

Octavio Paz: eight decades of poetry, politics and history

The Mexican poet Octavio Paz celebrated his eightieth birthday on March 31. To mark this occasion, several literary groups have undertaken the task of compiling his complete works, including some unpublished writings, in honor of the man who has employed the full range of literary genres to express and disseminate his universal words and thought.

Background

Octavio Paz was born the year World War I broke out: 1914, which was also the year of the American occupation of Veracruz, the fall of Huerta and the great split among the victorious revolutionaries. He was brought up in a milieu that oscillated between a cult of the French Revolution and Mexican Liberalism.

His early years were influenced by books, but also by play. With the passage of time, this combination of historical characters and the imaginary world led him to reflect on history and politics.

"One of my great pleasures was leafing through my grandfather's huge history books with one of my cousins and examining the illustrations: the capture of Jerusalem by the Crusaders, Cuauhtémoc's torture, the oath of the ball game, the Battle of Trafalgar.... Our childish games were heroic masquerades: D'Artagnan's duels, the Cid's cavalcades, Aladdin's lamp and

Buffalo Bill's escapades in the Wild West.

"Recalling my childhood games many years later, in *Pasado en claro* (The Past Seen Clearly), I found in them a prophecy of my passion for history and politics."

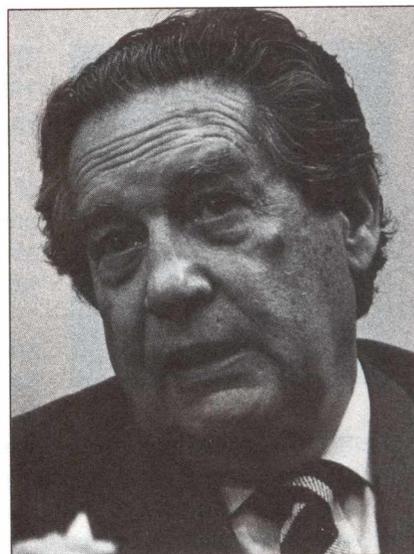
But these childish games also initiated him into one of his greatest passions, poetry. "Poetry is a game, a somersault. Perhaps poetry and history are nothing more than two sides of the same enigmatic reality. Both are present in our childhood."

In the '30s, the contradiction between his revolutionary ideas and his aesthetic convictions was reflected in his first book, *Raíz del hombre* (Root of Man). Of this "babbling"—as he would later call it—he said: "It was erotic poetry, but that was exactly why I thought it was revolutionary poetry. Love and sex were the root of men and women. For me, poetry and revolutionary activity were not essentially dissimilar, although the ways they operated were different."

Universality

His long-standing loyalty to universal thought was shaped by voluntary exile and the influence of other cultures. "Goethe said this repeatedly: 'The time of national literature is long past, now is the time for world literature.'"

When he was awarded the Alexis de Tocqueville Prize, Jean Meyer wrote: "Internationally recognized,



Frida Hartz / La Jornada

Paz was awarded the French Legion of Honor's Great Cross.

Octavio Paz has never been a nationalistic, provincial or small-town writer. He has been a man of synthetic thought and flashing intuition, with an eagle's eye for detail, within a context that is always universal."

Travels

On his first trip to Europe, Paz participated independently in the French Surrealist movement, keeping his distance as a poet—a Mexican poet. He was later to join the margins of the post-war group for a short time in the '40s.

The Surrealism of the time, particularly as embodied by André Bréton, was what helped him to clarify his values and adopt an ethical position as a poet in the contemporary world.

During his years in Europe he remained in close contact with Latin American writers, such as Julio Cortázar and Pablo Neruda, while keeping abreast of events in Mexico.

In accordance with his political ideas, in 1968 he resigned from his post as ambassador to India in response to the Mexican army's repression of the student movement. He declared himself in favor of: "Not a violent

revolutionary process, but a peaceful and gradual development towards more democratic political and social forms."

Criticism

Paz' ideas have been controversial, and even highly disagreeable to many people. He has been criticized as an elitist and anti-Communist, and for defending "art for the few" —among other things. Yet while he has been

rejected by many intellectuals, his universal thought has managed to attract world attention, and focus interest on Mexico and thereby Latin America.

Paz defines criticism as "the apprenticeship of the imagination, cured of fantasy and determined to face the reality of the world. We writers need a certain heroism to help us continue writing and persevere, with complete freedom, without

Literary prizes awarded to Carlos Fuentes



Marco A. Cruz / Imagenlatina.

The Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes was awarded the Grinzane Cavour and 1994 Prince of Asturias Literature prizes for the defense of freedom of the imagination and dignity of thought expressed in his writing.

The Literature prize is one of the eight presented annually by the Prince of Asturias Foundation since its inception in 1981. The Grinzane Cavour prize has been awarded by Italy's Cavour Foundation since 1991, with the aim of attracting young people to reading. As a result it has a double jury, with one part made up of critics and the other of students.

To commemorate these prizes, the Alfaguara publishing house announced the publication of the novels *Diana o la cazadora solitaria* (Diana or the Solitary Huntress) and *La edad del tiempo* (The Age of Time), as well as all of the author's narrative works, beginning with *El mal del tiempo* (Sickness of Time) —including *Aura*, *Cumpleaños* (Birthday), *Una familia lejana* (A Distant Family) and *Constancia y otras novelas para vírgenes* (Constance and Other Novels for Virgins).

Carlos Fuentes was born inside the Mexican Embassy in Panama in 1928. He studied at the Hautes Études Internationales institute in Geneva before taking classes in law in Mexico under the Spanish Republican exile professor Manuel Pedroso, who encouraged him to read authors such as Plato, Machiavelli and Rousseau.

Fuentes has been a professor of literature at the universities of Princeton, Columbia, Harvard and Pennsylvania, as well as Mexican ambassador to France from 1974 to 1977.

He began writing in Chile at the age of eleven. In Río de Janeiro, at the suggestion of Alfonso Reyes (a Mexican author who wrote on a wide variety of subjects), he decided to devote himself to literature. He combined his diplomatic work with narrative and essay writing, founding the *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* (1955-1958) and coediting the publications *El Espectador* (1959-1961) and *Siempre* (1960).

Among his most representative works are *Terra Nostra*, a literary plea for individual liberty in the face of modern society, for which he was awarded the Venezuelan Rómulo Gallegos Prize in 1977.

Some of Fuentes' works have been adapted for the cinema and theater. He has written a number of plays including *El tuerto es rey* (The One-Eyed Man Is King), *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna* (Orchids by Moonlight) and *Todos los gatos son pardos* (All Cats Are Brown).

Among the other prizes he has received are the New York Arts Club Award (1988), the Miguel Cervantes Literature Award (1987) and the Mexican National Literature Prize (1984).

This is the second Prince of Asturias Prize to be awarded to Mexico —the first went to the magazine *Vuelta*— and the fourth for Latin America. Prince Philip of Spain will present the award, consisting of five million pesetas and a reproduction of a statuette of the Spanish artist Joan Miró, next November, when Fuentes will be sixty-six.

Raquel Villanueva
Staff Writer.

Comillas Prize awarded to Enrique Krauze

In Madrid, Mexican historian Enrique Krauze was awarded the Comillas Prize for Biography, Autobiography and Memoirs for his book *Siglo de Caudillos* (Century of Caudillos —caudillos were the traditional strongmen-leaders of Ibero-America). This work analyzes outstanding figures of Mexico's post-Independence epoch—from 1810 to 1910—such as Hidalgo, Morelos, Iturbide, Juárez, Porfirio Díaz, Alamán, Melchor Ocampo and Santa Anna.

The prize was created in 1988 by the Tusquets publishing house for the purpose of awakening interest, in the Spanish-reading public, in a genre which has been but scarcely cultivated in our countries and which makes it possible to recall historical events through the individual figures or groups who were their protagonists.

Enrique Krauze was born in Mexico City in 1947 and received his doctorate in history. As a writer he has focused on history, essays, biography and interviews. He is presently assistant director of *Vuelta* magazine, which in 1993 received the Prince of Asturias Prize for Communication and the Humanities.

Among his main works are *Biografía del poder* (Biography of Power), *Caudillos culturales de la Revolución Mexicana* (Cultural Caudillos of the Mexican Revolution), *Caras de la historia* (Faces of History) and *Personas e ideas* (People and Ideas).



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complacency or fear.... Writers as such are not obliged to improve the country's situation directly. We all have social obligations, but writers have the additional duty of telling the truth. Criticism does not exist in Mexico; there is only a curious procedure of short, flattering little articles, in which only colorless adjectives are spared."

As a means of encouraging criticism, Paz founded the journals *Laurel and Taller* (Workshop), which later served as the basis for *Plural* and *Vuelta* (Turn) magazines; the latter has been published for the past fifteen years. "Well-oriented, authentic criticism could do a lot by drawing people's attention to valuable works.

Critics could promote the creation of a small circle of readers capable of appreciation and creating a genuine reading public."

In Mexico, Paz has passed this passion for criticism on to a generation of writers that includes Enrique Krauze, Christopher Domínguez, Aurelio Asiain and Alberto Ruy Sánchez.

Awards

Octavio Paz has received more awards than any other Latin American writer, but the most important of these is no doubt the Nobel Prize for Literature, which he received in 1990. This recognition has served to publicize his thoughts, this time as an official

spokesman, on one of his prime concerns nowadays: the cruelty and barbarity with which man is destroying himself and the planet.

During his speech in Stockholm he commented: "Life on our planet is in great danger. Our thoughtless cult of progress and our very success in dominating nature have become a suicidal race. At precisely the moment when we have begun to decipher the secrets of the galaxies and atomic particles, the enigmas of molecular biology and the origin of life, we have pierced nature to the quick. Thus, whatever form of political or social organization nations choose to adopt, the most immediate and urgent issue is the survival of the environment. By defending nature, we defend mankind."

Homage

To commemorate his eightieth birthday, Mexican and Spanish publishers have edited Octavio Paz' complete works in a variety of formats, ranging from pocket collections to special editions.

Mexico's Fondo de Cultura Económica publishing house has already distributed 15 volumes of the *Obras completas de Octavio Paz*, recently published by the Círculo de Lectores in Spain. Ediciones El Equilibrista will publish a two-volume edition of Paz' poem "Blanco" just as the poet did in 1966. In the publishers' opinion this poem was a watershed in the history of universal poetry. Ediciones El Tucán de Virginia began a collection of essays and poetry called *Festejo: 80 años de Octavio Paz* (Celebration: 80 Years of Octavio Paz).

Octavio Paz has experienced the changes of over half a century, becoming a writer of essays, novels, history, criticism and poetry along the way. He has yet to pass the torch ✎

Mónica Ching
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