

# Margaret Atwood and Octavio Paz: convergence and divergence

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It has come as a surprise to me, as a Mexican reader, to discover how much Canada and Mexico have in common. One might not have expected this, with Canada and its Anglo-Saxon and Gallic cultures and an economy placing it among the ranks of First World countries and Mexico with its Latin culture and an economy setting it among the developing countries.

Yet in both Canada and Mexico the question of national identity has long been present in reflections on cultural and intellectual life. It is strange to see how, despite the distance and divergences, there are convergences in the responses that some essayists have provided to this issue.

This article will attempt to point these out, using as a starting point two essays that have been central to the interpretation of national cultural identity: *Survival*, by Canada's Margaret Atwood and *The Labyrinth of Solitude* by Octavio Paz<sup>1</sup> in the case of Mexico.

Both the procedure and the form of these texts are similar. Starting from a personal appreciation, a

memory, an intuition, the authors move on to observing the phenomenon through deconstruction and analysis of its composite parts, in order to achieve an in-depth study and interpretative reconstruction. All this is done using a highly "essayist" tone—in other words, an intentionally personal voice to express judgments as well as ideas, without the critical apparatus one would expect from an academic study.

Atwood tells of her initial contact with Canadian literature when it was not yet recognized as such. Paz describes his first stay in Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup> From the unconscious, from childhood—the germ of a concern already lay in the pages they had at hand or the surroundings of these writers when they were still children. The specificity of this as yet unnamed awareness was a discovery that lay dormant until it emerged years later in the form of words.

In both texts, questions are born of confrontation. The childhood anecdote behind *Survival* is of a girl who discovers that Clark Kent's metropolis has nothing to do with her world. Conversely, there are

similarities between the world that she knows and the animal stories of Charles Roberts' *Kings in Exile* and Ernest Thompson Seton's *Wild Animals I Have Known*; the context of Canadian versus American fantasy.

The underlying circumstance of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* is that of a child who observes a foreign city inhabited by many of his fellow countrymen: the Mexicans of Los Angeles. The city ceases to be a prototypical American city and takes on a new atmosphere, full of adornments, unkempt, negligent and passionate. Thus similarities are established with the country of origin; the Mexican urban context within an American one.

On both sides of the border, to the north of America's northern frontier and to the south of the United States, definitions start with contrasts: we're not like our neighbor, we're not like the giant, we're not the empire.<sup>3</sup> The two essayists are aware of this: "The United States is a reality, but such a huge and powerful one that it

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Survival*. Toronto, Anansi, 1991; Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*. Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> The account of both the stay in Los Angeles and other important moments in his life appears in a longer version in "How and Why I Wrote *The Labyrinth of Solitude*" in Octavio Paz, *Itinerario*. Mexico City, FCE, 1993, pp. 13-42.

<sup>3</sup> A propos of this, it is interesting to note Pierre-Elliott Trudeau's simile comparing the relation between the United States and Canada to that of a mouse and an elephant who sleep in the same bed (every time the elephant moves, the mouse is squashed, not vice versa). This is similar to the Mexican saying, "Poor Mexico, so far from God and so near to the United States."

borders on myth and, for many, on obsession," writes Paz.<sup>4</sup>

For her part, Atwood discovers texts describing "the spectacle of what happens historically to small nations caught between big ones when the former try to preserve their own identity" and how they point "the finger at the enemy (identified as America)."<sup>5</sup>

Both are aware that in certain sectors of their societies the American way of life is regarded as a threat, a monster that devours and annihilates the specificity of the other. If these two essays are based on a similar motif, how do they go on to respond to the question it poses?

The leitmotif of *Survival* is Canadian literature, long regarded by Canadians themselves as second-rate. Atwood does not attempt to provide a history of this literature, seeking instead to find the most recurrent patterns in the texts she read as if they had been written by Canada itself. Why choose literature as a protagonist? Because Canada is a mental territory whose inhabitants feel lost, because of their own unfamiliarity with it:

*What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live.*<sup>6</sup>

The central idea of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* is a view of Mexico's history based on the idea that Mexican man and society move according to a succession of characteristic ruptures and unions. It does not attempt to

discover a chimerical philosophy of the Mexican nor to produce a psychological description or portrait. Beginning with an enumeration of characteristic features, it becomes an interpretation of the history of Mexico and its situation in the modern world:

*Waking up to history means gaining awareness of our singularity, a moment of reflective rest before submitting ourselves to the task.... What distinguishes us from other peoples is not the always debatable originality of our character—the result, perhaps, of ever-changing circumstances—but that of our creations... a work of art or a concrete action do more to define the Mexican—not only in that they express him, but in the sense that, by expressing him, they recreate him—than the most penetrating description.*<sup>7</sup>

Thus, although he does not choose it as his framework, Paz also recognizes art's capacity to serve as legacy, mirror and map.

The result of both works is quite similar, despite differences in the objects of study: a description of the tendency of both societies to adopt certain myths that individuals share. And it is similar because both Atwood and Paz choose fundamental core themes in human life to explore the issues surrounding them. This description may be terrifying. The image that the mirror of the word reflects back to us will not be the sort of embellishment assisted by make-up.

The core themes in *Survival* are: survival, which Atwood regards as the central symbol of Canada; nature, seen as a monster that destroys man or as a victim of the latter's depredations; the victimized animal which carries anthropomorphic values; natives (Indians and Eskimos), either as murderers and torturers of well-meaning white men or as people

exploited and exterminated by the modernity that the white man represents;<sup>8</sup> explorers and colonizers, the true ancestors; the family novel, in which there is a confrontation between strong grandparents defending a rigid, puritanical tradition and their grandchildren who must move away to be able to escape the failure to which their parents were destined; immigration that does not result in spiritual or financial success; failed heroes, martyrs without a cause, dead in accidents with no glory; artists unable to paint; cold, hard, sterile women, trapped in oppressive and even destructive family surroundings; mansions burning in the purifying flames of this deadly tradition; in short, the re-creation, from various angles, of Canadian society and the imaginary view that Canadians themselves have formed of it.

The core themes in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* include solitude, which is the central symbol of Mexico for Paz; the "Pachuco," the hybrid rebel, product of his Mexican ancestry confronted with the North American environment in which he is immersed, who even exaggerates his aesthetic appearance to differentiate himself from the rest of the society in which he lives; the mask, symbol of the voluntary solitude in which Mexicans enshroud themselves, to defend themselves against the rest of the world, as a form of preservation, demonstrating the prevalence of secrecy over openness, simulation, appearances, avoidance; parties as the only possibility of openness, the celebration of ceremonies to commemorate heroes and events, sumptuous festivities despite poverty, shouts, as a release of the soul, excess and commotion; death, disdained, in the face of which one is indifferent, revenge towards life, the object of

<sup>4</sup> Paz, "How and Why I Wrote....," p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Atwood, *Op. cit.*, p. 239.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> Paz, *El laberinto...*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> In the first case, the native would be a symbol similar to nature as a monster; in the second, he would be the equivalent of a cornered animal.

worship and adulation, fascination in the face of nothingness and nostalgia for limbo; woman, the enigma that is both exciting and repellent, a vulnerable idol that becomes a hardened victim, inured to suffering as a result of so much suffering, located at one of two extremes; the goodness associated with openness and passivity or the badness that implies obstinacy, similarity to man and activity; "La Chingada," the mythical mother whose children are the result of rape, a female who is totally passive, defenseless against the outside world, where the dialectic between the closed and the open is fulfilled with terrifying precision; the syncretism between the pre-Hispanic and the Spanish, where natives, conquerors and colonizers are protagonists of racial and cultural cross-breeding.

So in what way are these two visions alike? I think that their similarity lies, above all, in the dialectic through which the central symbols of each culture are defined. If the symbol of Canada is survival, Atwood approaches it from the dialectic of the conqueror and his victim. In the majority of cases, in her view, the Canadian experiences life as a conquered person. This is not unwarranted; Canadians' first encounter with the environment was brutal and for a long time survival was an achievement in itself.

If the symbol of Mexico is solitude, Paz approaches it from the dialectic of openness versus secrecy. According to Paz, Mexicans close in on themselves to avoid being conquered. This is not unwarranted either. Mexican culture derives from an initial violent confrontation, a clash between two powerful cultures. A feeling of inferiority<sup>9</sup> is expressed as frustration in both cases, whether one feels like an animal that has been cornered or knows

<sup>9</sup> As defined by Samuel Ramos in *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico). Mexico City, Espasa-Calpe, 1993.

one is the child of rape. This is the vision of the conquered.

Some will criticize the two texts for generalizing and granting the status of truth to a very personal and subjective reflection, based on individual impressions. While this is true, it does not make the texts any less valid. The essayist's task is to give voice to his beliefs and convince us through his work, with ideas and words.

According to Paz, the Pachucos worked out their rebelliousness "not by means of an idea, but by a gesture. The resources of the conquered are the aesthetic use of defeat, the revenge of the imagination."<sup>10</sup> *Survival* and *The Labyrinth of Solitude* can be interpreted as pessimistic because they present a dismal view of their respective cultures; they are an attempt to unravel the myths that colonization implanted. Yet one must

<sup>10</sup> Paz, "How and Why I Wrote....," p. 27.

also realize that the fact of asking why, and then trying to provide an answer, is a gesture similar to the one described by Paz.

Why should we ask questions about ourselves? To stop regarding other people as more important than ourselves. This is the basic premise behind the work of Margaret Atwood and Octavio Paz. Nowadays, their interpretations are part of the legacy that shapes the culture they described. Their texts are a mirror in which we can see ourselves, when we feel the need to recognize ourselves. They are maps of the spiritual geography of their countries. We should listen to our writers, to be able to agree or disagree. "For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge, we will not survive."<sup>11</sup> ❧

<sup>11</sup> Atwood, *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

## Explicación de textos literarios

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