Reji Paikkattu “Octavio paz vis-a-vis India Octavio paz's objective assessment of Indian culture with special reference to A tale of two gardens and In light of India” Thesis. Department of English, University of Calicut, 2001
Chapter 1
Octavio Paz in World Literary Tradition

Octavio Paz, the Nobel Laureate for literature in 1990, is equally acclaimed as a poet and prose writer of supreme eminence. Highlighting the importance of Octavio Paz in the central tradition of European literature, Richard Gott, a distinguished critic wrote in *Guardian*: that Octavio Paz was one of the greatest European cultural icons of the 20th century and added that he was a poet beyond praise, a critic beyond criticism and an essayist whose insights illuminate our mediocre culture with the gorgeous richness of a stained-glass window. Being a poet of sublime heights, Paz is able to bring his poetic insight and astounding knowledge on any subject that he chooses to write which makes the reading an enlightening and edifying experience. His poems and essays map the labyrinths of the Mexican mind. Paz could endow universality in whatever he wrote which makes them relevant in any corner of the world. Carlos Fuentes the distinguished Mexican novelist and an intellectual who differed with Paz on ideological grounds conceded that Paz has "changed forever the face of Mexican literature" (Kandell 177). The veracity of the praise is all the more convincing as the encomium comes from a literary rival of Octavio Paz. Pablo Neruda, the senior poet in Latin American
literature and a towering figure in 20th century world literature, who got Nobel Prize for literature in 1970, was impressed by Octavio Paz when he was in his twenties and introduced him to other writers.

It was Mexican President, Mr. Ernesto Zedillo who announced the death of Octavio Paz that happened on 20th April, 1998 (The Indian Express, 21st April, 1998). In his tribute to Paz, Mexican President said: "This is an irreplaceable loss for contemporary thought and culture – not just for Latin America but for the entire world" (Kandell 75). Associated Press commented on the distinctive style of Paz: "Mr. Paz's style was sometimes harsh, but it was so precise and clear that he changed the very way Mexicans express themselves" (The Indian Express, 21st April, 1998).

The Nobel Prize citation of 1990 described Paz as "the cultural polymath" and observed that the justly famous prize was given for the writer's "humanistic integrity". While giving him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1990, the Swedish Academy of letters hailed Paz for "impassioned writing with wide horizons, characterized by sensuous intelligence and humanistic integrity" (Kandell 75). The academy cited the following poem by Paz as the one illustrating his literary credo:

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.

Gonzalez Echecarria, a Professor of Spanish at Yale University, reviewing The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz 1957-1987 and Convergences, essays in art and literature, in The New York Times Book Review in 1988 said, "Mr. Paz is a vestige, an homme de lettres alive to all that is happening around him, willing to incorporate everything into his meditation, convinced that his perspective as a literate, non specialised observer is one worthy to be taken into account not only by intellectuals but by the public at large" (Kandell, 76).

The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, records that Octavio Paz is "recognised as one of the major literary figures in Latin America after World War II" (9: 220).

Octavio Paz was born in Mexicoac, Mexico City on 31st March, 1914. The family was mestizo on his father's side and his mother's family was purely Spanish. A well known journalist and writer, his grandfather fought with the patriot Benito Juarez against the French occupation of Mexico in the 1860s. Paz's father was a lawyer by profession who took part in the Mexican Revolution of 1910. He was associated with the agrarian
reforms and represented the peasant guerilla leader Emiliano Zapata in the United States. As the family was ruined financially on account of the Mexican civil war, young Octavio grew up in straitened circumstances.

Educated at a Roman Catholic School and at the University of Mexico, Paz turned to writing and in 1933, at the age of nineteen, published his maiden book of poetry entitled *Luna Silverstre* ("Forest Moon"). Paz went to Spain in 1937 where he strongly sympathised with the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War. In Spain he met celebrated writers like Antonio Machado, Alberti, Pablo Neruda, Caesar Vallejo, W.H. Anden, Stephen Spender, Andre Malraux, Andre Gide and Tristan Tzara. The next year he came back to Mexico via Paris and came under the profound influence of surrealism. In Mexico Paz founded a magazine named *Taller* (1939: "Workshop") and another named *El Hijo Prodigo* (1943: The Prodigal Son). These magazines introduced writers like Eliot, Lautreamont and John Donne to the Spanish reading public. The subsequent period witnessed the publication of his major poetic compositions like *No Pasaram!* (1937, "They Shall Not Pass"!), *Libertad bajo palabra* (1949; "Freedom under Parole"), *Aguila o Sol?* (1951; Eagle or Sun?) and *Piedra de Sol* (1957; The Sun Stone). Paz produced prose volumes of essays and criticism including *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950;
The Labyrinth of Solitude) a controversial and original analysis of modern Mexico and the Mexican character. A startling and insightful exploration of the formative influences on Mexican personality, The Labyrinth of Solitude became a rite of passage into the world of intellect for his fellow Mexicans and a required reading for anybody interested in Mexico.

With the help of a scholarship, Paz studied at the University of California, Berkeley and for sometime worked in New York as a translator rendering Hollywood scripts into Spanish. Paz went to Paris in 1945 where he formed a close friendship with Andre Breton and participated in the activities of surrealist movement. In 1946 Paz was offered a job as cultural attache to the embassy in Paris. As an official of the Mexican Foreign Service, Paz worked in Paris, New York, San Francisco, Geneva and New Delhi. Paz had been Mexico's ambassador to India from 1962 to 1968; in the latter year he resigned the post in protest against the Mexican government's brutal repression of student revolutionaries who demanded political reforms and democracy. About this incident and his reaction, Paz wrote: "... on the morning of October 3, I learned of the bloody repression of the previous day. I decided that I could no longer represent a government that was operating in a manner so clearly opposite to my way of thinking" (In Light of India 203).
After his resignation from Mexican Foreign Service, Paz held teaching posts at Cambridge University, the University of Texas and Harvard University, a fact that bears out the solid scholarship of the poet-diplomat. Returning to Mexico in 1971, Paz started a monthly *Plural*, which was published as a supplement to the newspaper *Excelsior*. When the government took over the paper, another monthly *Vuelta* (Return) was founded with Paz as editor. During this period Paz published collections of essays, as Eliot Weinberger says, "on nearly everything" (Preface, *The Collected Poems*, xv). Among these volumes, mention may be made of *Los hijos del limo* (The children of the mire), Paz's Harvard lectures on Romanticism and the avant-garde.

Paz's diplomatic stay in India had a rich creative flowering. *Ladera este* (1971; "East Slope") a mature volume of poems celebrating his oriental experiences in India, Ceylon and Afghanistan is the most significant of these works. His other important poetic works include *Blanco* (1967), *Hijos del aire* (1981; Airborn), *Arbol Adentro* (1987; A Tree Within). *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz 1957-1987*, a bilingual edition in Spanish and English, was published in 1987 (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation). The important prose works of Paz include *Conjunctions y disyunciones* (1970; Conjunctions and Disjunctions), *El mono gramatico*.

In 1995, Paz published *Vislumbres de la India* (Glimpses of India), a testament to his Indian experiences that lasted well over six years. The translation *In Light of India*, was brought out in 1997 (trans. by Eliot Weinberger; London: The Harvill Press). About this work Paz says: "It is not a memoir, but rather an essay that attempts, with a few quick notes, to answer a question that goes beyond personal anecdotes: How does a Mexican writer, at the end of the twentieth century, view the immense reality of India?" (*In Light of India*, 32). It is also "a long footnote to the poems of East Slope. It is their context — not vital, but intellectual" (32).

Paz's training for writing *In Light of India* is partly personal and partly official. In 1962 he was appointed the Mexican ambassador to India. Around this time Paz met Marie-Jose Tramini who became his wife, a union which Paz described in a memorable sentence: "After being born, the most important thing that has happened to me" (*The Collected Poems*, xv). Along with his wife he travelled throughout the subcontinent and began to
study Indian history, art, philosophy and literature with an absorption which is all too evident in his subsequent creative career.

A litterateur with deep interests in the visual arts, Paz organized the first exhibition of Tantric art in the west in 1970. Besides he collaborated on projects with many artists like Robert Motherwell, Rufmo Tamayo, Adja Yunkers et al. Commenting on the variety of Paz's interests and activities, Eliot Weinberger wrote: "In the 1980's Paz has been lecturing and reading around the world (India, Japan, South America, Spain, Germany, the US . . . ), editing Vuelta, appearing regularly on Mexican television" (The Collected Poems, xvi). Throughout his creative life, Paz showed his fierce-passion for his native land and its unique culture, a fact clearly demonstrated by monumental works like The Labyrinth of Solitude (1950) and Sun Stone (1963). True to this spirit, Paz published an exhaustive study of Sor Juana Ine's de la Cruz, the 17th century Mexican poet and visionary. Besides, there is a three volume edition of his writings on Mexican history, art, and literature.

From this brief survey of his personal life and creative evolution, Paz's 'myriad mindedness' and his solid achievement in Mexican literature in particular and world literature in general become evident. Against this background of Paz's many sided achievement, the comment made about
Octavius Caesar by Seutonius Polinus rings equally true in Paz’s life too: "he found it built of brick and left it in marble" (Snodgrass, 297).

Commenting on the multifaceted achievement of Paz, Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* that Octavio Paz was such a masterly presence in the dialogue of Latin American culture that it was easy to forget he is first and foremost a poet. According to Echavarria, a reading of the volume *The Collected Poems* reveals that in the polyphony of his voices the poetic one still rings loudest and clearest.

As an individual and thinker, Paz has been deeply committed to truth and throughout his life, remained a sincere seeker in quest of authentic existence. As a poet, Paz possessed an exceptionally energetic and creative intellect. Reading his poems, one is left with the impression that Paz has the ability to express the permutations and combinations of hundreds and thousands of ideas, images and imagination in finely integrated poetic discourse. Sometimes he wrote in a way that it sounded to be absurd on the surface; upon closer and deeper examination, the apparently absurd blooms into poetic utterance having rich levels of significance.
With his deep commitment to life and literature, Paz became the intellectual conscience of the 20th century. As a poet he relied on the creativity of language and spoke in a subdued tone thereby amplifying the impact of his utterance. As a thinker, he remained a pilgrim with inner vision who frequented different lands and domains of thoughts. His quest as a poet and thinker led him to Breton, Surrealism, Eliot, Blake, Gongora and eventually to Nagarjuna, Dharmakirti and the Buddha. In nowhere can we find contradiction or dissonance because Paz was deeply committed to the truth of language and the truth of being.

Highlighting the importance of Paz in world literary tradition, Manuel Duran, a distinguished critic hailing from Yale University wrote in *World Literature Today*, 1991.

If we are to compare Paz's total impact with that of others famous poets, we might say that he is as much a philosophical poet as T.S. Eliot was, but he is more intimate, more erotic, warmer than Eliot. We might add that he has become as much of a public poet and writer as Victor Hugo was in the nineteenth century, although Paz's style is less grandiloquent than Hugo's; Paz never over acts (7).