

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29509-3 - Octavio Paz: A Study of his Poetics

Jason Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)


---



---

## *Introduction*

### *1. The biographic prop*

Octavio Paz was born in March 1914, in Mixcoac, Mexico City. He was the son of an eminent lawyer who had defended Emiliano Zapata, the peasant revolutionary leader. Paz first published poems in reviews such as *Barandal* (1931–2) and *Cuadernos del valle de México* (1933–4). His first book, *Luna silvestre* (1933; *Rustic Moon*), was printed in an edition of sixty-five copies, and consisted of seven poems invoking ‘poetry’ with subdued echoes of Juan Ramón Jiménez; it has not been re-issued. In 1937 Paz went to Spain for the Writers’ Congress (1938), meeting many of the twentieth century’s most exciting poets. He contributed to Republican magazines (such as *Hoja de España*), edited anthologies (e.g. *Voces de España*) and published a book of poems (*Bajo tu clara sombra*, Valencia 1937; *Under your Clear Shadow*). From these decisive experiences in Spain onward, this study traces Paz’s relationships with the surrealists, from friendship to metaphysics. The first book of poems that concerns us is the first edition of *Libertad bajo palabra* (1949; *Liberty on Oath; or under Word*), a selection of his poems. This was expanded to include his work in the 1950s, again as *Libertad bajo palabra* (1960); a 1968 edition excised some forty poems. Then followed *Salamandra* (1962; *Salamander*) and *Ladera este* (1969; *Eastern Slope*). Paz has also written criticism: from uncollected articles in the 1930s and 1940s to *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950, enlarged 1959; *Labyrinth of Solitude*), *El arco y la lira* (1956; *The Bow and the Lyre*), *Las peras del olmo* (1957; *Pears from the Elm*), *Cuadrivio* (1965; *Quadrivium*), *Los signos en rotación* (1965; *Signs in Rotation*), *Puertas al campo* (1966; *Doors to the Field*), *Corriente alterna* (1967; *Alternating Current*), *Conjunciones y disyunciones* (1969; *Conjunctions*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29509-3 - Octavio Paz: A Study of his Poetics

Jason Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

OCTAVIO PAZ

and Disjunctions), *Le Singe grammairien* (1972; The Grammatical Monkey), *El signo y el garabato* (1973; The Sign and the Scrawl) and *Children of the Mire* (1974). He has edited anthologies (*Poesía en movimiento*, 1966; Poetry in Movement), collected his translations (*Versiones y diversiones*, 1974; Versions and Diversions), collaborated with other poets (*Renga*, 1971) and edited prestigious magazines like *Taller* (1938–41; Workshop), *El hijo pródigo* (1943–6; Prodigal Son), the magnificent *Plural* (1971–6) and *Vuelta* (1976– ; Return). He continually revises, excises and adds to his writings. He has written lucidly and excitingly on Michaux, William Carlos Williams, Cernuda, Darío, Pessoa, López Velarde, Duchamp, Tamayo, Breton, Lévi-Strauss, Fourier, Sade, Bashō – the list gets out of hand. He writes prolifically, his books pile up, his work expands with translations, new editions, interviews and innumerable studies on him. In the bibliography some of these are noted.

I have chosen 1968 as a symbolic date. After 1945 Paz represented his country as a diplomat; from 1962 he was Ambassador in India, then, following the atrocious massacre of Mexican students just before the Mexican Olympic Games (see Paz's *Posdata* (1970; Postscript)) he resigned in protest, returned home and participated polemically in Mexican life. If I have underplayed the biographic approach, more can be found in Claire Cέα's *Octavio Paz* and I. Ivask's collection of studies on Paz.

In order to avoid attempting a general survey, for Sr Octavio Paz is still very much alive, I have focussed on a moment in his poetic life – surrealism – and seen this as a centre, symbolic of an *actitud vital* (vital attitude), and stretched it over the rest like a net. To attempt anything else would be absurd.

## 2. *The critic*

It is a commonplace to talk about the 'crisis' in literary criticism, and the critic can no longer feign innocence. He has to explain himself, defend his views, reveal his position. This critic's relation to Octavio Paz's *obra* (work) has developed in a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29509-3 - Octavio Paz: A Study of his Poetics

Jason Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

3

schizoid way, divided between 'private' enthusiasm (he first read Paz in English in *Evergreen Review*) and academic concern, in that Paz's *obra* was the centre of an eight-year exploration of Paz's vision, surrealism, the nature and function of poetry and so on, pursued through the repressive and deforming convention of the doctoral thesis. That he occasionally writes about himself in the third person singular or in the self-effacing first person plural underlines the consequent distance (alienation?) of this writer from the texts. This loss of 'heat' and this numbing of enthusiasm contradict the essential, ecstatic vision of the poetry, and casts a 'cold' eye.

However, Paz is not a poet locked in the intensities of poetic language; as a concerned critic he is obliged, with a minimum of sacrifice, to water down his heady vision. He can expound in prose, in an amenable, immediately consumable language that is rooted in common sense, not ecstasy. In his case, as a critical poet and poet-critic, the need to *descend* from metaphoric heights, from hermetic song, and to relate his critical perceptions in prose to a shared body of thought, is symptomatic of the *absence* of those sensed, invisible meanings that weave poetry into the fabric which is called culture.

Further, the critic is not only an intermediary or more thorough 'reader', but creates a sense of tradition by relating works together, as Paz himself claims (*CA* 41). The critic discovers those texts and readings which give Paz's *obra* its meaning and from which his work makes sense. This activity avoids more dubious and coarser discourse; from the biographical and the sociological to the psycho-analytical, where the disparity between critic and text reflects the rigidity of ideology. Poetry loosens the tongue; it is Ezra Pound's 'brief gasp between clichés'. Paz is a poet whose reading of surrealism enabled him to revalue and affirm the role of poetry in the twentieth century in terms of a liberating, quasi-religious vocation.

Octavio Paz's *place* is not only Mexico with its intangible conditionings and visible survivals; he must also be placed as a body of work reverberating between his masters, T. S. Eliot and André Breton. If we concentrate in our reading on Breton,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29509-3 - Octavio Paz: A Study of his Poetics

Jason Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

space is our excuse. Further, these readings must be seen as critical, counter-readings. Within the wider context of history, Mexican post-revolutionary nationalism, the absence of a world image, the dead weight of ideologies, a sweetened Romantic tradition (and so on), they are liberating. The secret 'fathers' (cf. H. Bloom) who relate Breton to Eliot (their awkward placing together is symbolic, a simplification of hesitant, darker and more complex readings) are the Mexican poet Xavier Villaurrutia (1903–50) and his Castilian twin Luis Cernuda (1902–63), both poets whose readings of surrealism *initiated* Paz into an awareness that led him to become one of surrealism's foremost apologists, 'Breton's most brilliant disciple outside the French-speaking world' (H. Gersham). Villaurrutia and Cernuda are the 'Spanish' strands in our fabric.<sup>1</sup>

This study will explore Paz's poetics, 'poetics' being taken as a body of thought, morality, a life-attitude and metaphysic. We will deal with intention. This circumvents the problem of evaluating the poetry; it avoids excessive description, thematic summaries and what we might call the tautological trap, since many of Paz's poems are about the poem, the creative act, self-reflection and so on. The experience of one poem generates another. The responses to Paz's poems are determined by a chaos of factors that defies rationalisation and linearisation; from deep emotional responses and unconscious phonic associations to cultural conditioning (this critic is not Mexican; learned Spanish at sixteen, etc.). It would be presumptuous to attempt evaluation other than orally or privately. Our reading of Paz offers specialised insights, fitting the pieces into a version of literary history. However, what this critic 'hides' seeps through, in his selections, his use of adjectives, his desire to write this study and his irritation with the crudity of a medium ill-fitted to participate in the poetry.

### 3. *Some quotations*

'El pensamiento del surrealismo, crítico y utópico, fue tan importante como las creaciones de sus poetas y pintores' (CA 169; The thought of surrealism, critical and utopian, was as

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29509-3 - Octavio Paz: A Study of his Poetics

Jason Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

5

important as the creations of its poets and painters). This affirmation underpins our study: it points to a lucid awareness that the poem itself, severed from its matrix, fails as an act of communication in a time when there are no shared world views. Surrealism offers an alternative that is critical and utopian. This posits an extra-literary intent – the utopian surrealist dream that the poem will incarnate in society; Lautréamont's dictum that one day poetry will be *spoken* by all and that it will be lived, no longer *written in books*. The reverse of this vision is the desperation of the solitary poet. All Paz's writings envisage some *act* of communion beyond words, a faith that poetry *changes* the poet and the reader, ushering in the poetic society based on love, liberty and desire, the waking dream lived in broad daylight. The tension of Paz's writing stems from this utopian intention, for actual history is a 'nightmare', is reductive and repressive. Paz's insight about utopian surrealism is shared by others, for example Jorge Guillén: 'La poétique était peut-être supérieure à la poésie' (The poetic was perhaps superior to the poetry).<sup>2</sup>

'La obra de Cernuda es una biografía espiritual...todo presidido por una conciencia que desea transformar la experiencia vivida en saber espiritual' (CA 12; Cernuda's work is a spiritual biography...presided over by a consciousness that desires to transform lived experience into spiritual knowledge). Poetry for Paz is not a formal, aesthetic exercise, but it is his very being manifesting itself in the space of desire. The act of writing–reading is a metaphor of liberation from conditioning, from role, and the societal self; the pen runs beyond intention and the 'other' crystallises as desire; just as reading is to enter the 'other' and transcend the 'self'. (The 'other' is Paz's metaphor for the reality of those elements of the totality of the self that are ignored or repressed.) This is life (accidental and conditioned) transmuted into spirit, *saber espiritual*. 'Spirit', 'mind', 'self', 'being', 'desire' are all congealed terms for this elusive, denied truth. Heidegger, Norman O. Brown, Mallarmé and Buddhism would be supporting voices.

'Ser un gran pintor quiere decir ser un gran poeta: alguien que trasciende los límites de su lenguaje' (A 23; To be a great

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29509-3 - Octavio Paz: A Study of his Poetics

Jason Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

painter means to be a great poet: someone who transcends the limits of his language). Literary styles, generational tics and mannerisms fade away; genuine art overflows, raids the inarticulate, sings absence, voices silence. Art is an experience irreducible to its language, and experience is the only artistic truth. An analogy with mysticism forces itself upon us: experience renders *form* insignificant and absurd, but is its support and foundation. This is an ecstatic view of art; art is judged by its intensity as privileged moment, timeless *instante poético* (poetic moment), communion, fusion. Yeats (1917) speaks for all poets: ‘for the awakening, for the vision, for the revelation of reality, tradition offers us a different word – ecstasy’.

‘El surrealismo no es una poesía sino una poética y aún más, y más decisivamente, una visión del mundo’ (*A* 172; Surrealism is not a poetry but a poetics and even more, and more decisively, a world vision). The gradation – poetry, poetics, vision – is crucial; Paz embodies twentieth-century man’s anguished quest for meaning, for relating himself to a whole, *re-ligare* – to be tied back to matter. Life and death are re-interpreted; time, the fall, innocence, redemption are his concerns. Paz inherits the painful cries of the ‘surrealists’, the ‘existentialists’ – all who suffer *orfandad* (orphanhood). The centre has fallen apart and its absence justifies Paz’s much criticised eclectic approach, sieving through marxism, surrealism, structuralism, Buddhism, Tantra and other things for ‘nuggets’. Paz pursues an elusive salvation.

#### 4. *A parenthesis*

We are not necessarily dealing with influences. Surrealism did not influence Octavio Paz in the sense that it suddenly transformed his poetry and life-stance, for Paz was seeking what he found. Writing of Agustín Yañez (1904–), the Mexican novelist, Paz employs the word ‘example’ rather than influence; for what determined his art was not stylistic borrowings but an attitude towards reality (*Pu* 144). Looking beyond technical borrowings, Paz, as a critic, is concerned to unravel and locate a writer’s ‘vital attitude’ (*Pe* 91), for it is this energy that motivates the style; in other words style is a morality, the fibre

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29509-3 - Octavio Paz: A Study of his Poetics

Jason Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

7

in the patterned texture. Writing about Braque's supposed influence on the Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo, Paz claimed that such an influence could not be found in Tamayo's actual works but 'en su actitud frente a la pintura' (*Pe* 254; in his attitude towards painting). Inverting the process, I argue that Paz's 'vital attitude' manifests itself through the poetry, but that we must go beyond the poetry to understand it. I return to *intention*. It is here that surrealism clarifies.

## Chapter 1

### *I Octavio Paz and surrealism: attitude versus activity*

To write about surrealism is, above all, a problem of definitions, and this task itself has become a commonplace. Rather than repeat the familiar points of view – ‘surrealism is dead’, ‘surrealism is a phenomenon of the inter-war years’, ‘surrealism still lives but in another form’ – we shall approach it through Octavio Paz’s friendship with André Breton. This defines surrealism as a historical and theoretical phenomenon tied to Breton’s magnetic personality. With his death (1966) surrealism evaporated. This, of course, could be a limiting view (for those who never knew him, for those who still call themselves surrealists) and we use it only as a model, not as the truth.

In a series of interviews on the radio, published as *Entretiens* (1952), André Breton warmly alluded to Octavio Paz as the poet of the Spanish language ‘qui me touche le plus’ (who touches me the most), including him in post-second-world-war surrealist orthodoxy because his work/life-attitude/style, that grouping together of preoccupations so passionately sought by the surrealists, closely paralleled Breton’s own ‘esprit surréaliste’ (surrealist spirit). Later (1956), Breton praised Paz for being a revolutionary theoretician conveying ‘une image saisissante du Mexique’ (a striking poetic image of Mexico) and singling out his ‘fervour’ and his ‘avidité spirituelle’ (fervour; spiritual avidity). However, Breton confessed that he did not know Spanish poetry. He quotes Antonio Porchia (1886–1968, Argentinian author of *Voces* (1943; *Voices*), an odd collection of aphorisms and paradoxes translated into French by Roger Caillois in 1949) and discusses Pablo Neruda’s political attitude as disqualifying him from being a surrealist. But he never knew Neruda’s poetry. Rather, Breton talks of Spanish painters such as Miró, Dalí and others. Surrealistically, Breton



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29509-3 - Octavio Paz: A Study of his Poetics

Jason Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

confused works with authors; as he did not read Spanish, he had to speak of 'friends'. Jorge Guillén was correct when he wrote that 'l'unique ami hispanique d'André Breton sans doute fut Octavio Paz' (André Breton's one Spanish friend was Octavio Paz); we would underline *ami*.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Paz's surrealist qualities reached Breton through friendship, the spoken word, and gestures, and only later through translations by Lambert, Péret, and Mandiargues. That later critics include Paz in surrealist anthologies (César Moro (1903–55) and Paz are the only Latin Americans in Bédouin's anthology *La poésie surréaliste*) merely shows how faithfully the critics follow Breton's attitude, confusing works and lives to the point where the one stands for the other.<sup>2</sup>

This by no means implies that Paz failed to understand surrealism. For years before his actual meeting with Breton he had been assimilating ideas and images from his reading, perhaps even sharing a life-style (though that remains outside his texts) that would eventually pull him towards Breton. Without this previous internal evolution, Breton would not have interested himself in Paz, one of many Latin American 'poets' in post-war Paris.

This slow evolution towards the possibility of becoming Breton's friend and joining the Paris group blurs sharp divisions like the notion of a 'surrealist epoch' in Paz's poetry. He was not converted to surrealism. The notion of influence is too simplistic, for it is the 'vital attitude' that conditions the work. The real 'meetings' affect one's life first, and only later the poetry. It is not a matter of stylistic mimicry but life-style. Paz did not adopt a surrealist pose but shared the spirit and still does.

Paz assimilated surrealism long before meeting Breton personally, and he did this on many levels, some biographical, and impossible to unravel. We will outline two possible approaches. The first traces the repercussions of surrealism in Mexico, following my criterion of relating the movement to Breton's own personality as it developed out of his separation from Dada, from the first practical manifestation of automatic writing and from the manifestos – all this up to the meeting with

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29509-3 - Octavio Paz: A Study of his Poetics

Jason Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

OCTAVIO PAZ

Paz. The second approach would be through what Paz himself has written about his discovery of surrealism. This would confirm that there was no 'surrealism' in Mexico before Paz returned from Paris in the 1950s with the good news. Further, Paz went directly to the sources, sometimes through translations, or through Spanish poets close to surrealism like Cernuda and Villaurrutia, or through others in a similar position like Saint-John Perse, and also through the precursors such as Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Blake.

*Surrealism in Mexico*

The first vibrations of the European avant-garde in Mexico were picked up by the seismograph-like poet José Juan Tablada (1871–1943), who experimented with Apollinarian *calligrammes* (in 1920), with certain 'imagistic' devices and with the Japanese haiku. His contemporary Ramón López Velarde (1888–1921) imitated Jules Laforgue's irony and burlesque (probably through the Argentinian Leopoldo Lugones), and completed the dismantling of *modernista* rhetoric, opening poetry to the 'nouveau'. In a melange of futurism, Dada and political anarchy, the *estridentistas* (strident ones) noisily presented the first *isms*. The first notice about surrealism appears in what is known as the *Contemporáneos* (Contemporaries) group, friend-poets contributing to the magazine of that name. As spokesman for his generation, Paz thanked these *Contemporáneos* poets for discovering precursors such as Baudelaire, Nerval and Blake, the poetics of the dream, and the theory of correspondences and analogy; but he criticised them for their insensibility 'a la fascinación de la noche de místicos y románticos' (*Pe* 106; to the fascination for night of mystics and romantics). Paz guesses that literary curiosity was their motivating force, for the name of their magazine implies that they sought to be *modern*. They were fighting a stubborn spirit of post-revolutionary nationalism best expressed in its pictorial-political aspect (the Mexican murals of Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco etc.) and they clutched on to all that was *new*, critical and European. They dabbled with different styles in a sort of