

# On Poetry and Authentic Philosophical Reflection: The American Philosophy of Octavio Paz

*Sobre Poesia e Autêntica Reflexão Filosófica:  
A Filosofia Americana de Octavio Paz*

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**Abstract:** Octavio Paz conceives of authentic philosophical reflection as 'thinking *a la intemperie*'. This conception involves his idea that our contemporary historical and philosophical situation is one of *intemperie espiritual*. Based on the dual sense of the term *intemperie* for Paz, I propose that 'thinking *a la intemperie*' means: (i) Exposing our beliefs to the weathering effects of our vital, concrete experience; and (ii) apprehending reality in communion with others through poetic experience of the ever-flowing present. That is, authentic philosophical reflection means making our home thinking and living without rigid, stifling ideological systems, in communion with our neighbors and with our places, here and now, in the unity of present place and present time that we create together. This mode of reflection belongs within a broad American tradition of philosophizing and, for Paz, responds to concerns compatible with those of the pragmatists.

**Key-words:** American philosophy. Authenticity. Experience. Octavio Paz. Poetry. Time.

**Resumo:** Octavio Paz concebe a autêntica reflexão filosófica como 'pensar a la intemperie'. Esta concepção envolve sua idéia de que nossa situação filosófica e histórica contemporâneas é uma de *intemperie espiritual*. Baseado no sentido dual do termo *intemperie* para Paz, proponho que 'pensar a la intemperie' signifique: (i) expor nossas crenças aos efeitos tempestivo de nossa experiência vital, concreta; e (ii) apreender a realidade em comunhão com os outros através da experiência poética do sempre-fluente presente. Quer seja, uma autêntica reflexão filosófica significa viver e pensar for a de sistemas ideológicos rígidos, asfixiantes, em comunhão com vizinhos e lugares, aqui e agora, na unidade do tempo e lugar presentes que criamos juntos. Este modo de reflexão pertence a uma vasta tradição americana de filosofar e, para Paz, responde a preocupações compatíveis com aquelas dos pragmatistas.

**Palavras-chave:** Filosofia americana. Autenticidade. Experiência. Octavio Paz. Poesia. Tempo.

In the *Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz summons contemporary thinkers in Mexico and the Americas to authentic philosophical reflection. In calling for such a mode of reflection he writes: “Toda reflexión filosófica debe poseer autenticidad, esto es, debe ser un pensar a la intemperie un problema concreto” (1997, 203).<sup>1</sup> Paz thus describes authentic philosophical reflection as ‘*pensar a la intemperie*’. Unfortunately, the English translation of this work completely omits this crucial passage.<sup>2</sup> It is reasonable to speculate that this conspicuous omission is due to the difficulty of translating *intemperie*, as there is no precise English word to render its meaning. Being in the *intemperie* means being under the weathering effects of *el tiempo*. It implies a lack of protection from the elements, a lack of refuge from the forceful action of earth, wind, water, and fire. In other words, it implies an exposure to the raw, elemental forces of nature. In a poetical sense that accords with Paz’s thought, *intemperie* also suggests being unsheltered in the free, open flow of ever-present time.

Here I develop an interpretation of Paz’s notion of authentic philosophical reflection that considers carefully his dual sense of *intemperie*. Accordingly I put forth that ‘thinking *a la intemperie*’ takes our philosophical reflection along a two-fold trajectory: (i) Exposing our beliefs to the raw weathering effects of our vital experience so that our reflection is responsive to our concrete reality; and (ii) apprehending reality, actively and reflectively, in communion with others through poetic experience of the ever-flowing present.

The interpretation of this mode of reflection provides important insight into the thought of Octavio Paz since, throughout his critical work, he describes our historical and philosophical situation in late modernity as a condition of *intemperie*. In his Nobel lecture *Search of the Present*, for instance, Paz argues that as modernity ends we find ourselves in a state of “intemperie espiritual” (1991, 63). That is, we find ourselves without comprehensive religious or philosophical systems to provide spiritual and intellectual refuge and to guide us through our time in history. More importantly, I propose that this mode of reflection deserves our critical consideration in as much as our contemporary situation of living in a philosophical *intemperie* still lends legitimacy to the central questions that motivate the *Labyrinth of Solitude*: Who are we? And how do we express, how do we create and re-create, who we are? Paz aptly expresses the relevance and liveliness of this question for us when, towards the conclusion of the *Labyrinth*, he writes: “The object of these reflections is no different from that which troubles other men and other peoples: How can we create a society, a culture, that will not deny our humanity but will also not change it into an empty abstraction?” (1985, 193-194).

The origins of this question for Paz are largely historical and sociopolitical. He thinks it is a particularly relevant question in Mexico because “the consciousness of being separate is a constant feature of our spiritual history” (1985, 10). Mexicans experience solitude as consciousness that their history, manifest in their sociopolitical institutions and ideological systems, betrays their identity and separates them from others. Their philosophical systems do not provide guidance to escape historical solitude by entering into communion with others. On the contrary, these systems are most often

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<sup>1</sup> “All philosophical reflection must be authentic; that is, it must be thinking *a la intemperie* about a concrete problem” (my translation).

<sup>2</sup> See PAZ 1985.

inauthentic masks that bury the Mexicans' authentic vital impulses and deny the possibility of authentic communion. At the close of Paz's analysis in the *Labyrinth*, moreover, the state of solitude in the *intemperie* turns out to be a universal, and not an exclusively Mexican, experience even if the experience takes particular forms in different places. In calling us to 'think *a la intemperie*' from our concrete condition, then, Paz aims for us to find our way towards authentic communion.

Below, I aim to elucidate, critique, and develop this conception of philosophical reflection. This effort, I hope, will help to bring the critical thought of Paz to the attention of an English readership that knows and critiques him mainly as a poet.<sup>3</sup> More generally, I hope this will contribute to bring this *Latin* American thinker's understanding of philosophical reflection to the attention of philosophers, *American* and otherwise.<sup>4</sup> In fact, even though my main focus here lies in Paz's thought, I would like to point out explicitly the affinity of Paz's central philosophical interest in the *Labyrinth* with an important concern for classical pragmatist philosophers. Paz's interest in the problem of how to create sociopolitical institutions that adequately express the underlying ways of being and living of a society may be understood as the problem of creating sociopolitical *symbols* that adequately express the *nature* of underlying social practices for the purpose of fostering and improving the life of that community. Alain Locke for instance, writing on cultural pluralism during the course of World War II, only a few years before Paz first published the *Labyrinth*, conceived of different political, social, and religious institutions as different symbols that often express similar underlying values. In the context of a world violently divided, Locke thought that the hope for cosmopolitan peace resided precisely in our pluralistic recognition that such different symbols or forms often express functionally equivalent values and ideals (LOCKE 2002, 437). Paz's question, then, may be conceived along pragmatist lines as the problem of creating sociopolitical symbols

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<sup>3</sup> As far as my bibliographical research indicates, there has never been a philosophical article about Octavio Paz published in an English-language philosophy journal, even though there is ample bibliography in literary journals in English. This is not the case in Latin America, where there has long been philosophical literature on Paz's thought. Even Jorge Gracia, who in the United States has written extensively on Latin American and Hispanic/Latino philosophy, labels Paz simply as a "literary writer" (2000, p. 205).

<sup>4</sup> I use the italicized labels as a deliberate provocation. In calling attention to the absence of any reference to Latin American philosophy in most major encyclopedias of 'world philosophies' (written in English), Eduardo Mendieta points out that Latin American philosophy appears to be "[n]either 'American' nor 'European' enough. Nor non-Western enough" (1999, p. 51). Along with Mendieta, I think that it in fact has rich relationships with all those philosophies. Carlos Pereda (2006) in turn explores the reasons for this "invisibility" — some of them, he admits, are reasons internal to the practice of some philosophy in Latin America — and argues that "our" experience with the Latin American essay may help in remedying it. Pereda finds in the Latin American essay — among whose maximum exponents he includes Octavio Paz — a freshness of perspective, an incisive approach to particular problems with general implications, and an attitude of inquisitive engagement and interpellation that ultimately result in careful thought (2006, p. 196–197). The point of this article is partly to present the philosophical thought of an important writer who, it seems, would usually be classified as a 'Latin American poet' and not as a 'world philosopher', 'American philosopher', or just 'philosopher'.

that express and enliven the underlying life of a community, allowing it at once to be cosmopolitan in outlook while remaining steeped in its own particular ways of living.

It is important to emphasize, at the same time, that Paz belongs within a Spanish American tradition of thought. In this tradition, from its beginnings *as American* in the struggle for independence from Spain, the aforementioned philosophical question results in a search for national and continental identity. Octavio Paz agrees with philosopher José Gaos when, in the *Labyrinth of Solitude*, he writes, “Spanish American thought begins as a justification of Independence but transforms itself almost immediately into a project: America is not so much a tradition to be carried on as it is a future to be realized” (p. 119).<sup>5</sup> This project propels Spanish American thinkers into a search for the identity to be realized through cultural and political expression. An intellectual struggle ensues between those proponents of fragmentary national identities and those of a unified continental identity. In the twentieth century, José Enrique Rodó’s seminal essay “Ariel” spurs this literary and philosophical debate. The literary vein of the debate continues by way of Fernando Ortiz, Alfonso Reyes, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, and José Carlos Mariátegui, while the philosophical vein continues by way of Edmundo O’Gorman, Samuel Ramos, José Vasconcelos, and Leopoldo Zea, among others. Octavio Paz’s *Labyrinth of Solitude* belongs, I think, within both veins of this debate. Moreover, I think Paz’s *Labyrinth* constitutes at once a culmination — albeit not one devoid of problems — and an overcoming of the Spanish American tradition of search for identity. It is a culmination in that it brings both poetic imagination and critical analysis to bear on the search for national identity. It is an overcoming in that it resolves the project of realizing the future national identity into a *universal* search for present communion, a cosmopolitan search conducted from the *particularity* of our concrete condition. Octavio Paz’s notion of ‘thinking *a la intemperie*’ from our concrete condition summarizes the mode of this redefined search. At stake in adopting this two-fold mode of reflection is the viability of an authentic way of philosophizing — authentic, not in the sense of manifesting some abstract ontological being, as we will see, but in the sense of expressing in original, creative forms the particular, and even singular, ways of living of our communities.

### **I. The First Fold: Responsiveness to Our Concrete Vital Experience**

Along the first fold, authentic philosophical reflection in the *intemperie* means thinking that is responsive to the raw influence of our concrete living experiences; it means thinking that actively responds to the vital reality of the communities and of the places in which we live, here and now. In the philosophical *intemperie* we shed ideological masks and petrified ideas and think on our own. In the particular case of Mexico after the revolution, Paz sees this task as the most urgent one for the Mexican intelligentsia, that is, for “the group whose vital activity is critical thinking” (1985, 151-152). Throughout the periods of the conquest, colony, independence, and revolution, the imported ideas

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<sup>5</sup> This project again could be cast in pragmatist terms: the life of Spanish American societies, though informed by tradition, is defined and guided by their aims and ideals for the future.

of Catholicism, liberalism, and positivism become lies that deform the Mexicans through alien institutions. The Mexicans do not find authentic moral, juridical, and political forms to express their vitality and their 'being'. Successive systems of universal reason rule over their vital values and appetites; these systems are "Forms we have neither created nor suffered, are mere masks" devoid of any Mexican particularity (1985, 34).<sup>6</sup> In this context, Paz interprets the Mexican revolution as an explosion of authenticity and originality, of Mexico's buried indigenous past and of the open, inclusive — as opposed to the closed, exclusive — vein of Spanish culture. This vital explosion, however, lacks organic totality and philosophical coherence. To find such an organic coherence, the Mexican intelligentsia must think *a la intemperie*.

Paz's call is not for us to seek refuge in a new philosophical system that is devoid of our particularities. Our task is not to develop a new system to correct or overcome the failures of previous systems. His call is rather for us to stand nude and unmasked, so to speak, amidst our lands and our peoples, to tend to the questions and the problems that our realities pose to us, and to attempt to address them concretely. For instance, in its particular historical situation after the revolution, the Mexican intelligentsia must heed the philosophical summons to reflect upon the concrete problem of finding "a whole and organic solution" that would express the originality of the revolution without sacrificing its Mexican particularity to the universality of a system (1985, 157). The task is to find a formal solution — sociopolitical and institutional — congruent with the practices and the reality of Mexican community.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, authentic philosophical reflection in the *intemperie* emphasizes the vital practices of a community over theoretical speculation. In the *intemperie* we must attend to the vital, though sometimes buried, realities of our histories. Insistence on the plural here indicates that each of us thinks from a particular situation — Mexican, United Statesian, American for example — but in as much as our particular situations are part of a universal condition of *intemperie*, our particularly situated thinking takes a universal significance.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> We might again note here explicitly the affinity with Alain Locke. Locke writes that pluralism "breaks down the worship of the form — that dangerous identification of the symbol with the value" that leads to the errors and fallacies of political, moral and religious dogmatic absolutism (LOCKE 2002, 437). Paz precisely rejects this "worship of the form," exemplified in the rigid imposition of Catholicism, liberalism, and positivism in the life of Mexican society.

<sup>7</sup> As I understand it, Paz does not reject systematic thought *per se*, but only thought that is abstractly systematic, fixed and closed *a priori*, at the expense of concrete, particular experience. If we again express this in terms akin to classical American pragmatism, and especially in Peircean terms, Paz rejects *a priori* systems that purport to be purely universal while denying the irreducibility of singular, spontaneous experience. In contrast, the "whole and organic solution" that the Mexican intelligentsia must articulate in the *intemperie* should have the coherence of a different sort of system — an open, flexible organic whole that recognizes both what is universal and what is irreducibly and spontaneously singular in Mexican experience.

<sup>8</sup> By his own account, Paz is here in close agreement with Leopoldo Zea. Along with Zea, he thinks that what is particularly Mexican or American in a philosophy is the *emphasis* that results from its concrete problems but the import of these problems is ultimately universal. See PAZ 1985 (chapter 7).

As a response to the empty universality of inauthentic systems, the focus on the life of a community provides concreteness and particularity to our philosophical thought. Through reflection, the philosopher attempts to discern the live practices of a community in order to articulate political forms adequate to communal vitality. This mode of reflection, then, appeals to experience, to live participation in communal practices. Paz begins to sketch an example of this style of reflection in his brief consideration of communal property in Mexico.<sup>9</sup> His meditation especially treats of the *calpulli*, a form of communal ownership of the land, a social institution where all the members of a community share the land's product as long as they participate in cultivating, harvesting, and caring for it. According to Paz, the *calpulli* flourishes among the small indigenous communities of Southern Mexico and survives for centuries, even under the threat of the Spanish colony, until the abstract ideals of the liberal reform abolish it. During the revolution, only the program of Emiliano Zapata articulates, with clarity and simplicity, the problem of communal agrarian property. Paz sees in this program, and especially in the *Plan de Ayala*, a legitimate claim to create "legislation adjusted to Mexican [reality]" (1985, 157). This Mexican reality is a vital reality for Paz. That is, more than a system of agrarian production, the *calpulli* is a vital practice, a way of living; thus, Paz regards the *calpulli* as an authentic sociopolitical form in Mexico. Although it has been covered-up by liberal institutions, the communal spirit of the *calpulli* remains alive in the practices of the Mexicans, and a recovery of this institution can bring authenticity to Mexican political forms.

Xavier Rodríguez Ledesma observes: "Paz, a quien ligaban entrañables lazos con el zapatismo, veía en este movimiento el mejor ejemplo de una lucha por la reivindicación (legítima y explicable) del pasado, frente al avance de la época del progreso, de la instauración del tiempo lineal" (295).<sup>10</sup> That is, Zapata's movement expresses a pulsating, though buried, reality in Mexico. Therefore, Rodríguez adds: "Se hacía necesario [...] recuperar la noción de *otredad*, que nos refería a la existencia en nuestro país de otras realidades que debieran conocerse y respetarse, ya que tratar de enmarcarlas dentro de una sola [realidad] determinada por la búsqueda del progreso, por el acceso a la modernidad, era no entender la riqueza cultural de nuestro país y, por tanto, era querer someter a la realidad a la finitud de un concepto" (295).<sup>11</sup> In this context, authentic philosophical reflection consists in contemplating the live practices of these communities and in discerning whether these practices undergird the viability of a particular political form — of the communal system of property in this case. Paz, I have noted, sketches

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<sup>9</sup> See PAZ 1985 (p. 141-142).

<sup>10</sup> "Paz, who cherished his ties to the *Zapatista* movement, saw in it the best example of the struggle for the legitimate vindication of the past against the advance of the age of progress, against the establishment of linear time" (all translations from this work are mine).

<sup>11</sup> "It was necessary to recuperate the notion of *otherness* that indicated to us the existence, in our country, of other realities that should have been known and respected because the attempt to frame these realities within a single one — within a reality determined by the search for progress and by access to modernity — was a failure to understand the cultural wealth of our country and, therefore, constituted an attempt to subject reality to the finitude of a concept."

the beginning of this investigation in observing the live history of the *calpulli* in Mexico. In order to deepen his reflection, however, he would have to participate actively and creatively in the practices of this communal institution. Poetic experience, I argue in section II, is a way to add this active aspect to our reflection. It is a way of finding otherness (*otredad*) in a concrete other who participates with us in poetic activity.

Authentic philosophical reflection, then, concentrates on the practices of a community and not upon its ontological 'being'. Therefore, the call to think in the *intemperie* demands a critique of Paz's own tendency, in the *Labyrinth*, to focus his analysis on a Mexican 'being'. He tends to insist on the search for social, juridical, and political forms that will be the positive expression, and not the negation, of this Mexican 'being'. For instance, in writing about the ills that Porfirio Díaz's dictatorial, positivist appropriation of Mexican Reform brought to his nation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Paz writes: "El esquema de la Reforma, el gran proyecto histórico mediante el cual México se fundaba a sí mismo como una nación destinada a realizarse en ciertas verdades universales, queda reducido a sueño y utopía. Y sus sueños y leyes se convierten en una armazón rígida, que ahoga nuestra espontaneidad y mutila nuestro ser" (1997, 163).<sup>12</sup>

This tendency to write about a Mexican 'being' creates unnecessary problems in Paz's analysis.<sup>13</sup> Jorge Aguilar Mora critiques the gravest problem: the conceptualization of a false tradition of 'ontological rupture', that is, of a tradition of rupture between the Mexican 'being' and its forms of historical expression. According to Aguilar, Paz always puts forth an irreducible opposition between History and Myth—an opposition in which Myth transcends History and seems ahistorical — on the basis of this false tradition.<sup>14</sup> Due to the Myth/History opposition Paz's solutions to ontological problems seem to be disjoined from any historical specificity and appear to be radically transhistorical. According to Aguilar, Paz purports to offer atemporal solutions to Mexico's historical problems, solutions that ignore political, social, and economic relations of power between the dominant and the dominated classes.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "The ideological scheme of the Reform — the great historical project by way of which Mexico founded itself as a nation destined to realize certain universal truths — was reduced to a dream and a utopia. And its principles and laws became a rigid framework that suffocated our spontaneity and mutilated our *being*" (my translation; emphasis added). Notably, Kemp's English translation seems to "correct" Paz's reference to a Mexican 'being' by rendering the Spanish *ser* as 'character'. So the last sentence reads: "Its laws and principles became a rigid framework that stifled our spontaneity and mutilated our *character*" (PAZ 1985, 133; emphasis added).

<sup>13</sup> Paz himself recognizes this problematic tendency. In "The Other Mexico" he attempts a "clarification" (which more accurately amounts to a self-correction) when he writes that "*The Labyrinth of Solitude* was an exercise of the critical imagination [...] something very different from an essay on Mexican-ness or a search for our supposed being. The Mexican is not an essence but a history" ("The Other Mexico," in PAZ 1985, p. 215). In Spanish, see "Postdata" in PAZ 1997 (p. 249).

<sup>14</sup> See AGUILAR 1978 (p. 36).

<sup>15</sup> See AGUILAR 1978 (p. 44).

If my interpretation of authentic philosophical reflection is plausible, however, our attention to determinate problems and concrete practices does not require these ontological difficulties. In such a mode of reflection, we do not ignore the historical specificity of the problems that reality presents to us, including relations of power. In an authentic style of philosophical reflection, we must not meditate upon a communal 'being' but upon communal practices. This implies a crucial distinction between understanding political forms as actualizations of a communal 'being' and understanding them as vehicles for communal practices. Political forms, I hold, do not affirm or negate, express or mask, any communal 'being'; however, they can facilitate or obstruct the ways of living and sharing of a community. I take up the second strand in Paz's thought, and it is this strand, I think, that pervades his analysis of the *calpulli* as the expression of living communal practices in southern Mexico. In the case of the *calpulli*, the philosophical task consists in discerning whether the reinstitution in post-revolutionary Mexico of this form of property would facilitate the practices of communal living. That is, the task is not to determine whether the *calpulli* concretely expresses a Mexican 'being'; the task is rather to determine whether the *calpulli* responds to vital forms of communion.<sup>16</sup>

Now, it is necessary to emphasize that our condition in the *intemperie* is *experiential* and not *merely metaphorical*. Jorge Aguilar Mora, among other critics of Paz, argues that in the face of concrete problems Paz offers mere metaphorical solutions.<sup>17</sup> We might surmise that the notion of thinking *a la intemperie* is one such mere metaphor, devoid of real content. Understanding the *intemperie* as our concrete experiential situation, however, responds to the philosophical demand that our thinking attend to the summons of reality. The notion of the *intemperie* is metaphorical, no doubt, but it is not merely metaphorical. The *intemperie* is real in as much as our concrete experience is grounded in reality. For Paz, the *intemperie* describes the concrete historical and vital condition of the Mexicans in late modernity, a situation of spiritual risk and intellectual exposure. This condition is tangible and real since it is the live experience of each Mexican and, with acute critical awareness, of the Mexican intelligentsia. By extension to our human condition in late modernity, therefore, the *intemperie* is not a mere metaphorical illustration of our situation; it is our historical and vital reality. Moreover, that the notion of *intemperie* has a metaphorical aspect does not present a problem for Paz. Defining

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<sup>16</sup> Here I should emphasize that in interpreting Paz's notion of authentic philosophical reflection as a viable form of philosophizing in the Americas, I am not latching on to the notion of ontological authenticity — poorly borrowed from Heidegger and Sartre by some Latin American philosophers — that Carlos Pereda (2006) criticizes. I am not proposing either the sort of "authenticity model" of philosophy which becomes sectarian, militant, nationalistic, and closed to dialogue with other philosophical traditions that Guillermo Hurtado (2006) diagnoses. I am rather interested in rescuing, in the particular way proposed by Paz, what Hurtado himself calls "the insistence that our thinking must be congruous with our reality" (2006, p. 211). This philosophical approach is open to the Pan-American philosophical dialogue, especially with American pragmatists, that Hurtado proposes (2006, p. 212-213). As I have pointed out, Paz's philosophical concerns are shared by pragmatists such as Alain Locke.

<sup>17</sup> See AGUILAR 1978 (chapter 1).

authentic philosophical reflection through poetic recourse, namely through the metaphor of thinking in the *intemperie*, already suggests that, for Paz, poetry is a form of reflection intimately related to philosophy.

In *The Other Voice* Octavio Paz writes: “The influence of poetry [is] indirect: reminding us of certain buried realities, restoring them to life, presenting them. And confronted with the question of the survival of the human species on a poisoned and devastated planet, poetry can respond in no other way. Its influence must be indirect: intimating, suggesting, inspiring. Not logically demonstrating but showing” (1990, 157-158). Poetry expresses what remains wildly vital when our ideological masks fall off and our systemic roofs break down. Precisely the consideration of poetry brings me to the second fold of ‘thinking *a la intemperie*’.

## II. The Second Fold: Poetic Experience of the Present

The project of expressing a national identity through political forms involves an orientation towards the historiographic future. Paz, however, resolves the Mexican search of identity, oriented towards the future construction of political institutions, into a universal search for present communion. This resolution involves showing, through the dialectical interpretation of the historical ruptures and reunions of the Mexicans, that the situation of solitude of the Mexicans is in reality a universal situation — a situation of *intemperie espiritual*. Most importantly for the purposes of my current interpretation, this resolution involves a move from a historiographic notion of passing linear time into a poetic notion of the constant present. Accordingly, along its second fold ‘thinking *a la intemperie*’ means experiencing, through poetry, the ever-flowing present of poetic time.

To understand the character of this experience we must understand Paz’s concept of time. He distinguishes between original, mythological time and chronometric, historiographic time.<sup>18</sup> There is an original time that is not “succession and transition, but rather the perpetual source of a fixed present in which all times, past and future, are contained” (1985, 209). In this original situation, time and space form a unity: the present is here; here is the present. This is our experience in the womb and during play in early childhood. The rupture or separation of time and space, however, results in chronometric time: “As soon as time [is] divided up into yesterday, today, and tomorrow, into hours, minutes, and seconds, man [ceases] to be one with nature, [ceases] to coincide with the flow of reality [...] These spatial measurements of time separate man from reality — which is a continuous present” (1985, 209). We experience this rupture as we grow older and realize that the same historiographic time passes in other places for other people, regardless of their particular situation. Chronometric time passes by, for instance, whether Paz plays in the garden of his childhood home in Mixcoac or whether others fight in the Mexican Revolution or in World War I. The passing of chronometric time is indifferent to whether one is experiencing the pleasures of play or the horrors of war.

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<sup>18</sup> He presents this conceptual division in PAZ 1985, while he describes our experience of this division in PAZ 1991.

Accordingly, “chronometric time is a homogeneous succession, lacking all particularity. It is always the same, always indifferent to pleasure and pain. Mythological time, on the other hand, is impregnated with all the particulars of our lives [...] This idea allows for a [plurality] of times. Life and time coalesce to form a single whole, an indivisible unity” (1985, 209).

Thus the difference between chronometric and poetic time is that between homogeneity and heterogeneity, between empty universality and rich particularity. Bound to a chronometric experience of passing time in our condition of solitude, we nonetheless retain the possibility of access to an experience of original time through the rituals of religious and pagan *fiestas*, through love and through poetry. A *fiesta*, for instance, is not a mere calendar marker of a historical event. It is a re-creation, a reproduction of the event. It destroys chronometric time and reinstates original time, that is, the ever-flowing present: “The fiesta becomes the creator of time; repetition becomes conception” (1985, 210). Paz’s interpretation of the *fiesta* as mythical recreation provides us another way to understand the distinction between original and chronometric time: “The conception of time as a fixed present and as pure actuality is more ancient [or original] than that of chronometric time [because the latter] is not an immediate apprehension of the flow of reality but is instead a rationalization of its passing” (1985, 210).

Here we find the key to understanding the second fold of ‘thinking *a la intemperie*’ as a mode of authentic philosophical reflection: the experience of ever-present poetic time is an *immediate apprehension of the flow of reality*. Poetic experience enables an authentic mode of philosophical thinking that is (i) apprehensive, (ii) immediate, and (iii) firmly grounded in reality.<sup>19</sup> In order to understand this, it is important to elucidate what poetic experience means for Paz. For interpretive purposes, I concentrate on the following description of the mythical experience, an experience that in my forthcoming interpretation I discuss mainly in its poetic dimension:

In theatrical performances and in the reciting of poetry, ordinary time ceases to operate and is replaced by original time. Thanks to participation, this mythical time — father of all times that mask reality — coincides with our inner, subjective time. Man, the prisoner of succession, breaks out of his indivisible jail and enters living time: his subjective life becomes identical with exterior time, because time has ceased to be a spatial measurement and has changed into a source, a spring, in the absolute present, endlessly re-creating itself. Myths [and poetry] permit [us] to emerge from [our] solitude and become one with creation [...] Myth [and poetry open] the doors of communion. (1985, 210-211)

First, then, through poetic experience we apprehend reality as constituted by our particulars and not as extraneous to us, as merely given homogeneously and indifferently. Through poetry our experience of the present interrupts homogeneous temporal succession and we cultivate time — we enliven it with the particulars of our lives, with

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<sup>19</sup> In interpreting that the poetic experience of the ever-flowing present is a mode of authentic reflection, I do not mean to reduce poetic experience to a cognitive dimension. I rather hold that poetry is a mode of experience and that one of its moments is reflection grounded in concrete reality.

our experiences, with our pains and pleasures, our failures and achievements, our fears and our hopes. We animate time with our inventions and re-inventions; we experience time as a wellspring of the present that flows in unison with our formative, creative, and re-creative activities. We thus *apprehend* reality as our particular reality that is in harmony with our vital activities, including *poietic* ones. As exemplary of these *poietic* activities, in the passage above Paz includes theatrical performance and re-creation (recitation) of poetry. In the *Labyrinth* at large, however, there is a more ample conception of *poietic* activities that includes *fiestas*, love, artistic creation, labor and even the design of social, political and economic institutions.<sup>20</sup> All these activities create particular realities; that is, they are *poietic* activities.

Through poetic experience, then, we apprehend reality as harmonious with the vital activities of individuals and of communities. The emphasis on communal activities arises from the notion of poetic participation. Through poetic experience we emerge from our condition of solitude and participate in communal reality with others. We encounter our tangible neighbors that form a community with us in the poetic act. Thus, poetic experience, as an act of communion, is a way of coming to know the other. It is a form of participation in the productive creation or in the interpretive re-creation of the oral, dramatic, artistic practices of a community. Poetry provides a way of encountering our fellow men and women, of moving from solitude to communion. Poetry resolves the project of constructing our historiographic future in order to emerge from our historical solitude into an experience of embracing others in the poetic present. In this embracing, in this offering of our voices and of listening to the voices of others, we come to know each other's fears, hopes, losses, successes, loves, despairs, dreams, and projects — those that we share communally and those that we hold alone. Participation in poetic experience thus 'opens the doors of communion'.

For Paz, moreover, poetic experience apprehends the '*other* side of reality', that is, the side that may be buried by inauthentic political forms but that remains vital in the practices of particular communities. In this sense, poetic experience is a way of apprehending by listening. Paz develops this idea in *The Other Voice*. He writes, "[b]etween revolution and religion, poetry is the *other* voice. Its voice is other because it is the voice of passions and of visions. It is otherworldly and this-worldly, of days long gone and of this very day, an antiquity without days [...] All poets in the moments, long or short, of poetry, if they are really poets, hear the *other* voice. It is their own, someone else's, no one else's, no one's, and everyone's" (1990, 151). The other voice, then, is the voice of humanity that remains vital even if it is buried by inherited or imposed ideologies and by stifling sociopolitical institutions. Poetic experience is a way of reflecting upon this voice.

In light of this passage, however, I must emphasize that for Paz this reflection, this poetic listening to the '*other* voice', always happens in a particular reality. He takes his particular reality, for instance, to be that of a modern poet in post-revolutionary Mexico, and it is in this concrete reality that his poetic practice takes place. In writing that the

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<sup>20</sup> The majority of the activities are explicitly discussed in "The Dialectic of Solitude," the appendix to PAZ 1985.

poetic listening to the other voice takes place in an 'antiquity without days', Paz does not mean that poetic experience is atemporal and beyond reality. Our poetic listening is immanent within a particular reality. The experience of an 'antiquity without days' is the experience of the *intemperie*, of the ever-flowing present in which the authentic voice of humanity resonates in manifold tones and in which each accent is singular. This experience is not a transcendental stepping-beyond time and space; it is rather a different experience of time, of present time as harmonious with present reality and as shared with others in our vital communal practices.

In fact, for Paz poetry is "knowledge of origins" (1990, 101). Poetry reveals the enduring, unifying threads of the history of a particular community, of the Mexicans for instance. Thinking *a la intemperie* does not require a rupture with our particular origins to transcend into an atemporal other-worldliness; it rather implies that through poetic experience, as well as through enacted rituals and consummations of love, we stand on the ground of a particular tradition while thinking anew. Through poetic creation, memory becomes revitalized thought. In other words, poetry is memory as present and creative. Poetry announces "what has been obstinately forgotten for centuries. Poetry is memory become image, and image become voice. The *othervoice* is not the voice from beyond the grave: it is that of man fast asleep in the heart of hearts of mankind" (1990, 155). Thus, from the particularity of an individual's experience or of a community's history, poetry expresses a voice of universal significance. Through the living practice of poetry we listen to the innermost voice of humanity, the voice that the poet draws out from silence. This is the voice of one expressed through that of another; it is the voice *we* express through *our* practice of poetry. As thinkers in the *intemperie*, we listen to the voice of poetry and in so doing we reflect upon our human condition particularized in our concrete situation. The *Labyrinth of Solitude* is exemplary of this mode of reflection. In this work, Paz at once interprets the voice of Mexico and gives it an original expression. Paz, as a Mexican and as a man in a labyrinth, searches for the voice of his fellow Mexicans, of his fellow men and women. This work is an effort to reach out, to connect with the other, to escape the labyrinth of solitude and find the communion of the Mexican, the American, and the universal.

Now, the experience of listening reflection involves empathy but it is not reducible to it. Listening reflection through poetic experience is empathetic in that it is a way of being intimately aware of the concrete realities of others. Poetic experience, however, goes beyond empathy in that it involves actually sharing, creating, and undergoing reality with others — it is a communal sharing of concrete experience of things and people. In listening reflection, there is a shared experience of encounter and communication, but this communicative encounter does not take the form of an exchange of abstract ideas. The encounter rather takes the form of fellowship in the apprehension of our shared home in the *intemperie*. That is, the encounter happens in the apprehension of our shared reality as an ever-flowing present that is continuous with our authentic communal practices. Hence the issue of immediacy comes to the fore.

Second, then, poetic apprehension of reality is immediate in that it is grounded in our immediate, concrete experience. In this mode of apprehension we do not appeal to the mediation of *a priori* philosophical systems that seek to comprehend reality in its totality and that prescribe ungrounded, inauthentic practices. We rather distinguish between an immediate, experiential apprehension and a mediate, abstract comprehension

of reality. Along the second fold of authentic philosophical reflection, we seek the experiential, apprehensive mode of understanding. Through poetic experience, we apprehend reality as an unmediated continuity between our 'subjective' life and our 'objective' world. Reality no longer stands over-against us as 'objective' reality, and our philosophical reflection does not take the mode of an attempt to comprehend reality through abstract, mediating concepts. This is not to say that authentic philosophical reflection in the *intemperie* eliminates concepts altogether; it is to say, rather, that our philosophical concepts arise immediately and continuously with careful contemplation of our concrete, authentic, vital experience.

The immediacy of apprehension, then, is intrinsically related to a third aspect of philosophical reflection through poetic experience, namely, its firm grounding in concrete reality. In the first place, poetic activity is grounded in the concrete vital practices of particular communities. For instance, Mexican *fiestas*, Mexican art, and Mexican social institutions such as the *calpulli*, are creative expressions emerging from the *poietic* practices of Mexican individuals within particular communities — think, for example, of Diego Rivera in post-revolutionary Mexico — and of the communities themselves — think, for example, of the *calpulli*. Thus, poetic experience opens a door for us to apprehend the vitality of our concrete communal realities. Moreover, through poetic activity in the *intemperie*, we experience our concrete reality as 'absolute present'. Absoluteness here means our complete, unconditional grounding in a particular present, in a 'living time', that is continuous with our poetic activity. This absoluteness does not mean inescapable, repressive totality; it rather means reflective and active involvement in our present situation; it means complete engagement with our particular present. As we contemplate our poetic experience of the ever-flowing present, then, our reflections and our actions become immersed in concrete reality.

Having advanced my interpretation of the second fold of philosophical reflection in the *intemperie*, it is important to address Jorge Aguilar Mora's criticism of Paz's notion of the poetic experience of the present. Aguilar argues that Paz proposes it to be the dissolution of particular history. He thinks that in the *Labyrinth* Paz pretends to establish the legitimacy of a mythical origin as the solution to the tradition of historical rupture. For Paz, according to Aguilar, "la historia se confunde con la Identidad y [...] en sus enunciados diferentes a lo largo de una cronología se disuelve en una transparencia que le permite al origen reaparecer en el presente: el pasado que se reúne con el futuro para encarnar en el presente" (39).<sup>21</sup> This poetic present, however, lacks the weight of a concrete historical past. In this respect, Aguilar incisively brings into focus a problem in the *Labyrinth*, where Paz tends to emphasize the universality of the Mexican condition in detriment to its particularity. For instance, at the close of the *Labyrinth* Paz declares: "For the first time in our history, we [the Mexicans] are contemporaries of all mankind" (1985, 194). But in affirming the contemporaneousness of the Mexicans to the rest of

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<sup>21</sup> For Paz "history is confounded with identity and, in its different expressions throughout chronological time, [history] is dissolved into a transparency that allows the 'origin' to reappear in the present: the past unites itself with the future to bring the present to life" (all translations from this work are mine).

humanity, Paz tends to erase what remains unique about their particular historical context. This problematic tendency is not congruent with the foregoing interpretation of authentic philosophical reflection and, in my estimation, requires a critique.

Authentic philosophical reflection demands a steady focus on the particularity of our vital practices in present reality. This implies that Paz should not forget this particularity in emphasizing the universality of the Mexicans' historical condition. While Paz centers his own analysis upon the particular historical situation of the Mexicans, in attempting to universalize this situation without explicitly preserving its particularity, Paz tends to turn Mexican history into a linear succession ending in vacuity. In political terms, Paz confronts the problem of the opposition between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in Mexico, that is, between the drive to integrate Mexico into a larger world-context and the drive to isolate Mexico by asserting its irreconcilable differences with the rest of the world. In philosophical terms, this opposition turns into a radical disjunction between universality and particularity. Such an opposition is unnecessary. Without particular expression, universality is an empty abstraction; without an underlying universality, particularity is isolation and separation without commonality, that is, in terms of Paz, solitude without the possibility of communion. In authentic reflection, Paz should recognize Mexican history as a particular expression of universality, and he should grasp this universality as necessary to make communion possible. This necessity is not a logical necessity but the experiential necessity of commonality, of having the capacity to share present reality with our concrete others.<sup>22</sup>

In order to be more consistent with his own analysis and with his own definition of authentic philosophical reflection, then, Paz should defend more firmly the particularity of the historical situation of the Mexicans after the revolution. Such a defense would not necessarily represent a nationalist apology. On the contrary, it could turn into a meditation on 'difference', that is, on the historical particularity of a community in relation to other communities, and on the experiential particularity of an individual in relation to other individuals. Otherwise, Paz runs the risk of falling into the vacuous historicism that Aguilar criticizes when, regarding Paz's conclusion in the *Labyrinth*, he writes, "lo concreto, lo diferente, lo irrecuperable de la historia no es sino una 'abstracción', la abstracción del pasado" (AGUILAR 1978, 47).<sup>23</sup> Such historicism that turns the concrete past into an abstraction might also become, as Aguilar observes, a situation of a-temporality that

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<sup>22</sup> Alain Locke's analysis of cultural symbols and values might again be helpful to understand this issue in pragmatist terms. For Locke, "mankind is not so much at odds over basic end values as over divergent institutional means and symbols irrationally identified with these basic ends" (LOCKE 2002, 444). In other words, different cultural forms or symbols are mistakenly seen as representing different values or ideals. What we need is "to discover whatever pragmatic similarities already pertain underneath a variety of divergent value symbols" (444). These pragmatic similarities, common denominators, or functional equivalences would then form the basis for the development of "world-mindedness" and "world citizenship" (444); that is, for upholding cosmopolitanism while preserving cultural particularities.

<sup>23</sup> "What is concrete and what is different in history, what cannot be recovered from history, is nothing but an 'abstraction' — the abstraction of the past."

negates the historical content of our present reality: “[Esta atemporalidad] niega la tradición como pasado acumulado presente en cada uno de nuestros presentes, incansablemente insistente: la vida histórica, no como reflejo de la ideología dominante sino como vida universal, se abstrae, se hace irreal para reducirla a una idea, a una identidad” (AGUILAR 1978, 48).<sup>24</sup> Aguilar aptly criticizes Paz’s tendency to reduce history to an abstract, universal Idea. Paz thus tends to forget or ignore that history means *historical life* and in this, I think, he strays from a mode of reflection that focuses on living experience. However, we must remember that, even though Paz tends to fall into this ideological error in spite of his own analysis, in authentic philosophical reflection we always contemplate a live particular reality.

Now, we apprehend the universality — that is, the commonality — of our particular situation through our poetic experience of the present. Through this poetic experience, we realize the universal significance, that is, the *significance for others*, of our concrete actions. Creating, recreating, and realizing our own ways of living is restoration to authenticity, and our restoration to authenticity ultimately comes about through earnest reflective and active communion in the *intemperie*. Paz’s poem “Piedra de Sol” (Sunstone), in which he fuses Occidental and Aztec myths with the Aztec notion of cyclical time, expresses this experiential restoration to authenticity in communion:

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

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<sup>24</sup> A-temporality “negates tradition as the accumulated past that is present in every one of our present times, that is tirelessly insistent — historical life, not as a reflection of the dominant ideology but as universal life, is abstracted; it is made unreal in order to reduce it to an idea, to an identity.”

<sup>25</sup> In Eliot Weinberger’s translation: “...life is never / truly ours, it always belongs to the others, / life is no one’s, we are all life — / bread of the sun for the others, / the others that we all are — / when I am I am another, my acts / are more mine when they are the acts / of others, in order to be I must be another, / leave myself, search for myself / in the others, the others that don’t exist / if I don’t exist, the others that give me / total existence, I am not, / there is no I, we are always us, / life is other, always there, / further off, beyond you and / beyond me, always on the horizon, / life which unlikes us and makes us strangers, / that invents our face and wears it away, / hunger for being, oh death, our bread, / Mary, Persephone, Héloïse, show me / your face that I may see at last / my true face, that of another, / my face forever the face of us all” (PAZ 1987, p. 29, 31).

vida que nos desvive y enajena,  
que nos inventa un rostro y lo desgasta,  
hambre de ser, oh muerte, pan de todos,

Eloísa, Perséfone, María,  
muestra tu rostro al fin para que vea  
mi cara verdadera, la del otro,  
mi cara de nosotros siempre todos. (1987, p. 28, 30)<sup>25</sup>

I propose that the mode of philosophical reflection in the *intemperie* provides a genuine way to see our face, the face of us all, as individuals and as communities, in the Americas and in the world. In this mode of reflection we unmask our own vital values as we participate thoughtfully in concrete vital practices in particular places that nevertheless have a universal significance — namely, the significance of communion in present reality. We contemplate our *poietic* experiences, the experiences through which we apprehend our particular reality. This immediate, experiential *apprehension* of buried realities that remain vital stands in contrast with the mediated, abstract *comprehension* of reality that has collapsed and left us in the *intemperie espiritual*. Moreover, through these experiences we not only apprehend reality but we create it in communion with others. Through *poietic* experience, we create and re-create our concrete situation as a community of people and place. We reclaim the ever-flowing present and we cultivate it with our particular experiences. In this way, the two folds of authentic philosophical reflection come together. In this way, we make our home thinking and living in the *intemperie*, without rigid and stifling ideological systems, in communion with our neighbors and with our places, here and now, in the unity of present place and present time that we create together and experience poetically. Thinking *a la intemperie* constitutes then an authentic mode of philosophizing that enables us to apprehend, to create, and to express our vitality.

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