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Booklover -- Politics & Religion

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I n 1993 I was given a small volume of selected poems composed by Octavio Paz, the Mexican writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990. The sixty-seven selections were in English with the translations provided by a variety of individuals. I confess that I never took a close look at the work because I have learned that poetry is a form of writing that can completely disintegrate upon translation. Recently, I found not only another of Paz’s works, The Labyrinth of Solitude (El laberinto de la soledad) when I attended the SC Book Festival in May, but also the bilingual edition of his 1990 Nobel Lecture: In Search of the Present (La búsqueda del presente). Now I was ready to explore the writings and thoughts of this Nobel Laureate.

Octavio Paz was born in 1914 in Mexico City. From an early age he was influenced by the liberal, intellectual, and literary career of his paternal grandfather, and he began to write. Like many creative intellectuals, he became involved in politics and used his poetic talent to dissect the elements of humanity. As he pursued this dissection he began to change his viewpoints, and this led to a rift with his friends, Pablo Neruda and Gabriel García Márquez. At this observation, I stopped and googled “never discuss politics or religion.” There are 4,630,000 responses. The one that captured my attention is attributed to the character Linus in the Peanuts comic strip. Every year Linus waits for the arrival of the Great Pumpkin and thus is the subject of much abuse by his fellow comic strip companions. He muses: “There are three things I have learned never to discuss with people: religion, politics, and the Great Pumpkin.” Paz, like Linus, must have come to a similar conclusion, so Paz turned to poetry as a medium for expressing his ever-evolving thought process on politics. In 1976 he wrote: “Between what I see and what I say / Between what I think and what I keep silent / Between what I dream and what I dream / Between what I dream and what I forget: / Poetry.”

His writings, travel, and overseas study led him to a career in the diplomatic service in the mid 1940s. He was stationed in France when he began to explore Mexico and her identity in the series of nine essays known as The Labyrinth of Solitude. Sidenote: On my journey to read one book by every Literature Nobel Laureate, I have discovered I have a knack for stumbling on just the right book to read for each one. One reviewer describes The Labyrinth of Solitude as Paz’s poetical masterpiece. So I am in for a treat.

The first essay entitled “The Pachuco and Other Extremes” delves right into the self-awareness of the individual and thus a nation. Paz uses the pachuco, youths of Mexican origin that form gangs in Southern cities of the U.S., to micro-dissect his self-awareness. As I read his words, I felt the poetry in his prose even in the translation. I could see the pachuco and his world on the streets of Los Angeles. His description of their language, and behavior, down to the details of their clothes, created vivid imagery and an understanding began to emerge. Paz considered himself and fellow writers “the guardians of language,” and it only took a few pages to see that he took this responsibility seriously. “Even his very name is enigmatic: pachuко, a word of uncertain derivation, saying nothing and saying everything.”

In 1990, Paz was awarded the Nobel Prize for his “impassioned writing with wide horizons, characterized by sensuous intelligence and humanistic integrity.” And what an extra special present for me to stumble upon the small published volume of his Nobel Lecture, bilingual no less. He begins his lecture with the analysis of the word gratitude. He uses the words to grab us by the hand and walk with him in a garden of words as he discusses language, literature, ethnic identity, modern identity, poetic identity. It is delightful and refreshing, but Paz is challenging us to reenter the world and “search for the present.”

Throughout his career, which included being appointed as Mexico’s ambassador to India in 1962, Paz was a prolific writer expressing his thoughts, criticisms, and perspectives on religion, history, culture, and politics. I confess that I finally took a peek into the selection of poems and I leave you three excerpts from the English translation of San Ildefonso nocturne:

“The man who walks through this poem, between San Ildefonso and the Zocalo, is the man who writes it:
this page too
is a ramble through the night.
Here the friendly ghosts become flesh,
ideas dissolve.
Good, we wanted good:
to set the world right
We didn’t lack integrity:
we lacked humility.
What we wanted was no innocently wanted.
Precepts and concepts,
the arrogance of theologians,
to beat with a cross,
to institute with blood,
to build the house with bricks of crime,
to declare obligatory communion
Some
became secretaries to the secretary
to the General Secretary of the Inferno.
Rage
became philosophy,
itself has covered the planet.
Reason came down to earth,
took the forms of a gallows
– and is worshipped by millions.
...Between seeing and making,
contemplation or action,
I chose the act of words:
to make them, to inhabit them,
to give eyes to the language........
Poetry,
like history, is made:
poetry,
like truth is seen.”