

# THE SUN OF OCTAVIO PAZ<sup>1</sup>

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Staring at an empty page, full not of clean whiteness but of death, his death, I set myself an impossible task: doing justice to his life. What can be said? No accounting, no matter how detailed, can express the passion, the intelligence, the grandeur that he put into all his endeavors. But this country without memory is often cruel to its best men, and that is

why it is important to fight forgetfulness, why it is important, now and forever, to remember.

He was above all a poet. That is how he described himself and how he wished to be remembered. A poet of love and of poetry. Once I heard a relative of his tell a little story, never recounted. As a little boy, playing in Puebla with his cousins, suddenly Octavio, very serious, said, that the word "calcetín" (the Spanish word for "sock") should not be the word for a piece

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of clothing, but for a little bell because of its final sound, "teen." From that day until the day in Coyoacán, when he called for the highland sun to enlighten us with hope, and the clouds obeyed and parted, and the sun illuminated his prophet's face, defiant and tender, Octavio Paz was a man possessed, a priest, a lover of words. A poet.

He was also a thinker. The West has been disdainful of Spanish-language essayists. It has not taken them seriously. To them, our realm is poetry and the novel, not thought. Octavio Paz achieved what only one other, José Ortega y Gasset, was able to in our century: carve out a place for himself in Western thought. His curiosity was insatiable and it all bore fruit: he made the Western tradition and the cultures of the East his own; he explored the art of peoples, their philosophy, their history, their science; he wrote glowing texts about Man's basic questions: freedom, creation, justice, love; he was as demanding of himself as of others; he inhabited the outer reaches of knowledge, making those his limits. Even though sometimes in his poetry, someone spells out to us.<sup>2</sup>

He was the greatest and the most generous of Mexican writers. No one wrote as much as Octavio Paz about Mexico's writers and artists, from Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz to the writers of the Half Century,<sup>3</sup> educated in his work. From the time he began to publish in the early 1930s until today, several generations of intellectuals recognized the sun-like quality of his work: Vasconcelos wrote with enthusiasm about his books, the Spanish emigres<sup>4</sup> started the magazine *Taller* (Workshop/Atelier) with him, the Contemporary Group<sup>5</sup> adopted him from the very beginning as their prodigal son; he was the mentor of the generation that put out the *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* (Mexican Magazine of Literature); he returned to Mexico in the 1970s, not to preside or rule over culture but to found *Plural* and then *Vuelta* magazines, to set up house for dissidents, diversity, tolerance, criticism, to declare war on the armed abstractions that in our century have murdered millions of concrete human beings. In these magazines, in these lucid, implacable texts, Octavio defended freedom to the hilt; he "freed it on parole."<sup>6</sup> And, happily, he lived to see that same freedom vindicated everywhere.

He was a miner of the Mexican soul. In the underground river of his blood ran currents Catholic and Liberal, Andalusian and Aztec, reformist and revolutionary. Seeking a way out of the labyrinth of his solitude,<sup>7</sup> he picked them all up and carried them with him. That is why he saw in the 1910 Revolution the

communion of Mexico with itself, the fleeting reconciliation of this country with its multiple pasts. And then, with the thinking that watches over thinking, he wrote that "criticism is the imagination's learning the second time around, imagination cured of fantasy and determined to face the reality of the world." And he thought that "Mexico has no essence, but a history," and that that history was not a mystical coming but a daily task.

He was courageous in life, loyal in friendship, happy and complete when he found love and stoic in the face of death. He would have liked to die like [his grandfather] Don Ireneo—whose face was increasingly etched on his own—an instantaneous death, like lightening. That final grace was not granted him. But more than his own death, at the end what perturbed him was the anarchy that, in his words, seemed at moments to close in on Mexico. He had been born in 1914, the year of anarchy in Mexico and the world; he was the grandson of a rebel and the son of a revolutionary. But he did not aspire to the order of the false utopias he detested, much less to order imposed by force. He aspired to a historic leap, a leap toward responsible freedom exercised by everyone in this, our house, that is Mexico.

He was once the rising sun of Mexican literature. He crossed the sky and stopped at its center for almost a century. Now the old gold of his setting sun pains us. But tomorrow we will discover that Octavio Paz is spelling out to us. **MM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is a *Voices of Mexico's* translation of an article first published in the Mexican magazine *Vuelta* 258 (May 1998).

<sup>2</sup> An allusion to Octavio Paz' poem "Hermandad" which in English ends with the line "someone spells me out." [Editor's Note.]

<sup>3</sup> Name given to Mexican writers who began to achieve prominence in the 1950s, such as José de la Colina, Sergio Pitou, Salvador Elizondo and Juan García Ponce. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>4</sup> The Spanish emigre and exile community that formed in Mexico after the Spanish Civil War included a large number of artists and intellectuals who had an important impact on Mexican cultural life. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>5</sup> A group of Mexican poets and writers who proposed, among other things, a quest for universal art. The best known among them were Xavier Villaurrutia, Gilberto Owen, José Gorostiza, Jaime Torres Bodet, Salvador Novo, Carlos Pellicer, Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano, Enrique González Rojo and Octavio G. Barrera. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>6</sup> In Spanish the expression *libertad bajo palabra*, meaning "free on parole," would literally be translated "free having given his/her word." This double meaning has been lost in English, although the root of the word "parole" did originally imply "giving your word." The expression in Krause's original is an allusion to Paz' book *Libertad bajo palabra*. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>7</sup> Allusion to Paz' most famous book, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. [Editor's Note.]