

From:

OLIVER KOZLAREK (ED.)

Octavio Paz

Humanism and Critique

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Octavio Paz is one of the most recognized Latin American writers. His essays offer a sophisticated critique of global modernity. Although his work has advanced many of the arguments that orient our contemporary debates in the social sciences and in philosophy, it has hardly ever been seriously taken into consideration in these disciplines. The volume suggests that this may have been a mistake. Its authors indicate ways in which Paz' essays can be read as substantial contributions to the contemporary debates in various fields. The first book that makes the debate about Paz' contribution to the social sciences and to philosophy available to a non-spanish speaking audience.

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Foreword

OLIVER KOZLAREK

Edward Said once wrote:

Humanism, I strongly believe, must excavate the silences, the world of memory, of itinerant, barely surviving groups, the places of exclusion and invisibility, the kind of testimony that doesn't make it into reports but which is increasingly about whether an overexploited environment, sustainable small economies and small nations, and marginalized peoples outside as well as inside the maw of the metropolitan center can survive the grinding down and flattening out and displacement that are such prominent features of globalization (Said 2004: 81-82).¹

It is precisely through its willingness to “excavate” the legacies of forgotten or even vanished cultures and civilizations that humanism becomes practical.

This book is about the Mexican poet and writer Octavio Paz (1914-1998). Although Paz was one of the most prominent and internationally recognized Latin American authors of the 20th century, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990, and saw his work translated into many languages, neither he himself nor his works have yet received the attention they so richly deserve.

By showing that Paz’s work combines a strong commitment to modernity and critique with a similarly strongly felt commitment to humanism, it will become evident that he could well be considered an important *spiritus rector* of our era of globalization.

This book is the result of my collaboration in the project “Humanism in the Era of Globalization, an Intercultural Dialogue on Culture, Humanity, and Values,” in which I participated as a Visiting Fellow in 2007 and 2008. The project is organized by the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut – KWI) in Essen (Germany), in close cooperation with the neighboring universities of Bochum, Dortmund, and Duisburg-Essen, and is sponsored by the Stiftung Mercator in Essen. I owe

1 | Edward W. Said (2004): *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, New York: Columbia University Press.

a debt of gratitude to all those institutions and especially to the people who represent them.

Special thanks go to Angelika Wulff who worked tirelessly on bringing the different chapters into the homogenous form of a manuscript, to Shari Gilbertsen in Germany for the revisions of the English versions, and to Paul Kersey in Mexico whose skills as a translator and copy editor are invaluable. I would also like to thank Birgit Klöpfer from transcript for her patience and professional support. I am also grateful to Henner Laass for his help with the manuscript.

I wish I could express in words how grateful I am to Jörn Rüsen. He is not only the Director of the project, but also a grand human being who taught me what humanism is really all about: seeing and bringing out the best in every human being.

Morelia, August 2009

Oliver Kozlarek

Introduction:

Crossing Borders, Reaching Humanity

OLIVER KOZLAREK

In the preface of the first volume of his *Complete Works (Obras Completas)*,¹ Octavio Paz (1914-1998) wrote:

[I] do not feel able to choose among my writings. Their diversity intimidates me: poems, art criticism and literature, a biography which is, at the same time, a study of literature and a picture of history, essays about topics of morals and politics, notes and articles on issues and concerns of our time, digressions, glosses (Paz 1994a: 15).²

Indeed, Paz's work is intimidating! Its scope, in terms of both topics and forms, is difficult for the conventional academic disciplines to deal with. Literary scholars may be intrigued by the fact that Paz preferred essays over novels, while those interested in his poetry may be irritated by his essays which take up questions that are deemed the reserve of the social sciences or philosophy. Finally, social scientists and philosophers who may be interested in his essays could feel discouraged by the fact that Paz was not an academic peer.

This, of course, does not mean that nobody has actually written about his extensive and, as Paz himself thought, "intimidating" *oeuvre*. Just a short time ago, an anthology with some of the texts that can be considered milestones in the history of the critique of Paz's work was published. The editor, Enrico Mario Santí, writes: "It is difficult to find another author to whom so much attention has been paid" (Santí 2009: 11). This may well be true. The book itself, with its 700 pages, is an impressive piece of evidence of the many reactions that the Mexican Nobel Prize winner from 1990 has provoked. However, it also evidences something else: a sort of perplexity.

1 | The *Obras Completas* are published in 15 volumes and include Paz's poems, essays and interviews.

2 | Translations by Oliver Kozlarek.

It is not that the many words about Paz that Santí's book recapitulates are not eloquent but, rather, that many of them seem like so many echoes of isolated ideas that this celebrated Mexican man of letters expounded during his prolific life.

Was Paz then an opportunist, someone who discussed whatever seemed to be fashionable at a given point in time? Was he an eclectic who cared little for coherence? Without wishing to suggest that Paz left his readers a hermetically-sealed "system" of any kind, I do think that there are two especially strong and omnipresent guiding principles that oriented his thought in all the different manners in which he chose to express it: *humanism* and *critique*. Thus, one of the objectives of this book is to show that it is, above all, the unity of this double principle that may be understood as a key to Paz's thought, and that it is this quality that makes it so relevant to many of our contemporary concerns.

As I said above, much has been written about Paz and his work, but it is also true that outside of the Spanish speaking/reading world the situation is quite different. Certainly, Paz belongs to the elite of the international republic of letters. Much of his work has been translated into many languages (including English and German), but the potential significance of his contributions for many of the contemporary debates that dominate the social sciences and the humanities has not yet truly been appreciated.

A prime example is Jürgen Habermas' commentary on Paz: In his "Modernity: An Unfinished Project,"³ Habermas manifests that he felt that they were kindred spirits in the defense of modernity at a time when many were ready to abandon the "project" that he himself had so energetically stood for. He calls Paz a "*Parteigänger der Moderne*" (party follower of modernity) (Habermas 1990: 37).

This gesture from such an internationally influential author has raised hopes and has even been taken as proof that, "by the middle of the last century, Hispano-American thought reached a phase in which it changed from being a mere consumer and importer of original ideas into a producer and exporter [of them]" (Gomes 2004: 167; see also Pozas 2009).

Indeed just as it is beyond doubt that Paz's ideas were always committed to many aspects of what is commonly understood as modernity in Europe or the United States, there is also no question that his experience in, and with, modernity and, consequently, his ideas on this topic are in many ways different from – and perhaps even contradictory to – the meaning of this term in those countries. Instead of seeing in Paz only a confirmation of what had already been said in Europe or the United States, it is possible to discover in his writings the expression of a different modernity or, better, of different modernities that intermingle and overlap but without ever losing their particularities. The second objective of this book is thus to present to the reader a selection of texts that strive to translate some of Paz's ideas. "Translation" can be understood here in a double sense: on the one hand,

3 | I quote here from the German edition.

some of the essays in this book were previously published in Spanish, and translating them into English responds to our desire that readers who are not specialists in Latin American literature may develop an interest in Paz's work.

But at the same time, the book also intends to achieve a different kind of "translation": it intends to show how Paz's thought can be translated into the languages of many different intellectual and academic fields where his works have not yet been discovered and where he is not yet recognized as a serious interlocutor. The focus in this book is placed on critical theory, aesthetics, anthropology and sociology, as well as philosophy.

The affirmation that Paz combines critique and humanism needs to be explained, as for many the claim of this partnership can no longer go uncontested. A particularly influential voice in this respect is still that of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, humanism undermines modernity's inclination towards a "permanent critique of ourselves" (Foucault 1984: 43), since "what is called humanism has always been obliged to lean on certain conceptions of man borrowed from religion, science and politics" (ibid.: 44). Foucault continues: "Humanism serves to color and justify the conceptions of man to which it is, after all, obliged to take recourse" (ibid.). He concludes: "[...] I am inclined to see Enlightenment [modernity] and humanism in a state of tension rather than identity" (ibid.).

Foucault is correct: humanism has indeed served on more than one occasion as a convenient discourse that helped to justify hegemonic power relations. This is true, for instance, in the case of colonialism, where everything that did not attain the ideal of European man was excluded from the category of humankind. However, the humanism that Octavio Paz strives to achieve does not start out from such a closed understanding of humankind. Instead of an *idée fixe* of this or that image of "the human", Paz's humanism is the result of experiences with other human beings and their cultures around the world; experiences that simultaneously shaped his understanding of modernity.

One key to Paz's idea of modernity is what Hannah Arendt observed so keenly some 50 years ago. For this German philosopher, modernity comprised basically the following:

The decline of the European nation-state system; the economic and geographic shrinkage of the earth, so that prosperity and depression tend to become world-wide phenomena; the transformation of mankind which until our own time was an abstract notion or a guiding principle for humanists only, into a really existing entity whose members at the most distant points of the globe need less time to meet as the members of a nation needed a generation ago - these mark the beginnings of the last stage in this development. [M]ankind now begins to replace nationally bound societies and the earth replaces the limited state territory (Arendt 1958: 257).

Accordingly, “modernity” is above all the name of this ‘growing together’ of the inhabitants of the most distanced places on earth. Modernity is the name for the process that converts humankind into a concrete reality.

Paz shared this idea; however, he also knew that this process is far from finished. For someone like Paz, who oriented his ideas in experiences and not abstract ideas, this means that modernity should not be normatively overrated. Although he defended certain basic principles of modernity – such as autonomy, democracy, the independence of the sciences and arts, and so on – he knew that there are many aspects of the human condition that all modern cultures tend to overlook. Paz opted for a more cautious approach: instead of depositing certain normative contents in “modernity” – and at the same time excluding many others – he preferred to see it as an “empty name”, or a cipher, for “that which does not yet have a name” (Paz 1994b: 19).

But, we could ask, does that not sound like this “worldless mentality” that Hannah Arendt also noticed as a consequence of the world growing together? For Arendt there was no doubt that “[since] men cannot become citizens of the world as they are citizens of their countries [...] the formation of a lonely mass man” and “the formation of the worldless mentality” (Arendt 1958: 257) would be consequential. Here, Arendt touches on issues that Octavio Paz was indeed very much aware of. Loneliness – or as he prefers to say, solitude – is one of the central issues in his writings. But for Paz it is not only modernity that produces solitude. Or rather, he suspects that an anthropological particularity provokes the feeling of being lonely. “Man is the only being who knows he is alone”, he wrote. But just as it is certain that human beings feel lonely, it is also true that they seek out one another. In Paz’s words: “[...] Man is nostalgia and the search for communion” (Paz 1994c: 195), a concept that one could take even further: “solitude” and the constant search for “the other” are the two opposite sides that produce the typically human energy, that when all is said and done, is responsible for human culture in its totality. Time and again, Paz’s work explores the different forms in which distinct cultures deal with solitude and look for “communion” with “the other”.

Paz’s critique of modernity draws on these cultural comparisons. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, first published in 1950, stands out especially in this respect. It is not only a reflection on Mexican identity, but also a comparison of two modern cultures: the Mexican and the North American. At the same time, it is an exercise in the attempt to determine anthropological universals that shine through the fabric of cultures which can only be grasped through comparison. As the title reveals, the most important anthropological universal that the book is interested in is that of solitude.

Another universal that is very important for Paz manifests itself in the fact that all cultures seem to have an innate knowledge of poetry. For Paz, the “poetic experience” provides the certainty that everything in the universe is in reality connected to everything else. It is as if poetry reminded us of this universal connectivity that the “worldless mentality” of modernity seems to forget. In other words: poetic experience helps us to realize that it is indeed possible to connect to “the other” and to the world. Moreover, it makes us

aware of our incompleteness when we fail to do so. In his Nobel Prize speech from 1990, Paz recalled that even in his childhood he felt drawn to the “world out there”: “The experience repeated itself over and over. Any news, an anodyne phrase, the headline in a newspaper, a popular song: all proofs of the existence of a world out there and a revelation of my unreality” (Paz 1994d: 35). This too is a modern experience, and it was probably as a result of it that Paz devoted so much of his lifetime to traveling.

Instead of seeing in Paz – as Habermas did – a *Parteigänger* (party follower) of modernity, I would prefer to call him a *Grenzgänger*; that is, someone who crosses borders. Indeed, Paz crossed all kinds of borders: the borders between politics and arts, and the borders that in the academically institutionalized sciences separate different realms of the production of knowledge, but especially the borders of the countries through which he traveled and the cultures that he studied and compared.

Crossing borders, meeting people and learning from them and their cultures are activities that in the end help to strengthen an awareness of our own incompleteness. It is in this sense that they represent an important source for any kind of self-critique. But it also helps to understand that our modern world is far from being complete. We have created a world in which the most important sources of fear among human beings are not natural disasters or divine punishments but other human beings. We are living in a world that is still dominated by violence. For Paz this suspends the completion of the “project of modernity”. When he received the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 1984, he pronounced these words: “Violence exacerbates differences and impedes people from talking and listening; monologue eliminates the other [while] dialogue maintains the differences but creates a space in which othernesses coexist and intermingle” (Paz 1995: 466). He concluded with what can only be viewed as a grand humanist gesture: “Dialogue does not allow us to negate either ourselves or the humanity of our adversaries” (ibid.).

The “unfinished project of *modernity*” is for Paz the unfinished project of *humanity*. Modernity is not an end in itself, but a step – albeit a supremely important one – in this process that eventually will make us more human.

This book is divided into four sections: The first part is dedicated to a review of what may be called the “critical theory of Octavio Paz”. It begins with two chapters (by Alfons Söllner and Oliver Kozlarek) that examine Paz’s relationship to the critical theory of Theodor W. Adorno, followed by Yvon Grenier’s chapter on the important influence that Marx exercised on Paz. Rubén Gallo then discusses Paz’s interpretation of Freud, emphasizing that his concept of solitude can actually be traced back to Freud’s ideas about melancholia in particular, and his theory of cultural malaise in general.

At least two of the chapters of the second section might also have been placed in the first one, since they continue the discussion of Paz’s work through the lens of critical theory. The essay by Bolívar Echeverría compares Paz’s cultural critique, as expressed in his *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, to the

famous Mexican muralists whose footsteps he seems to have followed. He sees in *The Labyrinth* a picture painted in words. Rolando Vázquez makes a similar point. Not only does he explore the relationship between the visual and language, he also proposes a form of “poetic critique” that draws on Octavio Paz and Walter Benjamin. Juan Álvarez closes this section with a detailed reconstruction of Paz’s interpretation of the work of Marcel Duchamp that offers an insight into how Paz combined his poetic understanding of language and his visual intelligence in order to interpret the work of a figure whom he saw as one of the most important artists of the 20th century.

The third section centers on a discussion of the work of Paz in relation to the social sciences. The first two chapters, by Oliver Kozlarek and Jorge Capetillo-Ponce, attempt to show that although Paz was not a sociologist, there is a sociological aspect to some of his essays. In her contribution, Liliana Weinberg sheds light on Paz’s affinities with anthropology.

The fourth and final section is dedicated to the philosophy of Octavio Paz. Hugo Moreno begins by comparing Paz to Hegel, while Xavier Rodríguez follows with an essay that explores the philosophical depth of Paz’s ideas about otherness. Last, but not least, Juliana González discusses Paz’s ideas about sexuality, eroticism and love.

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