

PODCAST – “LA BIBLIOTECA”

An exploration of the Library’s collections that focus on the cultures of Spain, Portugal, Latin America, and the Hispanic community in the US.

SEASON 1/Episode 6

Listening to Octavio Paz

Introduction

Catalina Gómez: Bienvenidos! Welcome to “La Biblioteca”, the podcast series of the Hispanic Reading Room at the Library of Congress. I am Catalina Gómez, and I’m here with my colleague Talía Guzmán-González. For today’s episode we are going to interview one of my absolute favorite people ever! Our former poet laureate Juan Felipe Herrera.

Talía Guzmán González: Yes! That was a very fun interview.

CG: He was born in Fowler, California in 1948. He is the author of 30 books of poetry, novels for young adults, and collections for children. His many honors include the National Book Critics Circle Award, the International Latino Book Award, and two Latino Hall of Fame Poetry Awards, among others. Juan Felipe was elected a Chancellor for the Academy of American Poets in 2011, and he served as the Poet Laureate of California from 2012-2015. He received a BA from UCLA, and MA from Stanford University, and an MFA from the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop. In 2015, Juan Felipe Herrera was named the US Poet Laureate and he served until 2017.

TGG: And he had a great send-off. When he ended his tenure there was a big concert, there were readings. It was a fantastic party saying goodbye to Juan Felipe, no doubt. I remember my first day at the Library of Congress in July 27th of 2015 (that was my first day as a librarian here), and I walked to the Hispanic Reading Room, and you, Catalina, invited me to go with you to pick up Juan Felipe Herrera from the Poetry and Literature Office. I was absolutely star struck! He was such a kind man, generous, a great person. And we came back, one of the interns came up to him and she said how much she liked his work, and she asked her if she also wrote poetry. She said “well, yes, I do, but I’m not a poet like you.” And he said “well, I don’t think so. We are

both poets, and that's really great." Actually, the expression he used was "*que suave*" Which is the expression he always uses to say "how cool," or "how great," right?

CG: "*Que suave!*" Yeah, that's a very Juan Felipe phrase indeed. That anecdote really sums up his spirit, he's such a generous person. Well, I am very glad Juan Felipe chose Octavio Paz as the poet that he wants to discuss because Paz was a very influential intellectual for writers of Juan Felipe's generation, specifically those affiliated to the Chicano movement of the '60s and '70s.

TGG: Yes, Juan Felipe's contemporaries and himself saw in Paz a poet they admired a lot, but also a figure with whom they had many disagreements, some of them political in nature.

CG: But before we listen to the interview with Juan Felipe, let me tell our listeners, a little bit about Octavio Paz. Paz was born in Mexico City in 1914. He wrote close to sixty books; half are collections of poetry, including his masterworks *Libertad bajo palabra* (*Liberty under Oath*), in 1949 and the poem, "Piedra de sol", Sunstone, in 1957. The remainders are collected essays, including his sociocultural analysis of Mexico, *El laberinto de la soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*), in 1950 and his reflections on the poetic phenomenon, *El arco y la lira* (*The Bow and the Lyre*), in 1956. In 1990, Paz was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He cofounded many literary journals, which include *Taller* (Workshop) in 1938, and *El Hijo Pródigo* (The Prodigal Son), in 1943; all important magazines in Mexico. From 1943 to 1952 he served on diplomatic missions in France, India, Japan, and the United States, where he later taught at various universities. Paz died in 1998 in Mexico City.

TGG: Let's listen to our previously recorded interview with Juan Felipe Herrera.

Interview with Juan Felipe Herrera

CG: Dear Juan Felipe, we're so thrilled to have you here with us! You have become so close to us here at the Library of Congress and we're so happy that you're here to discuss the material from our Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape. So thank you for being with us.

Juan Felipe Herrera: Thank you so much. It's been a great pleasure being here, and to be back. Thank you. *Muchas gracias.*

TGG: We are very curious to hear your thoughts about the author that you chose to talk about today who is Octavio Paz -- for today's episode. Could you tell us why you chose him?

JFH: Well you know, Octavio Paz has always been a key figure in Latin American Literature and World Literature; and in particular with Chicano and Chicana Latino Literature. And he's always been a point of reflection, meditation, learning and contestation. So it's just fabulous, you

know. He's from Mexico City and, kind of from the center of Mexico, he also talks about Mesoamerica, which we all have dealt with and continue to talk about; indigenous reality, urban reality, and this other thing that he's dealing with which we'll talk about. Yeah I think it's fabulous, I love Paz and especially... in this case "Piedra de sol", "Sunstone."

CG: So in 1961 Paz recorded here in the Library of Congress for our Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape. Some of the poems that he read from were "Trabajos del poeta", "Piedra nativa", "Salamandra", and "Piedra de sol." What poem did you choose for today and why?

JFH: You know, I chose "Piedra de sol," a sunstone... Piedra de sol... I remember just listening to the title back in the late '60s in Los Angeles when I was in UCLA, and I just love that phrase; I love the title. You know, as we all are, words and phrases move us, and our imagination begins to fire up. So I thought it was a great title but I hadn't really read the poem. Why I chose it? It's because of that, I was always interested in this poem and we were always collectively interested in Octavio Paz, and all of us in a sense have walked through the streets of this poem. He talks about streets in this poem, and we've all kind of walked those streets. We've walked the streets of the indigenous Latin American streets of our history, the streets of power and powerlessness; we've walked the streets of image and culture and we've walked the streets of memory and revolution. We've walked the streets of words... our words. We've walked the streets also dissolving into each other, which he really focuses on.

So it does all the things that I think we all love to do in our literary experience, and perhaps in our lives. We dream and then are in reality at the same time. And that's very nice, and it creates a great melody, and sometimes people don't notice that melody or are attuned to it. I talked to a student from Pakistan in my travels recently, as a Poet Laureate, and she was a Chicana... a Pakistani Chicana. And I said, "well what are you reading these days?" and she said "I'm reading *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran." And I go "why would you be reading a book written in the late '60s or that was very popular in the late '60s and this is 2016?" this was last year. She goes "because of the melody." I go "what do you mean?" "Well, it has the melody of the Koran." And when she reads *The Prophet*, that's what she hears.

So I sense that with Octavio Paz. When I read Octavio Paz, it's a very familiar melody for Latin American and the Latin American experience. How he writes, how he speaks and how he sounds. And then we can get into what it's all about.

CG: So you were drawn to the title initially, though, right?

JFH: Yeah, "Piedra de sol" what a great title! And you know, in the 60's we were all into, or we began to rediscover our indigenous realities and histories and cultures; men and women. And it was a political gesture, and movement, and motion, and step to look into our indigenous

histories. And to do that we had to look at what was being written. So “Piedra de sol” is at the heart of it, you see? “Piedra de sol” is at the heart of the Latino and Latina literary cultural revolution because we had to reinterpret and rewrite – in many ways – our Latin American and Caribbean experience. We had to undo it, and reconstruct it. And at the center of was Europe, and our continent and islands. So we had to retrace the steps of the European colonization and everything attached to it: religion, and physics, and physiology. You know, we all got struck down by the viruses that the Spanish brought, so it was a lot of stuff we had to go into; and at the heart of it was “Piedra de sol” because it was one of the most powerful in its initial stages of civilizations, the Mexicas. So we had to go back to that stone and reinterpret it, and notice it, draw it, put it on murals, tattoos, talk about it, designs, and all that; and our poetry too. It appears in all that poetry, this same stone. You know, all our murals... the ones that remain... it appears. So Paz’s “Piedra de sol,” sunstone poem is again, it kind of vibrates at the center of what we have all been through in one way or another.

TGG: So let’s listen to Paz, Paz’s own voice reading from this poem. This is an excerpt from “Sunstone”.

- **[Excerpt] Mexican poet Octavio Paz reading his poem “Piedra de sol.” (Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape, Library of Congress, 1961)**

TGG: I don’t know if you have a comment in terms of the poem?

JFH: Oh, you know, I was like you said, it consists of 584 lines, and I was looking at the length of the stanzas, they kind of range from five lines to fifty-five lines. It’s interesting to look at the poem with a cold eye and say well how is it constructed? What are the spellings? How do the stanzas start? How many words per line? How many lines per stanza? How many stanzas? And all that, that’s delicious, that’s delicious for us and so then I thought about that. As I looked at it, I noticed that it begins with a short stanza which has a few lines, it’s not that long of a stanza, it has... one, two, three, four, five, six lines, and it ends with a three word phrase “y llega siempre:” and it always arrives, and then a colon. And “always” is the last word, *siempre*, so it goes “siempre:” two dots. And then it ends in the same manner, it ends with “y llega siempre:” and it arrives always, so it goes from the first always and then a colon and in between those colons from the beginning until the end we have the remainder of lines, just subtract... (I had it written down somewhere but I’m not going to look for it)... So you subtract one, two, three, four, five, six, six lines from the total of 584, and that’s what’s in between the colons; from the beginning to the end. And so we have kind of two layers, we have the lines before the colon, and the lines in between the colon, and then after the last colon we have just pure space.

So I thought that was very interesting because then we have, in a sense, two cycles; which is what he's interesting in which is *la piedra de sol*, two different calendars, two different aspects of that sunstone, right? One is that agricultural calendar, and one is the divinatory calendar, which is called a ceremonial calendar or the ritual calendar.

So then I see that you go from "always" to "always" with two wheels of time... and he's so concerned with the saying of infinity and eternity and also materiality. So that's also very interesting. So I see his poem then as two wheels. One wheel, which is the first one, that ends in the first colon, is kind like a, if you look at it, it's kind of the keys to the whole thing.

Un sauce de cristal, un chopo de agua,
un alto surtidor que el viento arquea,
un árbol bien plantado más danzante,
un caminar de río que se curva,
avanza, retrocede, da un rodeo
y llega siempre:

...

"A river that curves" are the last few lines. "Advances, recedes, goes around, and always arrives." It advances, it recedes. So this is what takes place throughout his whole poem is advancing, receding, water into water, life upon life, returning, advancing; being one. He calls it *totalidad*, totality. So he's interested in totality, the totality of lives, the totality of presences, the totality of elements... he goes way back into the totality of histories. But he goes way back to where? To the Greeks for sure, and he comes all the way up to Trotsky and further. Yet nothing it standing still, and nothing can be really held, and nothing stays forever. It's there and it dissolves and fuses into something else.

CG: Would you say that nothing is linear?

JFH: Nothing is linear. Again it's cyclical, right? We have these two wheel. We have the wheel of human events and environment and material, then we have the wheel of knowledge that he talks about, of intelligence, of light, and that thing which advances and recedes and always arrives which is stated at the very beginning; that kind of divinatory call that starts the poem and ends with a colon. And then we have all then we have all the events. We have just what happens on Earth, and its reflections, and then it ends with a colon and then it breaks into space – which is you and me, and whatever is next. It just ends with a colon. What's after a colon? You have to have something, right?

TGG: Exactly. But at the end, there's nothing.

JFH: But we don't have anything. It's a blank. So I just love that about the poem: its structure. So it has its own two wheels. It has its own calendars, and of course its talking about... Then he has a great phrase which he goes "ir más alla, pero no puedo", I want to go further, but I cannot. It's in this poem. It's like the sunstone, right? The actual Aztec calendar. It's real heavy thing; it weighs... who knows how many pounds it weighs. It's made out of stone, you can touch it, and yet it forecasts. As you read it, it's going to forecasts life, it's going to forecast growth, it's going to forecast fortune, and folly. And it can never go beyond, it's a stone, it can never really reach the light, it can never really reach that open indescribable space. So that's the paradox. You have this stone that says all of this. We will read all of this, but none of us will ever be able to grasp and hold and keep the light that's cast upon the stone, and that the stone is casting. "Ir más alla", to go further out, Paz says in the poem; to reach beyond my boundaries, "pero no puedo", I cannot do it, it cannot be done. And you'll see as he kind of does it, he does it in this poem with illuminations and we grasp them, we'll have many illuminations; but we cannot hold on to them, we cannot nail them down because they're going to flow out. Life and death is going to keep on happening; they keep on changing. So it's a fabulous poem. What's in it is amazing.

CG: Well I love that you decided to choose these two stanzas that begin referring to the "galleries of sound," because our next question is actually about... what's the difference between listening to a poem versus reading it?

JFH: One has more music. Even when reading, we can sense the music, but if you read it out loud, right? If you read it aloud or if you hear it being read out then you listen to its music and of course its music is a whole other layer and a whole other set of... it's a different kind of composition, you know, the acoustic composition. Even though we can say it's the same, but it really isn't. The acoustic or sonic composition is different than the text, the composition of text. We say it has so many lines, it has these kinds of words, and these worlds are images, and this is how many words per line, and this is how the first stanza ends; well that's great. That's all text. But when we sound it out we let the instruments be played, then actually it's a different poem. It's a different poem. How do you do that? It takes a kind of talent and genius that Paz has, has in this poem, and had when he was alive. So they're two very different things. It's a very beautiful sound, a very beautiful orchestration. We still find the same sonics in Latin American poetry today, and of course we had it with Lorca before Paz. We had it with Jiménez before Paz, and throughout Mexico and Latin America, we had, too, those kinds of melodies and sounds. But it's a very majestic poem, it's a very musical poem, and it's a political poem, a historical poem, and an anthropological poem. And also it branches out into some of his concerns. I was looking his up as I was getting ready to be on the air, and he's described as an existentialist

poet, as what else? As a surrealist poet. But you know? He's doing so many things; he's like a Mexican magician. He's like a Mexican magician. He's taking perhaps a Hindu culture and thought, he's taking Aztec and Mesoamerican culture and thought and he's taking world culture and thought, and what's happening in Mexico, the revolutions in Mexico and he's meshing all those in one. So you have to be kind of a magician to do all that and not "existentialist" plus "surrealist," that doesn't make it for if you want to talk about Paz. That's too easy. Because he also goes to India. He brings that in, he brings Buddhism in, Daoism in, brings in the concept of *ollin* and that Aztec concept of *ollin*, of change. the symbol of change; how one locks in with the other, how your hands lock into each other, or like how the serpent locks into itself. This is on all the pyramids, you know? Quetzalcoatl, the figure of Quetzalcoatl of kind of a plumed serpent; that which can fly and that which lives on the Earth and moves around the Earth in a swiveling manner, in spirals, in ellipses, in circles... So that's more Paz than just to say existentialism and surrealism.

TGG: Do you think that bringing together all those aesthetics, beliefs, is something that has, in any way, inspired... I don't want to use the word influenced, it's not a complicated word. But Inspired you in any way? Said something that you can identify with? When you write your own poetry, you talk about how Paz certainly influenced a generation with his writings, especially in the '60s, right?

JFH: Well definitely because Paz, of course was a poet, a fabulous poet. Maybe that's his major root or platform, but he was also an essayist, a great thinker, speaker, a demonstrator, a political writer, someone who denounced repressive movements and moments in Mexico, Latin America, and the world. So you know, that's quite a figure. So when you're just beginning to write, or you're writing, wherever you are – in this case, we were in California, and San Diego, and LA, and the West Coast... when I was starting up as a poet, you had to deal with Paz because he had thought about a lot of things dealing with major issues and moments in history and present in Mexico in the late '60s. In 1968, for example, in Tlatelolco, we all responded to that.

CG: So to end, we wanted to ask you if could read one of your poems to Octavio Paz. If Paz was sitting here with us, which one would you read?

TGG: If he could listen to the Archive tomorrow...

JFH: I would probably have to bow down to him... that's a good thing to do, you know? Is to bow down to each other and appreciate each other. Like I appreciate both of you because you're major thinkers and a major part of what I'm doing, and what literature is all about. This poem that I'm going to read, I'm going to read from *Half of the World in Light* that came out in 2010ish, and published by University of Arizona Press in Tucson, who I really thank as well. This

particular poem is called “19 Pokrovskaya Street” and I chose this one because everything... I wrote it with things blending into every other thing, which is what Paz does so well. It was art of his metaphysics and aesthetics, and it’s something that I love to do. and I call it “19 Pokrovskaya Street” because it’s a street that Chagall, where his family house used to be, when he was a kid, when he was born and it’s that address “19 Pokrovskaya Street” and that’s all, I’ve never mentioned the name, and somehow it’s in there. And that’s what’s good about poetry, you don’t have to explain anything. And I leave the rest to you.

- [Excerpt] Juan Felipe Herrera reads his poem “19 Pokrovskaya Street” from *Half of the World in Light* (2008)

CG: Beautiful.

TGG: That’s beautiful.

JFH: Thank you. So I make an attempt to have the kind of melody Paz has, where things merge into each other, and I like that because that’s how it is, perhaps. One moment to another, one impression to another, one color to another, one breath into another...

TGG: Juan Felipe, we just have to ask you because Catalina and I are fascinated by your notes... it’s a pity that you cannot see Juan Felipe’s notes to Octavio Paz’s “Sunstone” poem. They’re just a work of art. And you explained to us a little bit just what they are, I mean, can you tell us briefly what these notes are, how you explain to us their structure?

CG: They’re written on cardboard, by the way...

TGG: And smaller paper notes and there are lists and lists of words, it’s fascinating.

JFH: Yeah, well that’s true. That’s true, you know, well I just love writing. I love words and I love the material and physical experience of writing. I love the visual experience of writing, and I love the tactile experience of writing, and I love the experience of all of those put together. I like markers, I like fountain pens, I like ink, and I like laying ink over words. And I also like lines and almost drawing, drawing-writing-painting and sculpture.

CG: Thank you so much, Juan Felipe. This was wonderful.

TGG: Yes, thank you.

JFH: Thank you. Thank you so much.

CG: I could have two more hours of this.

TGG: We should

CG: For the sake of our episode... thank you so much.

TGG: Thank you.

JFH: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Conclusion

Thank you for tuning in! To listen to **this author's** entire recording visit our website at www.loc.gov. You can find the Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape by clicking on our "Digital Collections" and selecting "Audio Recording" collections category, or by going to the Library's Hispanic Division's website www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic. ¡Hasta pronto!