

AN EXCEPTIONAL SPIRIT¹

*Gabriel Zaid**

The advent of Octavio Paz in Mexican culture was a miracle that took it to a higher plane in the course of a single lifetime, like those trees that suddenly start to take root and grow beyond what had been expected of them, until they change the landscape itself, becoming symbols of it.

This is not the first time this has happened. Neither Nezahualcōyotl nor Sor Juana were foreign bodies in the Nahuatl

culture or that of New Spain. Quite the contrary: they were intense expressions of their development, so intense that they surpassed it and seemed to take it dangerously no one knew where. So intense that some people became quite agitated and even felt threatened, treating them as foreign bodies when all they were doing was taking the culture forward to a miraculous level, to a level so high it was difficult to equal.

Octavio Paz made us take interest in things we had never been interested in before. And he did it not by expounding brilliantly about this or that but by encouraging our sensibility.

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Paz with his wife, Marie Jose Tramini.

Unknown areas of intelligence, of sensibility, become necessary to Paz' readers. From there stems a great part of the fascination with his language: it brings alive all our faculties; it questions everything we are; it questions us totally. For Paz, language is the total exercise of being. And this is not a sermon; it is a living thing communicated through his work; it is the only way to read it. Reading Paz takes the exercise of all our intelligence, all our imagination, all our sensibilities. From there, one can dissent, negate or take another path, but it would be naive not to recognize in the reading itself the origin of those actions.

Today, I do not understand why I did not understand *El laberinto de la soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude) when I read it at the age of sixteen. I couldn't put it down; I just kept on reading even though it was beyond me, like listening to a song in another language that you like very much even though you can't understand it very well. It may have been the topics, the vocabulary, the way the sentences were constructed that caught my attention and held me. But I couldn't follow it fully.

It is not easy to recall the first experience of a new art when it has become a canon. It is quite a job to imagine what people who were offended were hearing when they listened to a piece of music, pieces of verse, or ideas that today seem normal. Or what the attraction was in something strange when a whole different world was first revealed.

Five years later, the first issue of the *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* (Mexican Magazine of Literature) arrived in Monterrey. It opened with a poem recently penned by Octavio Paz, "El cántaro roto" (The Broken Water-Jar). I walked out of the bookstore and began reading as I walked along, slower and slower until I came to a complete halt. I thought I was dizzy because I was wearing new glasses and was reading as I walked. But no. It was the poem going to my head. I leaned on a pole in the street to continue reading until I remembered a nearby cafe, where I went to sit down.

What were these fascinating fireworks of images and ideas? I read it and reread it, bedazzled, drunk with words.

The delirious enumeration, the fluid verses, between poetry and prose, the long breath of inspiration and respiration, the fountain of visions, metaphors, reflections, invocations, spells, had something of the magical incantation and the surrealist mural about them. But they were not senseless abracadabras. The enormous stones that burst under the sun among cacti and *huizaches* can be seen in the countryside and in the paintings of José María Velasco. The cold, green anger, with its tail of razors and cut glass, saunters through offices. It was the fluidity between dreaming and reality in a few lines that did just what they asked for and communicated the poetic, moral and even political experience of strangeness and reconciliation with the Other: reality transfigured as a dream, dream as reality.

In that same year of 1955, Octavio Paz filled out a questionnaire for André Breton about magical art and spoke of commotion, vertigo, fascination, the desire to penetrate what shakes up our certainties, in a fatal leap to the other side. All that was in the potion of the broken water-jar that disturbed the reader.

Inspiration and love are not new topics in Western culture, but rarely are they taken seriously by cultured people of a certain age. More rarely still do they stop being topics and become experiences. And even more rarely are they reciprocated. For some, believing in that is like immaturity. For others, it is discourse. But Octavio Paz was always first and foremost a poet. He believed in his craft and in culture, but he knew that there was something more important. In addition, it was his good fortune—and ours—that he was not one of those unfortunates who have a great, unrequited love for poetry. Inspiration throbbed through him and made him say things that surpassed him, things that he allowed himself to be carried by, like on a fair wind (or which became fair because he knew both

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how to let himself and not let himself go). His poems and essays are inspired and cannot be explained by his craft or his culture, but only as miracles. And as if that were not enough, he also had the luck to experience a long, reciprocated love.

How to harmonize inspiration and love with his vast wealth of culture? The sensibility and creativity of poets and the curiosity and analysis of specialists seem to be divergent worlds. But in Octavio Paz both worlds connected and enriched each other on the most diverse of literary, artistic, cultural, historical, social and political topics. He was always learning, reformulating, creating. For me, who read everything he wrote for almost half a century, it was wonderful to see how many new things he still said in his last book (*La llama doble* [The Double Flame]). And the most incredible of all: how much he had read and learned after the age of 70.

It is not the same to write in a country that is a given, in a culture inhabitable without the slightest doubt, in a life project that can fit into established social roles, feeling that creation is part of a specialized profession, as it is to write feeling the urgent need to create or recreate everything: language, culture, life, one's own place in the construction of the nation, everything that may be work in the broadest creative sense. The Promethean strivings of Vasconcelos, Reyes, Paz, more than individual excesses (taking on many things that elsewhere are the work of specialists), seem to fill a historic need, a national urgency that they feel responsible for: seizing all culture, expropriating it, recreating it, changing it, making it ours in a living way, being active subjects, not just contemplated objects, of universal culture.

From the departmental perspective imposed by academia's bureaucracy (specialties, power, budgets), or from today's English point of view about what a poet's career should be, it is not easy to understand the work of Octavio Paz. What department does he belong in? His trajectory becomes clear under a romantic profile: our cultural emancipation. His work is excessively ambitious for those preoccupied with jurisdiction; an anachronism for the English who feel that English culture is now simply culture; but now unavoidable and central, like a historic debt, for Mexican culture.

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concerned with the national question, broadened out until it became nothing less than a critique of Western culture.

Where is the Western poet—in any language—capable of writing *Los hijos del limo* (The Children of the Mire)? It is a critical overview of all of Western poetry from the romantics on, which not only takes into account the movement of poetry in different languages, but contrasts it with the non-Western. Who would be able to make the connection between this analysis and modernity in all its cultural, social and political senses? Not to mention linking it to the concrete national problem of how we can become modern.

He always had a sense of the polis. He felt responsible not only for his own house, but also for the common house that is the street and the public plaza. It seemed inconceivable to him not to intervene when he felt that something was wrong about the way the country or the world were going, or that opportunities for improvement were being thrown away. His propositions broke the scheme of day-to-day politics and referred issues to unaccustomed levels: those of a statesman outside the state, those of a citizen statesman who never lost sight of the historical perspective or of the ultimate meaning of building a common house.

His authenticity went to heroic extremes because he did not hesitate to risk his reputation in the cultural milieu when his convictions led him to take positions that were not self-serving. But he was interested in the questions themselves, beyond "this is in my interest" or "this is not in my interest." He had the honor of being burned in effigy by a pro-Sandinista mob, but he did not leave the public plaza nor the country as those fanatics who took to the streets or the lukewarm who stayed safe at home, who could not understand why he didn't remain silent, wished he had. He stayed to argue combatively, and happily, on many questions he had the satisfaction of history proving him right.

We had the good fortune of living together with an exceptional spirit. We continue to have it because his work and his example remain with us. That he made such a high mark should not discourage us, but rather accompany us, making us trust in the possibility of miracles. ■■■

NOTES

¹ This is a *Voices of Mexico*'s translation of an article which originally appeared in the Mexican magazine *Vuelta* 258 (May 1998).