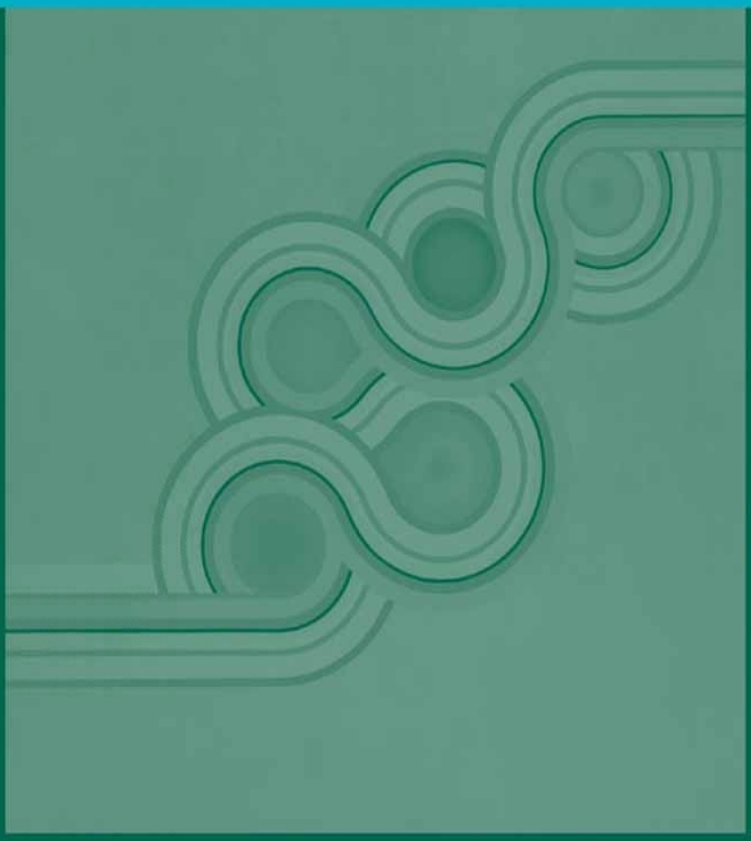
STUDIES OF THE AMERICAS

# THE ROLE OF MEXICO'S *PLURAL* IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERARY AND POLITICAL CULTURE

## From Tlatelolco to the "Philanthropic Ogre"

John King



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# The Role of Mexico's *Plural* in Latin American Literary and Political Culture

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John King

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THE ROLE OF MEXICO'S *PLURAL* IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERARY AND POLITICAL CULTURE

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*For Dimitra*

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# Introduction

*The original project of Plural was (and still is) to edit a Latin American journal in Mexico, that would be open to the world.*
—Octavio Paz to Tomás Segovia, 27 January 1972.

In its issue of July 1999, the cultural journal *Letras Libres*—which had begun publication following the death of Octavio Paz in 1998 and the subsequent closing down of Paz's magazine *Vuelta*—sought to claim its place within Mexican cultural traditions and institutions. It printed an "árbol hemerográfico" ("A family tree of little magazines"), with a growth span of almost one hundred years. At its base stood the cultural group known as the Ateneo de la Juventud and the literary magazine, *Contemporáneos* that appeared in Mexico between 1928 and 1931. Just above the base of *Contemporáneos*, we find *Barandal* (1931–1932) and *Taller* (1938–1941), magazines that Paz himself was involved with in his youth and in his early years as a poet. Toward the top of the trunk are *Plural* (1971–1976), *Vuelta* (1976–1998), and *Letras Libres* (1998–), the two magazines that Paz personally edited in the final three decades of his life, and this new journal that, following his death, openly declared its adherence to his legacy. In this particular mapping of the field of twentieth century Mexican cultural history, Paz—in his work as a poet and critic but also, crucially, in his role as an editor of journals—is seen as central. Indeed the critic Guillermo Sheridan has argued that Paz's work as an editor and promoter of literary journals should be considered almost on a par with his life as a poet.[1] The present book seeks to analyze the first of these central journals, *Plural*, edited by Paz between October 1971 and July 1976, and published as part of the *Excélsior* newspaper group, then directed by Julio Scherer.

In his introduction to this "árbol hemerográfico," Christopher Domínguez Michael asks other critics to draw up their own genealogies, "planting and tending to other trees."[2] I had been working on a

J. King, *The Role of Mexico's Plural in Latin American Literary and Political Culture*

similar enterprise some twenty years earlier, preparing a book on the Argentine cultural journal *Sur* (1931–1970), which I also argued was at the heart of the "family tree" of Argentine cultural and literary journals. I said in my introduction to that book that I follow the cue of the critic Raymond Williams who has argued that "the critic of a literary magazine or a cultural group must establish two factors: the internal organization of a particular group and its proposed and actual relations to other groups in the same area of enquiry and to the wider society."[3] My own reading of twentieth-century Argentine cultural history had therefore been through the prism of a cultural journal and it was this particular reading that I wished to apply to Mexican culture in the seventies.

I was well aware of the existence of *Plural* when I was working on *Sur* for my doctoral thesis in Oxford. The Taylor Institution library had a subscription to the magazine, thanks to the interest of the then Fellow in Latin American literature, David Gallagher, who, I would later discover in the *Plural* archive, was someone that Paz wanted as a literary correspondent for the magazine in the United Kingdom. I would read *Plural* both for general interest in the mid-seventies, as a neophyte in the emerging interest in the field of Latin American literature in Britain, and as a guide to my own research on Argentina. I benefited greatly from the series of interviews published by the Uruguayan critic Danubio Torres Fierro with the main writers in *Sur*—Victoria and Silvina Ocampo, José Bianco, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Alberto Girri—writers who were rarely interviewed at that time, unlike the "boom" novelists of the sixties. I knew of the close bond of friendship between Paz and José Bianco, the managing editor of *Sur*, and the important contributions that Paz made in *Sur,* in particular his denunciation of the concentration camps in the USSR in 1951, based on the work of David Rousset. It seemed to me that *Plural* was the natural successor to *Sur*, which had ceased regular publication in 1970, although I always found *Plural* more engaging than the overtly more serious *Sur,* especially the "Letras, letrillas, letrones" section at the end of the magazine, which commented on cultural and political life in a humorous and often sardonic way.

I also found *Plural* a very useful source of information on Latin American art as I worked, simultaneously, on a book on the Di Tella Arts Center in Buenos Aires, the center of "swinging Buenos Aires" in the 1960s.[4] I found that the managing editor of *Plural,* Kazuya Sakai, had exhibited in the Di Tella Institute in the early sixties before moving to Mexico, and that Octavio Paz, from his post as Ambassador in India, had found the time to write to some young conceptual

artists in the Di Tella about a media happening that they were staging in Buenos Aires.[5] In the pages of *Plural* there was also a regular "artistic supplement," with color illustrations introducing the work of contemporary Mexican and Latin American artists to its readers. There was thus a very clear affinity between the Argentine cultural institutions that I was working on and Octavio Paz's magazine.

As I struggled to finish my Argentine projects, I met Alejandro Rossi, the Mexican philosopher and essayist, in Oxford in 1983. I discovered that he was one of the regular columnists in *Plural* and later in its successor *Vuelta*, and he shared with me his own insights into Argentine culture and into overt and more arcane links between cultural groups in Argentina and Mexico. When, with the books on *Sur* and the Di Tella finally written, I received a letter from Alberto Ruy Sánchez—who I had met a few years earlier at a conference on film in Manchester—telling me that he was now working in the offices of *Vuelta*, it seemed to me somehow inevitable that I would write on Octavio Paz and cultural magazines in Mexico.

My first introduction to Mexican culture came in July–September 1985. I thought I should try to do some detailed work on *Plural* before approaching Paz and Alberto Ruy Sánchez managed to borrow for me Paz's copies of *Plural*. I was surprised, flicking through the pages, at the number of annotations there were in the margins and the text, in Paz's hand, correcting every typographical error with exclamations of impatience, on occasion commenting on the texts themselves. Here, evidently, was an editor passionately involved with a journal at every point of production. When later I plucked up the courage to ring Paz, I was further surprised when he picked up the phone himself: I had been expecting a secretary, a maid, someone who would be an initial buffer. I was still more surprised when, after stammering out my introduction, he invited me to meet him the next day. It quickly became clear as I settled into my first coffee, in his airy glass-fronted, plant fringed, study, that Paz himself read the history of Mexican literature through an analysis of literary groups, literary generations, and little magazines. As he mapped for me the antecedents of *Plural,* in a way not dissimilar to *Letras Libres*'s later "árbol genealógico," he seemed to have almost total recall of events that had taken place some fifty years earlier, in the 1930s: the different fractions and *cénacles* of intellectuals and poets, the continuities and breaks with the past. He had always been, from his earliest times as a writer, a person strongly identified with literary magazines, and he was very willing to cooperate with my research, through conversation and later by making available to me his own collection of letters on

*Plural* and also the *Plural* archive. In a memorable first trip to Mexico, I met many of the protagonists of the *Plural* years. I remember in particular an interview with the legendarily elusive Gabriel Zaid, who told me that he could give me forty-five minutes and that we would meet at a Sanborns restaurant at a specific time. I had been told by several people to be punctual, and indeed Zaid arrived at the precise minute of the agreed interview time. He then proceeded to eat and give me a most insightful and engaging overview of the magazine's place in Mexican letters. When he finished his last mouthful and left, I knew, without looking at my watch, that exactly forty-five minutes had elapsed: a memorable example of erudition and time management that I would struggle ever to approximate.

What struck me forcibly as a major difference with my work on *Sur* was that in Mexico there was no equivalent of the rich cultural Maecenas in Mexico, like the writer Victoria Ocampo, who funded the magazine, and the publishing house *Sur*, for more than forty years out of her own private fortune. I would sometimes ask Victoria Ocampo whether her magazine made any money, but she always refused to answer this question, implying that it was too uncouth. Of course, she must have lost money with every issue, but this did not deter her. In contrast, the main cultural Maecenas in Mexico is the state—that state which Paz would later come to call "the philanthropic ogre"—and, to a lesser extent, certain powerful newspapers, which themselves were in close relationships with the government and the ruling party of Mexico's then one-party state. Octavio Paz himself was alluding to this when he mentioned the case of the short-lived Mexican little magazine *Taller*: "Why did *Taller* cease publication? In the first place through lack of resources: in Mexico there was no way of keeping going an independent publication such as ours and there was not a single talented administrator amongst us. Literary magazines, until the appearance of *Vuelta,* had been supported or published by a public institution or by a newspaper conglomerate. The only exception was *Letras de México*, edited by Octavio G. Barreda."[6]

Thus, any work on *Plural* and its antecedents would, of necessity have as a necessary focus the relationships between writers, cultural institutions, and the state in twentieth-century Mexico.[7] It was interesting to discover, for example, that Mexico's great man of letters, Alfonso Reyes wrote to Victoria Ocampo asking her if he could work in her publishing house during a lull in his different state-sponsored activities. In a letter to Ocampo dated 15 August 1938, and sent from Rio de Janeiro, he confesses: "I need a salary to live. I have had offers

from some Yankee universities. But to accept them would be to bury myself for life in an environment that I am not suited to and which would not sit well with my European and French view of life . . . I would like to think of another possibility: the development of your publishing house."[8] That proposed Ocampo-Reyes collaboration could have been a most interesting development in Latin American letters, but it proved to be a fleeting idea, as President Cárdenas brought Reyes back to help set up the Casa de España, later to become the Colegio de México.

It was also clear to me on my first visit to Mexico, and became even clearer in subsequent trips, that while the Mexican cultural and political scene was at one level very stable—there were defined parameters that people worked within—there was still a great deal of movement within and among cultural groups, with shifting alliances. If I was looking to define a moment of *Plural* in the early to mid-seventies, then, I would need to be careful to separate those years from the more overtly polemical years of the eighties and nineties when I was conducting my research, by which time ideological differences that had previously been latent were much more openly—and irremediably—apparent. It seemed disconcerting, for example, to be working on a literary figure, Octavio Paz, who could receive a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990 and also be burned in effigy in Mexico City in anti-US demonstrations, accused of being the friend of Ronald Reagan for his criticism of the Nicaraguan revolution. In this shifting field, certain writers involved in the *Plural* project would later find themselves outside the Paz orbit. In issue 82 of the magazine *Vuelta*, October 1983, Paz wrote an article on Tina Modotti entitled "Tina Stalinísima" that was interpreted as a direct attack on Elena Poniatowska, who was then researching a novel on Modotti, and who had been close to Paz from the fifties. Some years later the friendship between Paz and Carlos Fuentes that reached back to 1950 was seen publicly to come to an end as the deputy director of *Vuelta*, Enrique Krauze, launched a frontal assault on Fuentes in the magazine in June 1988.[9] Some of these rifts were temporary, others were not.

From the mid-eighties, I began to find that the study of literary magazines in Latin America was no longer such a solitary task as it had been when I began my work in this field in the mid-seventies. An invitation by Claude Fell to the Sorbonne in 1987 found me in the midst of a group of international scholars all working on magazines throughout the region. Two writers in particular from Mexico, Carlos Monsiváis and Guillermo Sheridan, would become especially significant to my work. Monsiváis, as I had already discovered, occupied a

central position in Mexican intellectual life, different to that of Octavio Paz, articulating a world of Mexican culture in which the comic Cantinflas should be given as much attention as a poets or novelists. Sheridan offered a more specifically "literary" lesson in how to write the cultural history of Mexico, especially through the perspective of little magazines.[10] Thanks to the initiative of Claude Fell, the Sorbonne would host several international conferences on the study of magazines mapping a period from post-World War I to the late twentieth century.[11] From the late eighties, monographs, PhD theses—especially in the United States—and articles would begin to appear with a certain regularity on the topic of little magazines in Latin America.[12]

I returned to Mexico in the late eighties but by then my own research had taken a different turn: perhaps spurred on by reading Monsiváis on such screen idols as Dolores del Río and Tin Tan, I had been commissioned to write a general history of cinema in Latin America, a project that I thought would be a temporary diversion from my pursuit of little magazines, but that occupied most of my attention for the next decade or more. I spent most of my time in the screening rooms at IMCINE, the Mexican Film Institute, with occasional forays into different literary archives in Mexico.

Fortunately however, as I struggled to keep up my research on *Plural*, I was aided by the fact that the state publishing house, Fondo de Cultura Económica, under literary critic José Luis Martínez, had, from the late seventies, begun a policy of republishing literary magazines from the twenties and thirties in Mexico in facsimile editions Thanks to the generosity of Adolfo Castañon, the then managing editor of Fondo, I found myself boarding a British Airways flight back to London staggering under the weight of two huge boxes of literary journals that evaded excess baggage duty due to the cooperation (and cultural enthusiasm) of ground staff in Mexico City. While that ambitious publishing scheme would eventually run out of funds, my work was further facilitated by the later independent publication of facsimile editions of the journals *S.Nob* and *Libre*. There have been other attempts in Latin American countries to make available the cultural heritage of little magazines through facsimile editions and more recently through digitization, though no other country as yet can match Mexico's commitment to this area. The publication of these facsimile editions had the added bonus, for a researcher, of their publication being commented on, mainly in the pages of *Vuelta*, by Paz himself and by critics such as Castañon and Sheridan. There was thus a lively debate about the continuities and breaks with the past, with

Paz in particular revisiting some of the defining moments of his early years through his memory of such journals as *Taller.*

The greatest source of primary material was the correspondence of Octavio Paz himself, relating to *Plural,* which he had photocopied for me from his own archive in his study. All the letters I have from him have a neat JK at the top of every page. Getting to the letters was a long and fascinating process because he read extracts of every one of them to me, punctuating his reading with comments like, "Look how angry I got with x.," "Look at how we exposed the Soviet Union here," "Look at this letter to Pepe (Bianco)." He was reliving those times through reading out his letters, very focused, very enthusiastic. I wondered why there were so many letters written from abroad about the magazine until he explained the chronology of his frequent, and often protracted visits to the United States as a visiting professor in Harvard and later in the University of California. For example, he left for the States a few days after the publication of the first issue of *Plural* and spent the next six months in Harvard sending regular letters, combining exhortation, satisfaction, and discontent at the developing project of the magazine. And these are rarely short letters: they are often several pages of tightly packed, single spaced typescript, revealing a total attention to every aspect of the magazine, from the infuriating typos that crept into the text to comments about literature and politics, to the tensions between literary groups. Thus what is usually the secret life of a magazine—the strategies, agreements and differing interpretations that are usually discussed on the phone or in offices or private houses—is here shown in sharp relief. And, as mentioned above, Paz also gave me access to the *Plural* archive that was made available in a series of boxes and files brought to the *Vuelta* offices, where I was made welcome by Enrique Krauze and Aurelio Asiáin and benefited from the skills of Javier Aranda, who was classifying the archive. These files read as a Who's Who of international culture in the early seventies, from Butor to Lévi-Strauss, from Susan Sontag and John Cage to Julio Cortázar and Mario Vargas Llosa. There were also a number of letters, especially from the managing editors Tomás Segovia and Kazuya Sakai mapping out the every day myriad and complex issues involved in keeping this magazine in regular publication.

In hindsight I should have spent more time listening to Paz reading from his letters in the early to mid-nineties and less time looking at masked wrestler films and into María Félix's eyes, but there was always the sense with Paz that somehow his energy and passion would make him immune to the wearing of time, and that I could take the

study at my own, rather crabbed, pace. Certainly whenever he spoke to me, he was always affable and never showed what must have been an irritation that all this was taking rather too long. When last I spoke to him in Mexico City in April 1995, I told him that the Argentine filmmaker María Luisa Bemberg—who had adapted his biography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz for the screen, in the film *I the Worst of All* (1990)—was dying of cancer and he vowed to send her a note immediately. I had no idea that the same fate awaited him not many months later. Indeed when he came to Oxford University in June 1996 to give a talk on his recent book on art and eroticism, *La llama doble* (*The Double Flame*), he looked and sounded in good form.

After his death, his widow Marie-José Paz and the board of the Fundación Octavio Paz gave me a last push toward focusing on and completing the project by giving me a grant that I used to do concentrated archival work at the University of Texas in Austin in 2001 and 2002. Here in the extraordinary Nettie Lee Benson library was the most complete collection of Mexican literature, criticism, and little magazines, all on open access, and staffed by both subject experts in the field and helpful students anxious to guide one through the spaces of the library, with corridors running for hundreds of yards, where the uninitiated might fall victim to the characters in Borges's "Library of Babel," lost forever in the space between S for Segovia and Z for Zaid. Here I realized what other foreign scholars of Mexican culture had probably known all along: that going to Mexico City is about meeting the protagonists of the work, having access to their thoughts and personal archives, while the painstaking archival work can as easily be done in one of the splendid research libraries in the United States, instead of battling with hangovers, smog, and Mexico City traffic to reach a research archive in that city.

But of course the most abiding memories are those gleaned from Mexico City. The mornings I spent in the house of Carlos Monsiváis reading through his bound collection of *La Cultura en México* taught me more about the status of intellectuals in Mexico than the many interesting books and articles on the topic. The mornings would start well enough. Sharing Monsiváis's views that cats know a thing or two, I would take down volumes and open them up in different places: then, in a feline *coup de dés*, depending on how many of his dozen cats came to sit on my lap or on the bound copies of the magazine, I would concentrate on certain issues. Then the phone started ringing, insistently, every few minutes. Most often, it was answered by someone in the house, and the range of requests was legion, from invitations to international symposia to very local requests to support a

young poet, or attend a specific political rally. Radio interviews were in the main conducted over the telephone, while camera crews, mainly from television news channels, would wander in and out, their arc lights illuminating different parts of the house showing to good effect Monsiváis's collection of political cartoons. And somehow, in the gaps, Monsiváis was writing regular columns and books, with a sardonic humor that he had made his own. Once again, as I had done with Paz, I wondered at the energy and the range of topics that Monsiváis and others would be forced to cover on a daily basis. Every major (or indeed minor) political and cultural event would need to be passed through the filter of their opinion and they seemed not to resent this, but rather to see it as their civic and intellectual duty. Other writers, most notably Carlos Fuentes and Elena Poniatowska, are subject to similar media interest and it is not surprising that Fuentes has lived for a number of months a year abroad, most recently in London, where the anonymity of the city is conducive, at least, to writing and reflection.

Somewhere, in this tangled skein of personal and political stories lies the moment of *Plural* between 1971 and 1976, and the object of my study. Readers will have noticed that in the book title, I offer a slightly longer time frame taking the area of study as a ten-year period, from the student massacre at Tlatelolco in 1968—arguably one of the most important moment in Mexican history since the beginning of the revolution itself in 1910—to the tenth anniversary of that massacre, and the publication of perhaps the most quoted essay that Paz ever wrote, "The Philanthropic Ogre" in 1978. This framework allows me to explore the reaction of Paz to the events at Tlatelolco, and their aftermath, that leads directly to his setting up *Plural* some three years later. Ending the research in 1978 also enables me to study not just the closure of the magazine in July 1976, due to government pressure, but also to chart the early development of the magazine *Vuelta* that Paz founded as an independent venture some months later.

This book is organized into six chapters. The first chapter explains the centrality of Octavio Paz to the history of twentieth-century Mexican letters and gives a brief overview of Paz's political and aesthetic development from his years as a student in Mexico City in the early thirties. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first section traces Paz's career up to the early fifties, examining his work through the prism of the little magazines to which he contributed enthusiastically from 1931. It covers in particular the formative moments of Paz's political development: the Spanish Civil War and his break with Soviet-led

politics and culture in the thirties and forties. The second section offers a panorama of Mexican culture in the fifties and sixties, mapping the different cultural institutions that formed the relationship between Mexican writers and the state. This section also surveys a range of cultural protagonists and the growth of different cultural manifestations: a pro-Cuban intelligentsia after 1959, the internationalization of Latin American literature through the novel in the 1960s known as "the boom," and the growth of a specifically Mexican countercultural movement known as the "onda" or new wave. The third section focuses more specifically on the boom and Paz's early plans to form a Latin American magazine that would reflect or filter these different interests.

Chapter two takes up the story in 1968 and explores Paz's reaction to the massacre of Tlatelolco and his resignation from the diplomatic service, a move that would require him to rethink his life as a man of letters without any institutional affiliations, a radical departure for a writer and critic whose life and career had been defined by the realities and institutions of postrevolutionary Mexico. The chapter also concentrates on political developments in Mexico and in Latin America widely. In Mexico, following the brutality of the Díaz Ordaz regime, a new president, Luis Echeverría, would look to mend fences with the intellectual community by offering blandishments and state support for the universities and for cultural programs. Another assault on student demonstrators in the early months of the regime, however, would put a question mark over the reformist intentions of the government. In the broader cultural field, the "Padilla affair" in Cuba was to open up many complex questions about the nature of politics and commitment and would shatter for many the somewhat utopian idea of Cuba as a place of progressive reforms in the social and cultural spheres. Cuba—the first revolution of continental importance after Mexico's own historic process—would cast a long shadow over all debates about culture in Mexico, debates that Paz's new magazine, *Plural,* would seek to explore. Paz was offered the directorship of *Plural* by the editor of the liberal newspaper *Excélsior,* Julio Scherer: it was to be an independent journal, housed in and financed by *Excélsior.*

The following three chapters explore the content and orientation of the magazine over the five years of its publication. Chapters three and four analyze political and cultural criticism in the journal. Chapter three explores, in the main, three illustrative moments: the debate concerning the writer and the state sparked by the Echeverría government; the military coup in Chile on 11 September 1973, which

brought to an end the Chilean road to socialism and underlined, for some, the validity of Cuba's more ruthless form of revolution; and Paz's sustained attack on the policies of the Soviet Union—to which Cuba was by then economically and perhaps politically mortgaged—as centered around debates about the Gulag and the writings of Solzenitsyn, amongst others. Chapter four analyzes what the magazine saw as the key areas of literary and cultural criticism. It isolates which writers became regular critics within the magazine and explores their different interests ranging from Paz's reading of Fourier to Mario Vargas's Llosa's reappraisal of Flaubert and Camus. Particular attention is given to the magazine's analysis of modern art in Latin America. Chapter five explores which works of poetry and fiction were published in the magazine and assesses how broad a spectrum the magazine could offer of contemporary international Mexican and Latin American literature.

The concluding chapter discusses the circumstances surrounding the closure of the magazine and charts the development of a new cultural journal, *Vuelta*. It explores the ways in which *Vuelta* can be seen in terms of both a continuity and a break with *Plural*: sketching out a moment in which the image of "plurality" no longer had the same optimistic credence of the early seventies, ushering in a more polemical time. The titles of the two magazines are thus very significant and we will explore in the main the claims to "plurality" suggested in the one title, and also the challenging title of *Vuelta* that implied both a swift return to independent publishing after overt government censorship and also a more personalist (and less pluralist) title: "We/I are/am back." An analysis of the role of Paz and his magazines, therefore, can hopefully offer an illuminating focus on the complexities of culture and politics at a watershed moment in Mexican history.

# Chapter 1

# Mapping the Field: Paz, Politics, and Little Magazines, 1931–1968

In September 1974, Octavio Paz published in issue 38 of *Plural* an autobiographical poem, "Nocturno de San Ildefonso" ("Nocturne of San Ildefonso"), in which a mature poet—Paz was sixty at the time of writing—looks back, through a memory tunnel, to Mexico City, circa 1932 and discovers his seventeen-year-old self walking from the Zócalo in central Mexico City to the Preparatory School in San Ildefonso. Paz adds a footnote to the title and explains that, "In 1932, The National Preparatory School was housed in San Ildefonso, a building that that formerly been a Jesuit school."[1] We will see later in this book that in 1974 Paz was immersed in a very intense reappraisal of the impact of revolutionary thought in Mexico and in the wider world, in particular pointing out the harmful effects of Soviet communism which, he felt, still beguiled the young. This poem therefore, is an attempt to explore—on a sleepless night, as his wife lies sleeping by his side—his own personal political (and poetic) journey that had begun some forty years earlier.

In the poem, ideas are seen to be "burning"; "adolescent conversation" also burns. The young students are caught up in the fervor of exploring new ideas, seeking "good," looking to set the world to rights. Enrique Krauze puts it well: "The generation of young men born during the Mexican Revolution did not only dream about repeating the destiny of their fathers and grandfathers but about going beyond it to mark their struggle on the road to the true and final revolution: the Bolshevik revolution."[2] Paz's students were "inventing fates," facing "the century and its cliques." These admirable proposals, however, were to be crushed by developments in history, as

J. King, *The Role of Mexico's Plural in Latin American Literary and Political Culture*

the poem later argues. Innocence itself is seen as the greatest guilt, and every year the piles of bones mounted up and people are forced into "conversions," "retractions," "excommunications," "apostasies," "bewitchments," "deviations." This, the poet argues, is *his* history. After this anguished confession, the poet eventually achieves sleep trusting in the life-affirming presence of his wife.

Without reprising the entire intellectual history of the thirties we should begin by looking at several key moments in Paz's intellectual development which marked his later work so profoundly.

## The Early Decades

The armed phase of the Mexican Revolution was little more than a decade in the past when Paz joined the Preparatoria in 1930. During the Revolution, Paz was brought up in his grandfather's house in Mixcoac, while his father, a lawyer, followed the fortunes of Emiliano Zapata. His grandfather, a key figure in the formative period in his early years, had been at different times in his long life (he died in 1924, aged eighty-nine) a soldier, an intellectual with contacts to President Porfirio Díaz, the editor of the newspaper, *La Patria*, a writer, and a well known liberal figure. In his extensive library Paz would start his own journey through Mexican history and world literature. In the political discussions and conflicts that doubtless occupied his father and grandfather in the early 1920s, Paz would have been immersed in the history of those recent times, which profoundly marked him. Indeed Enrique Krauze argues that his later *El laberinto de la soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude,* 1950) is an attempt at dialogue with his own frequently absent, solitary father, and that his father's revolutionary affiliation would mark his own definition of the Revolution: "Deep inside, His Revolution is the Mexican, the egalitarian, the utopian, the communitarian, the true, the Zapatista, Revolution. Paz would always be, in the literal sense of the word, a son of the Mexican Revolution."[3] In his later life, Paz would return insistently to definitions of the term "revolution" in the political and artistic fields. These family conversations would also give Paz some inkling of the reconstruction of the Revolution under the presidency of General Obregón (1920–1924), and in particular the work of his indefatigable Education Minister, José Vasconcelos. They would doubtless have talked about the cultural nationalist ambitions of Vasconcelos, his support for state education, book publication and libraries, his utopian dream that Mexico and indeed the whole of South America could see the development of a "cosmic race" that

would meld all different ethnic groups. A Department of Fine Arts would look to foster new work in painting and music, and commissions were given to artists to act as mural painters, to cover acres of walls with monumental and didactic art. Paz would doubtless have seen the beginnings of these mural projects in family visits to the center and he would, years later, constantly engage with the issue of visual arts and revolution, praising the muralists for their technical abilities, but increasingly rejecting their ideological blinkeredness.[4] Paz was doubtless precocious enough to have read the 1923 Manifesto of the Union of Workers, Technicians, Painters and Sculptors, signed by the "big three" of Siqueiros, Rivera, and Orozco, and others, which declared a faith in the popular arts of Mexico.[5]

Vasconcelos left office in 1924, to be replaced by the more explicitly ideological nationalism of President Calles. Paz was fourteen, and already buying magazines, when a group of writers—Jorge Cuesta, Salvador Novo, Carlos Pellicer, José Gorostiza, Xavier Villaurrutia, Jaime Torres Bodet, and others—began a magazine in 1928 that they entitled *Contemporáneos.* Lorenzo Mayer takes up the story: "All, to greater or lesser degree, bore the mark of Vasconcelos and all were savagely attacked as 'intellectuals of bad faith,' 'traitors to the country,' *descastados* (untouchables); they were, in fact, fighting the cultural nationalism of Calles, a caricature of that of Vasconcelos, demanding absolute freedom of expression and declaring that Mexico must open its doors to all cultures, particularly from Europe. They devoted a large part of their time to translating, with considerable expertise, the most important writers of the twentieth century."[6]

In the effervescent years of the Preparatoria, the way that Paz and his friends found to nurture and then express their ideas was through the medium of literary magazines. The first literary journal that Paz cofounded was *Barandal* ("Balcony") in August 1931. Guillermo Sheridan, who has written the most complete and incisive account of Paz's literary and political activities in the 1930s and 1940s, makes the important point that even though this was a moment of intense political radicalism at the Preparatoria—Paz participated in its debates as a member of the student movement, the UEPOC (The Pro-Worker and Peasant Student Union)—when he came to start a literary journal, he thought in terms of the model of the *Contemporáneos* group of writers: "When everything would have pointed to them thinking of a political journal or at least a journal full of politicized literature, they opted from the outset to keep literature outside the realms of dispute."[7] This enterprise also caught the imagination of the older generation, Salvador Novo, Carlos Pellicer, José Gorostiza, and, in particular Xavier

Villaurrutia. The magazine was therefore conceived not just in the spirit of *Contemporáneos* but also as a dialogue with that group. The magazine published seven issues between August 1931 and March 1932. Paz would also participate in another short-lived magazine *Cuadernos del Valle de México* (two issues, September 1933 and January 1934) when he had joined the university proper as a reluctant student of law. Through little magazines his fame as a poet began to grow, whilst he was still immersed in the large ideological debates of the time: the growth of fascism, the Spanish republic, the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, Paz was later to remark that, "my generation was the first, in Mexico, to live the history of the world as its own history, especially the international communist movement. Another distinctive note of our generation: the influence of modern Spanish literature."[8] Two significant moments mark his career: an involvement with the agrarian reforms of President Cárdenas, which took him to Mérida in the Yucatán for six months in 1937 as a rural schoolteacher—he abandoned his Law degree and the family home when his father died in 1936—and, more significantly, his invitation to attend the Second International Writers' Congress for the Defence of Culture in Valencia in 1937, which was to meld both his enthusiasm for the antifascist movement and also consolidate his links with modern Spanish poetry.

The Spanish Civil War would have a marked effect on Paz's life and poetry. Perhaps the most quoted of all his poems, "Piedra de sol" ("Sunstone," 1957), for example, has at its center a concrete date, "Madrid 1937" and posits a utopian moment when the entwining of two lovers' bodies can transcend the horrors of the war. He did indeed travel with his first wife Elena Garro to the war, with an invitation received directly from Spain, from Rafael Alberti and Pablo Neruda, not through the official pro-Soviet, Marxist organization of the LEAR (Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios; League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists), founded in Mexico in 1933 as a popular front movement, akin to those in Europe. At the Congress, the twenty-three-year old Paz was surrounded by some of the most respected literary figures of the age. Most of the debates, however, were exhortatory and were conducted along simple, Manichaen lines on the assumption that the threat of Hitler and Franco was so great that any criticism of the left would be seen as playing into the hands of fascism. Thus Gide was condemned for his rather timid criticisms of the Soviet Union in his book *Retour de l'URSS,* in particular by the Spanish writer José Bergamín, without anyone standing up in his defense.[9] Paz also made close friends with the writers grouped around the Spanish magazine *Hora de España*, and the debates in the