VERBAL SOCIETY:
Poetry and Poets at the End of the Twentieth Century

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UNDERSTANDING OCTAVIO PAZ. By José Quiroga. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1999. Pp. 208. $29.95 cloth.)

FROM ART TO POLITICS: OCTAVIO PAZ AND THE PURSUIT OF FREEDOM. By Yvon Grenier. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001. Pp. 152. $29.95 cloth.)

NERUDA'S EKPHRASTIC EXPERIENCE: MURAL ART AND CANTO GENERAL. By Hugo Méndez-Ramírez. (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 1999. Pp. 244. $43.50 cloth.)

MAGDA PORTAL: LA PASIONARIA PERUANA. BIOGRAFÍA INTELECTUAL. By Daniel R. Reedy. (Lima, Perú: Ediciones Flora Tristán, 2000. Pp. 386. $30.00 paper)

POETS OF CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICA: HISTORY AND THE INNER LIFE. By William Rowe. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. 370. $78.00 cloth.)

"A poem is a society of words"
Robert Duncan

This epigraph, the inspiration for my title, gives us a condensed version of one possible attitude toward poetry; an approach that situates poetic language not as outside of, but as part of a community of discourses. This is William Rowe's method in *Poets of Contemporary Latin America: History and the Inner Life* (and I borrow the quote from him). Rowe reads a constellation of poets who shift poetry's conventional boundaries to use their work as a means of thinking through contemporary issues; in the process, they alter our expectations as readers. All of the books under review form another kind of society of words, through the association of poets and critical approaches to poetry from the last several years. Their approaches to the genre range from traditional, author-centered biographical readings (Daniel R. Reedy on

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Magda Portal and José Quiroga on Octavio Paz, in part) and text-centered readings (Quiroga, Rowe), to readings that open dialogues between poetry and others arts (Hugo Méndez-Ramírez) and situate the poet as an intellectual and political thinker (Quiroga and Yvon Grenier). This array of approaches tells us something about where poetry is today in the cultural assemblage of Latin American arts and letters.

The fact that two of these books deal with Octavio Paz attests to his centrality as one of the most influential cultural figures in Mexico in the second half of the twentieth century. In *Understanding Octavio Paz*, José Quiroga provides a detailed examination of the Mexican author's major works in both poetry and essay and in the process demonstrates his deep familiarity with Paz's work and cultural milieu. He illuminates Paz's writing through both his readings and by situating Paz's poetry in relation to his own writings about aesthetics and politics and in terms of his literary and intellectual antecedents: Stéphane Mallarmé, Charles Pierre Baudelaire, Comte de Lautrégment, Luís Cernuda, and Martin Heidegger, among others. While the scope of Quiroga's study is broad, it offers much more than an overview of Paz's multifarious work; in roughly chronological order, he agilely moves between Paz's autobiographical and critical works and incorporates detailed readings of his major poems into this analytical stream. In the process Quiroga demonstrates that Paz's criticism "is not written forward, but backward; it is a route in reverse" (141).

One of the ways Paz accomplishes this is through continual revisions of his work and throughout his study Quiroga offers us several possible reasons why Paz kept his work in process: one was to create an ideal history (exemplified by changes in the contents and ordering of *Libertad bajo palabra*), another was to bring out his own original intentions through correction (19). Paz does not deny his previous work; according to Quiroga, he repeats it and at the same time varies it (113), a technique the author demonstrates through his archival research on the production of the poem "Blanco" in chapter seven. This reading includes wonderful detail and Quiroga uncovers many insightful aspects of Paz as a poet and as a shaper of the poem as a paradoxical "historical and anti-historical machine" (52). Quiroga sidesteps some of the possibilities that his own research presents. Early on he states that the "polemical Paz" is outside the scope of this book (6). This stance means that Quiroga avoids analyzing Paz's attempts to control the interpretation of his work, his self-monumentalization, and the contradictions between his argument that poets are outsiders and his own central position in the Latin American cultural world. While he struggles with Paz's self-interpretations, perhaps the poet's own version of his work over-determines some elements of Quiroga's reading. This may have led the critic to constrict his focus at times; while history is

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continually brought into the readings, it is sometimes too narrowly Mexican, determined, perhaps, by elements from Paz's biography. The relationship between the events of Tlatelolco and the collection *Vuelta*, for example, are unavoidable, yet Quiroga only brings up possible relationships between Paz's intellectual evolution and the cold war briefly mentioned in the conclusion (178). This fine book could have benefited from more head-on confrontation with the polemical Paz, for Quiroga certainly demonstrates that he has the intellectual acumen to tackle both Paz's strengths and weaknesses.

Yvon Grenier approaches this cultural icon from a different perspective, that of a political scientist reading Paz's essays in terms of how they join politics and art. Although poetry is left out, *From Art to Politics: Octavio Paz and the Pursuit of Freedom* offers us the unusual opportunity to think about politics from a cultural or artistic perspective. Grenier proposes that Paz's political thought stems from both the European-influenced intellectual tradition of Enlightenment liberalism and certain ideas derived from Western Romanticism. The author explains that Paz's liberal "affinity"—it is not a "position," he cautions us (48)—is based on the concept of the free individual, "equality of condition, faith in progress," and universalism and its institutional form, democracy (51). Combined with romanticism's notion of artistic creation and the organic craving for self-expression and self-assertion, Grenier proposes that Paz does not fit categories such as "right" or "left," but is a syncretic political thinker who combines two European intellectual traditions that are marginal in Mexico. In this way Grenier analyzes some of the polemics Paz created in less personal terms, for he poses them as a clash between two "rival intellectual movements" (x).

The author struggles with how to separate Paz as poet, essayist, and intellectual. The resulting inevitable confusion, he finds, is consistent with romantic notions that do not differentiate between the theory and practice of art (9). Taking a sociological approach to culture, Grenier is quickly dismissive of literary theory and other important ideas if they problematize his own perspective. One example of this is his approach to Foucault, to whom Grenier responds: "if power is everywhere, it is nowhere in particular, and the distinction between use and abuse is lost" (8). While there is a kernel of truth in this retort, it does not contradict Foucault's complex ideas about the function of power in literature and society.

The idea of social and cultural power is, in fact, a thread that connects many pieces of this study, as it did Paz's life and work. The second chapter "Environments" brings this right to the surface in Grenier's examination of Mexico's intellectual environment, of literature and art's contributions to politics, and the relationship between culture and the state. He notes the limited autonomy of Mexican intellectuals, the rela-

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tionship between intellectual creativity and proximity to power, and the clash between Paz, the artist-intellectual, and professional academics who frequently engaged with him. George Yúdice's critique of Paz is brought up as an example of the academic reaction to Paz in the fourth chapter. Grenier finds that "Paz is not condemned because he is guilty, he is guilty because he is condemned" (102). He notes a similarity between Paz's and Jürgen Habermas's critiques of modernity, proposing that it is his identity both as a Mexican and a liberal democrat that prevents Paz's insights from being taken seriously in the North American academy. Yet this assertion seems ludicrous, given the kind and amount of attention Paz has received inside and outside of Mexico. Some of the contradictions in Paz's thought and action which provoke criticism like Yúdice's are enumerated in the next chapter: the clash between corporate sponsorship and taking a rebel role; support for the government's neoliberal policies and the critique of capitalism; the backing of presidents Carlos Salinas and Ernesto Zedillo, and the critique of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional's "democracy." Grenier claims that he does not intend to apologize for these facets of Paz's thought, but to situate his ideas as part of a romantic criticism of modern society—"fundamentally open-ended, aesthetic, and moral in nature," and not connected to a "particular timetable or political agenda" (118). But in the fervor of his tone and his continued reverence toward many of Paz's ideas, Grenier does at times cross the line from explication to apology and, still further, to defense.

This author does not avoid controversy but steps into it, and while he claims he is not using his ideas to excuse Paz's "incoherence," he does, in effect, demonstrate why Paz has been such a target. Paz did wield real political power in Mexico by blessing certain authors and intellectuals with his support and not others; controlling publication opportunities; and using his own access to forums and audiences, national and international, in a variety of ways. This is why he provokes such vehemence in both his critics and defenders. Paz's cultural power and fame resulted in the first generation of admiring literary critics (typified by the studies of Enrique Mario Santí and Anthony Stanton) and a later one, more willing to question other facets of his role as Mexican intellectual (seen in the work of Jorge Aguilar Mora and Rubén Medina). Grenier does not take a neutral stance, but uses Paz's writing to demonstrate how "art can inspire fresh thinking about politics" (127). As the argument unfolds he also reveals, perhaps unwillingly, how an artist and critic can manipulate politics to his own advantage.

While these books take a different approach to Octavio Paz's role as poet, essayist, and cultural guru in Mexico, Hugo Méndez-Ramírez in his recent book returns to an earlier emblematic presence in Latin American culture, another winner of the Nobel Prize in literature who has

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dominated Latin American poetry from the late 1920s to the present day—Pablo Neruda.[1] Neruda shares certain traits with Paz: both poets' work was well recognized in their lifetimes, both benefited from state support and were consuls to many countries (some of them the same), and both resigned or were removed from these posts at one time because of disagreements with national politics. Neruda, however, unlike Paz, was not an essayist and does not have a large body of writing about aesthetics and politics balanced against his poetry. Instead, his biography details his personal, professional, and political life; his loves and his rivalries, his election as a senator in 1945, representing the Chilean Communist party, form another textual corpus. Neruda's cultural power is different than Paz's; outside of his country he is *the* regional poet who voices "the genius of a place and a people," as John Felsteiner, one of his many translators, explains it (7), and he is a Communist, criticized by many North Americans and their allies, especially during the Cold War period, for representing an impossible political idealism.[2] Nevertheless, Neruda is not known for ideological inconsistencies. In Chile he is a poet whose works cross lines between high and popular cultures and whose homes have become monuments to his role in national culture. This latter trait may be part of a fairly recent "domestication" of his image, for he is still strongly associated with the left, Salvador Allende, and the *golpe de estado* that initiated Pinochet's dictatorship—a moment marked by the sacking of these houses, the poet's demise, and subsequent attempts to repress his popularity.

Méndez-Ramírez's study reinforces Neruda's popularity, in the Spanish sense of *"popular"* (*del pueblo*), by focusing on Neruda's connection to Mexican muralism. His study *Neruda's Ekphrastic Experience: Mural Art and Canto General* makes Neruda's Mexican experience (his years as a consul there, 1940–43) central to the creation of his magnum opus, the *Canto General* (published in Mexico in 1950).[3] Méndez-Ramírez explains the change in Neruda's poetry, not just in terms of the Spanish Civil War (critics frequently use his own self-referential poem "Explico algunas cosas" from *España en el corazón* to explain the shift from metaphysics to history), but as a result of his contact with Mexican muralists and their concept of art. While this is an insight mentioned in passing by multiple commentators of Neruda's work, Méndez-Ramírez's

1. Neruda's continued, though changing, cultural relevance is evidenced by the essays in the Teresa Longo's recently published collection *Pablo Neruda and the U.S. Culture Industry* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

2. John Felstiner, *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1980).

3. Originally published in Mexico in 1950 by both Comité Auspiciador and Ediciones Océano.

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originality resides in the depth of his readings and the fine points of the associations he draws. He reads the *Canto General* as part of an inter-artistic dialogue and demonstrates how this dialogue may explain the "chaotic" structure of the *Canto*.

Méndez-Ramírez gives each issue its due: he begins by recounting the history of image-text tradition and the role of ekphrasis, or verbal representation of a visual representation (35). He poses muralism as an "archetrope" which compels and guides Neruda to the "artistic image" (41) or the linguistic equivalent of muralism in his epic poem. He supports his reading by analyzing the first edition of the *Canto General*, which included paintings by Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siquieros as well as making links between the poetry and Rivera's other murals, "Creation" and "Amor América." Méndez-Ramírez argues that the mythical dimensions of the muralists correspond to the epic proportions of the poetry, but his analysis is best when making specific comparisons. He brings out the meta-textual and meta-artistic aspects and the didacticism in both media; he compares the synchronicity of images in the same mural frame to Neruda's multiple verb tenses and finds analogies between poetic technique, such as enjambment, and the visual and thematic circularity, continuity, and immortality present in the murals (141). He draws attention to allied perspectives in the different media and the focus on heroes and villains—a point of view similar to that favored in medieval painting and the muralists' ultimate goal to "destroy old idols of the mind"(172).

By putting poetry into dialogue with other art forms, Méndez-Ramírez demonstrates one way of inserting poetry into a broader cultural context. In this way he reads the *Canto General* as process and draws attention to earlier editions and the physical appearance of the books. This kind of reading revitalizes certain elements of the *Canto General*'s popularity, for the work itself is not often read in its entirety; instead, certain sections have come to represent synecdochically the whole (e.g, "Las alturas de Macchu Picchu"). In its scope and reach the *Canto General* has been compared to works of Anglo high modernism, such as T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland* or Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. While these works are undoubtedly influences, Méndez-Ramírez convinces us that the *Canto General* fits much better in the muralist tradition because of shared political ideals, autochtonous themes, and a mutual interest in revealing American history to a broad audience. This author's focus on a narrow time period and use of detailed comparisons demonstrate a productive methodology for re-reading a major figure and his most ambitious book.

Daniel R. Reedy's book *Magda Portal: La pasionaria peruana. Biografía intelectual* analyzes the work and life of another significant intellectual and political figure of twentieth-century Spanish America. Magda

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Portal, however, while perhaps both famous and infamous in her native Peru, is not nearly as well known throughout the region as Paz or Neruda, and she has received scant international attention. When she is recognized outside of Peru, it may be primarily in her role as an important social activist, rather than as a writer. Reedy's intellectual biography also highlights this aspect of her life, interweaving her political activity into her biography and a reading of her works. The author includes detailed consideration throughout of her poetry, stories, and essays, and these works are most often situated in terms of her biography—linked to people, places, and incidents in her fascinating life. In this, Reedy continues the biographical tendency particularly favored in reading women's writing. A large portion of Portal's writing encourages this association for hers is often a kind of confessional literature or personal lyric in the Romantic tradition; amplifying her personal experiences makes them emblematic of broader female experience in our "polarized gender systems."[4] The danger in this kind of reading, though, is that critics may come to see the works and life as one, to read the first-person pronoun only in limited biographical terms; Gabriela Mistral, with whom Portal is often compared here, was read much the same way. Now significant revisions of Mistral's work have depended upon separating her poetic persona from her biography and on examining her as one of a line of women writers who dealt with what was frequently a split between their public and private selves. This kind of analysis does not happen here, however, for Reedy stays within a more conventional definition of literary biography.

Considerable intellectual and political history of Peru is included here—the multiple visions of Portal's fundamental role in politics (particularly of her centrality to the founding of APRA, twentieth-century Peru's most important political party) and of her continued political commitment to socialism through multiple administrations (her activism led more than once to imprisonment and exile). Throughout her life story, Reedy also calls attention to her increasing feminism and the rise of gender consciousness in Peru. Portal exemplifies changing roles for women in multiple territories, and in the realm of poetry Reedy follows José Carlos Martiátegui's lead and reads her as one of the early twentieth-century Spanish American "women poets" among her contemporaries—Alfonsina Storni, Delmira Agustini, Juana de Ibarbourbou, Gabriela Mistral. Reedy offers intriguing information about Portal's essays on Mistral and Storni, and how Mistral intervened on Portal's behalf when she was in exile in 1940. Future scholars could

4. This phrase comes from Diane Middlebrook and Marilyn Yalom's introduction to the collection *Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985).

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take this one step further, perhaps, by opening a broader dialogue between these women and their texts, focusing on lesser-known texts, reading against the grain, and analyzing whether they shared certain strategies for confronting the conventions of cultural authority. Reedy demonstrates that Portal's writing is more analytical in her essays about social issues, such as workers' rights and questioning gender roles; she seems to fulfill certain stereotypes more conventionally in her poetry, which is rhymed, autobiographical, and largely confessional. When her poetic style shifts to include social issues, Reedy contrasts it to her essays and to political poems by César Vallejo and Neruda.

At the end of the book, the author notes the lack of attention to Portal's work and life until the 1970s, when she was resuscitated to serve as a precursor to the growing women's movement both inside and outside of Peru (he remarks that Portal has a place setting at Judy Chicago's installation, *Dinner Party*). Daniel Reedy's own work is a fundamental part of this recuperation. In *Magda Portal: La pasionaria peruana*, he lays out much needed historical and textual groundwork, brings together thought-provoking information about her work, and chronicles her intellectual and political contributions to national and regional culture and politics, paving the way for the next line of scholars who take up this compelling cultural figure.

The final book under consideration here, William Rowe's *Poets of Contemporary Latin America*, differs from the other four in that it only considers poetry, and it does so in the work of a variety of modern Latin American writers. Rather than concentrating on a particular figure, Rowe's work is driven by a general proposal about what poetry has done and what it can do in a contemporary setting. The author suggests that two main stylistic inheritances in poetry of the region have emerged since the 1950s: that of the avant-garde and the tradition of political poetry—according to Rowe, it is the latter that has formed the prevalent image of what Latin American poetry is for Anglo and North American readers. Both of these models determine how much poetry is read, for they create their object of study (I would add *modernismo* to these categories, though Rowe includes this as a precursor to the avant-garde; in some ways it is a separate line of influence that continues to guide readings of Spanish American poetry throughout the twentieth century). He proposes that we learn "new ways of reading from poems themselves" (6), from what poetry has to say about the realm of the symbolic, language, and the limits of expression. He uses the work of Nicanor Parra, Ernesto Cardenal, Gonzalo Rojas, Jorge Eduardo Eielson, Juan L. Ortiz, Ana Enriqueta Terán, Raúl Zurita, and Carmen Ollé to argue for a new era of post-avant-garde poetics that leads to a process of "active discovery." Through this combination of well-known and lesser-known authors, he tells us a lot about what

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emerged in Latin American poetry during the second half of the last century.

His first chapter on Nicanor Parra's work, "The Poem as Amoeba," exemplifies how his methodology takes us beyond prior readings of Parra's anti-poetry. Rather than characterize his use of language as "ordinary," "conversational," or "transparent," Rowe argues that it is analytical. Through his language Parra examines the social formation of reality through speech and investigates the social pathology of communication. The poem has an amoebic relationship to the world in that the boundaries between inside and outside are constantly in flux. The poem, like an amoeba, draws nutrients from outside, and like poetry, this amoeba "reproduces through endless division and so in a sense never dies" (57–58). Each chapter offers more examples of readings that go beyond conventional classifications of these poets. Rowe pays attention to patterned sound in Cardenal's "Hora O" and to time, breath, and the first person pronoun as "an embodiment of writing and its operative effects" in Chilean Gonzalo Rojas' work (161). Eielson's poem-sculptures demonstrate challenges to the boundaries of the poetic, and Raúl Zurita's poetry and performances makes space an event. "Doubts, vacillations and uncertainties" characterize the poetry of Argentine Juan L. Ortiz and "make the act of reading approximative" (224). Unlike many recent critics, Rowe does not just read the two female poets he considers in terms of intimacy, or how they write the body erotic. Instead, he finds that Venezuelan Ana Enriqueta Terán's work explores the poem as a place of creative action and the ways in which the body becomes an organ of knowledge, while Peruvian Carmen Ollé creates a "productive body" (331) in her poetry by using language to dismantle symbolism and as *materia prima* for creative invention and the recuperation of an inner life.

Throughout his readings, Rowe makes reference to a wide range of texts, prose, and poetry, primary and theoretical, from an array of traditions, situating Latin American poetry in a global context.[5] Inevitably, how Octavio Paz figures here may be indicative of shifts in the possible roles of poetry coming into the twenty-first century. Paz's voice is heard at the end of the introduction in a discussion of the relationship of poetry to history (a term that appears in the book's subtitle). Here Rowe reminds us that Paz, in effect arguing against the tradition of political poetry in Latin America, repeatedly asserted that "poetry should not be taken as symmetrical with history, as 'the word of history or antihistory'" (25–26). Paz's struggle against history makes poetry into a kind of transcending discourse that works on an intellectual level or as a kind of religious statement. This attitude restricts what

5. Although references in Spanish or from Anglo-American sources predominate.

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poetry, its readers, and the poet can do. Rowe counters with the idea that history is no one's property, but a material trace made readable by interpretation, a "task to be fulfilled in the future" (27). It is a way of writing that often exists outside of institutional spaces, outside of the "official" writing of history, for poetry writes prehistory or post-history, not a "smooth story," according to Rowe (27). It is another way of recording, analyzing, and writing that revises given notions of both history and poetry.

Reading outside of Paz's definitions means that late twentieth-century poets may use elements of the Occidental lyric tradition in distinct cultural and historical situations, not to restore or to outdo that tradition, but to make something else. In this case, to include poetry in a community of discourses. All of the poets Rowe studies have moved away from biography or confession and use their poetry as "a means of thinking" (19). While *Poets of Contemporary Latin America* does not include a "representative" sample of the myriad themes, styles, and problems taken up by poets, it does move beyond classification to reveal multiple roles for the lyric today. In a world in which poetry competes with new media and means of communication, such as film and the computer, this book demonstrates what literature can do. Poets (and their readers) may unleash inherited or imposed languages and poetics to expand possibilities of communication, enlarge "poetry" as a category of understanding, and transform and confront cultural conceptions of what lyric poetry can do and be.[6]

All of these books point to the fact that poetry is a powerful cultural practice that forms and informs a variety of cultural debates in contemporary Latin America. Poets and their work take part in struggles about aesthetics and politics, visual and written representation, biographical and invented subject positions, gender roles, history and modernity. Because of its dependence on formal traditions, contemporary poetry is always linked to the past. The community of readers it creates must, therefore, form bridges between past and present, at times reinforcing convention and sometimes shifting the boundaries of how poetry is understood. The formal history of the genre is a kind of architecture, a set of possibilities that brings together tradition and innovation in language. By means of the tools of their trade and in spite of time and distance, poets communicate with one another and with their readers; they use the society of their words to create society about words—to make us think again about language and the creation of community.

6. The concept of poetry as a "category of understanding" comes from the conclusion of Joe Harrington's recent book on contemporary North American poetry, *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

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