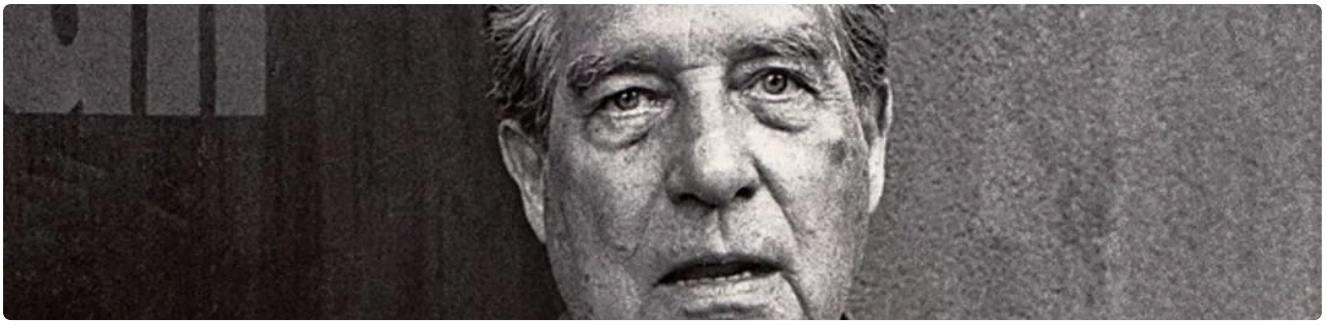
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Octavio Paz

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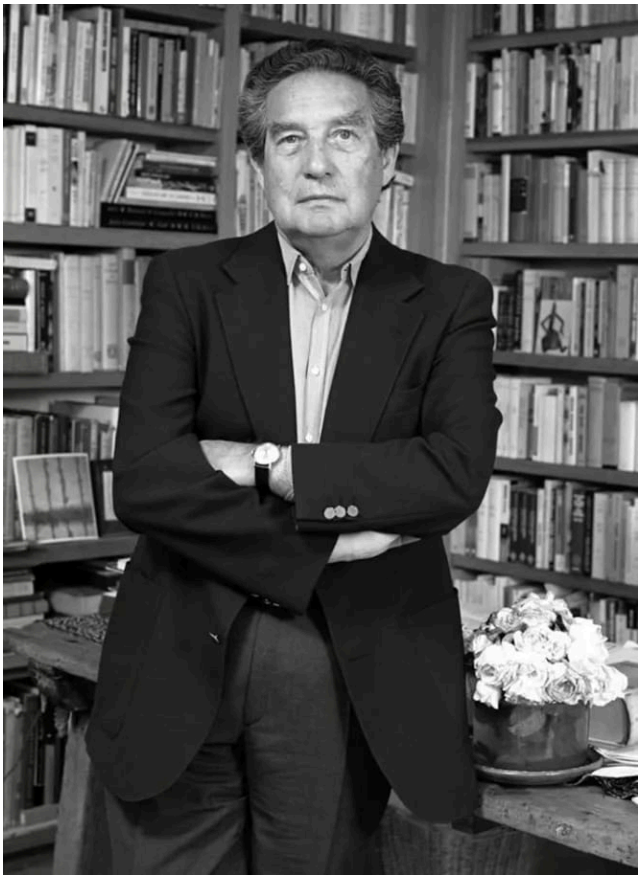
Paul-Henri Giraud

Full Professor · Centre d'Études en Civilisation, Langues et Lettres Étrangères · Université de Lille · France

Paul-Henri Giraud (1968) is Professor of Contemporary Hispanic Studies at the University of Lille. His research focuses on poetry and poetics in Latin America in the 20th and 21st centuries, the links between painting, photography and literature, and more generally literary and artistic modernities and cosmopolitanism. Life Member of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, he is currently Secretary General of the Institut des Amériques.

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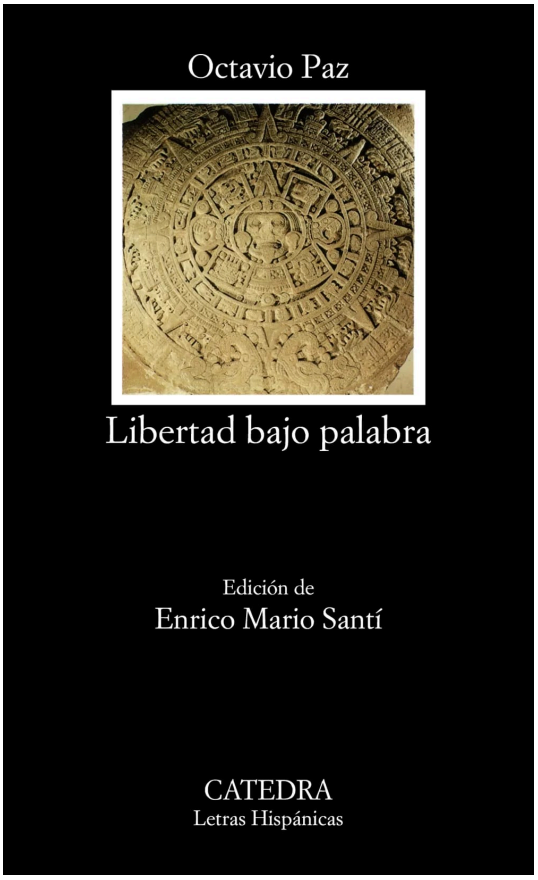


Octavio Paz in 1984

Source: Rafael Doniz / Fototeca Zona Paz, Wikipedia

Octavio Paz was a poet, journalist, writer and diplomat in Mexico, Europe, the United States and several Asian countries. His first, and decisive, major journey was from July to September 1937, when Rafael Alberti and Pablo Neruda invited the young poet and his wife, future novelist Elena Garro, to the anti-fascist Second International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture in Valencia, Spain, then the capital of the beleaguered Spanish Republic. This was also the first "trial of conscience" for Paz, until then a fellow traveler, who used the event as a sounding board to criticize the rifts in the Republican camp and what he called the perversity of Stalinism. This intimate wound – this "scission", as he called it – grew in Mexico City in the following years, when he became friends with anti-Stalinist activists in exile, Russian revolutionaries Victor Serge and Jean Malaquais and Surrealist poet Benjamin Perret. In the early 1940s, over 20,000 Spanish Republicans fled to Mexico, including many intellectuals, such as José Gaos, José Bergamín, Joaquín Xirau and María Zambrano. In the magazines he founded and led and the anthologies of Hispanic poetry in whose publication he participated, Paz brought Europe and Latin America together

and fostered dialogue between various literary traditions. He published the first Spanish translations of Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. However, Mexican cultural nationalism was stifling and, in late 1943, Paz seized the opportunity of a Guggenheim fellowship to escape to California, where he covered the United Nations' 1945 founding conference in San Francisco for the Mexican press and read contemporary US poetry (Ezra Pound, Eliot, William Carlos Williams and e.e. cummings) in English. "That is what put me on the path to poetry," he later said, as if he had not already published many poems in which the most diverse alluvia mingle in a trailblazing way. In 1949, Paz published *Libertad bajo palabra* (*Liberty Under Oath*), which he called his "first real book".



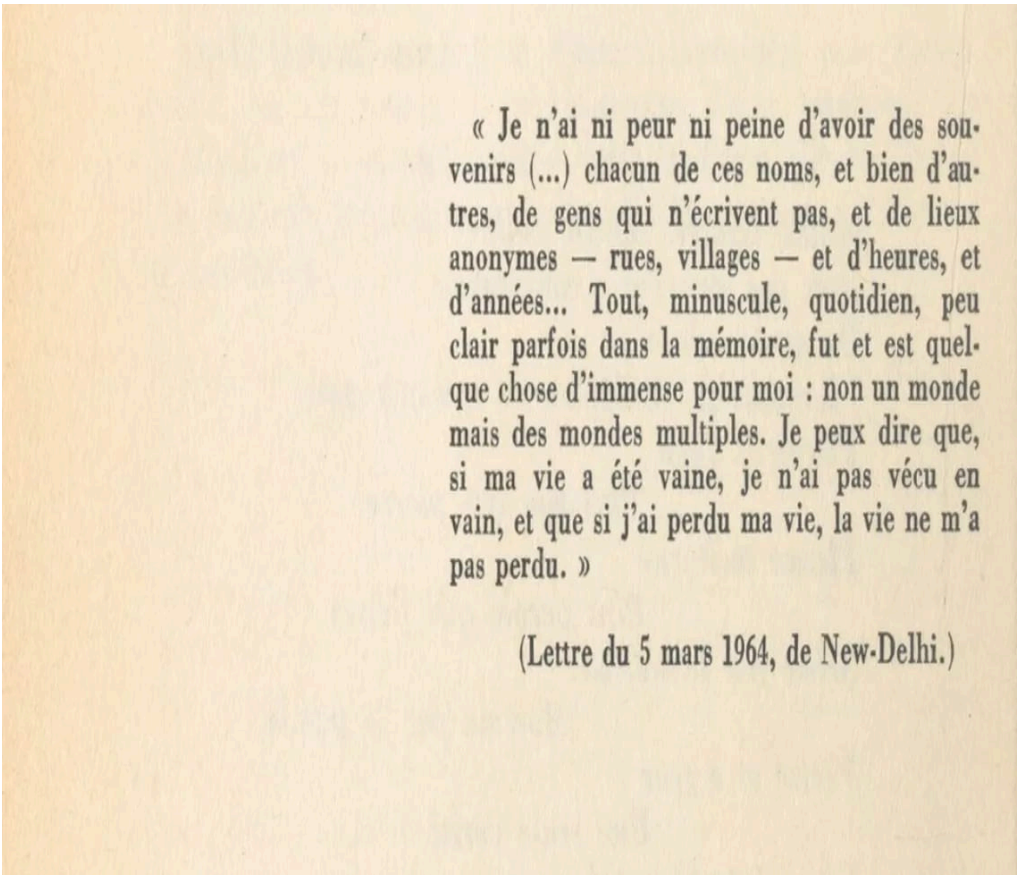
Cover of the first edition of *Libertad bajo palabra* (*Liberty Under Oath*)

Source: Cátedra

In 1945, Paz joined the diplomatic corps and was sent to Paris as secretary of the Mexican embassy. Feeling homesick, with the detached lucidity that comes from living abroad he wrote *El laberinto de la soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*), his great essay on being Mexican. After David Rousset made him aware of the Soviet concentration camps, he published a selection of testimonies and documents that the Frenchman had gathered on what was not yet called the gulag in *Sur*, the great intellectual magazine of Buenos Aires. At the 1951 Cannes Film Festival, Paz defended Buñuel's *Los Olvidados*. Two years later, he organized the first major exhibition of Mexican art in Paris. His friendship with André Breton, which began in 1949, was strong enough to transform his poetry (*Eagle or Sun?*, 1951) and, on his return to Mexico in 1954, to make him Latin America's leading spokesman for a broader Surrealism, conceived of as "a basic attitude" of "the human spirit" beyond the avant-gardes. Drawing its roots from the mists of time, this underground, anti-rationalist current resurfaced, according to Paz, with Romanticism in the advent of poetic modernity, which aimed to "create a new sacredness". Nurtured by a rich culture, this thesis led to

two fundamental books of theory, literary history and comparative literature: *El arco y la lira* (*The Bow and the Lyre*, 1st ed. 1956) – "the best essay on poetry ever written in America North and South", said Julio Cortázar – and *Los hijos del limo* (*Children of the Mire*, 1974). Often, Paz's essays expanded on intuitions already found in his poems, where Eliot, Breton, Apollinaire and Saint-John Perse meet each other in *Piedra de sol* (*Sunstone*, 1957) and *La estación violenta* (*Violent Season*, 1958). Paz pursued this passionate work comparing languages and traditions as a translator (*Versiones y diversiones* [*Versions and Diversions*], 1st ed. 1974) and initiator of multilingual experiences, especially *Renga* (1972), written in Paris in collaboration with Jacques Roubaud and Charles Tomlinson and based on the Japanese model of collective poetry.

Paz's decisive initiation – the one that, under his impetus, opened up Hispanic literature more than anything else – was his discovery of Asia. In 1952, the writer spent five months in India and as many in Japan before returning to Europe and Mexico, where he adapted haiku (*Piedras sueltas* [*Loose Stones*], 1955) and produced the first Spanish translation of Matsuo Bashô's masterpiece *The Narrow Road to Oku* (*Sendas de Oku*, 1957). After another stay in Paris (1959–1962), Paz was appointed Mexico's ambassador to India and Afghanistan. These years of maturity saw a personal, intellectual and poetic "new birth". It is when he discovered Hinduism, Buddhism and Tantrism, leading him to build bold bridges with Western culture (*Conjunciones y disjunciones* [*Conjunctions and Disjunctions*], 1969). It is also when he met his second wife, Frenchwoman Marie-José Tramini, whose youthful figure inhabits many pages where the poetic-carnal rite joins "transparency" (*Blanco* [*White*], 1967; *Ladera este* [*East Slope*], 1969; and *El mono gramático* [*The Monkey Grammarian*], 1972).



« Je n'ai ni peur ni peine d'avoir des souvenirs (...) chacun de ces noms, et bien d'autres, de gens qui n'écrivent pas, et de lieux anonymes — rues, villages — et d'heures, et d'années... Tout, minuscule, quotidien, peu clair parfois dans la mémoire, fut et est quelque chose d'immense pour moi : non un monde mais des mondes multiples. Je peux dire que, si ma vie a été vaine, je n'ai pas vécu en vain, et que si j'ai perdu ma vie, la vie ne m'a pas perdu. »

(Lettre du 5 mars 1964, de New-Delhi.)

Letter by Octavio Paz from New Delhi, 1964

Source: Claire Céa, Octavio Paz, étude, Paris, Editions Seghers, 1965, p. 14

History brutally interrupted the Asian parenthesis. After the armed forces massacred unarmed students in Mexico City's Plaza de las Tres Culturas on October 2, 1968, Paz resigned from his diplomatic post and began a career as a lecturer in England and the United States. He did not return to Mexico until 1972. In 1970, he wrote a sequel to *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, *Posdata*, translated into English as *The Other Mexico: Critique of the Pyramid*, a political and anthropological analysis of the tragedy that had occurred a few weeks before the Mexico City Olympic Games.

Paz soon became the focal point of Mexico's cultural life for the next quarter century. The two magazines he founded, *Plural* (1971–1976) and *Vuelta* (1976–1998), raised him to the rank of what biographer Christopher Domínguez Michael called a "spirituel leader", perhaps the only one in the Hispanic world after Ortega y Gasset. Literary, artistic and political at the same time, *Plural* and *Vuelta* aimed to open Mexico up to pluralism, debate and polemics (Paz was redoubtable in this art, particularly against Carlos Monsiváis of *Nexos* magazine), in short, democracy, which did not become a reality until the Institutional Revolutionary Party's 70-year rule ended in 2000. The magazines published work by writers and thinkers from Europe (Aron, Castoriadis, Cioran, Bonnefoy, Steiner), the United States (Ashton, Sontag) and Latin America (Borges, Traba, Rama, Rodríguez Monegal, Vitale, Vargas Llosa) as well dissidents from Cuba (Cabrera Infante, Sarduy) and the Soviet bloc (Kolakowski, Solzhenitsyn). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, some of them met in Mexico City for an international conference on freedom in 1990, the same year Paz received the Nobel Prize in literature "for impassioned writing with wide horizons, characterized by sensuous intelligence and humanistic integrity".

Ultimately, Paz was "a modern poet" in many ways, starting with the historical sense. In *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe* (*Sor Juana, or the Traps of Faith*, 1982), he portrayed the Mexican nun and Baroque poet, reduced to silence by her superiors, as the adumbration of many 20th century intellectuals, the more or less consenting victims of ideologies that eventually crush them. Paz's independence and outspokenness led to his being burned in effigy in 1984 in Mexico City for criticizing the Sandinista regime; hadn't he said "Sor Juana, she is I" two years earlier? In another sense, what made Paz modern was his constant criticism, which, at the end of his life, led him to edit and preface each volume of his complete works. Until the end, he continued to reflect on "the present" in multiple forms – the hottest news from near and far (the neo-Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, for example; *Vislumbres de la India* [*In Light of India*], 1995) – but also the present outside time that love and eroticism offer us (*La llama doble* [*The Double Flame*], 1993) and philosophy, as in "Hermandad" ("Brotherhood"), a brief poem dedicated to Claudius Ptolemy and based on the Palatine Anthology:*f*

> *Soy hombre: duro poco*
> *y es enorme la noche.*
> *Pero miro hacia arriba:*
> *las estrellas escriben.*
> *Sin entender comprendo:*
> *también soy escritura*
> *y en este mismo instante*
> *alguien me deletrea* [1].

VIDEO

View online: https://tracs-prod.s3.rbx.io.cloud.ovh.net/assets/records/octavio-paz/resources/octavio-paz-explique-la-flamme-double-au-cercle-de-minuit.mp4

Octavio Paz discussing *The Double Flame* on *Le Cercle de minuit*, France 2, May 25, 1994

Source: INA

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NOTES

1 "Hermandad" ("Brotherhood") from *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz 1987*. Translated by Eliot Weinberger: "I am a man: little do I last / and the night is enormous. / But I look up: / the stars write. / Unknowing I understand: / I too am written / and at this very moment / someone spells me out."