



Octavio Paz and *Piedra de sol* (1957)

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Octavio Paz was born in 1914, ground zero year of the Mexican Revolution, when the troops of agrarian leaders Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa entered Mexico City, shaking the foundations of the Mexican Belle Époque. For many historians, 1914 marked the true end of the nineteenth century. In Mexico, this agrarian revolution and the rise of urban modernity would together shape the course of the twentieth century, the century of Octavio Paz, who died just two years before the dawn of our own twenty-first century.

When Paz died, the vox populi remarked that, finally, “la literatura mexicana descansa en Paz” (“Mexican literature rests in peace”). The wordplay was far from innocent. Paz had been an essential figure in Mexican society, one of the principal architects of modern national culture. In addition to his prolific oeuvre, Paz shaped the course of Mexican culture and literature by founding and editing influential literary journals such as *Plural* (1971-1976), and *Vuelta* (1976-1998). His impact extended through public interventions, through his prominent role in literary production, and through his career as a diplomat. Despite his own reservations, this far-reaching influence transformed him from a modern poet into a national institution. As such, his work was both widely celebrated and sharply criticized; the weight of his public persona cast both a luminous presence and a long shadow.

On the other hand, his stature extends far beyond Mexico. His name carries the weight of public intellectuals like Sartre and Neruda, figures whose influence reached beyond literature into the political and cultural arenas of their time. A Nobel Prize laureate, Paz witnessed and engaged with some of the most significant movements of the twentieth century, including the Spanish Civil War and the 1968 youth movements. A true globetrotter, his years in the United States, Europe, and Asia helped shape a broad, cosmopolitan perspective while also sharpening his critical understanding of both Mexican national identity and universal poetry.

Some of Paz's essays are deeply rooted in national concerns, most notably *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), a widely quoted treatise on Mexican identity in which he weaves together myth and history to examine how the legacy of colonization shaped the national psyche. Yet at the core of Paz's thought lies a sustained reflection on literature, particularly poetry. His poetic work investigates the role of poetry as a distinct, non-referential language that paradoxically illuminates the hidden meaning of the world. One of his most significant essays on the subject is *El arco y la lira* (1956, translated as *The Bow and the Lyre*), where he articulates his philosophy of poetic language, explores its connection to society, and offers readings of key modern poets, including Walt Whitman. In the prologue of this book, Paz wrote:

From the time when I began to write poems, I wondered whether it was worth while to do so, would it not be better to transform life into poetry, than to make poetry from life? And poetry, cannot its proper object be, more than the creation of poems, the creation of poetic instants? Can there be a universal communion in poetry?¹

This quote captures Paz's central concerns with cyclical time and the meaningful instant: the ephemeral breakthrough from alienation that

renders life substantial and significant. These ideas lie at the heart of his poetic masterpiece *Piedra de sol* (1957). This long poem embodies his transculturation of mythology and modernity. With only three hundred copies printed, the first edition (Fondo de Cultura Económica 1957) was introduced with the following note:

On the cover of this book appears the number 585 written in the Mayan numeral system; likewise, the corresponding Mexican glyphs for Day 4 *Ollin* (Movement) and Day 4 *Ehécatl* (Wind) appear at the beginning and end of the poem. It may be useful to point out that this poem is composed of 584 hendecasyllabic lines (the last six are not counted because they are identical to the first six; in reality, the poem does not end with them but begins again). This number of lines equals the synodic revolution of the planet Venus, which is 584 days. The ancient Mexicans tracked the Venusian cycle (as well as those of the other planets visible to the naked eye) beginning with Day 4 *Ollin*; Day 4 *Ehécatl* marked, 584 days later, the conjunction of Venus and the Sun and, consequently, the end of one cycle and the beginning of another.²

Drawing on the symbolism of the Aztec calendar stone housed in the National Museum of Anthropology, *Piedra de sol* employs the techniques of modern poetry, particularly surrealist imagery, to meditate on cyclical time and the possibility of breaking its grip through poetry and love: “The world is born when two people kiss,/a drop of light from transparent juices,/the room cracks half-open like a fruit/ or explodes in silence like a star”³

Piedra de sol invites the reader on a wandering journey through a spatio-temporal dimension where history and myth collide, and human consciousness searches for meaning through flesh and emotion. History reveals its perverse masks (political corruption, war, betrayal) and language becomes the divisive force that fragments the communion of the self with

the whole. Yet it is the lovers, mythic or real, who alone can illuminate and momentarily suspend the corrosive effects of that empty, linear time, though only within the fleeting, universal instant. The poem never loses its cyclical rhythm; its structure allows the poetic voice to return, to incarnate endlessly, without exhaustion.

Although the underlying philosophical idea in *Piedra de sol* may be simple, the poem's beauty lies in its masterful use of poetic imagery. Influenced by surrealism, Paz's images move fluidly between abstraction and the concrete, offering moments of both intellectual depth and sensory experience. *Piedra de sol*, like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, José Gorostiza's *Muerte sin fin*, and *Primero sueño* by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, belongs to the tradition of the long poem, a form that allows for the exploration of the metaphysical, the historical, and the personal. In this sense, *Piedra de sol* resonates universally.

¹ *The Bow and the Lyre*, translated by Ruth L.C. Simms. McGraw Hill, 1975.

² *Piedra de Sol*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1957.

³ Sunstone, Scriptor Press. p. 17