Octavio Paz

THE PUBLISHING HOUSE CUADERNOS AMERIcanos has just released a good book, *El laberinto de la soledad* [*The Labyrinth of Solitude*], written by a Mexican author who is already known as a good poet and who now makes his debut as a critic and essayist. The book gives us more than the title promises: it contains the solitude necessary for thinking, but the thoughts are applied to the life and history of the Mexican nation. Octavio Paz, the author, comes from an intellectual lineage: his father was an opposition journalist who became a Zapatista revolutionary—a man of action and ideas, who, in turn, inherited the most salient traits of his own father, Don Irineo Paz, Octavio's grandfather.

Don Irineo was a journalist who opposed the Díaz regime, and we can imagine the stature of a man who daily faced arrest warrants and bloody duels. Octavio Paz issues from this line of revolutionary intellectuals, and he is now the most brilliant poet of his generation. He also works as a diplomat in Paris, where he has been writing about Mexicanness, but from a cosmopolitan perspective. Octavio Paz, as we said, began as a poet, which is the most desirable of all beginnings—at least so it seems to those of us who did not have such a beginning because of a complete lack of talent for prosody. But woe to poets who do not become prose writers! Unless a poet can, like the greatest, write widely read dramatic works destined for immortality, there comes a point at which every poet must turn to prose, which, since Plato, has been the most appropriate vehicle for expressing the spirit. Poets usually write excellent prose, and Octavio Paz is no exception. Unlike the young writers belonging to a certain group, he does not burden his writing with citations, but this does not prevent him from borrowing from and following the example of the greatest figures.

He has not yet shaken off the need, felt by most writers of his generation, to quote Ortega y Gasset, even if only to say platitudes. In contrast, when it comes to writing about history, Octavio Paz no longer refers to Dilthey or Hegel but follows Toynbee: a choice that places him in the most contemporary modernity and is in accordance with scientific truth. Paz writes in a sober and agreeable style, sprinkled with a judicious dose of erudition. Excessive erudition is always cumbersome, even when the author writes well. The ability to select what is valuable from among a jumble of information is a rare skill indeed.

The book opens with an essay on the pachuco, which we don't consider entirely successful; next come some ruminations on our holiday celebrations, which the author considers very lively. I don't share his assessment. On the contrary, it seems to me that nowhere is the sadness of our poor and limited country as apparent as in our national and religious celebrations, in our birthdays and anniversaries—events at which only alcohol provides a glimpse of fleeting joy.

The author's analysis of our history is insightful and well argued, even if his discussion of pre-Columbian cultures repeats the fashionable hyperboles coined by archaeologists on the government payroll and anthropologists who have not managed to persuade us that cannibalism and culture are compatible endeavors. Nevertheless, Octavio Paz's discussion is clear and well structured. His later assessment of the colonial period is exceptionally lucid. He mentions its errors—there are errors that every civilization must inevitably commit—but also shows its many virtues, unthinkable in other nations that were contemporaneous with our New Spain. We should remember that Octavio Paz belongs to today's revolutionary youth, encumbered by an anti-Spanish prejudice, but nevertheless he has the courage to write the following paragraphs in which the truth shines:

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> Catholicism was the center of colonial society because it was the true fountain of life, nourishing the activities, the passions, the virtues, and even the sins of both lords and servants, functionaries and priests, merchants and soldiers. Thanks to religion the colonial order was not a mere superimposition of new historical forms but a living organism. The church used the key of baptism to open the doors of society, converting it into a universal order open to everyone. And when I speak of the Catholic Church I am referring not only to the apostolic labors of the missionaries but to the church as a whole, with its saints, its rapacious prelates, its pedantic ecclesiastics, its impassioned jurists, its works of charity, and its accumulation of riches.

And later he adds:

> It is through the Catholic faith that Indians, who had been orphaned—their ties to their ancestral cultures were broken, their cities and gods destroyed—find a place in the world. . . . This possibility of belonging to a living order, even if it was at the bottom of the social pyramid, was cruelly denied to the Indians by the Protestants of New England. It is often forgotten that to belong to the Catholic faith meant that one found a place in the cosmos. The flight of their gods and the death of their leaders had left the natives in a solitude so complete that it is difficult for a modern man to imagine it. Catholicism reestablished their ties with the world and the other world. It gave them back a sense of their place on earth; it nurtured their hopes and justified their lives and deaths.[1]

A few pages later, Octavio Paz's assessments of the Reforma[2] and the revolution are notable. He is right in observing that the revolution lacked a doctrine and a guiding principle: deeds triumphed during the revolution, doubtless because of the paucity of revolutionary ideas. But it is unfair not to mention that Madero, in his *Plan de San Luis*, outlined a program that has been trampled and ignored but never improved.

Carranza's followers paraded as more radical revolutionaries, but this was a ruse designed to distract attention from the crimes that became the norm while they were in power. Today, when everyone follows the international trend and speaks about democracy, it is opportune to recall that if there was ever a Mexican who believed in free elections and sacrificed his life for this ideal, it was Madero.

Even if the revolution was ultimately hijacked by a bunch of illiterate caudillos and their pettifoggers, this was not its original design. In contrast to our republican traditions, the 1910 revolution began not with a *grito*[3] or a call to arms but with a book and a program, both written by Madero.

We should also remember that in the political realm, Madero's revolutionary program was designed as a correction against the liberal agenda. He proposed not only to break the stronghold of the positivist *científicos*[4] but also to revise the anticlerical policies instituted by Juárez in his Reforma laws. The goal was to create a new national identity based on unity, patriotism, and social stability—all requisite values to guarantee our nation's progress.

Translator's Notes

Vasconcelos's review appeared in *Todo*, 6 April 1950, on page 11.

1. I have modified the English translation by Kemp, Milos, and Belash (Paz 101–02).

2. The liberal reforms instituted by President Benito Juárez in the nineteenth century.

3. "Viva México," the patriotic "cry" traditionally performed by the president on the anniversary of the Mexican Revolution.

4. Economists trained in positivist methods who held key government positions during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz.

Work Cited

Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash. New York: Grove, 1985.

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