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The Roots of Transformation:

Octavio Paz and the Militant Americanist Awakening of Pablo Neruda

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

by

Daniel Solomon Cooper

2018

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Roots of Transformation:

Octavio Paz and the Radical Americanist Awakening of Pablo Neruda

by

Daniel Solomon Cooper

Doctor of Philosophy in Hispanic Literatures and Languages

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Maarten H. van Delden, Chair

In this dissertation I examine the roots of one of twentieth-century Latin America's most crucial literary exchanges, namely, that between the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda and his Mexican counterpart Octavio Paz. Specifically, I focus on their initial point of contact in 1937, when the much younger Paz sent his recently published poem *Raíz del hombre* to his idol Neruda, then living in Paris where he was organizing the Congress of Antifascist Writers in the context of the Spanish Civil War. While Neruda never elaborated on his appreciation for *Raíz del hombre* beyond the cryptic detail in his memoir of having identified in it "un germen verdadero," it is understood that he invited Paz to the Congress based on his positive reading. Therefore, and in light of the gaping hole in the Neruda-Paz scholarship whereby no systematic examination of this

first point of contact exists, I offer a speculative “Nerudian reading” of *Raíz del hombre* to understand why such an ostensibly apolitical erotic poem appealed to a poet who, at the time, was undergoing a dramatic transformation toward an aesthetic of revolutionary commitment.

Arguing for a generous conception of poetic influence based on Harold Bloom’s paradigm whereby a successor might exert power over his predecessor, I suggest that Neruda registers the influence of *Raíz del hombre*—and betrays a certain anxiety toward that influence—in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” (1938), his first socially engaged poem in a Latin American setting. In that poem, Neruda returns to the aesthetic of natural eroticism that he had cultivated in *Residencia en la tierra* in order to locate the potential for revolutionary salvation in the topography of Latin America. At the poem’s conclusion, the speaker exhorts Chile’s Mapocho River: “que una gota de tu espuma negra / salte del légamo a la flor del fuego / y precipite la semilla del hombre!” With the slight change from “raíz del hombre” to “semilla del hombre,” in my opinion, Neruda offers at once a tacit confirmation of his positive reading of Paz’s work, and a rhetorical exercise of power to reclaim for himself the *residencial* poetics that his successor had made his own in his emergence as a formidable newcomer to the world of Hispanic poetry.

In Chapter I, I offer an extended introduction to the dynamics surrounding Neruda and Paz’s initial encounter, primarily in the form of an analysis of Paz’s importance in the early years of Neruda’s transformation from trench warfare poet in the Spanish Civil War to committed Latin Americanist poet *par excellence*. To strengthen my argument regarding Paz’s contributions in Neruda’s trajectory, I introduce a reading of Harold Bloom’s theory of poetic influence. I also discuss how Paz’s emergence as a strong poet in the context of Neruda’s ascendant celebrity in

the Spanish-speaking world likely induced a certain anxiety in the Chilean. The chapter concludes with a comparative analysis of Paz's *¡No pasarán!* and Neruda's "Galope muerto."

In Chapter II, I offer a Nerudian reading of *Raíz del hombre* in order to identify the implicit radicalism of Paz's poem, the *raison d'être* of which critics tend to elevate as an eroticism stripped of political meaning. To do so I read the poem's celebration of love as the root of man in a context of ruins as a metaphor for the revolutionary solidarity required in the struggle against fascism.

In Chapter III, I explore the centrality of "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" within both Neruda's late-1930s transformation and his broader poetic trajectory. Arguing that the poem offers a commentary on the debate *du jour* regarding pure versus committed poetry, I discuss how the poet engages not only with Paz, but also with the voices of Francisco de Quevedo and Rainer Maria Rilke. In this way I demonstrate how Paz's treatment in *Raíz del hombre* of those poets' respective and optimistic understandings of death inspired Neruda's hopeful vision for a revolutionary future in Latin America as well as his commitment to an aesthetic of engagement.

Following a brief Conclusion, I end my dissertation with an English translation of *Raíz del hombre* as it appears in its entirety in Paz's 1999 *Obras completas*.

The dissertation of Daniel Solomon Cooper is approved.

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For Grandpa Sam

O Lord, grant death to each in one's own way.
Grant that one may pass away from a life
that was filled with love, meaning, and desire.

Rainer Maria Rilke

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INTRODUCTION

Winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Pablo Neruda (1971) and Octavio Paz (1990) are widely celebrated as “dos piedras fundacionales de la poesía latinoamericana del siglo XX” (Cuellar 98). Accordingly, their poetic, ideological, and personal dialogue over the course of three decades constitutes one of the more intriguing chapters in twentieth-century Latin American literary history. Between 1937 and 1967, the poets befriended each other, feuded bitterly, became estranged, and eventually reconciled. Their fraught exchange exemplifies many of the tensions and, ultimately, the tragedy that consumed the region’s intellectuals for the duration of the cultural Cold War, the Latin American iteration of which Jean Franco labels a “drama of loss and dislocation” (1). The nostalgia that tinges Paz’s end-of-life recollection of Neruda as his “enemigo más querido” underscores the complexity and passion that underlay their relationship from beginning to end (“Pablo Neruda [1904-1973]” 8).

A mutual appreciation for each other’s poetry, their shared antifascist convictions, and a certain level of comfort as fellow Latin Americans brought Neruda and Paz together in 1937 at the Congress of Antifascist Writers in Spain, where they forged a fast friendship during that country’s Civil War (1936-1939). Nevertheless their relationship deteriorated several years later in the Mexico City of the early 1940s, “one of the key nodes in the global [cultural Cold War] struggle,” where “key events [...] originated in the intersection of the legacies of the Mexican Revolution, dissent from Stalinism, and the turmoil of the Spanish Civil War” (Iber 22). Among other reasons for their rupture, for the most part personal in nature, Neruda and Paz had developed divergent understandings of their roles as poets vis-à-vis politics and society.

By then “a kind of prophet of Latin American unity” (Felstiner 135), Neruda increasingly exhibited his commitment to a hardline Stalinist ideology, not only in his poetry, as seen in the

1943 poem “Nuevo canto de amor a Stalingrado” (*Obras completas I* 396-399), but also in his public role as Chilean Consul General in the Mexican capital at the time. In that capacity, for example, he had protected the muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros from prosecution following the muralist’s failed attempt to assassinate Leon Trotsky at the dissident Bolshevik revolutionary’s Coyoacán home in 1940. Challenging the merits of Neruda’s evolving brand of artistic commitment, Paz, on the other hand, defined poetry in his 1943 essay “Poesía de soledad y poesía de comunión” as an individual enterprise immune to doctrine meant only to reveal the sacred nature of the human experience (*Obras completas XIII* 234-245). In August of that year, and in the midst of a simmering enmity that had formed several years earlier between the poets, Paz published “Respuesta a un cónsul,” in which he lambasts Neruda, whose “literatura está contaminada por la política, su política por la literatura” (*Letras de México* 5). Anthony Stanton designates the short article “el violento texto de su ruptura con Neruda” (“Encuentros y desencuentros” n.p.).

Following the “estallido” of their rupture, the poets traced divergent paths while operating in mutual antagonism: according to Paz, Neruda “me lanzó algunas flechas en [su obra maestra de 1950] *Canto General*. Yo también le contesté en algunos artículos. No volvimos a vernos sino hasta 20 años después. Sabía que de vez en cuando me honraba con su profunda antipatía” (Peralta 83). By the late 1960s, however, the Cold War had evolved to ensnare new fronts of conflict—Cuba and Vietnam, for example—and, consequently, the divide between Stalinism and anti-Stalinism that had torn the poets apart in Mexico City two decades earlier was now as archaic as the Popular Front antifascism that had brought them together in the 1930s. Thus in 1967, Neruda and Paz, each older and wiser, exchanged a hug and some brief small talk at a poetry festival in London. It would prove to be their last meeting, and Neruda would pass

away in 1973. As Paz recalls, “lo último que recibí suyo fue su libro: *Las piedras del cielo*, con una pequeña dedicatoria que decía: ‘Un abrazo, quiero saber de ti’, fechada en 1971” (Peralta 83-84). The Mexican poet died in 1998 but, as he told Jorge Edwards toward the end of his life, “releí la obra completa de Neruda, desde la primera página hasta la última. [...]. Mi conclusión es que Neruda es el mejor poeta de su generación. ¡De lejos!” (*Adiós, poeta* 76).

For a number of reasons, critics have generally viewed the poets’ exchange, particularly its most active phase between 1937 and 1943, through a Bloomian lens that casts Neruda in the role of precursor and Paz in that of successor. Beyond the fact of their age difference—Neruda was a full decade older than Paz—, the Mexican poet’s unmistakable engagement with his Chilean idol in his early poetry justifies such an approach. Additionally, the language the poets use to describe the beginning of the relationship further substantiates the perception of an unequal power dynamic in which poetic influence flowed in one direction from master to newcomer. Whereas Paz spoke of Neruda’s poetry as a “revelation” when he first read it as a young man (*The Paris Review*), Neruda proudly presented himself as having discovered Paz in spring 1937 after the then-unknown twenty-three year-old Mexican poet had sent him a copy of his recently published erotic poem *Raíz del hombre*. According to the Chilean in his memoir, *Raíz del hombre* “me pareció contener un germen verdadero. Entonces nadie lo conocía” (*Confieso que he vivido* 151).

Along this line, critics also tend to read Paz’s protagonism in the rupture as the assertion of his independence from the figurative yoke of his master. Without a doubt, the virulence with which he separated from Neruda in “Respuesta a un cónsul” betrays a profound sense of his “anxiety of influence” (Bloom).¹ The agreement among scholars including Stanton (“Octavio

¹ An earlier text in which, in my opinion, Paz displays a similarly direct and palpable, though much more innocent “anxiety of influence” vis-à-vis Neruda is the inscription he wrote on the inside jacket of the first number of the

Paz y los ‘Contemporáneos’”) and Rubén Medina (*Autor, Autoridad y Autorización*), for example, that Paz’s first phase as a poet lasts until 1943, or the year he broke with Neruda, attests to the standard Bloomian reading. Shortly after he published “Respuesta a un cónsul,” Paz recounts, “dejé México y no volví sino diez años después” (*Itinerario* 76). His journey over the next decade took him to the United States and France, where, discovering his voice while forging “El sendero de los solitarios” (76), he wrote what would constitute his masterpiece, *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950).

Without discounting such a framework for interpretation, in my dissertation I approach the Neruda-Paz nexus from a different angle, one that allows for a more fluid conception of poetic influence. Specifically with regards to the inception of their dialogue, it occurs to me that critics have universally neglected to examine Neruda’s response to *Raíz del hombre*. He received the poem while living in Paris, where, after having recently fled Francisco Franco’s fascist siege of Madrid in the early months of the Spanish Civil War, he was helping to organize the Congress of Antifascist Writers. It is understood that he invited Paz to the Congress based on his reading of the poem. Nevertheless, I have not come across any inquiries as to why *Raíz del hombre* might have appealed to a poet who, at the time, was undergoing a dramatic transformation from the anguished solipsism he had displayed in *Residencia en la tierra* (1933, 1935) toward a poetics of revolutionary commitment. Perhaps the most important reason for such critical neglect is the fact that Neruda himself never formally elaborated his appreciation for the poem beyond the sparse words from his memoir that I have cited above.

journal *Taller*, of which he was an editor and which he sent to Neruda in December 1938: “Querido Pablo,” the young Mexican writes earnestly, “¿Recibiste mi carta y mi artículo sobre tu libro, aparecido en *Ruta*? No has mandado el poema que te pedimos para *Taller*. ¿Lo mandarás? Te saluda, en el recuerdo de España, Octavio Paz. Querétaro 206, México, D.F. México” (Archivo Central Andrés Bello de la Universidad de Chile). The article to which Paz refers here is likely “Pablo Neruda en el corazón,” *Ruta*, núm. 4, 1938.

In “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” (1843), the young Karl Marx famously defines radical criticism as that which “grasp[s] the root of the matter” (*Early Writings* 52). Considering its weight in the history of Latin American literature, I believe that the Neruda-Paz exchange cannot be appreciated fully without an attempt to grasp its roots, which I consider to lie in the Chilean’s reception of *Raíz del hombre*, or the first significant point of contact between the poets. My purpose in this dissertation, then, is to channel Marx’s radical spirit through precisely such an attempt. Rendering this endeavor doubly rewarding, in my opinion, is that an exploration of Neruda’s reading of *Raíz del hombre* in spring 1937 not only unearths the roots of this crucial exchange, it also opens an important avenue by which to better comprehend the Chilean’s poetic evolution at the time. Accordingly, the question that drives my thesis asks: is it possible to speak of the influence of *Raíz del hombre* in Neruda’s rapidly radicalizing poetic priorities, which, a year later in 1938, would pivot decisively toward a distinctly Americanist orientation? If so, what is the nature of that influence?

In light of Neruda’s lack of commentary on his impression of *Raíz del hombre* beyond the cryptic detail in his memoir of having identified in it “un germen verdadero,” combined with the consequent and gaping hole in the Neruda-Paz scholarship whereby no systematic examination of this crucial first reading exists, it becomes useful as critics to “bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps” (Iser 285). For example, considering his penchant to shoot antagonistic “flechas” at Paz in his poetry subsequent to their rupture, could Neruda have similarly alluded, though in friendlier fashion, to his Mexican counterpart in his poetry prior to their falling-out?

In addition to assuming the type of phenomenological approach as summarized succinctly in the above Wolfgang Iser quote, to answer such a question I must also harness the

spirit—like all criticism must, to some degree in my opinion—of the title, if not of the ontologically-informed argument, of John Crowe Ransom’s essay “Criticism as Pure Speculation” (1941).² For it is speculation—perhaps more “informed” than “pure”—on which the kernel of my hypothesis rests: that, through the image of “la semilla del hombre” with which he dramatically concludes his 1938 poem “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” Neruda acknowledges the influence—and betrays a certain anxiety toward that influence—of *Raíz del hombre*.

As the first poem in which Neruda registers his social conscience in an American setting, “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” is central in the poet’s evolution toward an aesthetic of commitment, which began two years earlier during the Spanish Civil War and culminated twelve years later in his magnum opus *Canto General*. Examining why he might have alluded to Paz’s text in a poem of such transformative value, then, I seek answers to the several questions that will guide the organization of my thesis. For example, how did the Chilean understand Paz’s emergence as a strong Latin American poet in the context of his own consolidation of stardom in the world of Hispanic letters? In what ways might an ostensibly erotic poem like *Raíz del hombre* have appealed to Neruda’s increasingly antifascist worldview in the late 1930s? Beyond its parting image, how else does “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” respond to *Raíz del hombre*?

² Iser’s essay, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach” (1972), is a seminal articulation of Reader Response theory, which posits that “the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two” (279). Such an understanding of the process of literature, whereby a text’s meaning depends on the combined “work” of author and reader, directly counters the formalist theory of New Criticism, of which Ransom’s essay “Criticism as Pure Speculation” functions as a foundational text. There, Ransom argues that, independent of such outside forces as author biography or historical context, for example, “the poem actually continues to contain its ostensible substance” (105). Therefore, considering that “the business of the literary critic is exclusively with an esthetic criticism” (101-102), “the final desideratum [of criticism] is an ontological insight, nothing less” (112).

In the ensuing three chapters I will argue that Neruda would have perceived in Paz's emergence as a strong poet in the late 1930s a certain threat to his sovereignty as an unrivaled Latin American poet in the Spanish-speaking world. Paz's emergence, as I will demonstrate in Chapter I, manifested in the appearance of *Raíz del hombre* and other texts in combination with the praise of such giants as Rafael Alberti, who had served as a vital impetus in Neruda's success among the poets of the Spanish avant-garde in the early 1930s. Furthermore, in *Raíz del hombre*, which, in my estimation is far from a purely erotic poem, Paz offers innovative readings of the Golden Age poet Francisco de Quevedo and the early twentieth-century Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, both of whom had served as important influences in Neruda's poetry until then. Specifically, I argue that Paz reformulates Quevedo's trope of rebirth—best seen in “Amor constante más allá de la muerte”—and Rilke's optimistic vision of death as bearer of life—articulated in *The Book of Hours* (1905)—to exalt love as the root of man. In the context of the revolutionary struggle against fascism taking place in Spain in 1937 to which Neruda was completely committed when he read *Raíz del hombre*, the Chilean would have read such an exaltation of human communion as a message of radical solidarity. Importantly, Paz transmits his revolutionary message in *Raíz del hombre* largely through a reliance on the vision of an eroticized natural world that Neruda had cultivated in *Residencia en la tierra*.

The combination of Paz's emergence and his ability to effectively reformulate in a revolutionary light the poetry of Quevedo, Rilke, and Neruda amounted to a peculiar form of influence from successor to precursor at a crucial moment when the latter was rewriting his aesthetic code in the direction of radical engagement. With the subtle allusion to Paz's title through the image of “la semilla del hombre” at the dramatic conclusion to his first social poem set in Latin America, Neruda acknowledges both Paz's influence and his own anxiety toward

that influence. In this light, I understand Paz, *Raíz del hombre*, and Neruda's reception of both as crucial to the unfolding of the Chilean's well-documented evolution.

Chapter I is titled "Octavio Paz in Pablo Neruda's Transformation" and functions as an extensive introduction to the dynamics surrounding the poets' initial point of contact, or Neruda's reception of *Raíz del hombre*. The first sections of the chapter broadly outline what I identify as the two principle stages of Neruda's poetic transformation—his "poesía de trinchera" from the Spanish Civil War (Loyola, "De cómo Neruda devino comunista" 106) and his subsequent turn to Latin America as a theme—and the importance of his "discovery" of Paz within that process. I then discuss Harold Bloom's theory of poetic influence. First I demonstrate how Neruda-Paz critics have generally applied it to the relationship between the two poets. Then, based on Bloom's understanding of the "splendidly horrible paradox of Poetic Influence," whereby "the new poet *himself* determines the precursor's *particular* law" (42-43) (emphasis in the original), I establish the theoretical underpinnings of my argument that the younger Paz could have also exerted influence over the older Neruda.

To emphasize the Chilean's appreciation for *Raíz del hombre*, I then contextualize the only two known recorded statements in which he mentions Paz's name, in both of which he references the 1937 poem: the aforementioned comment in his memoir, written at the end of his life and presumably after their 1967 reconciliation, and the answer to a question in an obscure 1943 interview just months following their final rupture. I follow this with a section detailing Neruda's privileged place among the poets of the Spanish avant-garde in pre-Civil War Madrid to demonstrate the perceived threat posed by Paz's emergence. I end the chapter with a brief comparative analysis of Paz's 1936 propagandistic Spanish Civil War poem *¡No pasarán!* and

Neruda's obscure 1926 poem "Galope muerto." Such a comparison previews some of the ways the young Paz will engage with his Chilean idol's *residencial* aesthetics in *Raíz del hombre*.

In attempting to read *Raíz del hombre* as Neruda would have read it in 1937, my overarching goal in Chapter II, "The Revolutionary Implications of *Raíz del hombre*: A Nerudian Reading," is to identify the implicit antifascist radicalism of Paz's text, contrary to standard interpretations that see it as a purely erotic poem. To do so, I operate from the assumption that a consideration of historical context—specifically, the Spanish Civil War and the attendant binary of fascist/anti-fascist ideology that dominated leftist intellectualism at the time—is essential for understanding the poem. To better contextualize my inquiry into the revolutionary messaging of *Raíz del hombre* as Neruda would have perceived it, I first analyze the Chilean's "Canto sobre unas ruinas," a pessimistic and, in the context of his transformation, enigmatic poem that he published in February 1937, at least a month before he would have read *Raíz del hombre*. While wandering through the devastated landscape of Madrid in the aftermath of a heavy fascist bombing campaign the previous fall, the speaker of that poem concludes that, "No hay raíces / para el hombre" (*Obras Completas I* 384).

I then argue that, in exalting love as a resilient source of life in the midst of "las ruinas de la luz y de las formas," as *Raíz del hombre* opens, Paz's poem echoes the revolutionary thrust behind Alberti's Civil War poetry and, from a distinctly Latin American perspective, directly counters Neruda's anguish in "Canto sobre unas ruinas." I also evaluate how the Mexican poet's incorporation of certain *quevedesco* and Rilkean themes contributes to the poem's antifascist slant. I conclude Chapter II with a meditation on how the poetic descent to man's roots in *Raíz del hombre* fulfills the Marxism of its title, considering that it was Marx's definition of radical critique that inspired it.

Using as a point of departure the speculative premise that Neruda registers his appreciation for *Raíz del hombre* through the image of “la semilla del hombre” at the end of “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” his first social poem in a Latin American setting, I devote Chapter III to a discussion of that text’s significance in both Neruda’s late 1930s transformation and the broader trajectory of his life. Titled ““Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho’: Returning to Roots, Planting a Seed,” this chapter begins with a discussion of Neruda’s political activities in Chile upon his return there from Spain at the end of 1937, including his editorship of the antifascist Chilean journal *Aurora de Chile*, in which the poem appeared in October 1938. Noting that the poem marks the poet’s return to his national and poetic origins, I argue that “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” is also, at its core, a poem about poetry. I arrive at this conclusion partly by reading the poem alongside some of Neruda’s prose texts from the period in which he defines the duty of engagement for poets and intellectuals.

According to my analysis, Neruda offers a commentary on the debate *du jour* between an aesthetic of purity and impurity through his use of the Mapocho River as a metaphor for poetry. Unsurprisingly, he lands convincingly on the side of an impure and engaged poetry by demanding, for example, that the river rise up “como nueva cruz de estrellas para los olvidados” (*OC I* 661). As I argue, this image simultaneously packs in Rilkean and Marxist undertones, revealing one aspect of the influence of *Raíz del hombre* on Neruda as he shifted toward a poetics of commitment. Furthermore, through his use at the end of the poem of the oxymoron “espuma negra,” an image that he later associates with Quevedo in his memoir, Neruda echoes Paz’s “negras espumas” from *Raíz del hombre*. Such a convergence opens the door to a discussion on the other major aspect of Paz’s influence, namely, the ability to read Quevedo in a revolutionary light. Here I demonstrate how, as a way to declare his preference for an impure and

committed aesthetic, Neruda inserts himself into the centuries-old polemic between the *preciosismo* of Luis de Góngora—Golden Age precursor to twentieth-century Hispanic pure poetry, according to some estimates—and the *agonismo* of Quevedo.

I conclude the chapter by discussing two of Neruda's last texts, both prologues he wrote from his home in Isla Negra in 1973. The first introduces Neruda's final book of poetry, *Incitación al Nixoncidio*, while the second introduces the French edition of the autobiographical novel *El río*, written from a prison cell by Adolfo Gómez Morel. Like the "olvidados" of Neruda's 1938 poem, Morel had grown up destitute under the bridges of the Mapocho. In both prologues, as I argue, Neruda returns to some of the language, themes, and imagery that had informed both "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" and his prose texts from the moment in 1938 when his radicalizing poetics decisively pivoted toward an Americanist orientation. In this way I demonstrate the profound influence of "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho"—and by extension *Raíz del hombre*—on Neruda's broader trajectory.

Finally, in the Conclusion I summarize my argument, raise additional questions, and offer ideas for future projects that might grow from this thesis. In the Appendix, I present my English translation of *Raíz del hombre* as it appears in its entirety in Paz's *Obras completas* (1999), preceded by a brief "Note." Until now, translators like Eliot Weinberger (2012) have only published fragments of the poem in English.

It is my firm belief that as men and poets, Neruda and Paz cannot be separated from the historical context in which they wrote. Discussing some of Neruda's more ideological poetry—by today's standards largely unreadable—Enrico Mario Santí writes, "La justa lectura de cualquier obra pasa primero por la honesta, si bien dolorosa, apreciación de su contexto histórico" (*Letras Libres*). In *El laberinto de la soledad*, Paz defines man in the following way:

“El hombre, me parece, no está en la historia: es historia” (55). Thus channeling Paz’s spirit here while following Santí’s lead as a critic, my understanding of the poets’ output relies heavily on a methodology that loosely aligns with a “historicist/contextualist” approach, which Joseph North defines as the treatment of “literary texts chiefly as opportunities for cultural and historical analysis” (*Literary Criticism* 2). As I note in this Introduction’s opening paragraph, Neruda and Paz’s exchange as registered in texts from before and after their rupture provides an exceptional lens through which to examine the broader cultural Cold War tensions that dogged Latin American intellectuals, particularly with regards to the debate between pure and committed art. Furthermore, and like the New Historicists, I follow the principle that “literature and the social are always simultaneously engaged in acts of mutual creation” (Maza 253).

I choose the adverb “loosely” to describe my adherence to a “historicist/contextualist” approach, however, because I do make a concerted effort to also understand the poems in question through close readings of their language, structures, images, and meter, for example, despite having never received formal training in poetic analysis. For such an effort, I am indebted to Santí, Stanton, John Felstiner, and Evodio Escalante, among other critics I cite frequently in my thesis, whose work exemplifies the type of formal poetic analysis appreciative of historical context that I have attempted here. Furthermore, I take to heart the admission that the eminent Spanish writer María Zambrano made in the middle of a 1938 text analyzing the poetry of Neruda’s *Residencia en la tierra*:

Y ya que declaro mis preferencias, debo igualmente declarar mi incompetencia, sobre todo técnica, acerca de poesía, y que si me atrevo a hablar de ella es por creer que la poesía se dirige a todos a diferencia de la filosofía que exige un método, una preparación; la poesía se derrama magnánima para todos y no se alza severa si uno cualquiera de

quienes la necesitan se atreve a hablar de ella, y aun con ella (“Pablo Neruda o el amor de la materia” 4).

Channeling Zambrano’s unapologetic spirit, and as if I were dialoguing with the poets in the same way as they dialogued with each other—in other words, passionately—I have immersed myself in the powerful words, feelings, and messages that comprise their poetry.

Finally, I must acknowledge my awareness that my argument—that the younger and rather unknown Paz could have influenced his more established mentor Neruda—is entirely ambitious. Beyond the absence of such a notion in the existing scholarship, anecdotal experience has revealed to me the pushback that such an idea might face in the arena of critical debate surrounding the poets’ legacies. In a December 2016 email exchange with Christopher Domínguez Michael, for example, the Mexican writer and Paz biographer wrote to me with, in my opinion, a trace of smiling skepticism, that, “me encantará estar al tanto de sus descubrimientos sobre la para mí enigmática influencia del joven Paz sobre Neruda. Más bien es usted quien podría ilustrarme sobre ese tema” (“RE: Saludos”). And discussing the Paz-Neruda relationship over coffee in Mexico City one day in fall 2015 with the writer Marco Antonio Campos, who worked with Paz at the journal *Vuelta* and won Chile’s Medalla Presidencial Centenario de Pablo Neruda in 2004, I was surprised at his insistence that, even as late as 1943 when they ruptured, Paz represented little more than a minor poet in Neruda’s eyes. That Neruda would sling arrows at Paz in *Canto General*, his most important book, however, would seem to suggest otherwise. Nevertheless, I press ahead in the faith that our understanding of a poetic exchange as rich and meaningful as the one that took place between Neruda and Paz can always benefit from new and bold perspectives.

CHAPTER I

Octavio Paz in Pablo Neruda's Transformation

Dynamics of a Transformation:

From the Trenches of Spain to the Banks of the Mapocho

For decades, critics have sought to understand the transformation that Pablo Neruda's poetry underwent as a result of his experiences in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). The initial iteration of this transformation, exemplified by the appearance in 1936 of the poem "Canto a las madres de los milicianos muertos," can be loosely framed according to the following formula: confronting the trauma of war and in the face of the fascist threat, the poet assumed a revolutionary militancy that contrasted sharply with the nature-infused eroticism, anguished aimlessness, and probing descent-to-origins that had characterized his work until then, especially *Residencia en la tierra* (1933, 1935).³ The critic John Felstiner describes Neruda's transformation, as well as subsequent and divergent critical approaches to it, in the following terms: "The change in Neruda's writing, usually called by his less sympathetic critics a conversion and by others a development, consisted of a twofold realization, as he himself saw it: that he should give up his subjective, irrational, melancholy investigations and that he should join his fellows in the common struggle" (119).

In an early critique of Neruda's pivot, Amado Alonso, for example, argued that it corresponded to a sudden political conversion to communism and a concomitant rejection of an aesthetic of self-absorption (359). For his part, Enrico Mario Santí rejects a strictly biographical explanation and suggests that, in addition to responding to circumstances, the transformation

³ I highlight "Canto a las madres de los milicianos muertos" here because it is Neruda's first poem to explicitly respond to the Spanish Civil War. Hernán Loyola describes it as "el primer poema combatiente de Neruda" (104). Nevertheless, other Neruda specialists consider the poem "Reunión bajo las nuevas banderas," "cuya fecha de escritura no es conocida (Schopf 48), to be "the decisive break with the worldview expressed in *Residencia en la tierra* that steered him toward increasing political awareness" (Dawes 172).

comprised a self-conscious rhetorical strategy in Neruda's pursuit of a "narrative of conversion [that] accounts retrospectively for the self's progress" (*Poetics of Prophecy* 102). Others, like Hernán Loyola (2011) and Alain Sicard (1991), argue that the social concern in Neruda's Civil War poetry fell in line with the prophetic and humanist impulses that had marked his output from the beginning. According to Loyola, "no existió la 'conversión poética' supuesta por Alonso," as "la poesía políticamente *engagée* de Neruda es el desarrollo natural de la poética subyacente a *Residencia en la tierra*" (106). Luís García Moreno contends that Neruda's drift toward a politicized poetics reflected a larger trend among *vanguardistas* of the period: "Fue la crisis del propio callejón sin salida de la sublimación intimista, radicalizado en sus contradicciones por la vanguardia, la que provocó una búsqueda de alternativas en la intención social. El yo en crisis que forma parte de una multitud hueca intenta recuperarse a sí mismo a través de un nosotros rehumanizado" (25).

Despite these differences in interpretation, most critics tend to agree with the broad premise that Neruda's evolution at this point was nourished by the acute consciousness of history he adopted in response to Spain's emergency. Along this line, Santí writes of a transition "from an obsession with time to a concern with history" (*Poetics of Prophecy* 97), while Felstiner argues that "the change [...] meant in effect that Neruda entered into history" and "now felt the drastic pull of historical time" (120). For Sicard, Neruda's "humanismo lo explicará y lo politizará el terrible contacto con la historia" (558). Manifesting as "una poesía de trinchera" in "Canto a las madres de los milicianos muertos" and other poems in *España en el corazón* (1937) (Loyola, "De cómo Neruda devino comunista" 106), Neruda's entrance into history in Spain constitutes the jarring first step of his poetic transformation.

The subsequent application of his newfound historical consciousness to the Latin American context, however, lends his poetry a more celebratory and utopian vision. This second and more consequential phase of Neruda's transformation peaks in 1950 with his magnum opus *Canto General*, a collection of poems that Roberto González Echevarría describes as the expression of a "hope that out of the ruins of Europe and Western civilization in general, Latin America would emerge as a new, vital force" (2). The critic adds that *Canto General* represents the poet's "effort to create an American myth, a version of American history that can constitute the cipher of American destiny." "Alturas de Macchu Picchu," originally published in 1945 but included in *Canto General*, announces the poet's commitment to continental solidarity upon his discovery of Latin America's forgotten indigenous masses at the ancient Incan site. Having found his purpose, the speaker summons his idealized object at the poem's climax:

Sube a nacer conmigo, hermano.

Dame la mano desde la profunda
zona de tu dolor diseminado.

No volverás del fondo de las rocas, (OC I 446).

Combining elements of his pre-transformation verse—surrealist imagery, a sense of modernist alienation, an impulse to descend into material, for example—with the historical consciousness he adopted in Spain and a renewed concern for Latin America's social reality, "Alturas de Macchu Picchu" functions as the "poem at the heart of Neruda's work" (Felstiner 13).

While "Alturas de Macchu Picchu" represents a high point of the politicized Americanist materialism with which Neruda's name would become synonymous, the root of this second phase of his transformation can be traced to 1938 when, home in Chile from the war in Spain, he published "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho," a haunting poem that transports an antifascist

urgency directly to the banks of Santiago's river.⁴ Neruda had lived in Spain since 1934, serving in the Chilean diplomatic corps there until he fled the fascist assault of Madrid at the end of 1936. By early the following year he had relocated to Paris, where he helped organize the Second International Congress of Antifascist Writers to be held that summer between the City of Light, Valencia, and Madrid. Upon completion of the Congress and without work as a result of the closure of the Chilean consulate in Madrid, Neruda set sail for Chile, arriving there in October 1937 (Amorós 162-163).

"Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" portrays Santiago's river as a menacing natural force antagonistic to the plight of the metropolis' most impoverished inhabitants. Despite the poem's reliance on such features reminiscent of *Residencia en la tierra* as a sexualized natural order and a river as symbol of death, for example, the Spanish writer María Zambrano recognized immediately a kernel of transformation embedded within it. In an essay from November 1938 titled "Pablo Neruda o el amor de la materia," she notes that, with "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho," "una nueva era se abre en la poesía de Pablo Neruda" (5).⁵ After declaring her "incompetencia, sobre todo técnica, acerca de poesía" (4), Zambrano explains how the poem is

⁴ In the third volume of the Losada edition of his *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires 1973), Neruda's bibliographic account of the initial publications of "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" contains minor errors that merit rectification. He notes that the poem was published in "*Revista de las Españas*, Barcelona, núms. 103-104 (julio-agosto 1938)," "*Aurora de Chile*, Santiago, núm. 1 (agosto 1938)," and "*Ruta*, México, núm. 5 (agosto 1938)" (957). Among prominent Neruda scholars, Loyola ("Notas" 1210), Santí (*Canto General*, 2011, 421), and Concha (321) rely on the details of publication as reported by Neruda in their respective bibliographic treatments of the poem. Because the Hemeroteca Digital of the Biblioteca Nacional de España does not retain copies of *Revista de las Españas* from after 1936 when, due to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, the journal relocated from Madrid to Barcelona, it remains difficult to verify the details of the first third of Neruda's bibliographical account. The Hemeroteca Digital's website does, however, list Neruda as a contributor to *Revista de las Españas* following its move to Barcelona, suggesting that the poet was correct in that citation. But with regards to the poem's publication in *Aurora de Chile*, Neruda biographer Mario Amorós notes that it appeared in "*Aurora de Chile*, n.º 5. Santiago de Chile, 12 de octubre de 1938" (177), a citation that I corroborated during my research at the Biblioteca Nacional de Chile. Finally, the correct citation of the poem's publication in *Ruta* is the following: *Ruta*, México, núm. 3 (15 de agosto de 1938).

⁵ According to Amorós, "Este artículo lo entregó para el último número que se preparó de *Hora de España* (el XXIII), fechado en Barcelona en noviembre de 1938, impreso a fines de enero de 1939 y que no llegó a distribuirse. Se publicó un año después en *Aurora de Chile*, n.º 16. Santiago de Chile, 30 de noviembre de 1939, pp. 4-5" (171). I consulted the article in its *Aurora de Chile* microfilm version held at the Biblioteca Nacional in Santiago.

Neruda's first to combine his *residenciario* impulse to descend into material profundity—exemplified best in “Entrada a la madera”—with the understanding of human suffering on the collective plane that he gained during the Spanish Civil War.⁶ Underscoring the revolutionary implications of such a project, the writer-critic notes that “el profundizarse tenía que llegar irremediabilmente a lo humano” (5), a statement that echoes Marx's dictum where “to be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself” (*Early Writings* 52). This combination, Zambrano concludes, enables the poet to access the depths of man's tragedy through the evocation of the human figure in its basest state: “en la ‘Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,’ la figura humana aparece ya a través del dolor. Desde lo más desecho, desde los andrajos, ‘los terribles harapos de mi patria’ se siente y se llega a la integridad dolorosa del hombre y se siente al hombre por lo que no tiene, por su desamparo, por el olvido en que yace, por su miseria” (5). According to Zambrano's logic, then, with “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” Neruda taps into a theretofore-unrealized revolutionary potential of the very *residenciario* aesthetic from which he sought distance as he transitioned toward a poetics of commitment during and after the Spanish Civil War.

Beyond this insight, and perhaps due to the immediacy of her account, which she wrote only a few months after the poem first appeared, Zambrano did not recognize what René de Costa determined forty years later to be another component of the poem's transformative value, namely, that it is “Neruda's first [to be] concerned with a social theme *in an American context*” (113) (emphasis added). For this reason, and in addition to constituting one of the earliest poems included in *Canto General*, “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” serves as “the seed poem” for

⁶ It is important to distinguish between this newfound politicized understanding of collective human suffering and the solipsistic conception of individual anguish that underpinned much of Neruda's poetic world prior to 1936, particularly in *Residencia en la tierra*.

Neruda's masterpiece (114).⁷ More broadly, and even as it relies on elements of his pre-political verse, the poem signals the beginning of the militant Latin Americanist thrust that would round out his dramatic poetic transformation.

The Crucial Presence of Octavio Paz

At some point between “Canto a las madres de los milicianos muertos” and “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” or, in the moment before his gestating poetic transformation assumed its definitive Latin American inflection, Neruda discovered the poetry of Octavio Paz. From Mexico, Paz had sent Neruda, then living in Paris, a copy of his recently published *Raíz del hombre* (1937), a long poem in book form that, in affirming love as a revolutionary act at the root of the human experience, incorporated many of the sexual and natural tropes the Chilean had cultivated in *Residencia en la tierra*. For Evodio Escalante, “resulta obvio suponer que Neruda estaría gratamente sorprendido por la calidad de la poesía del joven Paz, pero todavía tenía que agradarle más, podemos conjeturar, encontrar que este talento mexicano reciclaba y hacía suya precisamente su retórica apasionada y matérica” (115). In response and with the help of the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti, Neruda invited Paz to Spain to participate as a delegate in the upcoming Congress of Antifascist Writers (Sheridan 232; Domínguez 81; Aznar Soler 140-141, 154-155).

In his memoir *Confieso que he vivido* (2014), Neruda expresses pride for his role in Paz's participation in the Congress and signals his approval of *Raíz del hombre*: “Entre noruegos, italianos, argentinos, llegó de México el poeta Octavio Paz, después de mil aventuras de viaje.

⁷ Additionally, according to Jaime Concha, the Mapocho river's transformation in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho”—from natural phenomenon, to historical witness, to agent of revolutionary change—foreshadows that of the rivers running through *Canto General*, rendering the 1938 poem “el embrión más temprano” of the 1950 book (334). I would add that, because “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” is the 126th out of 252 poems in *Canto General*, according to the index of Santi's 2011 edition, it functions literally as the work's central poem, whether Neruda consciously situated it there or not.

En cierto modo me sentía orgulloso de haberlo traído. Había publicado un solo libro que yo había recibido hacía dos meses y me pareció contener un germen verdadero. Entonces nadie lo conocía” (151).⁸ While Neruda never elaborated on his perception of the book’s promise, the timing of another similarly brief but laudatory reference to *Raíz del hombre* in an obscure interview from 1943 confirms the depth of his admiration, as I will discuss below.⁹

If, according to Stanton, Neruda’s use of the word “germen” to describe *Raíz del hombre* in his memoir “remite [...] a su propio lenguaje residenciario” (*El río reflexivo* 55), it is also fundamental to understanding his reception of Paz in the context of his own transforming poetics, especially considering his language in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho.” The poem concludes with a defiant yet hopeful challenge to the Mapocho River: “[...] que una gota de tu espuma negra / salte del légamo a la flor del fuego / y precipite la semilla del hombre!” (*OC I* 662). While such imagery exudes masculinist eroticism by evoking the insemination of a passive natural element by another, more active one, the phrase “la semilla del hombre” may also represent a subtle reworking of Paz’s 1937 title. Neruda’s retrospective association of the word “germen”—a synonym of both “semilla” and “raíz”—and *Raíz del hombre* in his memoir strengthens this speculation. And his evocations of “la espuma negra” and “la flor del fuego” in

⁸ On multiple occasions Paz seems to corroborate Neruda’s assertion that the book in question was his first, which would have been *Luna silvestre* (1933). Speaking of his youthful enthusiasm for the Chilean poet in a conversation with Julián Ríos published as *Solo a dos voces*, Paz notes, “Lo admiraba profundamente y le había enviado mi primer libro” (1973, n.p.). In an interview in *The Paris Review* he states, “When I published my first book, I sent a copy to Neruda. He never answered me, but it was he who invited me to the congress in Spain” (1991, n.p.). Nevertheless, according to Anthony Stanton, “ese libro (que no fue el primero de Paz, aunque seguramente fue el primero que conoció Neruda) es, sin duda, *Raíz del hombre*, [...] un libro en el que Neruda habrá percibido de inmediato ecos y resonancias de su propia poesía” (*El río reflexivo* 55). Stanton’s assertion that Paz had sent *Raíz del hombre* to Neruda remains convincing, especially considering the book’s date of publication in January 1937 and Neruda’s claim that he received it just two months before the Congress, which began in June 1937. The unmistakable influence of Neruda’s *Residencia en la tierra* at play in *Raíz del hombre* lends further credence to Stanton’s theory.

⁹ The interview with Osvaldo Muñoz Romero, titled “Presencia de Pablo Neruda,” appeared in the Chilean women’s magazine *Eva* on November 26th, 1943, just three months after Neruda and Paz had publicly ruptured in Mexico City. Having not previously seen the *Eva* interview cited in any study on Neruda, I discovered it by chance in an unorganized folder in the Archivo Central Andrés Bello de la Universidad de Chile in August 2016.

“Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” echo Paz’s elicitations in *Raíz del hombre* of “negras espumas” and “pétalos ardientes,” among other imagistic, linguistic, and thematic similarities. Such convergences suggest that “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” contains, however slight, Neruda’s response to *Raíz del hombre* where no other formal elaboration of his appreciation for that poem exists. Two questions to be addressed, then, ask how “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” responds to *Raíz del hombre* and, perhaps more importantly, why does it respond?

To begin to address the second question, it is important to note that Neruda would have first read *Raíz del hombre* soon after he published his poem “Canto sobre unas ruinas” (published February 1937, dated 1936), in which the speaker claims that “no hay raíces / para el hombre” (*OC I* 384). In that poem, grounded in the midst of the fascist Siege of Madrid and included among the insurrectionary poems of *España en el corazón*, Neruda offers a rare display of pessimism reminiscent of T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922) and a certain surrender to the Baroque theme of time as ultimate leveler, as I discuss in the next chapter. To account, then, for Neruda’s remarkable shift in less than two years from a sense of man’s rootlessness amid the destruction of European civilization in “Canto sobre unas ruinas” to a hope for the rediscovery of man’s roots in an erotically-charged Latin American topography in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” I view as fundamental his reading of Paz’s radical and *American* affirmation of love as the root of man.

As I argue, Neruda’s reworking of Paz’s title at the dramatic conclusion to his first social poem set in Latin America suggests the extent to which *Raíz del hombre* likely inspired the Chilean to reconsider the revolutionary potential embedded in his own *residencial* aesthetic at precisely the same moment he was engaged in a rhetorical distancing from the pessimistic vision behind it. And, just as Paz had recast Quevedo’s theme of rebirth in a revolutionary context in

Raíz del hombre, Neruda's preference for "semilla" marks an overt and similarly radical return to Quevedo's more optimistic vision of death. In a 1935 issue of *Cruz y raya*, Neruda had celebrated Quevedo's influence by publishing a selection of his work beginning with the Golden Age poet's famous line "No defraudamos la agricultura de la muerte: semilla es nuestro cuerpo para la cosecha del postrero día" (84).

To identify resonances of *Raíz del hombre* in Neruda's first explicitly social poem set in Latin America is to suggest that Paz was a crucial presence in the Chilean's evolution toward committed Latin American poet *par excellence*. Considering their respective levels of maturity as poets in 1938, the term "crucial presence" is more realistic than the assertion that, at this juncture, Paz could have directly influenced Neruda in the traditional sense. In 1938 the two sat at starkly uneven points in their trajectories. Having found his voice over nearly two decades of publishing poetry, first in Chile, then throughout Latin America, and finally in Spain, Neruda had established himself as a master of the Spanish language and a central figure in Hispanic letters. At the same time, Paz, at the onset of his career, was writing in thrall to his Chilean idol and still very much in search of his own poetic cadence.

The suggestion of Paz's "crucial presence" in Neruda's transformation can broaden not only dominant understandings of the transformation itself, but also critical narratives of the Neruda-Paz relationship that remain limited to exploring the former's influence over the latter. Of Paz's engagement with his idol in *Raíz del hombre*, Stanton, for example, writes, "es como si el joven Paz tratara de dialogar con Neruda" (*El río reflexivo* 154). But Stanton's use of the word "dialogue" remains incomplete because, although the critic acknowledges the poets' status as contemporaries, it does not seem to consider the possibility that Neruda might respond. By definition, of course, "dialogue" implies the active interchange of ideas *between two* people.

Casting “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” in part as a response to Paz, then, restores the inherent reciprocity missing from Stanton’s *diálogo* by pointing to the existence of an exchange that only really began with Neruda’s reading of *Raíz del hombre* and in which a more generously defined influence—and its associated anxiety—worked in both directions. Following a brief discussion of the reciprocal and dialogic nature of poetic influence according to Harold Bloom’s paradigm, as well as the presentation of other pertinent contextual information and comparative analysis, a close reading of “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” as a manifestation of the poets’ exchange will offer a new prism through which to better understand Neruda’s transition from trench warfare poet to utopian Latin American visionary.

The Bi-Directional Flow of Poetic Influence

Critics have correctly read Paz and Neruda’s relationship from 1937 to 1943 according to the theory of poetry that Bloom outlines in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1997) wherein a younger poet absorbs, wrestles with, and ultimately disowns his precursor in the struggle for self-discovery. Paz’s deliberate reformulation in his early poetry, especially *Raíz del hombre*, of the sexual and natural materiality that Neruda had developed in *Residencia en la tierra*, followed by his 1943 renunciation of Neruda over, among other factors, Neruda’s Stalinism, his corresponding actions in the public realm as Chilean Consul General in Mexico City, and the perceived ideological compromise of his poetry, lend credence to such a critical reading. While the Mexican poet himself notes that, “naturally, the greatest revelation during that first period of my literary life was the poetry of Pablo Neruda” (*The Paris Review* n.p.), Santí concludes that “la ruptura con Neruda significa [...] la necesidad, por parte de Paz, de desarrollar una voz propia” (*Primeras letras* 47).

Bloom's commonly cited and linear vision suggests that the influence of the predecessor can be measured in the psychosis and, ultimately, the production of the successor. Bloom defines poetic influence as a "disease of self-consciousness" in which poets must "wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death" (5, 29). Unable to overcome the anxiety of influence, "weaker talents idealize" and merely imitate their models, while "strong poets make [poetic] history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves" (5).

Reviewing *Raíz del hombre* in 1937, Jorge Cuesta anticipates Bloom's paradigm and its application to the early Paz-Neruda connection. Cuesta highlights Paz's ability to clear sufficient imaginative space for himself while engaging the voices "de López Velarde, de Carlos Pellicer, de Xavier Villaurutia, de Pablo Neruda": "debe advertirse que estas voces extrañas ni ahogan ni suplantán a su propia voz" (9). Exploring Paz's incorporation into *Raíz del hombre* of the eroticism and descent-to-origins aesthetic found in Neruda's *Residencia en la tierra*, Stanton locates the young Mexican among Bloom's strong poets: "las resonancias de Neruda son inconfundibles, pero el resultado final no es una ciega imitación" ("Encuentros y desencuentros" n.p.). Among the many echoes of *Residencia en la tierra* at play in *Raíz del hombre*, Stanton lists a nocturnal atmosphere, an abundance of plant and aquatic imagery, the omnipresence of blood, and the impulse to return to an originary chaos, while also taking stock of the books' formal divergences, including their rhythm and meter.

For Stanton, *Raíz del hombre* can be read as the expression of a "'sistema defensivo' que implanta el poeta más joven para aprovechar la influencia liberadora de Neruda y, al mismo tiempo, controlarla y mantenerla a distancia" (*El río reflexivo* 64). Furthermore, the critic echoes the Freudian undertones of Bloom's theory, noting the tensions with which Paz maneuvered at this early stage in his career so as to not "confundirse con una personalidad poética tan

absorbente, una presencia tiránica capaz de anular la identidad del hijo y transformarlo en un mero reflejo pasivo del padre” (“Encuentros y desencuentros” n.p.). Writing of Paz’s rupture with Neruda in 1943, Escalante adds that “Paz estaba obligado a romper con su modelo en aras de construir su personalidad literaria, o dicho de otro modo, de encontrar una voz distintiva, la suya propia. El *clinamen* de Harold Bloom [...] era en este caso inevitable” (121) (emphasis in the original). While Stanton and Escalante’s observations are correct and valuable, however, they do not consider another facet of Bloom’s theory that can help tell a fuller story of how Paz might have also played a role in Neruda’s evolution.

The relatively simple idea that a precursor’s influence manifests through the successor’s poetry gains complexity with Bloom’s assertion that the successor’s interpretation, or “misprision,” of his precursor can spur a reciprocal form of influence. Bloom writes, “if every act of vision determines a particular law, then the basis for the splendidly horrible paradox of Poetic Influence is securely founded; the new poet *himself* determines the precursor’s *particular* law” (42-43) (emphasis in the original). In other words, the degree to which a predecessor’s influence adds to the merit of a strong successor’s work—the poetry of “X Successor” is good thanks largely to his sharp absorption, or act of vision, of the influence of “Y Predecessor”—helps define the meaning, or particular law, of the former’s poetry in such a way that subsequent readings of that poetry remain incomplete without a consideration of the successor’s work. The long saga of poetry is thus understood generously here as an ever-evolving conversation of reciprocal influence between poets that necessitates continual rereading—and redefinition—of the greats. Such an understanding also begs of readers of all generations the humility to recognize poetry’s malleability as new and original visions of its various manifestations arise alongside the vicissitudes of history.

In this light, accounts of Neruda's poetic transformation during the Spanish Civil War remain incomplete without a consideration of Paz's early poetry, especially *Raíz del hombre*, which, based on its reliance on Neruda's influence, offers readers, including, most notably, the Chilean himself, a fresh perspective with which to approach Neruda's work and thereby decipher new meaning in it. As early as 1937, a perspicacious Cuesta, for example, predicted that the then-twenty-two year old Mexican would, by virtue of his budding talent, exercise a certain power over the precursors whose voices are heard in *Raíz del hombre*, including Neruda: "debe decirse que, si esas voces poseen alguna aptitud para durar, para prolongarse, el hecho de que Octavio Paz las reciba tiene la virtud de ponerlas en posesión del más seguro y del más valioso porvenir que se les puede ofrecer" (9). In other words, Paz's sharp reading of Neruda at this early stage—and therefore the inevitable attachment of Neruda's name to Paz's awakening as a strong poet—would help determine the potency of a legacy that, at the same time, the Chilean was writing for himself.

In this light, Neruda's reworking of Paz's title at the dramatic conclusion of "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho," a poem recognized here for its transformative implications in Neruda's trajectory, reflects the genuine appreciation and defensive unease—the anxiety of influence—with which he likely first read Paz. With the slight change from "raíz del hombre" to "semilla del hombre," Neruda offers at once a tacit confirmation of his positive reading of Paz's work, and a rhetorical exercise of power to reclaim for himself the *residencial* poetics that his successor had made his own in his emergence as a formidable newcomer to the world of Hispanic poetry.

By referring often to precursors as "dead poets," Bloom locates them at a temporal distance from their successors. Jorge Luís Borges offers a similar distinction between past and

present regarding precursors and successors while foreshadowing the second facet of Bloom's theory in which poetic influence can flow from the latter to the former: "cada escritor *crea* a sus precursores. Su labor modifica nuestra concepción del pasado, como ha de modificar el futuro" (148) (emphasis in original). But it is precisely the virtual simultaneity of Paz's interpretation of Neruda in such texts as *Raíz del hombre* and the essay "Pablo Neruda en el corazón" (1938) and Neruda's evolution as exemplified in "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" that renders enigmatic the poets' relationship when regarded according to the more widely followed version of Bloom's theory. The pertinent question, then, asks how Paz's interpretation of Neruda and Neruda's reception of that interpretation coincided with and helped determine Neruda's poetic evolution. To begin to answer this question means to shift the onus of the anxiety of influence from newcomer to precursor and to attempt to prove Bloom's more radical thesis that, "the movement toward self-realization is closer to the more drastic spirit of Kierkegaard's maxim: 'He who is willing to work gives birth to his own father'" (26).

Transcending the Rupture: Neruda's Appreciation for Raíz del hombre

A discussion of Neruda's brief and only comments on *Raíz del hombre*, which came years after his initial reading, as well as of the distinct contexts in which he made them, reveals his high esteem for that work and adds to the present argument that his discovery of it in 1937 constituted a crucial impetus in his poetic transformation.

In August 1943 Neruda was nearing the end of a three-year post as Chilean Consul General in Mexico City. As World War II raged in Europe, he had bought into Stalinist dictates for the function of art wherein "to concentrate on divergent topics other than the defeat of fascism would be tantamount to avoiding one's duty as a poet" (Dawes 235). The exaggerated praise of Stalin and the Soviet Union that he offers in his 1943 poem "Nuevo canto de amor a

Stalingrado” exemplifies the extremities of ideological commitment to which his poetry now reached:

Tu Patria de martillos y laureles,
la sangre sobre tu esplendor nevado,
la mirada de Stalin a la nieve
tejida con tu sangre, Stalingrado (*OC I* 397).

Accordingly, Neruda’s time in the Mexican capital had been marked by strong aesthetic and ideological solidarity with the city’s socially conscious muralists, including David Alfaro Siqueiros. At the same time, he maintained an uneasy relationship with the circle of *purista*-inclined poets that dominated Mexico City’s literary scene and with whom Paz frequently associated (Travis 107). In an interview with Alardo Prats in *Hoy* published on August 7th, 1943, Neruda summarized his divergent feelings toward Mexico’s painters and poets as he prepared to leave the capital:

De la misma manera que creo que los agrónomos y los pintores son lo mejor del México actual, considero que en poesía hay una absoluta desorientación y una falta de moral civil que realmente impresiona. Los poetas, con raras excepciones, se han quedado atrás en la lucha que los pintores mexicanos, con errores y con grandezas, vienen manteniendo vigorosamente. (“Un poeta levanta la voz. Visión poética del nuevo mundo,” qtd. in Stanton, “Encuentros y desencuentros” n.p.).

For Paz, such an attack by his now-former model had crossed the line. If they had not seen each other since a spat in August 1941 over the publication of the poetry anthology *Laurel*, the politics surrounding which had helped define the battle lines between *nerudistas* and

antinerudistas (Schidlowsky 502), Paz would definitively end their relationship with the response he published the following week.¹⁰

On August 15th, 1943, Paz's "Respuesta a un cónsul" appeared in *Letras de México* alongside another searing attack against Neruda by the Mexican writer José Luís Martínez. In what Stanton describes as "el violento texto de su ruptura con Neruda" ("Encuentros y desencuentros" n.p.), Paz employs a virulent tone, the excess of which betrays the profound anxiety of influence of a young poet declaring liberation from his master. Paz lambasts Neruda, whose "literatura está contaminada por la política, su política por la literatura" (*Letras de México* 5). He then mocks Neruda's political naiveté, suggesting that Mexico's impoverished *campesinos* would strongly disagree with the assertion that government agronomists struggle on their behalf. But for Paz, Neruda's personality remained as objectionable as the ideological zeal that cheapened his poetry: "en el señor Neruda la vanidad es una pasión tiránica, que le prohíbe confesar sus errores o sus extravíos." Fixated on Neruda's vanity, Paz writes in the first person plural to identify with the other Mexican poets Neruda had insulted the week before: "lo que nos separa de su persona no son las convicciones políticas, sino, simplemente, la vanidad [...]. La vanidad, que lo obliga a aceptar cada seis meses banquetes y homenajes de esas mismas personas que llama 'carentes de moral cívica.'"

Unsurprisingly, Paz's name is absent among those of hundreds of invited "amigos y admiradores" printed on the brochure announcing Neruda's farewell banquet on August 27th in

¹⁰ For several reasons, Neruda had refused to have his poetry included in the anthology of Spanish-language poetry edited by Paz, José Bergamín, and others who tilted toward aesthetic purity in the increasingly polarized world of Hispanic letters. While Stanton suggests that Neruda's refusal hinged on the editors' affinity for the era's purest poet, the Spaniard Juan Ramón Jiménez, with whom Neruda had been involved in a bitter polemic during the 1930s, Dominic Moran emphasizes the personal insult Neruda felt had been directed at him by the editors for their refusal to include the work of his close friend, the Spaniard Miguel Hernández, who at the time was languishing in Franquista prison (90). In a 1983 essay, Paz notes that, beginning with the *Laurel* episode, his friendship with Neruda "se mudaba en recelo mutuo" (53), and underscores the Chilean's domineering personality as a factor in their drifting apart.

Mexico City (“Homenaje de despedida”). Paz’s exclusion from the banquet suggests that his words in “Respuesta a un cónsul” impacted Neruda deeply, considering that even the Spaniard José Bergamín, another nemesis who once wrote to Neruda of “toda la porquería que llevabas dentro” (“Carta a Pablo Neruda, 11 de diciembre de 1940”), was listed as an invitee. In his memoir Neruda captures the weariness with which he left Mexico, hinting that his feud with the Mexican poets had taken its toll: “Cuando decidí regresar a mi país comprendía menos la vida mexicana que cuando llegué a México. Las artes y las letras se producían en círculos rivales, pero ay de aquel que desde afuera tomara partido en pro o en contra de alguno o de algún grupo: uno y otros le caían encima” (*Confieso que he vivido* 190).

On several occasions until the end of his life, Paz offered detailed accounts of the rupture. In one poignant testimonial written to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Neruda’s death, he acknowledges the emotional fallout:

A mí me dolió la ruptura y tengo la debilidad de creer que a él también le afectó. [...].

Ahora, al recordar todo esto y escribir estas líneas, me invade un sentimiento que solo de una manera muy imperfecta designa la palabra *nostalgia*; es una mezcla indefinible e inextricable de pena y de añoranza, de la sensación de lo irreparable y de la conciencia de la muerte y del olvido que a todos nos aguarda (“Pablo Neruda [1904-1973]” 8)

(emphasis in the original).

In contrast, Neruda left little by way of explicit commentary from which to glean a coherent grasp of his reaction to the rupture. In fact, his subsequent references to Paz in poems, interviews, and his memoir, either direct or veiled but always sparse in nature, paint the portrait of a precursor navigating the contradictions of his own anxiety of influence vis-à-vis his successor. Escalante, for example, suggests that the “pululante poetiso” in the poem “México

(1940)” in *Canto General* is Paz, noting that “Neruda se rehúsa a llamarlo *poeta*. Es un ataque fuerte contra Paz, no en un panfleto o un periódico, que se olvidan a día siguiente, sino en el libro mayor que deja Neruda para la posteridad” (120). For his part, Stanton posits that the reference to “las amapolas surrealistas” in the poem “Los poetas celestes,” also in *Canto General*, represents “un dardo dirigido a Paz, colaborador del grupo surrealista en París en el segundo lustro de la década de 1940” (“Encuentros y desencuentros” n.p.). Furthermore, the edits to an early draft of “Los poetas celestes,” preserved in a facsimile edition of *Canto General* held at the Fundación Pablo Neruda in Santiago, show that the poet had crossed out the word “pederastas” in favor of “amapolas” to reveal a troubling trace of homophobia behind his attacks on Paz (*Canto General*, edición facsimilar 192).

And yet, in what may be the only two recorded statements in which he specifically names Paz—an obscure interview from the immediate aftermath of the rupture and the passage in his memoir that describes their 1937 encounter—Neruda exalts *Raíz del hombre*. That Neruda insists on *Raíz del hombre* both times under such widely divergent circumstances underscores the poem’s impact, not only on how he conceived of his relationship with Paz, but also in understanding his own role at the vanguard of a new and authentic Latin American poetic expression.

We have established above how Neruda’s reference to *Raíz del hombre* in *Confieso que he vivido* displays a self-congratulatory tone through which the author presents himself as a father figure of sorts to Paz. According to his own rendering, Neruda selflessly brought the young poet under his wing after recognizing, before anyone else, Paz’s talent. Whether or not Neruda was the first international poet of stature to recognize Paz’s talent (he was not, as I will demonstrate below), his retrospective pride in having played a major role in Paz’s emergence is

justifiable considering the acclaim Paz would accrue in the years following 1937. Though it was published posthumously in 1974, Neruda presumably wrote his memoir sometime after 1967 when, thirty years after their initial encounter and twenty-four years following their rupture, he and Paz made peace in a London hotel during an international poetry festival. Perhaps, then, the prideful tone in Neruda's self-depiction as Paz's original promoter can be traced to the goodwill of the poets' final meeting, even though, according to Jorge Edwards, "a lo largo de los años, a pesar de la enemistad, seguía sintiéndose orgulloso de ese descubrimiento y le gustaba hacerlo notar" (120). Nevertheless, the circumstances surrounding Neruda's only other explicit reference to Paz render his citation of *Raíz del hombre* in that same instance remarkable.

Alluding to Paz and José Luis Martínez's invectives in *Letras de México*, David Schidlowsky writes that "no es conocida si hay una directa respuesta de Neruda a estos ataques" (565). In an interview with Volodia Teitelboim published in the Chilean newspaper *El siglo* on December 5th, 1943, Neruda refers to his Mexico City quarrels without naming names, though his targets are understood when he pejoratively casts his adversaries as "poetas artepuristas y [...] jovencitos dedicados a la literatura [que] me atacaron violentamente" ("Pablo Neruda Habla").¹¹ A week earlier, however, any tone of bitterness is curiously absent when Neruda names "Octavio Paz, autor de 'Raíz del hombre'" to end an interview with the journalist Osvaldo Muñoz Romero in the November 26th, 1943 issue of the Chilean women's magazine *Eva*. His terse and unelaborated reference to Paz is quoted under the heading "Poetas de América," where Muñoz Romero prompts him to highlight notable Mexican poets.

¹¹ In their respective and meticulously documented biographies, *Pablo Neruda y su tiempo: Las furias y las penas* (2008) and *Neruda: El príncipe de los poetas* (2015), both Schidlowsky and Amorós identify this interview as Neruda's first upon returning to Chile on November 4th after three years in Mexico City and following a journey that also took him through Panama, Colombia, and Peru. The biographers seem to have overlooked the interview in *Eva* that had been published the previous week.

When we recall the implicit reference to *Raíz del hombre* in Neruda's memoir, his laudatory mention of that work and its author in *Eva* is not particularly surprising. But considering that Neruda would speak favorably of Paz or his work in the immediate aftermath of Paz's vicious and public break with him, and especially in light of his veiled jabs at Paz a week later in *El siglo* and in subsequent poems, it is extraordinary. Beyond Escalante and Stanton's correct observations that Neruda recognized his own *residencial* poetics at work in *Raíz del hombre*, what more about that poem could have inspired him to emphasize its merit on these two occasions? In short, what is the "germen verdadero" that *Raíz del hombre* contained for Neruda, and what about that work motivated the Chilean's acknowledgment of it in a poem of such transformational value as "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho"?

Sovereignty Threatened: Neruda in Spain and Paz's Emergence

Neruda's complex reception of "Octavio Paz, autor de 'Raíz del hombre'" cannot be fully understood without considering his privileged status in the 1930s as an unrivaled Latin American poet, especially in the eyes of the leading voices of Spain's avant-garde *Generación del 27*. In 1934, for example, Federico García Lorca spoke glowingly of his friend's work, describing it in the following terms: "la poesía de Pablo Neruda se levanta con un tono nunca igualado en América, de pasión, de ternura y sinceridad" ("Presentación de Pablo Neruda" 250). Alberti, another leader of the movement, wrote years later of Neruda's "noble canto," "pasión abierta," and "estatura más alta que las cumbres" (*Obras Completas III* 437). For writers throughout the Hispanic world, including Latin America, such acclaim resulted from the transformational effect that his poetry had on the Spanish language, particularly in *Residencia en la tierra*.

Neruda did not move to Spain until 1934, and *Residencia en la tierra* was not published there until 1935.¹² Nevertheless he had begun to develop a small but passionate readership among the poets of the Spanish avant-garde as early as 1930 when Alberti, having received a manuscript of the poems of *Residencia en la tierra*, promptly “los mostró en todas las tertulias literarias y los ofreció a sus editores amigos” (Amorós 94). Highlighting Neruda’s unique incorporation of surrealism into *Residencia en la tierra*, the first iteration of which he composed in the 1920s during his anguished experience as a low-level consular official in Asia, Jason Wilson explains what accounts for the poet’s originality vis-à-vis the Spanish *vanguardistas*: “In his geographical isolation, Neruda was able to survey the European and Latin American avant-gardes and absorb whatever he wanted. This freedom from a school or movement is crucial in determining Neruda’s aesthetic position” (*A Companion to Pablo Neruda* 96). In 1974 Paz would also characterize the novelty of *Residencia en la tierra* in terms of its apparent independence from cultural tradition. Likening the book to a group of islands and a continent, Paz emphasizes the self-contained nature of its poetic world: “*Residencia en la tierra* era un archipiélago salvaje y más: un verdadero continente que emergía de las profundidades” (*Solo a dos voces* n.p.).¹³

The foreignness of its expression in relation to dominant contemporary currents in Western and Spanish poetry was a key factor in the peninsular poets’ attraction to *Residencia en*

¹² The first edition of *Residencia en la tierra* had been published in 1933 in Santiago by Nascimento. According to Loyola, it was published as an “Edición de 100 ejemplares numerados de 1 a 100 y firmados por el autor, más 10 ejemplares de autor marcados de A a J, todos en papel holandés Alfa Loeber” (“Notas” 1172).

¹³ Paz’s topographical vocabulary here plays into the mythology that Neruda honed for himself throughout his career as an anti-intellectual poet whose life and work emanated from cosmic and natural origins, as visible in the poetic opening to his memoir: “De aquellas tierras, de aquel barro, de aquel silencio, he salido yo para andar, para cantar por el mundo” (*Confieso que he vivido* 16). Nevertheless, María Luisa Fischer challenges Neruda’s self-portrayal in this way: “A pesar de que en innumerables ocasiones Pablo Neruda sostiene que su poesía no proviene del libro sino que brota como árbol, veta o raíz, directamente de la experiencia y la naturaleza, su obra se basa en tradiciones literarias y modelos textuales previos de los cuales es, de manera consciente o inconsciente, heredera; en suma, se debe también a los libros” (137).

la tierra. Discussing Neruda's "amor por una materia sin forma" in 1938, Zambrano lends insight into peninsular fascination with the Chilean's exotic American verse:

la cultura de donde surge la poesía de Neruda es otra que la nuestra grecocristiana de occidente. Otra si, y acostumbrados a los 'ismos', podríamos llamar materialismo a lo que late en esta poesía de Pablo. Materialismo de que no hay precedente ni en España, porque nuestro materialismo—el peculiar y propio que nos diferencia venturosamente de Europa—es otro. Nuestra materia amada de la que no quisieron jamás desprenderse nuestros más representativos ingenios son las cosas en que se unen substancialmente materia y forma. Mas, nuestra lírica se fue más bien por lo formalista. Y nuestro amor y nuestra muerte, muy cierto, son otros ("Pablo Neruda o el amor de la materia" 5).¹⁴

Likewise, Alberti had been taken aback by the otherness of the dark world presented in *Residencia en la tierra*: "desde su primera lectura me sorprendieron y admiraron aquellos poemas, tan lejos del acento y el clima de nuestra poesía" (*La arboleda perdida* 293). The accent and atmosphere of peninsular poetry in the late 1920s and early 1930s against which Alberti sets Neruda's verse, of course, had been shaped largely by a renewed interest in the formalist legacy of the Golden Age poet Luís de Góngora, famously rehabilitated by Spanish *vanguardistas* in 1927. Shrugging off the formal strictures of traditional Spanish poetic expression, Neruda in *Residencia en la tierra* had opted for a "great flow of lyric effusion" by which "he seems to imitate the natural processes that he describes" (Boll 97). From the Spanish perspective, then, Neruda in *Residencia en la tierra* had transformed a familiar language to give form—ironically

¹⁴ In his memoir, Neruda frames the divergences between his culture as a Latin American and that of his Spanish contemporaries in the following terms: "Naturalmente que españoles y americanos somos diferentes. Diferencia que se lleva siempre con orgullo o con error por unos o por otros. Los españoles de mi generación eran más fraternales, más solidarios y más alegres que mis compañeros de América Latina. Comprobé al mismo tiempo que nosotros éramos más universales, más metidos en otros lenguajes y otras culturas. Eran muy pocos entre ellos los que hablaban otro idioma fuera del castellano" (*Confieso que he vivido* 136).

through a fascination with unformed essence—to an entirely unfamiliar poetic world, nothing short of a revolutionary feat in the *longue durée* of a transatlantic Hispanic cultural exchange that includes the profound impact of Rubén Darío’s *modernismo* on early twentieth-century peninsular poetry.

From a Latin American perspective, on the other hand, the revolutionary legacy of *Residencia en la tierra* lay precisely in its ability to capture a familiar sensibility that until then had eluded the language. Writing three decades after the book first appeared, the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar, for example, captures the perception of its New World readers, demonstrating a certain gratitude for the book’s contributions toward an autonomous regional identity. For Cortázar, “aceptar, asimilar *Residencia en la tierra* exigía acceder a una dimensión diferente de la lengua y, desde allí, ver *americano* como jamás se había visto hasta entonces” (“Neruda entre nosotros” 386) (emphasis in the original). In another text, the author of *Rayuela* describes the revolutionary nature of *Residencia en la tierra* as “una mutación radical de nuestro lenguaje más profundo, [...] una obra que fundamenta, anuncia y apoya el encuentro del hombre latinoamericano consigo mismo, su residencia final en una tierra propia en un mundo más justo y más hermoso” (“Carta abierta a Pablo Neruda” 26).

In the context of Neruda’s ascendant celebrity in the Hispanic world, and especially in Spain, where leading poets recognized his verse for its transformational value, Alberti’s praise in 1935 for the revolutionary expression of another Latin American, the then-unknown Paz, is noteworthy. Recalling his visit to the Mexican capital with his wife that year, Alberti writes in his memoir that, “A casi todos nuestros actos acudían jóvenes escritores y pintores, de los que íbamos a haciéndonos amigos. A uno de los que más recuerdo es a Octavio Paz, tierno y luminoso, casi un muchacho, muy de izquierdas entonces, acompañado de su bella novia, Elenita

Garro. Recuerdo que gustaba de los poemas que yo venía escribiendo [...]” (*La arboleda perdida* 53). In an interview decades later, Paz remembers how the *vanguardista*-turned-militant poet from Cádiz singled him out among his novice Mexican poet peers as “el único poeta revolucionario” (Paz, *Solo a dos voces* n.p.). Despite Alberti’s militant leftism at that point, however, his praise for Paz was not a response to any ideological posturing in the Mexican’s poetry. Rather, for Alberti, according to Paz, the twenty-one year old was a revolutionary poet “porque es el único en el cual hay una tentativa por transformar el lenguaje.”

The “tentativa por transformar el lenguaje” that Alberti perceived in Paz’s poetry at this stage likely stemmed from what Stanton describes as the Mexican poet’s youthful and restless search for an appropriate language—his own language—to give meaning to reality (*El río reflexivo* 129-137). As an example, Stanton cites the 1933 poem “Desde el Principio,” in which Paz highlights, with a trace of disquiet, the limitations of existing language:

Desde el Principio, dóciles,
sujetos a la terrena gracia, al bronce y al pecado,
en la ignorancia de la palabra que nombra las cosas,
las larvas de las cosas,
las cosas sin nombre (Paz, *OC* XIII 42).

In his 1939 essay “Razón de ser,” Paz himself recognizes the revolutionary connotations of such a search, which necessarily places young poets at odds with the language of their poetic forebears. Writing of his relationship with his predecessors in Mexico, the *Contemporáneos*, he foreshadows Cortázar’s above-cited insight regarding the radical value of Neruda’s *residencial* verse whereby “una mutación radical [del] lenguaje más profundo” can lead to an “encuentro del hombre [...] consigo mismo.” Paz notes that, insofar as young poets must “*profundizar* la

renovación iniciada por los anteriores,” “las épocas de juventud son revolucionarias”: “si heredamos algo, queremos con nuestra herencia conquistar algo más importante: el hombre” (OC XIII 197-201) (emphasis in the original).

Having immediately recognized echoes of his own aesthetic in *Raíz del hombre*, Neruda in 1937 would have intuited himself to be one of those “anteriores” whose language Paz was actively working to “*profundizar*.” With *Raíz del hombre*, the emerging young poet had suddenly rendered Neruda’s *residencial* language ripe for revolutionary renovation, a prospect that would have induced anxiety in a poet who only recently had shot to unparalleled acclaim in the Hispanic world for the mold-breaking nature of that very language.

Paz’s emphasis in “Razón de ser” on the poet’s impulse to “*profundizar*,” or to reach for something beyond the surface, as well as his conclusion that such an effort can lead man to greater self-knowledge, reveals his familiarity at this early stage with Marx’s definition of radical critique, which I cite above in my discussion of Zambrano’s reception of “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho.” Not surprisingly, Paz would later admit that he had drawn from that precise Marxist definition for the title of *Raíz del hombre* (Peralta 159), as I will discuss in Chapter II. What is more, Escalante posits that the title’s Marxist orientation likely caught the attention of the increasingly militant Neruda when he received the book in 1937:

Además del valor literario como tal, *Raíz del hombre*—pese a su temática en lo esencial amorosa, como se vio—contiene en su título mismo un guiño para los ‘iniciados’ en el marxismo que no pudo escapársele a Pablo Neruda, militante de toda la vida del Partido Comunista. El título resulta ser la ingeniosa paráfrasis de [la] famosa expresión del joven Marx que dice ‘Ser radical es atacar el problema por la raíz. Y la raíz, para el hombre, es el hombre mismo.’ Como Marx, Paz buscaba que su poesía develara al hombre,

verdadera raíz de todas las cosas. Ese hombre que es hombre *entre* los hombres, como diría el propio Marx. (116). (emphasis in the original).¹⁵

Given Alberti's adherence to Marxism by the early 1930s, his understanding of Paz's poetry as revolutionary would have been informed at some level by the German philosopher's definition of "radical." Furthermore, considering his collaborative role in inviting Paz to the 1937 Congress of Antifascist Writers, Alberti most certainly shared his impressions of the young Mexican poet with Neruda. It is therefore fair to imagine the sense of territorialism with which Neruda may have reacted to such admiration for a younger Latin American poet coming from Alberti, whose discovery of *Residencia en la tierra* had paved the way for the Chilean to consolidate his celebrated status throughout the Hispanic world. Furthermore, Neruda revered Alberti as "el esplendor de la poesía en la lengua española" (*Confieso que he vivido* 161).

In an era in which the omnipresent idea of Revolution inspired artists on the Left to redefine their identity vis-à-vis society, and at a moment when Neruda had secured his prestige in Spain with a "poesía que no tiene vergüenza de romper moldes" (Lorca 249) while simultaneously evolving toward a more politicized verse, Alberti's praise for the transformational language of a younger Latin American poet had to be unsettling. In this context, Neruda's invitation of Paz to the Congress and his subsequent and lifelong self-presentation as the discoverer of the young Mexican in 1937—"entonces nadie le conocía"—can be read as the

¹⁵ Escalante's characterization of Neruda's communist proclivities is misleading, as the poet did not officially join the Communist Party until 1945. The timeline of his political trajectory vis-à-vis communism is murky, at least according to the poet's own rendering. In the late 1930s, for example, Neruda was compelled, perhaps to preserve some semblance of impartiality in his duties as a diplomatic functionary, to deny the communist label that was increasingly applied to him for his work on behalf of the Spanish Republic. In a letter dated August 3rd, 1937, he wrote the following to the Chilean foreign minister: "Pero tampoco soy comunista, ni pertenezco a ningún partido. Soy antifascista" ("Carta de Pablo Neruda a José Ramón Gutiérrez," qtd. in Amorós 160). And yet toward the end of his life, perhaps liberated from the atmosphere of paranoia of the revolutionary 1930s, he claimed that "Empecé a ser comunista en España, durante la Guerra Civil" (*Ercilla*, 27 de octubre de 1971, qtd. in Amorós 152).

anxious exercises of a predecessor attempting to stem the perceived threat to his identity as an unparalleled revolutionary poet posed by the emergence of a powerful protégé.

Alberti, Paz, and Cortázar's convergent diction in defining the revolutionary thrusts behind Neruda and Paz's pre-political poetry helps justify the speculation that the Chilean would have perceived the young Mexican as encroaching on his unique position in Hispanic letters. Thus, the appearance of *Raíz del hombre* in 1937 perhaps inspired in Neruda a certain defensive reflection regarding the direction of his own increasingly politicized poetry. If so, the minor allusion to *Raíz del hombre* at the end of "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho," a poem that signaled his pivot toward a poetics concerned with Latin American social reality, takes on a deeper meaning. The slight modification of "raíz del hombre" to "semilla del hombre" symbolizes Neruda's wrestling back of a materialism he had developed in *Residencia en la tierra* from a protégé who had appropriated it well enough to earn an invitation to the 1937 Congress of Antifascist Writers and the acclaim of the most revolutionary Spanish language poets, including Alberti and Neruda himself. In "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho," or the symbolic first step on his path toward becoming Latin America's shining example of a committed poet, Neruda would both acknowledge Paz's strength and re-exert his own.

Poetic Antecedents: ¡No pasarán! and "Galope muerto"

La libertad es alas [...]

—Paz, "Razones para morir," *Libertad bajo palabra* 136.

As a poem that was not explicitly ideological, *Raíz del hombre*, despite its heavy resonances with *Residencia en la tierra*, is at first glance a strange work to have provoked such a strong response from Neruda when he received it in early 1937. At precisely that moment, the Chilean was engaged in a conscious distancing from his own *residencial* aesthetic, the self-

absorption and obsession with nature of which he found increasingly inappropriate amid the political urgency of the Spanish Civil War. In July of that year he would publish the poem “Es así,” included in *España en el corazón* as “Explico algunas cosas,” in which he defiantly justified his shift toward a poetics of total antifascist commitment:

Preguntaréis por qué su poesía
no nos habla del sueño, de las hojas,
de los grandes volcanes de su país natal?
Venid a ver la sangre por las calles,
venid a ver
la sangre por las calles,
venid a ver la sangre
por las calles! (*OC I* 371).

The poem’s scornful attitude toward his previous artistic priorities resembles that found in the critique of *Residencia en la tierra* he offered in a 1971 interview:

My book *Residence on Earth* represents a dark and dangerous moment in my life. It is poetry without an exit. I almost had to be reborn in order to get out of it. I was saved from that desperation of which I still can’t know the depths by the Spanish Civil War, and by events serious enough to make me meditate. At one time, I said that if I ever had the necessary power, I would forbid the reading of that book and I would arrange never to have it printed again. It exaggerates the feeling of life as a painful burden, as a mortal oppression. (*The Paris Review*).

Furthermore, in a March 9th, 1937 letter “A mis amigos de América,” Neruda defended his newfound poetic commitment to the Spanish Republican cause against calls for his verse to

remain apolitical: “al situarme en la Guerra Civil al lado del pueblo español, lo he hecho en la conciencia de que el porvenir del espíritu y de la cultura de nuestra raza dependen directamente del resultado de esta lucha. [...] Y a todos mis múltiples amigos de América Latina quiero decir: no me sentiría digno de vivir si así no fuera” (cited in Schidlowsky 322). With a tone of such justified moral righteousness, Neruda here implicitly demands that his Latin American friends stake out similar positions of commitment in their work. That no such position can be immediately discerned in *Raíz del hombre*, which likely arrived in Neruda’s hands shortly after this letter was published, renders his fascination with it worthy of further examination.

Considering Neruda’s concerns at the beginning of 1937, including his call to arms in “A mis amigos de América,” it is also noteworthy that he left no commentary on Paz’s 1936 poem *¡No pasarán!*, which Stanton describes as “la primera de una avalancha de poemas sobre España publicados por poetas hispanoamericanos como Neruda, Vallejo, Huidobro y Nicolás Guillén” (*El río reflexivo* 144). In fact, that poem’s clear commitment to the Republican cause, announced immediately by the title’s reproduction of the popular Republican shout of resistance, would seem to have qualified it as the type of poetry Neruda sought from his fellow Latin Americans. But that it too exhibited irrefutable traces of Neruda’s *residenciario* aesthetic complicates critical understanding of both Neruda’s reception of Paz and the dynamics of the Chilean’s poetic transformation.

¡No pasarán!, “un texto propagandístico” and “una concesión panfletaria a la ideología revolucionaria en boga” (Stanton, *El río reflexivo* 141), was published in Mexico on September 30th, 1936, six days after the appearance in Spain of Neruda’s “Canto a las madres de los milicianos muertos.” Ironically, however, it was not Neruda’s social poetry from which Paz drew inspiration for the explicitly political and utilitarian message in *¡No pasarán!*, but rather the

Chilean's borderline surrealist poem "Galope muerto," originally published in 1926 and comprising the first poem of *Residencia en la tierra*. According to Felstiner, "No other poem by Neruda has elicited the fascinated uncertainty that 'Galope muerto' has. [...]. The poem's obscurity has made it less accessible than other lyrics in *Residencia en la tierra*, and its unaccountable imagery and syntax have scared off translators" (63).

In a 1937 review of *¡No pasarán!*, the critic Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano, writing under the pseudonym M.R., characterized the opening lines to Paz's poem as no more than a cheap imitation of the authentic expression in "Galope muerto" ("Poesía y retórica" 2). While Stanton dismisses Ortiz de Montellano's critique as unjust—"¿cómo establecer una comparación jerárquica entre un joven que apenas comienza y un poeta que ya ha conquistado una madurez envidiable?" (*El río reflexivo* 141)—, the resonances between the first stanzas of *¡No pasarán!* and "Galope muerto" are clear. Neruda begins his poem with a series of opaque similes, setting the tone for an ambiguity from which the poem never escapes:

Como cenizas, como mares poblándose,
en la sumergida lentitud, en lo informe,
o como se oyen desde el alto de los caminos
cruzar las campanadas en cruz,
teniendo ese sonido ya aparte del metal,
confuso, pesando, haciéndose polvo
en el mismo molino de las formas demasiado lejos,
o recordadas o no vistas,
y el perfume de las ciruelas que rodando a tierra
se pudren en el tiempo, infinitamente verdes (*OC I* 257),

The first stanza of Paz's poem is a clear attempt to echo the unsettling tone of urgency in "Galope muerto" through a comparable use of obscure similes. By the final line of the stanza, however, the antifascist and Republican orientation would have been clear to anyone in the Hispanic world abreast of Spain's situation in the late 1930s:

Como pájaros ciegos, prisioneros,
como temblantes alas detenidas
o cánticos sujetos,
suben amargamente
hasta la luz aguda de los ojos
y el desgarrado gesto de la boca,
los latidos febriles de la sangre,
petrificada ya, e irrevocable:
No pasarán. (OC XIII 115).

Despite whatever shortcomings early critics like Ortiz de Montellano may have identified in *¡No pasarán!*, it is remarkable that such an insightful reader of Neruda as Paz would look to what perhaps constitutes the most ambiguous and apolitical poem of *Residencia en la tierra* as inspiration for his first lyrical attempt at ideological commitment. Precisely for his wisdom at such a young age, Paz's ability to absorb elements of "Galope muerto" into a poem like *¡No pasarán!* strengthens critical arguments like those of Sicard and Loyola that the roots of Neruda's political poetry can be traced to his earliest work. Furthermore, such an example of poetic influence demonstrates that, at the height of the polemic surrounding socially committed and pure poetry, the relationship between both remained more tangled than the propagators of each, including Neruda and Paz, might have recognized.

With such words as “ciegos,” “ojos,” “boca,” and “latidos,” for example, Paz draws on Neruda’s *residenciario* poetry of the senses, on display in the first stanza of “Galope muerto” with “se oyen,” “sonido,” “vistas,” and “perfume.” Paz had already experimented with a Nerudian sensorial aesthetic in “Vigilias,” which he began to write in 1935, and would continue to do so in *Raíz del hombre*, described by Stanton as “una poesía de la sensualidad que se centra en lo corporal y su relación con el mundo natural” (*El río reflexivo* 148). That Paz should incorporate the natural materialism associated with Neruda’s (and Paz’s own) pre-political poetry into a poem like *¡No pasarán!* suggests an attempt to find middle ground in the struggle between intimate and committed poetry that defined the Mexican’s 1930s poetic coming of age. In “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” Neruda would accomplish a similar feat, harnessing for his first explicit message of Latin American revolutionary solidarity the understanding of man’s connection to nature that he had cultivated in *Residencia en la tierra*.

In addition to representing an expression of solidarity through the appropriation of Republican Spain’s rallying cry, Paz’s title is also of interest because it shares with Neruda’s 1926 title an explosive internal paradox that pits life’s force against death’s stillness. In his masterful reading of “Galope muerto,” Felstiner defines Neruda’s attempt to reconcile these opposing forces as “dynamic form” and suggests that, “at the source of the poem’s twofoldness, generating its rising and falling figures, stands the title. *Galope* starts with a rising, forceful movement, *muerto* kills it” (76) (emphasis in the original). In the case of *¡No pasarán!*, the sound of ascension produced by the repetition of the letter “a” in the word “pasarán” reaches its peak at the accented final syllable, and such an upward motion of sound suggests a gathering of strength and a will to proceed. The third person plural form of the verb points to the forces of fascism moving fast, perhaps galloping, through Spain. But just as Neruda’s “muerto” kills the

“galope” in its tracks, the emphatic and already announced monosyllabic “No” stands like an unbreakable wall of resistance that will effectively halt the fascists’ advance. Among other examples of dynamic form at play in *¡No pasarán!*, the poem’s first two lines (“Como pájaros ciegos, prisioneros, / como temblantes alas detenidas”) represent a clear nod to the first two lines of the third stanza in “Galope muerto” (“Por eso, en lo inmóvil, deteniéndose, percibir, / entonces, como aleteo inmenso, encima”). For Paz, the imagery of a bird whose flight is terrifyingly suspended by a disruptive force takes on political connotations, serving as a metaphor for the Republic’s struggle for freedom against fascism’s unnatural might.

For Stanton, Paz’s juxtaposition of opposing forces throughout *¡No pasarán!* reveals a level of Manichean naiveté in the young poet as he sought to universalize the Spanish struggle: “Se plasma la desnaturalización de la vida como el estancamiento del ímpetu vital,” and “las imágenes y el lenguaje expresan una oposición irreductible entre movimiento dinámico y parálisis mortal, entre libertad y encadenamiento, entre vida y muerte [...]. Lucha dramática, definitiva y apocalíptica entre contrarios” (*El río reflexivo* 145). In Felstiner’s estimation, on the other hand, at the heart of Neruda’s experiment with dynamic form in “Galope muerto” lay the *quevedesco* notion that out of the ashes of death new life might emerge. In the poem’s opening verse, according to Felstiner, “the ashes seem a deadening way to begin, except that Neruda’s free, ongoing syntax [...] enables the ashes as well as the oceans to be stirring with life” (75). The ease with which Quevedo’s famous line “serán ceniza, mas tendrá sentido,” from the poem “Amor constante más allá de la muerte” (*Selected Poetry* 136), can be applied to a revolutionary worldview does not require explanation, and so it is perfectly plausible that in drawing inspiration from “Galope muerto,” Paz sought to reformulate the Golden Age poet’s influence to fit the needs of his ideological commitment in *¡No pasarán!*. That Paz laments the “cuerpos

mutilados” and “vides secas y cenizas dispersas” of the Republic under siege, only to close the poem with an appeal to “la vida verdadera” that will “crezca, joven, en España,” reveals his adherence to a more hopeful vision of death. Speaking of his generation’s poetic priorities at the Congress of Antifascist Writers in Valencia in August 1937, Paz leaves no doubt as to the presence of Quevedo in his revolutionary outlook at the time: “nosotros anhelamos un hombre que, de su propia ceniza, revolucionariamente, de su propia angustia, renazca cada día más vivo” (OC XIII 262).

Relying on the influence of Neruda’s *residencial* poetics, Paz in *¡No pasarán!* exhibits clear ideological alignment with his Chilean idol who was in the midst of an evolution toward a poetry of social commitment. Furthermore, Paz’s work was met with appreciation in Spain, where thousands of copies of *¡No pasarán!* were distributed (Stanton, *El río reflexivo*, 143), and where the Mexican’s readings, at least of some of his Civil War poetry, were welcomed, as Zambrano recalls:

resulta imposible no recordar al poeta todavía adolescente llegado a España, a Madrid, a Barcelona, recitando en público [...] su cabal poema ‘Elegía a un joven muerto en el frente’ [...]. Sin mascara, el poeta se identificaba con el poema y con el camarada muerto en un [...] amanecer del mundo. Difícilmente se haya dado a ver con ojos de la cara una tal identificación entre el poeta, el poema y lo que el poema dice. (“Hora de España XXIII” xxi).

Nevertheless, Neruda’s lack of commentary on *¡No pasarán!* is unsurprising for at least one specific reason. While his poetry had taken a decisive turn toward the political around the time that *¡No pasarán!* appeared, the Chilean was still years removed from the blind ideological pamphleteering he would commit in such poems as “Canto a Stalingrado” (1943), “Nuevo canto

de amor a Stalingrado” (1943), and “Que despierte el leñador” (1948). In 1936 and 1937, the poet was experiencing first hand the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, and his poetry of the period reflects his authentic response as well as a deep love for the country. According to Zambrano,

Su ‘España en el corazón’ es la muestra verídica de la compenetración íntima verificada entre Pablo Neruda poeta y España, España en su tragedia, pero, ¿sería posible esta compenetración en la tragedia si no existiese algo común, si antes ya de la tragedia, en sus vísperas, Pablo Neruda, hombre y poeta, no hubiera recorrido, abierto el corazón, los caminos de España; si no hubiese dejado llegar hasta el corazón mismo de su poesía las voces de nuestro pueblo, esa voz de hoy, de siempre [...] [?]. (“Pablo Neruda o el amor de la materia” 5).

On the other hand, the twenty-two year old Paz had written *¡No pasarán!* in Mexico, protected from the danger and tragedy of the war by thousands of miles of distance and consumed by the type of idealism that precedes experience. As an active participant in Republican Spanish society since 1934 and a bard documenting from up close the terror of the Republic’s collapse, Neruda could have easily recognized in *¡No pasarán!* what Paz would write two years later in the essay “Pablo Neruda en el corazón”: “Que en poesía todo lo apriorístico, todo lo que no sea experiencia privativa del poeta, es dogmatismo” (OC XIII 273).

Perhaps one sign that pointed to the inauthenticity of the poetic experience in *¡No pasarán!* for Neruda, who “escribió en la turbulencia pura, en el ciclón negador de la forma” (Gullón 142), was the poem’s attempt to capture the chaos unleashed by the Spanish Civil War within the confines of classical poetic form, specifically through a reliance on heptameter and hendecasyllable verses. In other words, how could one legitimately fit into an ordered and

formalist poetry the absolute destruction of order and form represented by the fascist attack on the Spanish Republic? (Interestingly, Neruda would resort to heptameter and hendecasyllable verses in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” a poem that, as I will argue in Chapter III, engages the voices of Golden Age poets like Góngora and Quevedo.) For Neruda (just as for Paz in subsequent years—“el olvido del poema fue casi total por el autor” [Stanton, *El río reflexivo* 143]) the zeal in *¡No pasarán!* would have rung empty due to its author’s lack of personal experience in the Civil War. Despite its shortcomings, however, Paz’s reliance on certain *residencial* elements in *¡No pasarán!* proved that a pre-political Nerudian aesthetic could be applied in constructing a poem that was bound to history and written in service of a specific social cause.

If Neruda remained unmoved by a poem such as *¡No pasarán!*, which aligned well with his own politics, because it did not reflect an authentic poetic experience, his immediate attraction to *Raíz del hombre*, an erotic poem that exhibited no explicit ideological orientation, might be explained in part by the fact that it *did* reflect genuine experience. As Stanton notes of *Raíz del hombre*, “la lección de la experiencia erótica es la necesaria aceptación de la naturaleza dual del amor. Gracias al clímax tan logrado en su intensidad, el lector no duda en creer que la lección surge como culminación de la experiencia misma” (*El río reflexivo* 151). Guillermo Sheridan is more specific in his analysis, citing an early draft of the poem to prove that it charts, at least in part, Paz’s anguished early relationship with Elena Garro, whom he would marry in 1937 (152). Arguing against criticism that portrays *Raíz del hombre* as an apolitical poem, in the following chapter I explore how an implicit radicalism embedded in the poem’s natural eroticism, beginning with the privileged role of experience, also helps explain Neruda’s passionate response.

CHAPTER II

The Revolutionary Implications of *Raíz del hombre*: A Nerudian Reading

Introduction

Since its publication in January 1937, critics have consistently, and correctly, valued Paz's *Raíz del hombre* as an erotic poem. At the same time, they have largely ignored the possibility that the volatile historical context in which the poem appeared, in addition to its place within the young Mexican poet's coming-of-age negotiation between pure and committed poetry, might lend its verses an implicit but powerful political intention. In elevating as its *raison d'être* an eroticism stripped of political meaning, these critics have often set the intimism of *Raíz del hombre* in opposition to the overt propagandizing of *¡No pasarán!* as proof of the former's authenticity in the face of the latter's superficiality.

In a 1937 review of Paz's recent work, Rubén Salazar Mallén, for example, combined a blistering critique of *¡No pasarán!* with a celebratory appraisal of *Raíz del hombre*: “[*¡No pasarán!*] era una caja de palabras completamente vacía, era un aspaviento demagógico para ignorantes de la poesía. [...]. Pero acaba de publicar Paz un poema nuevo: *Raíz del hombre*, en que la lejanía de la política es cabal, en que se busca el camino y la libertad por la poesía” (qtd. in *Proceso*, 28 de junio de 1986). For his part, Stanton highlights the divergent voices Paz had displayed by early 1937—“el poeta de tema social y político [de *¡No pasarán!*]” and “el neorromántico y erótico de *Raíz del hombre*” (*El río reflexivo* 156)—and emphasizes the distance between each: “[con *Raíz del hombre*] estamos más lejos todavía de la poesía de consigna de *¡No pasarán!* [...]: el lector se encuentra ante una poesía auténticamente erótica” (147). Here Stanton implies that authentic erotic poetry eschews politics. And Boll insinuates a mutual exclusivity between eroticism and politics that seems, in light of the use of the

conjunction “but,” to preclude the possibility of interpenetration: “*Raíz del hombre* displayed no explicit political intention but traced an erotic relationship through sixteen poems of moderate extension” (92). Notably, and though he does not follow through on this line of inquiry, Boll does leave room for the possibility that the poem might display an implicit political intention.

Salazar Mallén, Stanton, and Boll are correct to note the lack of overt politics in *Raíz del hombre* and the divergences between its intimate sensuality and the pamphleteering effect of *¡No pasarán!*. The 1937 poem clearly abstains from direct references to any particular political or historical moment. But the impulse to demarcate Paz’s early styles so starkly, especially with regards to two poems published within a few months of each other, can undermine the fluidity—and perhaps confusion—that informed his absorption of influences and will to experiment during a poetic emergence determined in large part by the historical and political realities of a world in flux. Furthermore, such a limiting impulse echoes those approaches to Neruda’s transformation that perceive an abrupt conversion while ignoring the possibility that his evolving political verse fell in line with certain strains elaborated in his earliest work.

Interestingly, however, certain key figures in Hispanic letters directly involved in the antifascist struggle during the Spanish Civil appear to have appreciated *Raíz del hombre* for its value within its historical context. While organizing the Congress of Antifascist Writers after having recently fled Franco’s fascist Siege of Madrid, Neruda, for example, invited the relatively unknown Paz to participate as a delegate based on his impression of *Raíz del hombre*, as he describes in his memoir. Validating Neruda’s (likely) antifascist reading of the poem, in August 1937 the Spanish publisher Manuel Altolaguirre edited a short collection of the Mexican poet’s work titled *Bajo tu clara sombra y otros poemas sobre España* (Ediciones Españolas), which, alongside the revolutionary “Cantos españoles,” including *¡No pasarán!*, featured six fragments

of *Raíz del hombre*.¹⁶ That “el escritor chileno antifascista de mayor prestigio internacional” (Aznar Soler 135) would identify in *Raíz del hombre* “un germen verdadero” (*Confieso que he vivido* 151) in the lead up to a Congress of Antifascist Writers that he was helping to organize, and that a prominent antifascist publisher might include parts of that text in a collection of poems “sobre España” at the height of that country’s struggle against a fascist insurrection, render questionable—and limiting—those critical foci on the poem’s ostensibly apolitical orientation.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to explore how Paz conveys an implicitly antifascist and, more broadly, anti-totalitarian message through his highly erotic verse in *Raíz del hombre*. Because it is such an extensive poem—its original 1937 version consists of 541 verses, whereas the version Paz edited for his 2001 *Obras completas* consists of 370—*Raíz del hombre* offers many angles from which to understand it in relation to its historical context.¹⁷ Therefore, and due to the limited scope of my dissertation, I will focus only on a select number of elements that, together, demonstrate how the poem would have appealed to a revolutionary antifascist sensibility like the one toward which Neruda was evolving in the spring of 1937.

Without discounting entirely the sharp readings of critics such as Boll and Stanton, for example, here I shift critical emphasis from the poem’s eroticism as an end in itself to the

¹⁶ While *Bajo tu clara sombra y otros poemas sobre España* is the first book Altolaguirre published during the Spanish Civil War (Schidlowsky 396), another publication for which he is responsible during that time has accrued legendary status through the years. While embedded with Republican soldiers on the front in Catalonia in November 1938, Altolaguirre oversaw the publication of an edition of Neruda’s *España en el corazón*. Due to the precarious circumstances under which the soldiers printed the books, they used cloth from captured enemy flags and prisoner uniforms instead of paper. In the “Noticia” that opens the book, Altolaguirre writes: “El gran poeta Pablo Neruda, (la voz más profunda de América desde Rubén Darío, como dijo García Lorca), convivió con nosotros los primeros meses de esta guerra. Luego en el mar, como desde un destierro, escribió los poemas de este libro. El Comisariado del Ejército del Este lo reimprime en España. Son Soldados de la República quienes fabricaron el papel, compusieron el texto y movieron las máquinas. Reciba el poeta amigo esta noticia como una dedicatoria.” On the editorial page, the note states: “De este libro se han impreso 500 ejemplares numerados del 1 al 500, bajo la dirección de Manuel Altolaguirre, terminándose su impresión el día 7 de noviembre de 1938, segundo aniversario de la defensa de Madrid.” For these citations, I consulted “Ejemplar N.º 41,” held at the Archivo Central Andrés Bello de la Universidad de Chile.

¹⁷ Unless otherwise noted, I cite here the 1937 edition of *Raíz del hombre*.

possibility that it functions as a symbolic vessel through which Paz conveys his understanding of radicalism—as a search for and encounter with roots—in the context of his total commitment to the revolutionary struggle against fascism in the mid-1930s. I read *Raíz del hombre* as a fundamentally political poem: through its pervasive erotic imagery and symbolism, particularly of sexual communion and “desnudez,” Paz offers a message of radical solidarity while poeticizing Marx’s call to “unmask self-estrangement” to “establish the truth of this world” (*Early Writings* 44). Informed by the revolutionary zeitgeist of the 1930s, such an intention lends a political inflection to what the poet would write several years later in “Poesía de soledad y poesía de comunión”: “En la comunión el poeta descubre la fuerza secreta del mundo [...]. Y el poeta no sólo la descubre y se hunde en ella; [...] la muestra en toda su aterradora y violenta desnudez al resto de los hombres, latiendo en su palabra, viva en ese extraño mecanismo de encantamiento que es el poema” (*OC* XIII 238). That Paz delivered an implicitly political intention through a renovation of Neruda’s *residencial* aesthetic or, in other words, breathed new and radical meaning into Neruda’s poetics of eroticized natural materialism, speaks both to the revolutionary nature of *Raíz del hombre*—in aesthetic and ideological terms—and the Chilean’s reception of it.

It is important to note that Paz composed the poem in 1935 and 1936, before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War presented Hispanic intellectuals an urgent, and perhaps even personal reason for explicit antifascist positioning. Nevertheless, my focus on the implicit radicalism of *Raíz del hombre* is the result of my attempt to read the poem as Neruda would have read it at the crucial moment in his evolution when his understanding of poetry was increasingly conditioned by the antifascist struggle in which he was engaged. Appearing at a moment in history when the forces of totalitarianism were reducing human beings to instruments—and victims—of advanced

technological warfare, *Raíz del hombre*, as its title announces, constitutes a quest for man in his natural and original state. That Paz chose to send it, and not *¡No pasarán!*, for example, to his increasingly militant idol Neruda, who had famously called for “la constancia de una atmósfera humana” in poetry (“Sobre una poesía sin pureza” 108) and recently fled Franco’s aerial bombardment of Madrid, demonstrates the young Mexican’s awareness of the revolutionary value of such a quest.

“No hay raíces / para el hombre”:
Neruda’s Enigmatic Hopelessness in “Canto sobre unas ruinas”

El hombre, el inventor de ideas y de artefactos, el creador de
poemas y de leyes, es una criatura trágica e irrisoria: es un
incesante creador de ruinas
—Paz, *Itinerario* 139.

Before exploring the implicit antifascism of *Raíz del hombre*, and to better understand Neruda’s immediate and passionate response to it in spring 1937, it helps to examine how his reading of Paz’s poem coincided with a rather enigmatic moment in his evolution toward a poetics of commitment. Specifically, Neruda would have been justified if he perceived *Raíz del hombre* in part as a direct and affirmative corrective to “Canto sobre unas ruinas,” a particularly dark poem he published in February 1937 and in which a speaker wanders through a loveless wasteland only to discover that “no hay raíces / para el hombre.” Beyond a title that promised to define precisely that which Neruda had denied in “Canto sobre unas ruinas”—man’s roots—Neruda would have identified in *Raíz del hombre* a vision in which love proved resilient amid social collapse, was capable of recapturing the wholeness of lost origins, and revealed itself as a source of rebirth. Not only did such elements specifically counter Neruda’s more pessimistic concept of love in “Canto sobre unas ruinas,” but they also resonated with certain aspects of the

Civil War poetry of his Spanish idol Alberti who, as I noted earlier, had praised the revolutionary value of Paz's poetic expression.

By marking the place and date at the foot of "Canto sobre unas ruinas" as "Madrid, 1936," Neruda grounds the poem's otherwise unspecified drama of dislocation amid the smoldering remains of a Spanish capital hammered that autumn by a relentless aerial bombing campaign carried out by Franco's forces. Considering that Neruda would flee the city in the early days of the Siege, the turnaround between the initial devastation of the capital and his writing of "Canto sobre unas ruinas" highlights the journalistic approach with which he recorded, through poetry and in real time, his lived experience of the Spanish Civil War.¹⁸ Included in *España en el corazón* later in 1937, "Canto sobre unas ruinas" was originally published in February of that year in the first issue of *Los poetas del mundo defienden al pueblo español*, a journal established in solidarity with the Republican defense of Spain and "Compuesto personalmente a mano por Nancy Cunard y Pablo Neruda." The first page of that issue declares that "Madrid será la tumba del Fascismo Internacional – Escritores: combatid en vuestra patria a los asesinos de Federico García Lorca – Pedimos dinero, alimentos, ropa y armas para la Republica Española. No Pasarán" (1937).

For a poem composed and published in the tumultuous early days of Neruda's transformation, "Canto sobre unas ruinas" stands out not for any explicitly revolutionary resolve, but rather for a tone of despair and loss. The title announces a landscape of destruction, the hopelessness from which the speaker never escapes. For Cecilia Enjuto Rangel, "'Canto sobre unas ruinas' projects an apocalyptic vision of history" in which "there is no resurrection" and "the future is like a wasteland" (246, 250, 251). The speaker finds himself alone amid the city's

¹⁸ According to Schidlowsky, Neruda wrote "Canto sobre unas ruinas" in response to the heavy bombing of Madrid that took place on November 7th, 1936. He fled the capital the following day. (307-309).

ruins, surrounded by evidence of lives gone, searching futilely for meaning amid so much collapse. There are no people in “Canto sobre unas ruinas;” Neruda’s is a desperate vision in which fascist bombs have leveled the human spirit, reduced it to a pile of rubble. For Santí, the poem “is a lament for human fate through the spectacle of ruins destroyed by human intervention. [...] In Neruda’s bombed wasteland the destruction was so complete that little if any trace of human intention was left standing and therefore the ‘ruins’ of the poem’s title hardly existed” (*Poetics of Prophecy* 139).

Reminiscent of the book of Genesis, “Canto sobre unas ruinas” begins by remembering the original gathering of substances that would give way to such defining forms of human civilization as art, architecture, the measuring of time, and, of course, human beings themselves. In the second stanza, which emphasizes beginnings and growth, the monotonous repetition of the vowel “o” is magnified by the utterance of “oh” four times and a pair of exclamation marks, all of which offer a sense of gut-level wistfulness that will underscore the tragedy of the ensuing collapse:

Como el botón o el pecho
se levantan al cielo, como la flor que sube
desde el hueso destruido, así las formas
del mundo aparecieron. Oh párpados,
oh columnas, oh escalas.
Oh profundas materias
agregadas y puras: cuánto hasta ser campanas!
cuánto hasta ser relojes! Aluminio
de azules proporciones, cemento

pegado al sueño de los seres (*OC I* 383-384).

Here Neruda presents human civilization as having sprung from the same vital and originary thrust as that of a flower blooming. For Enjuto Rangel, such an association, along with other similar ones throughout the poem, contrasts “Canto sobre unas ruinas” with “the traditional antagonistic Baroque topos of ruins between nature and culture” (249). In my opinion, this essential connection between nature and human culture serves to prove the radical unnaturalness and inhumanity of the fascist forces responsible for the devastation to come.¹⁹ Halfway through the poem, a shell-shocked speaker then draws the reader directly to the aftermath of a catastrophe—the bombing of Madrid—to report austere that

Todo ha ido y caído
brutalmente marchito
Utensilios heridos, telas
nocturnas, espuma sucia, orines justamente
vertidos, mejillas, vidrio, lana,
alcanfor, círculos de hilo y cuero, todo
todo por una rueda vuelto al polvo,
al desorganizado sueño de los metales,
todo el perfume, todo lo fascinado,
todo reunido en nada, todo caído
para no nacer nunca. (384).

The poem’s approach to time in the stanzas cited above is telling for at least two reasons. First, it signals the multilayered influence of Quevedo. Discussing his legacy in another context,

¹⁹ In “Pablo Neruda en el corazón” (1938), as I cite below, Paz will echo such a contrast, describing Spanish fascism as “semihumana” (*OC XIII* 274).

Stanton offers a perspective on Quevedo's dualistic poetic treatment of time that helps contextualize Neruda's Spanish Civil War poem within a tradition imbued by Hispanic Catholic morality:

Quevedo ejemplifica la conciencia de la caída, la dualidad, la escisión [...]. La polarización dualista de esta poética histórica revela la proyección, sobre la historia de la poesía, del principio religioso de la caída: se trata de un esquema teológico de la historia de la poesía, de dudosa objetividad histórica, que obedece al comprensible deseo polémico de romper con un pasado inmediato a través de la exaltación de un pasado remoto que se erige en modelo utópico. Se inventa una genealogía. ("Octavio Paz, lector de Quevedo" 180).

In "Canto sobre unas ruinas," the preterite tense of the verb "aparecer"—"así las formas / del mundo aparecieron"—suggests that the time of creation is completed and past. Underscoring a nostalgia for the hope that the creative energy of a remote past had promised, the speaker looks back to the construction of civilization with a series of words signaling a directional flow upward, including, "se levantan al cielo," "sube," and "escalera." Such hope is captured most poignantly through the simile linking the formation of the world to the vital thrust of a flower sprouting from destroyed bone, an image that clearly invokes Quevedo's "agricultura de la muerte" and renders the remote past a time of rebirth.

On the other hand, the present perfect tense of the verbs "ir" and "caer"—"todo ha ido y caído"—emphasizes an immediate past, present, and possible future of disappearance and collapse. To offset the upward thrust that characterized the hope of the past, Neruda portrays the present calamity as a fall downward through the repetition of the word "caído." Thus channeling Quevedo's "despair at the true spectacle of man" (Rey 29) and resignation to the inevitability of

man's fall, Neruda evokes the cyclical, ever-present, and ultimately omnipotent nature of death through the image of a dust-churning wheel. The insistence on the impossibility of resurrection in the present underscores the triumph, however fleeting, of the second (and more pessimistic) half of Quevedo's dual approach to time in the Chilean's poetic vision at the moment he composed "Canto sobre unas ruinas."

The poem's depiction of time in ahistorical apocalyptic terms—a remote past of creation and rebirth is held up against a present of collapse—also suggests a momentary reversion on Neruda's part from his newfound poetic interest in historicity to his more established fascination with temporality as seen in *Residencia en la tierra*. According to Santí, as mentioned above, Neruda's transformation was marked by "the subject's passage from an obsession with time to a concern with history, or from temporality to historicity. In a sense, all of the poetry of *Tercera residencia*, and especially the poems of *España en el corazón*, delineate this change by their registering of historical events" (*Poetics of Prophecy* 97). Maneuvering poetically in temporality over historicity may have offered Neruda a more familiar, and thus more comforting, option with which to process the devastation he had witnessed up close, a possibility that complicates understandings of the poet's transformation as a decisive and linear break with one aesthetics for another. Santí sees the ahistorical nature of "Canto sobre unas ruinas" in the following terms: "Neruda pointedly omitted a historical object [...], either because the immediacy of the ruins preempted any such meditations or because the poem's context was felt to suffice" (*Poetics of Prophecy* 139). Nevertheless, his inclusion of "Madrid, 1936" at the foot of the poem signals an awareness of this internal tension at such a critical juncture in his poetic trajectory and constitutes a conscious effort to steer the poem in a more historically-grounded direction that fell in line with his evolving militancy.

Noting that the poet's "lack of faith in the resurrection of things and bodies aligns 'Canto sobre unas ruinas' with the Modernist and Surrealist aesthetics and an atheist ideology," Enjuto Rangel highlights the poem's attitude of bitterness toward "mechanized Modernity" (248, 250). The dystopian evocation of the city's ruins as a "desorganizado sueño de los metales" (*OC I* 384), for example, captures the distorted reality of the modern project, which modern warfare—i.e. the bombing of civilians from the air—has unmasked as a purveyor of chaos and barbarism rather than a bearer of reason and progress. The poem's parting image of marble shattered into a trail of sobs is a devastating portrait of the fate of a civilization—manifested most immediately in the Republic—that, having emerged in splendor under classical pretenses of harmony, has fallen prey to the "nada" of twentieth-century fascism. Historicizing Heidegger's claim that "la nada es la negación pura y simple de la omnitud del ente" (trans. Zubiri 94),²⁰ Paz in "Pablo Neruda en el corazón" adds existential depth to Neruda's lamentation over what has been lost: "Con el fascismo, en España, la nada impersonal, subterránea disgregadora, adquiere imagen, forma y acción semihumana. Con la República el lento tiempo que corroía a España de pronto afirma la vida que construye y alimenta y se pone de parte del destino español" (*OC XIII* 273-274).

If the speaker's surrender to the totalizing finality of death—represented in the image of the wheel that spins "todo" to dust—aligns the poem with the Quevedo who wrote "¡Qué mudos pasos traes, oh muerte fría, / pues con callado pie todo lo igualas!" (*Selected Poetry* 52), his attitude of anguish toward the fragmentation of modernity—represented in the imagery of disorganized metal and shattered marble—aligns it with the T.S. Eliot who wrote of a "heap of

²⁰ According to R.F.C. Hull and Alan Crick's 1949 English translation of "What is Metaphysics?", this sentence reads: "For Nothing is the negation (*Verneinung*) of the totality of what-is: that which is absolutely not" (361).

broken images” in “The Waste Land” (1922).²¹ Digging in vain for meaning amid the destruction, Neruda’s speaker exclaims fatalistically that, “no hay raíces / para el hombre. Todo descansa apenas / sobre un temblor de lluvia” (*OC I* 384). Here, the Chilean plays on Eliot’s dreary representation of the displacement of the modern individual:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water (*The Complete Poems and Plays* 38).

In flatly denying the existence of man’s roots, Neruda’s anguish is more acute than Eliot’s. For the latter, man’s roots are, at best, unidentifiable—“you cannot say or guess”—and, at worst, sustenance of a fruitless death, evidenced by “the dead tree” that “gives no shelter” and from under which they “clutch;” either way, though, Eliot stops short of totally writing off their existence. Channeling an Eliotic anguish in the context of the Spanish Civil War, Neruda demonstrates how “war uproots its victims as it destroys their sense of belonging, of *nostos*, because they end up either dead or in exile, internal and external, inside and outside of Spain” (Enjuto Rangel 252). With his adopted home of Madrid in ruins in late 1936—not to mention his marriage to Maria Antonia Hagenaar at the same time—in addition to the fact that for the better part of the past decade he had lived away from his native Chile, Neruda’s claim about man’s lack

²¹ While the image of “la flor que sube / desde el hueso destruido” from the second stanza of “Canto sobre unas ruinas” is treated here to associate Neruda with Quevedo as an example of the Chilean’s nostalgia for the possibility of rebirth promised by the past, it may also correspond to the end of the section “The Burial of the Dead” in “The Waste Land,” when the speaker interrogates Stetson: “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? / Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?” (39).

of roots is perhaps the most personal and introspective moment in a poem of such visceral immediacy.

That Neruda was compelled to echo the distressed tenor of “The Waste Land” in a poem set in an obliterated landscape is not surprising. As Boll notes, Neruda had previously demonstrated an affinity for Eliot’s poem in *Residencia en la tierra*, in which a sense of suffering in, and disgust for, a hostile world often serves as a guiding tone. Both *Residencia en la tierra* and “The Waste Land,” according to Boll, “were testimony to periods of emotional crisis for their respective authors” (93). Yet despite sharing Eliot’s understanding of “an analogy between a personal, sexual crisis and an inability to find relation in the world at large,” Neruda “departs from his source” in *Residencia en la tierra*: where the American-Englishman remains unable to overcome his isolation, the Chilean “finds satisfaction in a sensual relation to the physical world” (93, 94). With this key difference between Neruda and Eliot in mind, the former’s approach toward love at the end of “Canto sobre unas ruinas,” a poem clearly accentuated by the influence of “The Wasteland,” is noteworthy.

For a Romantic poet known for projecting “an active sexual desire into the world” (Boll 94) and who, in late 1936, was undergoing a radical reorientation from solipsism to solidarity, to frame it rather reductively, Neruda might have ended “Canto sobre unas ruinas” on a heroic note, allowing his speaker, for example, to discover love as a last revolutionary recourse with which to rise above the fascist onslaught, even if only in symbolic fashion. Nevertheless, the final stanza begins with a command through which the speaker conjures an image depicting the extinction of love among the tangled residue of human existence that he had alluded to earlier in the Canto. In a tone that resonates with the poem’s underlying Baroque theme of time as an ultimate destroyer, the speaker directs the reader:

Ved cómo se ha podrido
la guitarra en la boca de la fragante novia:
ved cómo las palabras que tanto construyeron,
ahora son exterminio [...]. (384-385).

In this depressing image, the female lover's mouth, otherwise evocative of the tender words, aroused cries, and damp warmth characteristic of passionate love, is transformed into a barren and hostile space where beauty, symbolized by the musical instrument, cannot survive. The lover's mouth here is the erotic complement to the poem's larger historical wasteland, while the guitar and the shattered marble correspond as symbols of beauty sacrificed. The clash between the sound of rot produced by a guitar fallen out of tune and the scent of fertility emanating from the "fragante novia" renders the image one of sensorial dissonance that captures the poem's overall sense of traumatic dislocation. The speaker's inability to find refuge in sexual connection, then, places "Canto sobre unas ruinas" more in line with a conventional Eliotic desperation from which even the poems of *Residencia en la tierra* were able to escape, despite the fact that, for Neruda, they represented "poetry without an exit," as I note in the previous chapter.

"Canto sobre unas ruinas" therefore offers a poignant glimpse of how, in the midst of his transformation, Neruda remained suspended between divergent poetic tendencies. He had recently staked out a position of revolutionary commitment with the appearance of "Canto a las madres de los milicianos muertos." Yet his emphasis in "Canto sobre unas ruinas" on the death of love and the impossibility of resurrection, as well as his reversion to temporality over historicity, demonstrate the continued sway of a vision elaborated in *Residencia en la tierra* that, according to Neruda himself, "exaggerates the feeling of life as a painful burden, as a mortal

oppression” (*The Paris Review* n.p.). Months later, of course, the sense of defeat driving the speaker’s command to observe the rot of love in “Canto sobre unas ruinas” will transform into a fierce antifascist call to action when the speaker of “Explico algunas cosas” demands that readers join in bearing witness to the blood running through the streets.

Because the speaker of “Canto sobre unas ruinas” wanders alone through a battered landscape devoid of others with whom to forge a connection of solidarity, in addition to a general tone of surrender, the poem remains unique amid the defiant and often celebratory “poesía de trinchera” collected in *España en el corazón*. The status of “Canto sobre unas ruinas” as an outlier in Neruda’s work of the period becomes more visible when considered alongside “Paisaje después de una batalla,” for example, another poem included in *España en el corazón* with a title and imagery blatantly evocative of “The Waste Land.” Falling in line with the collection’s revolutionary aims, “Paisaje después de una batalla” ends in conviction with the lines, “guarde mi sangre este sabor de sombra / para que no haya olvido” (*OC* I 386). Here the poet implies a promise of future revolutionary action that will draw inspiration from the injustices sustained and memorialized during the unnamed battle of the title. A similar ability, or willingness, to transform present trauma into future action is nowhere to be found in “Canto sobre unas ruinas.”

The inclusion in *España en el corazón*, then, of such a haunting vestige of the poet’s *residencial* anguish nuances his transformation and suggests that, even during the defining moment of his life when he discovered revolutionary camaraderie, Neruda remained susceptible to the darker tendencies of his poetic vision. Following “Canto sobre unas ruinas,” his determination to quash this lingering susceptibility—best articulated in the first half of 1937 in

“A mis amigos de América” and “Explico algunas cosas”—helps explain his positive reception of Paz’s *Raíz del hombre* two months before the July Congress of Antifascist Writers.

A poem set amid the ruins of progress and the de-formation of the human world, “Canto sobre unas ruinas” makes the desperate case for the rootlessness of man, for whom even love proves ephemeral. As he sought distance from such a perspective while simultaneously harboring nostalgia for his own roots, Neruda discovered in *Raíz del hombre* an affirmative—and American—vision of love as man’s most permanent and natural source of creation and rebirth. Read in the context of the Spanish Civil War, such a vision would have rendered the act of love an inherently revolutionary antidote to the “negación” and “nada” of fascism. That Neruda identified the influence of his own *residencial* aesthetic in Paz’s radical vision of love likely inspired the Chilean to recognize a theretofore unrealized revolutionary potential embedded in his own poetic roots, which he could harness as his verse evolved toward an authentic and unrivaled utopian Latin American expression. His reliance on certain *residencial* elements in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” his first explicitly political poem set in a Latin American context, in addition to that poem’s subtle allusion to *Raíz del hombre* in its final line, attests to this specific form of influence that Paz’s poem likely exercised over Neruda when he first read it in early 1937.

Retreat from Reason: A Historicist Reading of Raíz del hombre

Enlightenment [...] has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.

—Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 1.

Following his traumatic experience in the Siege of Madrid, Neruda and his partner at the time, the Argentinean Delia del Carril, resettled in Paris in January 1937 to resume activist work on behalf of the Spanish Republic. In his memoir he writes that, “Llegamos a París. Tomamos un

departamento con Rafael Alberti y María Teresa León, su mujer, en el Quai de L'Horloge, un barrio quieto y maravilloso" (*Confieso que he vivido* 145-146). Considering that Neruda and Alberti lived together in the wake of Franco's bombardment of the Spanish capital, it is no surprise that their poetry from the period reflects a similar impulse to process the trauma of having recently lost their beloved Madrid, which, for both of them until 1936, had represented a veritable Republican paradise of brotherhood and culture. In his memoir, for example, Neruda nostalgically describes a life of camaraderie, arts, and drink in "Aquel Madrid!":

Con Federico [García Lorca] y Alberti [...], con el escultor Alberto [Sánchez] [...], con Altolaguirre y Bergamín; con el gran poeta Luis Cernuda, con Vicente Aleixandre, poeta de dimensión ilimitada, con el arquitecto Luis Lacasa, con todos ellos en un solo grupo, o en varios, nos veíamos diariamente en casas y cafés. De la Castellana o de la cervecería de Correos viajábamos hasta mi casa, la casa de las flores, en el barrio de Argüelles. Desde el segundo piso [...] descendíamos en grupos bulliciosos a comer, beber y cantar. Recuerdo entre los jóvenes compañeros de poesía y alegría a Arturo Serrano Plaja, poeta; a José Caballero, pintor de deslumbrante talento y gracia; a Antonio Aparicio [...] y a tantos otros que ya no están o que ya no son, pero cuya fraternidad me falta vivamente como parte de mi cuerpo o sustancia de mi alma. (138).

The same month that "Canto sobre unas ruinas" appeared in *Los poetas del mundo defienden al pueblo español*, Alberti published in *Hora de España* poems under the title *Capital de la gloria*. In the collection's first poem, "Madrid-Otoño," Alberti, like Neruda, responds in horror to the destruction of culture brought about by fascist bombs:

Capital ya madura para los bombardeos,
avenidas de escombros y barrios en ruinas,

corre un escalofrío al pensar tus museos

tras de las barricadas que impiden las esquinas. (*Hora de España* 30)

But where Neruda is unable to locate even a kernel of hope amid the ruins of Madrid in “Canto sobre unas ruinas,” his Spanish comrade reveals an explicitly revolutionary intention several stanzas later: “Ciudad, ciudad presente, / guardas en tus entrañas de catástrofe y gloria / el germen más hermoso de tu vida futura” (30). In *Rafael Alberti’s Poetry of the Thirties*, Judith Nantell notes that “the underlying theme of these poems is death as a source of life,” and that “rebirth is dramatized throughout [...] by the imagery of ruin and rejuvenation, the juxtaposition of the present with the future, and the contrapuntal tones of sadness and hope” (92, 94).

Considering the esteem in which Neruda held Alberti, the latter’s revolutionary departure in “Madrid-Otoño” from the former’s sense of hopelessness in “Canto sobre unas ruinas,” in addition to the Spaniard’s earlier praise of the revolutionary expression of Paz’s poetry, offers valuable context for Neruda’s identification of a “germen verdadero” upon opening *Raíz del hombre* sometime in late March or early April 1937.²² In light of the counterbalance between Neruda’s claim that “no hay raíces / para el hombre” and Alberti’s discovery of “el germen más hermoso” in the “entrañas de catástrofe y gloria,” taken together, Paz’s title and the first stanza of *Raíz del hombre* are particularly striking:

Las ruinas de la luz y de las formas

glorifican, Amor, tu densa sombra,

la sombra en que se agolpan mis latidos,

árbol vivo en relámpagos crecido,

²² Referencing Paz’s June arrival in Paris for the Conference of Antifascist Writers, Neruda notes that the Mexican “había publicado un solo libro que yo había recibido hacía dos meses,” suggesting that he would have received *Raíz del hombre* in April. The letter to the Mexican Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios in which Neruda invited Paz to the Congress is dated “París, 9 de abril de 1937” (Aznar Soler 140).

ante el rumor confuso de los suyos. (11)

While these lines contain no explicit historical signifier, their setting of ruins, their appearance in the aftermath of the bombing of Madrid, and their expression in the Spanish language, like both Neruda and Alberti's poetic renderings of the devastated Spanish capital, locate the poem in a contemporaneously emerging tradition of Civil War poetry. At the very center of the second verse, capitalized and separated on either side by commas, the word "Amor" stands tall and on its own amid ruins of light and form and offers an immediate answer to the title's implicit question, what is the root of man? (The same year he began composing *Raíz del hombre*, 1935, Paz had answered this question in a love letter to Elena Garro: "El amor nos disuelve, pero esa disolución es fecunda: un despojar de todo, nos hace ver que la definitiva, *la raíz del hombre, es su amor*, la evidencia del amor" [Elena Garro Papers, Princeton University] [emphasis added]). Just as Alberti's "germen más hermoso" is embedded, oxymoronic, in "catástrofe y gloria," Paz's *raíz*, Love, is "glorifica[da]" by "las ruinas." Considering Alberti and Paz's similar attachment of the notion of *gloria* to their respective depictions of revolutionary defiance in the face of ruins, it is interesting to observe that, later in 1937, Neruda would grant his collection of revolutionary Civil War poetry, *España en el corazón*, the subtitle "Himno a las Glorias del Pueblo en la Guerra."

Through the opening imagery of "las ruinas de la luz y de las formas," Paz appears to simultaneously establish a tone of lamentation for what has been lost—light and form are symbols *par excellence* of Enlightenment reason—and provides the conditions out of which love can rise and offer redemption, as seen in the second verse. To better understand the nature of the first half of this equation—Paz's lament for the loss of reason—and before exploring how *Raíz del hombre* displays an antifascist spirit *à la* Alberti in "Madrid-Otoño," it helps to consider the

poet's broader, though nascent anti-totalitarianism of early 1937. (Paz's early aversion to authoritarianism, which I touch on here, would lay the seeds for the subsequent anti-authoritarianism around which he would fashion his political thought vis-à-vis communism throughout the Cold War, much to the consternation of many on the Mexican and Latin American Left.) To do so, in this section I historicize the retreat from reason that Paz announces in the poem's first stanza.

Fascism is understood here as the imposition through organized violence, or the threat thereof, of an exclusionary political philosophy that sublimates the individual to an abstract construct of the ideal nation or race. By 1937 fascists had consolidated power in localized totalitarian variations in Germany under Adolph Hitler and in Italy under Benito Mussolini while, alarmingly, in Spain, Franco's violent uprising sought to replace the Republic with a version of fascism rooted in Hispanic Catholicism. At the same time, the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin had largely succeeded, thanks to a massive propaganda campaign abroad, in fashioning its communist model as the supreme antidote to German fascism. The murderous totalitarian tendencies that Stalin had begun to exhibit inside the Soviet Union by the mid-1930s would, with some exceptions, remain out of sight to, and in other cases consciously ignored by, Western antifascists for at least another decade. Thus, assuming an antifascist posture in 1937 usually involved some level of association—or shared interests, at least—with the leftwing international efforts of the Comintern-concocted Popular Front, including demonstrations of solidarity with the besieged Spanish Republic. Through political organizing, armed resistance, art, and other means, antifascist social democrats, socialists, communists, and anarchists worked—often in conflict with one another—to create worlds that stood in active opposition to fascist ideology and practice.

Within this broad sketch of the historical moment in which *Raíz del hombre* appeared, Paz embodies somewhat of an enigma. While he had unequivocally pronounced his antifascism just several months prior to the appearance of *Raíz del hombre* with the publication of *¡No pasarán!*, he had also harbored intuitive reservations toward what he perceived as Stalin's authoritarian overreach into the realm of culture. As a young poet, he remained wary of Comintern efforts to steer Western art in the direction of antifascist protest: due to “la disparidad entre mis simpatías comunistas y mis gustos e ideas estéticas y filosóficas,” it was impossible to “aceptar la jurisdicción del Partido Comunista” (*Itinerario* 50, 53). To be sure, when he published *Raíz del hombre* in January 1937 his antifascist zeal and “simpatías comunistas” would have outweighed his budding and relatively unelaborated misgivings toward Stalinism.

Reading Paz's opening lament for the ruins of light and form in *Raíz del hombre* against his musings on modern Enlightenment thought at the end of the Cold War sheds light on how his antifascism of early 1937 is rooted in and foreshadows the anti-authoritarianism that would guide his subsequent politics. In *La otra voz* (1990), Paz locates the critical spirit of the Enlightenment, and the political revolutions it inspired in the United States and France, as the starting point for the modern age. He then writes:

No es un accidente que estas grandes revoluciones, fundadoras de la historia moderna, se hayan inspirado en el pensamiento del siglo XVIII. Fue un siglo rico en proyectos de reforma social y en utopías. [...]. Las utopías del XVIII fueron el gran fermento que puso en movimiento a la historia de los siglos XIX y XX. La utopía es la otra cara de la crítica y sólo una edad crítica puede ser inventora de utopías; el hueco dejado por las demoliciones del espíritu crítico lo ocupan casi siempre las construcciones utópicas. Las utopías son los sueños de la razón. (33-34)

Additionally, and in line with the Eurocentric tilt of his analysis, Paz concludes that Latin American “modernidad es incompleta o, más bien, es un híbrido histórico” due to the region’s failed nineteenth-century revolutions of independence. The inference here, of course, is that an underdeveloped post-independence Latin America represents the product of a stunted utopian vision.

While Paz does not denounce utopian thought outright here, his logic in tracing twentieth-century history to it aligns with a tradition of Cold War liberalism bent on “showing again and again just how it was that utopianism came to be the driving force behind the political catastrophes associated with Hitler and Stalin. [...]. Cold War liberals often said that the source [of totalitarianism] was really the Enlightenment, with its dangerous overestimation of Reason” (Shorten 109-110). As the Ukrainian-American political scientist Ihor Kamenetsky wrote in 1964, for example, “Both Communist and Nazi movements have in common with the utopias of the past the fact that they emerged amidst the turmoil and insecurity of a profoundly shaken or endangered society. They held a visionary program of a new stability of society and a permanent solution of all problems which seemed to be essential” (“Totalitarianism and Utopia” 114-115). The “visionary” nature of totalitarian Communist and Nazi plans for “stability” speaks precisely to the faith in such principles of Enlightenment reason as light and clarity, form and order.

From the vantage point of the underdeveloped Latin American margins of history, with a “tierna y desesperada actitud americana, en soledad frente a un mundo deshabitado” (Paz, “Cultura de la muerte: Xavier Villaurrutia,” *OC* XIII 264), a twenty-two year old Paz surveyed the world’s geopolitical landscape at the beginning of 1937—including the urgent threat of a fascist takeover in Spain, the Nazis’ totalitarian rise in Germany, *and* signs of Stalin’s authoritarianism—and intuited that “los sueños de la razón” of which he would write in 1990,

those Enlightenment hopes for utopia, were crumbling into totalitarian nightmare. In this regard, the opening verse's sober depiction of light and form in ruins, like shattered statues of Apollo, Theia, Eunomia, and Securitas, classical deities of light, sight, order, and stability, reads like a generally liberal lament for the consequences of the "dangerous overestimation of Reason."

Paz's more global and less ideologically discriminatory, though still emergent outlook on the trajectory of human culture, in which the dream of a modern project rooted in reason might devolve into either fascism *or* authoritarian communism, differentiates *Raíz del hombre* from "Canto sobre unas ruinas," where, as noted, Neruda castigates fascism as a grotesque mutation from a civilization that had emerged in sync with nature. For Paz, it is precisely culture's departure from nature—shown in the first stanza's starkly antagonistic positioning of light/form/reason (culture) against the lovers' intertwining heartbeats (love) combined with the energies of the tree and lightning bolts (nature)—that helps explain the contemporary gathering of authoritarian forces across the ideological spectrum. Toward the end of his life, the poet would articulate this departure in the following terms: "En el seno de la naturaleza el hombre se ha creado un mundo aparte, compuesto por ese conjunto de prácticas, instituciones, ritos, ideas y cosas que llamamos cultura" (*La llama doble* 16). Anticipating his future arguments against the inabilities of liberalism and capitalism—two products of the modern faith in reason—to answer to such irrational dimensions of the human condition as spiritual hunger and love and to respect nature, respectively, Paz seems to imply at the beginning of *Raíz del hombre* that the original bifurcation of culture from nature augured the civilizational doom that had become apparent by early 1937.

The divergence between "Canto sobre unas ruinas" and *Raíz del hombre* in this respect is perhaps best illustrated by briefly comparing each poem's treatment of language, a key

component of human culture. In the powerful image of the lover's mouth, which, as I suggest above, depicts the extinction of love in Neruda's poem, the speaker's command to "ved cómo las palabras que tanto construyeron, / ahora son exterminio" is a lament for the destruction of culture at the hands of a monstrous and alien force—fascism—and underscores the inhumanity of that ideological phenomenon. But if, for Neruda, fascism's destruction of the language ("palabras"), or culture, that had been central to the construction of human civilization constitutes reason for mourning, Paz's descent toward man's roots in love and nature depends on a retreat from culture predicated precisely on the negation of language. Paz insists on this conscious retreat throughout *Raíz del hombre* through such symbols and imagery as "un vivo dios sin nombre y sin palabras" (11), "mi lengua deshecha" (11), and "la noche desnuda de palabras" (22).

The theme of the loss of language in *Raíz del hombre* reaches an eroticized climax in Canto II, when the speaker says

Asidos a la noche delirante
no tenemos más voz que la del beso
que agrava la ternura en que crecemos,
ni más nombre que el inefable de la sangre. (22)

Here the kiss replaces the voice as the principal form of communication between the lovers, whereas their names give way to blood. As conveyors and markers of language, voices and names are supplanted by erotic and primal corporeality. Communication thus becomes communion between two bodies, as language gives way to the sexual embrace. Inasmuch as the poem exalts a corporal experience culminating in erotic communion, it rejects the frigid reason and geometric schema of a divided modern world that had led humanity to the brink of mechanized World War for the second time in less than three decades.

The image of light and form in ruins represents the result of the “dangerous overestimation of Reason” and stands in for the collapse of modern civilization as was apparent to Paz in early 1937. For Paz, the destruction of human culture was enabled by its own devices—several years later Horkheimer and Adorno would write of the “tireless self-destruction of enlightenment” (xiv)²³—while for Neruda in “Canto sobre unas ruinas” it was imposed by an alien force. In loosely inverse terms, then, Paz’s retreat from reasoned culture in *Raíz del hombre* departs from an opening image depicting the ruins of forms, while Neruda’s lament for the destruction of culture departs from an opening image depicting the growth of forms (“así las formas / del mundo aparecieron”).

Paz introduces his powerful critique of reason subtly in the first stanza through the presentation of a clear dichotomy between light/form and love. Beyond simply presenting reason and love in dichotomous terms, however, Paz literally predicates the glorification of the latter on the destruction of the former. It is as if Paz is saying that love is whole only when reason is overcome, or that love can only exist in its true form(lessness)—“densa sombra”—and natural spontaneity—“latidos”—once liberated from the straightjacket of reason. In other words, the geometric formulations of reason preclude the very possibility of love. Emphasizing the active opposition between the two, in Canto IX the speaker states that “en el amor no hay formas” (44).

The influence of Neruda’s *Residencia en la tierra* on this aspect of *Raíz del hombre* is notable, and is best appreciated indirectly through the language Zambrano employs in her 1938 essay “Pablo Neruda o el amor de la materia,” so much of which reads as if the critic were writing about Paz’s poem. For example, Zambrano’s approach to the Chilean’s *residenciario*

²³ Paz’s implication that modern civilization’s collapse stemmed, at least in part, from culture’s “dangerous overestimation of Reason” at the expense of nature foreshadows Horkheimer and Adorno’s argument in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). The authors write that, “in the service of an advancing rationalization of instrumental thought modeled on the domination of nature and serving its purposes, enlightened reason is progressively hollowed out until it reverts to the new mythology of a resurrected relationship to nature, to violence” (218).

impulse to descend into material profundity could easily be applied to Paz's retreat from reason on his quest for man's roots as introduced in his first stanza: "sobre la superficie del mundo están las formas y la luz que las define," Zambrano writes, "mientras la materia gime bajo ella.

Residencia en la tierra acaba por llevarnos a residir bajo la tierra misma, en sus oscuros túneles minerales" (4). Notably, Paz qualifies the first stanza's depiction of the "sombra en que se agolpan mis latidos / árbol vivo en relámpagos crecido, / ante el rumor confuso" with a particularly Nerudian treatment (according to Zambrano's language of "bajo la tierra" and "oscuros túneles") in Canto IV, where the speaker's blood flows

en un oscuro mundo
de latidos, relámpagos, silencio,
subterráneo universo
de ignoradas corrientes." (25)

Like Paz's poetic statement that "en el amor no hay forma," Zambrano identifies a similarly antagonistic relationship between love and reason/form in Neruda's poetry. She begins the essay by noting that the world of "substancia [...] virgen y gastada" that Neruda presents in *Residencia en la tierra* leaves no room for "lo humano si por lo humano se entiende lo que tradicionalmente, en nuestra tradicional cultura de occidente grecocristiana, se ha creído necesario, definitorio: la libertad, la pureza, la individualidad; *la religión en suma de la razón finalista*" (4) (emphasis added). With the opening verse of *Raíz del hombre*, and as if heeding Neruda's call, Paz immediately casts the cult of reason in ruins, announcing a poetic world that, like his Chilean idol's throughout *Residencia en la tierra*, requires of its reader a certain willful abandonment of modern logic's affectations of truth. Further emphasizing the battle between love and form in *Residencia en la tierra*, Zambrano writes:

El amor, en efecto, rompe los límites de las cosas, deshace como crea y quizá su mejor obra sea la destrucción, porque destruye los límites en que los seres y las cosas yacen oprimidos, porque liberta de la cárcel a la viva materia que espera inerte su hora de salir, de derramarse, de entremezclarse con los demás. Terrible amor que devora cuanto toca; no es ansia por la forma, ‘dolencia de amor que no se cura sino con la presencia y la figura,’ porque no se cree que la forma sea la verdad, porque tampoco hay verdad, sino materia. (4)

Like Neruda, Paz rejects reason’s claims of truth. But whereas Neruda rejects the very premise of truth beyond the materiality into which he submerges without pretenses of transcendence—“no es [...] un afán de sobrepasar el aspecto primero de las cosas para buscar su trasunto poético detrás, en el fondo” (Zambrano 4)—Paz discovers truth in the experiencing body, the most intimately material realm of the human condition, through his eroticized quest for what lie behind the symbolism of roots.

This last point, Paz’s insistence on the truth of the experiencing body, is helpful in setting *Raíz del hombre* apart from *¡No pasarán!* in their respective success in conveying a radical message. Departing from the notion, established in the previous chapter, that *¡No pasarán!* failed as an effective political poem due to its aprioristic pretenses, an exploration into the radicalism of *Raíz del hombre* in the context of the struggle against fascism specifically, and totalitarianism in general, leads to the privileged role of personal experience in Paz’s poetic worldview. According to Wilson,

Experience is at the source of Paz’s response to poetry and what he feels poetry can do for twentieth-century man. Behind this lies a literary tradition that equates authenticity with the uniqueness of personal experience (best represented by Rimbaud) coupled with

an existential drive to ‘start again’, to ‘rethink’. For Paz, the only certainty is that of the senses, of the experiencing body. Philosophical coherence, logical clarity and all the claims of the Western intellectual tradition to answer man’s spiritual hunger are meaningless if they do not correspond to feeling, emotions, sensations; in a word, experience. (*Octavio Paz* 83)

To illustrate Wilson’s point, it helps to reproduce all four stanzas of Canto XIV of *Raíz del hombre*, where the poet is clear in communicating his understanding of what is “cierto” and “verdad”:

Pero a pesar de todo es cierto.

Sí, es verdad todo esto.

Existen esos labios y esa boca,
alienta, vive, esa escondida sangre,
esa tierna tormenta de tu pelo
y ese vello que nubla en humo y oro
la piel que transparenta quietas venas.

Es cierto todo esto.

También lo son la soledad y el llanto,
el desorden del mundo y la tristeza.

Existen en el alma,
me devoran por dentro, sin palabras.
Existe, ahogada, irrevocable, tensa,
una invisible lágrima por esto,

una dichosa lágrima amorosa.

Es cierto que te amo

y que hubo labios, besos y promesas,

y que tu aliento, aquí, en el pecho,

como una tibia sombra me nacía.

Existen tu presencia y tu ternura.

Es cierto que te amo. (59-60)

Here, the speaker's grasp of the truth, namely, the love he feels for his partner, is grounded first in his perception of the physical existence of her body (her lips, mouth, breath, blood, hair, and veins), and second in the feeling of tenderness he experiences as a result of his contact with that body (their kisses, her breath on his chest). Furthermore, he can only place meaning on the world beyond their entwined bodies—particularly its disorder—insofar as it reflects the turmoil that gnaws from within his soul and manifests in his body as sensations of suffocation and tension, in addition to a solitary tear. There is nothing metaphysical or abstract about the truth that Paz's speaker understands. In the primitive world of *Raíz del hombre*, it is the experiencing body, not the reasoning mind, which yields veracity.

At the apex of an age of ideological certainties, as Stalinism and Hitlerism consolidated respective totalitarian chokeholds on the truth in preparation for the industrial genocide of World War II, and while the formalism of recent Western modernist aesthetics embodied a not unrelated “dehumanization of art” (Ortega y Gasset), Paz's insistence throughout *Raíz del hombre* on the most elemental corporal human experiences—“latidos,” “aliento,” “venas,”

“sangre”—represents nothing short of a radical posture. Paz’s is a materialism stretched to its most intimate and human lengths. Thus, to begin to deduce the political intention of *Raíz del hombre* is to understand that his exaltation of a sensorial humanism in sync with nature’s primitive energies, inspired by Neruda’s similarly-achieved celebration of sensual reality in *Residencia en la tierra*, represents a historically conscious expression of what he held as his “only certainty” in the age creeping totalitarianism. Such an expression, then, functions as a poetic mechanism for resistance against the “dangerous overestimation of Reason” that had led directly to the ideological rigidity—and the concomitant dehumanization of people and art—imposed during the age of European totalitarianism.

*Love as the Root of Man:
An Antifascist Message and Response to ¡No pasarán!*

To understand the antifascist intention that underlies *Raíz del hombre*, it is important to understand the poetic mechanisms that Paz employs to achieve it. In this section, then, I discuss how Paz’s readings of Quevedo, Rilke, and Neruda, in addition to the young Mexican poet’s insertion into the debate between pure and committed poetry, function together to offer a message of love as antidote to fascism that also responds directly to *¡No pasarán!*.

On one level, as I demonstrate above, the collapse of reason presented in the opening verse of *Raíz del hombre* is the collapse of the Republic defined in ideal terms by Plato as the city governed by justice and temperance (*The Republic*, Book IV). But, given the context of the fascists’ contemporaneous Siege of Madrid along with Paz’s recent antifascist pronouncement in *¡No pasarán!*, the poem’s first verse betrays a specifically antifascist orientation. Thus, on another level, the collapse of reason is the collapse of the Republic manifested in concrete sociopolitical terms in the Spain of the 1930s. The chaos unleashed by such a collapse, along with its ensuing human toll, finds expression in Canto XIV, the penultimate section of the poem,

when the speaker mourns “el desorden del mundo y la tristeza” (59). With this verse, according to Escalante, Paz captures the anguish of an entire generation of writers marked by the Spanish Civil War: “es un verso que reconcentra el amargo sabor de boca de un joven revolucionario que anhela un mundo diferente, y que se siente *triste* porque encuentra que no lo es” (114) (emphasis in the original).

In this light, and perhaps in an attempt to exert some control over the disorder that surrounds him, Paz relies on a repetition of hendecasyllabic verses throughout the poem. Such repetition gives the poem a sense of stability that is otherwise lacking in the outer world of politics and history in 1937. Furthermore, the repetition counters the imprecision of the poem’s seemingly still-in-creation and formless world, which pulsates with the lover’s irregular heartbeats in sync with the irrational murmurs of nature’s energies, as I demonstrate below.

Paz’s opening verse lamenting the ruins of light and form, the ruins of reason and the Republic, picks up where Neruda had left off with the image of shattered marble in “Canto sobre unas ruinas”: “mirad sobre la cal y entre el már- / mol deshecho / la huella –ya con musgos– del sollozo” (*OC I* 385). But whereas the ruins of the Republic represent finality for Neruda in that poem, for Paz, like Alberti, they signal the possibility of a new beginning. If Neruda’s entire poem leads up to the parting image of ruins and, in effect, remains unable to overcome their meaning, namely, the destruction of all that came before, Paz’s begins at the point of ruins and refuses to look back. Following the opening image of ruins, Paz in *Raíz del hombre* looks immediately forward to the means with which to overcome those forces that brought about the ruins in the first place.

It is precisely Paz’s Romantic impulse, his revolutionary faith in love as seen in the opening stanza’s second verse, that rescues the poem from the type of existential “paralysis of

the 1930s manifested in [Jean-Paul Sartre's] *Nausea*," published the following year (Kleinberg 149). In the previous chapter I suggested that, in the context of Franco's fascist assault during the Spanish Civil War, Paz had applied the theme of rebirth from death in Quevedo's famous verse "serán ceniza, mas tendrá sentido" to a message of revolutionary resilience in both *¡No pasarán!* and his speech at the Congress of Antifascist Writers in Valencia in July 1937. As a visual experience alone, the imagery of the first two verses of *Raíz del hombre*—a solitary and capitalized "Amor" standing in glorified triumph amid the ruins of reason—retains a similarly *quevedesco* and revolutionary feel: "las ruinas de la luz y de las formas," like Quevedo's "cenizas," have "sentido," namely, to reveal, or "glorifica[r]," love in its shadowy (irrational) natural state. This is particularly the case considering how, in his letter to Garro cited above, Paz presents the revelation of love as the result of a "fecunda" "disolución," similar to the way Quevedo addresses the titular mythological creature in his poem "La fénix"—symbol *par excellence* of regeneration after death—as "hija de fértil ceniza" (*Obra poética* 329). Unsurprisingly, Paz references "el fénix, el pájaro que renace de la llama," in a retrospective text discussing the genesis of *Raíz del hombre* ("La religión solar de D.H. Lawrence," qtd. in Stanton, *El río reflexivo* 152).

To better understand how Neruda might have read Quevedo's influence in Paz's treatment of the theme of rebirth from ruins in the context of the Spanish Civil War, as well as to strengthen my argument that Paz's reading of Quevedo was specifically antifascist, it helps to consider the Chilean's participation in an event celebrating the Spanish Republic in Montevideo in March, 1939, just days before Franco's April 1st proclamation of victory. According to Adam Feinstein, "It might seem strange that a profoundly pessimistic religious poet from Spain's Golden Age could exert so profound a hold over a twentieth-century, euphorically Communist

poet” (185). Nevertheless, in a brief text titled “Quevedo adentro,” which he read live on Uruguayan radio as part of the commemoration, Neruda explores the meaning of Quevedo’s poem “Amor constante más allá de la muerte” in the context of the Republic’s imminent collapse. After indirectly referring to Franco’s invading fascist forces as “una horda de villanos” and “cobardes que encierra al mundo como asqueroso anillo,” Neruda quotes Quevedo’s final verses: “Su cuerpo dejarán, no su cuidado; / serán ceniza, mas tendrá sentido; / polvo serán, mas polvo enamorado” (*Neruda entre nosotros* 56, 57). Then, dramatically, he beckons his listeners (I quote Neruda at length here and copy the text’s typography exactly as it appeared in the 1939 book in which it was published):

Escuchad, escuchad la voz del héroe español, la voz de la esperanza sobre las ruinas, la voz del ser absoluto, la voz que viene clamando desde el nacimiento del pueblo, y que tendrá que ser escuchada, porque se yergue como amenazante campana más allá de la lucha final, más allá de la derrota y del desierto humeante deshecho por la metralla, más allá de los campos de concentración donde los españoles expulsados de su patria por forasteros sanguinarios serán

serán ceniza, mas tendrá sentido

serán ceniza, serán materia esparcida por la crueldad y la cobardía del mundo, mas tendrá sentido, mas tendrá significación, tendrá combate, tendrá regreso.

polvo serán, mas polvo enamorado

Sí, Quevedo, serán deshechos tus familiares síntomas del amor y de la muerte españoles, serán exterminados cuanto dio al mundo más generosidad con un puñado de hombres que todo el resto de la historia.

polvo serán, mas polvo enamorado

que desde donde yace enseña una rosa profunda, una fe inmortal que no se desangra ni puede morir.

Español Quevedo, español de la misma estirpe que Cervantes y la Pasionaria, porque en tu raza se confunden el pueblo y la cultura, hemos leído este soneto levantándolo sobre nuestras débiles cabezas porque sus cortas sílabas dan sombra y viento de banderas, y rompen manantial allí donde no existe sino piedra implacable. (57-58)

It is as if Neruda is expressing here, two years later, exactly how he might have read Paz's 1937 exaltation of "Amor" amid ruins in *Raíz del hombre*. In this light, Neruda's understanding of the combativeness of that which will rise from the ruins of the Republic—"tendrá combate"—lends Paz's verses a certain radicalism that might not be apparent in those readings that view *Raíz del hombre* as a poem dismissive of politics.

In addition to revealing his debt to Quevedo, Paz's application in *Raíz del hombre* of the notion that positive meaning might be found in death and collapse also demonstrates his adherence to Rilke at the time. The following year, 1938, Paz would conclude an essay on the Mexican poet Xavier Villaurrutia by quoting several stanzas from Rilke's *The Book of Hours* (1905). In his lengthy quotation in Spanish translation, Paz does not indicate line breaks and even skips whole stanzas; nevertheless, Rilke's inspired vision of death as bearer of life is clear:

Señor, dad a cada uno su propia muerte, el morir que brota de su vida, para que tenga amor, sentido y urgencia. Porque somos nosotros la corteza y la hoja. La gran muerte que cada uno lleva en sí es el futuro fruto en torno al cual gira todo. Porque lo que hace extraño y difícil el morir es que no es nuestra muerte; una muerte que nos arrebatara por

fin, sólo porque no hemos madurado ninguna muerte en nosotros; por eso viene una tormenta, para despojarnos de todo. (OC XIII 267)

Visible, for example, in his statement in the opening Canto that “por esa viva llama muere el mundo” (12), or his description in Canto XII of the speaker’s lover as “Nacida, apenas muerta” (55), Paz tinkers throughout *Raíz del hombre* with a Rilkean understanding of the close relationship between life and death. Yet it is not until the final Canto when the Mexican poet demonstrates just how central Rilke’s vision of death is to the overall thrust of the poem. By Canto XV, the speaker has discovered Love as the root of man. But true to the Nerudian impulse to penetrate materiality that Paz channels throughout *Raíz del hombre*, the speaker seeks to understand love at its deepest limits. I quote the entire Canto here:

Bajo el desnudo y claro Amor que danza
hay otro negro amor, callado y tenso,
amor de oculta herida.
No llegan las palabras
a su inefable abismo,
eterno Amor inmóvil y terrible.

Bajo este Amor de soledad herida
hay una dulce ira,
un ciego amor de ira,
torbellino sombrío
donde tu nombre en sangre me devasta.

Bajo este Amor de fieras agonías
hay un sed inmóvil,
un enlutado río,
presencia de la muerte,
donde canta el olvido nuestra muerte.

Bajo esta muerte, Amor, dichoso y mudo,
no hay venas, piel ni sangre,
sino la muerte sola;
frenéticos silencios,
eternos, confundidos,
inacabable Amor manando muerte. (61-62)

The darkness and violence of the imagery here would suggest a pessimistic understanding of love, which Stanton perceives by identifying the first stanza of the Canto as proof that “el reconocimiento de la ambivalencia del amor” is the poem’s “triunfo final” (*El río reflexivo* 151). In my opinion, however, Paz’s depiction of death flowing endlessly beneath love, the root of man, represents a highly eroticized expression of Rilke’s “gran muerte que cada uno lleva.”

According to Barrows and Macy,

Rilke had no patience with the fear of death as something horrid and undeserved, and even less with the easy solace of an afterlife. Instead, he summoned us to accept our mortality, to free ourselves from compulsions to conquer or transcend it. The very fact that we are bound to die can be cause for gratitude, for it delivers us into the immediacy

and fullness of life. [...] Rilke sought to redeem the inevitability of death and presented it as a source of strength (17)

If in the metaphor of love as the root of man, love fulfills for man the same function that the roots of a tree fulfill for a tree, namely, sustaining life, Paz channels Rilke's affirmative vision to suggest that it is death, or perhaps the consciousness of mortality, that most animates love.

Combined with the poem's *quevedesco* theme of rebirth from death, such a vision assumes revolutionary value in the context of the struggle against fascism: in the face of death embodied by that ideology, men might respond in a show of radical solidarity, or love. In one paragraph in *Reflejos: replicas (diálogos con Francisco de Quevedo)* (1996), Paz contextualizes his readings of Rilke and especially Quevedo during the socio-political tumult of the 1930s:

leíamos a Rilke, que veía a la muerte como una maduración interior; con él la muerte dejó de ser anónima y se convirtió en una creación espiritual: cada uno tenía, o debía tener, una muerte propia. Al finalizar esa década, varios notables poetas mexicanos publicaron libros sobre, hacia o en torno al morir. Por todo esto leí a Quevedo desde una perspectiva ajena a su tiempo y a su persona. Lo más extraño es que esas preocupaciones, en vísperas de la segunda guerra mundial, lejos de alejarlo, lo acercaban: Quevedo resultaba un poeta extraordinariamente moderno, casi un contemporáneo. (13)

Paz's unabashed admission to having applied a revolutionary political worldview to his reading of Quevedo during the 1930s strengthens my argument regarding the implicit antifascist value of a poem like *Raíz del hombre*, which, despite its publication at a moment of acute historical crisis, has consistently been celebrated as an apolitical poem. Furthermore, if Paz was able to glean contemporary relevance in a poet who had been dead for centuries at the critical moment in twentieth-century history when fascism represented a legitimate threat to the fate of civilization,

a militant Neruda could have easily perceived the political intention of a poem like *Raíz del hombre*, published at that exact moment by an author who had recently announced his presence in the world of Hispanic letters with the antifascist message of *¡No pasarán!*.

Beyond identifying in *Raíz del hombre* echoes of Alberti's revolutionary message, in addition to revolutionary renderings of both Quevedo and Rilke's visions of death, a supremely self-conscious Neruda—in the midst rewriting his own aesthetic code—would have recognized in the young Mexican poet's expression a certain reliance on his own *residencial* impulse to fuse the erotic and the natural.²⁴ Inserting the seemingly out-of-place and phallicized verse “árbol vivo en relámpagos crecido” directly between two verses that describe the intertwining heartbeats of the lovers in the poem's first stanza, for example, Paz places nature—“árbol”—and its energies—“relámpagos”—at the center of the erotic embrace. Here, Paz's “árbol vivo,” which, in the following Canto will provide shelter for the speaker's resting lover—“bajo el gran árbol de mi sangre, / tú reposas” (15)—, directly contrasts with the “dead tree” that “gives no shelter” in the stanza of Eliot's “The Waste Land” that, as I discuss above, had inspired Neruda's negation of man's roots in “Canto sobre unas ruinas.” Suggesting that sexual communion, like

²⁴ Over the course of his life, Neruda maintained a complex literary relationship with Rilke. Early on, the Austrian had served as an important inspiration. In 1926, for example, Neruda translated from French to Spanish fragments of Rilke's novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). According to Schidlowski, it was Rilke's exploration of the anguished interior life of that novel's protagonist that had appealed to the young Neruda (116). Interestingly, however, at the height of his communist poetic commitment, Neruda used Rilke's name on more than one occasion to attack poets he deemed to be insufficiently engaged in their work. In a speech at the 1949 Continental Congress for Peace in Mexico City, for example, Neruda spoke disdainfully about how “En los últimos años hemos visto cómo nuestros snobs se han apoderado de Kafka, de Rilke, de todos los laberintos que no tengan salida, de todas las metafísicas que han ido cayendo como cajones vacíos desde el tren de la historia” (“Mi país como ustedes saben...” qtd. in Schidlowski 801). And in the same stanza in “Los poetas celestes,” in *Canto General*, in which he indirectly attacks Paz, as I discuss in the previous chapter, Neruda writes: “Qué hicisteis vosotros, gidistas / intelectualistas, rilkistas, / misterizantes, falsos brujos / existenciales, amapolas / surrealistas encendidas / en una tumba, europeizados / cadáveres de la moda, / pálidas lombrices de queso / capitalista, qué hicisteis / ante el reinado de la angustia, / frente a este oscuro ser humano [...]” (*OC I* 586). Several years later, however, the poet would admit that “Condené, por ejemplo, a [...] Rilke y Kafka, sin siquiera conocer bien su obra. Últimamente leí de nuevo y concienzudamente y a fondo las obras de esos escritores. Ahora opino que en las obras de Rilke hay mucho de la más espléndida poesía y que en la obra de Kafka hay mucho de un penetrante y específico realismo. Cometí un error, retrasando la creación de artistas a quienes solo conocía superficialmente” (“Neruda confiesa sus errores,” 1958, qtd. in Schidlowski 979).

nature itself, maintains the order of the world, Paz insists on an eroticized association between man and tree through corresponding verses in Cantos X and XI in which, alternately, and via similar language and imagery, he depicts each holding up the sky: “entre tus manos y las mías, / entre estas dulces manos que sujetan al cielo” (47) and “y el amor era como un paseo / bajo los altos árboles que sostienen al cielo” (52).

Furthermore, the lightning amid which the living tree of the first stanza has risen provides the erotic electricity seen later in the poem. In Canto III, for example, the speaker underscores the fusion with nature of the human body in the throes of a sexual embrace:

Y se agolpan los tiempos tumultuosos
y vuelven al origen de los días,
como tu pelo eléctrico si vibra
la escondida raíz en que se ahonda. (244)

And in Canto XI, the speaker describes to his lover, through imagery of electricity, how her love offers a combination of pain and bliss:

Yo temblaba a tu paso.
Florece mi sangre en una callada exaltación,
y era una punzante alegría la de mi piel,
herida en el vacío eléctrico que dejaba tu cuerpo. (51-52)

Understanding sexual communion as forming part of a broader natural world of pulsating energies, Paz channels Neruda in several poems from *Residencia en la tierra*, including “Agua sexual” and “Caballero solo.” After depicting a dizzying collage of the sexual encounters of a wide cast of characters—“el pequeño empleado” who seduces his neighbor with caresses in a movie theater, “jóvenes estudiantes” and “sacerdotes” who masturbate, animals who “fornican

directamente,” boy cousins who “juegan extrañamente” with their girl cousins, the professor who fulfills his “deber conyugal,” and “los adúlteros, que se aman con verdadero amor”—the solitary speaker in “Caballero solo,” for example, laments that

eternamente me rodea
este gran bosque respiratorio y enredado
con grandes flores como bocas y dentaduras
y negras raíces en forma de uñas y zapatos. (*OC I* 285-286)

Neruda would have certainly appreciated Paz’s reliance on his fusion of human sexuality and the natural world, but he would have also understood it, perhaps with a trace of astonished unease, as forming part of a larger revolutionary effort. Specifically, the Mexican poet was appropriating the Chilean’s trope of natural eroticism as a symbol to convey the message that, in the struggle against fascism in early 1937, nothing less than unmitigated human communion, or radical solidarity, would suffice. In essence, Paz had been able to decipher in Neruda’s pre-political verse precisely that which the Chilean himself could not summon in “Canto sobre unas ruinas,” namely, the symbolic and emancipatory potential of the erotic embrace, nature’s most intimate manifestation of love. Thus infusing Neruda’s *residencial* aesthetic with a radical intention, the Mexican lives up to Alberti’s earlier praise regarding his revolutionary “tentativa por transformar el lenguaje.”

In addition to projecting a message of revolutionary solidarity through a reliance on elements of Neruda’s pre-political *residencial* verse, Paz further transforms the language of Hispanic poetry in *Raíz del hombre* by subverting contemporary pretenses of aesthetic purity. He does so specifically by appropriating the language *du jour* of Spanish and Latin American pure poetry—“luz,” “puro,” “desnudo,” “transparente,” “claridad,” etc.—in his erotic rendering of

love as the root of man and revolutionary antidote to fascism. Neruda would have particularly noted the fifteen times Paz employs some variation of the word “desnudo” throughout the poem, considering that, in the mid-1930s, the Chilean had engaged in a fierce polemic against the Spaniard Juan Ramón Jiménez, champion of “poesía desnuda.” Jiménez had concluded his famous 1918 poem, “Vino, primera, pura,” for example, with the following stanza:

Y se quitó la túnica,

y apareció desnuda toda...

¡Oh pasión de mi vida, poesía

Desnuda, mía para siempre! (*Libros de poesía* 555)

According to Ricardo Gullón, Neruda’s 1935 text “Sobre una poesía sin pureza,” in which he lambasts what he considered the tendency of purist poets to remove all traces of the real, the historical, and the “impureza de los seres humanos” in their search for an abstract, eternal and universal essence, “es casi un manifiesto contra la ideología de Jiménez” (147). Sicard identifies in the manifesto the poet’s impulse to employ the rhetorical strategy of “la enumeración caótica [...] para evocar su programa” (557). Indeed, Neruda famously argues in that text that authentic poetry, “sin excluir deliberadamente nada,” might include anything from “observaciones, sueños, vigilia, profecías, declaraciones de amor y de odio, bestias, sacudidas, idilios, creencias políticas, negociaciones, dudas, afirmaciones, impuestos” to “los decretos del tacto, olfato, gusto, vista, oído, el deseo de justicia, el deseo sexual, el ruido del océano [...],” among other uniquely human possibilities (“Sobre una poesía sin pureza” 108).

As Stanton notes, “el conflicto entre la poesía pura y poesía social marcó todo una época de la literatura hispánica” (“Octavio Paz y los ‘Contemporáneos’” 1004). It was precisely this era, the 1930s, that Octavio Paz came of age as a poet, and, accordingly, his early poetry betrays

a certain tension between pure and social poetry. In Mexico, his most immediate source of poetic influence came from the *Contemporáneos*, for whom Juan Ramón Jiménez proved “la figura determinante” (Paz, “La Generación de 1927 y el grupo de los Contemporáneos” 17). According to Paz, Jiménez “les transmitió un concepto que fue, más que una definición estética, una verdadera poética: la poesía pura” (17). In Stanton’s words, the *Contemporáneos*’ elaboration of pure poetry “se caracteriza,” in general, “por su fuga de la realidad, y por la transformación de la dramática experiencia humana en cristalizaciones abstractas y eternas (“Octavio Paz y los ‘Contemporáneos’” 1004).

According to John Wilcox, however, an important distinction exists between pure and naked poetry. Specifically, the former, pursued most rigorously during the 1930s by the *Contemporáneos*, prioritized beauty and held the mind as its “basic metaphor,” while the latter, practiced most famously by Jiménez, prioritized truth and relied on the body as its “basic metaphor”: “The ‘naked’ poet cannot bring himself to accept the radical dichotomy of body and soul; he struggles for wholeness while of this earth; he neither banishes reality nor scorns the body, but exalts both. To adapt Ihab Hassan’s terms, the ‘naked’ poet’s concern is to heighten consciousness, to lift earth toward heaven” (“‘Naked’ versus ‘Pure Poetry’ in Juan Ramón Jiménez” 517).

The fact that Paz took his title from Marx’s “A Contribution to Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” in which the German philosopher appeals to “unmask self-estrangement” to “establish the truth of this world” (*Early Writings* 44), suggests that the pursuit of truth, *à la* the naked poets like Jiménez, ultimately guides his descent to roots. Furthermore, by insisting on the word “desnudo” in conjunction with an exaltation of the physicality of the lovers’ bodies and a simultaneous critique of the reasoned mind, and in light of the imagery of the lover’s hands and

the trees holding up the sky—i.e. “lift[ing] earth toward heaven”—the young Mexican poet appears to perceive the distinction between naked and pure poetry and thus offers a nod toward Jiménez. Such a gesture, in a poem that echoes Alberti while displaying revolutionary re-elaborations of Quevedo, Rilke, and Neruda’s *residencial* aesthetic, would have easily appealed directly to the Chilean’s sense of territorialism as he guarded his identity as unrivaled Hispanic poet in the context of his evolving poetics during the Spanish Civil War.

A suggestion of the revolutionary implications of Paz’s message—that love functions as the supreme antidote to fascism—presents an excellent opportunity to explore briefly how *Raíz del hombre* engages, rather than eschews, the politics of *¡No pasarán!*. As I discussed in the introduction to this chapter, critics have consistently read the poems in opposition, a position that, in my opinion, assumes little regard for the context in which *Raíz del hombre* appeared. While Paz composed *Raíz del hombre* between 1935 and 1936 before the Spanish Civil War had broken out, his decision to proceed with its publication just four months after he had published *¡No pasarán!* and in the immediate aftermath of the initial Siege of Madrid, as well as to send it to an increasingly militant Neruda, reveals an acute awareness of the poem’s centrality in his brief but passionate engagement with an overtly political poetics. That engagement would begin to fray a few months later when, at the antifascist Congress in Spain, Paz encountered firsthand the Left’s penchant for factionalism and authoritarianism (*Itinerario* 58-67), as I discuss below.

In early 1937 his experiment with political poetry was approaching its zenith in the form of *Entre la piedra y la flor* (1940), a fierce denunciation of the capitalist exploitation of Mexico’s Maya population written that spring and described by Escalante as “mejor que un ‘experimento’ de poesía social, [...] es el mejor poema acabado de protesta [...] de la poesía hispanoamericana del pasado siglo” (122). Contrasting *Entre la piedra y la flor* with *¡No pasarán!* Santí identifies

the former's merit in the measured intellectualism that informs its commitment: "denuncia, sin gritar, la explotación del campesino yucateco" (*El acto de las palabras* 53). Stanton's designation of *Entre la piedra y la flor* as a synthesis between the revolutionary activism of *¡No pasarán!* and the eroticized natural world of *Raíz del hombre* (*El río reflexivo* 160-169) strengthens the present argument that Paz was correct to recognize the latter's indispensability to the revolutionary thrust of his poetry at the time.

In this portrait of a young Paz in dialogue with himself at a crucial juncture in his emergence, the faith in a timeless natural eroticism that he invokes in *Raíz del hombre* should be read as an authentic and affirmative response, or complement, to both the premature and aprioristic militancy and absolute destruction depicted in *¡No pasarán!*, rather than their outright rejection. Efraín Huerta's appraisal from 1937 offers a convincing perspective with which to read the poems in connection with one another: "si el poeta habló por nosotros oponiéndose con todas las fuerzas y recursos del arte a la feroz acometida fascista sobre el proletariado español, hoy clama con el poder de sus nervios juveniles por una perfección en el placer y una justa nobleza en la forma de manifestarlo" ("Lady Jane y la poesía" 185). In publishing *Raíz del hombre* as a love- and life-affirming complement to the ideological rage of *¡No pasarán!*, Paz reveals his understanding in 1937 of the inherently revolutionary value of the erotic embrace that he celebrates as the root of man. Twenty years later, in a powerful section of *Piedra de sol* (1957) in which the speaker recalls the terror of the Spanish Civil War, Paz underscores the possibility of the erotic embrace as a form of resistance:

Madrid, 1937,

En la Plaza del Ángel las mujeres
cosían y cantaban con sus hijos,

después sonó la alarma y hubo gritos,
casas arrodillas en el polvo,
torres hendidas, frentes esculpidas
y el huracán de los motores, fijo:
los dos se desnudaron y se amaron
por defender nuestra porción eterna,
nuestra ración de tiempo y paraíso,
tocar nuestra raíz y recobrarnos,
recobrar nuestra herencia arrebatada
por ladrones de vida hace mil siglos,
los dos se desnudaron y besaron
porque las desnudeces enlazadas
saltan el tiempo y son invulnerables,
nada las toca, vuelven al principio [...]. (*Libertad bajo palabra* 344).

Presented as a defensive tactic in a context of destruction, his depiction of sexual communion here is imbued with a spirit of escapism that would seem to justify Wilson's understanding of Paz's Civil War erotic poetry. According to the critic,

The social calamity of the Spain torn by civil war can be redeemed if man really learns to love passionately; love between man and woman recovers the 'ser total' (total being) lost a thousand years back [...]. This naked, physical act of love breaks down the isolated ego and unites the body and the mind separated by a life-denying Christian tradition. [...]. In 1924 Breton wrote that love was the perfect compensation for the miseries of the world; in 1948 he wrote that the poetic and carnal embrace defends the poet-lover from the same

miseries. Misery is cast aside, defused; in both Breton and Paz the word *defends* reveals the intention. (*Octavio Paz* 117) (emphasis in the original)

Wilson identifies surrealism at the root of Paz's erotic poetry of the Spanish conflagration. While Stanton does not explicitly link *Raíz del hombre* to surrealism, his interpretation of the poem's title as signaling a descent to the most instinctive and buried depths of the human experience would seem to corroborate such a reading (*El río reflexivo* 148). Indeed, in subsequent years Paz would hone his conception of love as a subversive act in accordance to his embrace of surrealism during his time in Paris in the 1940s when he befriended André Breton. In *El laberinto de la soledad*, for example, Paz cites Breton's 1937 book *L'Amour fou*, noting that, "Para realizarse, el amor necesita quebrantar la ley del mundo. En nuestro tiempo el amor es escándalo y desorden, transgresión: el de dos astros que rompen la fatalidad de sus órbitas y se encuentran en la mitad del espacio" (203). Wilson is correct, then, to identify the surrealist energy that infuses Paz's 1957 depiction of the lovers' embrace during the Spanish Civil War in *Piedra de sol*.

Yet, having just published *¡No pasarán!* and sitting at the peak of his revolutionary poetic commitment in early 1937, Paz was years away from even entertaining the possibility of incorporating a surrealist aesthetic. In fact, on multiple occasions throughout the 1930s and early 1940s he expressed his suspicions of surrealism: if in 1931 he had dismissed the surrealist movement as "doctrinario" because its adherents "se creen poseídos de la verdad" ("Ética del artista," *OC* XIII 186-187), as late as 1943 he wrote that "La sola participación del inconsciente en un poema lo convierte en un documento psicológico" ("Poesía de soledad y poesía de comunión," *OC* XIII 243). According to Paz in 1988, his discomfort with surrealism in those early years stemmed first from a misguided disapproval of Breton's break with Stalinism in the 1930s, and second from an inability to understand that surrealism, more than a simple literary

movement, constituted a moral and spiritual orientation (*Primeras letras* 405). Because Paz rejected surrealism at the time he published *Raíz del hombre* in 1937, Wilson's suggestion that the Mexican's erotic poetry during the Spanish Civil War amounted to a surrealist-inspired retreat from the miseries of the social world remains premature, if not entirely unconvincing based on the poet's subsequent embrace of Breton. Rather than a defensive escape from conscious reality, for Paz at this time the erotic embrace was symbolic of the active communion, or revolutionary solidarity, required in the struggle against fascism.

According to Paz in 1938 in "Pablo Neruda en el corazón," as quoted above, fascism represented the negation of life through a violent undoing of human creativity. The most obvious—and intimate—foil to such destruction, then, is the sexual act leading naturally to the generation of new life. In 1937, Paz identifies the two acts through which man can counter fascism's negation: the more physically elemental act of eroticism, and the more historically consequential act of Revolution. In Canto VII of *Raíz del hombre*, Paz recreates the dynamic physicality of sex and alludes to its ultimate fertility: "Mi sangre te recorre / y crezco en otra forma. / Amante: renacemos" (38). And in his speech at the Congress of Antifascist writers, Paz defines Revolution as essentially mimicking, at the socio-political level, the biological function of the sexual act: "Vivimos dentro del ámbito eléctrico de la Revolución porque significa una nueva creación humana, el nacimiento de un espíritu nuevo. Creemos en la Revolución en la medida en que, siendo un mundo nuevo, llegue a ser una vida nueva y una cultura nueva" ("Noticia de la poesía mexicana contemporánea," *OC* XIII 262-263). Like the blood that animates the bodies of the embraced lovers, the electricity coursing through the revolutionary struggle against fascism will ignite new life in the form of a more just world.

In *¡No pasarán!*, Paz angrily depicts the destruction leveled by the “acometida fascista” through imagery of stagnation and waste, final products of “la nada.” In *Raíz del hombre* he responds, seemingly directly, by presenting the energy of human communion flowing seamlessly through a natural world pregnant with fertility and the potential for rebirth. For example, the sterile “sangre encadenada” in *¡No pasarán!* becomes in *Raíz del hombre* the active “sangre que penetra tu cuerpo,” which, like a river, “baña orillas” (23), and into which the speaker repeatedly sinks as he plunges into his lover’s body (“desciendo hasta tu sangre” [39, 40]). The motionless “árbol sin brazos, silencioso, insepulto, calcinado,” reminiscent of Eliot’s “dead tree” that “gives no shelter,” is transformed into the “árbol vivo en relámpagos crecido” and “el árbol de mi sangre,” as I note above. Meanwhile, the “viento funeral” becomes “suaves aires” (38) that emanate from the “húmeda presencia” of the lover’s “aliento” (37) and the “largo grito” turns into “el tallo de tu voz” “que florece” (27). In light of such parallels, when read as a response to *¡No pasarán!*, the message that Paz transmits in *Raíz del hombre* is unequivocally antifascist.

In wistful hindsight from the perspective of leftist literary criticism, Paz’s botched attempt at an authentic revolutionary poetry in *¡No pasarán!* might reflect the ultimate impossibility of the twentieth-century Revolutionary enterprise itself, embodied in the fatal combination of internecine squabbles among defenders of the Spanish Republic and the insurmountable savagery of the fascist forces they opposed. His subsequent retreat to the more certain and eternal domain of the erotic in *Raíz del hombre*, nevertheless, allowed him to affirm through a more genuine expression the same revolutionary hope for the creation of “la vida verdadera, / la sangre jubilosa, / la ternura feraz del mundo libre” with which he had ended *¡No pasarán!*. Like Huerta, Altolaguirre recognized the inextricability of the two poems as early as 1937 at the height of the struggle against Spanish fascism. In the “Noticia” introducing the

collection of Paz's poetry that he edited later that year, the publisher differentiates between the engagement of the *Cantos españoles* and the intimism of *Raíz del hombre*, but nevertheless hints at the revolutionary thrust behind the latter's message of love:

Esta vez le ha tocado en suerte a la poesía, al volver su rostro adolescente, el encontrarse con que Octavio Paz, su poeta, tiene sus mismos años, más o menos. Los dos juntos, tan jóvenes, el poeta y la poesía, la vida y el arte en este caso, llegaron a España para cantar a nuestro pueblo en guerra. Los *Cantos españoles* de Octavio Paz, bajo una clara sombra helénica, salen hoy a la luz, a todos los vientos, para que sean repetidos con fervor por nuestros valerosos combatientes; pero antes, en primer lugar, se imprimen algunos de sus poemas de amor, de su *Raíz del hombre*, porque de esa raíz ha nacido siempre lo épico: el amor como origen de todos los sacrificios. Quiero decir que los últimos poemas de este libro son la hermosa y elocuente arboleda de una secreta poesía interior, anterior, que le entrega su savia y la sostiene. (*Bajo tu clara sombra y otros poemas sobre España* 8-9)

Radicalism and the Quest for Roots

Another angle by which to gauge the radicalism of Paz's poem within its historical context is to explore the meaning of its title. As cited earlier, Escalante identifies Marx's definition of radicalism—"to be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself"—as the source of the title of *Raíz del hombre*. The critic then speculates that such a clear allusion to the great theorist of socialist revolution would have immediately inspired Neruda's interest in the poem; by the time he received it in early 1937, and in the wake of the fascist assault on the Spanish Republic the year before, the Chilean had committed himself fully to militant leftist activism. While Escalante's speculation helps account for how *Raíz del hombre* might have caught Neruda's initial attention, the question that drives the ensuing discussion

probes deeper: how does the poem fulfill the Marxism of its title? The answer, I believe, will allow us to discern the radical intention that pulses throughout *Raíz del hombre*, particularly when we consider the volatile political-historical context in which it first appeared.

In *El laberinto de la soledad*, his poetic essay on Mexican historical identity written in the intellectual and cultural milieu of a post-War Paris galvanized by existentialist thought, Paz offers a convincing, if not oxymoronic definition of the modern revolutionary enterprise that helps illuminate the radicalism of *Raíz del hombre*. Into his dazzling account of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) in the sixth chapter of *El laberinto de la soledad*, Paz weaves a brief theoretical meditation that assumes as its point of departure an interpretation of Marx: “Todo radicalismo,” Paz writes, citing the German philosopher, “es un humanismo, pues el hombre es la raíz de la razón y de la sociedad” (*El laberinto* 155).²⁵ Based on this essential association between the radical spirit and an implicit consciousness of, search for, and encounter with roots, Paz traces the revolutionary thrust to a desire, conservative in the sense that it looks backward, to reestablish the order of an originary past:

observo que casi siempre las revoluciones, a pesar de presentarse como una invitación para realizar ciertas ideas en un futuro más o menos próximo, se fundan en la pretensión de restablecer una justicia o un orden antiguos, violados por los opresores. Toda revolución tiende a establecer una edad mítica. [...]. El ‘eterno retorno’ es uno de los supuestos implícitos de casi toda teoría revolucionaria. (155)

²⁵ In “A Contribution to Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” (1844), Marx distinguishes “radical revolution” from “partial, merely political revolution” (*Early Writings* 55). The former attacks the foundation, or roots, of a given problem, while the latter “leaves the pillars of the building standing.” Associating “radical revolution” with the broad notion of “universal human emancipation,” as he does before explaining the limitations of “partial revolution,” Marx points to the holistic nature of radical critique. From the perspective of a poet like Paz, such holism might imply that, beyond the merely socio-political and material, radical revolutionary transformation can extend to the more intimate individual and even spiritual realms of the human condition.

In the Mexican context, according to Paz, the Zapatistas best embodied such an orientation, as their movement for agrarian reform in the south was based on restoring the indigenous system of communal land distribution that had been swept away by the liberal Reform of 1857. For Paz, the Zapatistas did not conceive of Mexico “como un futuro que realizar, sino como un regreso a los orígenes. El radicalismo de la Revolución mexicana consiste en su originalidad, esto es, en volver a nuestra raíz, único fundamento de nuestras instituciones” (156). By linking the radicalism of the Zapatista political program for emancipation through land reform to its quest to recover the indigenous roots of Mexico’s social organization, Paz is explicit in conveying what he understands to reside at the heart of authentic revolutionary thought and action: “una tentativa por reintegrarnos a nuestro pasado,” or “una voluntad de integración y regreso a las fuentes” (156, 157).

By the time he published *El laberinto de la soledad* in 1950, Paz had long grown weary of revolutionary politics. His disillusion began in the summer of 1937 during the Spanish Civil War when, as a participant in the Congress of Antifascist Writers, he was repulsed by the censorship of dissent he observed in the intellectual and political ranks of the revolutionary forces struggling on behalf of the Republic.²⁶ Later, while living in Paris after World War II, his almost-spiritual embrace of Breton’s surrealist libertarianism and Albert Camus’ existentialist morality of revolt placed him further at odds with Leftist orthodoxy.²⁷ The same year he

²⁶ In *Itinerario*, Paz cites the case of the French writer André Gide as a particularly eye-opening and chilling experience: “Se le acusó [a Gide] de ser enemigo del pueblo español, a pesar de que desde el principio del conflicto se había declarado fervoroso partidario de la causa republicana. Por ese perverso razonamiento que consiste en deducir de un hecho cierto o falso, las críticas más bien tímidas que Gide había hecho al régimen soviético en su *Retour de l’URSS*, lo convirtieron *ipso facto* en un traidor a los republicanos” (63).

²⁷ Illuminating Breton and Camus’ influence on his aversion to political orthodoxy, Paz writes: “Breton o la rebeldía; Camus o la revuelta. Como individuo, me siento más cerca de la primera; como hombre social, de la segunda. [...] El rebelde es casi siempre un solitario [...]. La revuelta es colectiva y sus seres son los hombres del común” (*Itinerario* 89). Discussing his embrace of Breton and surrealism in *Primeras letras*, the poet notes: “La diferencia con las otras tendencias o, más bien, la superioridad del surrealismo sobre ellas, es de orden espiritual, no

published *El laberinto de la soledad*, Paz wrote “his first critical text on the Soviet regime” (Stanton, “Introduction” 2). Titled “David Rousset y los campos de concentración soviéticos,” the article was published in 1951 in the Argentine journal *Sur*. Channeling “una orientación Trotskista” (Meyer-Minnemann 156), Paz blames the bureaucratic perversion of the original revolutionary spirit for the Soviet Union’s descent into totalitarian horror show, embodied in the vast network of concentration camps brought to the public’s attention by the Frenchman Rousset the year before: “la planificación de la economía y la expropiación de capitalistas y latifundistas no engendran automáticamente el socialismo,” Paz argues forcefully in the article’s final sentence, “pero tampoco producen inexorablemente los campos de trabajos forzados, la esclavitud y la deificación en vida del Jefe. Los crímenes del régimen burocrático son suyos y bien suyos, no del socialismo” (76).

His unwillingness to renounce the integrity of the socialist principle while simultaneously condemning the horrifying direction that Soviet socialism had actually taken parallels his approach to the Mexican Revolution in *El laberinto de la soledad*. There, he follows his celebration of Zapatista radicalism with a sharp critique of post-revolutionary Mexico’s submission to strongmen: “Toda revolución desemboca en la adoración a los jefes; Carranza, el Primer Jefe, el primero de los césares revolucionarios, profetiza el ‘culto a la personalidad’, eufemismo con el que se designa la moderna idolatría política” (157).²⁸ Considered together against his explicit aversion to the more repressive outcomes of the Bolshevik and Mexican Revolutions, Paz’s defense of socialism and his exaltation of Zapatismo in texts respectively

estético. Aunque en su período final no haya dado grandes obras, el surrealismo guardó intactos sus poderes de indignación moral. Fue un foco secreto de pasión poética en nuestra época vil. [...] La lección de Breton fue moral [...]” (405).

²⁸ It might be argued, ironically, that, based on his portrayal of Emiliano Zapata in *El laberinto de la soledad*, Paz himself remains susceptible to hero-worship: “solamente la Revolución del sur y su jefe, Emiliano Zapata, plantean con claridad, decisión y simplicidad el problema. [...] Realismo y mito se alían en esta melancólica, ardiente y esperanzada figura, que murió como había vivido: abrazado a la tierra” (154).

written and published in the same year signal an adhesion to an independent critical spirit in the vein of Marx, Trotsky, Breton, Camus, and others. More specifically, they read like the expression of an unshakable faith in the revolutionary principle stripped of historical and political pretensions and distilled to its organic core: that the realization of one's full potential depends on the profoundest sense of self-knowledge, accessible only through a critical encounter with one's origins. (Here, "a given society's" or "a given nation's" may substitute "one's").

Nowhere in Paz's poetry is this principle so thoroughly and explicitly treated as in the aptly titled *Raíz del hombre*, which he once described as "mi nacimiento poético" (OC XIII 28). If he had exalted the revolutionary principle precisely for its impulse to "volver a [la] raíz" in *El laberinto de la soledad* at a moment when he had generally lost faith in the Revolution as a sustainable historical-political endeavor, his insistence on that very language throughout *Raíz del hombre* came when the young Paz remained fully committed to the revolutionary cause. Featuring such eroticized verses as "Y se agolpan los tiempos tumultuosos / y vuelven al origen de los días" (24), "rozamos nuestro origen y raíces" (35), and "Desde las formas bajo a tus raíces" (40), among others, *Raíz del hombre* asserts that a "tentativa por reintegrarnos a nuestro pasado" functions as a central thrust.

As I have established, *Raíz del hombre* appeared at the peak of Paz's immersion in politically committed poetry, and deserves to be considered accordingly. I read *Raíz del hombre*, then, as a youthful yet conscientious rendering, in highly eroticized poetic form, of the eloquent definition of radical revolution that he would elaborate as a significantly more mature writer in *El laberinto de la soledad*. In this regard, I demonstrate briefly here how the poem lives up to the Marxist orientation of its title according to Paz's poetic logic and, consequently, how *Raíz del hombre* represents an ideologically informed poem at its core.

Stanton writes that the lovers' embrace in *Raíz del hombre* represents "un regreso a la inocencia primitiva, el acceso a un punto de inmovilidad donde se unen la desnudez humana y las fuerzas naturales. Estamos ante una recreación moderna del gran mito del Origen. Hay una nostalgia del principio, del punto inmóvil de la eternidad mineral, centro sagrado donde se tocan la vida y la muerte" (*El río reflexivo* 148). In his essay "La religión solar de D.H. Lawrence," Paz characterizes the poem as an attempt to "reinventar el mito del primer día del mundo" (qtd. in *El río reflexivo* 152), and in another retrospective text the poet is explicit in linking the eroticism of *Raíz del hombre* to a return to origins. His language here calls to mind the "eterno retorno" he had postulated as a key element of revolutionary theory in *El laberinto de la soledad*:

Había elaborado una suerte de vaga teoría de la sexualidad en la que el abrazo carnal era una repetición instantánea y en miniatura del proceso cósmico. Como los soles y los planetas, los hombres y las mujeres, al abrazarnos, caíamos en un espacio infinito. Caída que era un regreso al origen, al principio, pero asimismo, después de unos eones o de unos segundos, una resurrección. (*OC* XIII 28)

In a 1996 interview with Braulio Peralta, Paz speaks of his early poetic trajectory and unequivocally ties the eroticism of *Raíz del hombre* to his leftist political orientation at the time:

Al principio no me pareció que hubiese una oposición entre la política, que yo concebía en esos años como una actividad revolucionaria, y la poesía. Para mí, la poesía era, en ella misma, revolucionaria. De ahí el título de mi primer libro (un balbuceo más que un libro): *Raíz del hombre*. Era poesía erótica y a mí me parecía que, por eso mismo, era poesía revolucionaria. Repetía la frase de Marx: "el radicalismo llega a la raíz." El amor, el sexo, eran la raíz de hombres y mujeres. La poesía y la actividad revolucionaria no eran esencialmente diferentes, aunque sus modos de operación fuesen distintos. (159)

In line with such a thought process that so explicitly tied together poetry, eroticism, and revolution during the early years of his development, Paz's language in defining the first two in his 1943 essay "Poesía de soledad y poesía de comunión" is nearly identical to that found in his meditation on the third in *El laberinto de la soledad*. For example, Paz states flatly in 1943 that "La poesía [...] siempre es disidente," and concludes that poets can only achieve "la autenticidad rigurosa" when they "descienden a los orígenes" where, rather than "la novedad, esa sirena que se disfraza de originalidad," they discover "verdadera originalidad" (OC XIII 237, 244). Similarly, after having noted in 1943 that "el amor" is characterized by "la nostalgia de nuestro origen, oscuro movimiento del hombre hacia su raíz, hacia su nacimiento" (OC XIII 235), he writes in *El laberinto de la soledad* that "en nuestro tiempo el amor [...] es transgresión" (203). Considering the overt parallels between his understandings of poetry, eroticism, and revolution, namely, that they are dissident, transgressive, or radical for their common impulse to descend to roots, the implicit political intention of *Raíz del hombre* should not be in dispute. And yet, despite Paz's own words, particularly his admission of having drawn inspiration for his title from the original philosopher of socialist revolution at a moment when his political commitment lay with the actual revolutionary struggle against fascism taking place in Spain, critics have largely chosen to ignore the political relevance of the poem, as I note above.

One effect of the guiding effort to poetically render Marx's definition of radicalism through erotic symbolism in *Raíz del hombre* is that it infuses with a revolutionary accent the influences upon which Paz relies throughout the poem. By appropriating the language of Neruda's *residenciario* impulse to submerge in materiality for the purpose of depicting the descent to roots at the heart of Marxist radicalism, for example, Paz breathes new meaning into

his idol's aesthetic. In what constitutes, in my opinion, the most *nerudiano* of all stanzas in *Raíz del hombre*, Paz guides the reader through a strange region where the lovers access their roots:

Arrojados a blancas espirales,
a lugares informes de gemidos,
de materias increadas
y pavorosos vahos elementales,
rozamos nuestro origen y raíces. (35)

Foreshadowed in the previous stanza by “la blanca región de los desmayos, / en un voraz vacío” (35), the “blancas espirales” of erotic ecstasy into which Paz’s lovers are thrown quickly assume the attributes of the dark interior world that Neruda had presented throughout *Residencia en la tierra*. The verse “a lugares informes de gemidos,” for example, recalls the second line of “Galope muerto,” which sets the poem’s indecipherable action “en la sumergida lentitud, en lo informe.” Both challenge a reasoned sensibility by presenting haunting spaces that feel at once inaccessible and inescapable by dint of their shapelessness. Then, like Neruda’s speaker in “Entrada en la madera,” who observes “secretas materias inconclusas” and “materia misteriosa” while moving “entre húmedas fibras arrancadas / al vivo ser de substancia y silencio” (*OC I* 324), Paz’s lovers wade blindly through the thickness of “materias increadas / y pavorosos vahos elementales.” Considering María Zambrano’s praise for “Entrada a la madera,” in which Neruda’s “adoración desde dentro [...] a la materia sin figura, a la materia más material, virgen y madre, no ha sido nunca dicha, no será nunca dicha tan hermosa y justamente” (“Pablo Neruda o el amor de la materia” 4), it is easy to understand why, in his “nacimiento poético,” a young Paz might attempt to channel the sensorial dynamism that underlay the Chilean’s poem.

Echoing Zambrano's exaltation of the speaker's love of material in "Entrada a la madera," Boll understands the encounter with "[el] vivo ser de substancia y silencio" as proof that Neruda "finds satisfaction in a sensual relation to the physical world" (94). In my reading of the poem, however, the speaker, who repeats "soy yo" four times as if to emphasize the solitary nature of his endeavor, appears overcome by a sense of morbid fragmentation as he depicts his journey into wood as "un viaje funerario / entre [...] cicatrices amarillas" (*OC I* 325). In contrast, and as evidenced by the first-person plural "rozamos," Paz's lovers discover together the wholeness of roots by virtue of their sexual embrace. Thus, building on his idol's descent-to-origins aesthetic, Paz replaces Neruda's anguished solipsism with a faith in the emancipatory potential of communion. As José Quiroga writes, "This is the argument of the poem: love is the 'root of man'; it is precisely love that allows man and woman to abandon their individual beings in order to commune with a nature that is both within and without" (19). In the context of the struggle against fascism in which *Raíz del hombre* appeared, such a faith assumes political value as a symbol for revolutionary solidarity, as I have argued above.

Interestingly, in the final version of *Raíz del hombre* as edited in his *Obras completas* (1999), Paz changed the stanza above, now located in Canto VII, to read:

Arrojados a blancas espirales
rozamos nuestro origen,
el vegetal nos llama,
la piedra nos recuerda
y la raíz sedienta
del árbol que creció de nuestro polvo. (*OC XIII* 63)

In this version, Paz replaces a *residenciario* materialism of shapelessness with “la vegetal,” “la piedra,” and “la raíz sedienta del árbol” to suggest that man’s roots lie in nature. Such a rendering would fall in line with Wilson’s proposal that the root, for Paz, is “a literal symbol of the way back. Man’s ‘roots’ are in nature, but twentieth-century man is rootless [...]. Root is the spiritual symbol of contact. [...]. The aim [...] is to retrace the lost steps [...] and find the lost roots” (*Octavio Paz* 92).

In another stanza in *Raíz del hombre* that announces the search-for-roots theme as a driving force of the project at hand, Paz channels one of the most erotic poems in all of *Residencia en la tierra*. In “Material nupcial,” Neruda’s male speaker describes with an alarming violence how, “De pie como un cerezo sin cáscara ni flores,” he will sexually dominate his subject, “una niña de papel y luna”: “abriré hasta la muerte sus piernas temerosas, / y morderé sus orejas y sus venas, / y haré que retroceda con los ojos cerrados” (*OC I* 320-321). The speaker then describes as a ferocious escape toward timeless emptiness the orgasm he will impose on his subject: “Le haré huir escapándose por uñas y suspiros / hacia nunca, hacia nada” (321).

In Canto VIII of *Raíz del hombre*, the speaker addresses his lover directly and in a gentler tone that nonetheless captures a sense of masculine dominance before a feminine presence rendered passive—even absent—by the implicit characterization of her genitalia as “la nada”:

Desde las formas bajo a tus raíces,
desde las proporciones a la nada.
Desde la luz de pétalos ardientes
hasta la sombra que deshace al mundo.
Inefable, sin máscara, anhelante,
desciendo hasta tu sangre. (40)

Whereas Neruda's speaker starts out "sin cáscara," Paz's approaches his lover "sin máscara." Upholding the sense of male sexual eagerness that Neruda establishes by presenting his speaker's appearance as "sin cáscara"—as if announcing to his subject, "here I am, in my unabashed nakedness, to take you"—, Paz's subtle modification to "sin máscara" infuses his quest for roots, i.e., for truth, with a Nietzschean mask trope that will inform his writings subsequent to *Raíz del hombre*.²⁹ Furthermore, and beyond the erasure of the lover's physical femininity as noted above, Paz's use of "la nada" also directly channels Neruda's understanding of erotic bliss as a retreat to a space or state of nothingness, as previously seen in the imagery of "blancas espirales," "la blanca región de los desmayos," "un voraz vacío." For Paz, however, such an understanding in 1937 was more philosophic in nature, bound to his reading of a 1933 Spanish translation of Heidegger's "What is Metaphysics?," which he cites as "una revelación fulminante" during his early days as a poet (*Reflejos: réplicas* 13). Thus the female lover's "raíces" and "la nada" toward which the speaker descends locate man's origins in an eroticized variant of Heidegger's "das Nichts," which, as Boll points out, retains a "positive value" for constituting the very foundation of being (84). According to Heidegger in Zubiri's translation, "sin la originaria patencia de la nada no hay mismidad ni hay libertad" (103).

Having initiated the stanza with the speaker lowering toward his lover's roots, Paz rounds it off in parallel fashion, substituting the verb "bajo" with "desciendo" and "tus raíces" with "tu sangre." Paz articulates this association between roots and blood at two other moments in the poem. He does so explicitly in Canto IV when the speaker addresses his lover, "Desnuda, entre

²⁹ In an interview with Claude Fell titled "Vuelta a *El laberinto de la soledad*," for example, Paz acknowledges his debt to Nietzsche in composing his 1950 meditation on Mexican historical identity: "Hemos hablado de las deudas mías: Freud, Marx... No hemos hablado de una influencia esencial, sin la cual no hubiera podido escribir *El laberinto*: Nietzsche. Sobre todo ese libro que se llama *La genealogía de la moral*. Nietzsche me enseñó a ver lo que estaba detrás de palabras como virtud, bondad, mal. Fue un guía en la exploración del lenguaje mexicano: si las palabras son máscaras, ¿qué hay detrás de ellas?" (187).

mi sangre, en mis raíces” (26), and implicitly in Canto XV, in the poem’s dramatic final stanza.

As I argue above, the final stanza demonstrates Paz’s adherence to Rilke’s vision of death, wherein ceaseless death flows beneath and nurtures love, the root of man.

In the context of the Spanish struggle against fascism, Paz’s quest for roots, combined with his critique of reason, and his re-elaborations of Quevedo, Rilke, and Neruda, lend *Raíz del hombre* a powerful political intention. Not only did the poem inspire Neruda to invite Paz to the Congress of Antifascist Writers, it also influenced him, however subtly, in his first poem to assume a political intention in an American setting. In the following chapter, I explore the legacy of Neruda’s “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” in this light.

CHAPTER III

“Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho”: Returning to Roots, Planting a Seed

Y su poesía no fue jamás un poema, un hermoso poema, sino un
fluir vivo, vencedor, apasionado hasta hundirse en el fondo de la
materia sonora y silenciosa; un fluir espeso, impuro, como una
gran y confusa corriente trágica; semejante al parto de las mujeres,
al fuego de los volcanes, al esperma del hombre; persistente como
la sangre, poderoso como las lavas o el aire de transparente pecho
y con el candor, el misterio inocente de la piel del mundo [...].

-Paz, “Pablo Neruda en el corazón,” *OC* XIII 270.

Introduction

Published midway through 1938, “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” is one of the first poems Neruda wrote after having returned home to Chile from the Spanish Civil War at the end of 1937. According to Felstiner, “Somehow Spain’s trauma affected Neruda unexpectedly: in teaching him a form of patriotism, an identification through time with a land and people, the war on Spanish soil tightened his bond to Chile” (121). With a title that locates the ensuing drama at the heart of the Chilean capital, “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” like his poem “Almagro”—written in May 1938 and included in *Canto General* as “Descubridores de Chile”—, demonstrates this newfound poetic concern for his homeland.

Not only does “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” mark Neruda’s return to national origins, then, but, as Zambrano implied in 1938, it also signals a return to the impulse to “profundizarse” that had marked his “poesía interior” in *Residencia en la tierra* (“Pablo Neruda o el amor de la materia” 5). That the speaker, addressing the titular river in the informal second person, guides the reader “bajo tus puentes” and “debajo de las hojas de hierro” in order to witness the plight of Santiago’s “olvidados” attests to how such a return, combined with a clear social conscience, enables Neruda to arrive “irremediabilmente a lo humano” (Zambrano 5) for the first time in a Latin American setting. Furthermore, Neruda’s engagement with the voices of

Góngora and Quevedo in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” renders the poem a return to the peninsular Golden Age roots of modern Spanish-language poetry. The “heptasílabo” and “endecasílabo” verses that constitute “la mayor parte en la construcción del poema” also tie the poem to “la poesía del Siglo de Oro,” according to Concha, while Neruda acknowledges his debt to Darío as well through his use of the “alejandrino” (326).

If, at the moment in his trajectory when it appeared, “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” represented for Neruda a return to both his national and poetic roots, it also symbolizes the planting of a seed, as only an understanding of its place within the broader context of his subsequent writing reveals. When we consider the poet’s emergent Marxism in 1938, through which he would have increasingly understood the wretched of the earth as the protagonists of a future society brought about by revolution, the rag-clad “olvidados” planted under the Mapocho’s bridges eventually assume revolutionary symbolic value as the “semilla del hombre” with which Neruda ends the poem. In a parallel vein, and precisely for attaching such a radical social awareness to the topography of Latin America, “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” functions as the seed poem of his masterpiece *Canto General* and, by extension, of the rest of a poetic output recognized in 1971 for “the action of an elemental force [that] brings alive a continent’s destiny and dreams” (“The Nobel Prize in Literature 1971”). Furthermore, that Neruda would return so vividly to the same themes, imagery, and language of “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” and other writings from the period in two of the final texts he wrote in his lifetime—prologues to his book of poetry *Incitación al Nixoncidio* and Adolfo Gómez Morel’s novel *El río*, as I discuss below—confirms the prophetic nature of the 1938 poem.

To understand “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” as both a return to roots and the planting of a seed, as I cursorily outline above, is to see it for its transformative value at the key

moment in Neruda's evolution when he assumed his defining Latin Americanist thrust. Following my main line of inquiry in this thesis regarding Paz's crucial presence in that evolution, some of the questions that drive this chapter ask how the Chilean's reading of *Raíz del hombre* in 1937 might have directly or indirectly contributed to the qualities of return and prophecy that inform "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho." In what ways, for example, did Paz's poem impact Neruda's return to his American origins in "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho"? Or, how does the expression of his anxiety of influence vis-à-vis Paz in the poem prefigure subsequent articulations of his poetic duty that will come to define his transformation toward, and legacy as, committed Latin American poet *par excellence*?

In this chapter, I offer a summary of the political and personal context in which Neruda published "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho." Doing so illuminates the poem's obvious antifascist ideological orientation, which Neruda registers through specific images and allusions that I also discuss. Nevertheless, and as I argue below, "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" is, at its core, more a poem about poetry and its function than a denunciation of historically- and place-specific social inequities. Furthermore, the meta-poetic commentary at play in "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho," in which Neruda implicitly champions an impure aesthetic of engagement over one of purity, is informed in no small part by Paz's revolutionary readings of Quevedo and Rilke in *Raíz del hombre*, as well as by the Mexican poet's reliance there on the Chilean's *residencial* natural eroticism in conveying his antifascist message.

*Registering the Transformation:
"Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" as a Critique of Poetry*

The success of the 1937 Congress of Antifascist Writers that he had worked hard to organize inspired Neruda to continue his activism on behalf of the Spanish Republic when he returned to Chile after five years abroad. In fact, during the Congress, according to Feinstein,

“One major decision taken [...] was to create an international network of writers’ organisations to combat the fascist uprising in Spain. Neruda instinctively felt that it was his role to be responsible for setting up the Chilean ‘branch’ of this literary war” (129). Thus, in early November 1937, less than a month after arriving in Santiago, he helped establish “‘la sección chilena’ de la Alianza de Intelectuales por la Defensa de la Cultura,” of which he was named the first president (Moraga Valle y Peñaloza Palma 73).

In the months that followed, the poet travelled extensively throughout Chile, reading his poetry to sympathetic and, importantly, working-class audiences to raise funds for the Spanish Republican struggle. Neruda recounts how, after he had finished reading from *España en el corazón* to members of the porters’ union at Santiago’s Vega Central one day, “se produjo el hecho más importante de mi carrera literaria” when some of his listeners began to weep in gratitude: “Comencé entonces a pensar no sólo en la poesía social. Sentí que estaba en deuda con mi país, con mi pueblo” (qtd. in Robert Pring-Mill xxx-xxxi). That in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” Neruda would marry for the first time in his poetry the two halves of this most important realization—social poetry and a debt to his country/people—speaks to the absolute centrality of that text in his work and life.

In line with such a reckoning, and in addition to struggling for the Spanish cause, Neruda’s antifascist Alianza activism turned increasingly local as Chile prepared for a contentious presidential election on October 25th, 1938 that would pit the leftist Pedro Aguirre Cerda against the rightwing Gustavo Ross Santa María. Heightening tensions as the election approached, that September fascist forces under the banner of the Partido Nacista staged a failed coup d’état in Santiago. While fascism may not have presented the same direct totalitarian threat in Chile as it did in Europe in 1938, Neruda understood, based on his experience in the Spanish

Civil War, that it would have to be battled mercilessly at home. In this context, he took on the role of editor-in-chief of the journal *Aurora de Chile*, “la máxima realización de la Alianza,” which launched on August 1st and maintained a “línea editorial” that “se centró en la denuncia del fascismo” (Moraga Valle y Peñaloza Palma 74). In *Confieso que he vivido*, Neruda describes the journal’s mission with language that betrays an understanding of literature as a weapon of war: “Fui director de la revista *Aurora de Chile*. Toda la artillería (no teníamos otra) se disparaba contra los Nazis que se iban tragando país tras país. [...]. Fue una gran experiencia” (165).

“Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” appears in the journal’s October 12th, 1938 issue, which, just two weeks before the election, was almost entirely devoted to promoting the Frente Popular candidacy of Aguirre. At the foot of the page opposite the one on which the poem is printed, a note reads, “Miseria, obscurantismo, injusticia, opresión: eso hay tras las promesas engañosas de la Derecha. Un voto por Aguirre, es un voto para la libertad” (n.p.) In addition to the poem, Neruda’s name is attached to two other texts in the issue, both in prose, which rely on similarly dramatic and Manichean language. While propagandizing on behalf of the progressive Aguirre and against the conservative Ross in both “Don Pedro” and “Ante las elecciones presidenciales, los intelectuales definen actitud,” Neruda espouses talking points that, though by today’s standards read as somewhat reactionary, lend insight into his valuation of “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” at the time.

In “Don Pedro,” a brief three-paragraph exaltation of the Frente Popular candidate, for example, Neruda resorts to a trope commonly used by nationalists at both ends of the ideological spectrum. Specifically, the poet seizes on the Anglo origins of Ross’ name to present the rightwing candidate as an opportunistic outsider who, if elected, will exploit ordinary Chileans for the benefit of international financial interests. While Ross was not Jewish, Neruda’s language

of racial purity and national essence here eerily parallels those undertones that inform the more anti-Semitic versions of this trope as it was peddled in the era of Nazism and Stalinism:³⁰

La batalla política ha enfrentado como nunca antes en Chile a dos hombres extraordinariamente contrarios. Entre estos dos apellidos, Ross, internacional, y Aguirre, chileno, hay más que una simple contradicción lingüística. Esta palabra: Aguirre, y más aún, Don Pedro, la pronuncia Chile como en un estertor, como en una última mueca de esperanza. Ross es la mesa lustrosa, extraña, extranjera, de los directorios fuleros, de la ganancia codiciosa: de esas mesas salen las noticias de derrumbes financieros con suicidios y fugas [ilegible] Europa. [...]. La oligarquía chilena, el Club de la Unión recurren a un extranjero extralegal, un “bussiness’s desesperado” [sic], a una píldora tóxica. Chile escoge su más exacto representante, a un maestro moreno de nuestra clase media, a un hombre severo y puro, a un chileno esencial. (n.p.)

Neruda then concludes the text by likening Don Pedro to the wood of a native Chilean tree:

Aguirre “es como un bueno [ilegible] árbol de nuestras regiones sureñas, maderas fuertes y silenciosas, con las cuales se ha construido [sic] lo que tenemos de vivienda nacional y de familia y casa; [...]. Hoy traemos madera de Aguirres [sic], recia y callada madera de [ilegible] australes, para reconstruir la patria.” (n.p.). Neruda’s focus here on “vivienda nacional,” “familia,” and “la patria” lend, at least from a contemporary progressive perspective, a flair of hokey conservatism to what he surely intended to be an inspirational conclusion. Nevertheless, by associating revolutionary liberty and justice with the natural world of America, as he does through the Aguirre-“árbol de nuestras regiones” simile, Neruda practices in prose a tendency

³⁰ Interestingly, Ross had been the target of anti-Semitic attacks by Chile’s Partido Nacista in 1936. In an op-ed in *Trabajo* from that year titled “A merced del imperialismo judaico,” Jorge González von Marées, leader of the Chilean Nazis, describes then-Finance Minister Ross’s visit to the Rothschild family in London as a “verdadera traición a los intereses nacionales” (qtd. in Guzmán 58).

that, beginning with the simultaneously published “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” will mark his poetry going forward.

While dated “Santiago, Agosto de 1938,” the extensive manifesto “Ante las elecciones presidenciales, los intelectuales definen actitud” takes up two full pages of the same October 12th issue and is signed by Neruda and over thirty other Chilean intellectuals. Considering the poet’s leadership position as editor-in-chief of *Aurora de Chile*, it is not out of the question to surmise that, if he did not compose the text himself, he at least played a significant role in drafting it. The manifesto begins by establishing in dichotomous, Manichean terms the stakes of the election as a “lucha de las fuerzas progresistas contra las fuerzas reaccionarias; lucha de la libertad contra la tiranía, [...] de la justicia contra la injusticia, de la igualdad contra la desigualdad, de la cultura contra el oscurantismo. Es, en fin, lucha del orden contra el desorden” (n.p.).

The signatories then define such “desorden” as a status quo that, in addition to empowering corrupt capitalist interests, “mantiene al pueblo en una miseria oprobiosa y en un analfabetismo impropio de nación civilizada, que abandona al niño a la mendicidad y al delito.” While sounding an important alarm on the ease with which a reactionary Ross government might be exploited by foreign imperialists and fascists, the opening paragraph ends with a tone that, like Neruda’s language in “Don Pedro,” seems to channel the positivist and xenophobic caricature of 1930s nationalism: a potential Ross administration threatens a disorder “que debilita la soberanía nacional cediendo a las sugerencias del imperialismo a las presiones del fascismo, y que es, en suma, semillero de desprestigio, de criminalidad, de insalubridad y de descomposición social.”

A few paragraphs later, the signatories reveal the historical materialism that informs their ideological positioning vis-à-vis the candidates when they define the election as a struggle

between “la fuerza evolutiva de los pueblos y la fuerza reversiva que emana de los grupos reaccionarios.” And further along, at the point where they express the very thesis of the manifesto, they betray a certain adherence to the Stalinist dictates on culture and intellectualism that Andrei Zhdanov had famously articulated at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers, when the notion of Socialist Realism was first introduced as the priority of antifascist art. In Zhdanov’s words, “the aim of [Soviet literature] is to liberate the toilers, to free all mankind from the yoke of capitalist slavery” (487). For the signatories of the 1938 manifesto in *Aurora de Chile*, the duty “del escritor, del artista, del hombre de ciencia, del profesional” is to “redimir al pueblo, educarlo, sacarlo de la miseria material y moral en que se encuentra.”

“Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” had already appeared in journals in Spain and Mexico by the time it was published in *Aurora de Chile* that October. Nevertheless, Neruda’s editorial decision to include it in the same issue as two other texts in which, respectively, he links revolutionary values to the natural world of America and defines the Latin American writer’s radical duty to “el pueblo” is telling. Specifically, such a decision reveals that Neruda understood his poem as a coalescence of the two ideals—poetic engagement and a debt to his country—comprising the insight he had gained following his reading at Santiago’s Vega Central. While “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” is not explicitly political—and therein lies the power of its ideological messaging—, its appearance in an overtly propagandistic issue of a journal defined precisely by its partisan insertion into Chilean national discourse signals the American turn of Neruda’s emerging understanding of poetry as an arm in the global struggle against fascism.

The poem traces the course of its titular river as it runs from its frozen origins at the peaks of the Andes down through Santiago in the valley below, where, as an indifferent witness to the metropolis’ social calamity, it passes coldly by the destitute inhabitants under its bridges.

In this regard, Neruda's Mapocho corresponds perfectly with "the Baroque topos of ruins" in which "the river is traditionally the symbol of eternity and nature, the witness of history, who survives to tell the story" (Enjuto Rangel 32). But based on the Chilean's later association between rivers and poets in the section "Los ríos del canto" in *Canto General*, where, according to Concha, "lo que fluye [...] es el cauce de la poesía, la voz de escritores, poetas, músicos" (333), and considering the 1938 poem's status as the seed of Neruda's masterpiece, it is also safe to read the river in "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" as a metaphor for poetry. The consternation of the speaker, who alternately and exasperatedly interrogates and commands the river in a moralizing tone, then, is better understood in light of Neruda's simultaneous assumption of the perspective that a poet's duty is to work toward liberating "el pueblo" from the yoke of material and moral misery. As a witness of history, the river in "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho," like the poetry it symbolizes, must not be indifferent.

The rhetorical strategy of dichotomy on which Neruda relies to present his political arguments in his two prose texts in the October 12th issue of *Aurora de Chile* reflects the increasingly Manichean orientation of his ideological thought at a moment in the pre-World War II cultural Cold War when Stalinist and Popular Front antifascism galvanized the international left. That such a technique also dominates the poetic expression of "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho"—especially considering my argument here that it is a poem fundamentally about poetry—, speaks to the narrowing of perspective that also characterizes his evolving understanding of the function of poetry at the time. Such dichotomies as high/low and pure/impure, for example, frame the poem's narrative from beginning to end. Another implicit dichotomy, black/white, is symbolic of the rigid binarism that will increasingly come to define Neruda's worldview in subsequent years of the Cold War. That dichotomy crystalizes at the end

of “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” in the oxymoronic image of “espuma negra,” which, as I discuss later in this chapter, is key to understanding the influence of Paz’s *Raíz del hombre* in Neruda’s poem.

“Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” is neither Neruda’s first nor last poem in which he relies on dichotomy as a strategy to express his understanding of poetry. He had done so a year earlier while justifying his newfound poetic commitment during the Spanish Civil War in “Explico algunas cosas,” which Sicard reads as a critique of poetry “dentro de la poesía” (555). As cited in Chapter I, Neruda directs his words in that poem to the very conscience of his critics:

Preguntaréis por qué su poesía
no nos habla del sueño, de las hojas,
de los grandes volcanes de su país natal?

Venid a ver la sangre por las calles. (*OC I* 371)

Here, the poet establishes a dichotomy of verticality based on a divide between the heights of natural purity and the depths of human impurity: a poetic concentration on dreams, leaves, and volcanoes suggests a look upwards and away from human suffering, while a focus on the streets running with blood brings the reader down to the catastrophic vitality of war. As I discuss briefly below, Neruda will return in different ways to this dichotomy of verticality in “Los poetas celestes” and “A Miguel Hernández, asesinado en los presidios de España,” two later poems included in *Canto General* that also polemically treat poetry as a subject (and implicitly target Paz). In light of such a correspondence and considering that, as the embryo of *Canto General*, “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” is strategically positioned at the very center of the collection, while “A Miguel Hernández, asesinado en los presidios de España” is the last poem written to be

included in it, an interesting follow-up study might explore the extent to which a critique of poetry functions as the driving force in Neruda's masterpiece.

Neruda's dichotomy of verticality is visible in the two interrogations that open "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho." There, the speaker offsets an idyllic vision of a pure, natural, mountaintop environment with a portrait of human depravation below in the impure "patria"—modern social construct *par excellence*. As can be gleaned through such an opposition, in which the mountaintop landscape remains pure precisely for its lack of human presence, Neruda incorporates the problematic separation of nature and culture that had been absent in "Canto sobre unas ruinas" but central to *Raíz del hombre*, as I discuss in Chapter II:

Oh, sí, nieve imprecisa,
oh, sí, temblando en plena flor de nieve,
párpado boreal, pequeño rayo helado
quién, quién te llamó hacia el ceniciento valle,
quién, quién te arrastró desde el pico del águila
hasta donde tus aguas puras tocan
los terribles harapos de mi patria?
Río, por qué conduces
agua fría y secreta,
agua que el alba dura de las piedras
guardó en su catedral inaccesible,
hasta los pies heridos de mi pueblo? (*OC I* 661)

Here the speaker presents a division comprising antagonistic elements. One is the river, flowing with "agua fría y secreta" and "aguas puras" that emanate from a "catedral inaccesible" high in

the mountains where the eagle soars. The river's severe frigidness is best expressed in the image of "rayo helado," which recalls the dynamic form of "Galope muerto." Meanwhile, the words "imprecisa" and "temblando" reflect a sense of uncertainty—underscored by the question marks that punctuate the poem—in the face of the unpredictability of this cold force of nature.

The other element comprises the impoverished inhabitants of the "ceniciento valle." By identifying these people only in terms of their "terribles harapos" and "pies heridos," the speaker implies their dehumanization at the hands of larger economic forces. Combined with the desperate search for answers on behalf of these rag-clad people as seen in the questioning words "quién"—repeated four times—and "por qué," the possessive pronoun "mi" before "patria" reveals the speaker's interest in, and identification with this second, more human element. The opening of "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" offers the portrait of a cold force of inaccessible purity above versus the forgotten and impure human beings below. Considering Neruda's argument in "Sobre una poesía sin pureza," the commitment he announces in "Explico algunas cosas," and his definition of poetic duty in *Aurora de Chile*, it is easy to conclude, without being too reductive, that the river at the beginning of "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" stands in for the type of pure poetry that eschews the social and against which the poet was defining his transformation toward an aesthetic of engagement.

Further along at the very center of the poem, after angrily ordering the river to reverse course and return to its "copa de nieve" and its "secreto origen," the speaker lashes out at it dramatically. He does so with imagery and a question that, while demonstrating Neruda's increasingly communist orientation, simultaneously preview subsequent admonishments of the poet's enemies and reveal his debt to Rilke:

Río Mapocho cuando la noche llega

y como negra estatua echada
duerme bajo tus puentes como un racimo negro
de cabezas golpeadas por el frío y el hambre
como por dos inmensas águilas, oh río,
oh duro río parido por la nieve,
por qué no te levantas como inmenso fantasma
o como nueva cruz de estrellas para los olvidados? (*OC I* 661)

In a footnote in Chapter II, I allude to the complex relationship Neruda maintained with Rilke over the course of his life. I chart how the Chilean's early affinity for the Austrian gave way to a certain disdain for the latter's influence over pure poets during the 1940s, registered most prominently in "Los poetas celestes." In that poem Neruda uses the term "rilkistas" as an accusatory epithet for his poetic adversaries, including Paz. Appearing chronologically somewhere between these two extremes, "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" demonstrates that Neruda had not yet turned on Rilke. For the purpose of my thesis regarding Paz's crucial presence in Neruda's transformation, it is tempting to surmise that the Mexican poet's revolutionary rendering in *Raíz del hombre* of Rilke's vision of death may have inspired a similar undertaking in "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho." Through the simile likening the poor sleeping under the bridges to statues, as well as the imploration asking why the river does not rise up for the poor like a new cross of stars, Neruda announces such an endeavor.

In Chapter II I note how, in *Raíz del hombre*, which appeared in the heat of the fascist threat, Paz draws a revolutionary lesson from Rilke's understanding that the consciousness of mortality might inspire in men a life of love. In a 1938 essay, Paz quotes Rilke's famous stanza from *The Book of Hours* in which the Austrian poet writes, "O Lord, grant death to each in one's

own way. / Grant that one may pass away from a life / that was filled with love, meaning, and desire” (173). Here, Rilke outlines a three-pronged formula for a worthwhile life, through which an individual might cultivate his or her own death. But when confronting the issue of poverty, as he does in “The Book of Poverty and Death,” the third book of *The Book of Hours*, he laments that, based on their material misery, poor people are unable to cultivate a worthy death as their lives lack the required love, meaning, and desire. At one point, for example, the speaker says of the poor that “They walk about, degraded by their work, / serving meaningless things without desire” (171) and that death “hangs in them like a piece of fruit, / green and sour, refusing to mature” (173). In another poignant section describing the rampant plight of big cities, the speaker says:

People are living there poorly and grave,
in basement rooms, small and confined,
more timid than a firstborn herd;
and while outside your earth awakes to breathe,
they are unaware they too do live. (169)

He then describes the agonizing deaths of his impoverished subjects:

With the deathbeds way back in the dark,
they now begin to long for them;
and they die slowly, die like in chains,
and, like a beggar woman, depart. (171)

Rilke’s reliance on simile to describe death—“like a piece of fruit” and “like a beggar woman”—is telling. As Patrick Greaney argues in his discussion of Rilke’s “aestheticization of poverty,” “there is something deadening about simile that interferes with the conception of

poetry as a lively, enlivening ‘primary positing’” (105). The critic then cites Jacques Derrida’s understanding of the difference of metaphor and simile: “metaphor sets before us, vivaciously, what the comparison more haltingly reconstitutes indirectly” (105). For Greaney, Rilke resorts to the simile as a way to express the frustration and lifelessness that menace the poor:

In ‘The Book of Poverty and Death,’ the poor appear not as themselves but as a series of similes—and I would argue, as the simile itself [...]. ‘Like’ is a weakness, an abatement, an interruption, thus a linguistic approximation of the way in which the power of the poor remains distanced from enactment [...]. The poor are like ‘like’—they don’t fit into the system of economic production that they make possible, just as the ‘like’ of the simile appears, from Aristotle to Hegel to Benn—a useless embarrassing device. (107-108)

Neruda employs simile only four times in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” and all appear in the section in which he describes the heap of sleeping bodies huddled together under the river’s bridges: “como negra estatua,” “como racimo negro,” “golpeadas por el frío y el hambre / como por dos inmensas águilas,” “como nueva cruz de estrellas.” Where the river is presented as dynamic, alive, and transforming, Neruda’s poor are lifeless, still, and vulnerable. The presence of the color black that accompanies both the statue and cluster similes attests to the omnipresence of death in the lives of the poor. Furthermore, considering the poet’s hardening anti-capitalism, which he expresses in prose in the same issue of *Aurora de Chile*, the depiction of faceless bodies fused into a singular cluster of heads highlights the poem’s protest against the larger economic forces under capitalism that render human individuality a worthless commodity. Channeling a revolutionary spirit, however, Neruda will find inspiration in Rilke’s maxim that “You are as poor as the strength of a seed” (189) and his prescription whereby “If we surrendered / to earth’s intelligence / we could rise up rooted, like trees” (qtd. in Barrows and

Macy 12). Thus, at the end of the poem, the Chilean, also reaching back to his own *residenciario* impulse to eroticize nature, transforms the clustered heads under the bridge into “la semilla del hombre,” which, having been inseminated by the river and a flower, promises liberation.

Along with the anti-capitalist message at the center of the poem—the “negra estatua” and “racimo negro” similes appear in the eighteenth and nineteenth of thirty-eight verses—Neruda registers his antifascism through the association between “inmensas águilas” and “el frío y el hambre.” Might Neruda be referencing the oppression unleashed by German and Italian fascism, which used the eagle as a central symbol? Furthermore, Neruda’s “fantasma” is a clear reference to the opening line of Marx and Engels’ *Manifesto of the Communist Party*—“A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism” (11). The image of the “nueva cruz de estrellas” into which he would like the river to transform itself “para los olvidados” is a bit more complex. According to Concha, the image attests to the secularism of the poet’s emerging communism: “Nueva lo es esta ‘cruz’ porque no coincide con la vieja y tradicional que bendice y eterniza el sufrimiento; es ‘de estrellas’, porque no pertenece a un cielo trasmundano, sino que brota de la misma noche en que el pueblo está sumido” (332). Interpreting Neruda’s “nueva cruz de estrellas para los olvidados” as eschewing of Christian transcendence, Concha echoes Zambrano’s 1938 reading of *Residencia en la tierra*, the title of which underscores that Neruda’s is a

Poesía que reside en la tierra, que la habita, que está pegada a ella. No es un intento de salvación de lo terreno, un afán de sobrepasar el aspecto primero de las cosas para buscar un trasunto poético detrás, en el fondo, aunque este fondo fuese el de una apariencia, como hace la poesía de herencia platónica, contemplativa, idealista, idealizadora. No, la poesía de Neruda es rebelde a todo ese intento, de tal manera que para un cristiano—en

quien se exacerba ese afan [sic] platónico—sería justamente el pecado, sería poesía de la caída o de lo caído. (4)

In light of our discussion regarding the influence that Neruda likely drew from Rilke's rendering of poverty, it is not surprising that, though a Christian poet, the Austrian similarly sought a focus on the here and now of this world. As Greaney writes, "Rilke's poor are in no way rich [...] like the Christian, whose wealth in Heaven increases as his poverty on earth intensifies" (111). In "The Book of Pilgrimage," the second book of *The Book of Hours*, for example, Rilke writes,

No more waiting for the beyond, no looking hither,
only a desire not to minimize death and to train
for service on the things earthly
so as to be ready and of good use to them. (143)

Considering the similarities in Concha and Greaney's respective understandings regarding the non-transcendental undertones of Neruda's communist and Rilke's Christian renderings of poverty, the speaker's imploration of the river in "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho"—"por qué no te levantas como inmenso fantasma / o como nueva cruz de estrellas para los olvidados?"—echoes in striking fashion the questioning of God that ends "The Book of Poverty and Death":

Where is this sounding one, this clear one, gone?
Do not the poor who persevere
feel him, the joyous one and young?
Does he not climb into their dusks—
as poverty's great evening star? (207)

By transforming Rilke's "poverty's great evening star" into a "nueva cruz de estrellas para los olvidados," Neruda, perhaps inspired by Paz, demonstrates an ability to apply a revolutionary reading to one of his major literary influences at the key moment in his poetic trajectory when he increasingly saw poetry as a weapon in the struggle against fascism.

In light of our supposition that the river in "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" stands in for pure poetry, a further question arises from the possibility that Neruda associates the fascist symbol of an eagle with the cold and hunger given off by the river: could the newly radicalized Neruda, under the heat of the fascism/anti-fascism binary that dominated intellectual leftism in 1938, be suggesting here that an aesthetics of purity is tantamount to aiding fascism? If our suspicions are true, then Neruda in "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" channels the more explicit motives of his 1937 letter "A mis amigos de América." Through the dramatic imploration that the river rise like a specter, the poet is pleading with his peers to join him in writing on behalf of the forgotten so as not to ignore their suffering and, in effect, encourage the enemy.

A reading of "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" as a critique of pure poetry gains credence when we look at it in relation to "Los poetas celestes," a much more explicitly anti-purist poem in *Canto General*. Neruda wrote "Los poetas celestes" years after his feud with Paz and during his 1948 clandestine flight from Chile, where, as a senator in the Communist Party, he had been persecuted by a sudden anticommunist purge (Loyola 2005, 1205). The poem forms part of the section in *Canto General* titled "La arena traicionada," suggesting from the start that it treats as its subject a treasonous element. In a Cold War context, the word "traicionada" for a committed Stalinist like Neruda could only imply anticommunism, which suggests that Neruda associates pure poetry with his political enemies.

In “Los poetas celestes” Neruda establishes a similar dichotomy of purity-heights versus impurity-depths to the one he had established in “Explico algunas cosas” and “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho.” The title’s reference to the celestial invokes the high, unreachable, and unreal heavens as the dwelling place for the pure poets, similar to the “catedral inaccesible” of “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho.” At the other end, the poet refers to the impoverished masses as a “cabeza sumergida en el estiércol” (*OC I* 328), and concludes the poem with an image of death under the ground in graveyard tombs. Furthermore, Neruda’s angry interrogation of the river in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” through which he judges it for not rising like a new phantom on behalf of the masses, is mirrored here with his dramatic questioning of the purist poets. Neruda employs a similar tone of desperate moralizing. Whereas he had heavily channeled Rilke in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” he now uses the Austrian’s name to disparage his enemies:

Qué hicisteis vosotros, gidistas
intelectualistas, rilkistas,
misterizantes, falsos brujos
existenciales, amapolas
surrealistas encendidas
en una tumba, europeizados
cadáveres de la moda,
pálidas lombrices de queso
capitalista, qué hicisteis
ante el reinado de la angustia,
frente a este oscuro ser humano

a esta pateada compostura,
a esta cabeza sumergida
en el estiércol, a esta esencia
de ásperas vidas pisoteadas?
No hicisteis nada sino la fuga. (328)

The final verse of this stanza is heartrending if, with sympathy, we understand Neruda as a man who identified intimately with his craft and who, as a political fugitive in the midst of the Cold War, must have carried with him a profound sense of solitude and betrayal at the moment he composed it. In this respect, “No hicisteis nada sino la fuga” reads like a disillusioned answer to the question he had posed a decade earlier to the Mapocho River and the poetry/poets it symbolizes: “por qué no te levantas como inmenso fantasma / o como nueva cruz de estrellas para los olvidados?”

Furthermore, in my reading of “Los poetas celestes,” Neruda takes two implicit swipes at Paz within the first six lines. First, he begins the poem by invoking with disdain “gidistas / intelectualistas,” possibly referencing Paz’s abstaining from the vote to condemn André Gide as a counterrevolutionary at the 1937 Congress of Anti-Fascist Writers in Valencia. This is followed by his mention of “amapolas surrealistas encendidas en un tumba,” which, as I note in Chapter I, can be read as an allusion to Paz who at the time was close to Breton in Paris. These references suggest that the ramifications of his feud with Paz in 1943 still weighed heavily in his conception of poetic essence years later as he prepared his magnum opus. By placing them in the opening lines of a diatribe against pure poetry, Neruda implies the centrality of the feud in his understanding of his own role as a committed poet.

Additionally, a brief look at “A Miguel Hernández, asesinado en los presidios de España,” written in December 1949 just before the book’s first printing in 1950 (Loyola 2005, 1213, 1217), lends credence to the possibility that, with “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” as its seed poem, Neruda’s masterpiece is, at its core, a book about the function of poetry. Such a possibility offers a reasonable answer to the questions as to why Neruda would place “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” at the literal center of the book, as I detail in a footnote in Chapter I, and what led him to allow a poem dedicated to Miguel Hernández, who died in 1942, to “cerr[ar] efectivamente la escritura de *Canto general* (1217), which he once described as “mi libro más importante” (qtd. in Santí 2011, 25). Fittingly, “A Miguel Hernández, asesinado en los presidios de España” forms part of the same section of *Canto General*, “Los ríos del canto,” which, based on its association between rivers and poets, empowers us to assert that the river in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” functions in part as a metaphor for poetry.

To understand the value of “A Miguel Hernández, asesinado en los presidios de España,” it helps to return to an episode in 1941 that proved key in Neruda’s rupture with Paz. Neruda had met, befriended, and benefited from mutual poetic influence with the young Spaniard Miguel Hernández during the Spanish Civil War. Hernández had been attracted to Neruda’s notion of impure poetry, while Neruda loved Hernández for his humble agricultural roots and connection to the land. According to Stephen Hart, “tanto en la obra de Hernández como en la de Neruda [...] palpita la fusión indisoluble de hombre y tierra, pueblo y ciudad, Iberoamérica y España” (122). Having been arrested by Franco’s forces during the Civil War, by 1941 Hernández languished in a Spanish prison where he would die the following year. In this context, according to Dominic Moran, Neruda took offense at the decision to exclude Hernández’ work in the “Panhispanic poetry anthology *Laurel* (1941), of which Paz was one of four co-editors” (90).

After “upbraid[ing]” Paz for “not including enough socially committed poetry in the volume, especially that of Miguel Hernández,” Neruda “then waited until the book had gone to press – the most awkward possible moment – before formally requesting that his own contribution be withdrawn” (91).

In “A Miguel Hernández, asesinado en los presidios de España,” Neruda refers to his deceased friend as “el fuego azul” (*OC I* 745). Here Neruda incorporates the most iconic trope of the *modernista* generation: the color blue. According to Emily McGinn, “the symbolism of the colour blue takes its root in Victor Hugo’s ‘l’art c’est l’azur’, conjuring images of the ideal, the infinite, and the heavens, affinities of the modernistas” (402). By appropriating a trope associated with eternal and celestial purity and applying it to a poet who for Neruda was fundamentally rooted in a specific place and time—Spain during the Civil War—Neruda subverts his own dichotomy of purity/heights versus impurity/depths, suggesting that true poetic purity is that of a poet rooted in the land willing to commit his word to the struggle for justice.

Addressing Hernández in the middle of the poem, Neruda unleashes a rage not seen in any other poem in *Canto General*. If the accusatory tone of deception he employs in “Los poetas celestes” reads like a follow-up to the earnest hope for revolutionary poetry expressed in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” the violence he directs toward his poet-enemies here confirms the personal toll of the Cold War literary battles in which he had engaged since the beginning of his transformation during the Spanish Civil War. That Paz is one of the implicit targets of Neruda’s attacks, as seen in the reference to the *Laurel* episode, further underscores the centrality of the poets’ early 1940s feud in Neruda’s self-conception as a committed poet:

Que sepan los que te mataron que pagarán con sangre.

Que sepan los que te dieron tormento que me verán un día.

Que sepan los malditos que hoy incluyen tu nombre
en sus libros, los Dámasos, los Gerardos, los hijos
de perra, silenciosos cómplices del verdugo,
que no será borrado tu martirio, y tu muerte
caerá sobre toda su luna de cobardes.

Y a los que te negaron en su laurel podrido,
en tierra americana, el espacio que cubres
con tu fluvial corona de rayo desangrado,
déjame darles yo el desdeñoso olvido

porque a mí me quisieron mutilar con tu ausencia. (*OC I* 746)

Then, with these lines of praise to Hernández, “Miguel de España, estrella / de tierras arrasadas, no te olvido, hijo mío, / no te olvido, hijo mío” (747), Neruda anoints his deceased Spanish friend as the “nueva cruz de estrellas de los olvidados” that he so desperately seeks in 1938 in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho.”

“Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” ends with a final revolutionary imploration of the river: “que una gota de tu espuma negra / salte del légamo a la flor del fuego / y precipite la semilla del hombre!” In my opinion, the language of this dramatic conclusion holds the key for understanding the nature of the influence of *Raíz del hombre* in the militant Americanist awakening that Neruda announces in his 1938 poem. This influence, however, cannot be fully appreciated without considering a fragment from the Chilean’s memoir, written thirty years later, in which he pays homage to several of baroque Spain’s most important poets. In *Confieso que he vivido*, Neruda writes, “Los únicos verdaderos ríos de España son sus poetas; Quevedo con sus

aguas verdes y profundas, de espuma negra; Calderón, con sus sílabas que cantan; los cristalinos Argensolas; Góngora, río de rubíes” (138-139).

First, the association between rivers and poetry here confirms the argument that, through his depiction in 1938 of the Mapocho River’s passage from its pure origins to the impure human world—as well as of the ideological implications of that passage—, Neruda in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” offers a meta-poetic commentary on the more pressing tensions confronting Hispanic poets at the time. More specifically, it is a commentary on the debate *du jour* between pure and engaged poetry, which, along with his contact with history during the Spanish Civil War, informed Neruda’s transformation in the context of his return to Chile from Spain. Second, Neruda’s association of Quevedo with “espuma negra” illuminates his use of that very oxymoron in the revolutionary appeal for man’s rebirth with which he concludes “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho.”

Considering the metaphor of insemination at play in this closing appeal, Neruda undertakes a play-on-words through which “espuma” sounds like and replaces “esperma.” In light of Neruda’s description in his memoir of “la pasión genital que [...] ardía en Quevedo” (299), such an erotic connotation further ties the oxymoron to the Golden Age poet. Neruda’s qualification of the “espuma”/“esperma” wordplay with “negra” also injects a jarring morbidity into an image otherwise understood for its quality of fertility. According to Selena Millares, the classical figurative device that Neruda resorts to most throughout his poetry is the oxymoron, “ese recurso emblemático de la era barroca [...], consistente en unir dos conceptos aparentemente antitéticos para provocar una particular tensión expresiva” (138-139). Through such “tensión expresiva,” Neruda channels the awareness of death’s gnawing presence in life, or *agonismo*, that underlies much of Quevedo’s poetry. Based on the wording of his praise for

Quevedo in *Confieso que he vivido*, in addition to the *quevedesco* features at play in the “espuma negra” oxymoron, we can confidently surmise that Neruda had the Golden Age poet in mind at the end of “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho.”

At the same time, and as I argue in Chapter I, through the parting image of “la semilla del hombre” the Chilean assumes the optimism of Quevedo’s “agricultura de la muerte,” whereby “semilla es nuestro cuerpo para la cosecha del postrero día.” But in pursuing a line of inquiry that also reads “la semilla del hombre” as a subtle allusion to Paz’s title and, consequently, a reflection of Neruda’s anxiety in the face of the Mexican’s emergence, it is difficult to ignore the presence of one of the most potent images of *Raíz del hombre*—“negras espumas”—at the climax of a poem of such transformational value in Neruda’s trajectory.

Informed most conspicuously by Quevedo and Rilke, the theme of rebirth is central to Paz’s revolutionary intention in *Raíz del hombre*, as I argue in the previous chapter. Paz emphasizes the theme’s centrality when, in the final verse of the seventh of fifteen cantos—just about the literal heart of the poem—the speaker addresses his lover with an attitude of calm triumph: “Amante. Renacemos” (38). Two stanzas earlier, and through imagery steeped in oxymoron, Paz formulates the poem’s recurring metaphor likening the erotic embrace to a return to origins in the following terms: “Y crecemos de mar tumultuoso / de radiantes y negras espumas, / del principio del mundo” (38). Rendering as simultaneously radiant and black an image that readers would otherwise register as a neutral white, Paz uses the sea foam of man’s origins here to underscore his “reconocimiento de la ambivalencia del amor,” which Stanton identifies as the poem’s “triunfo final,” as I cite in Chapter II. The striking image of the lovers emerging from the sparkling but shadowy foam of a stormy sea on the first day of the world also contributes to a dramatic tone seemingly informed by the biblical Genesis.

More than a mere imagistic coincidence with *Raíz del hombre*, the appearance of “espuma negra” in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” actually points to the facet of Paz’s poem that most saliently influenced Neruda during his transformation, namely, the recasting in a revolutionary context of Quevedo’s theme of rebirth. In Chapter II, I argue that, in the context of the Spanish Republic’s imminent collapse in 1939, Neruda’s antifascist interpretation of Quevedo’s “Amor constante más allá de la muerte” echoes Paz’s *quevedesco* depiction in *Raíz del hombre* of the revolutionary resolve of “Amor” amid the ruins of the Republic. Between his 1937 reading of *Raíz del hombre* and his 1939 Montevideo radio presentation of “Quevedo adentro,” Neruda in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” channels his Mexican counterpart in successfully weaving the baroque poet’s influence into the antifascist intention of his poem. In this light, his appropriation of Paz’s black foam oxymoron in the same closing verses in which he subtly reworks the Mexican’s title represents nothing short of an acknowledgment of the essential role of *Raíz del hombre*—and particularly its radical reformulation of the *quevedesco* theme of rebirth—in his transformation toward a poetics of Latin Americanist commitment.

To attach Quevedo to the revolutionary conclusion of “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” through the “espuma negra” oxymoron constitutes for Neruda a highly symbolic move as he sought to redefine his aesthetic in the direction of Latin Americanist commitment upon his return from Spain. As I detail in Chapter I, Neruda had shot to fame in the world of Hispanic letters during his time in Republican Madrid thanks in no small part to the response to his poetry of his Spanish poet-friends that comprised the avant-garde *Generación del 27*, which had largely defined itself by reviving the legacy of the baroque poet Góngora. As the pioneer of *culteranismo*, Góngora is often—though not without dispute—considered the formalist precursor

to *poesía pura* in the Hispanic world. Edith Grossman describes his most famous work, *Soledades* (1613), in terms informed by such an understanding:

The Solitudes is a poem “about” nature, but the natural world in this work does not serve as the backdrop for a highly expressive love poem or spiritual meditation. It is there to be evoked for its own sake in the most rarefied, figurative, sensuous language because language itself, not its emotive referent or expressive content, is the intrinsic esthetic component of poetry. This notion informs most poetic composition to some degree, but Góngora’s rejection of figurative realism as a guiding standard for his work is absolute. It probably accounts for the attraction his writing held for Symbolist and Modernist poets of the nineteenth century and for avant-garde Spanish poets of the 1920s, who found in him a consummate antidote to bourgeois romanticism in all its guises. (11-12)³¹

In life, Góngora and Quevedo were great rivals, as the latter countered the former’s ornate *culteranismo* with the more direct and popular *conceptismo*. Considering his distaste for intellectual and pure poetry in the late 1930s, however, Neruda’s appreciation and love for Góngora has never been subject to doubt—the quote I cite above from *Confieso que he vivido* in which he celebrates Quevedo, Góngora, and others as “los únicos verdaderos ríos de España” proves as much. In fact, according to Millares,

La presencia de ambos [Quevedo y Góngora] se entrelaza en la textualidad de Neruda, y si bien es Quevedo el que lo acompaña hasta sus últimos versos, no ha de desdeñarse el

³¹ Alexander Parker is one critic who has pushed back against such an understanding of the poet: “Ever since his revaluation in the 1920s Góngora had been presented either as an exponent of ‘pure poetry’, or as a *culterano* with a heavily Latinized poetic style. It was clear to me that, despite his meticulous concern with form and the sensuous elaboration of his images, there was an all-pervading intellectual preoccupation which was characteristic of his age, and which made the concept of ‘pure poetry’ inapplicable to him; that, in other words, most of his images are conceits and not just poetic ornaments” (vi). In a similar vein, David Orr responds directly to Grossman’s interpretation: “To an extent, the view that Góngora was especially interested in ‘language itself’ reflects the misunderstanding [...] which we might call the pure poetry fallacy. The truth is, every poem is about its own manner of expression, no matter how limpid that articulation may seem” (“The Rediscovery of Luis de Góngora”).

papel de Góngora. De hecho, es bien sabido que, a pesar de que se les suele presentar como antitéticos, el agonismo quevedesco y el preciosismo gongorino cambian sus roles en alguna ocasión. [...]. Asimismo, encontraremos en Neruda textos que imbrican simultáneamente gestos habituales de Góngora y de Quevedo [...]. (136)

Nevertheless, and at the most consequential moment in his poetic trajectory—his first social poem set in Latin America—Neruda thrusts himself directly into the centuries-old polemic, on the side of Quevedo and against Góngora, with his use of the “espuma negra” oxymoron. This is apparent not just through his retroactive association between Quevedo and “espuma negra” in *Confieso que he vivido*, but also when we consider Góngora’s emphasis throughout *Soledades* on white foam as seen in the repetition of “blanca espuma” (*Poesía* 159, 169), “espuma cano” (155), and “espuma cana” (163).

The observation that Neruda’s “espuma negra” directly contrasts Góngora’s “blanca espuma” might seem a superficial lens through which to gauge the Chilean’s partisanship in the Quevedo-Góngora polemic. Nevertheless, considering the dominance of such imagery as “plata,” “nieve,” “líquidos cristales,” and “duro hielo” that informs the *preciosismo* of *Soledades*, the course of Neruda’s “duro río parido por la nieve” away from the “espaciosas escarchas” of its “plateada raíz” and “secreto origen” confirms his antagonism in 1938 toward Góngora’s supposed legacy as precursor to pure poetry. Such a specific antagonism is essential in the Chilean’s redefinition as a fundamentally Latin Americanist poet of impure commitment as first registered in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho”; as he writes in *Confieso que he vivido*, “La belleza congelada de Góngora no conviene a nuestras latitudes [...]. Nuestra capa Americana es de piedra polvorienta, de lava triturada, de arcilla con sangre. No sabemos tallar el cristal. Nuestros preciosistas suenan a hueco” (298-299).

Thus, as Paz had recognized when he wrote in “Ética del artista” that “para la futura realización de una cultura en América hemos de optar valerosamente por [un arte de tesis]” (OC XIII 187), Neruda transforms his river, metaphor for poetry, into the benevolent natural force that, channeling Quevedo’s “pasión genital” with its “espuma negra,” will precipitate “la semilla del hombre.” Having fled the Spanish Civil War and in the context of Europe’s imminent self-immolation in World War II, the Chilean’s insistence that the dawn of a more humane future remained bound to the topography of Latin America signals the moment that Neruda bloomed, like “la flor de fuego,” into “el más grande poeta del siglo XX en cualquier idioma” (Gabriel García Márquez, Cover copy, *Confieso que he vivido*).

Prologues as Epilogue:

The Legacy of “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” in Neruda’s Final Writings

As the year 1972 drew to a close, the Cold War continued unabated across the globe. The United States, led by President Richard Nixon, waged both overt and covert campaigns to stem the spread of communism on multiple fronts, particularly in regions of the world that remained underdeveloped and, from a capitalist perspective, more susceptible to communism’s promise of egalitarian liberation. That fall, Nixon and his counterpart in the People’s Democratic Republic of Vietnam had struggled to come to terms on a peaceful end to a war that had raged for years at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives on both sides. In December, however, Nixon shocked the world by launching on Hanoi and Haiphong an eleven-day bombing campaign known officially as “Operation Linebacker II” and unofficially as “The Christmas Bombings,” during which US B-52 bombers killed over 1,200 North Vietnamese civilians. At the time, *The Washington Post* called the attack “the most savage and senseless act of war ever visited [...] by one sovereign people upon another” (“Terror Bombing in the Name of Peace,” December 28, 1972). For critics of US Cold War policy, the bombings undermined peace negotiations while

proving Nixon's duplicity. On the other hand, US officials, including National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, credited the campaign with producing the final peace agreement that would be signed the following month (Leonard 267).

Meanwhile, the United States looked south to Latin America with trepidation. In Cuba, Fidel Castro had tightened a fiercely anti-American and increasingly authoritarian grip around his Revolution, which, by the early 1970s, was fully communist in orientation while appealing to many in the region as a legitimate model of resistance against a history of North American neo-imperial incursions. Fearful, then, that Chile under Salvador Allende, a Marxist who had been democratically elected to the presidency in 1970, might usher in a second Cuba in the western hemisphere, Nixon, Kissinger, and the CIA had, by the end of 1972, waged two years-worth of covert operations there, including assassinations and the plotting of a coup d'état. On September 11th, 1973, of course, a violent CIA-condoned military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet would topple Allende's government.

After having served for the past year-and-a-half as the Allende administration's ambassador to France, Neruda returned to Chile in November 1972. Citing his desire to remain in Chile, where he could better serve his country's democratic and socialist Revolution, the poet would officially resign his post during a meeting with Allende in early February 1973 (Schidlowsky 1354). In the month preceding his resignation, and while resettling into his oceanfront home in Isla Negra on Chile's central coast, Neruda wrote two texts in prose—both prologues—that lend insight into his understanding of literature, politics, and the relationship between each as he entered the final calendar year of his life.³² Labeling Neruda “un prologuista

³² The poet would die in a Santiago hospital twelve days after Pinochet's coup, on September 23rd, 1973, at the age of 69. While his death certificate indicates that he died of cancer, the circumstances surrounding Neruda's death remain clouded in mystery to this day, as forensic scientists work to determine whether forces of the new ruling junta had in fact poisoned him.

audaz,” Teitelboim notes that, “como toda su obra en el fondo es autobiográfica (algunos consideran diario de vida enmascarado) las fechas de sus prólogos son hitos que van señalando estados de ánimo y etapas en su trayectoria. [...]. Esos preámbulos contienen autodefiniciones y pronunciamientos de diversa índole” (*Neruda 100* 97, 98).

In the two prologues I discuss here, equally dated “Isla Negra, enero de 1973,” Neruda returns to the combative tone, language, and themes that marked his transformation toward an aesthetic of militant Latin Americanist commitment during the tumultuous days of the struggle against fascism. Thus, when read together in both their immediate Cold War context and that of Neruda’s broader poetic trajectory, “Explicación perentoria” and “Prólogo a la edición francesa [de *El río*]” can illuminate our reading of Neruda’s texts from that earlier period, particularly, and for the purposes of the present study, “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho.”

“Explicación perentoria” introduces the last book Neruda would publish in his lifetime, a collection of poetry titled *Incitación al Nixoncidio y alabanza de la Revolución Chilena* (1973). In the prologue, Neruda employs a tone of rage to justify the violent call to arms implied in the collection’s title and made explicit in the poems that follow. Referencing the previous month’s “Christmas Bombings,” and echoing *The Washington Post*’s dramatic rhetoric, he writes that “Nixon acumula los pecados de cuantos le precedieron en la alevosía. Llegó a su punto cenital cuando, después de acordados los términos de un cese de fuego, ordenó los bombardeos más cruentos, más destructores y más cobardes en la historia del mundo” (*Prólogos* 125). Then, directing his ire at the dirty war tactics unleashed against the Allende government in Chile, Neruda writes in personal terms of the 1970 assassination of General René Schneider, the commander-in-chief of the Chilean army who had opposed elements of the armed forces that sought to block Allende from assuming power after his election: “las circunstancias de mi país,

los actos terribles que enlutaron a veces nuestra paz política, me llegaron al alma. Los asesinos del general Schneider andan por ahí vivitos en cómodos departamentos carcelarios en suntuosos hoteles extranjeros” (126).

Identifying a North American neo-imperialism embodied in Nixon as the ultimate culprit for the world’s injustices in early 1973—just as he did with fascism in the 1930s and 1940s—the poet offers a vision of the function of poetry that, in my opinion, surpasses the militancy he had displayed in the most explicitly committed poems of his transformation, including, among others, “Explico algunas cosas” and “Los poetas celestes.” With a language of staggering violence Neruda writes in “Explicación perentoria” that, “Sólo los poetas son capaces de ponerlo [a Nixon] contra la pared y agujerearlo por entero con los más mortíferos tercetos. El deber de la poesía es convertirlo, a fuerza de descargas rítmicas y rimadas, en un impresentable estropajo” (125). His language here recalls his understanding of the function of *Aurora de Chile* in 1938 as I quote above (“Toda la artillería [no teníamos otra] se disparaba contra los Nazis”).

Then, in the prologue’s conclusion, in which he argues forcefully against an intimist aesthetic and in defense of unabashed poetic engagement, Neruda likens his work as a poet to that of a variety of manual laborers as a way to more closely identify with the working class for whom he implicitly claims to speak. His list of the various categories of workers with which he associates his own profession recalls “la enumeración caótica” that Sicard identifies in the 1935 manifesto “Sobre una poesía sin pureza” in which the poet catalogues a variety of options that qualify as poetic topics (557). Furthermore, the tone of self-righteousness in the closing argument of “Explicación perentoria” recalls the sense of duty expressed in both “Explico algunas cosas” and his 1937 letter “A mis amigos de América”:

También debo explicar que este libro [...] no tiene la preocupación ni la ambición de la delicadeza expresiva, ni el hermetismo nupcial de algunos de mis libros metafísicos.

Conservo como un mecánico experimentando mis oficios experimentales: debo ser de cuando en cuando un bardo de utilidad pública, es decir, hacer de palanquero, de rabadán, de alarife, de labrador, de gasfiter [sic] o de simple cachafás [sic] de regimiento, capaz de trenzarse a puñete limpio o de echar fuego hasta por las orejas.

Y que los exquisitos estéticos, que los hay todavía, se lleven una indigestión: estos alimentos son explosivos y vinagres para el consumo de algunos. Y buenos tal vez para la salud popular.

No tengo remedio: contra los enemigos de mi pueblo mi canción es ofensiva y dura como piedra araucana.

Esta puede ser una función efímera. Pero la cumplo. Y recurro a las armas más antiguas de la poesía, al canto y al panfleto usados por clásicos y románticos y destinados a la destrucción del enemigo.

Ahora, firmes, que voy a disparar!

The aggressive Manichaeism that pulsates from these lines betrays the stubbornness of the Cold War binarism that persisted in a man who, nearing sixty-nine years old, had recognized more than a decade earlier the moral shortcomings of Stalinism and recently accepted the Nobel Prize in Literature. In “Explicación perentoria” Neruda seems to boast as a source of pride the poetic attitude for which his more politically engaged work had been, and continues to be, so heavily criticized. In fact, Saúl Yurkiévich’s harsh reading of Neruda’s 1940s Stalinist poetry, summarized here by Rafael Bosch, appears light when applied to the 1973 prologue, in which Neruda so freely admits to his propagandizing aims:

Neruda se equivoca, según Yurkievich, al convertir la poesía en arma de combate, cuyas características son que adopta un estilo llano y deja la hinchazón, rechaza toda abstracción donde no intervenga todo el hombre como entidad indivisible, oscila entre la importancia de su testimonio y la conciencia de la poca capacidad de la poesía para operar directamente sobre la realidad exterior y mejorar el mundo, y subordina sus pretensiones estéticas a sus deberes de militante político, reflejando la realidad en vez de la esencia de la poesía, con resultados panfletarios [...] de modo que la poesía deja de servir a su propio mundo expresivo y se pone al servicio de la mera presentación de la realidad. (“*El Canto General* y el poeta como historiador” 65)

Considering the status of “Explicación perentoria” as one of Neruda’s last texts, its exaggeratedly militant take on the function of poetry in the context of his final return to Chile underscores the lasting impact of his evolution from *residenciario* solipsism to antifascist Latin Americanist commitment that took place upon his return to Chile from the Spanish Civil War thirty-five years earlier when, in 1938, he wrote “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho.” In that poem, as I have argued in this chapter, the poet makes a similar case for a poetics of engagement over one of purity, though in much less explicit terms, and particularly by inserting himself into the centuries-old polemic between Góngora and Quevedo. Fittingly, Neruda includes in *Incitación al Nixoncidio* two poems dedicated to Quevedo, “Leyendo a Quevedo junto al mar” and “Mar y amor de Quevedo,” in the latter of which he writes of “la [...] espuma de la poesía” (33).

At the same time that he was outlining in “Explicación perentoria” a vision equating the function of poetry to that of a firing squad, Neruda penned from Isla Negra another text that relates much more directly to “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho.” The poet would pass away

before its publication the following year as the prologue to the French edition of Alfredo Gómez Morel's novel *El río* (*Le río Mapocho*, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1974). Neruda had initially demonstrated his enthusiasm for *El río* when, likely during his tenure as ambassador to France, he “puso el libro en contacto con la prestigiosa y muy literaria editorial Gallimard de París” (Fuguet 207). In his prologue, Neruda insinuates that, once translated and available to readers in France, Gómez Morel's novel might find its place at the heights of that country's literary canon, noting that “este clásico de la miseria” “será recibido [...] en el país de Mallarmé, en el jardín de Ronsard, que es también la tierra de Zola” (Neruda, *Prólogos* 146). The Chilean Nobel Laureate's is high praise indeed for a novel clearly written by an autodidact.

Composed in a prison cell and originally published in Santiago in 1962, *El río* is the autobiographical rendering of the life of a man who, born the son of a prostitute, grew up illiterate and destitute under the bridges of the Mapocho River, where he matured into an adulthood of petty criminality. With its reliance on colloquial language and a style that is effusive, irregular, and pocked with errors, *El río* is a howl for recognition from the gut of a true underdog and, as a narrative, lives up to the spontaneous and natural flow implied in its title. According to Alberto Fuguet, the novel represents “populismo literario del mejor nivel. Excesivo y ruidoso [...], el libro de Gómez Morel es quizás la más cruda novela de aprendizaje moral jamás escrita en Chile” (207). In one paragraph in the introductory section of the novel, which takes the form of a letter to a certain “Señora Loreley Friedman V.,” Gómez Morel previews some of the themes, images, and episodes of the picaresque story he is about to tell. He ends the paragraph by telegraphing that the arc of his “aprendizaje moral” ends at his realization of the liberating potential of love:

Mis dudas, la poca solidez de mis propósitos, mi amor a la vida fácil, la pereza en que viví por más de treinta años, mi inclinación a la bebida, la desesperante fiebre erótica que me corroe, el desprecio que por mucho tiempo sentí hacia todos los valores, mi afán de huirle a la verdad –o de aprovecharla con fines ocultos– y el violento líder que llevo en el alma desde que fuera aceptado definitivamente por el grupo delictual, son mi batalla de cada día y creo que poco a poco voy venciénolos. A veces me pregunto qué me mueve. Creo que el amor. Me parece que el amor a **lo humano**, reflejado, sin medida, en mi propio yo. (*El río* 10) (emphasis in the original)

Neruda's desire to expand Gómez Morel's audience through translation is entirely unsurprising. Through his tale of redemption out of the depths of Santiago's literal underworld (under the Mapocho's bridges), the novelist represents for Neruda the fulfillment of the antifascist hope he had expressed for the first time in an American setting decades earlier in "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho," in which the liberation of the wretched of the earth was predicated on the realization of love. Neruda, of course, had metaphorized such a hope in the poem's highly eroticized closing image, when a drop of the river's foam jumps to the bank and inseminates a flower in order to precipitate "la semilla del hombre."

Writing of the "tiempos duros" "de privación y miseria, de hambres, fríos, y vejaciones" during his childhood under the bridges of the Mapocho (*El río* 124), Gómez Morel lends his own name and life to Neruda's poetic rendering of the otherwise nameless and lifeless "negra estatua echada / [que] duerme bajo tus puentes como un racimo negro / de cabezas golpeadas por el frío y el hambre" in "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho (*OC* I 661). In his prologue, Neruda recognizes this convergence between his poetry and Gómez Morel's life: "El corazón de Gómez Morel se moldea debajo de uno de estos puentes, signado por el abandono enorme que lo

conduce, delito tras delito, algunos años más tarde, hasta la misma cárcel” (145). Furthermore, in expressing an attitude of deference (perhaps respect, or even fear) toward the powerful river, Gómez Morel seems to channel the diction—“arrastrar” and “plata,” for example—and imagery—“despéñate y rómpete en otro mar sin lágrimas!”—that Neruda had employed in imploring the impassive Mapocho to stop menacing “los olvidados” huddled under its bridges with its frigid “agua negra.” The novelist writes in 1962, for example, that “el Río –nuestro Padre Río– seguía bajando en busca del mar, mudo silencioso, expectante [sic]...” (176), and “El río brilló como una serpiente de plata. Se diría que las aguas, al arrastrar piedras y leños, lanzaban macabras carcajadas” (202).

As a side note, and in light of the obvious convergences between Gómez Morel’s novel and Neruda’s poem, the former’s depiction of the river as a “serpiente” adds an interesting possibility to my reading of “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” as it relates to the Neruda-Paz connection in the context of the Chilean’s 1930s transformation. In the fifth verse of “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” as I cite above, Neruda presents the river as having been dragged “desde el pico del águila.” The Spanish word “pico” can be translated into English as either “peak” or “beak.” It is entirely possible that, in establishing the poem’s dichotomy of verticality between the heights of the river’s pure origins in the Andes and the depths of Santiago’s “ceniciento valle” toward which it descends, Neruda meant by “pico” the peaks of the mountains atop which eagles perch. But if Neruda meant “beak,” as Jack Schmitt assumes in his authoritative English translation of *Canto General*—“who dragged you from the eagle’s beak” (235)—, then the image might very well represent an ekphrastic rendering of the scene at the center of the Mexican flag, especially considering that a river (at least from a bird’s-eye view)

can resemble a snake, as Gómez Morel understands.³³ Resting at the heart of my thesis regarding Paz's crucial presence in Neruda's transformation is the suggestion that the images of "espuma negra" and "la semilla del hombre" at the end of "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" tacitly symbolize the Chilean's appreciation of, and apprehension toward, Paz's *Raíz del hombre*. In this light, might the ekphrastic interrogation of the Mapocho River—"quién te arrastró desde el pico del águila"—constitute another implicit acknowledgment of the young Mexican's importance in Neruda's trajectory, particularly upon his 1938 return to Latin America from the ruins of Europe?

In his prologue to *El río*, Neruda recycles much of the language and imagery he had used in "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" in charting the river's course from its origin in the pure heights of the Andes, to its problematic passage through Santiago's human tragedy, to its final destiny of liberation in the ocean. After he opens the prologue in dramatic fashion by declaring that Gómez Morel's novel recounts "una especie de historia abominable incorporada a la materialidad de lo humano, inscrita a fuego sobre la piel de cada uno de mis coterráneos latinoamericanos" (145), Neruda closely summarizes in prose his 1938 poetic rendering of the river's flow:

Como todos los chilenos, como Gómez Morel, abrí los ojos al mundo teniendo
frente a mí a las más altas de las cumbres. En Santiago de Chile, los Andes son una
especie de marco que nos acompaña a lo largo y a lo ancho de todo el año. De su regazo

³³ Neruda's relationship with Mexican art serves as Hugo Méndez-Ramírez's point of departure in *Neruda's Ekphrastic Experience: Mural Art and Canto General*. In that book, the author argues that "the [Mexican] muralists' search for the mythical origins of Mexico, and their panoramic depictions of history from before the Conquest to the present, have striking parallels with Neruda's own search for a literature of foundations and his desire to create a verbal representation of the vast American reality. [...]. *Canto General*, then, is the textual ekphrastic equivalent of mural art, a kind of linguistic companion that explicates and elucidates the deeper human complexities inscribed in the murals" (125, 205). Considering that Méndez-Ramírez focuses primarily on the years Neruda spent in Mexico City (1940-1943) in building his argument, however, "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" does not figure into his study.

proviene las nieves insondables. La cabellera del frío baja desde la altura. De esos senos inmutables nace un río, un río de vértigo que atraviesa las simas, penetra en la ciudad y llega al mar, para allí liberarse con esfuerzo.

Bajo los puentes de este río Mapocho (así llamado por araucanos y conquistadores), viven y sufren un puñado de niños difíciles, duros, familiarizados con el frío, el hambre y la más perversa inocencia. (145)

The poet then celebrates the fact that the novel will be published for the first time in a language other than Spanish—“La misma lengua, la misma amarga verdad que nos hace sentir este horror de compartir desde entonces la conciencia de los destinos humillados y de la ignominia que ensucia las manos de América Latina” (146). As the prologue draws to its conclusion, Neruda ties those “destinos humillados” to the larger Cold War context of the novel’s translation: “En este continente, Chile y Cuba trabajan difícilmente, atacados por todos, para cambiar los hechos desmentidos por las realidades que de una manera desgarradora se encarga de denunciar el libro de Gómez Morel” (146). By doing so, Neruda implicitly relates the novel’s story of personal redemption to the larger revolutionary projects taking place in Chile and Cuba. At the same time, he lays blame for the oppression through which Gómez Morel has had to struggle squarely on the machinations of a capitalist system that depends on the existence of an underclass like the one to which the novelist belongs.

Concluding his prologue, Neruda echoes the combative tone of the final line of “Explicación perentoria”—“Ahora, firmes, que voy a disparar!”—with which he had succinctly summarized his understanding of the function of poetry in an anti-imperialist Cold War context. At the end of his prologue to *El río*, he offers a similarly aggressive warning to his readers: “¡Cuidado! Escuchen: aquí comienza la más amarga de las barcarolas. La canta para ustedes un

río amargo y un hombre que no ha sido vencido ni por el mal ni por el sufrimiento” (146). In light of his appeal to Cold War history and politics in the preceding paragraph, the prologue’s final line attests to the extra-literary value of Gómez Morel’s narrative of denunciation and redemption, which Neruda likens to the song of a Venetian gondolier. Such an association recalls that between poetry and the river in “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho” and in the “Los ríos del canto” section of *Canto General*.

Based on its linguistic and thematic convergences with “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” Neruda’s prologue to the 1974 French edition of Alfredo Gómez Morel’s *El río* lends a prophetic quality the 1938 poem. In doing so, the prologue retroactively reinforces Zambrano’s intuition from that year, cited in Chapter I, that, with “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” “una nueva era se abre en la poesía de Pablo Neruda.” Though the Spanish critic could not have known, the “nueva era” she sensed then turned out to be the rest of Neruda’s life.

If, for any reason, Neruda’s understanding of the function of literature at the end of his life remained vague before January 1973, the two prologues he wrote that month from Isla Negra make emphatically clear that he never wavered from the ideas he assumed during his transformation in the late 1930s, expressed most clearly in three texts he published on October 12th, 1938 in *Aurora de Chile*, including “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho.” His return at the end of his life to so many of the words, images, and themes that had informed his initial transformation lend a circular quality to his trajectory. That he would close this circle writing the prologue to the Parisian edition of a novel written by a man who, having overcome the tribulations of poverty, recognized the liberating potential of love, reveals how that circle was opened in the spring of 1937 when, from Paris, Neruda opened *Raíz del hombre*, the title of which functioned, in a revolutionary context, as a definition of that same liberating force, love.

CONCLUSION

Pregnant with allusions to important poetic influences, and recalling his own language in *Residencia en la tierra*, the eroticized imagery with which Pablo Neruda concludes “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” his first revolutionary poem set in a Latin American context, offers a fascinating prism through which to investigate the dynamics of his transformation as it was unfolding when the poem appeared in 1938. Following the speaker’s implorations of the Mapocho River, which functions as a metaphor for poetry, to rise up on behalf of Santiago’s impoverished inhabitants, the parting image of “la semilla del hombre” represents a nod to the hopeful visions of death as espoused by both Rilke and Quevedo. The Golden Age poet had elucidated the notion of “la agricultura de la muerte,” in which “semilla es nuestro cuerpo para la cosecha del postrero día.” And through such verses as “You are as poor as the strength of a seed,” Rilke had relied on the symbolism of the seed to perpetuate his theme of rejuvenation and redemption, particularly in relation to his poverty-stricken subjects.

Furthermore, through the morbidly erotic oxymoron “espuma negra,” a drop of which is to inseminate a blazing flower on the bank of the river, according to the speaker’s final command, Neruda inserts himself into the centuries-old polemic between Quevedo and Góngora to stake out a firm position in the contemporary debate in Hispanic letters during the 1930s regarding pure and impure poetry. In “Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” the poet comes out forcefully on the side of impure poetic engagement. His ability to recast such influences through a radically Americanist voice and in the shadow of the fascist threat attests to the dynamism of an evolution nurtured by both aesthetic preoccupations and historical urgency.

But it is a third and rather unlikely source of influence to which Neruda most importantly alludes through the imagery of “la semilla del hombre” and “espuma negra.” A year earlier, the

much younger Mexican poet Octavio Paz had incorporated Rilke and Quevedo's visions of death into his erotic poem *Raíz del hombre*, which he had sent to his idol Neruda and in which he exalts the revolutionary and transcendent power of love in a context of ruins. By subtly referring to Paz's title with "la semilla del hombre" while also echoing the Mexican poet's similar use of "negras espumas" in *Raíz del hombre*, Neruda acknowledges in a poem of utmost transformative value a certain debt to the example set by his counterpart of applying to a revolutionary context, and in a distinctly American voice, Rilke and Quevedo's themes of death and rebirth. In light of Paz's emergence as a strong poet at the same time that Neruda had consolidated a privileged position as a Latin American among Spanish language poets, such an acknowledgement also functions as an enigmatic expression of the precursor's "anxiety of influence" vis-à-vis his successor.

Neruda had translated Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* in 1926 while living the hardscrabble life of a young bohemian poet in Santiago, "reticente y solitario" and "ritualmente vestido de negro" (*Confieso que he vivido* 45, 46). As Schidlowsky notes, "la reflexión íntima, junto con el carácter analítico interior" of the novel's poet-protagonist, in addition to Rilke's "descripción de la gran ciudad, con sus momentos crueles y con la esperanza de superación [...] explica la atracción que esta novela ejerce en Neruda" (116). Then, as a key contributor to Republican Madrid's pre-Civil War vibrant cultural life, in 1935 he had edited a selection of Quevedo's prose and poetry. In an essay titled "Viaje al corazón de Quevedo" from several years later, he would write that, "considero [a Quevedo] como el más grande de los poetas espirituales de todos los tiempos" (*Viajes* 10). And in line with the call in his 1935 manifesto, "Sobre una poesía sin pureza," to reintroduce "una atmósfera humana" into a Spanish-language poetry he saw as too imbued with modernist escapism, he had peppered

Residencia en la tierra with the words “hombre” and “humano.” Furthermore, his insistence on the words “raíz,” “raíces,” and “profundo” throughout that text attest to an urge to reach beneath the surface to grasp meaning.

In light of these facts, it goes without saying that Paz did not introduce Neruda to Rilke or Quevedo, and he certainly was not responsible for the Chilean’s impulses to elevate man or descend into profundity in his poetic rendering of the material experience on earth. Furthermore, given the circumstances of Neruda’s return to Chile from Spain, where his politics and aesthetics were radicalized based on his encounter with history, a poetic pivot toward Latin American social concerns that incorporated the voices of his most important influences as well as elements of his own pre-political verse was likely inevitable, regardless of his reading of *Raíz del hombre*. Nevertheless, the purpose of my thesis has been to demonstrate, based on a speculative “Nerudian reading” of Paz’s revolutionary reformulations of Quevedo, Rilke, and Neruda’s own aesthetics, the presence of *Raíz del hombre* in such a crucial pivot. As I outline in the Introduction, my investigation departs from the gap in the Neruda-Paz scholarship whereby there exists no analysis of the Chilean’s 1937 reading of *Raíz del hombre*. The gap persists despite the fact that Neruda’s invitation to Paz to the Congress of Antifascist Writers, which resulted specifically from his having identified in the poem “un germen verdadero,” opened the gates to a three-decade exchange between two of twentieth-century Latin America’s most celebrated poets. Through my dissertation I have begun to close this gap with the hope of enriching critical understandings of a most important poetic dialogue.

As I suggest in my Chapter III discussion of Neruda’s meta-poetic commentaries in three poems in *Canto General*—“Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho,” “Los poetas celestes,” and “A Miguel Hernández, asesinado en los presidios de España”—a future project might investigate the

extent to which a critique of pure poetry and a defense of an engaged aesthetic underlie the Chilean's magnum opus. Such a study could add a valuable perspective to the vast criticism surrounding *Canto General*, while at the same time build on my argument here regarding the importance of "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho" in Neruda's evolution. Yet another ambitious study could compare *Canto General* and *El laberinto de la soledad*, both of which were initially published in Mexico City in 1950 and draw on similar themes in espousing divergent understandings of Latin American historical identity. In what ways did the dynamics of the poets' rupture inform these understandings? Or, is it possible to identify ways by which the early iterations of their exchange—Paz's engagement with *Residencia en la tierra* in *Raíz del hombre* and Neruda's with *Raíz del hombre* in "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho," for example—also contributed to the epic visions they express in their respective masterpieces? While Anthony Stanton calls for such a comparison at the end of his excellent article "Encuentros y desencuentros," which broadly outlines the poet's initial contact and subsequent rupture, I believe that the rigorous analysis I have offered in my dissertation can provide a solid and necessary springboard from which to initiate a project of that magnitude.

In this dissertation, I have attempted to grasp the roots of both Neruda and Paz's relationship and Neruda's transformation toward a poetics of radical Americanist commitment. In doing so, I have prioritized Neruda's reading of *Raíz del hombre* and his subsequent response to that text in his poem "Oda de invierno al Río Mapocho." As an exploration of roots, I hope that my study may also serve as a seed for future investigations that not only consider other ways that Neruda and Paz nurtured each other's trajectories, but that, in doing so, also transform our perceptions of the poets' work and legacies. For theirs is an exchange rich enough to merit continual and innovative studies.

APPENDIX

Translation of *Raíz del hombre*

Note

What follows represents my first serious attempt at poetic translation. Without any knowledge of or, at that point, sincere interest in the art of translation, I began this project for more practical reasons, and really out of necessity. As I arrived at the moment in my writing process at which I would have to systematically analyze *Raíz del hombre*, I experienced a realization that sent me into a brief panic about whether or not I was qualified to finish the dissertation: I did not understand Paz's poem well enough to write about it with an authoritative voice. After completing the translation over several weeks, however, I recognize now that I had been misguided in assuming I had to "understand" the poem. Rather, immersing myself in Paz's language—turning words over in my head, combing dictionary pages, trying to envision impossible images, confronting the poet's sometimes concise and sometimes verbose Spanish verses with what I often felt was an inadequate depository of English vocabulary and grammatical structures, etc.—I learned that in order to write convincingly about it, I had to *feel* the text. Thus, what began as a merely practical and quite difficult attempt to master the poem by transforming its language into my own turned into a highly rewarding and, for several reasons, eminently personal and even therapeutic exercise that also deepened my appreciation for Paz's youthful genius and poetic boldness.

I began work on the translation shortly after separating from my now ex-wife, who I had met and fallen in love with during my junior year abroad in Madrid at age twenty-one, the same age at which Paz began to write *Raíz del hombre* as a poetic chronicle of his own early love story with Elena Garro. Because my ex-partner is a *madrileña*, our courtship and early relationship

took place entirely within the flowery bounds of the Spanish language. Naturally, then, Paz's Spanish-language account of youthful passion triggered nostalgic memories of the student bedrooms, grassy parks, and lively terraces of that warm spring in Madrid twelve years ago. But even as such memories complicated my separation, my nights translating the bliss and the agony of Paz's text, slowly, Canto by Canto, like holding up a mirror to my younger self, allowed me to understand at a fundamental level that I was no longer that same young man. In this way I identified fraternally with Paz, who, when he divorced Garro years later, was similarly no longer the same young man who had fallen in love with her in the 1930s.

About halfway through my translation process, I experienced another form of profound loss when my 103 year-old grandfather passed away. Over the course of the previous several months, I had watched as he grew weak and his body prepared for the end, unable to overcome the sickness eating away inside him. At his funeral I looked unblinking and dumbstruck at the dead body of a man I had known to be a pillar of strength for all thirty-three years of my life. I projected my complicated feelings surrounding my grandfather's death onto the canvass of my translation. As I moved through the poem's juxtaposed language of darkness and blood and light and heartbeats, there was hope in the young Mexican poet's insistence that death could inspire a fuller life, *à la* Rilke and Quevedo.

Finally, early in the translation process—after my separation and before my grandpa's death—I moved up to my family's cabin in the mountains two hours east of Los Angeles, where I could breathe fresh air, clear my head, and finish my dissertation. On early morning walks next to the creek and late afternoon jogs under tall pine trees, or at night staring into a blazing wood-burning stove, I found myself paying attention, like never before, to the nature surrounding me. Without a doubt, Paz's youthful insight in *Raíz del hombre* taught me to appreciate the

connection between my own vitality and the natural energies that enveloped me. Dealing with the deaths of my marriage and my grandfather, while processing it all in the seclusion of the mountains, my translation of *Raíz del hombre* proved an excellent source of inspiration for pushing through this final stage of the doctorate. Most importantly, it sustained my faith in the power of love at a time when two important sources of love—my ex-wife and my grandfather—were suddenly no longer in my life.

As a leftist alarmed at the forces of authoritarianism consolidating power throughout the world today, I also developed a deep sense of solidarity with the young Paz through my work translating the exaltation of love he offered in *Raíz del hombre* under similarly precarious geopolitical conditions. Without being too reductive, I have an acute and gnawing feeling that history is repeating itself in a terrible way, and that in 2018, just like in the mid- to late-1930s, we are witnessing the gathering of a storm that is about to explode in unfathomable and deadly proportions. But the impending doom I intuit every day as I read the daily news—mostly about the current megalomaniacal United States administration and its discontents—also tells me that the type of unmitigated human communion upon which Paz insists in *Raíz del hombre* is more urgent than ever. Thus I feel that, by translating his elevation of love as the root of man, and making his language meaningful and current by transforming it under the shadow of a socio-political and historical context dominated by so much depravation, division, and hate, in some way I am channeling Paz's radical spirit of resistance.

It is with profound gratitude, respect, and humility toward Paz, then, that I end my dissertation with the following translation of *Raíz del hombre* as it appears in the poet's 1999 *Obras completas*.

Idyllwild, California, May 2018.

Root of Man
Octavio Paz
Translated by Daniel Cooper

Testimonies

The ruins of light and forms
glorify, Love, your dense shadow,
the shadow in which my heartbeats throng,
living tree amid bolts of lightning risen,
against the confused murmur of hers.

A god, Love, frantic and dark,
a living god, nameless and mute,
moves the sinister silence in songs,
my shattered tongue in shrieks,
the slow-moving universe in a flame
that, in its bosom of fire, conceals another,
insatiable, secret, fearful.

Through that flame nightingales moan,
children, shapes, whirlwinds of semen,
sobs and screams pierce the night
until they overrun the edges of the earth
in an exasperated flood of foam;

through that living flame the world dies
held up in amorous splendors
and the women run upon the earth,
crazed horses through dried-out ditches,
like black streams of heartbeats,
until their dreadful breath envelops
the immobile star of my flesh;

through that tepid flame blood swirls,
a storm bursts in my ears,
my scorched tongue falls silent,
we run across a bridge of heartbeats
until we touch death and the void;

through that secret flame I extinguish the world,
I lay waste to the living without loving her,
I recognize her shape amid the shadows
and I sink into her blood, forever.

I.

Here beyond the music and the dance,
here, in the stillness,
site of tense music,
under the great tree of my blood,
you lie resting. I am naked
and in my veins throbs a force,
daughter of stillness.

This is the most immobile sky,
and this is the purest nakedness.
You, motionless, under the great tree of my blood.

II.

What beautiful, green day,
quivering, luminous river,
runs beneath your feet,
surrounds you and illuminates you?

The month of June, my love,
the implacable and tender month of June,
transparent, shapeless,
enveloping in its light your head of hair,
the pure month of dazzling clouds,
foliage of invisible appearances.

What suns, clouds, hills,
diaphanous cliffs,
dizzying marriages in the sky!

The month of June, my love, snatches you away,
fences you in from heartbeats and lights,
from sonorous appearances
and figures sailing through the air.

III.

Burn all the voices
and scorch the lips;
and in the tallest flower
arrest the night.

No one knows your name anymore;
in your secret force

the golden wisdom of the star
and the suspended night combine,
immobile ocean.

My love, all is silent
beneath the burning voice of your name.
My love, all is silent. You, without a name,
in the night stripped of words.

IV.

This is your blood,
unfamiliar and deep,
which penetrates your body
and bathes blind shores
ignored by you.

Innocent, remote,
in its thick persistence, as it flows,
it halts the flow of my blood.

A tiny wound
and it encounters the light,
the air that ignores it, my glances.

This is your blood, and this
is the damp murmur that betrays it.

And the times amass,
and they return to the origin of days,
like your electric hair if it vibrates
the hidden root into which it plunges,
because life turns in that instant,
oh, cruel heartbeat, irreparable,
and time is a death of times,
and names and shapes are forgotten.

This is your blood, I say,
and the soul hangs in the void
over the living nothingness of your blood.

V.

Hours, naked hours.
What hand carves time,
dismembers my body, opens my veins

and lets my blood run
in a dark world
of heartbeats, lightning bolts, silence?

What earthly breath, what heartbeat,
does your living body create
and in my slow hands destroy?

Hours, naked hours.
You are naked, in my blood, in my roots,
deeper than my bones,
deeper than the flame of which they are born,
deeper than the blood that bathes them,
you are naked and silent.

Hours, naked hours.
What hand carves time,
dismembers my body, opens my veins
and lets my blood run
in black hours, in heavy waves?
What beautiful, mortal hand,
cuts the music of the world
and the stem of your voice, in which it blooms?

VI.

At the furthest limits of your flesh
your blood quietly discovers you;
invincible pulsing, dark waves,
they tie you to the death that levels us all,
to my mortal hand, to the motionless time
that fills our love and our oblivion.

In the air populated by blind wings,
of invisible birds or flames
that are born of your breath and die,
where your voice, your very name, where?,
where we, you, if in the music
we are only a little tenderness?

Love, love, what shadows oppress us!
What slow, indifferent winds devour us!
What fertile fires in the night
engulf us in omens and flames!
What silences surround us and destroy us!
What defeats, love, or what victories,

elevate us, bury us in their waves,
ocean of shadows and nothing!

VII.

Stretched out and destroyed,
to the right of my veins, mute;
upon mortal shores infinite;
immobile and serpentine.

I touch your hallucinatory skin,
the silent pores, panting,
the circular flow of your blood,
its repeated beats, green and warm.

First it is an awakened breath,
an obscure presence of pulses
that run across your skin, all lips,
blazing touch of caresses.

The arch of your brows forms a ring.
Oh, thirst, heartrending,
horror of wounded eyes
where my origin and my death I see,
grave eyes of a castaway
resigning myself to the foam,
to the white region of blackouts
in a voracious void
that submerges us in ourselves.

Hurled into white spirals
we reach our origin,
the vegetable calls us,
the stone remembers us
and the parched root
of the tree that grew from our dust.

I discern your face amid these shadows,
the terrible sob of your sex,
all of your births
and the death you carry hidden.
In your eyes wander children, shadows,
lightning bolts, my eyes, the void.

VIII.

Life hurls us
from that burning edge
where your lips lift their castaway goodbyes
and jubilation blends with death.

I recover a smile,
some absent eyes,
the dread of blood
in its dark origin,
the damp presence of your breath
that is born in your mouth
like an invisible sea.

Into what naked spheres are we born?
into what darkness or music?
through what silence do we blindly move?
Toward what such pure shadows do we ascend while falling?

Your face illuminates you, it discovers me.
My blood runs through you
and I grow in another way.
My love: we are reborn.

IX.

A luminous touch
grows from my eyes;
I explore surfaces,
captive of forms,
and appearances asleep in your breast.

By the still incline of your hair,
running between your shadows like a flame,
feel the skin, the feeling mouth, thirst,
I descend toward your blood.

From shapes I lower to your roots,
from proportions to nothingness.
From the light of burning petals
to the shadow that undoes the world.
Without a mask, desirous,
sunk in brilliant lights and laments,
I descend toward your blood.

I cast you in proportions, in measurements,
Your being chained to my gazes
by invisible bonds,
I prolong my heartbeats in yours,
I descend toward your blood.

Beside your blood I remain,
blind, silent, luminous,
touching mortal flesh
and obscure relations.

Shape of agony,
contained in substance and in flight,
in a frozen spasm and in heartbeats:
beside your blood I remain
like a scream at the entrance of death.

X.

There is no life or death,
only your presence,
flooding time,
destroying my being and its memory.

In love there are no forms
save your immobile name, like a star.
On its shores fright and thirst
sing of the invisible.

XI.

All the words die.
And the purest lips wither.
This flesh, this beloved life,
this tender blaze that engulfs you
and raises reddish jubilations on your burnt skin;
your neck, which, one day, oh sweet dying one,
will rest its arched grace on my peaceful shoulder.

I trembled as you passed.
In my blood bloomed a quiet exaltation,
and it was a stabbing joy in my skin,
wounded in the electric void that your body left.
You were like a song in whose waters
a castaway was always a sweet inevitable castaway.

We were going to recapture happiness,
a son kicked in your insides
and our love was like a short walk
under the tall trees that hold up the sky.

Flesh, beloved flesh, silent and resentful,
we were going to recapture tenderness,
but I only encountered biting lips,
the submissive hostility of a body consumed without joy.

Each time that I sink into you,
dark abyss, unhappy vertigo,
I sink into a cruel atmosphere of echoes,
into a long, desperate absence.

Where is the music, the dance,
the carelessness of curls exposed to the wind?
Could it be this, friends,
the promised love?

If only you were lain waste to, destroyed.
That there remained of you no more than your fire.
If you were no more than a little bit of happy ash,
a desperate song in my hands.
If you sobbed.

Flesh, tear, lips,
beneath the infertile night my bitterness touches you all.
This touch and this silence,
touch and silence made squalid by rage,
are not mine.
This sad disorder is not mine, Life.

XII.

Hardly born you are dead,
you emerge from the shores of myself,
grave, like a promise
tied to the most unknown destiny.

Voices that cling to your memory may be my voices.
Jubilation of God was your body.
The burnt hair of your flesh was like fire,
and your words,
like gusts below the tense sky,
were the faraway and tender voice of the rain

Where did it end up, clarity of the air,
the residue of your voice?
Where, the outburst of your hair?
My love, and you, where? Your lips, where?

These clouds and this sky
in vain your praises will wait,
and in vain the words, never said,
the kiss of your young lips.
The pleasant breeze will never knot your hair
in a tender, vegetable caress.
That wish to cut flowers
will have remained without memory of flowers,
and the peaches without having met your teeth,
your white teeth.

Voices that cling to your memory may be my voices.
And nevertheless I know well that tears
impede the beautiful words;
which the voices of the poem bleed
as in the sky the voices of an archangel bleed;
Let the silence, let the pain, cover me, bury me,
and in my sterile lips your name stands still.

XIII.

Nights of parched voice and cruel panting,
nights of solitude, beside your name,
nights infertile and bitter
like my infertile tear.

Beloved and earthly somber blood,
deaf quiet blood,
motionless in the respite of my blood!

And your name burns between my lips
and my lips scorch its syllables.
In the dance of flames of the dance
your youth burns naked graces;
my thirst, your nakedness, the world burn;
my heart, my bones, my ash burn.

And you refresh my thirst with another, yours,
without your cruel spring ever satiating me;
and the lips, the kiss, the promise,
only burn my name, your name, our name.

And everything, my silence and my words,
thought and oblivion,
the youngest gifts of the earth,
the insomnia, whose mercury hours
alone fill, fanatically,
the memory that sculpts
the marble of your voices,
everything, like my blood, remains
in the fury and the thirst
of your name on my lips.

XIV.

But despite everything it is certain.
Yes, all of this is true.
Those lips and that mouth exist,
that hidden blood animates, lives,
that tender torment of your hair
and that fuzz that clouds in smoke and gold
the skin that betrays still veins.

All of this is certain.
So are solitude and weeping,
the disorder of the world and sadness.
They exist in the soul,
they devour me from the inside, without words.
For this exists an invisible tear,
suffocated, irrevocable, tense,
a blessed tear full of love.

It is certain that I love you
and that there were lips, kisses and promises,
and that your breath, here, in your chest,
like a warm shadow gave birth to me.
All of this is certain.

XV.

Under the naked and clear Love that dances
there exists another black love, silent and tense,
love of a hidden wound.
Words do not arrive
to its unspeakable abyss,
dark Love motionless and terrible.

Under this Love of wounded solitude

there are fingernails, teeth, claws,
a blind love of rage,
dismal whirlwind
where your name in blood devastates me.

Under this Love of savage agonies
there is an unmoving thirst,
a river in mourning,
appearance of death,
where oblivion sings our death.

Under this death, blessed and mute Love,
there are no veins, skin or blood,
only lone death;
raging silences,
eternal, confused,
interminable Love gushing death.

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