

**On the Presence of Absence:
Octavio Paz's *Blanco***

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If I had to summarize the sensation I experienced completing editorial work on Octavio Paz's *Blanco / Archivo Blanco* it would be my title: the paradox of the presence of absence. At the end of "Esto no es un poema," my 1996 essay, I reflected upon how the poem's concluding lines "**La irrealidad de lo mirado/ da realidad a la mirada**" (The unreality of the seen/gives reality to the seeing") described not only the vanishing bodies of the two lovers whose erotic experience the poem describes, but also the vanishing of the text itself.¹ My point then was not that the end of the poem allegorizes its own narrative ending—a trite theme and procedure in modernist art; instead, I wanted to show that the poem's running argument against all

¹See "Esto no es un poema," in *Blanco/Archivo Blanco*, ed. Enrico Mario Santí (Mexico City: Ediciones del Equilibrista, 1995), pp. 235-321; also in my *El acto de las palabras: Estudios y diálogos con Octavio Paz* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997), pp. 301-367.

forms of relativism reaches one devastating conclusion: all matter, including all bodies, and including the text we are reading, dissolve as soon as we reach a stage of silence after the word.

“Silence after the word,” precisely the poem’s target (Spanish *blanco*) could therefore be reduced neither to a mystical experience nor to a vulgar nihilism. In the poem’s, and indeed the poet’s, context, it refers to Buddhist relative silence, *Sunyata*, as refined in *Madhyamika*, the Buddhist school of Nagarjuna. An explanation of this concept appears in Paz’s book on Lévi-Strauss, the contents of which date from 1966, the same year he published *Blanco*. “There are two silences,” he wrote then, “one before the word, a desire to say; another, after the word, the knowledge that the only thing worth saying cannot be said.” In yet another text from the same year he added: “The poem is the transience between one silence and another—between the desire to say and the quietness that joins desire and saying.”² Obviously, these reflections point not only to the distinction between two types of silence--before and after the word, before and after the experience of poetry--,they also attempt to get at the meaning of meaning. “The Buddha’s silence,” he also wrote, “neither affirms nor denies. It says

²*Claude Lévi-Strauss: An Introduction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp.

something else, and it alludes to a beyond which is right here. It says:

Sunyata: everything is empty because everything is full, the word is not a saying because the only saying is silence. Not nihilism but a relativism that destroys and goes beyond itself.” Indeed, a summary of this idea appears in one line of *Blanco*: “**The unreality of the seen/gives reality to seeing**”. “Lo mirado,” the seen, according to a comment that Paz made to an early draft of my own essay, which I cited then and re-cite now, “[the seen] is the world of relative relations. As soon as we discover it, relativism opens up and lets us see the other side: untouchable and unsayable reality, a vision that also gives reality to us, mortal creatures, mere accidents in the chain of evolution.”³

Thus at the end of *Blanco* the paradox of an absence of presence takes hold by virtue of one fact: by then the reader has gone through an extremely elaborate *material* experience; radical presence yields to radical absence. Such material experience takes place on at least three levels. First, it becomes literally palpable with actual physical production: the reader must unfold all 32 sheets, the text’s 552 centimeters; a physical, sometimes awkward activity that harks back to precursor texts like Cendrars’ and Delaunay’s *Prose du Transibérien* (1913), not to mention Mallarmé’s *Un*

³ *Archivo Blanco*, p. 310, based on Octavio Paz communication, Santí archive.

coup de dés (1897, 1914). In the case of *Blanco* the experience is related to Buddhism and, specifically, as we shall see, to tantric ritual.

In 1969, when *Blanco* was included in *Ladera este/Eastern Slope* (1969), the poems Paz wrote earlier in the decade in India, the poem's unfolding was lost with its reprint in book format. Paz did use the occasion however, to point out that the poem "ought to be read" as a succession of signs on a single page; as the reading progresses, the page unfolds: a space that in its movement allows the text to appear and that, in a way, produces it."⁴ It became clear, then, that text production was very much linked, in Paz's mind, to unfolding the poem's single sheet. It was also clear that this central feature would be lost the moment the poem was reprinted in traditional print form. An echo of Paz's awareness of (and, I dare say, anxiety about) this loss can be heard in the letter he wrote to Emir Rodríguez Monegal (April 19, 1967), editor of the journal *Mundo Nuevo*, as the poem was also being printed in Mexico. He pointed out then, as instructions to print the poem, the need for several-sized fonts and more page-centered than was normally done for poems that the journal published. "Si Ud. lee el poema," he warned then, "verá que no se trata de caprichos tipográficos"

⁴See *Ladera este (1962-1968)*; (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1969), pp. 145-182; translation in *The Poems of Octavio Paz*, ed. and tr. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 2014), pp. 329-352.

(“If you read the poem you’ll see these are no typographical whims.”)⁵ Of course, traditional print happens to be the way most readers today know *Blanco*. And yet, Paz’s concern for its material production was evident at least one year before publication of *Eastern Slope*.

The same concern surfaces in yet another letter of his (January 25th, 1968) that topped fifteen months of correspondence with Joaquín Diez Canedo, *Blanco*’s Mexican (and first) publisher. Reacting to what appears to have been Diez Canedo’s misgivings about the finished product—which to a stodgy Spaniard must have seemed weird, to say the least—he wrote: “It’s not exactly a *luxury* edition: it’s a *functionale* edition, aimed at incorporating into the text the material part of the book. I dare say that its typography (*la disposición tipográfica*) constitutes a first reading of the text. The material difficulties of handling it are the equivalent of the language difficulties that every poetic text places before readers.”⁶

Yet a second level of material experience appears in the poem’s indeterminacy—the reader’s choice of various readings as shown in, though not exhaustively contained by, the directions that appear at the end. In the later, *Eastern Slope* version of *Blanco* the directions appear at the head of

⁵*Archivo Blanco*, p. 95.

⁶*Ibid.* Emphasis Paz’s.

the poem, and for good reason. According to that note--which proves, among other things, that Paz had in mind an open work-- there are at least six ways of reading *Blanco*: 1) as a single text; 2) reading the center; 3) left or 4) right columns by themselves; 5) reading the left and right together; 6) reading the six center sections together with the left and right ones. Nine years later, in a lecture at *El Colegio Nacional*, Paz himself increased the number of possible readings to 14, or rather six sections and 14 poems, and also proposed the structure of a *mandala*. *Mandalas*, as we know, are visual symbolic representations of the universe which are common in Asian cultures. Paz's own *mandala* had one entrance and one exit - ruled over, respectively, by silence and the color white - plus four intermediate sections with corresponding colors, elements, cardinal points and faculties. In my essay, however, I disagreed with this count and identified up to 22 possible readings, a figure that can actually be increased if we consider that the poem's "modular form," to use John M. Fein's useful term. A modular reading allows us to vary the design by manipulating the poem's interchangeable parts. That is, in reading *Blanco* we can actually opt not to follow the reader directions and simply fold the strip, build our Leggo so to speak, whichever way we wish in order to generate our own text.

In the same note attached to *Eastern Slope* Paz draws the difference between what he calls “temporal order, the form that the poem’s course adopts: its discourse,” from “spatial order: different parts spread out like mandala regions, colors, symbols and figures.” Thus we certainly can, on this basis, make up our own text. And yet, there is yet another compelling reason for having the poem proceed as it does: the poem has an order, a logic, an argument, and, of course, a goal or target: *blanco*. Elsewhere, Paz called this “head to toe” composition “fundamental;” it was in fact the same order he would follow whenever he gave public readings of the poem, including the the 1995 DVD on *Blanco* that he and Marie José Paz produced.⁷ What this meant, ultimately, was that, beyond whatever permutations the poem’s spatial order or modular form could generate, the reader appears to have two broad sets of options: either pursue a Western, ironic reading, where we follow directions; or else, an Eastern, analogical reading, where we simply flow with the text.

I mentioned earlier that in 1969, with *Blanco*’s inclusion in *Eastern Slope*, the reader directions shifted from the tail end of the poem to its head. The shift thereby eliminated the physical unfolding of the continuous strip; it

⁷ See John M. Fein, *Toward Octavio Paz: A Reading of his Major Poems 1957-1976* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), pp. 64-94.

also restricted, though not lost totally, the text's modular potential: no longer could the reader perform permutations through modular shifts. On the other hand, the reader can still go through the six alternate readings which, according to Paz, could amount to as many as 14 (and, according to Santí, 22). Temporal order, then, won over spatial order, though not completely: the "head to toe," or "fundamental and basic" reading, won out, a reading which the 1969 note, attempting perhaps to make up for the loss of the long-strip format, described further as a ritual, procession or pilgrimage. Changing the location of the reader directions from the tail end to the head also revealed something else, albeit indirectly. If the reader directions were in fact a guide to reading-as it happens, for example, in Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela*-why, then in the first edition were those directions placed at the tail end, rather than at the head?

The obvious answer is that this was the whole point of an Eastern reading: as readers we are supposed to go with the flow, unaided by (Western) instructions. A less obvious answer, however, is the one that the poem's best readers, notably Eliot Weinberger, *Blanco*'s translator into English, and the late Mexican poet Manuel Ulacia, have proposed: *Blanco* is actually a reversible text. We can read it in either of two ways. In the first,

we start at the end and read towards the top; the first lines would be: **“La irrealidad de lo mirado/da realidad a la Mirada”** (The unreality of the seen/give reality to the seeing);” the last word would be *Blanco*, the title. In this reverse (actually upward) reading, a different ritual takes place: the gradual ascent of the *kundalini*, instinctual or libidinal energy, through the seven *chakras* of the yogic or tantric body, which the textual body of *Blanco* is meant to represent. Weinberger explains this as a paradoxical movement: “*Blanco*, which necessarily must be read downwards can be viewed, waxing bold, like a diagram of the chakras in reverse... Thus the kundalini ascends at the same time that the poem descends through the [other] chakras.” Ulacia, in turn, went even further by identifying two additional aspects of this reading: first, the six sections of *Blanco*’s center column represent those six *chakras* (the seventh, which signifies the illumination of emptiness, lies of course outside language); second, the double stanzas of the center column represent the two *kundalini* channels, *rasana* and *lalana*, which correspond to the masculine and feminine principles. They symbolically run up and down, left and right, of the tantric body and they channel libidinal energy. Thus, as we read upwards the last word is *Blanco*; but as we read downwards the last word is “*Mirada*”: “*the*

seeing.” But be it up or down, we end up in the same place: the *sixth* chakra at the forehead, “the color of which,” according to Weinberger, alluding to Buddhist doctrine, “is transparency”: “**Transparency is all that remains,**” goes one of *Blanco*’s more prominent mantras.⁸

No doubt you have noted that while describing the second level of material experience, the poem’s indeterminacy, I have also been hinting at the third: the tantric ritual that makes up the poem’s narrative and which we could otherwise call its diegesis. Further to delve into the particular of Tantric doctrine would take us far afield. More pertinent for our immediate purposes would be simply to limit ourselves to the paradox that sustains it and that I have otherwise described as radical absence by means of radical presence.

Paz himself, in a number of writings, referred to the paradox of how Tantra, being an extension of Buddhism, is itself a new and exaggerated attempt to reabsorb, within the great critical and metaphysical negation of Mahayana, yogic, bodily and primal elements. Thus, in ritual copulation the yogi must avoid ejaculation, a practice that has two goals: 1) to deny the reproductive function of sexuality and 2) to transform semen into the

⁸ See Weinberger, “Paz in Asia,” in his *Outside Stories* (New York Directions, 1922), pp. 17-45, and Ulacia, *El árbol milenario: un recorrido por la obra de Octavio Paz* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 1999), pp. 225-239.

thought of enlightenment. Thus Tantrism employs ritual sexual intercourse, among other physical transgressions (which can include bingeing, intoxication, defecation and vomiting). It does do as, “immersion into chaos, into the original source of life,” on the hand; and ascetic practice, a purification of the senses and of the mind, on the other. The procedure is meant to reach into the annulment of world and self. In *Blanco*, the erotic ritual appears in its central column, each of whose sections is divided in turn into two stanzas in what constitutes a counterpoint between erotic ritual (on the left) with modes of knowledge (on the right). In the poem’s sixth section, the literal climax, the two stanzas colored in red and black join together typographically in an ideogrammic representation of the couple’s orgasmic union. The climax also coincides thematically, diegetically, with the speaker’s attainment of language. That is, linguistic germination (poetic achievement, lifting of the writer’s block) occurs simultaneously with the couple’s orgasmic climax.

The above description of the three levels of material experience-what I should like to call the levels of physical reading, interpretation, and diegesis- is actually meant as a preface to my main point. It is also a preface to a new modest proposal regarding *Blanco*, to which I shall now devote the

last brief section of this essay. Although I have already stated my main point, I shall clarify it further. By the time the reader reaches the concluding, ninth section of *Blanco*, beginning with the key lines.

In the center

Of the world of the body of the spirit

The crevice The splendor

two contradictory issues have taken place. The first is that we (speaker and reader) have arrived at the verge of illumination through emptiness; “the crevice” is the poem’s metaphor for this experience. The second issue is that we have become aware of emptiness by virtue of an earlier, more radical and opposite experience: the complex materiality we have gone through by virtue of reading, interpretation and diegesis. Indeed, the “crevice,” this crack or slit through which both speaker and reader now perceive “splendor”- where world, body and spirit become one and the same--also constitutes the metaphor for both the woman’s vulva--worshipped in Tantric ritual, experienced in the poem-- and the fissure through which we transcend relativism. That is, the “crevice” is both physical object and metaphysical

concept. According to Paz, the “crevice” is the tear that allows us to experience Poetry, “the other shore.” That we are at a higher stage of consciousness is signaled further by the poem’s line “in the center,” where “center” refers not only to the reader’s return to the poem’s center column. It also alludes to “the Way of the Center,” the name given historically to *Madhyamika*, the middle road of Buddhist relativity that was reconceptualized and refined by Nagarjuna, the master of this “central” tendency which proclaims an emptiness that neither affirms nor denies the world.⁹

What I here call a higher stage of consciousness represents merely an inadequate conceptual shortcut for understanding what that “central” or middle way entails. For once we become aware of such relativity and our language names emptiness—if everything is emptiness, then the proposition “everything is emptiness” is itself empty--the world tears open and “splendor” appears through the “crevice.” The end of *Blanco* thus describes metaphorically a logical operation: the world becomes meaningful by means of acknowledging its emptiness, an acknowledgement that turns against itself and therefore dissolves the assertion. Far from fleeing the world, then,

⁹On “the middle way,” see S.B. Dasgupta, *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1958).

as some Western readings of the poem want to do, *Blanco* returns to the world and plunged into all its relative relations. The first of these is the link between “world” and “word”. Thus the cryptic lines: “if the world is real, the word is unreal,” “yes and no, two syllables in love,” etc. By this point, we have reached the stage of silence after the word. But because by now we have also learned that the only thing worth saying cannot be said, the poem resorts to acknowledging and celebrating the world.

Pere Gimferrer, whose early sensitive reading of *Blanco* has been the basis of many interpretations, was wrong, I think, when he limited the poem’s anecdotal content, (what I call the celebration of the world) to the “steps heard in the other room,” to which the speaker refers in this last section. While Gimferrer does attribute this anecdote correctly to the speaker’s woman companion, I would argue that this is hardly the only other anecdote to which the poem refers.¹⁰ In fact, the poem makes constant, if elliptical, references to many other objects, events and experiences to which the speaker responds as he attempts to write the poem. For example: the “sunflower” and “lamp” of the first section, the “insect” that flops through the manuscript pages; the Livingstone diary that happens to be on his desk

¹⁰See Pere Gimferrer, *Lecturas de Octavio Paz* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1980), pp. 59-71.

and from which he quotes, the thunder and lightning heard in a looming storm; the “amethyst ring” he turns on his finger; the music heard in the next room along with the woman’s steps. All of these everyday material events objects, and circumstances are, in fact, anecdotal and constitute what Paz elsewhere calls the experience of otherness. As we know, Paz first described otherness in a long, lyrical reflection in the essay “Signs in Rotation” (1965), but in his written reaction to drafts of my old essay, never before made public, he drove the point further. Otherness was the stuff *Blanco* was made of:

Otherness designates everyday life... in its radical strangeness... It is the stuff of poetry, from its origins until today... It is the experience of being in the world, being here and now. On one extreme, Otherness borders with religion and philosophy; on the other, with everyday life. Otherness is... the central source for *Blanco*, which is a carnal poem, a love poem... Yet, the experience of Otherness is unsayable; it alludes to a reality beyond words and that only silence can name. (Poetry can name it, too, but only by alluding to it.) Each true poem,

be it a haiku or a long poem, is a window open onto infinity, onto the Otherness that makes us up.¹¹

We would not be wrong in viewing Paz's attempt in *Blanco* to find equivalents in Western poetic language to the experience of empty illumination that he found Tantric Buddhism. Indeed, this is the central goal of Paz's mature thought on poetry and poetics during the late 1960's and 1970's. The problem, of course, is that there exists no such actual equivalent in Western experience, which makes the experience of *Blanco* hypothetical at best. How can we represent emptiness, precisely that which excludes expression and representation? Paz's technical compromise, so to speak, was therefore to attempt a material equivalent by making paper the literal ground of absence, or as he once noted about the 1969 reprint version: "*Blanco's* typography and binding wanted to underscore not so much the presence of the text as the space that sustains it: that which makes writing and reading possible, and where all writing and reading end." Yet despite such monumentally daring experimentation, it is also evident that from the outset Paz became aware of the inadequacy of that compromise. For years he

¹¹ In *Archivo Blanco*, p. 310.

sought ways to resolve that inadequacy or at least improve upon it. He sought it, first, through public readings of the poem. As early as May 2, 1967 he told editor Diez Canedo that the reading he was then planning in Mexico City would be “special”: “partly recorded, either with my voice or with two actors, plus a very brief audition of modern music in which language would appear more for its sounds than for its meaning.” Years later in those pre-digital days, there was the film based on *Blanco* that he very much wanted to produce with artist Vicente Rojo. In a March 6, 1968 letter he described that project as “a screening of the book (and of the act of reading it)... that would combine dynamically letters, spoken words, visual and hearing sensations and the different senses. In other words: the transfer of an interior subjective movement (reading) onto an exterior objective movement (film screening).” He added then, and reiterated barely eight months later in another letter to Rojo, that “letters would appear on the screen, either moving or upon a moving background with changing colors; other times, upon the empty screen there would appear only colors and abstract forms and the audience would hear the words **without reading** the text.”¹² The film with Vicente Rojo never got done. Paz himself made it in

¹² All quotations from Paz letters are from *Blanco/Archivo Blanco*.

1995. Finally, in this long list there was a stage version of *Blanco*, whose idea also dates from 1968, when Paz first proposed it to Mexican director José Luis Ibáñez and even sent him a script.¹³ Twenty-three years later Paz would even give a slightly different version of that script to Vicente Molina Foix, the distinguished Spanish writer who at the time was Director of Madrid's National Theatre for a staging that unfortunately never took place. Today we have the good fortune to have both the 1995 DVD version plus a third staging and DVD, both made recently by the Catalan artist Fredric Amat.¹⁴

All of the avatars of this complex poem demonstrate, I think, that, in addition to its supple materiality, there remained another element, the strange matter of its performativity. It was as if Paz had been the first to become aware that it was only through its fleeting performance that one could capture *Blanco's* central, paradoxical core: the presence of absence.

¹³ My thanks to my friend Vicente Molina Foix for allowing me access to this letter, dated July 19, 1991, from Octavio Paz.

¹⁴ On Amat's 2007 staging of the poem, see, http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-04-12-2007/abc/Catalunya/frederic-amat-le-da-forma-y-escena-al-poema-blanco-de-octavio-paz_1641449475215.html. My thanks to my friend Frederic Amat for sharing with me his DVD on *Blanco*.