

The Labyrinth of Solitude: Construction and Deconstruction*

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English Abstract

The Labyrinth of Solitude (*TLOS*) has sold more than one million copies in Spanish alone, and, to this day, it continues to draw praise and criticism. In the first part of this paper, I will examine the history of *TLOS*, from the first excerpts published in 1949 until the inclusion of the book in the *Complete Works* of Octavio Paz in 1993. In the second part, I will perform a critical review of the structure and contents of the book. Finally, in the third part I will perform a deconstruction of *TLOS*.

Resumen en español

El laberinto de la soledad (*ELS*) ha vendido más de un millón de copias en español y, hoy en día, sigue atrayendo elogios y críticas. En la primera parte de este trabajo, examino la historia de *ELS*, desde los primeros ensayos publicados en 1949 hasta la inclusión de la obra en las *Obras Completas* de Octavio Paz en 1993. La segunda parte, es una revisión crítica de la estructura y el contenido del libro. Por último, la tercera parte es una deconstrucción de *ELS*.

Resumo em português

O Labirinto da Solidão vendeu mais de um milhão de cópias apenas na Espanha, e, até hoje, continua a ser elogiado e criticado. Na primeira parte deste artigo, examinarei a história dessa obra, dos primeiros excertos publicados em 1949 até a inclusão do livro nas *Obras Completas* de Octavio Paz, em 1993. Na segunda parte, farei uma resenha crítica da estrutura e dos conteúdos do livro. Por fim, na terceira parte, farei uma desconstrução de *O Labirinto da Solidão*.

I. The History of *TLOS*

In 1945, Octavio Paz became a member of the Mexican Foreign Service and was assigned to the Mexican Embassy in France. It was in Paris, during the summer of 1949, that he wrote the first version of *TLOS*. According to Paz, the process of writing *TLOS* took him “a few months.”[1] On June 26th of that year, Paz wrote a letter to Alfonso Reyes in which he said that the month before he had sent an essay to Jesús Silva Herzog, then director of *Cuadernos americanos*, as the first of a series of essays that he had called *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Paz had the intention to publish the series

as a book. The essay was published in 1949, in the September-October edition of *Cuadernos americanos* with the title: "The Labyrinth of Solitude. I. The Pachuco and Other Extremes." It was the first version of the first chapter of *TLOS*. The idea was to publish the whole set of essays, so in the following edition of the magazine, in January-February of 1950, another essay was published with the title: "The Labyrinth of Solitude. II.- Mexican Masks," which would become the second chapter of *TLOS*. However, by November 22nd of 1949,[2] Paz had finished writing the entire book, which he sent to Jesús Silva Herzog.

The first edition of *TLOS* was printed by *Cuadernos americanos* on February 15th of 1950. That first edition had eight chapters: "The Pachuco and other Extremes," "Mexican Masks," "All Saints' Days. Day of the Dead," "The Sons of La Malinche," "The Conquest and Colonialism," "From Independence to the Revolution," "The Present Day," and "The Dialectic of Solitude." But chapters one and two are not the same as the essays that Paz had published already in the magazine; he made many changes in style and in content to both.

In 1959, Fondo de Cultura Económica published a second edition, revised and expanded, of *TLOS* as a volume of the collection "Vida y Pensamiento de México." In that edition, the book had the previous eight chapters and an added epilogue: "The Pachuco and other Extremes," "Mexican Masks," "All Saints' Days. Day of the Dead," "The Sons of La Malinche," "The Conquest and Colonialism," "From Independence to the Revolution," "Mexican Intelligence," "The Present Day," and the epilogue with the subtitle "The Dialectic of Solitude." The chapter Paz called "The Present Day" in the first edition is found in the second edition with a different title: "The Mexican Intelligence," and the chapter in the second edition called "The Present Day" is entirely new. The epilogue of the second edition is chapter eight in the first edition.

The differences between the first and second edition are considerable: Paz added an entire new chapter and revised the text very carefully, making changes both in content and in form.[3] Some chapters, like "The Conquest and Colonialism" had major style and narrative changes. Others, such as "From Independence to the Revolution," suffered important changes in content.

In 1972, Fondo de Cultura Económica transferred the book from "Vida y Pensamiento de México" to "Colección Popular." In this last collection, the book has been published in Mexico and other countries with the number 107.

In 1981, "Colección Tezontle" of the Fondo de Cultura Económica published a new edition that contained *TLOS*, *Postscript* - the text was originally published in 1970 by Siglo XXI - and "Return to *The Labyrinth of Solitude*," a transcript of the 1975 interview by Claude Fell to Paz, which had been published in November of that same year in *Vuelta* magazine. The addition of *Postscript* and Fell's interview influenced the readers of the original *TLOS*, since *Postscript* was intended to further develop and update Paz's views about Mexico, and Fell's interview was meant to guide the reader to

Paz's interpretation of *TLOS* in 1975. The fact that these three books were published in one single edition, *as three connected chapters of the same book*, hints at the author's intention that he wanted the three texts to be conceived as a unit. In 1993, the trilogy was transferred to the "Colección Popular" with the number 471.

In 1987, Fondo de Cultura Económica published Volume I of *Mexico in the Works of Octavio Paz* in its "Colección Letras Mexicanas"[4] edited by Octavio Paz and Luis Mario Schneider. In this book, Paz included several of his works on Mexican history and some chapters from *TLOS*. In the making of this anthology, Paz chopped up *TLOS*, changed the titles of the chapters that were inserted in the book as separate units, added to these some footnotes to explain his new thoughts on those chapters, and even completely changed the text in some of the chapters (i.e., he added the final paragraphs of "The Present Day" to "From Independence to the Revolution"). The publication of *Mexico in the Work of Octavio Paz* would be peripheral to this paper, except for the fact that Paz used the shredded pieces that appeared in the book to rewrite *TLOS* as it would appear later in his *Complete Works*.

In 1993, Madrid's Círculo de Lectores published the eighth volume of Paz's *Complete Works* with the title "The Pilgrim in His Homeland." Fondo de Cultura Económica reprinted the book in Mexico the following year. What I want to underscore is that the text of the new edition of *TLOS* is different from the one that had been published previously by Fondo de Cultura Económica in "Colección Tezontle" and "Colección Popular" with the respective numbers 107 and 471. There are changes in form and substance. Yet not many people have realized that there are two different versions of *TLOS* published by Fondo de Cultura Económica, and one of the reasons is that the publishing house has never acknowledged this in either of the editions of the book.

Paz would reassemble *TLOS* based on the scraps of the book that he had inserted into *Mexico in the Works of Octavio Paz*, and added new footnotes to the 1993 edition. For example, Paz added a footnote at the end of "The Present Day" in the *Complete Works*, but the chapter had not been published in its entirety in *Mexico in the Works of Octavio Paz*. Some of the footnotes of *TLOS* in the *Complete Works* are references to other texts of the *Complete Works*, which makes *TLOS* a book that belongs in that collection of works; in other words, it transforms *TLOS* into a text that cannot function outside of the *Complete Works*. In the version of *TLOS* published in the *Complete Works* there are several changes in the wording and in the punctuation from the previous version. To name one example: chapter 7, which in 1959 had the title "The Mexican 'Intelligence'" changed its title in 1993 to "The Mexican *Intelligentsia*." In short although the differences between the *TLOS* of 1959 and the one in the *Complete Works* are not too many, but they are enough to consider them as two versions of the book.

Volume 8 of the *Complete Works* begins with a prologue where Paz comments on *TLOS* in an autobiographical style.[5] Right after *TLOS*, Paz includes five minor texts (most are prologues) with the following title: "Myth and History." [6] These five texts delve

on pre-Columbian and Novohispanic themes, which makes them easily interpreted as appendixes to chapter five of *TLOS* "The Conquest and Colonialism." Then, Paz includes the Fell interview called "Return to *The Labyrinth of Solitude*" (with added notes), and then he includes *Postscript* (in a very different version from the original). The remaining volume includes texts on Mexican politics and society. It should be noted that Paz arranged the texts of Volume 8 of his *Complete Works* in a different order from the one in the trilogy published with number 471 of "Colección Popular." This decision should be carefully analyzed. *Postscript* was written to develop and criticize the reflections contained in *TLOS*, which is why it was published immediately after *TLOS*. However, it may be said that *Postscript* has grown old much quicker than *TLOS*, and that one can read *TLOS* with much interest without having to read *Postscript*. In fact, it could be said that reading the interview by Claude Fell is much more revealing after reading *TLOS*.

II. The Structure and Content of *TLOS*

TLOS can be divided into three relatively independent parts, each written and rewritten in different moments that responded to the author's interests and even to different stylistic and rhetorical resources.

II.1. First Part

The first part of the book, which contains chapters one, two, three and four, is an analysis of Mexicans based in elements that Paz borrowed from philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology and sociology. Paz offers here a sort of phenomenology of the Mexicans through an examination of some of their characteristics, their regular behaviors and use of language, a psychological and anthropological analysis of myths, celebrations and customs, and a psychohistory of Mexico based in the trauma of the Conquest by Spain. The style used by Paz is the essay format, abounding in metaphors and other literary resources.[7]

In "The Pachuco and Other Extremes," Paz declares that Mexicans suffer a solitude that is deeply grounded in their souls. This solitude, and not the inferiority complex diagnosed by Samuel Ramos, is the key to understanding the true Mexican Being. According to Paz, "Man is alone everywhere, but the solitude of Mexicans, under the great night of stone of the Mexican plateau that is still haunted by insatiable gods, is different from that of the man from North America, lost in a world of machines, fellow citizens and moral principles." [8] To Paz, the solitude of the Mexicans is the consequence of a cosmic orphanhood, of a primal rupture, whereas the solitude of the North American is the result of being alienated in an artificial world built with his own hands. Paz uses the North American man as a contrasting agent to detect the main characteristics of Mexicanidad. The North American man is, according to Paz, the radically *other* from the Mexican: that is why the "Pachuco" serves Paz as the subject of study from which he draws conclusions that he applies to all Mexicans.

Not many of the conclusions from “The Pachuco and Other Extremes” can be sustained today. The thesis that Mexicans suffer from a constitutive solitude was never popular, and the impressionist picture of the Pachuco did not satisfy readers on either side of the border. On the other hand, it is not too convincing to insist on a radical contrast between Mexicans and other North Americans, especially if we take into account that approximately one out of every ten Mexicans now lives in the United States.[9]

In the next chapters, Paz explores additional theories about the solitude of Mexicans as an explanation of their being. In “Mexican Masks,” Paz argues that a Mexican’s refusal to “flinch” (in Spanish, *rajarse* also means “to split” or “open up”) leads him to use a mask to conceal his Self. In “All Saints’ Day. The Day of the Dead,” Paz argues that popular celebrations are opportunities for the Mexicans to open up in an explosive way, and this he connects with the idea that Mexicans are indifferent to life and death. If read as literary pieces, the chapters comprised in the first part of *TLOS* are brilliant; Maria Zambrano accurately said that they could be read like the journey of the poet to the Mexican underworld, the mythical site of the unconscious collective of Mexicans, a place inhabited by ancient gods.[10] However, Paz’s portrait of the 1950’s Mexicans is no longer accurate for the 21st Century. Mexico experienced a huge transformation in the second half of the 20th Century. Mexico stopped being a rural society to become an urban society, it stopped being an isolated country to become a nation connected to the rest of the world, and it stopped being an authoritarian society to become one demanding democracy. Although it has been a gradual process, it can be said that the cultural changes in the 60’s accelerated the changes in the paradigms regarding Mexico. All those stereotypes of “Mexicanidad” that had been repeated *ad nauseum* (like the one that said that the Mexican “macho” is not afraid of death, and that he never reveals his true feelings except when drunk), have become obsolete due to repetition.[11]

Seen from a distance, chapter four, “The Sons of La Malinche,” is the most enduring, disturbing and valuable of the book. There are three moments in this chapter that deserve a closer examination from a critical perspective: the first is Paz’s peculiar analysis of the verb “*chingar*,” ‘to fuck’ (very much along the lines of the linguistic turn that took place during the second half of the 20th Century in the fields of philosophy and psychoanalysis); the second is Paz’s symbolic interpretation of the dichotomy between “La Chingada” and “La Guadalupana” (which evokes Jung’s research on the archetypes of the collective unconscious); the third is the psycho-history of Mexico beginning with the trauma of the Conquest. In this chapter, more than in any other place in the book, there’s a certain closeness *avant la lettre* with some of the characteristics of French structuralism. A way of describing what Paz is doing in this part of *TLOS* is to say that he is unearthing historic, linguistic and psychological *structures* in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomena standing on them.

According to Paz, the character of Mexicans is explained by the historic trauma that caused a rupture with their origins, a denial of the Self, and thus their solitude:

All these attitudes are an indication that Mexicans feel a blemish in them and in the very flesh of their country, tarnished by an undetermined but nevertheless alive, original and indelible stain. Every single one of our gestures is directed at hiding that open wound which is remains alive and ready to light up and shine under the light in the eyes of an outsider.[12]

While other people or races, according to Paz, struggle with elements of a specific reality, Mexicans are in a fight with their inner ghosts, the remains of their past:

These ghosts and remains are real, at least to us. (...) They are untouchable, and invincible, as they are not outside but inside us. In our struggle to fight against them, they find a strong and secret ally: our fear of being. Because everything that a Mexican of today is can be reduced to this: Mexicans do not want to be themselves, or they dare not be themselves.[13]

In the chapter “The Sons of La Malinche,” Paz suggests that the root of the personality of a Mexican lies in our bastardly origin, that is, in the awareness that we are the progeny of a raped woman. Our solitude is the result of the original trauma of the Conquest, and therefore that trauma lies in the very basis of Mexicanidad. When faced with that historical condemnation, Mexicans opt for a denial of their origin. Mexicans do not want to be the sons and daughters of Cortés and La Malinche; they do not want to be their half-bred offspring. Mexicanidad is defined, according to Paz, as rupture and denial.

In Claude Fell’s interview, Paz offers two keys to understand this chapter. One is the idea that there is “... a buried, yet living, Mexico. Inside the Mexican men and women there is a universe of hidden images, desires, impulses.”[14] The second key is that the profound Mexico is hidden primarily in the mind of Mexicans, and secondly in the culture, in the Mexican way of life, in its society. To unearth the hidden Mexico, to reveal it, is needed a psychoanalytic method, to extract from the individual psyche the causes of personal behavior. Paz says “A moral critique is a self revelation of the things we hide, and, as Freud has taught, it is also a cure.”[15] The purpose of *TLOS* is therefore to unearth the hidden Mexico, to submit it to a critical analysis and, thus, to reach a healing point. In Fell’s interview, Paz is even more explicit about his source of inspiration: Freud’s analysis of Moses and the origins of monotheism. In sum, what Paz wanted to accomplish by writing “The Sons of La Malinche” was to perform a Freudian analysis of Mexicans, of the collective psyche of Mexico that was different from the Adlerian analysis that Ramos had performed in his book, *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México*. Although Paz did not use the central concepts of psychoanalysis, such as the term neurosis, which he doesn’t mention, it is evident that he is close to the method and the elements of the Freudian doctrine. Paz argues that the problem of Mexicans lies in the *trauma* (although the word is not explicitly mentioned, that’s clearly the subject) inflicted to their ancestors hundreds of years ago. To be precise: Paz talks about painful sexual violence that has not only been transmitted through collective memory but also repeated from generation to generation in some sort of macabre ritual.

In Paz's works on Mexico after *TLOS*, he tried to distance himself from the type of analysis that he had performed in the first part of the book. For example, in *Postscript* he says:

Mexicanidad is not an essence, but a history. Neither an ontology, nor a psychology. (...) In *The Labyrinth of Solitude* I tried to escape (without entirely succeeding, of course) the traps of an abstract humanism and the illusions of a philosophy of Mexicanidad: the mask turned into a face / the face petrified in a mask. In those days I was not interested in a definition of Mexicanidad but rather, as now, in a critical analysis, an activity that consists in knowing ourselves but, more particularly, in freeing ourselves.[16]

Paz's opinion about his intentions when writing *TLOS* should not define our interpretation of the book but rather help us understand the way in which Paz wanted us to read *TLOS* when he wrote *Postscript*.

II.2. Second Part

The second part of the book, which contains Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 is a critical appraisal of the history of Mexico. Here, Paz shares his personal interpretation of the history of Mexico from Colonial times until the mid 20th Century, paying particular attention to Mexico's intellectual history.

This second part can be interpreted on two different levels. One is to see it as a very basic summary of the history of Mexico; the other to see it as Paz's highly complex philosophy of the history of Mexico. But because this philosophy of history is barely outlined, and never explicitly or systematically formulated, in order to analyze it critically some previous work of interpretation is required. It is unclear if Paz's interpretation of Mexico's history in the second part of *TLOS* is the premise for the idea of Mexicanidad proposed in the first part of the book, or if, on the contrary, the metaphysical, anthropological and psychological theses of the first part of *TLOS* are a platform for Paz's interpretation of Mexico's history in the second part of the book. When questioned, Paz says both assumptions are correct, but this answer is not satisfactory. I believe that after a careful reading of *TLOS*, we reach the conclusion that the interpretation of Mexico's history that Paz proposes in the second part of his book is a result of his perspective of Mexicanidad as developed in the first part.

Paz defines the history of Mexico as a juxtaposition generated by the dialectics between two opposing forces: on one hand, the impulsive necessity of returning to the mythical origin, the existential imprisonment, the source of tradition, the mythical mother, in sum to solitude; on the other, the impulsive necessity to deny that origin, to be able to project oneself into the future, into the openness, to be surrounded by others, to abandon the old Form and adopt a new Form that we have in common with others. The liberal reform of the 19th Century is an example of the latter necessity, and the Zapatista ideology of the 20th Century is an example of the former necessity. Paz does

not predict whether or not this dialectical juxtaposition will ever end. At times, he seems to suggest that Mexicans are condemned to repeat the same patterns again and again; at others, he seems to suggest that if Mexicans could resolve their deepest conflicts, we would be able to break away from the cycles of introspection and explosion in our history. In the 1950 version of *TLOS*, Paz seems to find in the Mexican Revolution the best historic example of a *synthesis* of both necessities. The Revolution gave birth to a new kind of Mexican citizen, to a new culture and, particularly, to a national form of government which achieved the synthesis (impossible to avoid the comparison with Hegel's concept of the Prussian State.) This mythological, teleological and eschatological interpretation of Mexico that was ignored by professional historians during the second half of the 20th Century, had a huge impact on the intellectual circles of Mexico and other countries (an example of its repercussions can be seen in Carlos Fuentes' novel *The Most Transparent Region*).

In "From Independence to the Revolution," the Mexican Revolution is portrayed as a popular, spontaneous movement that, despite having no ideological background, had a deep - almost metaphysical - effect on Mexico. Paz believed that the Revolution had allowed Mexicans to discover themselves:[17]

The Revolution is a sudden immersion of Mexico in its own being. From the very deep bowels of its self, Mexico extracts, almost blindly, the foundations of a new State. In a return to tradition, and a renewal of the ties with the past that had been broken by Reform and Dictatorship, the Revolution is a self-search and a return to our Mother. (...) The revolutionary explosion is a wondrous party in which Mexicans, drunk with themselves, at last come to meet, in a mortal embrace, the other Mexicans.[18]

From this point of view, the Revolution revealed a Form of ourselves that nurtures our identity and at the same time works as a navigation chart in the ocean of world history.

The inclusion in 1959 of "The Present Day" in *TLOS* shines a less favorable light upon the Revolution than it did in "From Independence to the Revolution." As Paz himself acknowledged in a footnote added to the 1993 edition, his interpretation of the Mexican Revolution in the added chapter followed very closely the Marxist theories which were in vogue back then. Paz said:

It is now easier to see what the Revolution was about: to consummate, in short term and with a minimum of human sacrifices, a work that took the European bourgeoisie more than 150 years to accomplish. In order to achieve this, first we had to consolidate our political independence and to regain control of our natural resources, and to ensure the continuation of social rights, particularly the rights of workers as established in the Constitution of 1917.[19]

When seen under this perspective, the goal of the Revolution was the creation of capitalism and a national bourgeoisie. But in 1959, Paz, just like many leftist intellectuals in Mexico, believed that the bourgeoisie wanted to take over the

revolutionary government to defend its interests at the expense of the interests of the proletariat. Paz responded that the solution was a reform of the revolutionary government.[20]

Postscript was written after the events of 1968, which changed Paz's perspective and his criticism of the post-revolutionary regime: he stopped believing in the possibility of a reform of the Mexican political system. Instead, he advocated for the implementation of a liberal democracy.[21] But although in *Postscript* Paz took a distance from the more speculative reflections of *TLOS*, he could not resist the temptation of finding common threads with Mexican history and so he wrote: "... a criticism of Mexico and its history, similarly to the methodology of therapy in psychoanalysis, should begin with an examination of the significance of the Aztec vision of the world (...). The criticism of Mexico begins with a criticism of the pyramid." [22] When Paz wrote *Postscript*, he still believed that a criticism of nationality would cure us by unearthing our past; but while in *TLOS* his object of study was the collective unconscious of Mexico, in *Postscript* it was the *Weltanschauung* that we inherited from the Aztecs.

The apparent conclusion of the second section is baffling. Paz claims that after the Second World War, the Mexican Revolution inserted us in world history, and from then on we had the same issues of any other Latin American country and the Third World in general. Paz considers that after the spiritual, moral and intellectual crisis of the post-war, "... after the collapse of Reason and Faith, of God and Utopia," [23] Mexicans became just as lonely as the rest of human beings. In a way, this conclusion, which was already present in the 1950 version of *TLOS*, contradicts the fundamental propositions of *TLOS*: if in 1950 Mexicans were already, as Paz puts it, "for the first time in our history contemporary of all men," [24] if our labyrinth was just the same as every other man's labyrinth, then we would have to conclude that in 1950 there was nothing peculiar about the being of Mexicans, nothing original about our history.

Paz would expand and alter his interpretation of Mexican politics and history many times in his later works, for example the ones included in Volume 8 of his *Complete Works* and his book *Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz or The Traps of Faith* published in 1982. He would never explicitly defend again in these books the philosophy of the history of Mexico as he developed it in the second part of *TLOS* (although on many occasions he would invoke it again, as in the first texts he wrote about the Neo-Zapatista uprising).

II.3. Third Part

The third part, or appendix, of *TLOS* is an essay on solitude as a condition of human existence. The profound solitude that was described in the first part of *TLOS* as distinctive of Mexicans is considered an existential condition of the entirety of humanity in the appendix.

Paz studies four themes in the appendix. The first is the idea that human beings are alone in their individuality and that they want desperately to experience a communion with nature, society, family or a partner.[25] Paz develops this same idea in some of his more philosophical poems, like "Sunstone." The second theme is the impossibility of love throughout history, from the most primitive to the most developed societies. This is an idea that Paz returns to in all of his poetic work and in many of his essays, such as "The Double Flame." The third theme is that primitive societies have created myths to explain why human beings have been cast away from the center of the world and eternity. Finally, Paz analyzes the difference between the mythical and historical time. The first is a perpetual present, and the second a timeline. He finalizes with a kind of apology of myth, in rejection of the dominance of reason, which produces monsters.

Did Paz turn his back on the thesis of the peculiarity of the solitude of Mexicans, or did he use it as a stepping stone for his proof that solitude is part of human condition?[26] There are no clues in the book to provide us with answers. My opinion is that the third part of *TLOS* was an entirely separate essay that he added later to the book. Paz seems to concede it when in the second edition he stopped calling this text a "chapter" and renamed it an "appendix."

III. How to Read *TLOS*

III.1. Deconstruction of TLOS

The first edition of *TLOS* was published more than half a century ago, influencing the idea that millions of people around the world have of Mexico. Because of this influence, we cannot accept a naive reading of *TLOS*. We must use the filters provided by literary, historic and philosophical theories[27] if we want to perform a serious interpretation of the book. In the two previous sections I have discussed the lack of internal unity of *TLOS* and underscored that there are different versions of the book in the past four decades. This gives us the liberty to say that *TLOS* is like a loaf of bread that cannot be eaten unless it is first sliced into crumbs. For this reason, I believe that in the 21st Century the best possible way to read the book is through deconstruction. Much has been said for and against deconstruction; I will not analyze here all the interpretations of this theory. My proposal is limited to a deconstruction of *TLOS* alone; in my view, deconstruction ought not to be used in any other text (not even one written by the same author). I will now list a series of deconstructive actions that can be used when reading *TLOS*.

The first stage is to disassemble *TLOS* into its *diachronic moments* and *synchronic parts*. Instead of talking about *TLOS* as a *synchronic unity*, we will propose it is an ensemble of texts that are bound together by a diversity of variable inter-textual relationships. From this perspective, we cannot speak of a totality as the object of a complete or definite interpretation of *TLOS*, but rather of a plurality of texts that are related to each other in different ways, which in turn allows the book to be read in a

diversity of forms. On the other hand, instead of talking about *TLOS* as a text with a *diachronic identity*, I will assume *TLOS* is an ensemble of texts arranged in a progression in time. It makes no sense to look for the final or definite edition of *TLOS* as the object of study of literary criticism, since the object of a deconstructionist reading is the dynamic ensemble of the texts or, even better, the very changes in that ensemble of texts due to Paz's textual and extra-textual interventions over time. Deconstruction of a text is not taking a pair of scissors out and cutting up a book or a magazine, but performing a different reading of the text. That is why if we want to deconstruct *TLOS*, we must eliminate our tendency to consider it as a unit. The main obstacle in achieving our goal is the deliberate effort that Paz made to present *TLOS* as a literary unit in time; that is, as a book that, even with the minor changes that it underwent after 1950, never stopped being the same book. In this sense, the deconstruction strategy is to separate the text from its author's intentions, even despite the irony that it was Paz himself the first person to deconstruct *TLOS* in the book *Mexico in the Works of Octavio Paz*. [28]

The second stage of deconstruction consists in separating the narrative pieces and parts of *TLOS* into its most basic argumentative, rhetorical and symbolic elements. In this stage of deconstruction, we have to dissolve the tensions between the text, its parts and its elements. The challenge is to go beyond the *aporia* to engage in a reading of *TLOS* that will allow us to recover its most valuable insights. For this to be possible, we need to deconstruct beyond the text to focus in the very act of reading; that is, in the relationship between the reader and the text. In this case, we would also have to eliminate the dichotomy between Mexican and foreign readers of *TLOS*. This opposition stands as the basis of the supposition that when Mexicans read *TLOS*, they would have to see themselves *portrayed* in the book (hence the metaphor of the book as a *mirror*), whereas when foreigners read *TLOS*, they would have to *discover* a character or a new, unknown territory (hence the metaphor of the book as a *guide*). This means we must reject the Mexican/foreigner *aporia* that determines the two poles of the act of reading; this does not mean, though, that we should reject the actual distinction between Mexicans and foreigners, but rather that we understand this distinction as gradual and contextual. In this sense, it is possible that Mexicans will not find in *TLOS* many interesting things about themselves (this will not make us less Mexican), while foreigners will find plenty of ideas to reflect upon themselves.

I would like to underscore that a deconstructionist approach to *TLOS* does not necessarily imply a negative attitude towards Paz's ideas. On the contrary, I believe that a deconstructionist approach actually allows us to focus on the best features of the book.

There have been several critical reviews to *TLOS* since its first edition in 1950; I will mention only a few: some say that Paz makes false generalizations; others, that his description of the Pachuco is superficial; that the solitude he attributes to Mexicans is not a real condition but a metaphysical or literary invention; that in his book, Paz displays Creolism and sexism; that his analysis responds to a chronological, racial and class perspective that he never openly assumes; that many of the characteristics he

attributes to Mexicans are more likely a projection of his own personal history; that lyricism prevails over objectivity; that his version of Mexican history is literary, subjective and lacking of historical rigor; that he exalts revolutionary violence, etc.

If we follow the critical perspective that I have defended in these pages, some of these critical reviews will still stand, others will be weakened, and others will have to be restated. But the fact remains that most criticisms have been made within the hermeneutical scenario that assumes the *synchronic unity and the diachronic identity* of the book. What I have proposed is a more radical reading of *TLOS* from a hermeneutical point of view, one that will also do the book philosophical, ideological and moral justice.

A couple of decades ago, there was a consensus among certain critics to read *TLOS* not as a treaty but as a collection of essays. *TLOS* lacks a coherent argumentative line or a thesis grounded in any kind of empirical evidence or methodology of the social sciences. What we find, especially in the first part of the book, is a plethora of rhetorical rhizomes that weave, interweave and unweave some intuitions and narrations around the subject of Mexicanidad. Mexicans as described in *TLOS* are in part the real flesh and blood Mexicans, but they are also fictional characters inspired in Mexican archetypes. That is why it is mistake to look in *TLOS* for a *set of articulate truths* about Mexico and Mexicans. And yet, we cannot deny that the book does offer some sparse glimpses of the truth of Mexico and Mexicans. *TLOS* is like a box full of disperse intuitions, and that is the main explanation of why it has captivated the imagination of so many readers. These intuitions, images and metaphors actually do *reveal* something about us (whether we are Mexican or not), if seen from a certain perspective (as gems gyrating under the light to show off their beaming). Some of these intuitions may seem more *real* than others (and that depends of course on who is doing the judging), and some may seem more *disturbing* than others (again, it's in the eye of the beholder). Perhaps it is the latter ones that are more valuable, by making us think critically about ourselves. Take for instance, the psycho-history in "The Sons of La Malinche," which should be read not as a historical narrative but as a *symbol* of the conflicts in the Mexican family life in the first half of the 20th Century: the wicked twists of the female and male roles, the internal violence, the prejudiced view on sexuality. What Paz achieved with this game of symbols was to shed a light into the resentment and the admiration of Mexicans for the figure of a violent and absent father, and the compassion and contempt for the figure of a mother that was both victim and manipulator. However, one can argue that family no longer exists, and claim that its disappearance is not the result of collective therapy but of the structural changes in Mexican society: migration from the fields into the cities, a decrease in the number of children, inclusion of women into the workforce, etc. Mexican families have changed indeed; in any case, we could ask ourselves if the memory of the previous family life is still fresh in our memory and if it still has the power to affect us.

But as long as *TLOS* retains the capacity to produce a sense of revelation or unbelief, of agreement or rejection, in the readers, it will remain valid; that is, it will continue to achieve its goal of forcing us to think about ourselves.

III.2. Demystification and Remystification of TLOS

In Claude Fell's interview, Paz quoted Lévi-Strauss who said that a myth is born every time one deciphers a myth; in his own words: "I think that *TLOS* was my way to describe and to understand certain myths; at the same time, because it is a work of literature, it too has become another myth."^[29]

Paz was right. Over time, *TLOS* has become a repository of Mexican myths, and that also explains why it has been so harshly criticized. In the Western philosophical tradition there are two positions standing against myths, and both have been used to debate Paz's explanations about the myths of Mexicanidad in *TLOS*.

The first line of argument holds that the nature of myths is not to produce a verifiable and objective knowledge of the world, whereas science does enable us to reach a true explanation of natural and social phenomena. Thus, with the advance of civilization, we have learned how to replace myths with other type of explanation. Those who defend this position, like Jorge Aguilar Mora,^[30] are opposed to the use of myths to provide Mexicans an understanding of themselves. They want us to find the *truth* about ourselves through objective explanations.

The second line of argument against myths is based on the premise that myths are a form of *deceit*, a symbolic tool used by the more powerful to justify domination. In that sense, demystification is a liberating operation, in an epistemological and a political sense. Those who defend this second line of argument, like Roger Bartra,^[31] want Mexicans to release themselves from their beliefs in the myths of Mexicanidad and shake off the yoke of those who use the myths to submit and exploit them.

To deconstruct without offering to *reconstruct* is an intellectual, eventually sterile exercise. I believe that a reconstructionist reading of *TLOS* should go beyond *demystification* and attempt to *remystify*.

Several things can be understood by the term 'remystify.' One is to substitute some of the elements in a myth in order to modernize it, as when we change the time, place or vocabulary of the events explained by the myth (as is usually done in children's adaptations of classic mythology). Another is to reassign a new meaning to the elements in an ancient myth from a new perspective; for example, to preserve its structure but give it a new content (as was done with some Pre-Hispanic myths by Christian cosmology). But what I mean by the term remystify is the appropriation of the elements in a myth to produce new discourses (whether philosophical, literary, artistic, political, historical, etc.) to reformulate the questions about our individual or collective existence that such myth once tried to answer. This appropriation can have a vein of

irony, which would not alter the myth's purpose already discussed. Let's take for example the figure of 'La Chingada.' This mythical character is still very powerful, and elicits a strong reaction from our psyche. Let's elaborate: La Chingada makes us think about the female roles in Mexican society; about our traumatic sexual experiences; about the importance of the dimension of violence in our collective psyche, etc. What is interesting in this case is that, even if the myth as Paz has explained it has lost its explanatory power, the character of La Chingada can be translated into other discourse and make us reflect creatively about ourselves.

This is the first sentence in *TLOS*: "At some point, every one of us has become aware of our existence as something special, non-transferable, and precious." [32] It is unquestionably true that human beings have the vital need to make sense of the phenomenon of our existence. The question for the meaning of life is common to all: people, families, communities, towns and countries. Nothing could be more natural for Mexicans to reflect on the meaning of Mexico as a historical occurrence, or to question the sense of our collective existence. Mexican identity has developed from a series of myths: from the historical myths invented by the Aztecs to justify their domination and the religious myths created during the Colonial times, to the national myths forged after the Mexican Revolution. Half a century ago, the myths of Mexicanidad developed in *TLOS* helped us attempt to give answers to the questions of who we were, who we are and who we want to become. Back then Mexico was a rural country, smelling of gunpowder and of tortillas, a country that was at the same time sweet and ferocious, innocent and baroque. Today, Mexico has become an urban country, obese, addicted to television, incredulous and chaotic. But although some elements in the myth of the 20th Century Mexicanidad have become old, others are still useful to imagine new questions about the meaning of our existence. The day will come, however, when the myths contained in *TLOS* will seem strange to all of us. They will then be substituted by other myths or other pieces of narrative texts that will provide new clues to the understanding of our collective existence. [33]

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Notes

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[1] The ideas contained in *TLOS* were born some years before. There is a precursor in some articles published by Paz in the journal *Novedades* during 1943, in *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* Spring, 2016

which he wrote about different issues of Mexico. And it is probably true that he developed some of the main ideas of the essay between 1943 and 1945 during his residence in the USA.

[2] Cfr. Octavio Paz to Alfonso Reyes, November 23rd, 1949, in *Alfonso Reyes/Octavio Paz, Correspondencia (1939-1959)*, edited by Anthony Stanton, México, Fundación Octavio Paz, FCE, 1998.

[3] In the critical edition of *TLOS* published in 1993 in Editorial Cátedra, prepared by Enrico Mario Santí, it is possible to see in the footnotes the majority of the significant variations of the text between 1950 and 1959. However, to this day no critical edition that exposes all the variations of the text between 1949 and 1993 has been published.

[4] There is a previous version of the anthology published by Luis Mario Schneider in one volume (México, Promociones Editoriales Mexicanas 1979). This version includes four chapters of *TLOS*: “Mexican Masks,” “All Saints Day. Day of the Dead,” “The Conquest and Colonialism,” and “From Independence to the Revolution.” The texts of these chapters are the same as those of the edition of *TLOS* published in 1959.

[5] The same autobiographical style was also used by Enrique Krauze in the essay “The Solitude of the Labyrinth,” in *Anuario de la Fundación Octavio Paz*, n. 3, 2001, pp. 98-112.

[6] The texts are: “Cuauhtémoc, joven abuelo” (prologue to the French edition of the book by Héctor Pérez Martínez, *Cuauhtémoc: vida y muerte de una cultura*), “Hernán Cortés: exorcismo y liberación” (article originally published in the Spanish journal *El país*), “Comunicación y encuentro de civilizaciones: la Conquista de México (A conversation with Tzvetan Todorov e Ignacio Bernal, originally published in *Vuelta*), “El tres y el cuatro” (prologue to the collective book *Utopías mexicanas del siglo XVI*) and “Orfandad y legitimidad” (prologue to the book of Jacques Lafaye Quetzalcóalt et Guadalupe).

[7] The first part of *TLOS* is very similar to other books in philosophy, essay and literature of the time. It has been rightly pointed out on several occasions that we cannot fully understand *TLOS* without its precursor, Samuel Ramos’ *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México*. Nor can we ignore the influence of the works by Jorge Cuesta or Rodolfo Usigli in *TLOS*. On the other hand, to understand the intellectual atmosphere which *TLOS* was released into we must remember the studies of the philosophy of Mexico by the Hiperión group. Its members saw in Paz a privileged poet who was capable of perceiving and expressing the most intimate fibers of Mexico that they tried to understand using a different methodology. *TLOS* is also inserted in the ideas of post-war Paris. Also evident are the influences in thought, and in a lesser extent in doctrine, of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche. The same can be said of the themes and orientations of Gaston Bachelard, George Bataille and particularly, Roger Callois (all of them members of *College de Sociologie*). The influence of the German Romantic thought and even of Hegel has also been examined by Enrico Mario Santí.

[8] Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude, Postscript, Return to The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Colección Popular 471, 1999, p. 22.

[9] In *La increíble hazaña de ser mexicano* (Mexico, Planeta, 2010), Heriberto Yépez has stated that 21st Century Mexicans are not the stereotypical mestizo

portrayed by Paz. The identity of the new Mexicans is a mixture of Spain and our indigenous past, but also of North America. To deny the influence of North America is, according to Yepes, to deny a part of us.

[10] María Zambrano's review of *TLOS* was published in number 356 of *La Gaceta del Fondo de Cultura Económica*, August of 2000.

[11] There is no doubt that Carlos Monsiváis was the greatest chronicler of the changes in the self-conception of Mexicans. In his books, written in the last third of the 20th Century, he documented the new ways of thinking of the Mexicans born after 1950.

[12] *Ibid.* p. 70.

[13] *Ibid.* p. 80.

[14] *Ibid.* p. 325.

[15] *Ibid.* p. 326.

[16] *Ibid.* pp. 235-236.

[17] The thesis about Mexico reaching some sort of ontological consolidation through the Mexican Revolution was developed in 1952 by Leopoldo Zea in this book *Consciencia y posibilidad del mexicano*. This ontological thesis, which permeated the intellectual circles around the post-revolutionary political system, can be criticized as a philosophical legitimizing of the regime. It should be underscored that this thesis was related to the doctrines of the permanent revolution and the triple identification of Nation, State and State Party, which were also a part of the discourse that sought to legitimise the regime.

[18] Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude, Postscript, Return to The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Colección Popular 471, 1999, p. 162.

[19] *Ibid.* p. 190.

[20] A *dossier* about the legitimacy of the Mexican Revolution which was published in *Cuadernos Americanos* that same year with the participation of intellectuals such as Víctor Flores Olea, Carlos Fuentes, and Enrique González Pedrero among others, allows us to verify the coincidences between Paz and the leftist reformers of the "Mid-Century Generation ('generación del medio siglo') (Cfr. "Tres interrogaciones sobre el presente y el futuro de México", in *Cuadernos Americanos*, Mexico, Año XVIII, no. 1, January-February of 1959, pp. 44-75). On the other hand, the chapter of 1959 shows the interest that Paz had in connecting the Mexican Revolution and the Third World Movement. It must be said that Leopoldo Zea had exactly the same ideas at that time (see Zea's collaboration in the *dossier* of *Cuadernos Americanos* already quoted), and that those ideas were also adopted by President López Mateos in his foreign policy. Finally, the chapter also transpires the coincidences between Paz and the criticisms against Soviet totalitarianism as proposed in Paris by the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.

[21] For a chronicle of Paz's distance from Marxism see Xavier Rodríguez Ledesma, *El pensamiento político de Octavio paz. Las trampas de la ideología*, Mexico, Plaza y Valdés/ UNAM, 1996. Tensions between poetic romanticism and political liberalism in Paz can be reviewed in Yvon Grenier, *Del arte a la política. Octavio Paz y la búsqueda de la libertad*, Mexico Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004.

[22] Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude, Postscript, Return to, The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Colección Popular 471, 1999, p. 304.

[23] *Ibid.* p. 210.

[24] *Ibidem*.

[25] It would be interesting to compare the themes and proposals of Paz in the appendix of *TLOS* with the themes and proposals of Luis Villoro's essay "Soledad y comunión" (*Filosofía y Letras*, n. 33, 1949) as two expressions of the same intellectual atmosphere.

[26] It might be useful to compare this with the similar problems that Emilio Uranga faced in the *Análisis del ser del mexicano* (Mexico, Porrúa y Obregón, 1952). Uranga characterizes the being of Mexicans as accidental, to later state that accident is a characteristic of humankind. In answer to the question of whether or not the being of Mexicans is different from the being of others (and if it makes any sense, then, to speak of a being of Mexicans, as he wanted), Uranga answers that in Mexicans accident is more evident than in the rest of humankind. Similarly, Paz could have answered that although all humans are alone, the solitude of Mexicans is more evident, more intense, than in others.

[27] Most of the critical studies of *TLOS* have not assumed a theoretical posture. This was clear in the events organized to commemorate the 50 Anniversary of the publication of *TLOS* in 2000. See the works published in the *Anuario de la Fundación Octavio Paz*, n. 3, 2001, and those included in the special number 356 of *La Gaceta del Fondo de Cultura Económica*, August of 2000.

[28] A clarification is required at this point. If we are interested in understanding Octavio Paz, an author that creates and recreates himself through the creation and the recreation of *TLOS*, we cannot ignore Paz's intentions. If, on the contrary, we are interested in the ideas contained in *TLOS* and the vision of Mexico within the book, then we must cut the umbilical cord between the text and its author.

[29] Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude, Postscript, Return to The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Colección Popular 471, 1999, p. 328.

[30] Jorge Aguilar Mora, *La divina pareja: Historia y Mito en Octavio Paz*, Mexico, Era, 1978.

[31] Bartra, Roger, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Culture*, Rutgers University Press 1992.

[32] Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude, Postscript, Return to The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Colección Popular 471, 1999, p. 11.

[33] My gratitude to Fabiola López for her valuable reading of the diverse editions of *TLOS*.