

Review of Octavio Paz, 'Vislumbres de la India' ('In Light of India')
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Details of book:

Seix Barral S.A. (Córcega 270, 08008 Barcelona, Spain), 1995, soft covers, 221 pp.,
ISBN 84-322-0715-2

Note: This review was written and published on Usenet (soc.culture.mexican) in 1995, shortly after the original Spanish edition came out. The English translation is 'In Light of India' (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997). All English renditions in the present text are, however, my own.

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This volume by Octavio Paz, Mexico's 1990 Nobel laureate, poet, essayist and onetime ambassador to India, consists of a series of reflections on the multiform reality of a country which has never ceased to fascinate outsiders who fall under its spell. In a text part autobiography, part essay, Paz examines multiple aspects of India - politics, history, society, philosophy, religion, cuisine - in what he calls 'mis tentativas por responder a la pregunta que hace la India a todo aquel que la visita' ('my attempts to answer the question that India poses to all who visit it' - p. 38).

The author's credentials for writing this book are substantial enough: after an initial diplomatic posting in Delhi in 1951, he returned in 1962 to serve as Mexican ambassador for six years, resigning in 1968 in protest at his government's pre-Olympic killings of students in Mexico City. His position allowed him to make contacts at the highest levels, including Nehru and Indira and Rajiv Gandhi. Clearly, however, Paz's interest in the subcontinent was as much cultural as political, and there can be no doubt of his efforts to grasp the elusive complexities of the mind of India.

Readers expecting a 'third-worldist' view of India-as-seen-by-a-Mexican will be disappointed: having broken with Marxism soon after the second world war, Paz has long maintained (as in 'Corriente alterna' - 'Alternating Current', 1972) that Latin America is essentially a peripheral and backward part of the West - as he puts it in the new book, a *semi-modern* society (p. 72), and thus his empathy with India is not based on revolutionary solidarity. If there is a model of the world's cultures subjacent to his analysis, it is one of cultural specificity and multiplicity: India is variously compared with Europe, China, the Islamic world and, indeed, the pre-Columbian societies of the Americas. On that last point, Paz's most interesting contrast is between India's capacity to interact with other cultures, even invaders (the Mughals, the British), and absorb elements of them without losing its identity and sense of difference, and the failure of the Aztecs and Mayas, whose civilizations, after centuries of total isolation from an outside world of which they knew nothing, collapsed at the first contact with an alien culture (pp. 106-108).

On the politics of post-independence India, the book covers familiar but necessary ground, up to the time of writing. Paz offers what is largely an impeccably liberal-democratic and secularist analysis, marred only by what seems an over-indulgence of Indira Gandhi (the sole reference to the notorious excesses of the Emergency is a passing mention of 'abusos ... contraproducentes' - 'counter-productive abuses' - p. 151). Commenting on such recent phenomena as the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque and the rise of Hindu nationalist parties, Paz sees secularism - meaning, in the Indian context, the neutrality of the state between all religions - as the sole guarantor of democracy, thus, here at least, aligning himself with Salman Rushdie's critique of Hindu particularism in 'The Moor's Last Sigh' (Paz mentions Rushdie briefly - p. 90 - but one wonders if he is familiar with that author's acrid satire on the Emergency in 'Midnight's Children').

However, the book's main enthusiasm and passion is reserved for Indian culture. The cover photograph is a three-headed image of Shiva from the Elephanta caves, and this may stand as an emblem of the multiplicity which Paz approvingly finds in the subcontinental way of being. The polymorphic, intricate pluralities of Hinduism are contrasted with the absolute certainties of Islam, with which Hinduism has nonetheless managed to coexist; indeed, India emerges as doubly plural, both in the metamorphic polytheism of its dominant religion and in the cohabitation of that same religion with half a dozen other faiths. The subcontinent is greeted as a space of unending contrasts: asceticism and eroticism, pacifism and violence, abstract and concrete: 'Vive entre los extremos, abraza los extremos, plantado en la tierra e imantado por un más allá invisible' ('It lives between extremes, it embraces extremes, planted on earth and magnetized by an invisible beyond' - p. 199).

The other side of India's plurality is its urge to synthesis, to the transcendence of difference in an ultimate unity. Paz here approvingly stresses two philosophical aspects - syncretism, the fusion of elements from diverse religions; and synchronicity, the negation of linear time in a continuous present. He visibly favours the endeavours across Indian history of such figures as Ashoka, Aqbar, Kabir and Tagore to reach a synthesis between different-belief systems; and, passing in a very Indian way from the abstract to the concrete, appreciates Indian cooking for the way it simultaneously gratifies contrasting tastes. Taking up an idea from Claude Lévi-Strauss, Paz points to the synchronic nature of Indian cuisine, as opposed to the sequential method of the West - instead of a linear series of courses, the timelessness of the thali: 'fusión de los sabores, fusión de los tiempos' ('fusion of tastes, fusion of times'- p. 100).

There is no Western cultural triumphalism in Paz's analysis; nor, equally, does he lapse into guilt-laden excoriation of all things occidental. Rather, he makes a lucid endeavour to compare cultures as objectively as possible, while not hiding a palpable passion for India. One may conclude that the author is holding up the multiplicity of India as a lesson to today's West. He has harsh words for the superficial notions of 'modernity' and 'progress' current in Europe and the US, seeing today's generation as enslaved to the television, now the true 'opium of the people' (p. 210) and prey to a 'facile hedonism' (pp. 77-78), while objectively and despite the fall of Stalinism, in a world threatened by ecological disaster 'la idolatría del cambio, la creencia en el progreso como una ley histórica ... han comenzado a desmoronarse' ('the idolatry of change, the belief in progress as a historical law ... have begun to collapse' - p. 210).

India would seem, for Paz, to offer certain alternative values. Indeed, in an interview published in France ('Octavio Paz: itinéraire d'une vie', *Magazine Littéraire*, No 342, April 1996, pp. 140-147) he confirms: 'Je croyais cette civilisation pétrifiée, elle est très vivante' ('I thought that civilization was petrified, but it's very much alive'), going so far as to declare: 'Je n'ai guère d'attrait pour le monothéisme et c'est mon séjour en Inde qui m'a fait comprendre le vrai fond du polythéisme' ('I am hardly attracted at all by monotheism, and it was my stay in India that made me understand the true basis of polytheism' - p. 147). If 'monotheism' stands for monolithic and dogmatic ideologies and 'polytheism' for plurality and flexibility, the implication would be that democracy and dialogue require the recognition of an ever-shifting diversity and plurality at work in the world; for this, perhaps, a symbolic model may be found in the Hindu cosmos. These concerns, of course, apply to India too, and Paz clearly sees pluralism (cultural and philosophical) as an authentic and ancient Indian tradition, not an occidental import, and deplores the potential threat to that Indian pluralism from rigid and intolerant social movements.

The book may, in the end, be read as an initiatic experience. Near the beginning, Paz describes his arrival in India for the first time, at Bombay (now Mumbai), and his first visit to the island caves at Elephanta. The conclusion comes round full circle: the author revisits the island, knowing it is for the last time, as he is about to leave India. As a valedictory, he offers the reader

a poem celebrating the figures of Shiva and his consort Parvati: 'Shiva:/ tus cuatro brazos son cuatro ríos,/cuatro surtidores' ('Shiva, your four arms are four rivers, four fountains'). The plural being of the gods becomes an image of human potential and creativity: 'Shiva y Parvati:/los adoramos/no como a dioses,/como imágenes/de la divinidad de los hombres' ('Shiva and Parvati: we adore them, not as gods but as images of human divinity'- p. 218).

If the Mexican laureate's 'glimpses of India' ultimately reveal an initiatic process, it may be valid to compare his impressions of the subcontinent with those of another writer from a peripheral part of the West, Romania's Mircea Eliade. 'India', the young philosopher's carefully-arranged account of his visit from 1928 to 1931 (Bucharest: Editura Cugetarea, 1934; French translation, Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1988; Italian translation, Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991), reads as a gradual movement inwards, progressing from the superficial to the intimate in a complex, detailed initiation into the heart of the culture (a ritual dance in Jaipur, an ashram in the Himalayas). Perhaps the most exciting analyses of the occidental encounter with India - managing to be both objective and subjective, at once passionate and dispassionate - are those offered us by 'peripheral' westerners with only a partial, if real, stake in Caucasian hegemony and a consequently greater openness to the potential and the challenge of Asia - which, as we now know, we shall all have to live with in the twenty-first century.