

RESPONSE AND RECONCILIATION *

Octavio Paz

I.

Ah life! Does no one answer?

His words rolled, bolts of lightning etched
in years that were boulders and now are mist.
Life never answers.
It has no ears and doesn't hear us;
it doesn't speak, it has no tongue.
It neither goes nor stays:
we are the ones who speak,
the ones who go,
while we hear from echo to echo, year to year,
our words rolling through a tunnel with no end.

That which we call life
hears itself within us, speaks with our tongues,
and through us, knows itself.
As we portray it, we become its mirror, we invent it.
An invention of an invention: it creates us
without knowing what it has created,
we are an accident that thinks.
It is a creature of reflections
we create by thinking,
and it hurls into fictitious abysses.
The depths, the transparencies
where it floats or sinks: not life, its idea.
It is always on the other side and is always other,
has a thousand bodies and none,
never moves and never stops,
it is born to die, and is born at death.

Is life immortal? Don't ask life,
for it doesn't even know what life is.
We are the ones who know
that one day it too must die and return
to the beginning, the inertia of the origin.
The end of yesterday, today, and tomorrow,
the dissipation of time
and of nothing, its opposite.
Then— will there be a then?
will the primigenious spark light
the matrix of the worlds,
a perpetual re-beginning of a senseless whirling?
No one answers, no one knows.
We only know that to live is to live for.

II.

Sudden spring, a girl who wakes
on a green bed guarded by thorns;
tree of noon, heavy with oranges:
your tiny suns, fruits of cool fire,
summer gathers them in transparent baskets;
the fall is severe, its cold light
sharpens its knife against the red maples;
Januaries and Februaries: their beards are ice,
and their eyes sapphires that April liquefies;
the wave that rises, the wave that stretches out,
appearances-disappearances

* This is one of the last poems written by Octavio Paz.

Translation by Eliot Weinberger.

on the circular road of the year.
 All that we see, all that we forget,
 the harp of the rain, the inscription of the lightning,
 the hurried thoughts, reflections turned to birds,
 the doubts of the path as it meanders,
 the wailing of the wind
 as it carves the faces of the mountains,
 the moon on tiptoe over the lake,
 the breezes in gardens, the throbbing of night,
 the camps of stars on the burnt field,
 the battle of reflections on the white salt flats,
 the fountain and its monologue,
 the held breath of outstretched night
 and the river that entwines it, the pine under the evening star
 and the waves, instant statues, on the sea,
 the flock of clouds that the wind herds
 through drowsy valleys, the peaks, the chasms,
 time turned to rock, frozen eras,
 time maker of roses and plutonium,
 time that makes as it razes.

The ant, the elephant, the spider, and the sheep,
 our strange world of terrestrial creatures
 that are born, eat, kill, sleep, play, couple,
 and somehow know that they die;
 our world of humanity, far and near,
 the animal with eyes in its hands
 that tunnels through the past and examines the future,

with its histories and uncertainties,
 the ecstasy of the saint, the sophisms of the evil,
 the elation of lovers, their meetings, their contentions,
 the insomnia of the old man counting his mistakes,
 the criminal and the just: a double enigma,
 the Father of the People, his crematory parks,
 his forests of gallows and obelisks of skulls,
 the victorious and the defeated,
 the long sufferings and the one happy moment,
 the builder of houses and the one who destroys them,
 this paper where I write, letter by letter,
 which you glance at with distracted eyes,
 all of them and all of it, all
 is the work of time that begins and ends.

III.

From birth to death time surrounds us
 with its intangible walls.
 We fall with the centuries, the years, the minutes.
 Is time only a falling, only a wall?
 For a moment, sometimes, we see
 —not with our eyes but with our thoughts—
 time resting in a pause.
 The world half-opens and we glimpse
 the immaculate kingdom,
 the pure forms, presences
 unmoving, floating

on the hour, a river stopped:
truth, beauty, numbers, ideas
—and goodness, a word buried
in our century.

A moment without weight or duration,
a moment outside the moment:
thought sees, our eyes think.

Triangles, cubes, the sphere, the pyramid
and the other geometrical figures
thought and drawn by mortal eyes
but which have been here since the beginning,
are, still legible, the world, its secret writing,
the reason and the origin of the turning of things,
the axis of the changes, the unsupported pivot
that rests on itself, a reality without a shadow.
The poem, the piece of music, the theorem,
unpolluted presences born from the void,
are delicate structures
built over an abyss:
infinities fit into their finite forms,
and chaos too is ruled by their hidden symmetry.

Because we know it, we are not an accident:
chance, redeemed, returns to order.
Tied to the earth and to time,
a light and weightless ether,
thought supports the worlds and their weight,

whirlwinds of suns turned
into a handful of signs
on a random piece of paper.
Wheeling swarms
of transparent evidence
where the eyes of understanding
drink a water simple as water.
The universe rhymes with itself,
it unfolds and is two and is many
without ceasing to be one.
Motion, a river that runs endlessly
with open eyes through the countries of vertigo
—there is no above nor below, what is near is far—
returns to itself
—without returning, now turned
into a fountain of stillness.
Tree of blood, man feels, thinks, flowers,
and bears strange fruits: words.
What is thought and what is felt entwine,
we touch ideas: they are bodies and they are numbers.

And while I say what I say
time and space fall dizzily,
restlessly. They fall in themselves.
Man and the galaxy return to silence.
Does it matter? Yes— but it doesn't matter:
we know that silence is music and that
we are a chord in this concert.