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Octavio Paz. Crítico practicante en busca de una poética. By J. Agustín Pastén. Madrid: Pliegos, 1999. 232 pp.

This book provides a general, yet well-informed analysis of the most fundamental critical essays written by Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz. J. Agustín Pastén departs from the true fact that Paz has not been fully studied as a literary critic, although he recognizes the advancement in this area carried out by Emir Rodríguez Monegal, Allen W. Phillips, and Enrico M. Santí. The title of this book refers to what T.S. Elliot defined as a "practicing poet", and the author goes on to explore Paz's contributions to the literary world in Mexico. Paz is seen as a writer and also as an artist capable of developing a critical analysis of other authors and of his own works. One of the important ideas developed in this book suggests that Paz took opposite positions to the ones defended by the Mexican *intelligentsia*, and that his relations to intellectuals and writers of his own country were frequently very controversial.

The opening chapter examines the essays and reviews published by Paz between 1931 and 1943. These are texts that include the author's own vision of poetry, his absolute opposition to other Mexican literary critics, his personal poetic canon, and his search for a Mexican identity in literature and the arts. Chapter two is devoted to several essays included in *Las peras del olmo*, the first miscellaneous book of essays published by Paz. It is easy to find here the expectations of the young Paz trying to make a personal contribution to the formation of a public literary sphere in Mexico. The following chapter is an exhaustive examination of several key poems of *Aguila o Sol?*. Pastén believes this book of poetry links Paz's definitions on poetry later on included in the systematically organized book of essays *El arco y la lira*. Chapter four connects some of Paz's first ideas of poetry with another book that is key in his evolution as literary critic: *Los hijos del limo*. It is enlightening to see the comparison that Pastén establishes between the two editions of *El arco y la lira* in order to show Paz's evolution. The last chapter of the book is centered on the so-called theoretical poetry written by Paz and gathered in *Blanco*, *El mono gramático*, and *Vuelta*. According to Pastén, Paz was the writer who most clearly fought for the existence of a literary and cultural criticism written in and for Latin America. This can be seen in Pastén's analysis of one of Paz's most internationally acclaimed

essays: *El laberinto de la soledad*. Paz did not believe in just writing histories of national literatures of Latin America, but in the idea of authors and literary styles. According to Paz, there are no schools of poetics or national stylistic features, but universal aesthetics shared also by some of the best Latin American authors. The search of that intellectual space is one of the legacies we can find in Paz's writings. As Pastén points out in his study, it is also outstanding to see the way this Mexican author shifted from being a critic of the poetry produced in his own country to becoming a critic of modern poetry, beyond borders and nationalities.

Out of the many achievements of this study, it is specially recommended to read some of Paz's ideas collected in chapter four, regarding the polemic concept of Hispanic *Modernismo*. Paz puts it in the context of modern poetry, modernity, avant-gard and its many manifestations in Europe, the United States and Latin America. Departing from the European Romantic movement, Paz defines the "modern", and he studies the Hispanic *modernista* poetry. It is in this regard that Paz wrote "El caracol y la sirena", a careful study of the poetry written by the Nicaraguan, Ruben Darío. Some of Paz's ideas on Darío written almost forty years ago are still validated by the latest literary criticism on Hispanic *Modernismo*. It is also important to note how Paz was one of the very first critics who defended the *modernista* aesthetics, and who defended poets like Darío, Silva, Casal and others from the traditional exotic vision given to them by traditional histories of Latin American literature. He correctly saw the importance of those poets for the evolution of twentieth-century Hispanic poetry, and their commitment to a Latin American social reality.

In the final analysis, one of the achievements of this book is to provide a view of Paz as an ongoing critic who followed his own ideas and who progressively perceived the changes of meaning in poetry. The amount and quality of the scholarly works used by Pastén and the careful reading of some of the best pieces of Paz's essays make this book not only a fundamental piece of scholarship on Paz but also an enjoyable voyage into literature and culture.

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