

AN ESSAY ON THE MODERNISM OF OCTAVIO PAZ

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The article analyses an important essay by O. Paz 'The Labyrinth of Solitude' from several points of view – moral, philosophical-historical or cultural-anthropological. The author uses the notion of national identity for a wider explanation of mythological and universal interpretation of human existence which enables Paz "to become someone else within one's own self" on a psychoanalytical basis. In this sense he observes especially his bonds with German Romantic poetry and philosophy (Hegel, Goethe, etc.). As he points out, from a literary point of view it is important that Paz goes beyond formalist and structuralist principles towards catching individual signs of the spiritual culture of nations (cf. his book 'Shadows of Works', 1996). To a considerable extent it enables us to fruitfully connect determinism with dialectics, scholarly view with the poetic view one whereby, he also fulfils a deeper methodological framework of the term historical poetics.

By analysing the concept of modernism, a question of the possibility of a more precise and more exhaustive definition of its content or of several interconnected meanings structured in a complex way arises. Interestingly, taking a more concentrated look at different results of modern exploration in the field of literature or culture a moment of critical and self-critical reappraisal of its positive sides comes to the fore in many cases. It should be underlined that this takes place in writers whose work represents an unusual variety of ideological-aesthetic attitudes at a glance and this a priori disables any efforts to make a synthesis. The explorer is therefore at first dependent on an analytical examination and only in the later stage can he launch a search for hidden relations and connections.

It will probably not be a surprise to those who read valuable Spanish-American literature more often, when these characteristics will be followed in the creative writing of one of the most revealing as well as most discussed phenomena of modern thought – in the work of the Nobel Prize winner – Mexican Octavio Paz (born 1914). It should be said at the very beginning that the complexity of Paz's creative message springs from the many-sided experiences of the poet, essayist or thinker, expert in the economic, cultural and socio-political tradition of his nation. It was

precisely Mexican reality that was the chief starting point of Paz's contemplations on national identity from the very beginning of his career, namely the 1930s.¹ It is characteristic of similar creative writers that the image of their own nation within a breadth of historical agents was created through gradual comparison with foreign, Western-European but also oriental philosophical and artistic tendencies and currents. During the author's maturation, as we shall see later, he was very dissatisfied with the traditional determinants of knowledge, a simultaneous role was played by several agents of scientific as well as artistic character.

Paz's essay 'El laberinto de la soledad' (The Labyrinth of Solitude) has these signs. It is often declared to be the most significant work of Hispanic-American prose that has ever been written in this genre. The critics said that the work was at a complex crossroads of the essay about morality, philosophy of history, anthropology of culture, psychohistory and autobiography. Octavio Paz defined the 'Labyrinth of Solitude' as "a book within the French tradition of moralism". It was written during the author's stay in Paris in 1948–49 although many topics had already been raised from the second half of the thirties. Its first edition appeared in Mexico in 1950. In addition to several revisions and supplements the publication of a critical and self-critical continuation of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* entitled *Postdata* (1970) is worth noting. Paz's interest in the "Mexican topic" endured in the following years, the topic became for him a sort of a fixed idea, a fruit of constant search for broken ties with his country: "...it is a sort of diary written during approximately half a century. It does not contain, however, stories of one life but of the mentally and emotionally fickle and not always happy relationship of the writer to his homeland. Looking for Mexico or for myself? Probably a place in Mexico: my place. Or such a place that Mexico occupies inside myself. Wandering began with the feeling of strangeness and with the question: Am I the foreigner or is the country I call mine foreign? This question is as old as man. The answers of religions to the question were almost the same: This country is not your real country but the place of your banishment."²

¹ The work from the Hispano-American literature dealing with national identity, that should be mentioned is the work of the Argentinean Ezequiel Martínez Estrada *Radiografía de la pampa* (X-Ray of pampas, 1933) and that of the Cuban José Lezama Lima *La expresión americana* (American expression, 1957). The essay about national identity that had been called *Völkerpsychologie* in Germany in a certain period, was followed by Spanish romantics (Mariano José de Larra, Ramón Mesonero Romanos), Generation 98 (José Ortega y Gasset, Miguel de Unamuno, Azorín – José Martínez Ruiz). We cannot forget the French tradition of "moralism", beginning with Montaigne through the great eighteenth-century encyclopedists (Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire), ending with the work of Valéry.

² Introduction to Octavio Paz's collected works under the title *El Peregrino en su patria* (A Pilgrim in his homeland) *Historia i política de México*, D.F., México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, ed. by Octavio Paz and Luis Mario Schneider, 1987, pp. 13–14. In: PAZ, O.: *El laberinto de la soledad*. Ed. Cátedra, Madrid 1995, p. 16. (Cited from the introduction by Enrico Mario Santi).

The quotation of the statement written only several years ago shows that the feeling of foreignness, oddness, or a sort of interior banishment afflicted Paz from his young years. Understandably, he found a fertile land in the post-war Paris milieu, meeting some intellectual and artistic streams, French existentialism, in particular. As critics have noted, it would not be correct to reduce the content of the book to the existentialist issue since the topic of solitude had occurred in Paz much earlier. Moreover, in the author's understanding, it takes a special emphasis, close rather to the topic of alienation, that is the 'modern' topic par excellence.

The writer's relation to surrealism is also outlined. Many French surrealists, e.g. André Breton and Antonin Artaud, were fascinated by Mexican revolutionary reality, particularly by the connection between political and poetical activities as well as by the possibility of searching for the poetic power of the subconscious. Naturally, the fact of Paz's alliance with another cultural tradition (Hispanic and Hispanic-Mexican) must have been reflected in that his aesthetics diverges from surrealist orthodoxy. Paz's poetic creation proves this: as is well-known, it is not a reflection of either oneiric or automatic writing. It is not surprising that similar differences could also be found in other significant Hispanic-American writers who had undergone Paris experiences. For instance, the Argentinean Julio Cortázar (1914–1984) well-known also in our country, was inspired by the achievements of surrealism to some extent, but ultimately he distanced himself from surrealist hermetism and in his poetics he evidently went beyond its limits which was certainly also due to his Hispanic-American descent. It should not be forgotten that during his diplomatic mission in Paris the author did not devote himself merely to artistic activities and, while being absorbed in minute administrative work, he did not seek any way out of solitude in an unambiguously formulated art credo. His goal was an interiorized search for, or re-discovery of a relationship to a remote homeland which he could get to know from a distance from an unusual perspective.

In a mesh of diverse stimuli accompanying the birth of the future essay long before it was written, an important place in the author's reflections was occupied by his search for a "mythic hero". His features also gradually crystallized in direct contact with Mexican literature. In national poetry, he was attracted by the fate of a Mexican poet "between heaven and earth, between sirens of foreign cultures and the soil, on which the soul finds itself unconsciously and is defined". Such a feeling embodies, in his opinion, José Vasconcelos and he compares his search in a borderland village to a spiritual odyssey: "...to the odyssey of the traveller, who comes back, not to run his house as the Greek did, but to rediscover it." He lays emphasis on the possibility of overcoming the feeling of alienation by looking for a particular picture, which springs from concerned and emotional self-knowledge through a variety of experiences. The road to liberation is simultaneously marked by a strong charge of universality, which, according to Paz, follows from the character of a Mexican.

In the Labyrinth of Solitude we meet several definitions of the concept of solitude. Some interesting ones are: "solitude, the essence from which anxiety springs, began when we were separated from the mother milieu and we fell into another, strange, unfriendly one." Or: "to feel lonely does not mean to feel inferior but to feel different." The life feeling of a Mexican who, due to unfavourable social or political-economic development has to "wear a mask", grows finally into the central thesis that every nation, every individual suffers a special feeling of loneliness and expresses it in a characteristic way. Therefore, if it is the poet's intention to "get through this disease, which would be grotesque if it was not dangerous", and, simultaneously, it is his desire to pull the nationalistic mask off, to which he alludes: "Mexicanness is probably a mask, which, when it falls down, enables to see the end of man." The citations help us to better understand the whole architecture of the construction of Paz's essay about national identity, which concentrates in the first stage on the interpretation of individual myths or customs and then passes to universal mythological interpretation of human existence. If the attribute of hypocrisy and sham is assigned to the Mexican's mask, we should not see any peculiarity in it, since "in all times and in all climates human relations – love relations, in particular – are exposed to a risk of becoming ambiguous. Narcissism and masochism are not the exclusive features of a Mexican."³ The awareness of the modern creator that "the order of the universe was broken and disturbed by man himself" has, in Paz's conception, a particular possibility to result in the need "to become someone else within one's own self". That means to enter the subconscious, so far unexplored area uncovering the deep essence of the human ego and not "the class society". Here Octavio Paz feels decisively closer to Nietzsche and Freud rather than to Marx and Rousseau.

The analysis, in which Paz describes myths and gives a clearer and broader account of the character of a Mexican, his "mask", *ninguneo* or a variety of feasts or the figure of Malinche (Cortés's lover, who, during the conquest of Mexico, betrayed indigenous Indians), is at first sight of a folkloric character. It is not by coincidence that many a reader has an impression of a definitely critical, even hostile attitude to the home reality. We shall not mention here the sharp critical reactions to the writer's courageous approach, particularly in Mexico. The fact that such a description does not concern only the recent past played a significant role, and the author realized it as well, but directly also the moment of evident or latent perseverance of the natural features of Mexican character at present. It should be said that his approaches follow from the hermeneutic essence of the cognitive process, in which it is not the search for the external sense that is at issue, but "decoding of its meanings". This is actually the core of the demanding role to overcome the feeling of alienation in a strategic way of decoding and at the same time of realizing the latent reality.

³ PAZ, O.: *op. cit.*, p. 177.

In comparison with the external effects, which Paz had to face as a Mexican even at the cost of the weakening of original Indian or Spanish features, his description of the situation of the nation at the times of porphyryism, which he had observed before the publication of *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, is interesting. In his review of a significant study of the Mexican Professor Leopoldo Zea 'Positivism in Mexico' (1943), he thinks about the concept of "ideology" which is not based on Marx in the mentioned study but on secondary sources. In these terms he chiefly means the "false consciousness" of porphyryism and that enables him to differentiate between "social interests of Mexican bourgeoisie" and "the political reality called porphyryism". With this consciousness he heads for the revelation of the discrepancy between positivism as an intellectual movement, which brought adequate results in Western Europe from the point of view of the goals set, and the modern historical reality of Mexico. According to Paz, "the laws of the reform did not bring power to the bourgeoisie or democracy to Mexico: spiritual feudalism was simply secularized and the clergy was deprived of public education". This made of positivism a dishonest weapon in this country which was used with "bad intention" by the class of latifundists; it meant the confirmation of "anachronistic feudalism dressed in modernism" and was not an authentic intellectual movement.

The re-edition of the revised and amended essay *The Labyrinth of Solitude* appeared thanks to Enrico Mario Santí. In a well-grounded and comprehensive introduction he concentrated on the elucidation of the genesis of the book. He did not miss the fact that the first meditations on the myth date back to the end of the 1930s, when Paz wrote his poetic diary under the title *Vigilias* (Vigil). This was later joined by the texts from two conferences drafted by the author in 1942 on the universal topic of Poetry and mythology. A significant influence on the book by Roger Caillois *Myth and Man* (1939) should be underlined, especially the three key concepts: the concept of the myth as a code of mental conflicts; projection of these conflicts towards a mythic hero whose "actions can lead us to its denouement"; and the need to create again the "mythic atmosphere" in the form of collective rituals. The perseverance of the myth according to Paz shows to what extent "religion i.e. the essence of various denominations, is the intellectual food of the nation. It is a fruit of the spirit and its imagination".⁴

When mentioning the author's longing for liberation from the feeling of "dis-ease" by exploring the mechanisms of national myths, it is desirable to emphasize again the complexity of his reflection which is unthinkable without inner concern. Just such a state enabled him to meditate on the causes of national and individual crisis and finally to be reconciled – although not through the nationalistic mask – with his own nation. An intuitive approach to the historical process in Mexico is called "the dialectics of solitude" in the book. In contrast to the approaches of tradi-

⁴ PAZ, O.: *Palabras bajo libertad*. Barcelona, Seix y Barral 1958, pp. 289–290. In: PAZ, O.: *El laberinto de la soledad*, op. cit., p. 29.

tional syllogism, the fates of the nation are seen through analogous interiorized cognition having a more extensive aim, which actually is not to meet a Mexican any more, but a man as such and this understandably also means reconciliation with oneself – with Octavio Paz. No wonder, therefore, that all efforts to define the genre or the theme of the book had to face a number of problems from the very beginning. It was clearly associated with Paz's dual ambitions to enter into contact with the national myths in both scientific and poetic ways. In 1990 he characterized *The Labyrinth of Solitude* as follows: "I felt lonely and I also felt that Mexico was a lonesome, isolated country remote from the central flow of history... Thinking about foreignness, which means to be a Mexican, I discovered an old truth: every man hides in himself someone unknown. Every man is inhabited by a phantom. I wanted to penetrate into myself and to extricate the unknown someone and to talk to him. My work is neither a sociological nor a psychological tract. What is it then? It is a confession or – better to say – a declaration."⁵

The key word is thus confession: a personal story, which tries to express the essence, the truth about man. Consequently, the solitude does not appear as an individual or individualistic phenomenon, an exclusive feeling of a man shut in himself, completely alienated but as a highly human need to recover the broken ties with the homeland and the surroundings.

The author's contemplations always have a basis, a particularly seen or observed phenomenon, which, from the point of view of concepts, is able to pass to a certain paradigm as a reflection of the psychoanalytic perception of reality. This is a function fulfilled for instance by an analysis of the "pachuco" (dandy, fop) embodying one of the extreme traits of the Mexican. The author characterizes the Mexican as a contradictory person: "he is ashamed of his descent", he moves with "a furtive and disconcerted countenance" and although he "does not want to return to his Mexican origin, he equally – at least seemingly – does not want to integrate into Western or American life". The sign of conflicts is also a peculiar costume which "isolates him and makes him different... the same costume is respect for the society, which he wants to deny". In a word, as bearer of "controversial visions he necessarily inclines to violence". Enrico Mario Santi noticed that the premise of this analysis is exactly the fact that neurotic symptoms are characteristic of the "pachuco" and, in Freudian terms, of the "ill ego, which has lost its unity and through which contradictory and opposite desires penetrate". A conflict is in fact a disease, a neurosis. The aggressiveness of the subject per se means not only the existence of the conflict, but also the need to express it. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, the central conflict takes place between instincts and their suppression, between biology and culture.

It is noteworthy that the figure of the 'pachuco' becomes a sort of prototype in relation to the Mexican as such. At the same time, it is an archetype of the

⁵ Ibid., p. 47.

“chicano” – the North American of Mexican origin. It should be added that besides the figure of the “pachuco”, Paz gives a wider account of the character of the Hispanics living in the USA. He lays emphasis on the differences and particular cohesion of Hispanic groups which “is not manifested in political forms but in collective behaviour and attitudes. The society of North America is built on the individual. The origin of the rule of the individual as a central value is of two kinds...: it comes from reform and the enlightenment. Hispanic-Catholic society is communitarian with the family as its core, a small solar system which circulates around the constant star: mother. The crucial function of the image of mother in Latin-American society is not coincidental: two feminine deities of the Mediterranean and Christian virgins, pre-Columbian and African goddesses – Isis and Maria, Coatliene and Yemayá, are joined within her. The earth’s axis, the wheel of time, the centre of motion, the magnet of reconciliation, mother is the spring of life and the reservoir of religious convictions and traditional values” (p. 540).

The citation is a clear evidence of Paz’s efforts to draw attention to the unusual spiritual variety of Mexican society. The interpretation of differences, which the author observes in relation to Anglo-American society, with the exclusive regard to the Christian basis of both societies, is also convincing. From the point of view of ethics, which is fed by the Christian heritage the differences are, in his opinion, more than evident: “In the centre of the Anglo-American Puritan and neo-Hedonistic, prohibition and permissive ethics, there is the individual, while in Hispanic morals the actual hero is the family. The dominance of the family does not only have charitable effects: the family is in principle hostile to common welfare and general interests. (...) The root of our apathy and passiveness in political matters as well as the hereditary nepotism of our rulers – with their deeply rooted favouritism and corruption – is the selfishness and narrow-mindedness of family interests. Just because of the smaller space, which an individual has for his own development, the individual act often occurs in equally harmful directions: in the closed order and violent clash with the surrounding” (p. 54). It is not surprising that the awareness of similar characteristic features lead Octavio Paz, through a generalizing look at the more extreme manifestations of the current Mexican, to the feeling of a sort of retardation, suppression of natural and life-giving impulses and, at last – “to the final uncovering of what we actually are”. In contrast to active life, meaningful need to change habits, to adapt to the surrounding world, Paz sees a rather opposite tendency with the Mexican: instead of a dialogue – a liking of silence, instead of creativity criticism, instead of hard working – irony: “Inside each of us love and hate embrace each other, their faces blend until they reach an unprecedented and indescribable unity. We have burnt with love for Spain for years, where our pride found guilt; through its denial we were led to the denial of ourselves; and we did something similar with our domestic past. We have torn ourselves to pieces finding an odd pleasure in destruction and we have torn our hearts with holy delight. Acid drops off our hands, which destroys everything it touches. We live in love with

nothingness but our nihilism has nothing intellectual; it is not born from reason but from instinct and therefore it is necessary. These darknesses and lights of our soul have never been expressed either in art or in thought.”⁶

Hermetism, the constant presence of the mask, incapability to express fully in words what creates the essence of art is, according to Paz, the consequence of the dominance of instinct over reason, non-belief in the intellectual coping with the literary theme which should have a constant support in something higher – in extra-sensory certainty. He sees such an ability in other non-verbal arts, particularly in painting, music and dance, based on one's own and almost self-sufficient sources of inspiration; on the other hand, when writing works on the basis of imagination, whether poetic, prosaic, or theatrical, “the soul or the language, in which somebody tries to write, should be changed”. He sees the cause in the unconscious essence of the Mexican vision of history and politics. Particular ability to complete such a statement is characterized, for instance, by Paz's contemplations on the changed situation of the nation, after the arrival of Spanish colonists and their overthrow of Mexico: “The mythology of the Mexicans was obviously foreign to the Spanish viceroys – in contrast to the Indians, mestizos or Creoles; all these saw in the Spanish state spontaneously and naturally a continuation of the Aztec power. Their identification was not explicit and did not have a rational form: it corresponded to the order of matters. The continuity between the viceroy and the Aztec master, between the Christian capital and the former devotional town, was, moreover, only one of the aspects of the vision, which had been created about the pre-Columbian past by colonial society. The continuity is also visible in religion: the revelation of the Virgin of Guadalupe above the ruins of a sanctuary dedicated to the Goddess Tonatzin is the main, though not the only example of this relation between the two worlds – indigenous and colonial. In the medieval theatrical play with a biblical theme written by sor Juana Inés de la Cruz entitled ‘Narciso divino’ the former pre-Columbian religion appears in spite of its bloody rituals as a parable of the arrival of Christianity to the Mexican territory. (...) Since the fights for independence, the process of identification with the pre-Hispanic world has been emphasized and has become one of the most remarkable features of modern Mexico after the revolution. It was not said that the majority of Mexicans adopted the Aztec point of view and thus, unconsciously strengthened the myth embodied by the pyramid and its sacrificial stone” (pp. 397–398).

Now, after the citation, Paz's conviction about a sort of ambiguity of the character of the contemporary Mexican will not surprise us and this is directly connected with the notion of none-ness (ninguneo) by denying the (imaginary) others. By means of an intelligent game of hints Paz relates the None to the Spanish Don Nobody (Don Nadie): “If this is an influential man with an aggressive and haughty

⁶ PAZ, O.: *Palabras...*, op. cit., pp. 263–264. In: PAZ, O.: *El laberinto de la soledad*, op. cit., p. 27.

way of non-being", the second one is "calm and timid, resigned". His disadvantage is that in spite of sensitivity, constant smiles and intelligence, "he runs into the wall of silence" (...) and his gestures and shouts are lost in a vacuum, "created around it by Don Nobody's strong voice". The most important is, however, that "also the None-ness-maker becomes nothing; he is the negation of somebody" (p. 181).

For a deeper insight into the essence of the Mexican character the author had rich proof material on hand, offered mainly by pictures of a typical Mexican feast. Relying on the knowledge from psychoanalysis the critique alerted to the basic conflict between closeness and openness. In contrast to the suppressed emotional life which leads to the formalistic, polite and pretended behaviour, collective life enables to showing or expression of such a life outwardly. It is precisely thanks to the feast, which has a recovering function, that makes the human existence unique: "If we hide ourselves from ourselves in everyday life, we relax in the vortex of the feast." The feast does not mean to Paz a conflict but rather an oblivion or suppression of its sense. As is known, Mexico is a ritual nation and the art of the feast was preserved untouched among people. The Mexican feast belongs to the "area of holiness" because it primarily means an "invasion of unusualness" since it is controlled by "special or typical rules" which make a unique event of it. Thanks to the feast "a Mexican opens up during common participation with his kin and the values which make sense of his religious or political existence". But in contrast to other communities, "the Mexican feast is actually a return to the original status of becoming indifferent and the status of freedom; the Mexican does not try to come back but he tries to get out of himself, to overrun himself" (p. 188).

In this connection, Octavio Paz warns against the simplified interpretation of the Mexican feast, which certainly does not have the form of direct escape from the state of closedness or isolation. Noisy manifestations of love or friendship, tinged with constant singing, conceal sadness. He even argues that the night feast is actually "the feast of sadness". It clearly mirrors "to what the extent our hermetism hinders our way to the communication with the world". In such an approach, the feast has the function of violent parting with the past status and the established order. The native is able to push things to extremes, which sometimes end with tragic death: "A Mexican as a harsh, introvert being suddenly explodes, reveals his chest and with some pleasure he displays shameful and awful nooks of his interior." A constantly suppressed possibility to exist and to look into one's own being in everyday moments results, according to Paz, in the need of the feast. As he says, this act is, however, simultaneously a jump into the vacuum, the intoxication being a sign of closedness, "a shot in the air, a firework" (p. 189).

Another important phenomenon we have encountered in the previous analysis and is equally associated with the dialectic of the closed and the open is the sacred meaning of death. As in some other manifestations of Mexican reality, also in this case the meaning of death is suppressed and overlooked not only by the phantom of a Mexican but also of modernity as such. Since the contemporary Mexican sup-

pressed dual heritage – both Aztec and Christian – the sacralness of death, “in the modern world everything functions as if death would not exist”. Octavio Paz understands the contradiction of the life and death of the old Aztecs as far from absolute, he does not forget, however, that in accord with the impersonal meaning of sacrifice “the Aztec fed the greediness of eternally unfulfilled life with his death. The object of sacrifice was double: on the one hand man entered the creative process (paying simultaneously the family’s debts to the gods); on the other hand, he nourished cosmic and social life, which was fed from the first. (...) Our native ancestors did not believe that death belonged to them and did not think that – in the Christian sense of the term – their life was really their life” (p. 190). The space and time were therefore linked and created an inseparable unity. Their life was determined by religion and fate which distinguishes them from the modern concept of life based on freedom and morality. Prophetic practices were therefore very important to them and the only free beings were the gods. In this connection Paz gives some examples of the sinfulness of gods embodied particularly in Quetzalcoátl. These gods are often in low spirits, abandon their believers; without it we could hardly understand the conquest of Mexico.

With the advent of Catholicism, the content of sacrifice and the idea of salvation lose the collective meaning, which preserved the continuity of creation and expressed the cosmic salvation. An individual comes to the fore and the question of salvation depends in principle only on his activities: Christ’s salvation operates in the particular sense for each man separately. What both faiths have in common is the fact that in spite of different values which are the corner-stone of the problem of life and death for both Indians and Christians, none of them functions autonomously: “they refer to invisible realities”.

If such a possibility stops existing, in the modern understanding death is deprived of deeper transcendental sense it is overlooked, even denied. In civilized societies – as Paz emphasizes – “the word death is never pronounced”. Since death lost its temporary sense, it became a large open mouth which does not suck anything, and bites into everything we do. The century of health – hygiene, contraception, miraculous drugs and synthetic food – is also the century of concentration camps, police states, nuclear disaster and “murder story” (p. 193). Paz presents the understanding of death by significant authors of the past, e.g. Rilke who wanted to extract the most personal feeling from death, as a counterpoint to the new collectivization of life.

He observes the same indifference to death in the Mexican, the only difference being that he is constantly interested in death. Although the feeling of fear has not disappeared from his attitude, “our songs, refrains, feasts and folk meditations are an unambiguous manifestation of the fact that death is not terrifying because life has cured us of fear”. An accompanying sign is a more intimate relation to death, compared with that of other nations. It lacks, however, a necessary charge of eroticism: “Mexican death is sterile, it is not a guarantee of fertility as with Aztecs and Christians.” In this sense Octavio Paz’s critical and at the same time self-critical

acumens are of particularly topical importance. They alert to an increasingly evident loss of the joy of life in the nations, which promoted scientific optimism to the only possible search for a starting point for the future and eliminated the question of the authentically experienced death from the visual angle of their exploration: "elimination of death from our visions, words, and ideas is in vain since it will eliminate us all, primarily those who ignore it or pretend that they ignore it" (p. 196).

The dehumanized relation of the technically advanced societies to death is merely one of the points which are the targets of Paz's reflections about modernism. His criticism is so much multi-dimensional that it affects not only a "serial production in the world of things", which was characteristic of totalitarian political systems, but also the loss of natural roots in nations which see the only source of social profit in utilitarianism. One cannot then wonder that in such a confrontation, the historical marginality of Mexico is also a sound exception because it is in contradiction to "the work conception as impersonal effort". Paz's criticism would not be complete, however, if "mental swings", which reflect "the traits of manipulated people who are fearful and only simulate before their master", would slip. The newness of the approach to national reality is reflected by Paz in a clear disclosure of all the limitations of a deterministic approach. By emphasizing the dialectics of knowledge he tries to uproot the thesis about the character of the Mexicans as a product of the prevailing social circumstances in the country. According to him, the "mechanical" view of national history is always insufficient because it is incomplete. To make it complete, the concept of metahistory should be understood, that is the critical imagination directed behind history, namely through exploring the myth or subconscious signs of human existence. It is just the point, where the significance of knowledge based on an integral unity of science and poetry lies. It is necessary to pass from the causal observation of individual agents creating the image of a nation to the search for "mutual influences: historical events elucidate our character just as it retrospectively explains them".

The joining of science and poetry as a prerequisite for comprehensive understanding of reality was naturally neither simple nor easy with Octavio Paz. If we mentioned the concept of the variety, even multiplicity of stimuli affecting the author's manuscript at the beginning, then the exploration of particular components of the concept is a very important vehicle for successive disclosure of the general platform of Paz's conception. As is known, his long stay in Europe, especially in France, enabled the author to study a number of works of a philosophical and ethnological character. It was already the spiritual essence of Mexican culture that brought him to several sources of idealistic thought, which he gradually connected with other, more modern theories and opinions.

In his introduction to the latest edition of the *Labyrinth of Solitude*, Enrico Mario Santi alerted to many aspects of philosophical influence.⁷ It is understandable

⁷ For details, see PAZ, O.: *El laberinto de la soledad*, op. cit., pp. 75–85.

that the account of the historical processuality of the knowledge of reality in its variable forms led explorers to the concept of historical monism, which shows through a variety of the forms of Paz's analysis. The criticism of the present proceeds against the background of the evaluation of the past. Such a procedure assumes the existence of a primary unifying substance from which diverse, also degraded, elements are derived. They are gradually incorporated into the forms which they represent in historical reality. Therefore we meet in the book the leitmotif of uprooting or parting with the "centre of life from which a Mexican was once torn out". Any uprooting from the original state of existence engenders the feeling of solitude. We have elucidated in several places how this feeling arises: the marginal cases of existence in borderlands or in foreign milieu finish in several ways the drawing of the symptoms of the given state, which is in general called modernism.

As is well known, historical monism is part of the romantic philosophy which was primarily influenced by Hegel and Schelling. Its sources date, however, back to neo-Platonism which in fact has influenced the whole work of Octavio Paz. There are two aspects in this romantic conception: first, the idealistic principle of the incorporation of the spirit into the forms of the material world and then the cyclic return of this spirit to the same way out which signalizes reconciliation with oneself. The incarnation into the forms is represented in the book by gradual historical stages, in which the Mexican tries to join universal currents – colony, independence, reform, revolution. This actually means a sort of "stops on the way" or the "form of conscience" (*Gestalten des Bewußtseins*), which Hegel described as the aim of his exploration in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. If the author argues that "the history of Mexico is the history of a nation looking for a form that would express it" or the history of a Mexican and the history of a man longing for "better understanding", it is the reference to the primordality of the forms as it is proved by the romantic conception of history, which becomes a sort of paradigm of the circular wandering of the spirit.

The view that the main (or secret) source of Paz's book was Hegel's phenomenology of the spirit would be an exaggeration. We hardly find Hegel's messages in the book and the forms to which he refers, do not quite follow from the idealistic tradition because they are neither static nor passive. By contrast, in spite of their non-authenticity, they are modelled by creative active historical experiences. Therefore we can observe rather a kind of crossing between Hegelian idealism and Kantian formativeness in the essay since in Kant only experience can create forms. In this sense Paz's cohesion with the neo-Kantian conception of George Simmel as presented particularly in the work *Sociology* (1908), could appear still more distinctively although too generally and diffusely. But here it does not concern "social types" of queer fellows or adventurers in the proper sense of the term, rather incarnations of particular stages on the route to authenticity.

It is therefore logical that the differences mentioned lead explorers to search for more adequate, more artistic sources of inspiration. According to Enrico Mario

Santí these are revealed in German romantic poetry, primarily in Goethe (especially his theory of *Urformen*), Holderlin and Novalis, whom Paz had known well before he wrote *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. His poetry of that time is the best evidence of his interest in the forms of the world; for example the poem 'A la orilla del mundo', 1942 (On the bank of the world). The poem supports the circular structure of spiritual wandering by looking for a relation between the internal feelings of the creator and the miscellaneous material and historical reality of the Hispano-American world. This is the basis on which his 'poetics of solitude' was created culminating in the edition of the analysed essay.

Its core is a sort of separation of the subject from the surrounding forms. This concerns ontological isolation since the subject and nature belong to different categories which can, however, enter a new relation at a higher level of spiritual harmony thanks to the strength of the genius of poetry as the following evolution of Paz's poetic expression shows.⁸ Alienation is, however, also born of the silent and invisible act, which precedes this perception. It is merely coming to self-awareness of the possibility to take a pen and think about the causes of this crisis. With Hegel, alienation is the result of the "coming to self-consciousness as a split naturalness, that is not only the separation from nature but also from the self". Hegel used several terms to express this state – *Entzweiung*, *Entfremdung*, *Entäußerung* – the second term being used in philosophical tradition. The conscience cannot remain in such a state of decomposition; therefore reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) has to be reached, which simultaneously is an alliance (*Vereinigung*) and acquisition (*Aneignung*). Hegel named the totality of this process dialectics, which assumes positive features in his system through the fact that it concerns the process of self-realization, in the following stage – on the way to reconciliation. As is well known, after Hegel the question of alienation was newly formulated by Marx, who, however, deprived it of spiritual and metaphysical contents, when he directed attention towards what is according to his opinion its "human" or "concrete" aspect: the isolation of man from his culture and work, particularly from the economic class to which he belongs, and from the means of production. By contrast, with Freud, alienation is a disorder, which he calls neurosis and which follows from the repression of the desires and feelings of the subject. Similarly, in the existential tradition – from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Sartre – alienation takes on a moral and psychological sense and means any form of non-authenticity, when the subject feels separated from his own values and principles.

Obviously, a comparison of these definitions of the concept of alienation elucidates Paz's understanding of the concept of solitude; it continues not only this but also the critical tradition: solitude is a concrete 'picture' of the abstract notion of

⁸ See PAZ, O.: *Kde sa končí láska* (Where the Love Ends). Translated by Ján Stacho with the linguistic collaboration by Dr. V. Oleríny. Selection and epilogue by Dr. V. Oleríny. Bratislava, Slovenský spisovateľ 1972.

alienation. While alienation is thought, solitude is felt – or better – it is suffered. It should be added that if solitude and alienation can be felt by all, solitude is a feeling characterizing a ‘person separately’. This is shown by the very first sentence of the book: “At a certain point, our existence will be uncovered to all of us as something unique, non-transferable and precious.” The aspect of feeling and suffering that accompanies solitude is inseparable from consciousness of certain roots, certain tradition, and just such a consciousness can finally result in the ‘universal picture’ of human existence.

As is seen, within modern reflections about the process of cognition, Paz’s understanding of the concept of solitude has a broad methodological meaning since from the point of view of the productivity of form, it enables us to look at form as a metaphysical and historical category. In the case of the dynamic relationship between the closed and the open as we have mentioned in more detail, it means a search for a real source of the author’s description and not so much in Freud as in Bergson, particularly in his work *The two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932). Bergson used there the concepts of the open society and the closed society to which he assigned particular types of morality and religion for the first time. In agreement with his conception, the closed society is natural, comparable to instinctive animal groupings in which – as a moral form and static religion – oppression prevails; on the other hand, the open society is educated, human and free with the prevailing constant striving and dynamic religion. Paz’s interpretation indicates that the colonial society of New Spain – the origin of present Mexico – was afflicted by these two types of morality: the open in the universal sense, but closed in its creations. Consequently, “the devotion and the depth of Mexican religion contrasts with the relative poverty of its creations. This paradoxical situation – and therefore not less real – elucidates a great part of our history and is the source of many of our psychic conflicts” (p. 241).

The existence of the above-mentioned paradox, characterizing not only the Mexican reality during its development, but also the character of Paz’s reflections about its identity, is constantly fed from dual sources. They can also be defined as the relation between the national and the universal since the analysis of the former proceeds in the Hegelian spirit of overcoming solitude by the assumption of a constant search for a special principle, which directs human existence in general.

The interconnection of the above-mentioned parts is observed in Paz’s reflections about language and literature: although this does not appear in the essay analysed, their knowledge is associated with its basic principles and premises. An extraordinarily wide spectrum of the author’s interests, which significantly intervened in the field of art calls for special study. Therefore we highlight at least one aspect connected directly with Paz’s conception of national culture on the basis of a particular harmony with its formal and content determinants. The philological view respecting the specificity of national culture is of irreplaceable importance for better and, in principle, differentiated understanding, of the history of each nation

or national culture. In contrast to formalistic-structuralist principles which did not take into account the individual perspective in the communication between nations and cultures any more, Paz remains – through language – in contact with their spiritual basis.⁹ On the basis of the knowledge of the North-American linguist and explorer, Benjamin Lee Whorf, who studied the language of American Indians (Hopi, Maya, Náhuatl) from the 1920s, Paz was looking for a compromise between the scientific and religious-spiritual approaches. Whorf, who was in contact with one of the most distinguished modern linguists – Edward Sapir – postulated theoretically the linguistic approach against the background of the so-called ‘pluralistic monism’. In one of his last essays entitled ‘Science and Linguistics’ he argues that the “basic principles of the system of every language (in other words: its grammar) are not a pure reproduction device of the verbal expression of ideas; it is rather the system that produces the ideas... The production of ideas is not an independent – in the old sense – strictly rational process but is a part of special grammar... We analyse nature and think it through the forms which are revealed by our mother tongue.”¹⁰ This also reflects to some extent the overcoming of the symbolist understanding of the linguistic sign as had been formulated, for example, by Paul Claudel and the Russian Pavel Florensky.¹¹

The dual approach is based on the connection of the principle of relativism and determinism, the latter being the result of, according to Whorf, agreement between the members of the linguistic community. Paz also says that with this idea the name of Rousseau immediately emerges. In his contemplations on the origin of language, Rousseau argued that there was a sort of verbal agreement among people at the very beginning. It follows from the need of passions – not from freedom or from reason – and is the predecessor and the necessary cause of social agreement. Remarkably, Paz’s admiration of the ideas of Whorf and Rousseau led him to the criticism of Saussure’s conception of the linguistic sign: “If the relation between the signifier and the signified depends on convention, how can such a convention be realized without the will of the speaking people? Who is the author of this convention? The language itself? What was then before language and what does it come from? (...) There is no society without language; there is no language without soci-

⁹ Cf PAZ, O.: *Sombras de obras* (Shadows of works). Barcelona, Biblioteca del Bolsillo, Seix y Barral 1996, p. 36.

¹⁰ This Paz’s unique linguistic understanding was also influenced by the Buddhist concept of the void (*sunyata*). In these terms Whorf’s conception approaches the opinions of the Greek philosopher Plotinus: “forms do not denote in their last reality: they are.” PAZ, O.: op. cit., p. 44.

¹¹ For details, see, MALITÍ, E.: *Realistický symbolizmus Pavla Florenského v ruskom modernom myslení o jazyku a umení* (Realistic symbolism of P. Florensky in Russian modern thought about language and art). In: *Symbolizmus ako princíp videnia* (Symbolism as the Principle of Vision). Bratislava, VEDA-ÚSL SAV 1996, pp. 20–51.

ety. This is to me one of the great mysteries of human history. Better to say a mystery.”¹²

In his further contemplations, Paz compares Whorf to Wittgenstein, seeing an accord between them in the old nominalism, although Whorf’s nominalism is relativist and pluralist. It necessarily leads to the fact that “every language is an interpretation of the universe, through the prism of which we see the non-linguistic universe”. Here he refers to Vic Herder because both defended the vision of the world determined by language. In Herder he documents it by the regard for the historical physiognomy of signs; this means that language is fate, the way not only of speaking, but also of being. Logic in Herder’s understanding functions then in direct connection with the different structures of individual languages: “there are as many logics as languages”. In my opinion, it would not be difficult to find out why Octavio Paz uses the term rhythm as a basis for studying national identity so often also in his most significant essay “The Labyrinth of Solitude”. The acoustic components, the ‘rhythmical essence’ of individual languages create the meaning, which he himself calls “a child of the sound”. I will not probably be far from the truth if I say that his “poetics of solitude” becomes thus an ideal pattern of the ‘historical poetics’ since it is able to ascribe its versatile human dimension neglected in modern age. Particularly if it concerns the notion which in the given sense opens a wide range of possibilities also in the area of literary research.

In the preface to the edition of his collected works under the title *El Peregrino en su patria* (A Pilgrim in his homeland), Octavio Paz wrote: “It is not an accident to see our history as a process which is directed by rhythm – or by dialectics – of the open and the closed, of solitude and alliance. (...) Our history is only one of the versions of constant separation and alliance, and this is the life of all humans and nations” (p. 578).

¹² PAZ, O.: *Sombras de obras*, op. cit., p. 37.