

Nobel Prize in Literature 1990



Octavio Paz

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1990 was awarded to Octavio Paz "*for impassioned writing with wide horizons, characterized by sensuous intelligence and humanistic integrity*".

In *A Draft of Shadows* from 1975 there is a line which provides the key to much of Paz's production: "Seeing the world is spelling it." His poetry consists, in other words, to a very great extent of writing both with and about words. In Paz's surrealistically inspired thought the words are endowed in this way with new, changeable, and richer meanings. The power of the poetic vocation - often asserted by Brodsky, Walcott and others - gives the words a form of otherwise unattainable content. "We never say/ the words of the poem/ The poem tells us" (from *Return* 1969). In a poem to Roman Jakobson of 1976 he articulates his stance: "Between what I see and what I say, /between what I say and what I keep silent, /between what I keep silent and what I dream, /between what I dream and what I forget: /poetry."

Paz's poetry and essays evolve from an intractable but fruitful union of cultures: pre-Columbian Indian, the Spanish Conquistadors and Western Modernism. Experiences from India and other areas are included as well. All of this has, in shifting configurations,

been reflected in his work. His own identity, Mexican and, in its broader meaning, Latin-American, has already been explored decisively in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950).

The poet himself embodies this union of cultures - it is in his blood. His mother's family was Spanish, from Andalusia. On his father's side the Indian and the Spanish are combined.

One of the high points of Paz's poetry is the long poem *Sun Stone* (1957). This was inspired by a magnificent calendar stone, which still stands as an heirloom from the Aztecs, whose calendar was based on the conjunctions of Venus and the sun. The 584 days of this cycle are matched by the 584 lines of the poem. This suggestive work with its many layers of meaning seems to incorporate, interpret and reconstrue major existential questions, death, time, love and reality.

As a publisher of magazines, *Vuelta* (Return) being the latest, Paz has been a lodestar in the tide of opinion. Others have quite simply been obliged to state their position in relation to his. He has pursued his humanistic course with unique integrity, which is also recorded in the prize citation.

In his book *Sor Juana: or The Traps of Faith* (1982) he applies literary history and the history of ideas in depicting Juana Inés de la Cruz, a remarkable 17th century woman. This erudite poet and dramatist, a lady-in-waiting who later became a nun, is the subject of a penetrating analysis against the background of the culture and society of her day. The work takes the form of a portrait, one which bears the signature of a great humanist.

Paz has written exquisite love poetry, at the same time sensuous and visual. "Woman:/fountain in the night./I am bound to her quiet flowing." In his latest collection of poems, *A Tree Within* (1987), we are confronted with a series of reflections on death. Paz turns inwards on himself in a new way.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1990/press.html