The Blue Fire of the Double Flame

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As the original fire of universal life, sexuality rules living beings with a single and determining end: reproduction; key to survival and renewal of life itself. But in humans – as Paz highlights – sexuality goes beyond this one end; it diversifies limitlessly, transforming itself into eroticism. "Eroticism is not mere animal sexuality: it's a ceremony, a representation. Eroticism is transfigured sexuality: a metaphor. The agent that moves both the erotic and poetic acts is imagination" (Paz 1993: 10).

They are not equivalent. "Animal" sexuality is programmed and ruled by a single imperative: survival. Not so human sexuality, which does not remain as such but is instead, transformed into eroticism, its manifestations pluralized without losing its natural and instinctive root as another facet of the vital fire. "Eroticism is the human dimension of sexuality, that which imagination adds to nature" (Paz 1993: 117); it is an inventive mode, innovative. Sexuality, for its part, is uniform, reiterative: "Sex is always the same", says Paz.

Eroticism would be polymorphic - in Freud's terms -, in contrast with mere genital reproductive sexuality. Even - as the author of The Double Flame highlights -, eroticism is characterized by an essential ambiguity: it is solar and nocturnal, sublime and perverse: "it is repression, permission, sublimation and perversion" (Paz 1993: 17).

Eroticism is, in summary, historic. It is created and recreated in human time and space: it is culture and not just nature (though it never stops being nature and body).

But eroticism is not the only dimension that's exclusive to humankind. Humans are also capable of another particular transformation: that of eroticism into love, in the essential meaning that Paz gives to it.

It is - so to speak - a double metamorphosis: the first, from sexuality

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2  All quotes are translated from: Paz 1993.
to eroticism; the second, from this into love: blue vortex of the flame. And if eroticism is an exception in sexuality, so too is love in eroticism: it is a transfiguration of eroticism, without losing its erotic and sexual roots.

The “double”, and at the same time, “single” flame, expresses the essential enigma of that which we can call the paradoxical continuity-discontinuity that is human life (see Changeux/Ricoeur 1998): simultaneously body and spirit. It is the harmony of opposites which expresses the metaphor of the “double flame”, opposed to the dualist conception and the separation of “soul” and “body” that markedly characterizes Plato, in Paz’s view.3

It is true that Octavio Paz acknowledges that Plato reveals the fundamental key of love as he conceives, on one hand, as a radical desire for completeness. He remembers thus, the two great myths of the Symposium. One about Eros as the radical impulse of each human towards another, that which constitutes the complementary half of oneself (symbolo, in Greek); as the primordial imperative to recover the original unity possessed by mythological prehistoric humans (pre-humans) that, according to the myth of Aristophanes, had existed before they were “cut in half” thus ending as humans, reduced to their separated selves. Eros would be thus, the primordial desire which lies in the deepest reaches of every human to recover in the you the being that it’s lacking. Paz describes it as follows: “We are incomplete beings and the desire of love is perpetual thirst for “completeness”. Without the other, I will not be myself” (Paz 1993: 41).

This idea of Eros coincides, in essence, with another myth, culminating in the Symposium – and also highlighted by Paz – in which Socrates speaks what Diotima revealed to him about Eros as the “son” of richness (poros) and poverty or lack (penia). Love – the poet says – “communicates light with shadow, the empirical world with the ideal one. As the son of Poverty, he seeks riches; as the son of Richness, he shares goods. It is the wisher who asks, the wished who gives” (Paz 1993: 42).

However, the author of The Double Flame also highlights the “incorporeal” sense that love already acquired in the Symposium, “platonic” love; he emphasizes how for the Greek philosopher, the experience of love turns into a process of ascension, from the beauty of a loved body and soul, to the love for beauty itself, that is, the Idea of Beauty, that lies beyond the beauties in this world and beyond this reality made of shades.

Paz does not accept this platonic dualism: he refutes the idea of love as a separation from the body and the world or love as an impulse towards abstract Beauty, located beyond the soul-body unity that constitutes each particular human being: “Because of the body, love is eroticism and thus

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3 As I will show now, the interpretation of Paz of the platonic idea of love is viewed from a perspective of platonic creation, a “classic” reading based foremost on some passages of The Banquet, seen themselves under the light of the dualism in the Phaedo and The Republic. But there is another possible reading, especially of the Fedro, that in retrospective would support a unified and dialectic view of love (spiritual/carnal) of the Double Flame. See González 2000, chapter 1.
communicates with the biggest and best hidden forces of life. Both, love and eroticism - the double flame -, are fed by the original fire: sexuality” (Paz 1993: 207).

In the same way, the distinctive characteristic that Paz attributes to love is its literally interpersonal character. This is the other transformation of sexuality, beyond eroticism. Love expresses the sublime dimension, specific to humans, where humankind gets closer to the “completeness” that Eros desires.

Love is an attraction towards a particular person: towards a body and a soul. Love is choice; eroticism, acceptance. Without eroticism – without any visible form that enters through the senses – there is no love. But love goes beyond the desired body and seeks the soul in it and, in the soul, the body. The whole person (Paz 1993: 53).

The mystery of love – we can say – coincides with the mystery of the person, which is definitely the mystery of humankind itself. That is, it coincides with the sense of radical unity that defines what is most human about humans; that which makes each human being an end in itself (as Kant already saw), insofar as a unique and irreplaceable person. From here the intrinsic need for fidelity: “For us, fidelity is one of the conditions of the loving relationship” (Paz 1993: 46). In this sense, fidelity would not express anything but the attraction for the loved one in her identity and oneness as well as the consequent exclusive commitment arising out of love. For the poet, this is what constitutes the passion of love: insofar as it is radical affection for a concrete person, “in body and soul”. “Each person is unique and for that it is not an abuse of language to talk about the “sanctity of the person” [...]. Yes, each human being, even the vilest, houses a mystery which is not an exaggeration to call holy or sacred” (Paz 1993: 95).

And all this does not mean in the end anything else than recognizing in love the highest form of freedom – and that is how Paz expresses or implicitly conceives it. Eroticism is the manifestation of the condition of freedom in humans, in the sense of the capacity to go beyond natural sexuality and reach fulfillment in many historical ways, from every sign, both positive and negative, which are inscribed in the reign of cultural freedom. But the blue fire of love, the fiery vortex of love, the highest intensity of the flame, which is passion concentrated on the person, is only understood as the expression of human freedom. The person itself, individuality, is freedom.

In love – as Paz sees it – we reach the miracle of the meeting of two persons, supreme choice of the loved one in herself and by herself, in her unity, her intimacy and irreplaceable essence. “Love is acknowledgement, in the loved person, of that gift of flight that distinguishes every human creature. The mystery of the human condition resides in its freedom: it is fall and flight” (Paz 1993: 95).

But the author of The Double Flame penetrates also the dialectical character of freedom, and therefore, of love. Freedom is neither pure nor
absolute, but it is conjugated with destiny. Fatality, its opposite, is also not pure or absolute:

Fatality manifests itself only with and through the complicity of our freedom. The knot between freedom and destiny [...] is the axis on which all loved ones have turned throughout history [...] it is the unbreakable union of two opposites, body and soul (Paz 1993: 128).

Even though Paz does not say it, it is implied that freedom is also “double”, like the flame: it expresses two dimensions of the human capacity to transcend or go beyond mere nature without ever breaking with it. In as much as it is interpersonal, love touches both soul and body, it does not abandon it, as the Plato of the dualist reduction believed, but on the contrary: love is also – we can say – a projection of corporeality and, with it, of the sexuality that, in its essential meaning, is the primordial impulse of life, as Paz understood. That is why love is not “platonic” in the habitual sense that this notion has acquired. “Without body and the desire that ignites the lover, there is no ascension towards the archetypes. To contemplate the eternal forms and participate from the essence, we must traverse the body” (Paz 1993: 206).

But, notably, a re-reading of the platonic Phaedrus can corroborate what Paz defended: the integral (psychosomatic) meaning of love. I think the metaphor of the “double flame” is not in essence far from the platonic metaphor (allegory) of the winged chariot. In this dialogue (written after the Symposium, in the transition towards the phase called “self-criticism” or “second maturity”), the problem of the irrational and corporeal character of love appears. This is a question to which Plato proposes a new and wondrous answer: that the “soul” (Psyche) is movement in its very essence (it moves itself and therefore is immortal); that it is pulled by two contradictory passionate forces: a “white horse” that symbolizes good passion and a “black horse”, symbol of concupiscence, of the lower passions: one impels from above and the other from below. The movement is directed or driven by the “charioteer”, the rational part of the soul: the driving force, but, by itself, immobile. The “soul” (actually the human being: anthropos) is configured in this triple structure, intrinsically contradictory, conflictive, always pulled in two opposite directions: down below, when the power of the lower passions prevails, or up above when another madness (mania) born from the other passions, prevails. When this happens, this soul/body is driven towards the heights, to the world where Beauty itself resides. And this ascension is explained because the soul is attracted to and possessed by the god of its choice: because it is prey to its own enthusiasms. Love is madness in every case; but it can be madness that can save or lose – so to speak –, that takes you up or down, elevate or fall.

4 Even though we must insist this “platonic” love is a simplistic and vulgarized form that is very far from what love really is for Plato, if we understand his whole context.
What the allegory reveals as decisive, is in any case, that there is no proper soul without a body: the soul carries within itself corporeality when it ascends: both horses, and these are, in essence, (the body), the engine of the movement of the soul. The soul is a double flame and only with its libidinal strength, does it ascend.\(^5\) The *Phaedrus*, in essence, would agree with Paz. Even though it is also true that the platonic concept of love which permeates western history is not this concept, which originated in the *Phaedrus*, but rather the one about the two worlds and with it, the need for love to separate itself from the world, of the reality that deceived the senses. The world of here/now is abandoned in favor of one beyond: the “celestial place”, without time or space.

Paz says repeatedly and accurately that our image of love is historical and changing. It is a cultural fact and as such, it is “invented” in every tradition even though there are always communicating vessels and common elements, essential ones, between times and cultural traditions. Love, especially, has not always been conceived of in the same way (which is why it is a work of freedom). The *Double Flame* pays close attention to these historic/cultural variations, revealing the poet not only as a notable scholar of the subject, but also and precisely his deep awareness of the historical character of the phenomena known as love as well as the realization that it is not actually a natural fact, but a human “image”, a product of imagination, born of necessity and freedom, of the “given” and the “created”.

In his journey through historical imagery, beginning with the Hellenic conception of Eros, Paz stops to linger over some of the innovations which Greek, and particularly Roman poets and writers introduced.\(^6\) Rome, in particular, is for Paz a model of civic and other important freedoms that enrich erotic life, freedoms most markedly demonstrated by the presence of the Roman woman. He also alludes to some aspects of the twists and turns love will take in the Christian world, particularly the damnation of body and eroticism, focusing his attention next on 12th century France, where a new form of love arises, a form that for Paz is the real thing, love in the strictest sense, referred to precisely as “courtly love”.

The poets called it “fin’amors”, purified love, “refined” love, characteristic of Provençal poetry as well as the ballads of troubadours and court singers, which flourished within the context of a singular civilization of vital refinement, thereby privileging the ascendance of love as an interpersonal sublime link, while at the same time maintaining the erotic. In that moment in France, where the oriental cultures (especially Arabic ones) commingled

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\(^5\) And its descent, its fall, is also integral: corrupt love, dangerous madness (evil in itself), is not a thing of the body: it is “movement” of the whole soul: body/soul, reason/passion, simultaneously.

\(^6\) Of this journey, which spans a great part of the work, we must limit ourselves by pointing out here, and very briefly, just a few moments, without referring to the notable flood of authors and works than Paz attends to.
with western tradition, those new ways to conceive the love life appeared and from that time, would nurture the flow of the culture of love.

The interpersonal character of love implies a reciprocal free condition of the lovers; it therefore carries with it, in Paz’s view, the progressive liberation of women, now thought of as subjects of love. In that sense, the principle of reciprocity (which is not equivalent with correspondence) would become the basis of love. Lovers are most certainly persons, and it is this status that women must reach before, according to the poet, we are able to speak of love.

It is certainly heterosexual love that is preferred by the author of the Double Flame. It is love in this form which constitutes for him the model, among other things, since it is in this form that women are considered essential for love: “The rise of love is inseparable from the emergence of women: There is no love without female freedom” (Paz 1993: 72-73).

Nevertheless, in Paz’s book, homosexual love does have a significant presence. He cannot truly navigate the history of love and its cultural manifestations without paying attention to the great poets, writers and scholars who dealt with and championed homosexual love (from the ancient Greeks to the modern thinkers), even though, for him, the image of courtly, heterosexual love has a paradigmatic meaning.

This image of courtly love, as the Double Flame states, permeates every western tradition through to the present, insofar as love is founded on interpersonal freedom, in the liberation of women and the consequent possibility of the sublime character of love, blue vortex of the double flame. This does not mean, however, as Paz clearly affirms, that love is a feeling exclusive to the occidental world or that it did not exist prior to 11th and 12th century Provence. Paz apprehends correctly that the emotion of love is universal, it belongs to all times and all places. Another way to put it is that “the idea of love adopted by a society and an age” which is formed into “a way of life, an art of living and dying” (Paz 1993: 34-35).

The poems of Sappho - Paz notes - are not a philosophy of love: they are a testimony in which that strange personal tendency to be magnetically drawn towards a single person has been crystallized. This is the transformation of the “erotic object” into a “unique and free subject”.

But both the feeling and the image or idea of love, that is, the supreme expression of freedom and the interpersonal bond, that blue flame of love, is precisely what is threatened with oblivion or extinction in our time, according Paz in his sharp critique which makes up the most crucial pages of this book.

In the present, we have the diametric opposite of a purely spiritual love,

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7 It is important to remember in this point that — unlike many interpreters that deny it or undermine it — Octavio Paz acknowledges with marked respect, the notes concerning a possible homosexual element in Sor Juana’s life and works. (See Paz 1982, and my essay González 1998).
separated from sexuality and body. "Modernization has de-sacntified the body and publicity has used it as an instrument of propaganda" (Paz 1993: 159).

Sexual liberation in our time has resulted in the opposite affirmation – a purely impersonal sexuality and therefore, has all the marks of the agony of love. Even eroticism itself is assimilated within mere sexuality to be absorbed by the market forces and publicity machines.

Capitalist and democratic society has applied the impersonal laws of the market and the techniques of mass production to erotic life. Thus, it has degraded it, even though as a business, its success has been enormous (Paz 1993: 158).

Our age denies the soul and reduces human spirit to a mere reflection of bodily functions. It has thus mined the very notion of person out of its center [...]. The notion of soul constitutes the person and without person, love regresses to mere eroticism (Paz 1993: 129).

And the agony of love is the agony of what is truly human; the agony of freedom and creativity, of erotic imagination and spirituality. It is a new form of barbarism, technological and turned into publicity:

Our time is simplistic, concise and brutal. After having fallen into idolatry of the ideological systems, our century ended up in the adoration of Things. What place does love have in a world like ours? (Paz 1993: 151).

The great absent one from the erotic revolution of this century has been love [...] true breaking that has turned us into cripples not of the body, but of the soul (Paz 1993: 153-154).

The brain and other organs today possess nearly all of the faculties of the soul. The body, without ceasing to be body, has turned into soul (Paz 1993: 165).

Today the body is affirmed for the sake of the body itself; sexuality for sexuality, with the consequential de-personalization and mechanization of the bonds. A crisis of the human condition and of our freedom to be human.

On the other hand, it would seem that the subject of love, of its history and destiny, would have little or nothing to do with another theme of the Double Flame, which is relative to some crucial advances in the contemporary sciences: cosmology, biology or especially, neuroscience. This is only in appearance, though, since as with great accuracy and sharpness the poet notes, the scientific revolutions of our time bring with them some of the most primordial and fundamental questions that humankind has faced since the beginning to light, and now they take on a singular importance. Questions about the origin of life and the universe; about the place that humankind has in the cosmos – as Scheler, the philosopher expressed it – from which our very humanity depends on, and thus, our freedom, our capacity for eroticism and love.
Paz highlights, among other scientific ideas, the one relative to "black holes" in modern astronomy, calling attention to those new dimensions of scientific thought in which notions such as antimatter, chaos and others must be seen. These are dimensions in which the "random" factor becomes as or even more powerful than necessity: what is the place of freedom in the new image of the universe, the poet asks?

Regarding the advances on neurobiology, Paz notes the biologist tendencies than conceive the spiritual ("the mind") in body's terms, such as the neurological construction. This, in consequence, makes the idea of the self disappear, the idea of a subject who acts, who makes decisions (and is therefore responsible for them). The spiritual life is conceived, as Paz says, as if it were an orchestra that played without a conductor. In summary, the laws of necessity and universal "objectivity" prevail over freedom and individuality.

The notion of person. It is the fundament of our political institutions and our ideas about what justice, solidarity and social coexistence should be. The notion of person is confused with that of freedom [...]. What is the place of freedom in a universe ruled by immutable laws? (Paz 1993: 163).

We have a real and very noteworthy resurgence of the mechanism – as Paz highlights – in the de-humanizing consequences that are the results of the unconditional defense of artificial intelligence:

Is [the human person] a mere limited body, a group of physical and chemical reactions? Is it a machine, as the specialists in artificial intelligence believe? [...]. It stops being the result of natural evolution and enters the order of industrial production: it is a fabrication (Paz 1993: 165).

Some philosophers, who – echoing thoughts found in the Double Flame – talk about the end of philosophy, an idea that Paz not only rejects, but turns upon itself. Our time is the moment to join science with philosophy, to provide a meeting ground that allows us to ask about the questions brought forward by science. He believes that

[...] the time is ripe to start a philosophical reflection, based on the experiences of contemporary sciences, that illuminates us about the old and permanent issues that have set the human intellect alight: the origin of the universe and life, the place of humans in cosmos and the relationships between our thinking aspect and our emotional aspect, the dialogue between body and soul. All of these subjects are directly related with this book's objective: love and its place in the horizon of contemporary history (Paz 1993: 199-299).

It is pertinent to mention also that we need a proper meeting ground with the human aspect of humankind, which is, to a large extent, based upon our capacity for love. And this meeting implies, in the metaphorical context
of Paz, fanning the flames in order to intensify the blue light of the double flame.

What it is not about, according to the philosophical and poetical view of Octavio Paz, is a return to the old image of platonic love that has been left behind in the dust of history by today's science — and we add, by today's philosophy as well. It is not about leaving this world in pursuit of another one which will give this one meaning.

The Double Flame expresses the final mystery of the unity/duality of love and humankind, because to restore love is to restore “the humanity of humans”.

Poetry, more than philosophy (at least philosophy of “no contradiction” so prevalent in the western world), has always had the capacity to penetrate into the opposites, to acknowledge that what exists in this world is struggle and harmony between them. Only a meeting with dialectic philosophy — of the Heraclitean kind —, closely related to Paz, makes it possible to penetrate to the real substructure of what is human, the essence of life and love.

Paz states that human imagination is “set since the beginning into resolving the opposition of elements in unity” (Paz 1993: 65). This is the reason why love is basically a union of opposites. Love is natural destiny and free choice; it is corporeal and spiritual, earthly and sublime. It is a meeting between fatality and freedom, ascension and descent. The poet expresses it thus: “Loving attraction [...] is made from animal humors and spiritual archetypes, of the childhood experiences of ghosts that populate our dreams” (Paz 1993: 126).

And, markedly, the transcendental meeting between time and eternity is made in love. Love does not definitively conquer death, although you could say that perhaps it defeats death at the same time that it doesn’t. An extreme example of poetic synthesis would be the supreme paradox of Quevedo: “dust in love”; prodigious union to which the essential pages of this book are dedicated to.

Paz teaches that love, the blue fire of the double flame, achieves the miraculous interpenetration of here and there. Love, he says, is vivacity, intensification of life in the loving instant that transcends death; and thus he expresses it in two incomparable passages:

Beyond happiness or unhappiness, even though it is both, love not only gives us eternity but also vivacity, that minute in which the doors of time lie half-open: here is there and now is forever. In love, everything is two and everything moves to become one (Paz 1993: 131).

I believe that this redundancy: human human, “human man” (sapiens sapiens) is necessary to comprehend this being, radically contingent, which can be “human” or “inhuman”; that can be humanized or dehumanized; that must acquire and maintain its humanity, its human quality, via actions. The main quest science and technology undertake today is defining what is human about humankind, what — in my view — can be conceptualized as the homo humanus (see González 2005).
The loving impulse rips us from the ground and the here; the awareness of death makes us return: we are mortal; we are made from earth and must return to it [...]. Love is life fulfilled, united with itself: opposite of separation. In the feeling of the corporeal embrace, the union of the couple turns to feeling and this, in turn, transforms itself into consciousness: love is the discovery of the unity of life (Paz 1993: 144).

So it is confirmed, that both poetry and love have the prodigious capacity to penetrate into that deep “world”, that horizon of sense, contained in this very world and not beyond it. Or as Octavio Paz expresses it with the unique quality of his words: “The poetic testimony reveals to us a new world within this world, the other world that is this world [...]. Isn’t this what happens in dreams and erotic encounters, actually?” (Paz 1993: 9)

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