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## Reading Sunstone

Wyatt Reu  
*Bard College*

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Reading Sunstone

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
Wyatt Reu

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Introduction: Reading the Sun Stone

This project, if it is nothing else, is the testimony of reading a poem. That poem is called, in English translation, *Sunstone*. In Spanish: *Piedra de sol*, a name it almost shares with the famous Aztec Sun Stone, also known as the Calendar Stone, called “Piedra del sol.” The poem was published in Mexico City in 1957 by the Mexican poet, essayist, editor, and diplomat, Octavio Paz. It is commonly said that Octavio Paz was one of the most important Latin American writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, certainly of his native Mexico. Take out ‘Latin American,’ which is somewhat belittling anyway, and you have an accurate estimation of the poet. The Nobel Prize Committee which awarded Paz the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990 commended him for, “impassioned writing with wide horizons, characterized by sensuous intelligence and humanistic integrity.” Paz transformed the landscape of Mexican poetry and his essays and poems were a major contribution to world literature. *Sunstone*, the subject of these essays, is a poem as profound and spiritually important as any of the great Modernist long poems – *The Wasteland* or *The Cantos* or his one-time friend Neruda’s *Heights of Macchu Picchu*. Its recognition as such is long overdue, and I hope only that my essays provide some sense of its incredible value.

Paz was a prolific and wide-ranging author: he wrote volumes of penetrating essays on topics as diverse as literature, art, politics, history, culture, and religion; he published around twenty books of poetry which served not just as a record of transformation of his own spiritual and philosophical life, but that of his age; he was an astute translator bringing authors as diverse as Arthur Rimbaud and Ezra Pound into Spanish; he was a founding editor of the influential reviews ‘Plural’ and ‘Vuelta’; and he

was the Mexican ambassador to India from 1962 to 1968 in which year he resigned in protest over the Mexican government's culpability in the Tlatelolco Massacre.

*Sunstone* was published in 1957 when the poet was forty-three years old; by this time, he had been publishing poetry for more than twenty years. His poem, like the Aztec Calendar Stone from which it takes his name, is a cosmography and like the stone, deals with questions of time, death, and humanity's relation to the sacred. But it is also a lyric poem, deeply personal, and concerned perhaps most essentially with the problem of solitude and communion, with the possibility or impossibility of love. The poem contains 584 lines, a nod to the synodic cycle of the planet Venus, an important celestial body for the ancient Mayan and Aztec cultures, and an introduction to one of the main themes of the poem: the contrast between the cyclical and linear conceptions of time.

Aztec civilization viewed time as a series of ages punctuated by cataclysmic transitions in which humanity and the world are destroyed and created anew. The Aztec Sun Stone depicts the four previous eras, or 'suns.' They believed that they lived in the fifth age, represented in the center by the face of the sun god Tonatiuh, and that this age would end in a permanent solar eclipse: the sun's light would be blotted out and darkness would descend on the world. To avert this catastrophe and ensure the sun god, Tonatiuh's favor, they performed sacrifices on certain days of the calendar, itself, like all calendars a repeating cycle. The Aztec Sun Stone was carved only a few decades before the Spanish conquest; it eerily foreshadows the eclipse of Mesoamerican civilization itself by the European arrival. It marked, inadvertently, the end of one age and the beginning of a new.

Likewise, Paz's poem marks an important point of transition, though in poet's own life and work. Paz's themes are so modern that it seems peculiar he would have appropriated such an image to serve as the title of his poem. He had just returned to his native Mexico after more than a decade abroad, absorbing a diverse array of influences: the North American Modernists, the Surrealists and Existentialists in France, Eastern philosophy and literature in India. If this was a period of wandering in the poet's life, it was also a period of wondering – Paz working toward his understanding of himself as a poet, his role in society, and the nature of poetry. Upon returning to Mexico, he published two monumental works, products of those years of searching: his poetics, *The Bow and the Lyre*, and his masterpiece: *Sunstone*. In *Sunstone*, Paz sought to produce a kind of ars poetica, a distillation of his previous work with a newfound vision of poetry.

It is believed that the Aztec Sun Stone was carved in Tenochtitlan, the capitol of the Aztec empire, between 1502 and 1521, under the auspices of the infamous Aztec emperor Moctezuma II. The stone was discovered in December of 1790 during the construction of Mexico City's Plaza Mayor, the Zócalo. The stone had been buried by the conquistadors almost two centuries prior. At first, Mexican anthropologists such as Antonio de León y Gama thought that the stone was some kind of calendar. He and other experts like him viewed the Stone through a particularly rational and European lens, and so they did what anyone would do with a sculpture or calendar, they put it up on display for people to examine and look at: they exhibited it publicly and erected it vertically on the western side of Mexico City's Metropolitan Cathedral (itself built with the very same stones of the main Aztec temple of Tenochtitlan, the Templo Mayor). Today, in the

National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, it is displayed like so: it is an object the gallery-goer studies as they would study a painting or any other work of art.

Our attempts to ‘read’ or understand the Sun Stone occur within this paradigm – we study the features of the stone; our eyes circle the stone’s rings as we attempt to decipher its ‘meaning.’ We read a poem in the same way; we circle the meaning of the text, reading its lines over and over, and yet feel ourselves drawn, at times, by a certain presence in the center of the poem. We sense the possibility of a disclosure of ‘meaning’ which is related to our reading of the text, but which is at the same time of a completely different nature than our rational comprehension of the work. At the center is something else, someone else, an enigma of creation – something which looks at us and reads us while we read it – a face like that on the Calendar Stone that mocks us at the same time that it invites us into a different kind of understanding; a face which perhaps tries to close the gap itself that ‘understanding’ maintains – the distinction between subject and object, interpretation and identification.

It is this vague presence, this face, that I have tried to elucidate through these essays. By illuminating various facets of the crystal, the stone, these essays are attempts at ‘reading’ the Sun Stone, itself a brilliant metaphor for Paz’s poem. My first reading of the poem in the Spring of my first year of college was one of the most important reading experiences of my life. It was what made me decide to become a poet. These essays are first and foremost an expression of gratitude to this great work which has given me so much. And they are an attempt not to define the meaning of the poem – if any poem would resist such an endeavor, it is this one – as much as to discern the nature of the transformation the poem has made and works still to bring about in me.

### A Few Notes on Methodology

I have used Eliot Weinberger's translation of the poem as it is published in *Sunstone/Piedra De Sol* published by New Directions in 1991. Where I use other sources or reference certain images or artworks, I introduce them with their title and author for anyone interested to look them up.

Throughout, I have referred to the narrator of the poem, the 'I,' as 'the poet,' and the 'you,' or object of the poem, as 'the beloved.' The identities designated by these pronouns are intentionally ambiguous throughout the poem, but what remains constant is their difference, and the dance which is love, composed both of desire and fear, to reconcile that difference and become one. Paz wrote the poem in 1957 and Mexico today is still an extremely gendered culture, which is why I have identified the 'poet' as male and the 'beloved' as female. I believe this is closest to what Paz would have intended his meaning to be, though we must bear in mind that the meaning of those designations and this essential expression of 'difference' is not essentially fixed: it is a starting point and is meant to change throughout the poem.

Similarly, I refer to the 'I' as the 'poet' and not 'the voice' or something like that because I believe the Paz himself, or his 'poetic' identity, is the protagonist of the poem; because I read and have always read *Sunstone* as a kind of Dantean pilgrimage, a poem which depicts above all the poet himself moving through poetry. This identity too, is unfixed, but what remains the same is its continual self-creation and renewal through language, which is ultimately the life and work of a poet.



### Original Face

A Zen master asks you: “Show me your original face, the face you had before your parents were born.” A well-known koan – the Zen master asks you this question not to receive a correct answer but to force a realization of your true nature. The question must be answered with your entire existence, your whole body and mind. After the poet falls and his former certainties have been erased, he makes such an inquiry:

setting out from my forehead, I search,  
 I search without finding, search through a moment,  
 a face of storm and lightning-flashes  
 racing through the trees of night,  
 a face of rain in a darkened garden,  
 relentless water that flows by my side

Perhaps one reads Tlaloc into this face, the Mesoamerican god of the rain; or Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent, a deity conjuring wind and rain, who brings both knowledge and inspiration. Perhaps another sees Indra, the Hindu god of thunder, lightning and rains; or Zeus. No matter the myth, the meaning is the same – the poet seeks the face of the world, he wishes for the gods to reveal their nature. Enlightenment; theophany. Is it his identity, his face, or that of another?

The original face is the other face, from which speaks ‘the other voice’ – the water that flows by the poet’s side throughout the poem; a voice that breaks through his alienation in little ways to remind him of the other world, the world of no separation. The poet searches for the presence, the voice that will return him to himself – this is nothing other than the nature and function of inspiration. And to answer the question that

inspiration presents – not a question but a requirement: a movement of the spirit, a transformation of the mind. Hearing echoes of this other voice, glimpsing here and there this face, the poet is reminded of ‘an overwhelming question’: neither this nor that, not one, not two. Eliot, always wise, chides us: “Oh, do not ask, ‘what is it?’ / Let us go and make our visit.”

## Correspondences

The ‘I’ of the poet-narrator of *Sunstone*, emerges in the fifth stanza of the poem. In Spanish grammar, because verbs are conjugated depending on who performs the action, oftentimes the pronoun is omitted entirely. The ‘I’ of *Sunstone* as we read it in English, as a separate pronoun, only occurs a few times throughout the poem’s; the rest of the ‘I’s’ we see are in Spanish merged with their verb. I am not sure if Paz or other Spanish speakers see it this way, but it has always seemed to me that the subject is inextricable than their action – the subject-pronoun *is* the verb. The ‘yo’ of *Sunstone* is conjugated with the verb ‘ir,’ to go, forming one of the repeated verbal structures of the poem “voy por” which translates variously, depending on the context of the line, “I travel through, across, within” or “I make for” as in, make an attempt, or simply, “I go, I move,” a basic if not vague motion of the poet through space and time.

It is not clear where the poet ‘goes’ when he says ‘he goes’ in the poem: the landscapes and scenes depicted by the first few lines in which this ‘voy’ appears are puzzling and seemingly unreal places. Take for instance the realm described in that same fifth stanza:

I travel my way through galleries of sound  
 I flow among echoing presences,  
 I cross transparencies as though I were blind,  
 a reflection erases me, I’m born in another,  
 oh forest of pillars that are enchanted,  
 through arches of light I travel into  
 the corridors of a diaphanous fall

These movements are vague, these ‘places’ abstractions. A world of mirrors and windows in which the poet, incorporeal, takes different forms, disappears and reappears.

The only real clue we are given to ground the scene is an allusion embedded in the fifth line: the, ‘forest of pillars that are enchanted,’ is a reference to Charles Baudelaire’s poem, “Correspondences.” That poem opens, famously:

Nature is a temple in which living pillars  
 Sometimes give voice to confused words;  
 Man passes there through forests of symbols  
 Which look at him with understanding eyes.

(William Aggeler transl. 1954)

Baudelaire’s ‘Man’ walks through the temple of ‘Nature’ which I take to mean, he walks outside, he walks through the world, and this world, with or without this ‘man’ writing poems, is governed by a certain poetic law of analogy and correspondence. Those correspondences of Nature exist already – it is merely the work of the poet to notice them, and to read the book of the world so to speak, and translate it into his own words.

Paz grounds his poet’s movement through the poem in the same vision of analogy and correspondence – a world that is comprehensible to the poet, lucid, transparent – and yet it seems clear to me that Paz’s poet is not moving through a real world at all, but purely through a world of the imagination. The poet makes no attempt to clarify that this landscape is outside or real as Baudelaire seems to do by placing us in ‘Nature.’ Rather, Paz’s poet moves through words – the poet is alive in the mind that walks through the lines of the poem as through “the corridors of a diaphanous fall.” I’ve seen the title of Baudelaire’s poem itself once translated as, “Echoes” – Paz’s world of echoes is perhaps

not meant to point us to the world but to an intertextual landscape, to the world of literature – an unreal and yet deeply real, imaginary realm where the words of one work echo the words of another. Paz transforms Baudelaire’s image and brings our attention back to the present moment in which we read the poem: this movement and no other, that which you are doing now, *Sunstone* seems to say, is what constitutes what Baudelaire calls at the end of his poem, “the ecstasy of the soul and senses.”

## I and You

'I' and 'you' are never identified in *Sunstone* – the undefined 'I' and 'you' of many lyric poems, including *Sunstone*, was one of the first things that attracted me to poetry. It is intimate, direct, urgent – as if the subject of the poem was so important and so exciting that it couldn't waste the time filling me in on the details. There seemed to be an implicit understanding in many poems that the setting or the scene wasn't as important as what the poet had to say. The poet's omission of these details also seemed to imply that they believed that what they had to say would be comprehensible to any reader, and that they didn't need the context to figure it out. All poems are written for an occasion, and yet, all published poems also aspire to transcend that occasion and attain a life of their own in the world.

There is a phase of ambiguity at the beginning of most lyric poems, during which time we are unsure who is speaking and to whom – all we know, is that we are thrust into the middle of some (we hope) incredibly important and oftentimes personal matter. As we rush along through the poem to hear the poet's confession or their ecstasy, we puzzle over the omitted details. But in the meantime, we make certain substitutions, and miraculously, the poem usually makes sense. In this zone, either the 'I' and the 'you' are both someone else, the poet is addressing someone and we are looking in on a fascinatingly intimate scene (as is the case with the best of Shakespeare's sonnets); or, we as readers adopt this 'I' as our own and imagine our own desired addressee in the poet's 'you'; or, some mixture of these: the poet remains the 'I' of the poem, but we the reader become the addressee – the poet is talking to us, but at the same time, another; or we become the speaker of the poem and imagine the poet or the poem as our object. It is as if

lyric poetry itself points to a world in which these pronouns (in which identity itself) are not so easily distinguished. Or in which such a distinction is unimportant.

*Sunstone* being a lyric poem itself employs this ambiguity to great effect in its form: the ‘you’ that emerges at the beginning of the poem designates nothing more than a numinous presence, a, “body of light filtered through an agate, / thighs of light, belly of light...” We do not know if this ‘you’ is a person, a god, or something else entirely: “the hour sparkles and has a body, / the world is visible through your body, / transparent through your transparency...” This is the poet speaking to the reader through the poem; or it is a character in the poem, the poet’s beloved who emerges here; or the poet speaks directly to his world, baptizing it with this ‘you’; or the poet refers to the body of the poem, of words; or all of these and none of them.

*Sunstone* invokes this world of conflated identities in a beautiful way towards the end of the poem, an invocation, a prayer for this world to come about: “door of being... / take me to the other side of this night, / where I am you, we are us, / the kingdom where pronouns are intertwined...” Of course, in the context of the poem, the poet seeks to be united with his beloved – he wishes to leave his own solitude and enter into a world where there is no separation between himself and another. But doesn’t this also echo, at least in an indirect way, this shuffling of pronouns, this confusion of who is speaking and to whom that we attempt to resolve whenever we read a poem that does not immediately disclose this information to us? Don’t we catch a glimpse of this ‘kingdom’ when we, wondering about who is speaking realize that we, at least most concretely, are speaking – that for a time when you read the poem, that ‘I’ is no other than you?

## Abyss

Abyss, or the Spanish equivalent, ‘abismo,’ strikes me as one of the most important words in Paz’s *Sunstone*, which makes it troubling that it is omitted in one of its most widely read translations – that of Eliot Weinberger. The poem hinges on the word: it designates the fundamental shift of the poet’s awareness from his consciousness of communion to his consciousness of solitude. The word describes the poet’s new reality, the new condition of his identity. It comes in the middle of the eighth stanza of the poem:

I travel your length, like a river,  
I travel your body, like a forest,  
like a mountain path that ends at a cliff

Or it should have come in that third line. In the original, it reads (the second and third lines together): “[voy por tu cuerpo] como por un sendero en la montaña / que en un abismo brusco se termina...” Weinberger elides the two words ‘abismo brusco’ (literally: abrupt abyss) into, merely, ‘cliff.’

Cliff conveys that the poet’s path up the mountain has ended, but it doesn’t convey just how abrupt this end is and what it is exactly that the path drops off into. A cliff could end at anything, but an abyss is a specific type of thing. The word comes to English from Greek: *bussos* means ‘depth,’ so *abussos* means ‘without depth.’ It is precisely its quality of not having a bottom that makes it such a compelling symbol of hell and perdition, from Tartarus to Dante’s *Inferno*. The abyss that opens up in the poem is indeed a hell, for when he catches sight of this abyss, the poet’s previous certainties



dissolve, and he is flung from Paradise like Milton's Satan into an endless fall of doubt and solitude.

The two lines at the beginning of the stanza bear the residue of that soon-to-be-lost paradise: "I travel your length, like a river, / I travel your body, like a forest." The poet's movement, and his awareness, previously in the poem were like this; this 'you' is none other than the poet's beloved. In his rapture, the poet sees in his lover's body a world, a world in which he can move and have his being: "I travel your body, like the world, / your belly is a plaza full of sun." The beloved herself becomes the poet's world, and he is real insofar as he exists standing on the ground of her being, so to speak. Her love for him is indubitable, he exists because she perceives him to exist: "the world is visible through your body," the poet says, "transparent through your transparency."

But this is a world of the body, of surfaces and appearances, and the poet's faith in such appearances is called into question as soon as he becomes conscious of his beloved's eyes: "I travel your eyes, like the sea, / tigers drink their dreams in those eyes, / the hummingbird burns in those flames." These images are strange reactions to what he sees there. Weinberger's 'I travel' softens the image of the poet going through or across the sea – 'travel' makes it seem like a vacation, but we should remember that the sea is also a place of peril, a boundless and possibly lethal force. We can contrast that image with one that came before it, that of the plaza, to get a sense of how the beloved's geography, the poet's sense of her, is changing. The tiger perhaps represents the poet himself, or one aspect of him: a predatory creature seeking to satisfy its own will in her eyes; the hummingbird perhaps the apologetic and entreating aspect of the poet who is destroyed by the beloved's wrath or her resentment at the poet's intention to possess her.

Here and there in these lines, we see emerge the seeds of doubt which grow into jealousies and insecurities: “my glances cover you like ivy, / you are a city the sea assaults.” The poet’s movement becomes restricted by obsession and anxiety. He begins to see his beloved as a fortress; her body which was once a plaza is now a wall. He becomes paranoid that she is hiding something from him, and he cannot shake this doubt unless he knows for certain the content of her mind.

For she is the source of his reality, and what he wishes above all is to see into her mind to be certain that he himself is real. Again, the world the beloved represents becomes perilous, she becomes a river, and then a forest – these images call to my mind the beginning of Dante’s *Inferno*, the poet lost in a wood and seeking to climb Mount Purgatory and reach the Earthly Paradise, yet unaware that he will be forced by the obstinance of certain vices to descend into hell and confront the darkness of his soul.

The abyss opens suddenly and without warning, and it is this that irrevocably alters the direction of the poem. That eighth stanza continues:

I travel along the edge of your thoughts  
 and my shadow falls from your white forehead,  
 my shadow shatters, and I gather the pieces  
 and go with no body, groping my way

The poet falls out of his beloved’s graces and is unable to verify his own existence, and so is plunged into doubt and despair. He loses his body and becomes a ghost; he enters into his mind.

Solitude and escape from solitude is perhaps the great theme of the poem. But without a clear description of the nature of the poet’s movement in this scene that depicts

his fall, and without the symbolic depth and mythological reach that the word ‘abyss’ has, we as the readers are left not fully recognizing the importance of this event, and thus the nature of the poet’s estrangement. Hell is the poet’s estrangement from his beloved, from the source of his reality, his faith. It is this distance that constitutes his abyss.

And yet, there is an upside to this event, besides the fact that narratively it sets the poem in motion: there comes from Catholic theology the notion of the ‘felix culpa,’ or happy fall/fault. The idea, for Catholics, is that if Adam and Eve had never lost their innocence, they and humanity would never have the privilege of experiencing God’s grace, His salvation through Christ. Many Jewish commentators view the fall of Genesis as a coming of age story, an allegory for maturity; a necessary part of life, and especially of the life of faith.

The abyss, a necessary ‘fall,’ was also important to the existentialists, who deeply influenced Paz. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in *Nausea*: “It’s quite an undertaking to start loving somebody. You have to have energy, generosity, blindness. There is even a moment right at the start where you have to jump across an abyss: if you think about it you don’t do it.” Here too, I think of the idea of the ‘felix culpa’ the necessary fall. Perhaps the whole movement of *Sunstone* is not a fall into the abyss but a leap across it or through it. And this abyss is not an end, an eternal perdition, but a necessary obstacle which allows the poet to learn who his beloved truly is, at least by discovering what she is not. His contact before is illusory, she was merely as the poem puts it: “dressed in the color of [his] desires.” After, there is at least the possibility for a genuine seeing to occur, and perhaps from this, the possibility for love.

### I've Forgotten Your Name

“To love is to undress our names” reads one line, late in the poem. *Sunstone* is a love poem, but it is a philosophical love poem – the poet is driven as much by a desire to convey his love to his beloved as he is by a desire to know who it is he loves. The second aim proves harder to fulfill. We glimpse various women, either through the poet’s memories or his reveries. The poet cycles through many names – names from myth and literature – in an attempt to name this ‘you’ to whom he speaks. But any attempt to fix her name or her identity fails. Take for instance one of the first images we have of someone who might be the poet’s beloved, a kind of dream image:

tiger the color light, brown deer  
 on the outskirts of night, girl glimpsed  
 leaning over green balconies of rain,  
 adolescent incalculable face

A conjuration, the poet evokes an elusive presence, almost a ghost. Weinberger translates the Spanish ‘innumerable’ as ‘incalculable’ which brings home the enigma of her identity but doesn’t necessarily convey its multiplicity. Innumerable is also somewhat vague, but I think the poet means to say that this face, in his mind, has a metamorphic quality – her identity changes the more he tries to pin it down.

The girl here is like one of these rarified creatures, partly belonging to myth, belonging to that other world that transpires ‘on the outskirts of night,’ in the poet’s dreams. The poet makes a number of attempts to name her, or rather to remember her name; that stanza continues:

I’ve forgotten your name, Melusina,

Laura, Isabel, Persephone, Mary,  
 your face is all the faces and none,  
 you are all the hours and none

The poet tries to remember not a particular name of a particular person that he loved, but the name of that essence, that otherness the girl revealed to him, an ‘otherness’ which transcends her individual identity. The poet seeks to find her in myth and in literature but he cannot. Melusina was Andre Bréton’s famous muse, a siren-like figure from European folklore who resided in wells and fatally seduced unsuspecting victims – Bréton saw her as a kind of Circe, who recalled man to his mortality and irrationality; Laura was Petrarch’s muse, Isabel, Garcilaso de la Vega’s, who inspired in these poets beatific visions; Mary is the Mother of Mercy who loves and pities the Man of Sorrows; Persephone is the violated bride and queen of Hades. All of these reveal shades of this girl, but none of them define her.

There is a certain tension here in the poem in this attempt and failure to name – the poet seems to want to know her true name, who she is to herself, at the same time that he wishes to know the role she will play in his own salvation. All of the figures the poet mentions are women in stories and poems who are defined by their relation to men: they are witches and muses, forces of salvation or damnation. But these are just ways that ‘man’ has seen ‘woman.’ The poet recognizes she is none of these figures because she does indeed exist apart from the poet. And that is what compels the poet to her, the fact that she is *not* just a character in his story, but that she contains a reality that exists completely independently of him.

We continue through the poem, never knowing exactly who the poet addresses, but there is a moment of clarification towards the end of the poem; three of the female figures that appeared in the poem, Mary, Persephone, and Heloise, return, and the poet invokes them as a trinity. This time there is no question, the beloved is represented by these three. He pleads:

Mary, Persephone, Heloise, show me  
 your face that I may see at last  
 my true face, that of another

What brings these three disparate figures together is their capacity for sacrifice. Heloise who would gladly suffer the ignominy of becoming Abelard's mistress as opposed to marrying him and ruining his reputation; Persephone who although stolen from her life and violated by Hades perhaps decides, depending on whether we believe she willingly ate the pomegranate seeds which would bind her to him forever, to love him and forgive him and thus give hope and beauty to those suffering the pains of hell; Mary whose grief over the death of her son makes her the mother of mercy.

Each of these figures embodies in some way the capacity for sacrifice and life and mercy that the poet seeks to find within himself. To see her true face, that of the one he loves, is to see his own face: his own capacity for compassion and renewal. And it is this act of grace which the poet identifies with the cosmos itself, the face-faces of this trinity revealing to him:

my face forever the face of us all,  
 face of the tree and the baker of bread  
 face of the sun and face of the stream

## The Labyrinth

Octavio Paz is perhaps most famous for his 1950 book titled, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. The title of that book expresses eloquently what was one of the central preoccupations of the poet's life. He wrote therein: "Solitude is the profoundest fact of the human condition. Man is the only being who knows he is alone, and the only one who seeks out another." The book was harshly critical of Mexican culture, making Paz a controversial figure in Mexico. In it, he sought to examine the psychology of his native people, specifically that of Mexican men; he took aim at Mexican 'machismo' which he viewed as a mask condemning Mexican men to a brutal, self-imposed solitude, the desperation and indigence of which could only be expressed through cruelty and violence. It is not a flattering image, and Paz was denounced by many as a hypocrite and an enemy of Mexico.

But if Paz harshly criticized his country and its people, he was an equally harsh critic of himself. His poems, *Sunstone* prime among them, are the testimony of a rigorous and oftentimes devastating interrogation of his own psyche, of the sources and expressions of his own solitude. *The Labyrinth of Solitude* is in many ways autobiographical – the American literary critic Harold Bloom said that Paz had been wrong to call the book a work of 'cultural criticism' and that what he had actually written was a long prose poem. Maybe so, and yet we need not look any farther than Paz's own poems to witness the poet's conception of his own consciousness and his own solitude.

We don't find the word 'labyrinth' itself in *Sunstone*, although we sense it is there through the poet's descriptions of his interiority. As we make our way through the poem,

we find ourselves lost in a maze of hallways and rooms, such as after the poet's 'fall from grace' which lands him in the first room of his self-consciousness:

the endless corridors of memory, the doors  
 that open into an empty room  
 where all the summers have come to rot

We should immediately think of the section towards the middle of the poem in which the poet tries in vain to remember where and who he was and who he loved:

was it I making plans  
 for the summer – and for all the summers –  
 on Christopher Street, ten years ago,  
 with Phyllis, who had two dimples in her cheeks  
 where the sparrows came to drink the light?

It is in this room where the poet is most alone that he thinks of the lives he has lived, the dreams and the plans which have amounted to little more than his persistent awareness of solitude: "and reaching my room – always a room – / was it true the mirrors didn't know me?" None of these hopes come to fruition – the poet remains where he's always been.

Every corridor of memory the poet ventures down brings him somehow back to this room where he is alone. This is when we realize that the poet is not Theseus attempting to find the center of the labyrinth to slay the minotaur, but that the poet is the minotaur itself, trapped in the maze of its own brutal isolation. The memories of life rot and fade and there is nothing left in the room besides hunger, a terrible, lecherous desire: "jewels of thirst burn at its depth," and later the poet cries:

there is nothing inside me but a large wound,



a hollow place where no one goes,  
 a windowless present, a thought that returns  
 and repeats itself, reflects itself,  
 and loses itself in its own transparency

There is nothing but woundedness and hunger – the condition of the minotaur: the bestial, shadow aspect of the self which the poet fears no one will love, an aspect of the poet's self he is afraid to reveal to the world. Like the monster of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, no matter how the minotaur tries to reason his way out of the labyrinth or to understand what he is, and why he is, he cannot. What would be windows are mirrors which allow the beast no escape from his physical imprisonment, but also no escape from his psychological imprisonment, for he sees nothing but his own insecurity and lack wherever he goes.

Paz is as unsparing in his depiction of this isolation in *Sunstone* as he is in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* or any of his books. Most readers of his poem will identify and sympathize at least somewhat with the poet who has, more courageously than most, confronted this aspect of his condition. But if the poem enters into these labyrinths and rooms to show us the extent of our isolation, it does so to show us the true locus of our freedom from such isolation. These rooms occur throughout the poem, but so do doors, and windows. Sometimes these windows merely look out onto other solitudes, such as in this poignant description of a cityscape:

rooms adrift

in the foundering cities, rooms and streets,  
 names like wounds, the room with windows

looking out on other rooms

with the same discolored wallpaper

But sometimes they open to something dazzling, a reality fundamentally different than that of the poet's endless self-consciousness. Sometimes, we catch glimpses in the poem of something beyond the poet's rooms, beyond any room at all.

Paz's solitary rooms remind me of those of another great artist, the American painter Edward Hopper. Empty rooms, blank walls filled with sun, lonely characters gazing out onto some ineffable 'outside.' My favorite painting of his is displayed at the Yale Art Gallery in New Haven, I first saw it when I was a teenager and immediately fell in love with it. It is still to this day one of my favorite works of art; it is called *Rooms by the Sea*. We look at a blank wall from inside an empty room. The floor is yellow. To the right is a door, to the left an opening which leads into another room, this one with things in it. It would be a quiet and unassuming scene were not the door to the right open to nothing but the open sea, stretching into the horizon.

He finished the painting in 1951, and it was thought to have been inspired, at least partly, by the view from his studio in Truro, Massachusetts, which overlooked the ocean from the cliffs of Cape Cod. But the painting more importantly reflects the painter's interiority, his inner life, and this has nothing to do with place or time at all. The image is a raw, almost archetypal scene: the walls and floors, furnishings that constitute the self; dependable if not somewhat sterile forms. And then this imponderable door, which opens out onto the inconceivable. Out of all of Hopper's paintings, this one exhilarates me the most – it is in my eyes his most mystical and his most surreal work, and in that way his

most honest. The room is so spare, the door so huge; it seems to say: what do you need to see but this?

I bring up this painting because the same scene, the same exact opening appears also in Paz's poem. I wonder if the poet could have seen Hopper's painting – Paz was in the Northeast around the time it was finished – although I have no way of knowing this. Something marvelous occurs at the center of *Sunstone*: the poet embraces his beloved and loves her, and these rooms which are hitherto so intransigently internal, which condemn the poet to the perdition of his own mind, they finally open:

and the traps, the cells, the enchanted grottoes,  
the birdcages and the numbered rooms,  
all are transformed, all take flight,  
every molding is a cloud, every door  
leads to the sea, the country, the open  
air, every table is set for banquet;

The poet is real again, he sees the world beyond this illusion of his solitude. Every door leads to the sea – I love that line, and it captures the wonder of such an opening, as does Hopper's piece.

And what is perhaps most exhilarating and liberating about this image, is that it looks back to all of the previous dead ends and false doors that kept the poet trapped within himself – it seems to say: all doors lead to the sea, were not such doors always there? Hopper's room is completely unmoored, it drifts like a dream upon the even greater and more vivid dream of the sea. Could it be that the labyrinth of the poet's solitude was likewise never fixed, but was too moving upon this vast and liberating sea?

rooms that are ships  
that rock in a gulf of light; rooms  
that are submarines: where silence dissolves  
into green waves, and all that we touch  
phosphoresces

Hopper's painting was alternately titled *The Jumping Off Place* – the painting, like Paz's poem, shows us our solitude but it also shows us the intimations of an exit from that solitude. And moreover, it seems to tell us that such a place is really no place at all – we need not look for the jumping off place, we are already there: “every molding is a cloud” – we are already jumping off as we speak, not even the threshold, ultimately, is real.

### Madrid 1937

Paz's poem drifts through mythological and psychological landscapes; fantasies, dreams, images – there is an element of unreality to much of the poem, much of it eschews any kind of historical grounding or context at all. But there are a few moments in the poem where we approach sections that we might read as autobiographical, such as the series of interrogations the poet makes of his own memory as we fall towards the center of the poem: “did we watch the dawn from the Hotel Vernet... did we eat grapes in Bidart? in Perote / did we buy gardenias?” But these are old memories of love and they distant enough to be questions rather than recollections. The poet's personal identity is a source of great doubt and perplexity – the poet searches through myth and archetypes, all kinds of visions and symbols to figure out who he is. But at the center of the poem, in what is perhaps the most important scene, we are confronted by a place and a date, no longer a question; a simple line which is exactly halfway through the poem's 584 lines: “Madrid, 1937.”

The scene that follows is a shocking depiction of the carnage of the Spanish Civil War:

in the Plaza del Angel the women were sewing  
 and singing along with their children,  
 then: the sirens' wail, and the screaming,  
 houses brought to their knees in the dust,  
 towers cracked, facades spat out  
 and the hurricane drone of the engines

The bombing of Madrid by Franco's forces was one of the first instances in history where a civilian population was deliberately targeted in an aerial bombing. We must remember that this image is a response to a series of questions that leads us down into the center of the poem, a series which begins with the poet trying to remember, "where I was, who I was, what your name is, / what my name is..." This memory is the poet's only certainty; it is the ground that he discovers as he travels back further and further into his past to remember who he is. To understand why this image comes to the poet here, and why he is certain of its importance, we must understand how it relates to the life of Octavio Paz.

Paz was 23 years old and had been invited to Spain by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda to take part in the Second International Congress of Anti-Fascist Writers. The conference was held in Valencia, an important city for the Republican forces. The young Paz traveled throughout Spain for a year after the Congress and worked as a non-combatant, writing articles and poems in support of the Republican cause. Paz had been a boy around the time of the Mexican Revolution, and it cast a shadow over his early life, but he never saw the conflict directly. It was here, in Spain, that the poet witnessed, for the first time, the brutality of war; and it is here that he becomes aware of the intractable nature of conflict and history, the intransigence of historical suffering.

But it is also here that he glimpsed a 'New Man;' as he put it in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* almost 15 years later: "I remember that in Spain during the civil war I had a revelation of 'the other man' and of another kind of solitude: not closed, not mechanical, but open to the transcendent." During this year, the poet would have seen great despair and destruction, but also great hope; In one interview, he described being invited in by

peasants during a bombardment and offered food, although the peasants had next to none: “that’s something I can’t forget.”

It is at such a point, in which the poet witnesses the horrors of the war firsthand, that he realizes his obligation not only to bear witness to the war, to give his testimony of what happened, but to express the image of hope and fraternity that the poet witnessed in his compatriots in response to such violence. *The Labyrinth of Solitude* itself ends with the following recollection of that year in Spain: “The memory will never leave me. Anyone who has looked Hope in the face will never forget it. He will search for it everywhere he goes, among all kinds of men. And he will dream of finding it again someday, somewhere, perhaps among those closest to him. In every man there is the possibility of his being — or, to be more exact, of his becoming once again — another man.” It is this that the poet realizes in Spain; as *Sunstone* puts it: when I am I am another, my acts / are more mine when they are the acts / of others, in order to be I must be another.”

It is interesting then, that after the poet describes the scene, that he does not set forth such a vision of fraternity and solidarity – a vision, say, of peasants sharing bread, or men looking at each other in the trenches – but instead a surreal and completely imaginary vision of love. In the ruins of the bombed city, or perhaps, while the bombs themselves still fell:

the two took off their clothes and made love  
to protect our share of all that’s eternal,  
to defend our ration of paradise and time

This image is shocking, but why should it be any more or less shocking than the image of war we saw before it? This erotic embrace is not a frivolous dream but is in fact the only adequate response the poet can imagine: this love proves that war is not as intractable as it seems, and that humanity is capable of choosing its own destiny in the same way that it is capable of the surrender that is required by love.

It is this love that serves as a symbol for reconciliation, a healing of the deep and ruinous wound that we received when we drew a line between ‘me’ and ‘not me.’ True love is the only act that addresses the fundamental problem, the lovers who strive in their union to achieve not just personal salvation and escape but to rectify the great solitude and alienation that produces such cruelty and makes history a hell in the first place. The erotic act as Paz imagines it here is not merely sexual: it is a spiritual surrender. Paz saw eroticism as a drive towards knowing and understanding that which is other, not as the predatory desire to control and subjugate it.

This is why I struggle, somewhat, with Weinberger’s choice to translate the line: “los dos se desnudaron y se amaron” as: “the two took off their clothes and made love.” That translation doesn’t capture the profundity of the erotic act that Paz describes. ‘Desnudarse’ in Spanish might be translated as ‘to remove one’s clothes, to undress,’ but it also carries a deeper meaning of stripping away that which conceals, maybe closer to ‘denude,’ in English. Similarly, ‘se amaron’ could be interpreted as ‘made love’ or ‘had sex’ but it also carries the much deeper meaning in Spanish of truly loving someone: ‘te quiero,’ a common utterance, means, in a casual sense, ‘I love you,’ or, ‘I care about you;’ ‘te amo,’ a phrase so sincere and powerful it feels almost cheesy to most Spanish speakers, expresses something deeper: a transforming love.



Not only is that aspect of the love Paz was envisioning lost, but also the reciprocity that the Spanish conjugation suggests: ‘se desnudaron’ suggests that it is not each individually taking off their clothes, but that they are doing it to each other, they are stripping each other bare; and likewise, they could be ‘making love’ to each other, but they could also, in this denuded, vulnerable state, be loving each other. The true basis of the poem’s conviction is this love, not merely the sexual act. A later section brings this home: “the world changes if two look at each other and see / to love is to undress our names.” It is the other that each lover sees; here, we are closer to the deep meaning of undressing – it is not clothing that the lovers relinquish in their union, but their very identities – their separateness. It’s only in this sense that a line such as: “amar es combatir” – ‘to love is to fight back,’ is not utterly silly.

It is only this willingness to see another, to ‘undress our names,’ as the poet says, and to recognize our mortality – the lovers embrace beneath the certain death of the falling bombs – that results in the great epiphany of the poem, the awareness that forms the basis of the poet’s hope for a new world. It is only when we learn to love that we can see:

the unity that we lost, the desolation  
of being man, and all its glories,  
sharing bread and sun and death,  
the forgotten astonishment of being alive

There is No One Here, I Write Alone

We return at various points in *Sunstone* to an uncanny awareness, one that most works of literature attempt to conceal: that of being a reader reading and watching a writer write. I cannot comment upon so-called ‘metafiction’ or ‘metapoetry’ because I haven’t read anything that has designated itself as such – but I can say *Sunstone* makes a point of bringing us back to a certain metacognition of reading. And he does this mostly by bringing us back to an awareness of the act of his composition of the poem, as in a stanza that begins:

I search without finding, I write alone,  
there’s no one here, and the day falls,  
the year falls, I fall with the moment

The poet’s previous search – “setting out from my forehead, I search,” – is no such setting out. The poet is merely sitting at his desk to write. He sallies out with his words, but when they fail their charge, he retreats back into an awareness that he the poet is not a seer but an artificer.

What’s interesting is that this consciousness also results in a collapsing of time: when the poet believes his words are illusory, he is somehow closer to them at that time. Memory is the mother of the muses and the source of all inspiration, personal memory if you take Hume’s view that all we believe and know is ultimately traceable to experience. But it is precisely the poet’s failure to recall his own experience that makes him aware of the various illusions of words and the truth of his sitting and trying to conjure words. In another section, this awareness becomes distressing, and the poetic act onerous;

composition becomes a war against the night, the poet wrestling with the undifferentiated mass of experience:

there's nothing in front of me, only a moment  
 salvaged from a dream tonight of coupled  
 images dreamed, a moment chiseled  
 from the dream, torn from the nothing  
 of this night, lifted by hand, letter  
 by letter...

It is time itself that the poet attempts to salvage through the act of his creation; the poem is a dike against the floods of evanescence. Both time and space appear to the poet as night.

Shakespeare, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, famously outlined the poet's task:

The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,  
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
 And as imagination bodies forth  
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
 Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
 A local habitation and a name.

But there is an ambiguity in this description of the work as much as there is in Paz's: are there indeed 'things unknown' which the poet merely finds, illuminating their form with a line as if with a lamp? Or is there merely 'airy nothing' which the poet 'turns' into shapes, those shapes owing their existence to the poet's art alone?

Paz's scene of creation continues:

[a moment] lifted by hand, letter  
by letter, while time, outside, gallops  
away, and pounding at the doors of my soul  
is the world with its bloodthirsty schedules

The poet does not want to see time, to give it form, but to protect himself from it – a particular time, the time of ‘the world with its bloodthirsty schedules,’ which “turns eternity into empty hours, / minutes into prisons, and time into / copper coins and abstract shit.”

But these escapes are illusory as well, the fortress of words that is the poem is itself, the poet realizes, composed by time. But when the poet renounces, at various moments in the poem, the visions and fantasies that take him into unreal worlds, he returns to the act of composition which, although pointing to future ends, tending in imagination towards past and future, occurs in the present. And it is this present in which time collapses and the poet becomes so severely disillusioned that he confesses to us that we cannot have our dream in this poem, that he is making it all up, where writer and reader meet. For if the poets are right and inspiration, that force which makes the words appear, comes from without, then we have the experience, perhaps illusory as well, but closer to the truth, of seeing the words as they appear, which is exactly what the poet does as he writes.

### The Fire Sermon

Octavio Paz read T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* in Mexico in 1931 when he was about seventeen. He confessed in an interview for the Paris Review: "The poem baffled me. I couldn't understand a word. Since then I've read it countless times and still think it one of the great poems of the century," and later on: "Eliot was one of my idols." The third section of Eliot's *Wasteland* was titled, "The Fire Sermon," which takes its name from an ancient Buddhist scripture of the same name, the *Adittapariyaya Sutta*. Eliot's fire sermon describes the spiritual desolation of the modern world and a series of iniquitous sexual encounters. Like the Fire Sermon of the Buddha, or really much like Ecclesiastes in the Abrahamic tradition, Eliot's poem confronts the reader with the emptiness of desire, and the fate of all things in impermanence and death.

Paz was widely read in Eastern philosophy and likely, due to its prominence in Eliot's text, read the Buddha's sermon itself. Paz too, in his *Sunstone*, has a section which might be called a fire sermon: it follows directly a section that describes the immense suffering of historical and political life ("Moctezuma insomniac / on his bed of thorns, the ride in the carriage / toward death – the interminable ride / counted minute by minute by Robespierre..."). This litany ends with the poet's summation of history, all of which he perceives to be nothing more than, "the scream of the hangman / and the scream of the victim," and then we receive the poet's sermon:

eyes are flames,

what they see is flames, the ear a flame

and sounds a flame, lips are coals,

the tongue a poker, touch and the touched,

thought and the thought-of, he who thinks  
 is flame, all is burning, the universe  
 is flame, the nothing is burning, the nothing  
 that is only a thought in flames, and nothing  
 in the end but smoke: there is no victim,  
 there is no hangman...

The text is remarkably similar in tone and meaning to the original sutra of the Buddha, moreso than *The Wasteland* is, which is all the more interesting considering the fact the Paz doesn't explicitly allude to the text the way Eliot does.

The sutta of the Buddha is metaphysical but also psychological, in the way that Buddhist teachings always are: the nature of reality and the nature of the mind's perception of reality are the same. Paz, like the Buddha, identifies this origin of concepts and belief in essence in the senses. Reads the sutta, as translated by Ñānamoli Thera:

Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what is the all that is burning? The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning ...

Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion. I say it is burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs...

The cause of this burning world is that the mind perceives the hangman and the hanged man as separate, that it clings to forms and appearances where no such forms truly exist.

Eliot uses the name of the sutta to talk about desire and desolation, but he doesn't interact with the psychological aspect of the text in the same way Paz does. I brought up Ecclesiastes because it seems to me that despite his reference to Buddhism, Eliot still

essentially sees the nature of desolation and the spiritual poverty of the world in a Western, Christian way. At the end of the section, almost speechless with grief, Eliot turns away from suffering and looks toward heaven:

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning

O Lord Thou pluckest me out

O Lord Thou pluckest

burning

In Carthage, Eliot looks conveys as Paz does the unending suffering of the world and the consequence of sin, but rather than viewing the solution to this suffering as a transformation of his own consciousness, Eliot's poet seeks an escape from time, an assumption, a transcendent salvation. He quotes Augustine's *Confessions* and the saint's prayer for the Lord's prompt intervention.

Paz not only leans farther into the sutta's ideas, but even goes as far as to explicitly contrast the Buddha's message with Eliot's Christianity. Paz's own sermon ends in a poignant question about the truth of such salvation when seen from the perspective of emptiness:

and the cry on Friday

afternoon?, and the silence covered in signs,

the silence that speaks without ever speaking,

does it say nothing? are cries nothing?

does nothing happen as time passes by?

The cry is that of Christ on the cross, as if Paz here is examining directly the seeds of Eliot's 'solution' to the burning world sown here in his great poem. Paz's poem does not look away but more directly into the suffering described. It confronts the possibility that if all things are empty, then perhaps there is no one who saves and no one or nothing who is saved.



### The Garden

*Sunstone* begins and ends in a garden – a vision of paradise – a structure it shares with the Bible. As per the observation of the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye, the first ‘event’ of the Bible is humanity’s loss of the tree and water of life; its final event is the regaining of this divine life source, and the recovery of humanity’s original, unfallen nature in the Heavenly Eden. The Garden of Eden of the Book of Genesis is mirrored by the Heavenly Eden of the Book of Revelation – the basic symbolic and narrative dynamic of the Bible, seen as a whole, is of type and antitype, prophecy and fulfillment of prophecy; a dialogue between the ‘Old’ Testament and the ‘New’. All of the stories and themes contained between – the search for identity, the search for origin, the struggle for justice and peace, the search for a solution to the problem of suffering – all of these are interrelated and gain mutual coherence because they are manifestations of this essential ‘action’ or basic dynamic expressed by the relationship between these two gardens; the paradise in which we begin and that in which we end.

Paz’s poem also follows this basic structure, and shares these spiritual concerns. *Sunstone* begins with an image of paradise:

a crystal willow, a poplar of water,  
 a tall fountain the wind arches over,  
 a tree deep-rooted yet dancing still,  
 a course of a river that turns, moves on,  
 doubles back, and comes full circle,  
 forever arriving:

An image which is then forgotten as we move through the poem. All throughout, the poet attempts to recover it and remember it, searching for it within the maze of his own mind, ending finally with a kind of luminous failure, wherein both poet and reader are returned to the first image of the poem. Paz was a deeply religious poet but he was not a sectarian poet. He was born in Mexico, a deeply Catholic country, and he would have known the Bible well, but he was not a Catholic poet – his concerns were existential and transcended any particular denomination or creed. Paz, like many other great ‘religious’ poets, like Milton or Dante, understood and put to use the basic spiritual framework of his culture, but in a way that reflected his own spiritual concerns, and transitively, those of his age.

Which is why *Sunstone* begins and ends in a garden – an image that all of his readers would implicitly understand as an allusion to Genesis and Revelation. But in Paz’s poem published in 1957, well into the ‘modern’ period, this framework is utterly transformed, and though we return to the basic spiritual dynamic expressed by the Bible of loss, estrangement, searching, and recovery, this story takes on a new life and is vitalized by the heterodoxy of the poet’s personal search.

For one, *Sunstone*’s garden, its cosmogenic opening, is not diegetic like that of Genesis, but instead mimetic: it does not tell of paradise, but attempts to express it directly through sounds and images. Its first line: “a crystal willow, a poplar of water.” Two trees, and so we immediately think of the twin trees of Genesis, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge; but we are not actually told where we are, who created these trees, and who is looking at them. There are no characters, and no ‘action’ or ‘plot’ in the traditional sense. There are images and sounds which move forward in time as the reader reads across the line, but which also, for lack of any identifiable verb, are able to move

back, and to jump across the straight tracks of the poetic line to achieve unexpected resonances.

For instance, because the structure of the line is perfectly symmetrical – two images composed of six syllables each separated by a caesura, both hemistiches with identical stresses – the two subjects resonate with each other, as do the two descriptors. ‘Willow’ and ‘poplar’ contrast each other sonically as well as in their images: willow is soft and flowing, poplar firm and unyielding. The modifiers ‘crystal’ and ‘water’ contrast and complement each other in the same way – and their relationships to each other mirror their relationships to their nouns; in Spanish grammar, the preposition ‘de’ which links the descriptor to the noun, can either mean ‘of,’ as in ‘made of,’ or ‘from’ as in ‘comes from.’ The willow tree is made of crystal but perhaps also has its origin in crystal – and crystal resonates with the diamantine appearance of the poplar, as the poplar which is made of or comes from water, resonates both symbolically and sonically with the willow.

These two images are perfectly counterpoised, and although they are set up to be contraries – it makes me think of the great tantric symbol of Vajrayana Buddhism, the vajra representing method, the bell representing wisdom– each side also, like that other great tantric symbol, the yinyang, contains within it already an aspect of its opposite. And it is perhaps for this reason that the two forces represented by *Sunstone*’s first images are not locked in stalemate, but interact with each other in a generative dynamic tension. And so, *Sunstone*, expresses, in its own way, its own cosmogony – the nature and origin of reality, the ‘original nature’ of paradise and human consciousness, one in which ‘essences’ move and play and participate in each other’s nature, in which they mutually arise and fall, and have their nature only by way of this dance. We are blind to this reality

if we view these images dualistically, and view the very nature of words to be exclusive and definitional. Likewise, if we insist on reading these lines merely in a linear and diegetic way, we will not see the way they echo back and flow in many different directions, and thus open the door to another realm of experience.

This nexus composed of ‘one’ and ‘two’, engenders the third line of the poem: “a tall fountain the wind arches over.” No simile or verb linking this third image to the first two, only succession. And yet again, ‘after’ is really a return to the beginning: the fountain reconciles the first two images – if we believed they were separate trees, and two distinct entities, through the image of the fountain. We see that they are in fact metaphors which describe the two essential aspects of the fountain of water as it changes through time and in response to its environment. When the wind blows, the fountain is splayed and arched by the wind: it takes on the appearance and symbolic quality of a willow tree; when there is no wind, it rises firm in a straight, concentrated jet, taking on the aspect of a poplar tree.

This succession and the relationship between the three make me think of section 42 of the Tao Te Ching which reads (Red Pine’s translation): “The Tao gives birth to one / one gives birth to two / two gives birth to three / three gives birth to [the] ten thousand things / ten thousand things with *yin* at their backs and *yang* in their embrace...” And yet what *Sunstone*’s first two lines show beautifully is that there is some essential ambiguity in the order of such events – does not the third seem to engender the first two at the same time that the first two engender the third? Does the creation of all things really occur in temporal succession, one, two, three, or does it actually, in an uncanny sense, happen all at once?

And the ‘ten thousand things,’ the epithet in Taoist and Buddhist traditions for the myriad things of the phenomenal world, as opposed to the world of the absolute, which is characterized by oneness; *Sunstone* contains thousands of words, a stream of images that springs forth from this first image – could we not see the poem itself expressing the same truth of the relations between phenomena as described by Lao Tzu in his text? The second line, the image of the fountain engenders the fourth which is the first of the ‘ten thousand things’ – the image of the river:

a course of a river that turns, moves on,  
doubles back, and comes full circle,  
forever arriving:

The two trees are yoked to each other and to a greater reality which transcends and subsumes them by the fountain, and the fountain is likewise connected to an even deeper reality – the invisible, underground network streams and rivers which erupt into the visible world to produce the forms that we perceive with our senses. One begets two begets three begets four, but isn’t this last image in Paz’s poem the most fundamental of the lot? But these are simultaneous realities; there is no way to distinguish the foundation from the construction, the source from the expression. The poem establishes its own base, its own origin and end, by showing that in poetry – in this particular mode of language in which words are open to resonance and change, in which they look forward at the same time that they echo back – that there can be no base, nothing prior or subsequent.

Red Pine translates no. 42’s description of the myriad things as having “*yin* at their backs / and *yang* in their embrace,” which is to say that each line of the poem, each image, each ‘thing’, experience, aspect of the poet’s life or perceptions which is

contained within the body of the poem, everything that flows from this first image, is in constant dialogue with these first images of the poem; that every poetic phenomena within the poem is equally an expression of the push and pull, the embrace and the propulsion, that characterize this first image which we read as 'paradise'. We see that within this stream of the poem, the appearances of separate forms all interpenetrate; they are not in fact separate, but aspects of the same underlying reality which is fundamentally a wholeness. And we also see that this wholeness is not merely a unity of phenomena in space, the analogy and likeness of all words to all other words, but also in time: echoes, allusions, rhymes, repeated images and phrases – these all point to the fact that the entirety of the poem exists all at once at each particular instance of the poem. Paz constantly played with this idea in his writings, returning to an illuminating pun: *presente, presencia* – presence, present.

In *Sunstone* this image is alluded to and reappears in various guises (the body of his beloved, in the weather and the elements, in certain memories), and this transforms the meaning of the final image when we come to it. Something similar happens too in the Bible. Each of the prophets reformulate and transform the image of paradise as described in Genesis. If in the Old Testament, as in the words of the prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, the garden of Eden is seen still mostly as a place, an environment, which has been lost and which might one day be rediscovered somewhere on earth, or reestablished, in the New Testament, the garden becomes, through Christ, an image not of a place, but of a particular and always-present possibility of the soul: it becomes an image of the human.

Where Jeremiah speaks of the desolation of Israel and its future redemption and regeneration through God: “For the Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord;” Christ uses the same imagery of Genesis to immanentize the garden in his own person: “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink.” And moreover, this discovery of the water of life in the human form of Christ allows the believer to discover that they share the same nature as Christ, that they too contain paradise within them: “He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.”

When we first encounter the image of paradise in Paz’s poem, we are bewildered. We do not know where we are – we are confronted with a peculiar kind of world that we know only through our imagination of it; it is a world we have never seen. We sense some beauty and some order in the lines but we cannot make sense of them because we do not see how we ourselves fit into the image. We do not know our relation to it. The poet of Paz’s poem searches for this garden – this search and its fruitlessness constitutes the central conflict of the poem, the agony of the poet who wanders aimlessly, estranged, cut off from the source of his existence.

The poet searches for this lost nature in history and in nature, and most importantly in his female beloved – over and over these first images recur, but they are not apprehended in their entirety as at the start of the poem; rather, they are seen as aspects of things and people in the world; presences which speak to the poet and remind him of this lost awareness:

I walk through the streets of myself

under an ageless sun, and by my side  
 you walk like a tree, you walk like a river,  
 and talk to me like the course of a river

Here is the Garden, but as it is perceived by the poet who is still lost in the world of 'I and you', not yet arrived at the, "kingdom where pronouns are intertwined..."

When we finally arrive at the final image, which is no other than the first, we rediscover this place through a kind of failure: the last stanza of the poem begins: "I want to go on, to go further, and cannot:" This thing that the poet cannot do – it is to recover this paradise, it is to make the leap out of dualistic consciousness, the separation of the self, and back into wholeness. The poet wants to say this, wants to enact this transformation through language. But he cannot recover this nature through his own efforts; it is his own words that prevent him from recognizing the unity of his experience. The poet admits defeat, he cannot say what this wholeness is, and when he does so, he receives the final vision of the poem, its origin and end:

as each moment was dropping into another  
 I dreamt the dreams of dreamless stones,  
 and there at the end of the years like stones,  
 I heard my blood, singing in its prison,  
 and the sea sang with a murmur of light,  
 one by one the walls gave way,  
 all of the doors were broken down,  
 and the sun came bursting through my forehead,  
 it tore apart my closed lids,



cut loose my being from its wrappers,  
and pulled me out of myself to wake me  
from this animal sleep and its centuries of stone,  
and the sun's magic of mirrors revived  
a crystal willow, a poplar of water,  
a tall fountain the wind arches over,  
a tree deep-rooted yet dancing still,  
a course of a river that turns, moves on,  
doubles back, and comes full circle,  
forever arriving:

He himself is the image, he himself the poem. All of his suffering was nothing other than the paradise which he sought – though at the end, there is no one to realize this, there is merely the image – pure being, a return to the source; perfect identification between subject and object, the pure world of phenomena in a perfect dance of interbeing – a colon which leads us either out into the world, of which the poem is a part, or back into the poem, to begin the cycle anew, which in its wholeness reflects the completion of our existence in the world.