

OCTAVIO PAZ 1915–1998

The death of Octavio Paz on April 19 was mourned in the Spanish-speaking world. His reputation as one of the most influential public intellectuals in this century was capped with the receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1990. In the grand tradition of Tolstoy and Tagore, Octavio Paz had universal interests, particularly with their complex relationship to Asian themes.

Octavio Paz's interest in India was sparked professionally. He served briefly as a minor diplomat in Mexico's first mission to Independent India in 1951. Some of his best earliest prose involved India. His first essay about India, "Ventana al Oriente" was written on the occasion of the visit of the then vice-president of India, Sarvapelli Radhakhrisnan, to Mexico in 1954. Paz later returned to India as Mexico's ambassador to India from 1962 to 1968. As ambassador, Octavio Paz had the opportunity to befriend many leading poets. He often read collectively written poems with Sacchidanand Vatsyayan Agyeya and Shrikant Verma. He resigned from his ambassador's post in protest over the 1968 massacre of students in Mexico City. He lived in self-imposed exile in Paris but he quickly returned to India. In his book of essays, *Claude Levi-Strauss o el Nuevo Festín de Esopo*, he described his relationship with India. For him India was a "giant cauldron, and he who falls within it can never leave."

Paz was particularly fond of the Himalayan mountain states as well as South India and often vacationed there. Some of his most lyrical poetry and key poetic images were directly influenced by his travels throughout India. This influence was clearly developed in his poetry book, *Ladera Este*. *Ladera Este* is arguably the only serious book of poetry about India written in Spanish. He dedicated *Ladera Este* to the Chinese poet, Su Shih. The collection included three poems about Himachal Pradesh, a state that was particularly intriguing to Paz due to the syncretic elements of its population. There he claimed that: "I saw at the foot of the ridge horizons undone, I saw vertigo petrified." Other classic poems in *Ladera Este* included "In the Lodi Gardens," "The Day in Udaipur," "On the Roads to Mysore," "The Mausoleum of Humayun," and "Happiness in Herat."

Throughout his life, Octavio Paz embraced some Indian philosophical concepts. In *Ladera Este*, he was intrigued by spiritual synthesis and by the poetic possibilities of silence. He wrote: "Nirvana is Samsara, silence is music." His praise of silence was also articulated in his book, *El Mono Gramático*. *El Mono Gramático* was a Derridaesque tour de force about two converging scenarios, the road to Gaita in Rajasthan and a garden in Cambridge. Paz was able to interweave exuberant descriptions of temples, people, monkeys as the backdrop for a metaphysical investigation about the meaning of happiness and language. Once again a central theme in Paz's work was the motif of the relationship between poetry and silence. He observed that poetry "feeds us and annihilates us, it gives us words and it condemns us to silence."

During his tenure as ambassador to India, Octavio Paz had the opportunity to develop a close friendship with Indira Gandhi. She later invited him to speak at an annual memorial conference in honor of her father, Jawaharlal Nehru. Octavio Paz's last book, *Vislumbres de la India*, began as an account of his observations during this conference. The conference was postponed due to Indira Gandhi's assassination. Paz was deeply disturbed by what he learnt about Indira Gandhi's actions in Punjab. He concluded that the ruthlessness that had served her so well politically ultimately

clouded her judgment and precipitated her downfall. A decade later he was able to disentangle his disappointment with Indira Gandhi by writing a book about India.

Vislumbres de la India should be considered a landmark in South Asian studies because it is one of the first surveys of Indian politics and society written in Spanish. He began and concluded his book with a cultural travelogue of India. He was particularly enthralled by the mausoleum of Humayun. He wrote that the mausoleum “can be compared to a poem composed not of words but of trees, ponds, and avenues of sand and flowers. They are strict meters that cross and intercross in angles that are foreseen rhymes, and at the same time, surprising.” In an earlier poem, “El Mausoleo de Humayun,” he had succinctly described that same structure as “the architecture of silence.”

A central figure in Octavio Paz’s discussion of Indian politics is Mohandas Gandhi. His admiration of Gandhi stemmed from his being “a living contradiction” who was both at the center and at the extreme of the Indian nationalist struggle. He argued that Gandhi was at the extreme of the nationalist struggle because he offered a reformist vision of Hinduism, while at the same time “showing the extremists that tolerance and non-violence were not in discord with intransigence and efficacy.” Paz masterfully blended his exaltation of Gandhi as a reformer and a moderator of the nationalist discourse in order to critique the current impact of Hindu nationalism represented by the B.J.P. He called this sort of emerging Hindu nationalism “a political corruption of religion.”

Paz’s observations about India provided the reader with a uniquely Latin American postcolonial vision. This critical tradition was unique in that it had not been influenced or impressed greatly by the impact of Anglo-Saxon colonialism. Paz used India as part of his struggle to come to terms with his own ambivalence about Mexico’s colonial past. Paz addressed this concern when he wrote that “the fact of being Mexican has helped me to see the differences of India . . . from my differences of Mexican.” He claimed that he “may understand; to a certain point, what it means to be an Indian because I am a Mexican.” Octavio Paz argued that as a result of their disparate colonial experiences, neither Indians nor Mexicans “reject their past, instead they recloak and repaint it.”

Admittedly, Paz was quick to recognize that some of his reflections in *Vislumbres* were not for “the specialists; it is not a child of knowledge but of love.” In *Vislumbres de la India*, though, he showed the range of his expertise and love for classical Sanskrit poetry, particularly *kavya* texts. Although his repertoire was largely selected from Daniel Ingalls’s translation of Vidyakara’s *Subhasitaratnakosa* and Barbara Stoler Miller’s translation of Bhartrihari’s poems, Paz masterfully commented on key images of Sanskrit poetry. His contagious enthusiasm, not surprisingly, is eventually drawn to the erotic images of this subject, an area that resembled Paz’s own poetic sensuality in *La Llama Doble*.

After receiving the Nobel Prize, Octavio Paz reexplored his interest in other Asian poetry. His influential literary magazine, *Vuelta*, routinely featured articles about his life long passion for the clarity and conciseness of Japanese poetry. In his book, *Versiones and Diversiones*, he translated poems by Masaoka Shiki. Moreover, one of Octavio Paz’s poems replicate Japanese epigrams. This visual poem was exhibited with a mobile design composed by the Japanese artist, Toshiro Katayama. Paz also developed a life-long fondness for classical Chinese poetry. As early as 1957 in his book, *Trazos*, he translated the poetry of Su Tung-p’o. He also translated Wang Wei’s *Lu Zhai*. He recently translated other classical poems by Li Po, Li Ch’ing-Chao, and Chuang-Tzu.

The loss of a great intellectual is never properly honored. Those of us who were influenced by Octavio Paz's writings shall miss him. Perhaps the best way to honor him is through his own poetry:

Como un arbol
un dios
coronarlo con un nombre
immortal

("Tumba del Poeta," *Ladera Este*)

Like a tree
a god
crown it with a name
immortal

("Tomb of the Poet," *East Slope*)

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R. SUNTHARALINGAM 1936–1998

It is with deep regret that I write to report the death of Dr. R. Suntharalingam, a specialist on Indian history who taught at the National University of Singapore from 1960–75, and at Universiti Sains Malaysia from 1975 until his retirement at the age of 55 in 1991.

Dr Suntharalingam received his primary and secondary education at Mahmud School in Raub, Pahang, and at Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur. He graduated from the University of Malaya at Singapore in 1960, earning a First Class Honours Degree in History, and obtained his Ph.D. from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in 1966. A specialist on Indian history, in more recent years he also published on historiography, and wrote his later books and articles in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language of Malaysia, to increase historical awareness among students in Malaysia.

After his retirement Dr. Suntharalingam was honored by his friends and colleagues with a festschrift; see Abu Talib Ahmad and Cheah Boon Kheng, eds., *Isu-isu Pensejarahan: Esei Penghargaan kepada Dr. R. Suntharalingam* [Issues in Historiography: Essays Honouring Dr. R. Suntharalingam]. Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1995. His publications include: *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India, 1852–1891* (Association for Asian Studies Monograph no 27. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974); *Indian Nationalism: An Historical Analysis* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983); *Pengenalan kepada Sejarah* [Introduction to History] (Kuala Lumpur: Marican and Sons, 1985); *Pensejarahan Barat* [Western Historiography] (Petaling Jaya: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1987); and many articles in a variety of journals and edited collections.

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