






## India as a Reference in Octavio Paz INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER





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# India as a Reference in Octavio Paz

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## Abstract

Mexican poet Octavio Paz is a major figure in contemporary literature. An important stage of his writing deals with personal experiences or philosophical and religious traditions from India. In this paper, we focus on a set of principal points and figures in which these influences appear inside his work. The Indian presence is visible not only in his poems of *East Slope* [Ladera este] but in other works he wrote specifically to clarify his points of view, knowledge, and feelings about this country. Other works in which India is a principal topic are *In Light of India* [Vislumbres de la India], and *The Grammatical Monkey* [El mono gramático]. *The Double Flame* [La llama doble] and some translations also connect with India. Octavio Paz had a particular interest in ancient Mexican culture, searching there for the deepest signification of being a Mexican, as he was. But, on the other side, Paz identifies himself as a citizen of the world, focused on languages, history, myths and arts from several countries or, at least, groups of countries. Ancestral manifestations from various places were particularly meaningful to him because of the links he found between them. In this way, a big amount of his work is based on comparisons and analogies.

**Keywords:** Octavio Paz, India-Mexico, cosmopolitanism, ancient culture

Cultures from India and Mexico, and especially in poetry, have contacts from a long data. Not only in a shared transcendental conception of life, but in forms of expression and other schemes of cultural relations. For example, Kolkata poet Rabindranath Tagore had just died in 1941, being one of the most well-known India writers in Spanish language, thanks to translations, mostly from English, in the maturation epoch of Octavio Paz, and a decade before he travelled to India for the first time. This link between poetry from India and from Mexico has progressed until our days. For example, poems by Octavio Paz are included in the 2020 Kolkata edition of *Florilegium of Spanish America Poems Translated into English* [Florilegio de poemas hispanoamericanos traducidos al bengalí].<sup>i</sup>

Octavio Paz, as we all know, was appointed Mexican Ambassador to India, in 1962-1968. In this country, he found not only the tangible reality of those things that before were for him only words and references,<sup>ii</sup> but he finds there the love too. Separated from his first wife, the remarkable Mexican writer Elena Garro, in 1959, Paz arrives in India open to a new fate. He said about this in his Preface to *The Double Flame*:

Around 1965, while I was living in India – the nights were as blue and electric as those of the poem that sings of the loves of Krishna and Radha – I fell in love. I decided to write a little book on love. Taking as its point of departure the intimate connections between the three domains – sex, eroticism, and love – it would be an exploration of the amatory feeling. I made a few notes but had to stop: pressing tasks claimed my attention and forced me to postpone the project. I left India.

India was the nest for that book on love and was the place to postpone the project. Both internal and objective life developed in such a way that the writer lived the love and lived the country in full, leaving for later the writing of that book.

Since Octavio Paz visited India in the early 50s, the surprise could be of less impact in the 60s, but Paz is equally moved, and yet differently, on both occasions, nonetheless the short duration of the earliest. About reaching India for the first time, at *In Light of India* we can read this:

We arrived in Bombay on an early morning in November 1951. I remember the intensity of the light despite the early hour, and my impatience at the sluggishness with which the boat crossed the quiet bay. An enormous mass of liquid mercury, barely undulating; vague hills in the distance; flocks of birds; a pale sky and scraps of pink clouds. As the boat moved forward, the excitement of the passengers grew.

Instead of this sensitive and poetic description, but not less in intensity, the second arrival is seen by Paz as a return to a familiar land: a place where you lived and work and have your friends. More than a sensation of the moment, as we already saw in his first, the second arrival consists of a series of components in a more permanent structure. Let us read, from the same *In Light of India* this paragraph, that I feel is more like a report than a literary piece:

Eleven years later, in 1962, I returned to India as the ambassador from my country. I stayed a little more than six years. It was a happy time: I could read; I wrote several books of poetry and prose; I had a few friends with whom I shared aesthetic, ethical, and intellectual affinities; I could travel through unfamiliar cities in the heart of Asia, witness strange customs, gaze on monuments and landscapes. Most of all, it was there that I met my future wife, Marie José, and there that we were married. It was a second birth.

Octavio Paz said it was a "second birth", so the importance of these years is fundamental for his biography, but when he points to them the tone is like from an accepted and completely formed and elaborated consciousness, more than a gradual discovery as we read about the first time at Bombay. A plausible explanation is that Paz looked at his early contact with India as a revelation, and the other as a sheltering paradise. This has been seen as a presence of *otherness*. Octavio Paz, in an interview conducted by César Salgado in 1988, evaluates his India experience in these words: "India put me in front of another civilization. It was a singular experience, as looking into a mirror and seeing there another person appearing, who at the same time is, strangely, myself."<sup>iiii</sup>

An aspect I have not ever seen inside the studies on Paz is that the poet is inserted in a period of Western culture discovering East forms, especially India's spirituality, several types of meditation, conceptions about sex, and some Buddhist trends. These forms have an important place in the constitution of the 60s counterculture movement, both in America and Europe. Of course, all of this is not a new thing, since the middle 1850s German thinker Arthur Schopenhauer attracts some Hinduist ideas and Sanskrit language reflections for his philosophy. In the early 20th Century, as we said before, the works by Tagore found a wide Western audience both in English and Spanish spoken countries. And spiritual influence from India had an explosion in the West with well-known personalities, starting with Vivekananda at the dawn of the century, and Yogananda in the first half; or Maharishi and Prabhupada at the top of counterculture movement, amongst other promoters in this field. So, Paz arrives to India when a wave of influential voices from India had strong acceptance in the Western literary, artistic and intelligentsia circles.

One large poem, titled "Mutra", appears in the group named *The Violent Season* [La estación violenta, 1948-1957]. This poem has as place and date *Delhi, 1952*. The writing of this text is clearly connected to the first trip of Octavio Paz in that year. But is clear too that it is not as especial as *East Slope* will be in the weight of India inside Paz's poetry. "Mutra" is a companion to other poems dated in Venice, Paris, Tokyo, and Mexico City, among other cities. It shows that India is, in this early 50s experience, one more between the multiple sources for the traveler. There, Paz wants to underline the cosmopolitan character of his life and writing, more than focusing on an interiorization of India, as he will do in the 60s book.

Living in India, Paz established his perception of local realities and, at the same time, over an idealistic set of concepts and comprehensions about what India is for him, departing from what influential authors had told. Everyday life not always reveals the world, but sometimes it covers the meaning of acts and rituals that are a substantial part of the quotidian routine. Paz acquires the firsthand capture of life as it is in India. This situation is combined with cultural figures he took in the previous years. So, in his books, we can read about both direct experiences and literary visions from other writers or experts. Anil Dhingra, in the essay "India in Octavio Paz's work" [La India en la obra de Octavio Paz] says: "His arrival to India was like that of a pilgrim in search of the truth, and he can reach the definitive answer in the dialectic negation proposed by Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna"<sup>iv</sup>

Searching for the truth is a hard work because we have a lot of notions that tint with subtle colors this noble purpose. Paz is not an exception to that. Vasant G. Gadre notes the skew in Paz's point of view relative to India in the paper "*In Light of India: a view by Octavio Paz viced because of his Western Thought*" ["Vislumbres de la India: viciadas por el prisma de pensamiento occidental de Octavio Paz"]. That paper discuss how Paz is aligned with some ideas about India, for example, the topics of the Aryan invasion, the sense of India as a unified nation, the Sanskrit basis of India's diverse language composition; all of them are treated by Paz in a way Gadre see as a political one, which maintains compromises with a specific political wing, with a typical Western position on each of those themes. Gadre's conclusion is as follows: "Searching for comprehension of India reality, but without knowledge of any India language, he has considered the country as a part of the Western thinking prism, and he has not penetrated into the soul of this nation."<sup>v</sup>

As we have said, inside the Western intelligentsia circles India's spirituality is received as a serious matter. In Paz, this kind of appropriation flows as the poetic substance in his work, being different from that of militant practitioners or superficial seekers. As says Fabienne Bradu, in the 2012 paper "Persistence of India in Octavio Paz" [Persistencia de la India en Octavio Paz]: "how far is Octavio Paz from the metaphysical flight, between cartoonish and colorful, vaporous and flowery, that the hippies of his time went to find in India".<sup>vi</sup>

Octavio Paz, of course, is not a hippie: quite the opposite. But, as we saw earlier, Paz continued being a Western person, in touch with emotional and experiential issues captured in India, even not being an expert in its history, language or philosophy. He went to India for work purposes and little by little, in the six years he spent there, India grew in importance for his life and work. However, I think Paz was always oriented to the West and wrote about India or from India to be read by Western people. In the system of oppositions, Paz feels as a resident of the West. Paz confirms, in 1969, in *Conjunctions and Disjunctions* [Conjunciones y disyunciones]: "I believe that Indian

civilization is the other pole in the scales of the West, the other version of Indo-European world. Relationship between India and the West is of an opposition inside a system."<sup>vii</sup>

Octavio Paz thinks that these two worlds in the system touch each other in one point: eroticism. It is a communication beyond language and a common human experience in tension between what is permitted or prohibited by society values. On the limit of this figure, Paz sees eroticism as liberty and affirmation. Paz said in the same quoted 1969 book: "Orientalists and philosophers who have described Buddhism as a life-denying nihilism, were blind: they never saw the sculptures of Baharut, Sanchi, Mathura and so many other places"<sup>viii</sup> Paz denies even the Buddhism way as a negative one, for it is the case it has erotic sculptures in its temples, and that is, in a sense, a sort of affirmation.

Nonetheless, eroticism, because it is communication, has a frontier with language. Not only it is a vital, experiential thing, but a meaningful one, ready to be deciphered and expressed with words. Poetic words mainly. And that is an act of world-to-word translation. Octavio Paz assumes an allegory: Hanuman, a divine entity he describes in a book titled *The Grammatical Monkey* [El mono gramático]. At the same time, that description works in reference to the human being, who is also a grammatical monkey. In this book, Paz travels an imaginary trip with plenty of poetic elaborations in each step. There he finds that eroticism and language go together in the same spot, as desire has in them two analogous faces. With this, Paz says farewell to any void since bodies are full of meaningful sensations. Plenitude is the sign of both Nature (the monkey) and Language (the grammatic). In this way, human writing reflects the natural universal writing: the poem unifies both the natural and human meanings:

Valmiki's ink and pen on paper are a metaphor for the lightning and rain with which Hanuman wrote his drama on the rugged crags. Human writing reflects that of the universe, it is the translation of this, but also its metaphor: it says something totally different and, at the same time, the same thing. (Paz, 1974, p. 125)<sup>x</sup>

In the end, the problem is that of language: Paz discovered India in the experiential world, but local languages were not learned by him. As he does not know those languages, how his Indian poems will exist? Translation merges as a necessity. Especially because the roots of India's history, spirituality and poetry lie in those languages. Paz decided in some point to attempt translations, not knowing the original. I think it is the cultural scheme of his experience: he was there, but the linguistic root was inaccessible, mediated by other voices, in English or French principally. In this case, Paz was a translator from languages he never knew.<sup>x</sup> Examples are Chinese, Japanese, and the languages from India "translated" in his work. How can it be? Flora Botton Beja (2011, p. 284), in the case of Chinese, but applicable to Indian languages, stated this question: "Are they translated Chinese poems or poems by Octavio Paz inspired in the Chinese poetry?" ["Son poemas chinos traducidos o poemas de Octavio Paz inspirados en la poesía china"]. We can say, as far as India is concerned, that they are poems by Paz, related in some mediated way to the originals.

Our poet considers translation as a non-literal version of the original poem. He prefers to make of translation the writing of a new poem, which puts again in movement the fixed original text. Fabienne Bradu (2013), in her paper "Versions and Tergiversations by Octavio Paz" [Versiones y tergiversaciones de Octavio Paz] links Paz's translating activity with two functional and conceptual couples: "accident-bet/play-pleasure" [accidente-apuesta/ juego-placer]. She concludes that Paz

creates a new poem when translating. So, the original, she says, is only like an "original", since the second is as creative as the first.

Paz himself (2004, p. 563) confirms that he is making a new original poem more than a strict translation. Without knowing Chinese, he "translated" poems: "The formidable obstacle of the language never stopped me and, without any respect for the philology I translated them from English and French" ["El formidable obstáculo de la lengua no me detuvo y, sin respeto por la filología, traduje del inglés y del francés"] Something similar happens with languages from India. Paz (2000) wrote:

I lived for more than six years in India, and keep in touch with experts in Sanskrit and Pali: Why I never tried to translate with their help a text from the *kavya* tradition? I tried two or three times, but I quit: *kavya* tradition is so far from us as Hellenistic art is. (p. 7-8)

Those words clarify that our poet is rooted in Western contemporary cultural values, in such a way that even the ancient Greek culture is for him a distant one, and even more the *kavya* tradition. From these values, he will look at India's culture and everyday life.

A large sector of criticism about Paz accepts that love was the connecting element of his vital experience and intellectual approach to India. Sometimes the main argument relies on the tantric incursions of this poet and, specifically, the large and magnificent poem *White* [Blanco]. So, for them, love and eroticism will function as India's references, since Paz married there and years after he will write the books *In Light of India*, and *The Double Flame*, with some connections between India and aspects of love and eroticism. But, as we have seen earlier, Paz is a writer from the Western pole of an opposition, translating from languages he does not know, without respect to the philology in this, and with a widespread interest overall human possibilities and cultures. In this point, we must quote Paz himself, from *The Double Flame*: "My conclusion: the Western concept of love shows a greater affinity with that of the Arabs and Persians than with those of India and the Far East." (65)

India is an invaluable reference for Paz, who has also a lot of invaluable references about Mexico, of course, and Europe, the United States, and several points in Asia, such as China, Japan, and, indeed, India. These interests are in both historical and contemporary issues. In this comprehension, there is no doubt that India occupies a very significant place, evident principally in the book of poems *East Slope*.

The very title alludes to the East-West dichotomy Paz himself has referred in more than one occasion. In this opportunity, he derives the East slope in an analogous way to other of his books inclined along of what we can profile as the "West slope". *East slope* allows us to conceive that the other side of the mountain is the West, to which Paz never resigned: West is his kingdom, and from there he will launch ties to the rest of the cultures in his expanded world.

In *East Slope*, India is a perception and a series of concepts. In the first case, Paz goes thru that country and directly sees the things and people; in the second, his eyes turn into memories of central ideas from philosophy and religion. Delhi, for example, in the poem *The Balcony* is a specific name: "Two high syllables / surrounded of sand and insomnia"; and, at the same time, a real city with "two towers / sowed in the plains".

This perception-plus-concept has one foot on India's culture and the other in Mexico's. In the poem *Amir Khusrau's Grave*, in an image of traditional prestige, this Sufi poet is compared with birds, one of them is from India and the other evokes a Mexican one: "Amir Khusrau, parakeet or cenzontle". Something similar happens in the poem *To the Painter Swaminathan*, mixing the "Mexican red" and "the red of India"; or equating goddesses from India (Kali) and Mexico (Guadalupe).

In the 60s, there was in the West an explosion of fragments from India spirituality, which made some words or aspects familiar to people interested in the presence of the East, its impacts in the counterculture, and in some kind of literature. Several of them appear in Paz's poetry, coming from perception or learned ideas. For example, in the poem *Perpetual Incarnate* there is a mention of the most famous symbolic tree: "The banyan / more a forest than a tree", and "an identical indifferent vibration". In *The Day at Udaipur*, he mentions "lingam and yoni". In *Vrindaban*, as expected, appears Lord Krishna, who is a "blue and sparkling tree". The Western mystical approaches to silence by composer John Cage surprised Octavio Paz, who wrote *Reading John Cage*, in which the poet says: "Nirvana is Samsara / Samsara is not Nirvana". And in *Concert in the Garden* refers the instruments vina and mridangam.

Other presences in these poems are sunyata, maithuna, Shiva and Parvati, yakshi ("hamadryad / yakshi / laughter in the bush"), prajnaparamita, Nagarjuna and Dharmakirti ("I forgot Nagarjuna and Dharmakirti / in your breast"), Tantra, and mandala.

Octavio Paz uses those words and names because they are among the main, and more visible, schematic, abstract, and more general from Indian tradition, accessible to the West in such a way that they appear in most Western books and authors about Buddhism, Tantra, or Hinduism. We will not say anything more about these words and names, since Octavio Paz uses them in their primary meaning, without new insights or depths as to spend more time on this.

There are a lot of studies on Paz and the East with subtle arguments and well-documented sources. Here we only have looked at punctual references to India, evaluating the place and importance they represent in the very works of Paz, and to Western readers of Paz's books.

From his prolific bibliography, he devoted only a few particular books to India, and here and there we can localize several allusions to the country and culture. Nevertheless, these three books, *The Grammatical Monkey*, *In Light of India*, and overall *West Slope* have transported to our time a potent verbal dynamism to feel India inside the poetry in Spanish in such a way that no other can be to the date compared with Paz's.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The book, translated by Tirtha Prasad Mukhopadhyay, is dedicated to Octavio Paz, "builder of a bridge of words between Bengal and Mexico"

<sup>ii</sup> As those references coming to Paz from French poet André Breton, in more than a way a mentor for Paz.

<sup>iii</sup> "La India me puso frente a otra civilización. Fue una experiencia singular, como mirarse en un espejo y ver aparecer otra persona que también, extrañamente, es uno mismo."

<sup>iv</sup> "Su llegada a la India fue como la de un peregrino en busca de la verdad, y pudo encontrar la respuesta definitiva en la dialéctica de negación del filósofo budista Nagarjuna" (Anil Dhingra, "La India en la obra de Octavio Paz", p. 162.

<sup>v</sup> "Nos inclinamos a creer que, al tratar de comprender la realidad india, sin dominar ninguna lengua india, ha recurrido a considerarla parte del prisma del pensamiento occidental y no ha podido penetrar en el alma de la nación india.", p. 212.

<sup>vi</sup> "Así vemos cuán lejos está Octavio Paz del vuelo metafísico, entre caricaturesco y colorido, vaporoso y florido, que los *hippies* de su tiempo fueron a buscar a la India", p. 103.

<sup>vii</sup> "Creo que la civilización india es el otro polo de la balanza de Occidente, la otra versión del mundo indoeuropeo. La relación entre India y Occidente es la de una oposición dentro de un sistema.", p. 58.

<sup>viii</sup> "Los orientalistas y filósofos que han descrito al budismo como un nihilismo negador de la vida, eran o estaban ciegos: nunca vieron las esculturas de Baharut, Sanchi, Mathura y tantos otros lugares", p. 214.

<sup>ix</sup> "La tinta y la pluma de Valmiki sobre el papel son una metáfora del rayo y la lluvia con que Hanuman escribió su drama sobre los peñascos. La escritura humana refleja a la del universo, es su traducción, pero asimismo su metáfora: dice algo totalmente distinto y dice lo mismo."

<sup>x</sup> As Flora Botton (2011) says: "translating poems from a language he did not know was a more delicate work" ["traducir poemas de un idioma que no conocía era una tarea más delicada"], p. 276.

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