

1990

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Paz, Octavio (Otoño 1990) "In Search of the Present," *Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica*: No. 32, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti/vol1/iss32/3>

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The Nobel Lecture

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IN SEARCH OF THE PRESENT

Octavio Paz

I begin with two words that all men have uttered since the dawn of humanity: thank you. Grace is gratuitous; it is a gift. The person who receives it, the favored one, is grateful for it, and if he is not base, he expresses gratitude. That is what I do now, at this moment, with these weightless words. I hope my emotion compensates for their weightlessness. If each of my words were a drop of water, you would see through them and glimpse what I feel: gratitude, acknowledgement, and also an indefinable mixture of fear, respect, and surprise at finding myself here before you, in this place that is the home of both Swedish learning and world literature.

Languages are vast realities that transcend the political and historical entities that we call nations. The European languages that we speak in the Americas illustrate this. The special position of our literatures, when compared with the literatures of England, Spain, Portugal, and France, depends precisely on this fundamental fact: they are written in transplanted tongues. Languages are born in and grow from, the native soil; they are nourished by a common history. Some of the European languages were rooted out from their native soil and their own tradition, however, and planted in an unknown and unnamed world. They took root in the new lands, and as they grew within the societies of America, they were transformed. They are the same plant, and yet a different one. Our literatures did not passively accept the changing misfortunes of the transplanted languages; they participated in the process, even accelerated it. Soon they ceased to be merely trans-Atlantic reflections. At times, our literatures have been the negation of the literatures of Europe. More often, they have been a reply.

In spite of these oscillations, however, the link has never been broken. My classics are those of my language, and I consider myself a descendant of Lope

de Vega and Quevedo, as any Spanish writer would. Yet I am not a Spaniard. I think that most writers of Spanish America, as well as those from the United States, Brazil, and Canada, would say the same about the English, Portuguese, and French traditions. To understand more clearly the special position of writers in the Americas, we might recall the dialogue that has been conducted by Japanese, Chinese, or Arabic writers with the different literatures of Europe. It is a dialogue that cuts across multiple languages and civilizations. Our dialogue, on the other hand, takes place within the same language. We are Europeans, yet we are not Europeans. What are we, then?

It is difficult to define what we are, but our works speak for us. In the field of literature, the great novelty of the present century has been the appearance of the American literatures. The first to appear was the English-speaking one, and then, in the second half of the twentieth century, the Latin American literature in its two great branches, Spanish American and Brazil. Although they are very different, these three literatures have a common feature: the conflict, which is more ideological than literary, between cosmopolitanism and nativism, between Europeanism and Americanism.

What is the legacy of this dispute? The polemics have disappeared; the works remain. Apart from this general resemblance, the differences between the three literatures are many and profound. One of them belongs more to history than to literature: the development of Anglo-American literature coincided with the rise of the United States as a world power, whereas the rise of our literature coincides with our political and social misfortune, with the upheavals of our nations. This proves, once again, the limitations of social and historical determinism: the decline of empire and social disturbances sometimes coincide with moments of artistic and literary splendor. Li-Po and Tu Fu witnessed the fall of the Tang dynasty; Velázquez painted for Felipe IV; Seneca and Lucan were contemporaries and also victims of Nero.

The other differences are of a literary nature. They apply more to particular works than to the character of each literature. But can we say that literatures have a character? Do they possess a set of shared features that distinguish them from other literatures? I doubt it. A literature is not defined by some fanciful, intangible character; it is a society of unique works, which is united by relations of opposition and affinity.

The first fundamental difference between Latin-American literature and Anglo-American literature lies in the diversity of their origins. Both began as projects of Europe — in the case of North America, the projection of an island; in our case, the projection of a peninsula. The two regions are geographically, historically, and culturally eccentric. The origins of North America are in England and the Reformation; ours are in Spain, Portugal, and the Counter-Reformation. About the case of Spanish America, I should briefly mention what distinguishes Spain from other European countries, giving it a particularly original historical identity. Spain is no less eccentric than England, but its

eccentricity is of a different kind. The eccentricity of the English is insular, and is characterized by isolation: its is an eccentricity that excludes. Hispanic eccentricity is peninsular, by contrast, and consists of the coexistence of different civilizations and different pasts. It is an inclusive eccentricity. In what would later be Catholic Spain, the Visigoths professed the heresy of Arianism, and we might note also the centuries of domination by Arabic civilization, the influence of Jewish culture, the Reconquest, and other characteristic features of Spanish history.

Hispanic eccentricity was reproduced and multiplied in America, especially in countries such as Mexico and Peru, where ancient and splendid civilization had existed. In Mexico the Spaniards encountered history as well as geography. That history is still alive; it is a present rather than a past. The temples and gods of pre-Columbian Mexico are a pile of ruins, but the spirit that breathed life into that world has not disappeared. It speaks to us in the hermetic language of myth, legend, forms of social coexistence, popular art, customs. Being a Mexican writer means listening to the voices of that present, that presence. Listening to it, speaking with it, deciphering it, expressing it.

Perhaps we may now perceive more clearly the peculiar relations that binds us to, and separates us from, the European tradition. This consciousness of being separate is a constant feature of our spiritual history. Separation is sometimes experienced as a wound that marks an internal division, as an anguished awareness that invites self-examination. At other times, it is a challenge, a spur that incites us to action, to go forth and encounter others and the outside world.

It is true that the feeling of separation is universal, not peculiar to Spanish Americans. It is born at the moment of our birth: as we are wrenched from the Whole, we fall into an alien land. This experience becomes a wound that never heals. It is the unfathomable depth of every man; all our ventures and exploits, all our acts and dreams, are bridges designed to overcome the separation and reunite us with the world and our fellow beings. Each man's life, and the collective history of mankind, can be seen as an attempt to reconstruct the original situation. An unfinished and endless cure for our divided condition. But it is not my intention to provide yet another description of this feeling. I wish simply to stress that for us this existential condition expresses itself in historical terms. It becomes an awareness of our history.

How and when does this feeling appear, and how is it transformed into consciousness: The reply to this double-edged question can be given in the form of theory or in the form of personal testimony. I prefer the latter: there are many theories, and none is entirely convincing. The feeling of separation is bound up with the oldest and vaguest of my memories: the first cry, the first scare. Like every child, I built emotional bridges in the imagination to link me to the world and to other people. I lived in a town on the outskirts of Mexico City, in an old dilapidated house that had a jungle-like garden and a great room full of books.

First games and first lessons. The garden soon became the center of my world; the library, an enchanted cave. I used to read and play with my cousins and schoolmates. There was a fig tree, a temple of vegetation; and four pine trees, three ash trees, a nightshade, a pomegranate tree, wild grass, and prickly plants that produced purple grazes. Adobe walls. Time was elastic, space was a spinning wheel.

All time, past of future, real or imaginary, was pure presence. Space transformed itself ceaselessly. The beyond was here, all was here: a valley, a mountain, a distant country, the neighbors' patio. Books with pictures, especially history books, eagerly leafed through, supplied images of deserts and jungles, palaces and hovels, warriors and princesses, beggars and kings. We were shipwrecked with Sinbad and Crusoe, we fought with D'Artagnan, we took Valencia with the Cid. How I would have liked to stay forever on the Isle of Calypso! In summer the green branches of the fig tree would sway like the sails of a caravel or a pirate ship. High up on the mast, swept by the wind, I could make out islands and continents, lands that vanished as soon as they became tangible. The world was limitless, yet it was always within reach; time was a pliable substance that weaved an unbroken present.

When was the spell broken? Gradually, rather than suddenly. It is hard to accept that a friend has betrayed you, that a woman you love has deceived you, that the idea of freedom is the mask of a tyrant. What we call "finding out" is a slow and tricky process, because we ourselves are the accomplices of our errors and our deceptions. Still, I can remember rather clearly an incident that was the first sign, though it was quickly forgotten. I must have been about six when one of my cousins, who was a little older, showed me a North American magazine with a photograph of soldiers marching along a huge avenue, probably in New York. "They've returned from the war", she said. This handful of words disturbed me, as if they foreshadowed the end of the world, or the Second Coming of Christ. I vaguely knew that somewhere far away a war had ended a few years earlier, and that the soldiers were marching to celebrate their victory. That war had taken place, however, in another place and in another time, not here and now. The photograph refuted me. I felt literally dislodged from the present.

From that moment, time had begun to fracture. And there appeared a plurality of spaces. The experience repeated itself more and more frequently. Any piece of news, a harmless phrase, a headline in a newspaper: everything proved the outside world's existence, and my own unreality. I felt that the world was splitting, that I did not inhabit the present. Real time was elsewhere. My time, the time of the garden, the fig tree, the games with friends, the drowsiness among the plants under the afternoon sun, a fig torn open (black and red like a live coal, but sweet and fresh): this was a fictitious time. In spite of what my sense told me, the time from over there, that belonged to the others, was the real one, the time of the real present. I accepted the inevitable. I became an adult.

That was how my expulsion from the present began. It may seem paradoxical to say that we have been expelled from the present, but it is a feeling that we have all known. Some of us experienced it first as a punishment that we later transformed into consciousness and action. The search for the present is the pursuit neither of an earthly paradise nor of a timeless eternity; it is the search for a real reality. For us, as Spanish Americans, the real present was not in our own countries. It was the time lived by others, by the English, the French, the Germans. It was the time of New York, Paris, London. We had to go and look for it and bring it back home. Those were the years of my discovery of literature.

I began to write poems. I did not know what made me write them; I was moved by an inner need that is difficult to define. Only now have I understood that there was a secret relationship between my expulsion from the present and my writing of poetry. Poetry is in love with the instant, and seeks to relive it in the poem. Thus it separates the instant from sequential time and transforms it into a fixed present. In those years, though, I wrote without wondering why I was doing it. I was searching for the gateway to the present; I wanted to belong to my time and to my century. A little later this obsession became a fixed idea: I wanted to be a modern poet. My search for modernity had begun.

Modernity is an ambiguous term. There are as many types of modernity as there are societies. Each has its own. The word's meaning is uncertain and arbitrary, like the name of the period that preceded it, the Middle Ages. If we are modern compared with medieval times are we the Middle Ages of a future modernity? Is a name that changes with time a real name? Modernity is a word in search of its meaning. Is it an idea, a mirage, or a moment of history? Are we the children of modernity or its creators? Nobody knows for sure. It doesn't matter much: we follow it, we pursue it. For me, in those early years as a writer, modernity was fused with the present, or rather produced it: the present was its final supreme flower.

My case was not exceptional. Since the Symbolist period, modern poets have chased after that magnetic and elusive figure that fascinates them. Baudelaire was the first. He was also the first to touch her, to discover that she is nothing but time that crumbles in one's hands. I am not going to relate my adventures in pursuit of modernity; they are not very different from those of other twentieth-century poets. Modernity has been a universal passion. Since 1850 she has been our goddess and our demoness. In recent years there has been an attempt to exorcise her with talk of "postmodernism". But what is postmodernism, if not a more modern modernity?

For us, as Latin Americans, the search for poetic modernity runs historically parallel to the repeated attempts to modernize our countries. This tendency began at the end of the eighteenth century, and it included Spain, too. The United States was born into modernity, and by 1830 it was already, as Tocqueville observed, the womb of the future; but we were born at a moment when Spain and Portugal were moving away from modernity. That is why there

was frequent talk of "Europeanizing" our countries: the modern was outside, it had to be imported.

In Mexican history, this process began just before the War of Independence. Later it became a great ideological and political debate that passionately divided Mexican society throughout the nineteenth century. One event was to call into question not the legitimacy of the reform movement, but the way in which it had been implemented: the Mexican Revolution. Unlike its twentieth-century counterparts, the Mexican Revolution was not really the expression of a vaguely utopian ideology. It was, rather, the explosion of a reality that had been historically and psychologically repressed. It was not the work of a group of ideologists intent on introducing principles derived from a political theory, but a popular uprising that unmasked what was hidden. For this reason, it was more of a revelation than a revolution. Mexico was searching for the present outside only to find it within, buried but alive. The search for modernity led us to discover our antiquity, the hidden face of the nation. I am not sure that this unexpected historical lesson has been learned by all — that between tradition and modernity there is a bridge. When they are mutually isolated, tradition stagnates and modernity vaporizes. When they are joined, modernity breathes life into tradition, while the latter responds with depth and gravity.

The search for poetic modernity was a Quest, in the allegorical and chivalric sense that this word had in the twelfth century. I did not find any Grail, although I did cross several wastelands, visiting castles of mirrors and camping among ghostly tribes. Still, I discovered the modern tradition. For modernity is not a poetic school, it is a lineage, a family dispersed over several continents, which for two centuries has survived many changes and misfortunes: indifference, isolation, and tribunals in the name of religious, political, academic, and sexual orthodoxy. Because it is a tradition and not a doctrine, it has been able to survive and to change at the same time. This is also why it is so diverse: each poetic adventure is distinct, each poet has sown a different plant in the miraculous forest of speaking trees.

If the works are diverse and each route is distinct, what is it that unites all these poets? Not an aesthetic, but a search. My own search was not fanciful, even though the idea of modernity is a mirage, a bundle of reflections. One day I discovered that I was returning to the starting point instead of advancing, that the search for modernity was a descent to the origins. Modernity led me to the source of my beginning, to my antiquity. Separation became reconciliation. Thus I discovered that the poet is a pulse in the rhythmic flow of generations.

The idea of modernity is a byproduct of our conception of history as a unique and linear process of succession. The origins of this conception are in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but it breaks with Christian doctrine. In Christianity, the cyclical time of pagan cultures is supplanted by unrepeatable history, which has a beginning and will have an end. Sequential time was the profane time of history, an arena for the actions of fallen men, yet still governed by a

sacred time that had neither a beginning nor an end. And after Judgment Day, there will be no future either in heaven or in hell. In the realm of eternity there is no succession., because everything *is*. Being triumphs over becoming.

The new time, our concept of time, is linear like that of Christianity, but it is open to infinity, it makes no reference to Eternity. Ours is the time of profane history, an irreversible and perpetually unfinished time that marches toward the future and not toward its end. History's sun is the future. Progress is the name of this movement toward the future.

Christians see the world, or what used to be called the *seculum* or worldly life, as a place of trial: in this world, souls can be lost or saved. In the new conception, by contrast, the historical subject is not the individual soul but the human race, sometimes viewed as a whole and sometimes through a chosen group that represents it: the developed nations of the West, the proletariat, the white race, or some other entity. The pagan and Christian philosophical tradition had exalted Being as changeless perfection overflowing with plenitude, but we adore change; it is the motor of progress and the model for our societies. Change articulates itself in two ways, as evolution and revolution. The trot and the leap. Modernity is the spearhead of historical movement, the incarnation of evolution or revolution, the two faces of progress. And progress takes place by means of the dual action of science and technology, applied to the realm of nature and to the use of her immense resources.

Modern man has defined himself as a historical being. Other societies chose to define themselves in terms of values and ideas different from change: the Greeks venerated to *polis* and the circle, yet they were unaware of progress. Like all the Stoics, Seneca was much exercised by the eternal return; St. Augustine believed that the end of the world was imminent; St. Thomas constructed a scale of being, linking the smallest creature to the Creator; and so on. One after the other, these ideas and beliefs were abandoned. It seems to me that the same decline is beginning to affect our idea of Progress — and, as a result, our vision of time, of history, of ourselves. We are witnessing the twilight of the future.

The decline of the idea of modernity, and the popularity of a nation as dubious as "postmodernism," are phenomena that affect not only literature and the arts. We are experiencing the crisis of the essential ideas and beliefs that have guided mankind for over two centuries. First, the concept of a process open to infinity and synonymous with endless progress has been called into question. I need hardly mention what everybody knows: that the resources of nature are finite and will run out one day. We have inflicted what may be irreparable damage on the natural environment and our own species is endangered. Science and technology, the instruments of progress, have shown with alarming clarity that they can easily become destructive forces. The existence of nuclear weapons is a refutation of the idea that progress is inherent in history — a refutation that can only be called devastating.

Second we must reckon with the fate of the historical subject, mankind, in the twentieth century. Seldom have nations or individuals suffered so much: two world wars, tyrannies spread over five continents, the atom bomb, the proliferation of one of the cruelest and most lethal institutions known to man: the concentration camp. Modern technology has provided countless benefits, to be sure, but it is impossible to close our eyes to slaughter, torture, humiliation, degradation, and all the other wrongs inflicted on millions of innocent people in our century.

And third, the belief in the necessity of progress has been shaken. For our grandparents and our parents, the ruins of history — the spectacle of corpses, desolate battlefields, devastated cities — did not invalidate the underlying goodness of the historical process. The scaffolds and tyrannies, the conflicts and savage civil wars, were the price to be paid for progress, the blood money to be offered to the god of history. A god? Yes, reason itself was deified and was prodigal in cruel acts of cunning, according to Hegel. But now the alleged rationality of history has vanished. And in the very domain of order, regularity, and coherence (in pure sciences like physics), the old notions of accident and catastrophe have reappeared. This disturbing resurrection reminds me of the terrors that marked the advent of the millennium, of the anguish of the Aztecs at the end of each cosmic cycle.

The last in this hasty enumeration of the elements of our crisis marks the collapse of all the philosophical and historical hypotheses that claimed to reveal the laws governing the course of history. The believers, confident that they held the keys to history, erected powerful states over pyramids of corpses. These arrogant constructions, destined in theory to liberate men, were quickly transformed into gigantic prisons. Today we have seen them fall, overthrown not by their ideological enemies, but by the impatience and the desire for freedom of the new generations. Is this the end of all utopias? It is, more precisely, the end of the idea of history as a phenomenon whose outcome can be known in advance. Historical determinism has been a costly and bloodstained fantasy. History is unpredictable, because its agent, mankind, is the personification of indeterminacy.

Thus we are very probably at the end of one historical period and at the beginning of another. The end of the Modern Age, or just a mutation? It is difficult to tell. In any case, the collapse of utopian schemes has left a great void, not in the countries where this ideology has been probed to have failed, but in those countries where many embraced it with enthusiasm and hope. For the first time in history, mankind lives in a sort of spiritual wilderness, no longer in the shadow of the religious and political systems that consoled us even as they oppressed us. All societies are historical, but every society has lived under the guidance and the inspiration of a set of metahistorical beliefs and ideas. Ours is the first age that is ready to live without a metahistorical doctrine.

Whether they be religious or philosophical, moral or aesthetic, our abso-

lutes are not collective, they are private. This is a dangerous experience. It is also impossible to know whether the tension and the conflicts unleashed in this privatization of ideas, practices, and beliefs that belonged traditionally to the public domain will end up destroying the social fabric. Men could become possessed once more by ancient religious fury or by fanatical nationalism. It would be terrible if the fall of the abstract idol of ideology were to foreshadow the resurrection of the buried passions of tribes, sects, and churches. The signs, unfortunately, are disturbing.

The decline of the ideologists whom I have called metahistorical, but which I mean those that assign to history a goal and a direction, implies a tacit abandonment of global solutions. With good sense, we tend more and more toward limited remedies for concrete problems. It is prudent to abstain from legislating about the future. Still, the present requires much more than attention to its immediate needs. It demands a more rigorous global reflection. For a long time I have firmly believed that the twilight of the future heralds the advent of the now. And to think about the now requires, first of all, a recovery of critical vision. For example: the triumph of the market economy (a triumph that is owed to its adversary's default) cannot be only a cause for joy. As a mechanism the market is efficient, but like all mechanisms it lacks conscience and compassion. We must find a way of integrating it into society so that it expresses the social contract and becomes an instrument of justice and fairness. The advanced democratic societies have reached an enviable level of prosperity, but at the same time they are islands of abundance in the ocean of universal misery.

The question of the market is intricately related to the deterioration of the environment. Pollution affects not only the air, the rivers, and the forests, it also affects our souls. A society possessed by the frantic need to produce more in order to consume more tends to reduce ideas, feelings, art, love, friendship, and people themselves to consumer products. Everything becomes a thing to be bought, used, and thrown on the rubbish heap. No other society has produced so much waste, material and moral, as ours.

Reflecting on the now does not imply relinquishing the future or forgetting the past: the present is the meeting place for the three directions of time. Neither can it be confused with facile hedonism. The tree of pleasure does not grow in the past or in the future, but at this very moment. Yet death is also a fruit of the present. It cannot be denied, for it, too, is a part of life. Living well implies dying well. We have to learn to look death in the face. The present is alternately luminous and somber, like a sphere that unites the two halves of action and contemplation. Thus, just as we have had philosophies of the past and of the future, of eternity and of the void, we shall have a philosophy of the present. The poetic experience could be one of its foundations. What do we know about the present? Nothing, or almost nothing. Yet the poets do know at least one thing: that the present is the source of presences.

In my pilgrimage in search of modernity, I lost my way in many places,

only to find myself again. I returned to the source and discovered that modernity is not outside us, but within us. It is today and the most ancient antiquity; it is tomorrow and the beginning of the world; it is a thousand years old and newborn. It speaks in Nahuatl, draws Chinese ideograms from the ninth century, appears on the television screen. This intact present, recently unearthed, shakes off the dust of centuries, smiles, and suddenly starts to fly, disappearing through the window. A simultaneous plurality of time and presence: modernity breaks with the immediate past only to recover an age-old past, and to transform a tiny fertility figure from the Neolithic age into our contemporary.

We pursue modernity in her incessant metamorphoses, but we never trap her. She always escapes; each encounter ends in flight. We embrace her, and she disappears immediately: it was just a little air. It is the instant, that bird that is everywhere and nowhere. We want to capture it alive, but it flaps its wings and vanishes in the form of a handful of syllables. We are left empty-handed. And then the doors of perception open slightly and the other time appears, the real time, the one that we were searching for without knowing it: the present, the presence.

—*translated by Anthony Stanton*