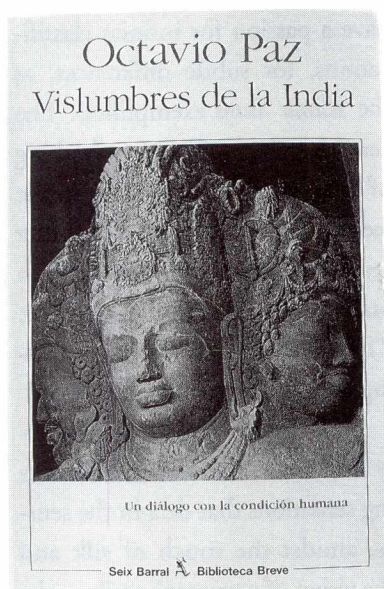


Reviews



Vislumbres de la India

Octavio Paz

Ediciones Seix-Barral, Mexico City, 1995, 238 pp.

SAVORING THE DANCE OF THE BEES

Indira Gandhi maintained that those who really want to know India must empty their minds of all preconceived ideas. "India is different," she would say; "it is one and many. And it wants to continue to be so. If you want to understand her you must begin from zero." Now, with his *Vislumbres de la India* (Glimpses of

India), Octavio Paz shows us that one of this zero's forms consists of being Mexican. Despite appearances, this statement is neither tragic nor comic. It is not a lament or a joke. "The fact of being Mexican," says Paz, "helps me see India's differences on the basis of my Mexican differences. They are not the same, of course, but they are a point of view."

In any case, throughout the book he makes observations on many of the astounding similarities between Mexico and India, as well as the sharp differences between the two countries. His reflections on food are enthralling, as are his observations on the case of Catarina de San Juan, the *china poblana*,¹ who was from India and immersed herself in the religiosity of New Spain (Mexico's Colonial name) with delirious beatitude. Some time ago I began a novel on this historical character, in the

¹ *La china poblana*, literally "the Chinese woman from Puebla," was an Asian woman residing in that provincial capital, whose clothing set the trend for a style of dress that became traditional in Mexico. (Translator's note.)

spirit of my *Demonios de la lengua* (Demons of the Tongue), and I can state that Paz is right in viewing her as a historical symptom of the encounter between two worlds that were disparate, equivocal and somewhat parallel. Also of a terrible lucidity is the resemblance Paz notes between the obstacles the two countries face with regard to modernity: different anchors, which unite us. I like the way this book subordinates historical and political analysis to the comprehension of art. This scale of values stands opposed to the one we live by daily in our newspapers, some of our literary journals, as well as our publishing industry, which presents gossip in the guise of analysis. Does the same thing occur in India?

Mexico and India are not, as the Caribbean song goes, two wings of the same bird, but they may be two ears of the same elephant. Of course, this would be an elephant with one very big ear and one very small one. Be that as it may, Octavio Paz confronts the problem with the confidence of someone with a passion for disparities, for great cultural differences. Or as an Indian

poet would say, describing the god with an elephant's head, Ganesh: "a dancing heart between two ears." And as we know, in India dance is one of the ways of poetically describing creative thinking, the kind of thinking which is classified as that which induces in us, the readers, a state of lucid happiness. This kind of thinking allows us to ex-

(The Grammatical Monkey), but the entirety of his work, since that time, takes on a new and vital consistency. And, as is well known, it was in India that he met Marie José. "In India," Paz stated in an interview, "I find a tissue of sensations, of ideas, of experiences. Eroticism, for example, neither brings me closer to nor distances me

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perience what they call "the delights of reason." *Vislumbres de la India* is clearly a book of that dancing genre: an essay in fluent movements which both analyzes and recalls, synthesizes notions and ventures hypotheses. A book which is a voyage, a ceremony, just as his poems are ceremonies. A ceremony of ritual passion, like dance.

This is a book by a Mexican writer who, at the end of the 20th century, invites us to witness part of his long, intense amorous dialogue with India. India transformed him and it may be that everything he has written since then bears the stamp of that transformation. On the basis of his experience in India, Paz's poetics became erotic. Thus, not only the poetry in his book *Ladera este* (Eastern Slope)—which includes "White" (brilliantly analyzed by Elliot Weinberger in his essay "Paz in India")—or the poetic prose and essays of *El mono gramático*

from the sacred; and this experience is quite difficult for someone from the West. Eroticism is sexuality converted into imagination. Love is that erotic imagination converted into the choice of a person. And that is what I discovered in India, and what probably changed my poetry. On the one hand it gave my words more reality, more density; they became fuller. On the other, they became more lucid. In a certain way this was recapturing the reality of this world through the beloved person." This quotation already held the central seed of what, various decades later, would become his book *La llama doble* (The Double Flame), where he makes his poetics/erotics key to life.

In *Vislumbres de la India* I find the operation of a concept that has always struck me when reading Indian art historians (such as Coomaraswamy): they frequently say that a given work has, or lacks, *rasha*. And as far as I understand it,

rasha is the grace of a work, but also its essence, if we understand the latter to be not only a content but a flavor, a taste and a depth at one and the same time. *Rasha* is analyzed in theatrical theory as a work's expressive power to produce different states or feelings in the spectators. These feelings are usually classified into nine categories (Paz rightly notes that the Indians have a passion for infinite classifications, for subtle differences, as the *Kama Sutra* exemplifies). The central *rasha*, *rasharajá*—the king of aesthetic feelings—is the erotic feeling (*shringara*). All the other aesthetic feelings are connected, in one or another way, with this one. The erotic feeling is key to obtaining the delights of reason.

The poetry of India frequently mentions—as one of the exciting sensations that delight the senses, amidst the touch of silk and the vision of a woman's smile—the buzzing of bees: the sound of their dance. And among the classic poems which Paz translates at the end of this book there is one which speaks of "Two lotuses which open, their breasts tight/The house of two bees: their nipples dark." The vital and poetic axis of some books, such as this one, seems to be the *rasharajá* of eroticism, and to our ears this makes them sound like the buzzing of bees searching for their home. Let us listen to their dance, so as to make it our own.

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