

# Octavio Paz and Gendered Spaces: Nature and the Search for the Other in *Libertad bajo palabra*

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**Abstract:** Nature is a central thematic element in *Libertad bajo palabra*, by Octavio Paz, as it acquires the characteristics of a living, autonomous entity, most often female. Paz conflates nature with woman in order to find union with the Other. In so doing, Paz prioritizes certain natural spaces and elements throughout this collection of poetry. In sum, this study will show that the natural environment is an indispensable aspect of Paz's poetry as it enables him to develop his lifelong preoccupation with *otredad*.

**Keywords:** Octavio Paz, nature, *otredad*, *Libertad bajo palabra*, gendered spaces

Much of the criticism on the poetry of Octavio Paz had focused on aspects such as the search for the other and the concept of *otredad* or on the cyclical view of time, and significantly less so on his use of the environment. However, this latter element is still pivotal in trying to gain a better understanding of the more commonly examined aspects of his poetry. This study will focus on the various ways in which Paz uses natural imagery and the aims for which he appropriates such imagery. The natural world is an animate entity which is often conflated with humankind, above all the human (and frequently female) body, and is an essential poetic vehicle which Paz uses in his quest to bridge the gap between self and the Other.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Enrico Mario Santí has synthesized Paz's essential definition and understanding of *otredad* as, in the poet's words, "poetry marked by 'a simultaneous perception that we are people without ceasing to be who we are, and that, without ceasing to be who we are, our true being lies elsewhere'" (269, 270). The Other is understood to live within all people, and as a result of this philosophy, the search for the Other is also the search for Self, as Santí succinctly explains: "Poetry, Love, and the Sacred—the poem, the lover, and God—mean, for Paz, the three ways to a radical absolute, what he calls *Otherness*, which in the end turns out to be the experience of an encounter with ourselves. According to Paz, poetry reconciles with the Other who lies within each of us" (270). Similarly, Susana Hernández Araico defines *otredad* in terms of humankind's search for what is already within: "Sujeto al cambio, el hombre siempre anda buscando al otro que lleva dentro de sí mismo" (231). Rodney Williamson considers the *yo-tú* dialogue of *otredad* in Jungian terms: "the 'yo'-'tú' dialogue is the necessary pre-condition for the union of opposites, of subject and object, consciousness and the unconscious, which leads, according

This study will focus on poetry taken from the initial compilation of collected poems titled *Libertad bajo palabra. Obra poética [1935-1958]*, first published in 1960. Though an exhaustive analysis of the use of the natural world during Paz's career as a poet would be impossible for the length of this study, it will become evident that nature in Paz's poetry accomplishes several tasks. Very frequently, the natural world is treated as animate, as certain common elements, such as the sea, the sky, and various topographical forms are given human qualities. The reader sees how the natural environment is accorded an identity, one which very often helps the poetic voice achieve union with an unnamed Other—most frequently a female. Oftentimes the natural world acquires female-gendered characteristics as well. Paz also uses specific images such as trees, water, and the earth in order to convey a sense of connectedness with the Other, especially in poetry infused with eroticism. On other occasions, the natural world becomes the Other which Paz's poetic voice aims to reach. In this poetry nature becomes a necessary element by which Paz attempts to close the space between self and other, leaving the *soledad* which so preoccupies his poetic voice. As the collection progresses, the reader notes that Paz uses nature as a backdrop by which the poetic voice seeks plenitude and fulfillment with his eroticized partner, and on occasion as a fundamental element in his metapoetic quest for the way in which to write of his subjects. Indeed, *Libertad bajo palabra* has been characterized as a “group of poems clearly dominated by the amorous theme which dramatizes the intensity of life both in the lovers' relationship and in their participation in the simple world of nature” (Goetzinger 233). In sum, while Paz may not necessarily be considered a “nature poet” in exactly the same vein as other Latin American contemporaries such as Pablo Neruda,<sup>2</sup> it will become clear that the environment is an indispensable element—alive, complex, often gendered, and deeply rooted in the poet's psyche—which Paz uses in his search for completeness and unity.

Many of the poems from *Libertad bajo palabra* in which Paz's use of nature is most clearly visible come from one of his earlier collections, *Bajo tu clara sombra [1935-1939]*, which in turn is divided into several sections, having been written and published at different times. Within this collection, the initial section of *Primer día [1935]* is notable

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to Jung, to fullness of being and the construction or enrichment of what he calls the self, which he referred to as the process of “individuation” (15). Finally, Hugo Verani sees *otredad* as a matter of reflection of the self: “El hablante se contempla a sí mismo y encuentra a un desconocido, a otro que no acaba de ser y no acaba de desaparecer; sin dejar de ser uno mismo, vive y se mira vivir como si fuera otro. Todo parece ser reflejo de otro reflejo, simulacro de una presencia.” (“Octavio Paz: el poema como caminata” 55)

<sup>2</sup> Guillermo Sucre offers the following assessment comparing Paz and other Latin American poets with respect to the use of the natural world: “the telluric concepts in [Paz's] poetry are somewhat removed from the tellurism found in some Latin American poets from the Argentine Leopoldo Lugones to the Chilean Pablo Neruda: descriptive exuberance, geographic enumerations, an almost interminable list of elements of nature—everything, of course, crowded with metaphors. Nature in Paz is always free from accumulative and picturesque excesses. Only a few elements are necessary to make the presence of Nature felt; those elements, while very material, seem to be very archetypal” (9).

for several poems (primarily sonnets) which set the tone for the development of the nature theme for Paz's work. Sonnet II is a prime example in which Paz likens the natural world to a human body for the sake of finding fulfillment with what is understood to be a female Other (1960: 15). Specifically, it is the sea which stands out in the poet's attempt at grasping his feminine object and inscribing her within verse:

El mar, el mar y tú, plural espejo,  
 el mar de torso perezoso y lento  
 nadando por el mar, del mar sediento:  
 el mar que muere y nace en un reflejo.

El mar y tú, su mar, el mar espejo:  
 roca que escala el mar con paso lento,  
 pilar de sal que abate el mar sediento,  
 sed y vaivén y apenas un reflejo.

De la suma de instantes en que creces,  
 del círculo de imágenes del año,  
 retengo un mes de espumas y de peces,

y bajo cielos líquidos de estaño  
 tu cuerpo que en la luz abre bahías  
 al oscuro oleaje de los días.

Here the reader notes how the sea forms a mirror in which his unnamed "tú" is reflected, and how it also becomes an element used to inscribe and contain this anonymous object.

The repetition of "El mar y tú" in the initial lines of the first two quatrains helps to establish the bond between the natural and the human worlds, as each element reflects its animate qualities in the other. On the one hand, the sea itself is accorded human traits. On the other, the sea also becomes an element which highlights Paz's focus on the instant, specifically the concept of the extraordinary instant as characterized by Martin Heidegger, in which Paz's poetic voice attempts to grasp his true self.<sup>3</sup> The sea, often an image associated with eternity due to its vastness, in this case also acquires instantaneity, as seen in "el mar que muere y nace en un reflejo" of line 4. The second stanza adds the image of a cliff—an image of strength and durability—which rises out of the sea, and also the reference to a "mar sediento," a symbolically "thirsty"

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<sup>3</sup> Myrna Solotorevsky has described this concept of the instant as an exceptional or extraordinary moment, and not a daily occurrence, in which, according to Heidegger, "fulgura el ser" (536). Though her focus is primarily on *Semillas para un himno*, the concept can be applied to other poems in which Paz focuses on the instant.

sea engaged in its own quest for finding the true instant along with Paz's voice. Yet this same sea is "apenas un reflejo"—as it is important to note that this part of the poem centers on the search for the Other and for the extraordinary instant, not on the actual achievement thereof. Raymond D. Souza has noted Paz's focus on this instant as both erotic and cosmic, along with its dialectical nature: "[T]here is the subject of the 'instante amoroso,' or sexual climax, by which the poet achieves harmony with the essential rhythm of the universe and the ultimate synthesis, the synthesis of the individual with the universe takes place" (63).

The two tercets provide the reader further insight into the concept of time as an aggregate series of instants. For Paz's "yo," here is specifically one month in time which he associates with the sea and the Other, clearly noted through the simple elements of the "espumas" and "peces" comprising that one month. This unnamed Other opens up the continuum of time and breaks the constant cycle of one day leading into the next. This is accomplished through the Other's body, which "abre bahías / al obscuro oleaje de los días." Indeed, it is the body of a human being which conjoins nature in its own metaphoric "body" to help Paz's poetic persona find the exact moment in which self and other are bridged. The erotic component is what helps define Paz's conception of male-female coupling and this act of conjoining, as Agustín Pastén has noted (72).<sup>4</sup> Finally, this poem's use of the sea creates a bridge between the conscious and the unconscious, as Rodney Williamson states: "The unconscious sea and the 'tú,' the conscious construct, become a 'plural mirror,' reflecting each other back and forth. The mirror thus becomes both a metaphor for the poetic dialogue and the symbolic cornerstone of the poem's architecture" (25).

Sonnet III is a more explicit attempt at using nature to help cross the divide between self and other (15, 16). More specifically, this sonnet creates a set of gendered spaces in which nature and woman are conflated into one entity.<sup>5</sup> In this case the thematic focus is the conjoined space of the natural cosmos and the female body.

Del verdecido júbilo del cielo  
 luces recobras que la luna pierde  
 porque la luz de sí misma recuerde  
 relámpagos y otoños en tu pelo.

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<sup>4</sup> Note Pastén's appraisal of *otredad* in this context; we see "el encuentro entre dos seres esencialmente incompletos mediante el erotismo" (72). Other critics have gone even further, suggesting that not only is the erotic act essential to one's encounter with *otredad*, but something far larger; for example, Marcela Labraña characterizes this erotic union as a "proyección del cosmos" (50). Additionally, the figure of woman in specific poems such as those of *Primer día* is itself not only a link between the poet and the universe, but also a microcosm in itself; see Tarroux-Follin (35).

<sup>5</sup> Paz does not limit his association of woman and the natural world to these earlier texts. For much of his vocation as a poet, Paz had conflated the natural world with female identity, both physically and psychologically. See, for example, Ricardo Gullón's study, "Reverberación de la piedra," which focuses largely on "Piedra de sol."

El viento bebe viento en su desvelo,  
 mueve las hojas y su lluvia verde  
 moja tus hombros, tus espaldas muerde  
 y te desnuda y quema y vuelve yelo.

Dos barcos de velamen desplegado  
 tus dos pechos. Tu espalda es un torrente.  
 Tu vientre es un jardín petrificado.

Es otoño en tu nuca: sol y bruma.  
 Bajo del verde cielo adolescente,  
 tu cuerpo da su enamorada suma.

A number of natural motifs stand out to describe the topography of the female Other. In the first quatrain, the sky, the moon, and natural light draw the reader's attention to this unnamed woman, as that which is human is now transported to a celestial plane. Her body is further likened to the wind and the rain in the second stanza, continuing the association of her hair with the autumn from the preceding stanza. The wind and the water suggest fluidity and smoothness, characteristics which help to demarcate the body. Naked and pure, this woman—again, a sexualized object on the part of the poet—also acquires paradoxical traits, as seen in the expression “quema y vuelve yelo.” It is both nature and the woman who are alive and animate; both are conflated in an eroticized portrait of the Other which Paz's voice aspires to join.

Water imagery, either directly or indirectly, is used again in the first tercet (“Dos barcos de velamen” and “torrente”) to describe the female body, suggesting fluidity and timelessness.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the “jardín petrificado” that forms the abdomen suggests firmness. Finally, Paz returns to the autumn in treating another erogenous zone of the woman, the nape of her neck, in the second tercet. The “yo” of the poem suggests playfulness and youthful abandon in treating the sky as “adolescente,” before returning to the body in the last line. Paz's poetic voice immerses itself in his love for an eroticized woman and also achieves union with the entire world. This process, in which Nature and the “tú” are conflated, is what Williamson has characterized as a

double process: the transformative ‘greening’ of nature, in which the ‘tú’ is or becomes a series of natural elements (ice, waterfall, a petrified garden), and the process of conscious perfection, in which through ‘magistry’ the green is

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<sup>6</sup> Paz often uses water as a sign of desire in later poetry as well as in these texts; see Martha Nandorfy, “‘Petrificada petrificante’ (1976).” Here, she observes that “el agua es signo del deseo porque el deseo siempre se refiere a la ausencia” (585). Paz's use of water imagery is, of course, not limited to these earlier poems, and evolved over time. See Elsa Dehennin, “Stone and Water Imagery in Paz's Poetry,” where the author examines *Cántico* and *La estación violenta* for ways in which Paz uses these natural motifs.

turned into purest, reflected gold. The ‘magistry’ in this case, we may assume, is that of the artist. (29)

Both the female body and the environment are sexualized spaces and become intertwined. This becomes an essential part of Paz’s poetry, as Enrico Mario Santí observes: “the analogy between the woman’s body and the world, woman as a source of knowledge” (266).<sup>7</sup>

Finally, “Mar de día” continues the process begun in the sonnets above in which nature is treated as an eroticized female body (17, 18). In this instance, it is a solitary strand of hair which provides the impetus for the poetic voice to seek out unity with the environment. Though not a sonnet, “Mar de día” is another brief poem which grants the earth characteristics of a human body, while Paz’s poetic voice achieves unity with a female other through the lens of nature:

Por un cabello solo  
 parte sus blancas venas,  
 su dulce pecho bronco,  
 y muestra labios verdes,  
 frenéticos, nupciales,  
 la espuma deslumbrada. (17)

The entire world becomes a human body, in many respects one which takes on the female form of the desired Other. The woman’s strand of hair illumines the entire world and creates a sense of openness and oneness with the universe, as seen later in “Por esa luz en vuelo / que parte en dos al día” (17) and “el universo roto / mostrando sus entrañas” (18). Everything in the sea becomes visible and animate thanks to the hair, from deep sea creatures to waves on the surface, and from octopi to undersea mineral deposits such as coal. Even seaborne algae acquire human traits, likened to “lentas cabelleras.” Paz then calls this one strand of hair “entre mis dedos llama, / vibrante, esbelta espada,” an image of fire, passion, and power, in spite of its diminutive size. Woman acquires the force and fury of nature at the same time that nature acquires the bodily features of a human female, and Paz ends the poem with an implication of achieving unity with his desired Other and with the world at the same time: “Por un cabello solo / el mundo tiene cuerpo.”

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<sup>7</sup> Some scholars have observed Paz’s association with woman and the natural world, though often in other texts. Anne Marie Remley Rambo authored one early study of how Paz appropriates the female presence, and observed the following regarding gender identity and natural spaces: “Paz metamorphizes familiar objects into objects of Nature and intermingles the two worlds. In this atmosphere of his own creation, the poet is linked philosophically and physically to woman and hence to all natural life. We find the figure of woman related to the Nature symbols of trees and water which suggest fecundity, profundity and the power of life. The woman is seen indirectly in the manifestations of these things” (261). Additionally, for further study of the sonnets of *Libertad bajo palabra* and their variants, see Lombó Mulliert, “Octavio, sus sonetos. Notas sobre las variantes de *Libertad bajo palabra*.”

Though the object of the poetic voice's attention is female, it is the natural world which provides the foundation for inspiration here. As María Vázquez observes, "En su visión del mundo, [Paz] encuentra su inspiración principalmente en la naturaleza y en la mujer. Sin embargo, es la naturaleza la que se convertirá en su fuente de inspiración primera y la que lo llevará a reflexionar sobre su propia naturaleza" (107). *Primer día* thus sets the stage for the ways in which Paz will treat nature throughout the rest of *Bajo tu clara sombra* and its component sections, at the same time that it shows him beginning to develop as a poet. In general, *Libertad bajo palabra* will heavily involve the association of nature, feminine identity, and the need to bridge self and Other. As Daniela Chazarreta notes,

esclarecemos que en la mayor parte de sus menciones, la naturaleza que se hace presente en *Libertad bajo palabra* constituye un orbe apartado del ser humano. Sin embargo, la otredad o ajenidad del orbe natural se diluye o intenta diluirse a partir de la configuración del paisaje que consolida el anhelo o voluntad de analogía, imperante en la cosmovisión paciana. En esta línea leemos el poemario a partir de los siguientes principios: por una parte, se plantea una voluntad de analogía en la cual la mujer resulta ser la intermediaria predilecta entre la otredad (la naturaleza) y el sujeto poético, ambas instancias ampliamente fundamentadas y analizadas por la crítica; por otra parte, la dicotomía naturaleza / cultura se resuelve a partir de la categoría de paisaje. ("Naturaleza y paisaje" 227, 228)

In short, Paz's poetic search here is the search, in many ways, for authenticity (231, 232).

*Bajo tu clara sombra* [1935-1938], first appearing in 1937 and republished in different parts in the following decade, is a smaller collection unto itself as well as one longer poem, divided in ten sections of unequal length (19-29). This poem continues the pattern begun several years prior, in which nature and woman are often conflated and in which Paz seeks to achieve union with the feminine Other through the environment. This poem, whose title reflects the paradox of light and shadow as projected by the female Other, centers on the subject's quest for wholeness with the latter. In this poem, the relationship between the female presence and the natural world can best be described as symbiotic; one gives life to the other and is reflected in the other. Hugo Verani's observations regarding a later poem, "Piedra de sol," are applicable to this earlier collection as well: "La mirada del poeta convierte el cuerpo de la mujer en un cuerpo cosmogónico; por vía analógica, el amor libera las pasiones y restaura un estado de plenitud... El hablante recorre el cuerpo de la mujer-naturaleza-cosmos como si fuera una celebración de la unidad de lo natural y lo humano, de lo material y lo abstracto." (*Octavio Paz: el poema como caminata* 96)

In the interests of staying within the parameters of this essay, only several sections will be discussed. After the poetic subject directly addresses his love and implores it to give him its voice (19, 20), the fourth section metapoetically begins

with his stated intent—“Tengo que hablaros de ella” (21)—and shortly thereafter shows this woman to be at the center of the natural cosmos (“La huella de su pie / es el centro visible de la tierra,” 22). Yet her location within the world is paradoxical in another way as well—“encadenado y libre”—suggesting that at once she is free in being a part of the universe that surrounds her yet bound in her being apart from the one who wants to find completeness in her. Her importance is seen not only as someone desired by the speaker’s voice; indeed, it is this woman who acts as a harbinger of life and nature’s bounty, suggesting springtime:

su voz, alba terrestre,  
nos anuncia el rescate de las aguas,  
el regreso del fuego,  
la vuelta de la espiga,  
las primeras palabras de los árboles,  
la blanca monarquía de las alas. (22)

Nature’s bounty and animate qualities are evident but are made so by the unnamed Other. In fact, it is the entire cosmos which is brought to life by this feminine object, one whose very living essence is intertwined with hers: “se enciende su sangre cada noche / con la sangre nocturna de las cosas.” Paz must speak to his reader of her, of her “fresco costumbre,” “simple tormenta,” and “rama tierna.” (23) Woman encapsulates the qualities of nature and birth commonly ascribed to her throughout literature (though most commonly as written by men).

The sixth section of the poem contains numerous imperatives directed at his female object, as Paz calls attention to the world and all its living elements. This natural environment is conflated with the woman, and throughout this section Paz shifts imperatives from “mira” to “toca,” asking her to symbolically touch both him and herself. The world and all its power are visible in much of this section:

Mira el poder del mundo,  
mira el poder del polvo, mira el agua.

Mira los fresnos en callado círculo,  
toca su reino de silencio y savia,  
toca su piel de sol y lluvia y tiempo,  
mira sus verdes ramas claras al cielo,  
oye cantar sus hojas como agua. (24)

The poem acquires a notably sensorial aspect in engaging both the woman’s and the reader’s sight and sound. Nature is accorded the familiar traits of a human body, a tendency already familiar in Paz’s work. However, the focus shifts from nature’s body



to the bodies of both his poetic alter ego and the woman inscribed in this work. As a result, Paz charges the poem with a noticeably erotic element.

The following two stanzas illustrate the poem's eroticism and continue to the conflate nature with the Other:

Toca mi piel, de barro, de diamante,  
oye mi voz en fuentes subterráneas,  
mira mi boca en esa lluvia oscura,  
mi sexo en esa brusca sacudida  
con que desnuda el aire los jardines.

Toca tu desnudez en la del agua,  
desnúdate de ti, llueve en ti misma,  
mira tus piernas como dos arroyos,  
mira tu cuerpo como un largo río,  
son dos islas gemelas tus dos pechos,  
en la noche tu sexo es una estrella,  
alba, luz rosa entre dos mundos ciegos,  
mar profundo que duerme entre dos mares. (24, 25)

Both the male narrative self and the female object of desire become sexualized, within a framework of nature which itself is used to describe the human body. Through this process Paz's voice comes closer to achieving its goal of finding communion with the Other. Of note is the particular image of light, especially the graphic characterization of the female body as various representations of light—"estrella," "alba," or a "luz" which connects two symbolically blind worlds, that of self and other. The woman's "light" brightens a dark world in which Paz's poetic persona hopes to break out of his *soledad*. This sexual encounter with a woman is achieved by placing her on a level equal to that of the entire world. This erotic conjunction of self and other via the natural world has a certain sacred character, as Blas Matamoros notes, a trait "que se vincula con la utopía de cohesión instantánea del mundo: la visión mística, el orgasmo y el acto poético son episodios privilegiados de esa tentativa" (20).

The seventh section continues the poem's established tendency to focus on different body parts, starting from the "cuerpo" in general to various specific areas thereof, including the "garganta," "vientre," "tobillos," "muslos," "pecho," "cuello," "manos," "labios y dientes," and "ojos" (25, 26). Many of these same elements are treated as representations of nature, such as "un vientre que amanece" and "un pecho que se alza / y arrasa las espumas." (25) Water, so often used as a symbol of sensuality and eroticism as much as one of purity, is something desired which escapes the poetic voice—"Esto que se me escapa, / agua y delicia oscura, / mar naciendo o muriendo" (26)—but which also provides some ambiguity. The sea may either be dying or being born, suggesting the ongoing nature of time as well as the simple ebb and flow of

the timeless sea. The woman's lips, teeth, and eyes all strip the narrative voice of its clothing and transport it to a celestial sphere where the instant—what Paz searches for on so many other occasions—is attainable, “donde vibra el instante.” It is there where Paz's voice can find “la plenitud del mundo y de sus formas.” As the poem begins to conclude, the female body and the male narrator are transported to a celestial sphere, suggesting timelessness once again.<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, the ninth section begins with an Adamic invocation as Paz wants to name his interlocutor, the earth, whereas previously it was the woman who was the antecedent of the poet's “tú”:

Deja que una vez más te nombre, tierra,  
y que mi lengua sepa a tu sustancia.  
Mi tacto se prolonga  
en el tuyo sediento,  
largo, vibrante río  
que no termina nunca,  
navegado por hojas digitales,  
lentas bajo tu espeso sueño verde. (27)

The river again is accorded the characteristics of eternity, like the sea seen earlier, and once more the poem is infused with a tactile quality. The section begins to conclude with a strophe of equal length addressing the object as “Tibia mujer de somnolientos ríos,” as a “pabellón de pájaros y peces,” and as a “paloma de tierra,” all suggesting peace and harmony with the natural world (28). However, Paz also calls this woman “mi muerte” and ends the poem by declaring to her, “en un amor más vasto te sepulto.” Woman will be his partner to the end; yet, he will also “bury” her in his unending love. The woman is at once a sexual object, a stated object of love, a symbol of life and a representation of nature itself.<sup>9</sup> Taken together, the varied sections of this one long poem show an “estructura arquetípica que imita claramente la naturaleza,” along with “la búsqueda del poeta de una unión mística con la tierra,” as Michael Moody has described (592). The natural environment is an essential component to understanding the poet's quest for finding wholeness.

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<sup>8</sup> This concept of the instant is not only understood to be the erotic coupling described earlier; indeed, it includes an element of not being limited by time. Israel Rodríguez explains this, as seen in his study of “Piedra de sol”: “El instante es más que una superposición del pasado, del futuro y del presente, es una concentración atrapada del tiempo en un instante. Este instante echa raíces y da frutos de tiempo” (108).

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that not once is the female offered an opportunity to speak. Such embedding of traditional gender roles is not surprising and still a sign of male privilege, though Paz had at least acknowledged male privilege in other texts. For a brief description of how Paz examines traditional gender roles in Mexico, see Adelaida R. Del Castillo, “Mexican Gender Ideology.”

*Asueto [1939-1944]* contains a number of shorter poems returning to the theme of *soledad/otredad* and the search for connection to a wider cosmos. This smaller collection, also part of the larger compilation of works published under *Bajo tu clara sombra*, recycles many of the same motifs and elements taken from the natural world seen earlier in Paz's work. Elements of the earth, the water and rivers are present as vehicles by which Paz articulates his larger concerns regarding the search for the Other and for plenitude. Several poems from this short collection are notable; this study will discuss two. The sonnet "Junio" shows how the poetic persona aims to achieve timelessness via the month of June—traditionally the end of spring and the harbinger of the summer season—and the central motif of a river (65). In this instance, the element of the water is fundamental in helping to establish the poet's quest for eternity and the transcendence of time.

Llegas de nuevo, río transparente,  
 todo cielo y verdor, nubes pasmadas,  
 lluvias o cabelleras desatadas,  
 plenitud, ola inmóvil y fluente.

Tu luz moja una fecha adolescente:  
 rozan las manos formas vislumbradas,  
 los labios besan sombras ya besadas,  
 los ojos ven, el corazón presiente.

¡Hora de eternidad, toda presencia,  
 el tiempo en ti se colma y desemboca  
 y todo cobra ser, hasta la ausencia!

El corazón presiente y se incorpora,  
 mentida plenitud que nadie toca:  
 hoy es ayer y es siempre y es deshora.

Paz's interlocutor is ostensibly the river, bringing with it images of light and transparency. But this river itself is a metaphor for the month of June, something that comes and goes with each passing year. The seasonal setting provides an idealized time in which the poet's memories are activated and are brought to the present. Not only does June bring with it "cielo," "verdor," and "nubes," but also human form, reminding Paz of an amorous union with the Other. The second stanza focuses on this, via such physical elements as "manos," "labios," "ojos," and "corazón." Everything becomes both transcendent (the "eternidad" of the third stanza) as well as immanent (the "presencia" immediately thereafter), as the natural world serves as a vehicle by which Paz's poetic persona breaks free from the constraints of time and simultaneously acquires presence in the here and now. No one can remove this timeless

quality from the human heart, as the final stanza implies, as plenitude is achieved thanks to this river/month. One bears in mind Fredrik Sörstad's characterization of how Paz treats *otredad* generally: "el énfasis se sitúa en la presencia del otro en el sentido de desdoblamiento del yo que pone de manifiesto su trascendencia, esto es, su aspiración a rebasar constantemente los límites de su ser." (328) Paz even echoes Francisco de Quevedo in the final line, "hoy es ayer y es siempre y es deshora," as the boundaries separating past, present, and future are dismantled and the temporary becomes eternal.<sup>10</sup>

Then, "Noche de verano" treats the night as a human body, as night provides the time during which one can feel nature as an animate entity and during which one can also achieve union with it (65, 66). Again, nature—via the central image of a summer night—is the catalyst in the poet's search for *otredad*. Like the two preceding poems, "Noche de verano" conveys its message in a brief space, this time in only five stanzas.

Pulsas, palpas el cuerpo de la noche,  
 verano que te bañas en los ríos,  
 soplo en el que se ahogan las estrellas,  
 aliento de una boca,  
 de unos labios de tierra.

Tierra de labios, boca  
 donde un infierno agónico jadea,  
 labios en donde el cielo llueve  
 y el agua canta y nacen paraísos.

Se incendia el árbol de la noche  
 y sus astillas son estrellas,  
 son pupilas, son pájaros.  
 Fluyen ríos sonámbulos,  
 lenguas de sal incandescente  
 contra una playa oscura.

Todo respira, vive, fluye:  
 la luz en su temblor,

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<sup>10</sup> Quevedo's sonnet treats a different theme altogether, the brevity of life, yet the intertextual echoes of timelessness remain. The sonnet reads as follows: "¡Ah de la vida!... ¿Nadie me responde? / ¡Aquí de los antaños que he vivido! / La Fortuna mis tiempos ha mordido; / Las Horas mi locura las esconde. // ¡Que sin poder saber cómo ni adónde / La Salud y la Edad se hayan huido! / Falta la vida, asiste lo vivido, / Y no hay calamidad que no me ronde. // Ayer se fue; Mañana no ha llegado; / Hoy se está yendo sin parar un punto: / Soy un fue, y un será, y un es cansado. // En el Hoy y Mañana y Ayer, junto / Pañales y mortaja, y he quedado / Presentes sucesiones de difunto" (158, 159).

el ojo en el espacio,  
 el corazón en su latido,  
 la noche en su infinito.

Un nacimiento oscuro, sin orillas,  
 nace en la noche de verano.  
 Y en tu pupila nace todo el cielo.

This summer night also appears as a mildly eroticized female partner. The unnamed object of the poem, the *tú* addressed by the speaking subject, is the first to achieve union with the night, embodied from the very beginning of the poem. Water imagery, seen throughout the poem and initially so in the “ríos” of line 2, suggests the continuous presence of the natural world as well as life. Water is not the only natural element, however; the earth of the second stanza is also granted corporeal form, whose metaphoric “labios” suggest the power to communicate with humanity and which provides a *locus amoenus*, as seen in “paraísos.”

The intensity of the summer night is even more visible in the third stanza, as the burning tree of the night acquires human characteristics as well (“pupilas”). All of nature is alive during this one summer night, a normally brief period of time which soon acquires permanence, as seen in its “infinito.” However, it is neither merely the natural cosmos nor specifically the summer night which are alive; indeed, it is also the *tú* which comes alive and which embodies the entire natural world. Something is born, unbounded by time or other limitations (“Un nacimiento oscuro, sin orillas, / nace”); this “birth” suggests the presence of another living entity during the summer night. At the poem’s conclusion, the entire cosmos becomes encapsulated in the interlocutor’s “pupila,” as the human eye reflects the natural world surrounding it. Paz’s poetic voice achieves unity with its desired partner and with the rest of the universe simultaneously.<sup>11</sup>

This study will conclude with an examination of three short poems taken from *El girasol [1943-1948]*. Paz continues his poetic search for finding fulfillment in the figure of the Other within the context of the environment.<sup>12</sup> The body and the world become conflated yet again, while Paz uses nature as a means by which to describe his unnamed female object. “Escrito con tinta verde” is an instance in which Paz metapoetically “writes nature;” in this case, the poet’s own words craft a space

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<sup>11</sup> One must note how nature also provides a means by which humankind can reflect upon itself, as well as a setting through which the gap between *soledad* and *otredad* is bridged. Paz covers this later in his book, *Los hijos del limo*, as Jorge Román Lagunas notes: “la naturaleza es un elemento de la correspondencia universal; es una imagen de nuestras vidas” (84)

<sup>12</sup> Judith Goetzinger describes the significance of this section, as one which contains “‘seeds’ of a positive faith in life” and in which the “theme of loss and solitude is still maintained, but more often in the aspect of nostalgia for the perfection and peace of a world seen through a lover’s eyes” (229).

in which humankind is linked to the cosmos (84). Only four stanzas long, this poem metaphorizes the act of writing in some ways as a product of nature, as one can see immediately from the phrase “tinta verde.”

La tinta verde crea jardines, selvas, prados,  
follajes donde cantan las letras,  
palabras que son árboles,  
frases que son verdes constelaciones.

Deja que mis palabras, oh blanca, descendan y te cubran  
como una lluvia de hojas a un campo de nieve,  
como la yedra a la estatua,  
como la tinta a esta página.

Brazos, cintura, cuello, senos,  
la frente pura como el mar,  
la nuca de bosque en otoño,  
los dientes que muerden una brizna de yerba.

Tu cuerpo se constela de signos verdes  
como el cuerpo del árbol de renuevos.  
No te importe tanta pequeña cicatriz luminosa:  
mira al cielo y su verde tatuaje de estrellas.

Here, the reader sees a conjoining of the act of creating a written product with life as created by nature. More specifically, the written word here creates the natural cosmos inscribed within the poem, which in turn is conflated with a female body.

The first stanza briefly details the creative process by which this natural world is constructed. Literary discourse itself is treated as a natural entity in its own right, as words become sturdy and visible “árboles” and sentences become “verdes constelaciones,” as groupings of thoughts in the same manner as a constellation is a grouping of stars. The second stanza continues the creative process by Paz’s voice now addressing his female interlocutor, as he in turn is responsible for writing his desired love object much the same way that he writes the natural world. He implores her to let him cover her with his words as leaves cover a snowy field or ivy covers a statue. Unlike most of the poems seen thus far, in this case the female body, the quest for *otredad*, and the natural world are combined this time with the willful act of literary creation or poesis; as Gustavo Correa has observed, in this collection, “la figura femenina aparece como mediadora y, aún más, como vía de identificación con el cosmos y de experiencia poética incandescente” (492). The remainder of the poem further likens a woman’s body to the topography of the earth. It is within nature, and at the end of the poem specifically within the celestial sphere, where woman becomes eternal; of

course, Paz wrote texts like these from a heterosexual male perspective. Lloyd King has noted Paz's gender identifications: "For Paz, woman is the embodiment of the eternal feminine which in cosmic terms is complementary to the male intellectual principle, and therefore eroticism has a fundamental psychic significance" (48). Both woman and the cosmos are encapsulated in the "signos verdes" of this poem written in symbolic "green ink," much the way that the color green reflects living vegetation.<sup>13</sup>

"Visitas" is a much shorter composition in which nature itself becomes the object of the poet's quest for *otredad* (85). Nature "visits" the poet at night and helps him to achieve plenitude. This poem suggests harmony and tranquility:

A través de la noche urbana de piedra y sequía  
entra el campo a mi cuarto.  
Alarga brazos verdes con pulseras de pájaros,  
con pulseras de hojas.  
Lleva un río de la mano.  
El cielo del campo también entra,  
con su cesta de joyas acabadas de cortar.  
Y el mar se sienta junto a mí,  
extendiendo su cola blanquísima en el suelo.  
Del silencio brota un árbol de música.  
Del árbol cuelgan todas las palabras hermosas  
que brillan, maduran, caen.  
En mi frente, cueva que habita un relámpago...  
Pero todo se ha poblado de alas.  
Dime, ¿es de veras el campo que viene de tan lejos  
o eres tú, son los sueños que sueñas a mi lado?

The context of this poem is somewhat unique: in this case, nature is the desired Other for Paz and proves to be a powerful antidote to the daily pressures of living in the city. In crafting this poem, Paz advocates for a communion with nature even in the midst of modern urban life. Though in some ways the relationship between humankind and nature here can be seen as an I-thou relationship, it also becomes one best characterized as part-whole, as seen elsewhere. Initially, nature may seem separate from humankind, yet it is Paz's analogic vision which bridges the two; as Chazarreta states, "El primer

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<sup>13</sup> This conflation of nature and the female body also includes the notion of fertility, a concept seen throughout human history and in other works by Paz. As Chazarreta notes, "La mujer se vincula con la noción de la fertilidad que ingresa a partir de la mención de la lluvia, de la luna y de Semíramis (diosa de la fertilidad y de la belleza). Se enlaza, además, con la antigua noción de lo eterno femenino; es un intertexto cultural construido a través de deidades y figuras femeninas diversas a lo largo de su obra y emparentado con la naturaleza. La mujer es concebida, inclusive, como un puente, un pasaje a la otredad, la realidad de un tránsito... presente en el personaje del cuento infantil, Almendrita." ("Dilemas del otro" 142)

aspecto que sobresale en esta concepción es la otredad de la naturaleza, su carácter autónomo y ajeno al hombre. En segundo lugar, emerge de estas palabras una noción que atraviesa la estética de Paz: la cosmovisión analógica, es decir, la construcción de paralelos entre el hombre y su entorno.” (“Entre la piedra y la flor” 2) The natural world peacefully invades his artificial realm of a room and extends its bodily form out to him. The eternal flow of the river<sup>14</sup> is also clearly visible, as are the sky and the sea in their vastness. The central image of the tree itself becomes a discursive presence, as its metaphoric leaves are the “palabras hermosas” which nature uses to communicate with the narrator. Through this, we see a communicative symbiosis between humankind and nature, as the poem suggests a dialogue and an engagement with each other. Although this poem does not treat the environment ostensibly as a gendered entity or as an object of sexual desire, this same environment becomes an indispensable part of the poet’s life and allows him to have a lyrical voice.

Finally, “A la orilla” returns again to the common association of femininity with the natural world within Paz’s search for companionship and communion (86). Again, the reader notices the night as the time in which this unity is forged, along with the juxtaposition of light amidst the dark:

Todo lo que brilla en la noche,  
collares, ojos, astros,  
serpentinadas de fuegos de colores,  
brilla en tus brazos de río que se curva,  
en tu cuello de día que despierta.

The human body suggested in these lines encapsulates the natural world, including the now-familiar trope of the river and its continuous, life-affirming presence. Light-dark contrast is visible in the second stanza, “La hoguera que encienden en la selva,” which along with a giraffe’s long neck and the eye of an insomniac, become tired of waiting. The poem shifts from imagery of brilliance and being awake to somnolence, as Paz exhorts his interlocutor, “Apágate, / para brillar no hay como los ojos que nos ven: / contéplate en mí que te contemplo.” Unity with the Other is achieved during this time frame of the night, and again it is the natural environment which grants Paz the words with which to affirm life and unity. He exhorts his partner to sleep, likening her directly to the “terciopelo de bosque, / musgo donde reclina la cabeza.” The poem concludes with an oneiric and even metapoetic image of Paz writing his words during a dreamlike state during the night, only to have them erased by the same night: “La

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<sup>14</sup> The river appears as a motif for movement and flow elsewhere in Paz’s work, sometimes distinguished from elements such as the tree, often seen as a symbol of plenitude and unity with the Other. See Hernández Araico, where she explains the function of these two motifs in “Piedra de sol” (232). In other works beyond the scope of this study, Paz maintains the image of the river as a symbol of life and of eternity. See, for instance, Magis for an examination of the river (and of water more broadly as well) in *La estación violenta* (138).



noche con las olas azules va borrando estas palabras, / escritas con mano ligera en la palma del sueño.” This grants a certain measure of timelessness and eternity, as the human form and the natural world become conjoined yet again.

To conclude, it would be simplistic to label Paz merely as a “nature poet” or “nature writer,” as some might be tempted to do. In this instance, one does not merely see hymns of praise for nature, nor a particular nationalist rendering of humankind’s place in nature (such as what is visible in nineteenth-century Romanticism). Instead, the natural world is an indispensable tool for Paz as he attempts to find his own identity vis-à-vis the presence of another and to inscribe that search within the lyric. Without the natural world, there can be no completion with the Other; the gap between *soledad* and *otredad* could not be sufficiently bridged. This is visible not only in these sections of *Libertad bajo palabra* but also in later publications, such as *¿Águila o sol?* and the long poem, “Piedra de sol.” Additionally, the concept of the natural world as a bridge can be seen in the work of other Latin American poets, such as José Lezama Lima Vicente Gerbasi; in Chazarreta’s study of their work alongside Paz’s, she notes, “El paisaje... se presenta como una categoría que religa, que concilia.” (“Convertir la naturaleza” 9)<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it is partly through the natural world that Paz infuses his poetry with a sense of undertaking a walk or a journey, a phenomenon visible in much of his work, as Verani had recently studied.<sup>16</sup> One is to hope that we may see future study of Octavio Paz and his manipulation of the natural world, and that readers may better understand how something so central to his thought—the search for *otredad*—came into being through nature.

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<sup>15</sup> Chazarreta discusses the meanings of spatiality and landscape in Gerbasi in greater detail in “Dimensiones del espacio: el trópico en la poesía de Vicente Gerbasi.” This cosmovision, thus, is not limited exclusively to Paz.

<sup>16</sup> Verani’s monographic study, *Octavio Paz: el poema como caminata*, illustrates how the concept of taking a walk, winding one’s way through word and image, pervades nearly all of Paz’s poetic output throughout his career, heavily influenced by the travels he had undertaken throughout his life. A highly thorough analysis, this in many ways lies beyond the scope of this study.

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