The Poetry of Octavio Paz: An Independent Study

Between What I See and What I Say…
for Roman Jakobson

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.

It slips
between yes and no,
says
what I keep silent,
keeps silent
what I say,
dreams
what I forget.

It is not speech: it is an act.

It is an act
of speech.

Poetry

speaks and listens:
it is real.
And as soon as I say
it is real
poetry
comes and goes

between what is
and what is not.

It weaves
and unweaves reflections.
Poetry

scatters eyes on a page,
scatters words on our eyes.
Eyes speak,

words look, looks think.

To hear
thoughts,
see
what we say,

touch the body of an idea.

Eyes close,

the words open.
In this unit, you will explore the poetry of Paz. You will also learn what he thought about writing. You will also learn about his background as a person.

Assignments are detailed in the separate document - *Paz: Independent Study Tasks*

> Poetry is knowledge, salvation, power, abandonment. An operation capable of changing the world, poetic activity is revolutionary by nature; a spiritual exercise, it is a means of interior liberation. Poetry reveals this world; it creates another. Bread of the chosen; accursed food. It isolates; it unites. Invitation to the journey, return to the homeland. Inspiration, respiration, muscular exercise. Prayer to the void, dialogue with absence: tedium, anguish, and despair nourish it. *(The Bow and the Lyre)*

> ...all men know that they are going to die. They know it, they feel it, they dream, it, and they die. The same thing happens with the other basic human experiences: love, desire, work. These experiences are historical: they are prepared. Poems are machines that produce time and that [sic] continually return to their origins...*(The Bow and the Lyre)*

As Paz is well-known, you will find biographical information about him in your encyclopedia of choice (online or otherwise). Those of you who do not have a favourite reference will find that LitNet has an adequate biography ([http://www.litweb.net](http://www.litweb.net)). Go to the Biography Section and you will find Paz if you ‘search by author’.

As you were carefully reading Paz’s biography, you came across the name of Emelio Zapata and were instantly intrigued. The word ‘revolution’ was mentioned; as well, you learned that Octavio’s father worked as a secretary for him. Of course, you immediately did some research and found that Zapata was one of the key leaders of the Mexican Revolution. He was a radical supporter of agrarian rights for peasants (land for the people) and his slogan ‘Terra Y Libertad’ can be translated as either “land and freedom” or “land and justice”. He is also credited for the statement, “It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees.” The Mexican Revolution was a seminal time in modern Mexican history. When Zapata was killed by the army, Paz’s family went into exile for a short time.

In order to get a sense of the passion involved in the Mexican Revolution and a sense of its historical connection to the international Marxist movement, look at the art of Diego Rivera. [http://www.fbuch.com/diego.htm](http://www.fbuch.com/diego.htm) is an interesting site in terms of the art and the connections which are drawn. It is an individual’s site and he is not completely certain of all the rules of grammar. However, the art is amazing and it will give you a flavour of the revolutionary impulse in the Mexican revolution and the importance of murals as public art. You can also explore further by consulting other sources about Mexican muralists.

Paz explored Marxism. He, along with many other passionate young men, joined the Republican cause and fought against the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War. The Spanish Civil War was another seminal time in the history of the struggle against repression; revolution was embraced and, eventually, crushed. If you have forgotten the history of this era, do a little research on your own.

To see the passion of the Republican cause (which Paz joined) go to The Visual Front at [http://orpheus.ucsd.edu/speccoll/visfront/index.html](http://orpheus.ucsd.edu/speccoll/visfront/index.html). This site is sometimes tricky to access.
the link does not work, simply type ‘The Visual Front—Posters of the Spanish Civil War’. This will also take you directly to the site. Here you will find a series of posters (which you may click and enlarge) which were part of the Republican ‘information/propaganda’ mission. Browse through these images; it is perhaps another example of ‘public art’ (which might bear some similarity to ‘public poetry’?).

Picasso created one of the major pictures which are associated with the Spanish Civil War in response to the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica. You can see this image (and enlarge it) at [http://www.artchive.com/artchive/P/picasso/guernica.jpg.html](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/P/picasso/guernica.jpg.html). Look at the details in this piece and marvel at it. There is a tapestry of this piece at the UN building. In 2003, when Colin Powell addressed the UN about Iraq, it was ‘covered’. The story can be found at [http://www.commondreams.org/headlines03/0203-13.htm](http://www.commondreams.org/headlines03/0203-13.htm) and is an interesting example of the power of art and the possibility of ‘spin’. Check it out. Goya was also moved by the war. Go to [http://www.artchive.com/artchive/G/goya.html](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/G/goya.html). Click on The Shooting of May 3rd, 1808 (in the Image List). While exploring this site, you might also want to explore The Black Paintings of Goya; they are truly amazing.

Later events in Paz’s life included serving in the Mexican Diplomatic Corps in Paris, Japan, the United States, and India.

When discussing his poetry, ‘critics’ comment that some of the main ‘influences’ on it were surrealism, Marxism, existentialism, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

Andre Breton, in The Manifesto of Surrealism defined it as “the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association heretofore neglected, in the omnipotence of the dream, and in the disinterred play of thought. It leads to the permanent destruction of all other psychic mechanism and to its substitution for them in the solution of the principal problems of life.” In another work, Breton stated, “Everything leads us to believe that there is a certain state of mind from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, height and depth are no longer perceived as contradictory”.

One technique which surrealist poets used was the ‘exquisite corpse’ wordgame. Participants opened a dictionary, picked random words and used those words alone to create a poem.

Surrealism was also a powerful movement in Art. To ‘experience’ surrealism (including some clickable artistic visions) go to [http://www.mcs.csueastbay.edu/~malek/Surrealism/](http://www.mcs.csueastbay.edu/~malek/Surrealism/) This site is also ‘tender’. If it does not link, type ‘surrealism. Malek’ into the search area and it should be the first one on the list! This site is scrollable so do not simply stare, fascinated, at the opening graphic (like Ms. Morgan did for quite a long time!).

There is a good basic primer about Buddhism at [http://www.fwbo.org/buddhism.html](http://www.fwbo.org/buddhism.html). It is put together by ‘Friends of the Western Buddhist Order’ and has good links to readings. Once you have read the outline about Buddhism, it is difficult not to explore the writings as they are very interesting.

Existentialism is a difficult concept. To get a ‘flavour’ of what it entails, go to [http://www.tameri.com/csw/exist/](http://www.tameri.com/csw/exist/) and read the Introduction. You will be introduced to a few ‘main names’ and some of the confusion surrounding the definition of existentialism. Confusion is good for you!! Feel free to delve into existentialism; readings abound.
EN10 Voices: Looking from the Inside Out and from the Outside In

Now it is time to explore some of Paz’s poetry. The poems which you are required to read and experience are listed. Please feel free to sit somewhere and read the entire book; there is much to be experienced. However, if you read the ones noted in this list, you will get a flavour and understanding of Paz the poet.

Here is the required reading.

Example (489), Wind and Night (489), Insomniac (499), Wind, Water, Stone (505), Brotherhood (509), This And This and This (517), Although it is Night (525), Here (49), Bang (53), Certainty (67), Sleepless Night (95), Water and Wind (125), The Other (187), Interruptions from the West (223), Interruptions from the West-3 (225), and Dawn (47).

If you are working at the 5-7 level, you must also read Blanco in its entirety. This piece is one that you can ‘share’ (by reading aloud) with another person if you choose (pages 310-331).

Paz was the recipient of a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1990. It is your task to read his lecture at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1990/paz-lecture-e.html. As you read it, concentrate on the parts which ‘resonate’ with you as a person, reader, and thinker. If you are planning to work at the higher level, you must try to ‘get your head around’ Paz’s concept of modernity. And here, to nearly end, is a rhetorical question which you may bring to the table…why is Paz the ‘perfect IB learner’?

If you, at this point, are interested in some enrichment, may I humbly recommend the Paz podcast at the Library of Congress. It is long. However, some of you might enjoy it and it will be useful if you choose to do a commentary on a Paz poem next year. http://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=4329

And so, it is ended. Let us end with three quotations as they are interesting and will give you a sense of completion…and, hopefully a sense that as you wined your way through this independent study unit, the ‘doors of perception open[ed] slightly’ (Paz).

So, where, or out of what or whom, does the future arise? Where is the creative energy of the first part of the next millennium to come from? An idea out of Octavio’s “Otra Voz” has always struck me as valuable. It is that we must look for the survival of true poetry not in the horizontal deployment of an ever-shrinking population of readers at any given historical moment but in a vertical time-depth: poetry surviving as a diachronic passage of culture from one generation of readers to another. For me, this time-depth is without limit: it reaches back to whatever we can envisage as the beginning of all and any time, encompassing the poetry voiced by any human from that beginning onward, not to mention the immense population of the dead. (Nathanial Tarrn. On Octavio Paz.)

For Paz, poetry is a brink, a precipice, an abyss, where silent before a void, the poet leaves historical time to reenter the time of desire, a time always with us, for which our myths of the Golden Age are only a representation. (Helen Vendler)

It is the instant, that bird that is everywhere and nowhere. (Octavio Paz)