lacunae, zones of indetermination, which, as in Joyce's *Ulysses*, challenge the reader's capacity to configure what the author seems to take malign delight in defiguring.... The act of reading is thus the operator that joins mimesis₃ [refiguration] to mimesis₂ [configuration]."²⁶

Five works by Ricoeur, from *La métaphore vive* (1975) to *Temps et récit* (1983–85), form the canon of literary hermeneutics today. One of the most significant aspects of Ricoeur's hermeneutics has been his philosophical argument for the re-evaluation of literature, especially poetry, as a necessary engine for social and cultural development:

[F]or me, the world is the whole set of references opened up by every sort of descriptive or poetic text I have read, interpreted, and loved. To understand these texts is to interpolate among the predicates of our situation all those meanings that, from a simple environment (*Umwelt*), make a world (*Welt*). Indeed, we owe a large part of the enlarging of our horizon of existence to poetic works. Far from producing only weakened images of reality—shadows, as in the Platonic treatment of the *eikōn* in painting or writing (*Phaedrus* 274e–77e)—literary works depict reality by *augmenting* it with meanings that themselves depend upon the

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, (tr.) K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 77.

virtues of abbreviation, saturation, and culmination, so strikingly illustrated by emplotment.²⁷

Paul Ricoeur's philosophy is imbued with a deep ethical purpose—and this is certainly true of his literary hermeneutics. The ethical strength of his approach lies in its respect for differences and the primary importance it attaches to dialogue among readers; his is the ethical position that resonates so deeply in Latin America and in the two Mexican poets I have treated in the first part of this essay.

Although philosophical hermeneutics has an international trajectory, nowhere has it had such a profound cultural impact on a community's identity as in Mexico. Of course, we can read and appreciate the essays and poetry of Octavio Paz and José Emilio Pacheco without the slightest notion of hermeneutics. Poetry needs only readers who are ready to participate in the making of metaphorical sense. Obviously, one can also read and profit from the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur without any knowledge of Latin America's or Mexico's aesthetic development. But the two traditions have come together in Latin America to the enrichment of all who care to know.

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²⁷ *Ibid.*, 80; footnote removed from the original.