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Theodor W. Adorno and Octavio Paz: Two Visions of Modernity

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Abstract *2003 was the hundredth anniversary of Theodor W. Adorno's birth. In Germany – and elsewhere – there was clearly a desire to show that critical theory was still alive. Although this article affirms the return to one of the classics of critical theory, it criticises the hagiographic ways in which this was done. If one of the most important challenges facing 'global modernity' is our ability to connect to the 'concrete other', Adorno's critical theory is insufficient, and needs to be complemented by other intellectual articulations. This article proposes a comparison between Octavio Paz and Adorno. Both men located their intellectual commitment in a critique of modernity. But, so runs the argument here, Paz knew much better than Adorno that a critique of modernity needs to take into account the multiplicity of modern cultures.*

2003 was the year in which the hundredth anniversary of Adorno's birth was celebrated. In Germany – and elsewhere – the will to make sure that critical theory was still alive was apparent. However, was the ambition expressed by a flood of publications really proof for the 'actuality' of Adorno's thinking? Reading some of the many articles and books published in the 'Adorno-year', it was difficult to avoid the suspicion that what really motivated the euphoria over the work of this highly uncommon thinker was not so much the assurance that Adorno's ideas are still valid, but, on the contrary, a certain nostalgia for a time which is no longer ours. Again and again, Adorno was described as an icon of an era which was long over: 'a last genius' for example, as the title of Detlev Claussen's book on Adorno clearly states (Claussen 2004). For Lorenz Jäger, it seems to be beyond doubt that Adorno's biography is linked to a modernity which started with the year of his birth, 1903, but which was definitely over by 1969, the year of his death (Jäger 2003).

Nostalgia for a time in which it might have been easier to be a critical, non-conformist or 'negative' intellectual is probably a legitimate motivation to return to Adorno. It allows us a glimpse into a time when the life and the work of an intellectual was in many ways unique. However, it does not tell us whether Adorno's work still has any social, political, cultural or academic relevance today. Therefore, it is important to return to Adorno's writings in a more critical way. This is what Martin Seel proposes when he wrote recently: 'It would be time to free Adorno's philosophy from the dogma and trauma of

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negativity, from the sometimes unhappy fixation on Hegel and from the supposed focus on artistic problems' (Seel 2004: 29). Specifically, Seel discovers in Adorno a 'philosophy of contemplation', the announcement of a kind of thought in which the 'respect for other human beings' is of prime importance, and which emphasises first of all 'a singular form of opening to the world' (33). A few lines later, Seel writes: 'Contemplation is Adorno's name for a praxis in which one engages with an other and in which, at the same time, one can let the other be the other' (34). He goes on: 'In these kinds of relationships to the other which are not guided by utilitarianism, Adorno sees the "core of the experience" that motivates and sustains his critique of the condition of modern societies' (34).

In what follows, I would like to show that Seel has identified two different attitudes that are not balanced in Adorno's work. On the one hand, there can be no doubt that Adorno wanted to protect the right of the other to be different. This he expresses in a negative sense by criticising permanently the provincial tendency of his own German 'culture' (*Kultur*) to wall itself off against the other. In this sense, one of Adorno's achievements is to have helped to break the chains of this self-confinement. This is not the same as 'engaging', or connecting with, the concrete other. In order to take this second step, Adorno's 'critique' (*Kritik*) would need a complementary effort such as the one Octavio Paz adopted in his effort to reach out to other cultures. For Paz, comparison is not only a technique or a method, but also a different attitude. It is already an opening to, and at the same time an embracing of, the *concrete* other. My comparison of Adorno and Paz is not only interested in differences between them. Before I begin to compare them, especially with respect to their understandings of 'critique', I will show that they share a commitment to a fundamental social role in modern societies, namely that of an intellectual, a term I would like first to define.

Intellectuals in post-traditional societies

According to Anthony Giddens, modern societies are post-traditional societies (Giddens 1995). Giddens explains that the shift from traditional to post-traditional societies must have disturbing psychological consequences since traditions guarantee 'ontological security' (Giddens 1990, 1991). As a controlled form of repetition, traditions assure us of being in the 'world we know' and they help to avoid having to expose to 'alien values' and 'ways of life' (Giddens 1994: 73). Consequently, modernity must represent a severely destructive impact on any tradition. This occurs not so much because of the commonly celebrated unleashing of rationality, but according to Giddens' understanding, because modernity is a process of globalisation, that is, the constitution of a global network of communication and interaction, in which any society is constantly confronted with 'alien values', meanings and 'forms of life'.

Giddens recognises that modernity does not eliminate traditions across the boards. Although his argument still resembles in many aspects conventional 'modernization theory', according to which modernity and tradition are seen as fatal opponents (see Knöbl 2001: 17), he reminds us that traditions do not even exist for so-called 'traditional societies' since they have no

notion of tradition as such. As Octavio Paz has observed: 'more than having an awareness of their traditions, they live with and in them' (Paz 1985: 26). Rather than being 'the other of tradition' modernity can even be considered a process whereby tradition is 'invented' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). Such a process does not lead to post-traditional forms of human life, but to an unprecedented, worldwide effort to challenge the institutional, symbolic and imaginary ways in which traditions do inform human action and thought. Giddens's intuition needs emphasising: it is not the *unleashing of reason*, but *globalisation*, which triggered this programme. With Paz we could add: while *reason* can only explain *negation*, *globalisation* explains the recognition of *difference*, of *different* cultures, civilisations, and traditions (Paz 1985: 21).

With this in mind, we can also try to specify a more homogenised concept of the modern intellectual: What 'local' and 'universal', 'political' or 'a-political', 'engaged' or 'ironic', 'opportunist' or 'non-conformist', intellectuals share is the awareness of the challenge to 'work on traditions'; that is, to deconstruct, reconstruct and even invent them. This understanding of an intellectual can be found in Adorno and Paz. For both, modernity means first of all this work on traditions without relapsing into a kind of fundamentalism.

Adorno's negative re-appropriation of his own tradition

In Germany those intellectuals who dominated the cultural debates at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century when the 'crisis' of tradition became an issue in this country have been named the 'German mandarins' by Fritz Ringer. Hauke Brunkhorst gives a very concise definition of this term: 'In Germany the mandarins take over a similar role as the spirit of pragmatism in the United States or, at least since the Dreyfus-Affair the "universal intellectual" in France'. Much more effectively excluded from political and economic power than comparable groups in other western countries, the German mandarins took over the *power of the symbols*. It was their task to replace the virtues, values and traditions of the old religion of the aristocratically organised worldly order, which was devastated by the storm of modernisation, with *new values*. It was this substitution that guaranteed their long-lived *cultural hegemony*. Aristocracy of the spirit (*Geistesaristokratie*) and religion of education (*Bildungsreligion*), social pessimism, nationalism and a neo-pagan metaphysic replaced the binding forces of the old church. But they did so *without* democracy, *without* a political ideal of liberty and *after* Enlightenment' (Brunkhorst 1990: 45). 'German mandarins' have thus been a very important moment in the German process of modernisation, and they have played a key role in an academically successful educational and university system. At the same time they have painted the German path to modernity with conservative and even reactionary colours.

Critical intellectuals such as Adorno were relegated to the fringes of the educational and cultural institutions with very little chances to participate in the public sphere. Adorno reflected on this situation many times. In particular, his *Minima Moralia* (1951) expresses the experiences of a marginalised intellectual, an 'intellectual in suspension', a situation which became even more accentuated when Adorno had to leave his country, becoming detached

from his own culture, from his own tradition, from his own language: 'Every intellectual who lives in exile is, without any exception, damaged […]. He lives in a world which he won't understand […]' (*GS* 4: 35). Another powerful and oft-cited metaphor emerged in this context that reflects how Adorno evaluated the impact of his work; without the expectation that it would find an immediate public, he looked upon his work as a 'message in a bottle' (*GS* 4: 239).

Eventually, this 'bottle' was picked up after Adorno returned to Germany (1949) and the message was appropriated by a generation of young Germans who defined themselves by their fierce opposition to their parent's generation. A new, historical consciousness and 'political culture' developed in Germany but it was expressed in negative terms. 'Non-conformism' became the leading slogan of the student movement and its latent mistrust of all institutions, along with a historical consciousness summed up by the term 'Auschwitz', became the most important building blocks of a new identity that would guarantee a democratic and peaceful future. To put it bluntly: western Germany after World War II became a country whose cultural and political 'project' was defined partly by a critique of its own tradition. Adorno's idea of negativity seemed, all of a sudden, to be exactly the programme that fitted its needs.[1]

Yet Adorno's critique of his own tradition was not a radical negation of it. He realised that any attempt to leave one's own tradition was futile, because the writer especially is tied to his tradition through his language (*GS* 10.1: 314). In this sense, Adorno's critique of tradition attempts to 'renounce tradition and still follow it' (319); or in more general terms, to establish a 'relationship to the past which is not conservative' (315). This does not mean that Adorno's critique of his own tradition was not radical enough. The problem, rather, is that he focused to a considerable extent on his *own* European, specifically German[2] tradition. Although he understood that European culture had long since been globalised, he rejected the idea that a different experience with modernity might help in the work of critique. For example, in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno recognises that some might think that 'the integration of the non-occidental peoples in the struggles of the industrial societies was long overdue' (GS 4: 59). Yet he tries to convince his readers that this would not only be wrong, but even dangerous, since there cannot be any critical thinking outside of Europe: 'It would be bad psychology to assume that from what one has been excluded, wakes hatred and resentment; it wakes also an

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[1] Adorno was aware of the fact that he, the former 'non-conformist' intellectual, became a protagonist in the 'intellectual founding of the Federal Republic' of Germany (see Albrecht *et al*. 1999). Horkheimer reflects about this in a letter he wrote to Adorno:

> It would create a unique situation in which two persons, who act with so much resistance to reality, and who precisely for this reason seem to be determined to powerlessness, are offered a possibility of influence which can hardly be calculated. (Kraushaar, 1998: 54)

[2] I appreciate a commentary by Stefan Müller-Doohm that Adorno's thinking is situated in a European context. I would not discuss this observation, which is definitely true. However, here I am trying to make the point that his idea of 'critique' is probably the result of a particularly German cultural situation. I will develop this argument later.

obsessive, impatient kind of love, and those who don't come close to the repressive culture turn easily into its most stubborn guardians' (58). That this was not only arrogant, but also wrong is evident when we compare Adorno with Octavio Paz.

Paz and the 'fabrication' of a universal of tradition

There are many objections to calling Paz a 'non-conformist' intellectual. Outside of Mexico the last two decades of his long and productive life, Paz (1914–88) seemed to be dedicated to storming the Olympus of an international elite of writers, an effort that was rewarded by nothing less than the Nobel Prize in 1990. In Mexico, however, Paz will also be remembered for his polemical relationship to the political establishment (see González Torres 2002). One of the most controversial decisions Paz ever made was his support of the former Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gotari who came to power by what many consider a fraudulent election in 1988, and who propagated his neo-liberal policy as the only way for Mexico to enter into modernity (see González Torres 2002: 114). However, it would be unfair to argue that Paz made his decisions because of some kind of opportunism. It has to be remembered that in the 1980s he was already one of the most internationally recognised Mexican writers and thus did not need to bow before political power in order to make his career. Additionally, earlier in his life Paz made many uncomfortable decisions as a protest against the political system.[3] And it would also be too simple to see in neo-liberalism the culmination of Paz's commitment to liberalism.[4]

This does not mean that Paz was not interested in maintaining a healthy relationship with the political system. However, just as I tried to show that Adorno's intellectual 'non-conformism', maybe even his philosophical negativity, cannot be understood without reference to the historical and biographical context, it would be incorrect to see Paz's interest in maintaining a connection with the political system as a kind of personal weakness. Instead, the Mexican political system, especially during and after the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), established a very astute way of dealing even with critical intellectuals.[5] Though the preparation for the Revolution itself did not depend importantly on support by the intellectuals – 'it was essentially the work of the common people […] no great intellectuals prescribed its program, formulated its doctrine, outlined its objectives' (Knight 1991: 144) – once the revolution was successful, the process of the administrative and cultural construction of a new nation did require the help of the intellectuals.[6] This

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[3] The most spectacular was probably when he resigned from his post as Mexican ambassador to India in protest against the slain of students in Mexico City in 1968.

[4] For a more sophisticated view on Paz's liberalism, see Grenier 2001.

[5] One of the most severe crises in the relationship between intellectuals and government had been triggered by the crackdown on the Mexican students movement in 1968 (see Volpi 1998).

[6] Some of which even sacrificed their lives, working as government officials instead of producing an intellectual oeuvre. This can be said for the '*generación de 1915*' (see Krauze 2000).

means that in Mexico, there was almost always an opportunity for intellectuals to identify with, and to participate in, a state-orchestrated political project. However, the price to pay was considerably high, as the Mexican sociologist Fernando Castañeda explains in his recent book: the protagonists in the cultural organisation of post-revolutionary Mexico are neither the intellectuals nor a group of 'illustrative citisens' but the state itself. 'The Mexican culture emancipated itself from the church, but not from the king', writes Castañeda (2004: 112). One of the consequences has been an all-pervasive nationalism, from which no cultural or academic activity could easily escape.

It is no secret that also Paz 'did his duty' for his country. For many years (from 1944 until 1968), he belonged to the diplomatic staff of the Mexican foreign ministry. The last position he held was that of the Mexican ambassador to India. However, this does not mean that he had sacrificed his critical attitude and succumbed to a crude nationalism. On the contrary: the diplomatic service allowed Paz to get to know many different countries – above all the United States, France, Switzerland, Japan and India – thus helping him to understand the richness of the world and consequently the mistake inherent in any kind of self-satisfied nationalism (see Sheridan 2004: 433–95).

Of course, Paz participated in the mission of defining the character of 'the Mexican'. Enrique Krauze writes: '[…] the permanent subject and object of his passion and his critique was Mexico, his country […]' (Krauze 2003: 141). But Krauze also recognises a 'permanent fascination for duality' (142). This means that for Paz it was always imperative to understand Mexico as both a culture which has developed its own ways of coping with the most import aspects of the human self-understanding – solitude, communion and death – and, at the same time, as a culture which, despite all its particularities, participates with its own voice in the 'polyphonic' concert of a global modernity. The task of a *modern* Mexican intellectual as Paz understood it, was, consequently, the 'fabrication' of a new tradition (Zermeño 2003: 7), one able to recognise these dialectics of being one self without being detached from the rest of the world.

Paz found his major source of inspiration in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–95), a nun and also poet of New Spain. At a time when the power of Spain in the American colonies started to fade, and in which a new Creole society started to take over, Sor Juana became the 'mother' of modern Mexican intellectuals. She 'transformed natural maternity into a symbolic or spiritual' one (*OC* 5: 112). The stress on 'maternity' is crucial. For Paz, Mexico is a maternalist culture. Already in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), he wrote about two other important female characters; but while *Doña Malinche*, an Indian aristocrat who became the wife of the conqueror Hernán Cortés, is still today the symbol of treason but also of Mexico's cultural and ethnic hybridity, and the *Virgen de Guadalupe* the representation of the Mexican unity under the roof of the catholic church, Sor Juana is presented by Paz as *the* Mexican key to the modern world. In her poetry, Paz senses an important step towards a 'universal' tradition he himself was longing for. 'Universal,' however, does not refer to universal and abstract principles, but first of all to a universal language. The language in which Sor Juana wrote, Spanish, was for Paz such a universal language. It became universal in the poetry of Sor Juana, where it ceased to be only an alien language, the 'language of the

conquistadors'. *In nuce*, a language or tradition becomes 'universal' when it is *appropriated*. Appropriation does not mean to copy that which is appropriated; rather, it always involves a process of transformation and consequently of creating something *different*. A universal tradition is for Paz, thus, something 'which does not annul diversity, but which makes it possible, which sustains it' (*OC* 3: 18).

As we have seen, Adorno and Paz saw the challenges facing modern intellectuals to consist in the work on tradition; but while Adorno stuck to what he considered to be his own European (and as we will still see: more specifically German) tradition, Octavio Paz looked to many other cultures for inspiration. In what follows, I would like to show that this difference determines their respective understandings of 'critique'.

Why Adorno's '*Kritik*' is so difficult to translate

In an etymological sense 'critique' always contains the meaning of 'marking differences'. Critique requires a constant work on the language in which it expresses itself. It is impossible to mark differences in 'stale language' (*abgestandene Sprache*) that is, rather, condemned to indifference and only reaffirms the conventional understanding about reality. In 'stale language' the 'whole' speaks for every individual. What Adorno was looking for, however, is the transition to *Mündigkeit*, a condition in which everybody has his/her own voice and where the polyphony of discourses opposes radically any kind of monologism (see *GS* 10.2: 785–93). Modernity is thus a permanent critique of language.

Adorno found inspiration for his understanding of critique not in philosophy but in aesthetic modernism. Modernity's critique of language mimics modern art, even more: '[modernity] is art through mimesis of the petrified and the alienated; it is by this, not by neglecting the mute, that it becomes eloquent …' (*GS* 8: 39). Hauke Brunkhorst sums up Adorno's idea as follows: 'It is decisive that critique follows art and *not* theory' (Brunkhorst 1995: 127). Brunkhorst explains:

> [Critique] accepts the experience of contradictions and antinomies, of complex and uncontrollable situations and impulses and it renders to them, it looses itself in the things, mingles with them [*verfranst sich selbst in ihnen*], and rejects the prefabricated *solutions* of theory, which it finally reveals as appearance [*Schein*] and false absolutizing. (127)

The motor of critique is not the effort to produce novelty in a positive sense. Adorno is very clear about that in his *Aesthetic Theory*:

> The authority of the new is that which is historically unavoidable. In this sense it implies an objective critique of the individual, its vehicle: aesthetically the new ties the knot of the individual and society. The experience of modernity says more; although its concept, despite of all qualitative meaning, always works on abstraction. It is from the beginning more a negation of what should not be anymore, than a positive phrase. (*GS* 7: 38)

This 'negation of what should not be anymore' is only possible through the recognition of the 'non-identical' which Martin Seel defines as 'the 'heterogeneous', 'the strange', 'the different', 'the unique' or 'the special' (Seel 2004: 23), and in which he suspects the '*individual presence* of things and persons' (24), that is, something definitely positive and existing. Seel thinks that Adorno's diagnosis may be negative, but that the procedure – which orients itself toward really existing things and persons and which 'recognizes' them in their resistance to the facticity of the totalising discourses and institutions – is positive. Seel refers in this context to Adorno's essay 'Scientific Experiences in America', suggesting that a 'positive' source of inspiration for Adorno's critique was the scientific and political culture he encountered in the USA, where he lived for more than a decade of his life. In order to make his point, Seel quotes a very important passage of this text: 'We will not become free human beings by realizing ourselves after a terrible phase as individuals, but only by going beyond ourselves, getting into a relationship with others and, in a sense, by rendering ourselves to them' (quoted in Seel 2004: 27; Adorno *GS* 10.2: 735–36).

But is this quotation really a proof of Adorno's decision to look in other cultures for positive inspiration, as Seel seems to suggest? I have my doubts and would like to propose a different reading: Adorno's phrase is not an indication that he is looking for inspiration in a different 'culture' or a different modernity[7], but it is rather a summary of his critique of German culture itself. In order to bring out this point, it might be helpful, to focus on another text, namely, 'About the question: what is German?' (*GS* 10.2: 691–701). At the beginning, Adorno denies the possibility of giving a positive answer to this question. Instead, he underscores that what he is really interested in, is the question itself, and that thinking about this question helps to understand that a possible answer is always burdened by a normative ideal of what 'German' *shall* be. In other words: the question 'What is German?' leads usually to idealisations and stereotypes, that is, to positive images – which because of their abstract character – can only be 'wrong'. Therefore: '[True] and better is […] that which does *not* fit into the collective subject, which, wherever possible, resists to it' (691). This 'critical self-understanding' (*kritische Selbsbestimmung*) (692) does not need positive images that a comparison to other 'cultures' might provide. On the contrary, it nurtures itself in an alternative German tradition of which Adorno sees in Kant the most prominent expression. 'His [Kant's] thinking has its center in the concept of autonomy, the self-responsibility of the reasonable individual and not in the blind dependencies, of which one is the unreflected predominance of the national' (692). It seems quite obvious that Adorno situates Kant's, as well as his own, ideas in an outspokenly German situation, in that of a 'culture war,' as it were, which is marked by a 'dialectical' tension: on one side, 'a radicalization of the spirit' (695), on the other, a just as radical tendency to collective delusions, by which individuality and subjectivity – that is, the recipients and shaper of spirit and

[7] Just as if he would announce an awareness of the plurality of modernities – which marks the debate about 'multiple modernities' in contemporary sociological theory – ahead of time.

reason – are constantly crushed. In still another text (*GS* 10.2: 786–93), Adorno even explains '*Kritik*' as a direct outcome of this ambivalence; it is the radical reaction against the just as radical and 'essentially German' tendency to 'call for the positive' (792).

To put it differently: in spite of all the years Adorno spent outside of Germany, it is quite possible that his thinking never escaped this German cultural and political battlefield that shaped his ideas so decisively. That is not to say that Adorno did not recognise anything positive in the countries in which he lived during his years of exile. The USA, especially, as Seel has pointed out, actually left some important impressions on Adorno's thought, as, one might also add, did England and France, as Adorno himself admits (791). However, these influences, I would suggest, are not decisive for his understanding of 'critique' nor do they provide indispensable criteria for his critique of his own German culture.

At this point an aspect of critique – its dependency on language – should be recalled. One of the most important reasons that Adorno decided to return to Germany (see *GS* 10.2: 699) was that he felt the need to express himself in German in order to be a fully functioning intellectual. Adorno was not referring to the common problems of acquiring a new language. He explains the need for the German language rather by underlining its intrinsic connection with critique: if critique is the undermining of the 'positive', the 'essential', the 'facticity', and so on, then it is the German language and especially its 'speculative moments' – which philosophy appreciates above all – that explain the 'elective affinity' to critique: it enables the expression of the phenomenon which does not fit into its 'pure positivity and giveness' (700).

So, Adorno's relationship to his own culture may be ambivalent; but this ambivalence is still an ambivalence produced within German culture, which Adorno is reflecting upon.[8] There is no reason to doubt that there is a typically German form of 'critique' which can only work in the German language and which is impossible to translate into other languages. Yet despite Adorno's constant ambition to fight the 'narrowness' (*Enge*) and the 'mustiness' (*Muff*) of German 'culture' (*Kultur*)[9], which certainly helps to break the iron shell of 'the own', allowing one to think the 'non-identical' (the other, the strange), Adorno's '*Kritik*' does not make contact with the other. Rather, it needs to be complemented by a more 'extroverted' form of critique, like the one we can find in Octavio Paz.

Octavio Paz's cosmopolitan modernity

At first sight Adorno and Paz could not be more different. In his own comparison of the two thinkers, Alfons Söllner describes the work of Paz as an

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[8] 'Critique is an indispensable element of the culture which is contradictory in itself […]' (*GS* 10.1: 15).

[9] 'Narrowness' (Enge) and 'mustiness' (Muff) are words that accompany Adorno's thought at least from very early 1930s to the last decade of his life. They always seem to refer to a typical German attitude for which Adorno finds the most striking evidence in the 'jargon of authenticity', that is, a language that he encounters above all in Heidegger's philosophy (see *GS* 6).

expression of 'a joyful universalism which discovers in the singularities of the most different cultures of the world, [what] makes the human essence in general' (Söllner 2004: 2–3). It is the 'comparison of cultures' that Paz declares 'explicitly as the guiding principle of his essays' (4). But the essay is the 'formless form' (Adorno) and therefore also a privileged instrument for critique. In his 'Vuelta a *El laberinto de la soledad*' (*OC* 8: 241–60), Paz explains:

> Critique is for me a *free* form of commitment. The writer has to be a sniper, he has to stand the solitude and he has to know that he is marginalized. That we writers are marginalized is a condition which is a blessing. To be marginal means to give a value to our writing. (258)

This does not sound too different from Adorno: the relationship between critique and the form of the essay as well as the solitude of the critical intellectual is what Adorno underscores again and again. And still, there is also a very important difference between the two thinkers. For Paz there is always a way out of solitude, while for Adorno this seems to be endlessly more difficult, perhaps even impossible.

For Paz there is no doubt that solitude is part of the human condition. He writes in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*:

> the feeling and consciousness of being alone, of being alienated from oneself and from the world, even of being separated from oneself is not an exclusively Mexican condition of the soul. All human beings feel sometimes alone. [And] Life means to separate ourselves from what we once were, in order to become what we will be at one point in the unknown future, and solitude is the most stable foundation of the conditio humana. (*OC* 8: 189)

But solitude, and the awareness of it, is only one part of a much more complex condition. Complementary to it, Paz sees the constant search for new ways of 'communion' with the other. In this sense Paz writes: 'The human being is the only creature which knows that it is lonely, the only one that searches the "other"' (189). This sentence could not express more clearly what Paz means when he speaks about the 'dialectics of solitude'. The sensation of solitude is part of the human condition; however, to it belongs a complementary moment, the desire and search for communion with the other.

This dialectical pair builds a 'force field' that Paz recognises especially in modernity. In this context, modernity is awareness and problematisation of the relationship to the other. Paz explains this with reference to the relationship between Mexico and the rest of the modern world. He understood that, from a Mexican point of view, modernity is not some kind of 'alien' exteriority and that, in this sense, Mexico cannot be relegated to a position 'exterior' to modernity. Rather, there is a typical Mexican modernity that, though obviously unique in some respects, also shares many pivotal experiences with other modernities. Consequently, one might say that Paz anticipated an intuition which has been explored and exploited in recent years and which has paved the way for a whole research-program like that which in current

sociology goes under the name of 'multiple modernities'. Although he dedicates much of his writing to describing and interpreting the Mexican culture, Paz also demonstrates that *modern* Mexican culture can only be understood if it is compared to the many other cultures on the planet, to which it belongs as part of the modern *world*. This awareness is no accident, nor is it the result of the sort of Mexican 'inferiority complex' famously postulated by the Mexican philosopher Samuel Ramos. It is, rather, the consequence of a deeply felt *normative* commitment, intrinsic to Paz's concept of modernity. In modernity Paz sees not only a planetary phenomenon; he also recognises that it is precisely the intercultural aspect of a global modernity which calls for an ethics that emphasises the imperatives of comparison and mutual learning from each other.

Modernity is thus seen as a global but not homogeneously shared definition of social and cultural realities. It creates differences and finds one of its most important normative orientations in comparison, an activity that celebrates differences without ignoring important affinities. This might have motivated Paz to see in modernity an 'empty name' (*OC* 3: 19). In Habermas's words, one could say, modernity is and will be an 'unfinished project'. However, to be able to capture the complete sense of what Paz might have had in mind, one has to go beyond Habermas, since for Paz it would be a mistake to presume that the empty name 'modernity' can be encompassed in one single project or one 'grand narrative'. But just as wrong as seeing in '[m]odernity […] an arrogant affirmation of the future and the now' would be to understand it as an impending catastrophic, barbarous and totalising cataclysm on a planetary scale, which Adorno's negative philosophy of history predicts. Both ways fail to understand what modernity really means: it is an 'empty surface of questions' (20) i.e. a name for a permanent challenge, which accepts the vanishing of unquestioned certainties and, at the same time, the certainty of continuity of uncertainty. Critique is thus the permanent questioning of any self-satisfied manifestation of the given; but while for Adorno the critique is grounded in a German context, for Paz it results from comparing one's own culture with what is actually different.

Yvon Grenier has seen Paz as one of the precursors of postmodernism (Grenier 2001: 98). In spite of his defence of modernity, one can sense in his writing some kind of horizon beyond modernity.

> […] it is good to repeat that modernity, like anything else which is history, is a vanishing reality: nothing will stay of it, but if something will stay, it will be some lively moments, a few words before and after the dates. (*OC* 3: 22)

The last part of this phrase is certainly obscure and therefore very atypical for Paz, who was always concerned with clarity. What is meant with those 'lively moments' and the words, which seem to have a certain independence from time? Certainly, what is independent of time is the present. It is not only different from past and future; it is different from time; the present is the suspension of time. This suspension of time creates the instant of transcendence that shines through the fabric of history (40).

But for Paz that which shines through history is not (the) postmodern. It refers rather to an experience for which an anthropological condition is responsible and which cannot be simulated in any other language than poetry. 'The poem', says Paz in his *El Arco y la lira* (1956), 'draws a line which separates the privileged instant from the temporal flow. In this here and now begins something: love, an heroic act, a vision of divinity, a momentous amazement about this tree or about Diana […]' (2003: 186–87). The poem brings us back to Paz's anthropology of the 'dialectics of solitude' and 'communion': it marks the instant as the 'space' between human beings (187). In 1990 Paz said in his Nobel Prize speech: 'What do we know about the present? Nothing, or almost nothing. But poets know something: The present is the fountain of presences (*presencias*)' (*OC* 3: 41). Paz refers to the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, when he sums up the virtues of the poetic language in the following words: 'The *other* presents itself and speaks through the [mouth of the poet]' (OC 10: 35).

None of this means that poetry should serve as some kind of definite exit from 'history'. Paz recognises that history is another condition of the human being and he was very clear about that in the 1950s: 'In order to be in the present the poem has to become present between human beings, incarnate in history' (2003: 187). But the message of poetry, which stems from the deepest source of our human desires, is what should inform history or, more precisely, *histories*. Again: Paz is not arguing for a definite suspension of history, but rather for the conflation of distinct times, of different histories. According to him, it is modernity that allows this 'simultaneousness of times' in one globally shared 'moment'. Of course, under the conditions I just outlined, it becomes difficult to talk about modernity in the singular. Paz knows that, and he sounds definitely like an early herald of the awareness that informs the current debate about 'multiple modernities': 'What is modernity? First of all it is a wrong term: there are so many modernities as there are societies' (35).

Finally, critique is for Paz first of all self-critique, something he shares with Adorno. However, while the latter's critique somehow reduces itself to the critique of the 'own', Paz goes a step further. He reaches out to the other by learning its language and comparing to it. In doing so, he follows a very important instinct: the desire to know the world, which he remembers having experienced since his childhood: 'The experience repeated itself over and over. Any news, an anodyne phrase, the headline in a newspaper, a popular song: all proofs of the existence of a world out there and a revelation of my unreality' (35).

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