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Death Imagery in Octavio Paz's *Blanco*

*"La identidad, que es la muerte,
es la aspiración del intelecto.
La mente busca lo muerto, pues
lo vivo se le escapa"*

Miguel de Unamuno

The idea of death is a distinctive aspect of the work of Octavio Paz. Paz's work not only reflects his concern with the Mexican identity and the questions it entails, but also his personal obsession with death (Stavans 84). While there is a consensus on the central role of the idea of death in some of Paz's texts, such as *El Laberinto de la Soledad*, most scholars have overlooked its overwhelming presence some of his other works, such as his poem *Blanco*. Along with the death imagery, Xavier Villaurrutia's influence on this poem has also been neglected, despite the fact that Paz cited him as his most important precursor. Villaurrutia's poetry—as well as Paz's criticism of it—is relevant to the reading of *Blanco*, because it helps unravel *Blanco's* death

images; when Villaurrutia's influence is taken into consideration, Paz's use of the color white as its title, and his use of the ideas of silence, bones, nothingness, and *tierra* become clear death references. Since death is the unifying force that "*atraviesa como un hilo oscuro la compleja trama de la obra entera de Octavio Paz*" (Rodríguez Monegal 127), its identification within *Blanco* will result in a deeper reading of this poem that can lead to a better understanding of his work, and consequently, shed light on the complexity of the Mexican identity. Furthermore, *Blanco*'s death symbols also attest to Paz's participation in the construction of a collective view of death that helped create a much-needed national identity in post-Revolution Mexico.

Obviously, Paz's fixation with death did not start *in vacuo*. Around the time he published *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (1950), death was in the air; other important Mexican poets who belonged to the *Contemporáneos* group were dealing with the idea of death in their own ways; José Gorostiza published *Muerte sin Fin*, and Xavier Villaurrutia was working on *Nostalgia de la Muerte*. The *Contemporáneos* belonged to an older generation, whose influence Paz openly acknowledged in his work. He identified Villaurrutia as one of his strongest influences; therefore, in order to understand the importance of death in the work of Paz, it is necessary to study first the parallels between both poets. In his book *Xavier Villaurrutia en persona y en obra*, Paz places Villaurrutia's poetry—and, consequently, his own—within the Hispanic literary tradition that is obsessed with death, with López Velarde being the most recent of his precursors (70). While the obsessive character that death acquired for the Mexican writers of Villaurrutia's generation was intertwined with the skepticism that resulted from the failure of the Mexican Revolution (Paz, *Xavier* 78), it further connected them with their Hispanic literary tradition; Villaurrutia's sense of despair and skepticism resembles that of the Generation of '98, particularly that of Unamuno. For Paz, the core of Villaurrutia's poetry is about the duality between *vigilia/sueño* (Paz, *Xavier*

56), which brings to mind Unamuno's poem *El Cristo de Velázquez*:

*blanco cual luna de la noche. Es sueño,
Cristo, la vida y es la muerte vela.
Mientras la tierra sueña solitaria,
vela la blanca luna; vela el Hombre
desde su cruz, mientras los hombres sueñan;* (26-30)

While Paz uses this duality to explain the paradoxes in Villaurrutia's poetry: "*despertar es morir. . .vivimos nuestra muerte. El contenido de nuestra vida es nuestra muerte,*" it also explains Paz's own philosophy: "*nuestra verdadera patria es la muerte y por eso sentimos nostalgia de ella*" (Paz, *Xavier* 81). That same *vigilia/sueño* image is present in *Blanco* as one of its many death references: "*O dormido/o extinto*" (27-28), "*país de espejos en vela/país de agua despierta/en la noche dormida*" (101-103). Furthermore, this association is also found in one of Paz's later poems, *Pasado en Claro* (1974) in the passage where he refers to his father: "*Lo encuentro ahora en sueños, /Esa borrosa patria de los muertos*" (363-364), thus connecting Paz's universalist *Blanco* to the Hispanic literary narrative where it belongs, despite Paz's deliberate intention to make it a mandala-inspired "succession of signs" (Paz, *The Collected* 311).

Both Villaurrutia and Paz aimed to be universal, but they could not escape their own Mexican-ness. Since their idea of death as "*patria*" results from deep self-reflection, it seems to be universalist on the surface, but it is rooted in the death imagery that abounds in Mexican folk culture. While some scholars like Frank Dauster describe Villaurrutia's work as showing the universal horror for death (42), Paz views the poet's reaction to death as deeply Mexican, as an occasion of seclusion and acceptance (Paz, *Xavier* 67). However, Paz also mentions that Villaurrutia's death is neutral and does not show any elements of Mexican folklore. This denial

of the presence of the vernacular death imagery in Villaurrutia's poetry is significant because it can be interpreted as Paz's own attempt to transcend the restrictions that come with his Mexican identity, as an attempt to achieve universality. Villaurrutia's contact with the vernacular death imagery is undeniable; regarding the cultural atmosphere that surrounded him, Paz noted: "*en la pintura de esa época abundan las Calaveras, los esqueletos... fastos de la muerte Mexicana*" (Paz, *Xavier* 79). Furthermore, Villaurrutia was as equally involved with lowbrow art forms—he wrote lyrics for commercial songs under a pseudonym—as he was with his literary production (Linstrom 97). An example of this death-shaped Mexican-ness that often comes uninvited to the surface of Paz and Villaurrutia's texts is his poem *Nocturno en que Habla la Muerte*, in which Villaurrutia builds a neutral setting—a hotel room in New Haven—that serves as a background for the appearance of the quintessential Mexican motif: the anthropomorphic character of death. The poem's death is not an abstract, universal idea; instead, it displays the distinctive corporeal attribute of the Mexican death character. His death moves around, travels, and hides: "*Si la muerte hubiera venido aquí, a New Haven, /escondida en el hueco de mi ropa en la maleta*" (1-2). Furthermore, the way death talks to the author, with the familiarity of a close companion, confirms the presence of the folkloric death in the poem:

Ni las infantiles argucias con que has querido dejarme

Engañada, olvidada.

Aquí estoy, ¿no me sientes?

Abre los ojos; ciérralos, si quieres." (32-35).

This character serves Villaurrutia—as it does in popular culture—as a reminder of the inevitability of death, of its imminent threat: "*Aquí estoy, ¿No me sientes?*"(34). Although Paz and Villaurrutia's work deal with existential issues—Villaurrutia was concerned with being alive,

while Paz dealt with the meaning of being a modern Mexican—that give them the satisfaction of considering themselves universalists, those same existential questions lead them to deal with the particular issue of their Mexican identity, and therefore with the Mexican idea of death.

Even though there is a plethora of literature on the life and work of Octavio Paz, little has been written about the presence of death images in *Blanco*. Scholars agree with Paz that *Blanco* is his most ambitious and complex poem.¹ Given Paz's status as Mexican ambassador to India during the time he wrote the poem, the academic discussion on *Blanco* leans towards the East vs. West idea; much of its criticism focuses on its influences from eastern philosophy, particularly tantric Buddhism (Quiroga 142). Other influences on *Blanco* have been widely discussed, such as structuralism—mainly the work of Levi-Strauss, since Paz wrote *Claude Levi-Strauss o El Nuevo Festín De Esopo* in 1970, a few years after the publication of *Blanco* (Williamson 94)—and relativism, which has been associated with Paz's use of opposites and paradoxes that invite multiple readings (Williamson 101; Fein 66, 68). The attempts to decipher this complex poem are as varied as the possibilities of its interpretation; authors like Pere Gimferrer have interpreted *Blanco* as a love poem, others, like the José Quiroga, offer an analysis of the poem's structure (135), while Rodney Williamson has attempted to do a Jungian reading of it, just to mention a few examples.

If there is any doubt about *Blanco*'s emphasis on its own materiality and the experience it entails, Paz's instructions at the beginning of the poem certainly provide clarification. His authorial intent to create the experience of reading a poem-object that is as self-contained as the mandala it emulates is evident.² This conspicuous characteristic of *Blanco* has lead critics to interpret it as an artifice invested solely in the physicality of sensory experience, therefore disregarding the richness of cultural associations that lie in the images within the poem. An

example of this approach is work by Jean Franco, who argues that *Blanco* is a poem that centers the reader in the present (160). By claiming this, she is completely missing the image associations that link that sensory experience of the present with its history in the culture that contains it. On that same note, Williamson states: “there is only one truly archetypal image in *Blanco* and that is the mandala which is the poem itself. . .the rest is simply words” (103). This argument seems to contradict his own explanation that in Buddhist philosophy the color white signifies fullness, synthesis, and the state of complete being (100). Thus, in the context of Paz's idea of the nothingness that exists before and after the poem, *blanco*, or the color white, is more than a simple word; it becomes an abstract representation of the archetype of death.

Besides the color white, there are other images in *Blanco* that represent the idea of death. Such is the case of words like *la nada*, *huesos*, *silencio*, and *tierra*. The idea of nothingness, or *la nada*, seems to be the first one that the reader encounters when he reads *Blanco*. At the beginning of the introductory note, Paz defines *Blanco* as “blank; an unmarked space; emptiness; void. . .” (311), or, in other words, nothingness. Donald Southerland has identified Paz's use of blank space as an important element of the poem that is related to Mallarmé's nothingness, turning death into one of *la nada*'s forms (203). Instead of using the idea of nothingness uniquely as a “revival *de Mallarmé*,” Paz evokes this term's association with death in the Hispanic tradition, which once again can be found in Unamuno's work. In *Del Sentimiento Trágico de la Vida*, Unamuno demonstrates how, in the Hispanic mind, nothingness is synonymous with death:

Y es que los hombres desgraciados, cuando conservan la sanidad en su desgracia, es decir, cuando se esfuerzan por perseverar en su ser, prefieren la desgracia a la no existencia... y aun de niño, no lograron conmoverme las

patéticas pinturas que del infierno se me hacían, pues ya desde entonces nada se me aparecía tan horrible como la nada misma. (Unamuno 13)

But unlike Unamuno's anguish over death, Paz's representation of nothingness is not only the blank space in which the text is written, it is evoked through a series of associations: *cara en blanco, olvido, lo vacío, pierdo, and sombra*. Paz's nothingness is a place that exists somewhere in the past where we will eventually return, the *patria* where we ultimately belong. Thus he recalls Villaurrutia's nostalgic vision of death: "*la cara en blanco del olvido, /el resplandor de lo vacío./Pierdo mi sombra*" (183-185).

Out of all the death images of *Blanco*, *huesos* is the poem's strongest bond with Paz's Mexican identity, with his national history. Starting with the context in which the poem was written, it has often been pointed out that the non-Western character of the Indian culture reminded Paz of Mexico (Caistor 95). Southerland even states that "*La abigarrada turbulencia de la escultura de ciertos templos hindúes se habría correspondido con las fuentes católica o azteca de su país*" (204). It is reasonable to assume that the exoticism shared by both cultures could lead him to reflect on his own country. Having dealt extensively in *El Laberinto de la Soledad* with the essential role of the character of death within Mexican culture as one of the few aspects that is present in both of its mother cultures, it was only natural that the image of death would appear in *Blanco*, despite his intention to create "a succession of signs on a single page" (Paz, *Collected* 311). Literally, *huesos* are the physical remains of the dead; they are the material with which Mexican folklore builds its most distinctive character: death, in a *calavera* shape. They are also a metaphor for our ancestors, and their permanence in the ground connects civilizations with both their past and their landscape. Gimferrer, one of the authors who believes *Blanco* rejects exterior themes, states

that “what takes place is happening within the poem, alluding only to the poem’s reality” (61), arguing that Paz’s inclusion of external references such as Mexican orography functions only as means to construct the internal structure of the poem, instead of connecting it with meanings from the exterior world:

entre sableras llemeantes:
Castillas de arena, naipes rotos
y el jeroglífico (agua y brasa)
en el pecho de México caído.
Polvo soy de aquellos lodos.
Río de sangre,
río de historias
de sangre, (62-69)

It is clear how this passage continues with *Blanco*’s cohesive use of colors and sensations. However, the words *jeroglífico*, *México caído*, *río de historias*, and *Río de sangre* depict a lot more than just geographic accidents; they speak of the tragic history of Mexico. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that Paz placed the word *huesos* in the lines right after this powerful depiction of Mexico’s past: “*por la conjuración anónima/de los huesos, /por la ceñuda peña de los siglos,*” where the words *anónima*, *ceñuda peña*, and *siglos* reinforce the sensation of the passing of time.

Paz openly rejected *indigenismo* (Brotherston 146) and the post-Revolution process of nationalization of culture that was based on Vasconcelos and Gamio’s ideas on *mestizaje* (Taylor 98), yet pre-Hispanic motifs were central in some of his most celebrated poems like *Piedra de Sol*. This allusion to pre-Columbian Mexico is also part of the associations of *huesos*; his

employment of “*pulir huesos*” brings to mind his ancestors’ practice of polishing bones for the creation of artifacts and weapons:

Hablar

Mientras los otros trabajan

es pulir huesos,

aguzar

silencios (85-89)

And along with those white bones comes their inevitable silence. Consequently, Paz’s use of the word *silencio* works as a death image. In *El Laberinto de la Soledad* he used silence to describe the melancholic nature of the (Mexican) Indian: “*se funde con el paisaje, . . . con el silencio que lo rodea. . . y se vuelve piedra, pirú, muro, silencio: espacio*” (47). Analisa Taylor interprets this aspect of Paz’s writing as “an example of indigenista literary sensibility” (96). She explains how, due to his inability to understand the indigenous people’s language, he perceives them as being silent and hermetic. On the other hand, Sutherland points out that Paz describes Mexican silence as being mortal (204). Both of Paz’s associations of silence—with the Indian and with death—explain why the word *silencio* appears next to *huesos* in *Blanco*: “*es pulir huesos, /aguzar /silencios /hasta la transparencia*” (87-90). By using *huesos* and *silencios* in that sequence of words, Paz recreates his own image of Mexico, its past, and its death.

In *Xavier Villaurrutia en Persona y en Obra*, Paz discusses how Villaurrutia’s death does not have “*tierra*” in the literary sense of the word, meaning that although death is the central theme of his poetry, it does not have any reference to Mexican funerary practices (71). This aspect of Paz’s analysis of Villaurrutia’s work is relevant to the reading of *Blanco*

because it indicates that *tierra* can be interpreted as a word associated with death. *Tierra*'s first appearance takes place in the first section: “*enterrada con los ojos abiertos*” (10); the word “*enterrada*” is one of the poem's clearest indications of the presence of death. While burial is a universal concept, the second part of the verse, “*con los ojos abiertos*” relates to the uniquely active life of the Mexican character of death. Since, in Mexican folklore, death is paradoxically a quite lively character that “*pelea, se emborracha, llora y baila*” (Rivera 370) in a skeletal body whose empty eye sockets do not stop her from seeing—on the contrary, they seem to act as wide-open eyes—it is likely that Paz is referring to this character in this verse. From the beginning, Paz makes *tierra* a literal image of death; therefore, the rest of this word's appearances, such as “*la tierra es un lenguaje calcinado*” (113) or “*Cielo abierto, tierra cerrada*” (137), can also be read as death images.

The intellectual life of Paz dwelled in both his solitude and his social responsibility. His work has been praised for its ability to reconcile the duality between individuality and the world (Stavans 83-84; Gimferrer 90). This remarkable characteristic is present in his treatment of death; whereas he identified Villaurrutia's use of death as intimate and personal, a symbol of his rejection of the outside world, he corrected this shortcoming in his predecessor's work by incorporating elements of the vernacular idea of death into his own work. *Blanco* is a perfect example of the cohabitation of the universal and the particular in Paz's work. While this poem has universal traits—such as its form—Paz's lifetime concern with the meaning of his Mexican-ness is also an important part of it. Identifying the images in *Blanco* is key to appreciating the depth of Paz's work, and, more importantly, acknowledging Paz's contribution to the construction of a post-Revolution national identity in which the idea of death played a central role.

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