

Text, Figure, Monogram: The Embodiment of the I in the Essayistic *écriture* at Octavio Paz's *El mono gramático*

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This article traces the characteristics of the “essayistic” as a genuine mode of writing in Modernity, using Octavio Paz’s El mono gramático as an example. This work is regarded as one of the most complex by the 1990 Mexican Nobel Prize laureate and resists classification. It stages ambivalent and unstable figures of ‘the essayistic’, describing intents of shaping in general, and giving an aesthetic form to the writing subject in particular. The hope for a consistent self-formation is driven by a deep metaphysical ideal, which, however, is repeatedly shattered. In the figure of the Hindu Monkey God Hanumān, the monkey grammarian, Octavio Paz walks the fine line of a “writing of oneself” between a figurative and integral embodiment of the self and a disintegrating analytic discursivity. The “essayistic” unfolds in an ethos and aesthetics of endeavor which forces the subject to compromise, leaving it as an unmet aspiration, forever fractured and incomplete. It realizes itself processually as ascesis in intransitive writing and describes a self-critical and performative textual practice.

Keywords: Mexican literature / Paz, Octavio / literary genres / essay / essayistic writing / ascesis / monogram

As the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature of the year 1990, the Mexican poet and diplomat Octavio Paz is certainly known to the wider public. His work *El mono gramático*, however, seems to be rather unfamiliar beyond Hispanicist circles, despite being considered Paz’s work with the highest intellectual density (Gómez Arciénaga 154). Though written in Cambridge in 1970 in Spanish, the text was first published in 1972 in French language by Geneva’s art publisher Skira. The text itself shifts back and forth between prose and poetry, addressing the

search for a divine primaeval language; a paradisiac state of transparency, when the sign still referred directly to the things of the universe, speech provided absolute knowledge, and the speaker was in harmony with his *I*, language, and world. This, in Octavio Paz's perception, means nothing less than a vision of poetry itself. It is not quite possible to assign a specific genre to the text, since it ranges between Far Eastern meditation, study on philosophy of language, and autobiographic pilgrim- or travel literature. It traces an associative array of verbal images, as well as reflections and parentheses in which the author interrupts, comments on and corrects himself. Of equal importance to the linguistic signs, however, appear to be inserted images, photographs and replicas of paintings, showing abstract pieces of art and religious sculptures.

Despite the difficulty to define any exact content, it is possible to specify a vague narrative frame: an autobiographical Octavio Paz sits in his room in Cambridge by dawn and remembers a historically documented excursion to Galta, on which he went together with his second wife Marie José and his good friend, the photographer Eusebio Rojas. Galta is a temple and palace complex, which is situated near the city of Jaipur in northern India and accommodates the main sanctuary for the monkey-shaped Hindu (semi)god Hanumān. The god is envisaged as a superhero against the legions of the demon king Rāvana, but also as a poet, savant, advisor, and companion of the highest deity, Rāma. Paz is on a dusty road towards Galta, which metaphorically stands for poetry itself. The poet thus takes the road to poetry. His destination, however, seems to blur like a mirage and disintegrates into an array of images and free associations, remaining oddly ungraspable. The heat of the afternoon shimmers in a *mélange* of different odors: fire, incense, a rotting carcass at the wayside. The smell is blended with the voices of the pilgrims who that very day celebrate the solemnity of Hanumān. They sing, chant, and purl incomprehensible litanies. Paz now walks through the gate and roams the complex. The decaying architecture adopts the exuberant forms of a lush jungle. The facades are inhabited by stony chimeras and fabulous creatures, merging with the scrollwork and liana-like columns. All seems to be intertwined like flourishing ornate letters on a book page. But all is crumbling down, high and low; the linguistic architecture is decomposing. In between the pariahs are dwelling, with loamy faces: figures of clay coalesced with the dry soil. The ruins are inhabited as well by ascetic wanderers, the Sādhus, and monkeys. They gaze at Paz with their animal faces, with both curiosity and indifference. With a long stick, Paz pushes his way through the hordes.

One of the key metaphors of the text, which appears time and again, is to write as to walk: to pace, set step after step, letters and words one after another. Paz, however, does not arrive anywhere, and does not manage to establish a final meaning of his writing: instead, he loses himself treading devious paths, going astray. Poetry, the visionary language, remains a chimera itself. And so, Paz writes pondering:

As I began these pages, I decided to follow literally the metaphor of the title of the collection that they were intended for, the Paths of Creation, and to write, to describe a text that was really a path and that could be read and followed as such. As I wrote, the path to Galta grew blurred or else I lost my bearings and went astray in the trackless wilds. Again and again, I was obliged to return to the starting point. Instead of advancing, the text circled about itself. (Paz, *The Monkey* 157)¹

As the objective keeps eluding, the text withholds any external reference. On the contrary, it appears that writing obtains its meaning through the oblivion of meaning:

The best thing to do will be to choose the path to Galta, traverse it again (invent it as I traverse it), and without realizing it, almost imperceptibly, go to the end—without being concerned about what “going to the end” means or what I meant when I wrote that phrase. ... I wasn’t asking myself questions: I was walking, merely walking, with no fixed itinerary in mind. I was simply setting forth to meet ... what? I didn’t know at the time and I still don’t know. Perhaps that is why I wrote “going to the end”: in order to find out, in order to discover what there is after the end. A verbal trap; after the end there is nothing, since if there were something, the end would not be the end. Nonetheless, we are always setting forth to meet ... But the end is the refutation and the condemnation of the path: at the end the path dissolves, the meeting fades away to nothingness. And the end—it too fades away to nothingness. (Paz, *The Monkey* 1f.)²

¹ “Al comenzar estas páginas decidí seguir literalmente la metáfora del título de la colección a que están destinadas, *Los Caminos de la Creación*, y escribir, trazar un texto que fuese efectivamente un camino y que pudiese ser leído, recorrido como tal. A medida que escribía, el camino de Galta se borraba o yo me desviaba y perdía en sus vericuetos. Una y otra vez tenía que volver al punto del comienzo. En lugar de avanzar, el texto giraba sobre sí mismo.” (Paz, *El mono* 137f.)

² “Lo mejor será escoger el camino de Galta, recorrerlo de nuevo (inventarlo a medida que lo recorro) y sin darme cuenta, casi insensiblemente, ir hasta el fin—sin preocuparme por saber qué quiere decir “ir hasta el fin” ni qué es lo que yo he querido decir al escribir esta frase. ... No me hacía preguntas: caminaba, nada más caminaba, sin rumbo fijo. Iba al encuentro... ¿de qué iba al encuentro? Entonces no lo sabía y no lo sé ahora. Tal vez por eso escribí “ir hasta el fin”: para saberlo, para saber qué hay

Although the wanderer of the jungle of signs loses his way, he needs to predetermine an aim, because journey and target mutually depend on one another. The path of prose, sinuous and tedious, as well as the relieving and spontaneous vision of poetry; the analytical discursiveness as well as the instantaneous epiphany of a metaphysical wholeness, the human as well as the divine grammar. Analytical, disintegrating text and integrating figure, both are part of the production of language and meaning, symbolized at Paz by the geometric shapes of line and circle. Paz unites them in an erotic sense into another, deeply paradoxical symbol: the monogram, the *mono gramático*, the monkey grammarian Hanumān.

Hanumān: a monkey/a *gramma* of language, of its dynamism and its endless production of phonetic and semantic creations. An ideogram of the poet, the master/servant of universal metamorphosis: an imitative simian, an artist of repetitions, he is the Aristotelian animal that copies from nature but at the same time he is the semantic seed, the bomb-seed that is buried in the verbal subsoil and that will never turn into the plant that its sower anticipates, but into another, one forever different. The sexual fruits and the carnivorous flowers of otherness sprout from the single stem of identity. (Paz, *The Monkey* 131)³

The text *El mono gramático* itself is a monogram: a figure, composed of letters which refer to nothing else than themselves. A monogram means just itself: identity. A token for an absolute transparency of language and thus, a symbol of the vision of poetry understood as reconciliation of name and object, representation and reality, sign and Being.

Paz stages two possible perspectives on language: on the one hand, the metaphorical, subjected to the law of *displacement* and Derridean *différance*, and the symbolic on the other. Both elements, however, do not melt, but remain rather in suspenseful conflict. This conflict, genuine expression of Modernity finds its form in the essayistic utterance.

detrás del fin. Una trampa verbal; después del fin no hay nada pues si algo hubiese, no sería fin. Y, no obstante, siempre caminamos al encuentro de ... Pero el fin es la refutación y la condenación del camino: al fin el camino se disuelve, el encuentro se disipa. Y el fin—también se disipa.” (Paz, *El mono* 11f.)

³ “Hanumān: mono/grama del lenguaje, de su dinamismo y de su incesante producción de invenciones fonéticas y semánticas. Ideograma del poeta, señor/servidor de la metamorfosis universal: simio imitador, artista de las repeticiones, es el animal aristotélico que copia del natural pero asimismo es la semilla semántica, la semilla-bomba enterrada en el subsuelo verbal y que nunca se convertirá en la planta que espera su sembrador, sino en la otra, siempre otra. Los frutos sexuales y las flores carnívoras de la alteridad brotan del tallo único de la identidad.” (Paz, *El mono* 113)

The essayistic mode yields imagery of ambivalence and difficult compromise and some of it can be studied in Octavio Paz's metareflection on essayistic writing: *El mono gramático*.

What I consider to be essayistic is, thus, a paradox: a way undertaken and full of detours, of skepticism, of distrust and reservation about any discourse of truth, led, however, by a deep impetus and the longing for an integrated understanding of the world as an entirety, and for reflecting and locating oneself in the world. Michel de Montaigne stated his famous question: "Que sçay-je?" "What do I know and what am I able to know?" Proceeding from this question, "the essayistic" strives for an expression of totality, and for a wholeness in self-experience.

As Jacques Derrida said in an interview with Derek Attridge in Laguna Beach 1989, the impulse for his writing came from a desire for expressing simply *everything*, a desire for confidences or confessions: "What I should be tempted to denounce as a lure—i.e., totalization or gathering up—isn't this what keeps me going? The idea of an internal polylogue [...] was first of all the adolescent dream of keeping a trace of all the voices which were traversing me ..." (Derrida and Attridge 34). This polyphonic symphony or preposterous synaesthetic glossolalia is what Octavio Paz experiences on his way to Galta, the way to poetry and to himself: a cacophonous rather than symphonic mélange of chants, prayers, scents, colors, forms, and monkey bellows. It is the genuine essayistic mode of writing, which is practiced by Paz, essaying to register and put into order all the polylogue roaming the inner self—in order to perceive oneself, the *I*, as a coherent and conclusive shape or *Gestalt*. However, as Derrida argues, our discursive means are never sufficient for such a project and so this object is always unmet. Only the yearning for wholeness, totality, and for the not *yet* said remains. It is the desire for the missing absolute aesthetic sensation, which can be translated in geometrical symbolism as the *roundness* of a replete form. Yet, this *roundness* is unachievable by lining up letters and following the road of writing.

Intransitive writing

"Galta is not here: it is awaiting me at the end of this phrase." (Paz, *The Monkey* 11) The end of the sentence does not occur, the satisfaction in meaning is not granted but remains an empty space. And so, the spiritual Galta can only be experienced as wreckage and ruins—intuitions of splendor in a mayhem of tortuous figures, colors, noises, reminiscence

and traces. Paz draws a crushed aesthetics—or an aesthetics of the ever crushed, fractional and broken. Now, this experience could very well lead to the abandonment of writing. But instead Paz keeps on writing: “Nonetheless, we are always setting forth to meet . . ., even if we know that there is nothing, or no one, awaiting us.” (Paz, *The Monkey 2*) The objective of reaching an absolute transcendence and the sensation of unity with oneself would imply death and would put an end to human communication which can only continue following the idea of not having said it all, of not having yet hit home: “But the end is the refutation and the condemnation of the path.” (2) And so, the only meaning Paz’s text develops is, strictly speaking, the monogram; the text refers only to itself, to the path, the search for meaning, to Paz’s writing of the text.

With Roland Barthes we could regard this mode of writing as intransitive (*écrire, verbe intransitif*), that is, writing not yet *about*, but writing in itself. This form of *écriture* which Barthes considers the modern writing par excellence, affects the writer himself. Hayden White, following Barthes refers to it as a “writing in the middle voice” (cf. White): Barthes is pointing towards diathesis or grammatical voice which in Greek grammar includes, besides active and passive, a “middle voice.” It indicates that the subject is affected by his action and denotes thus an inner participation or involvement of the subject: “To write is today to make oneself the center of the action of speech, it is to effect writing by affecting oneself, to make action and affection coincide, to leave the *scriptor* inside the writing—not as a psychological subject [...] but as agent of the action.” (Barthes, “To Write” 18) Regarding the context of a self-referential *écriture*, this means that a subject does not yet write *about itself*, but it simply writes *itself*. This constitutes a performative act: the writer does not live but in and through the act of writing. Writing is considered a performative act of self-authoring. In Michel Foucault words, it is “etho-poetic,” that means, it enables individuals “to question their own conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape themselves as ethical subjects.” (Foucault 13) This is reflected in Paz’s *mono gramático*. The search for the vision of poetry, for an absolute meaning and the road of the *I* towards an inner self is the road itself, the quest itself. To write oneself is to be in pursuit of an objective and going intentionally astray—a main characteristics of “the essayistic.”

At this point it may be fruitful to turn to Michel Foucault, who in his *History of Sexuality* traces the tradition of writing oneself back to late antiquity. Foucault refers to it as the culture of oneself, of caring for oneself. This *souci de soi* has to be thought of as a practice of generally turning towards oneself—an ascesis. Ascesis has the meaning

of practicing several techniques which are supposed to contribute to transformation and reshaping. By means of these self-practices (*pratiques de soi même*), the subject is supposed to act upon itself and create the ethical being as an aesthetic existence. Thus, it is about an aesthetic self-formation by means of control, exercise, and effort for and towards oneself. These measures aim to enable the subject to not merely absorb all surroundings without control and distinction, but rather to appropriate it by bringing it into harmony with one's substance (Foucault 25–32). Following the stoic idea of freedom, the ideal consists of not surrendering oneself to external control. Being familiar with oneself, again, means to be free from external affects, to keep one's independence and thus to substantiate the ethic-aesthetic materialization of one's existence and fate.

In “the essayistic,” and this may count for all modern moralist literature, the objective of “being oneself” is deeply questionable. Any close look at this being oneself reveals the polylogue and the unfamiliar as one's inherent substance: the amorphous, protean and monstrous *I*, which is never itself. “The essayistic” clings to formlessness; not only does its text structure consist of heterogeneous figures of anecdotes, quotes and other fragments, but also does the writer in search of himself find nothing but the recognition of his own deeply disjointed texture. This recognition feeds both: disenchantment and fascination. Hope for metaphysical wholeness and appetite for its deconstruction. Between these extremely contradictory positions, the subject can just consistently reconceptualize and rewrite itself as a makeshift.

The topos of writing oneself at first appears apparent in *El mono gramático*: after having written all night, the poet moves from his place behind the window in his Cambridge room. He has created a body of signs which he imagines to be the body of his lover: Splendor, his text, with whom he copulates: “The body of Splendor as it divides, disperses, dissipates itself in my body as it divides, disperses, dissipates itself in the body of Splendor.” (Paz, *The Monkey* 160)⁴ Paz has interwoven himself through a “poetic performativity” into his text and coalesced beyond recognition. Paz's writing, thus, is *hyphologie* in the meaning Roland Barthes gives the term:

Text means Tissue; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the

⁴ “El cuerpo de Esplendor al repartirse, dispersarse, disiparse en mi cuerpo al repartirse, dispersarse, disiparse en el cuerpo de Esplendor.” (Paz, *El mono* 139)

text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue-this texture-the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as an hyphology (*hyphos* is the tissue and the spider's web). (Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text* 64)

The tentatively onward movement of the text is as well search for the aesthetic embodiment of the *I* as Hanumān and the ideograph of the poet. It is no coincidence that in India the monkey is associated with poetry that literally becomes corporeal, fleshly. It is an incarnation of art in the sense of a bridge between poetic language and its physical expression (Dunsmoor 91). And so, the path to Galta is a path as an incarnation, the becoming of an aesthetic body: "The path is writing and writing is a body and a body is bodies." (Paz, *The Monkey* 142)

Full integration, however, fails. The *écriture* of oneself turns into an unwieldy jungle instead of becoming an orderly structure of properly placed horizontal lines. The lines and letters become lianas and vines, similar to the grotesque figures on the temple facades. The different parts of the text-body won't integrate—or will do so only very fleetingly to form a shapely body who disintegrates again immediately into fetishized pieces taking part in a sexual act.

[...] the body is always somewhere beyond the body. On touching it, it divides itself (like a text) into portions that are momentary sensations: a sensation that is a perception of a thigh, an earlobe, a nipple, a fingernail, a warm patch of groin, the hollow in the throat like the beginning of a twilight. The body that we embrace is a river of metamorphoses, a continual division, a flowing of visions, a quartered body whose pieces scatter, disperse, come back together again with the intensity of a flash of lightning hurtling toward a white black white fixity. (Paz, *The Monkey* 142)⁵

The architecture of the temples and palaces, too, reflects the dream of the body of identity turned into stone; the dream of perseverance and persistence, whose contours become blurred. The architecture of language turns out to be constructions of the *Imaginary*.

⁵ „[...] el cuerpo es siempre un más allá del cuerpo. Al palparlo, se reparte (como un texto) en porciones que son sensaciones instantáneas: sensación que es percepción de un muslo, un lóbulo, un pezón, una uña, un pedazo caliente de la ingle, la nuca como el comienzo de un crepúsculo. El cuerpo que abrazamos es un río de metamorfosis, una continua división, un fluir de visiones, cuerpo descuartizado cuyos pedazos se esparcen, se diseminan, se congregan en una intensidad de relámpago que se precipita hacia una fijeza blanca, negra, blanca.” (Paz, *El mono* 125)

[...] an architecture contaminated by delirium, stones corroded by desire, sexual stalactites of death. Lacking power and above all time ... [the princes of Rajasthan] erected edifices that were not intended to last but to dazzle and fascinate. Illusionist castles that instead of vanishing in this air rest on water: architecture transformed into a mere geometric pattern of reflections floating on the surface of a pool, dissipated by the slightest breath of air. (Paz, *The Monkey* 105)⁶

Ascesis and text practice

Octavio Paz interprets the effort for himself, the essay of coming to himself as an intention of coming to his own language; a language he really owns and controls. This intention is ascesis, spiritual exercise in language. The exuberant erotic copulation of the signs leads to chaos, destruction of sense. He who does not restrain the pleasure of language is going to be dominated by language. For Paz, to be in possession of oneself, however, is to possess one's own language, to appropriate it truly. However, the intention fails again. The human being remains in this most precarious state: not only does he dominate language, but is in turn dominated by it. He remains *sub-iectum* to a language unfamiliar and incomprehensible, running the risk of being pulverised and torn away due to its movements of *displacement*. And so, Paz discovers on a half-blurred mural painting in the Galta palace the *genotext* or uncontrollable primordial basis of language: sheer monstrosity because there is no form to enforce upon it: "fairytale mountains where wild beasts, anchorites, and marvels abound, in front of them there rises and falls, swells with pride and humbles itself, a mountain that creates and destroys itself, a sea shaken with violent spasms, impotent and boiling with monsters and abominations ..." (Paz, *The Monkey* 32)⁷

What Paz describes as a violent sea full of monsters corresponds to what Julia Kristeva refers to as "semiotic *chora*." This is the rhythmic and tonal dimension within the signifying process; the prosody of language and its physical, sensual and erotic implications that subliminally

⁶ "[...] arquitectura contaminada por el delirio, piedras corroídas por el deseo, estalactitas sexuales de la muerte. Faltos de poder y sobre todo de tiempo ... los príncipes de Rajasthan levantaron edificios que no estaban hechos para durar sino para deslumbrar y fascinar. Ilusionismo de castillos que en lugar de disiparse en el aire se asentaban en el agua: la arquitectura convertida en una geometría de reflejos flotando sobre un estanque y que el menor soplo del aire disipa." (Paz, *El mono* 95)

⁷ "montañas de cuento, ricas en fieras, ascetas y prodigios, frente a ellas cae y se levanta, se yergue y se humilla, montaña que se hace y deshace, un mar convulso, impotente e hirviente de monstruos y abominaciones ..." (Paz, *El mono* 36)

shape the trajectories of meaning. Kristeva distinguishes the “symbolic” and the “semiotic” as two modalities of the process of meaning-making that are intertwined. Thereby the “symbolic” means the subject as well as the fixed sense and denotative function of language. The “semiotic” with its kinetic drive-energy undermines all settings. Both modalities take part in a “subject process” in which the “symbolic” relies on the punctual but unstable positing of ego through the interventions of the “semiotic.” It is precisely the connection of subject- and language process that provides valuable insights to an analysis of the “essayistic.” What Kristeva wants to stress is, that there is no such unitary subjectivity independent from contradictory drives, which in turn are not separable from linguistic experience situated even before the establishing of concepts and meaning. There is no other possibility to form the subject than in an agonistic rhythm of trial and rejection. The essayistic shapes the writing subject in a way Kristeva describes the signifying practice of text, or “text-practice”: “The text is able to explore the mechanism in its heterogeneity because it is a practice which pulverizes unity, making it a process that posits and displaces thesis.” (Kristeva 208) Equally the text-subject is in an ongoing process of remodeling through the modalities of language: “This subject moves through the linguistic network and uses it to indicate [...] that the linguistic network does not represent something real posited in advance and forever detached from instinctual process but rather that it experiments with or practices the objective process by submerging in it and emerging from it through the drives.” (126)

The writing subject Octavio Paz finds and loses himself in the linguistic texture of the monkey grammarian revealing the semiotic motility which it constitutes and thus, takes a look beyond representation. As Kristeva substantiates the subject has to carry out the practice in order to understand it by giving up any meta-position. This includes the “destruction of sign and representation, and hence of narrative and metalanguage.” (Kristeva 103) In accordance with the specifications Kristeva gives of text-practice, Octavio Paz cannot relate autobiographically anymore but is scattered by text. However, the ruins of the subject provide an unstable home: “You are is I am; I am is you are: you are is I. Demolitions: I stretch out full length atop my triturations, I inhabit my demolitions.” (Paz, *The Monkey* 37)⁸

In *El mono gramático*, Paz does not gain full command of his language and remains subject to this linguistic drive-energy which is the

⁸ “Es eres soy: soy es eres: eres es soy. Demoliciones: me tiendo sobre mis triturationes, yo habito mis demoliciones.” (Paz, *El mono* 40)

“semiotic chora.” Instead, he focuses on the intent, the struggle for the ability to speak and to obtain meaning from speaking—the struggle for being the author of himself. Two perspectives on language emerge from it. On the one hand, the perspective of the figure as a scene where transcendence takes place. On the other hand, the perspective of text: the arena of tissue and textures, of interweaving, of displacement and alterity, and the site of iteration of labyrinthian references—*différance* and *iterabilité*.

These two perspectives cannot be separated from one another as they are closely intertwined. That way, the referentiality of language appears always unsound, and meaning is always transient and provisional. Man who wants to grasp meaning by means of language becomes entangled in a jungle of signs. The prefigured, imaginary object crumbles away as it is on the tip of the tongue. “Plethora becomes hecatomb: signs devour signs. The thicket is reduced to a desert, the babble to silence. Decayed alphabets, burned writings, verbal debris. Ashes.” (Paz, *The Monkey* 35)

The principle of *displacement* erodes and caves meaning as equally the absolute meaning of the monogram. So the abundance of meaning is in constant danger of turning into its opposite: hollowness, absurdity, wordlessness, and silence. However, this silence allows for new possibilities and new intents of establishing meaning: “Ashes. Inchoate languages, larvae, fetuses, abortions. A thicket.” (35)⁹

The monogram oscillates between these two perspectives. It is true transcendence of meaning, but equally *imago*, illusion: a figure of the ephemeral human construction of meaning. The monogram, as the book *El mono gramático*, is for Paz a symbol of ambivalent modern critique of language. Language, on the one hand, provides integrated and meaningful figures, but on the other hand, it is soaked with the textual component which fails meaning. Language is a scene where transcendence can occur, but it is also soiled with historic discursivity. However, the most historic, the most discursive language still refers to inner figurativeness and to all-encompassing images. This startling experience is what we receive from the reading of the *mono gramático*. Every intent of metaphysical thinking is subject to skepticism, yet at the same time, every form of criticism and self-criticism is steeped in a metaphysical ideal.

⁹ “Los signos se comen a los signos. Maleza se convierte en desierto, algarabía en silencio: arenas de letras. Alfabetos podridos, escrituras quemadas, detritos verbales. Cenizas. Idiomas nacies, larvas, fetos, abortos. Maleza.” (Paz, *El mono* 39)

In this ambivalence, Paz's monogram remains broken in itself, unstable and oddly hollow. The monogram seems to be just an empty space: dwelling for monstrosities as of benedictory gods. Thus, the image of the monkey grammarian is equally ambivalent: not only is he a holy animal, poet, eroticised body, master of the Vedic rhymes, but also Darwinian anthropoid ape: profane animal without language, which masturbates senselessly, scratches its rear and answers the idea of a divine language by wild bellows and shrieks.

Hanumān is merely human, but also a divine creator; and Galta, ideational scene of transcendence, remains in an uncertain status between the two poles: either to be overgrown by a jungle of vivid signs ultimately incomprehensible to human beings or to be absorbed by a desert of a dried-out object- and communication language. The modern poet is torn between these poles. He has to find difficult and fragile compromises between a wild glossolalia of a monstrous language, and silence. Paz traces one of these compromises in *El mono gramático*, following the line from the preface to his volume of poetry *Libertad bajo palabra*: "Contra el silencio y el bullicio invento la Palabra."¹⁰

Between poetic vision and prosaic chatter lies the deliberate, well-chosen word as a bridge and delicate compromise. The experience of transcendence either won't occur or only very fleetingly. The very frustration of the intent, however, is vital. Knowing that every attempt is going to fail leads by no means to despair, but originates an ethics and aesthetics of essay: to a resilient individual trained on dealing with risky makeshifts impossible to ensconce in. Paz's poetics is therefore one of failure, revision and new beginning; of running in circles or, as Heidegger states it, of *Kreisgang* which he describes as "Fest des Denkens"—feast of thinking (Heidegger 3).

To the critical mind of modernity, circuiting routes and returns are more important than road and destination. Continual reflection and going astray provides not only the possibility of contemplating the contingency of reality and the incommensurability of language, but also sets the scene for making the truthful experience of failure and, more importantly, of relating oneself to it and of reflecting oneself within this experience. The intent of experiencing transcendence through linguistic construction is an indispensable detour, because only the experience of seeing it frustrated allows for a critical writing which integrates visionary sensation and a reflective approach. As Paz writes in *El mono gramático*: "Each attempt I make ends up the same way: ... We proceed

¹⁰ Transl.: "Against the silence and uproar I invent the Word."

from a search for meaning to its destruction in order that a reality may appear, a reality which in turn disappears.” (Paz, *The Monkey* 134)¹¹

On the road towards transcendence Paz’s suspenseful essayistic word models and shapes itself as a compromise, very aware, however, of the impossibility of finally resolving the conflict between poetry and prose, literature and critique, literary form and monstrosity, between human and divine expression.

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¹¹ “Cada tentativa termina en lo mismo: ... Vamos de la búsqueda del sentido a su abolición para que surja una realidad que, a su vez, se disipa.” (Paz, *El mono* 117)

Besedilo, figura, monogram: Utelešenje Jaza v esejistični pisavi Octavia Paza in njegovem *El mono gramático*

Ključne besede: mehiška književnost / Paz, Octavio / literarne zvrsti / esej / esejističnost / askeza / monogram

S sklicevanjem na *El mono gramático* Octavia Paza, ki velja za eno najkompleksnejših del tega mehiškega Nobelovega nagrajenca iz leta 1990, načrtamo značilnosti »esejističnega« kot pristnega modernističnega načina pisanja. S tem ko uprizarja ambivalentne in nestabilne figure »esejističnega«, se delo izmika klasifikaciji ter na splošno opisuje namene oblikovanja, prav posebej pa daje estetsko obliko subjektu pisanja. Upanje na dosledno samooblikovanje pogajanja poglobljen metafizični ideal, ki pa se znova in znova razblinja. Prek lika hindujskega opičjega boga Hanumāna, opičjega slovničarja, se Octavio Paz sprehaja po tanki meji »pisanja samega sebe« med slikovnim in integralnim utelešenjem jaza ter razpadajočo analitično diskurzivnostjo. »Esejistično« se razkrije v etosu in estetiki prizadevanja, ki subjekt prisili h kompromisu, a ki zastane v neizpolnjenem stremljenju, za vedno uničeno in nepopolno. Procesualno se realizira kot askeza v intranzitivnem pisanju in opisuje samokritično in performativno besedilno prakso.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article

UDK 821.134.2(720).09-4Paz O.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3986/pkn.v46.i2.01>