



Luis Humberto González

OCTAVIO PAZ (1914-1998) BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Octavio Paz, poet, essayist, political thinker, is undoubtedly one of the central figures in Mexican letters and culture of the twentieth century.

Paz was born in Mexico City March 31, 1914. Of both indigenous and Spanish descent, he was the son of lawyer Octavio Paz Solórzano who fought at the side of Emiliano Zapata in Mexico's 1910 Revolution.

After graduating from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, having studied at both the School of Law and the School of Philosophy and Letters, Paz decided to devote himself to literature. In 1931, he founded the

magazine *Barandal* (Banister) and two years later, published his first collection of poems, *Luna silvestre* (Wild Moon).

In 1937 he went to Spain to support the Republican government in the Spanish Civil War, having joined in 1936 the Alliance of Antifascist Writers and Artists, of which he was a member until 1939. After a brief stay in Paris where he met the Surrealists, Paz came back to Mexico and founded the magazine *Taller* (Atelier) in 1939, beginning what would be a lifelong dedication to research and literature. In this period, other works of poetry also appeared, like *Raíz del hombre* (Roots of Man), *Bajo tu clara*

sombra (Beneath Your Clear Shadow) and *La flor a la orilla del mundo* (The Flower at the Edge of the World).

Octavio Paz began to write about art at the age of 25. His first essay of this kind, on the culture of Crete, was published in the first issue of the magazine *Artes Plásticas* (Visual Arts).

In 1943 he went to the United States on a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 1945 he became part of Mexico's diplomatic corps, where he held a series of posts. One of his first appointments was to the Mexican embassy in Paris from 1946 to 1952. It is in this period that he wrote *Libertad bajo palabra* (Freedom on Parole) (1949) and *El laberinto de la soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude) (1950), the work which established his reputation as an essayist which lasted until his death. He acted as commercial attache in Japan and in 1962 was named ambassador to New Delhi. He resigned from this post in 1968 to express his repudiation of the massacre of students at Mexico City's Tlatelolco Three Cultures Plaza on October 2 of that year.

His resignation came at a time when he was already established as a well-known figure in Mexican cultural milieus. He toured Europe and the United States giving lectures about Mexico. One of these, given at the University of Texas at Austin later became his famous book *Posdata* (Postscript), published in 1971.

When he returned to Mexico in the 1970s, he founded the magazine *Plural*, which he edited for five years, and then in 1976, *Vuelta*, a magazine which was given the Prince of Asturias Award for Communications and the Humanities in 1993. In *Vuelta*, Paz brought together Mexican intellectuals of great stature like Rufino Tamayo, Enrique Krauze, Alejandro Rossi, Gabriel Zaid, Juan García Ponce, Aurelio Asiain, Salvador Elizondo and Tomás Segovia.

He was given a great number of awards: the Cervantes Award, the highest honor given in Spanish letters (1981); the International Award for Poetry (1983); France's Great Gold Eagle Award (1978) and Tocqueville Prize, given him by François Mitterrand in 1989. In 1990, he became the only Mexican ever to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, the world's highest honor in letters.

In 1982, he wrote a polemical essay about Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Mexico's seventeenth-century nun poet.

Paz wrote countless books of literary and aesthetic criticism, political debate, philosophy of history and eroticism, all fired by the same critical spirit.

Outstanding among his works are the compilation of poems *¿Aguila o sol?* (Heads or Tails?) and *Libertad bajo palabra* (Freedom on Parole), as well as *Piedra de sol* (Sun Stone) (1957), *Salamandra* (Salamander) and *Ladera este* (East Slope) (1958-1961).

As part of his efforts to make poetry an element of universal communication, he translated different poets from English, French, Portuguese and Japanese into Spanish.

His best known literary and political essays are *El arco y la lira* (The Bow and the Lyre) (1956), *Conjunciones y disyunciones* (Conjunctions and Disjunctions) (1969), *El ogro filantrópico* (The Philanthropic Ogre) (1979) and *Posdata* (Postscript) (1971).

Paz' most recent work was *Vislumbres de la India* (Glimpses of India) (1995). His complete works in 14 volumes have been published by the Fund for Economic Culture.

His last appearance in public was in December 1997 when he attended the inauguration of the Octavio Paz Foundation.

He died April 19, 1998 in Mexico City.

In him, Mexico loses its most important twentieth-century intellectual and a symbol of international literature.

He was a man who enjoyed the friendship, complicity and critical relationships with writers like Rafael Alberti, Pablo Neruda, Jorge Luis Borges, Albert Camus, André Malraux, as well as a great many of this century's painters. He maintained an intense, critical relationship with all the Mexican presidents from Adolfo López Mateos to Ernesto Zedillo, saying that distance was the main way of relating culture to politics.

Paz is survived by Helena Paz Garro, his daughter by his first wife Elena Garro, and Marie Jose Tramini, with whom he spent the last three decades of his life.

A year after his death, Paz' ashes will be transferred to Mexico City's Rotunda of Illustrious Men to rest alongside other Mexicans famous for their achievements in science and culture, such as David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Rosario Castellanos, Amado Nervo, Agustín Lara and Ignacio Chávez. ■■■