

## Octavio Paz’s “My Life with the Wave” An Allegory of the Creative Process, by Diane Thiel

Octavio Paz’s “My Life with the Wave” has a many-layered nature which eludes immediate definition. Is it a love relationship that the wave describes, or is it an aspect of himself? Is it memory? Or is it the muse, inspiration—which follows him from the sea, causes him imprisonment, and then is waiting for him on his return home, ready to toss him in many directions?

The wave is vested with human qualities, and the speaker has a relationship with her that is both physical and emotional. A superficial reading might lead to the conclusion that the wave is merely a representation of a love relationship. The sensuous nature of the wave and the erotic and tempestuous relationship of the speaker with her support this impression. A closer reading, however, reveals some inconsistencies. The wave presents some non-human qualities. Her tempests, like those of the sea, are tied to the weather. She lacks the human center of mortality, and the vulnerability which comes from it.

The origin of this piece—its inclusion in *Águila o sol* (Eagle or Sun), a collection of prose poems which deals with the creative process—offers a useful clue to the deeper possible meanings of the wave. The pieces in *Águila o sol* describe the artistic process as a physical, erotic encounter, sometimes violent. Paz’s choice of a wave to depict the experience is an evocative one. As a writer, he struggles with the volatile demands of the Muse. It is a relationship which strikes a familiar chord with all writers. The wave will follow you home. You have no choice in the matter. It will come in search of you. You will do anything for this wave. Going to prison will not keep you from writing.

But it is a tempestuous relationship—tortuous at times, because you may not know what the Muse requires.

The double metaphor—the creative process as a wave, and the wave as a person—is effective because it can describe the relationship with the Muse simultaneously on intellectual, emotional, and visceral levels. The erotic connotations are particularly effective because they heighten the intensity of the piece. Paz chose a feminine noun (*la ola*) for his character, which requires the feminine pronoun in Spanish. The effect in the original language is somewhat subtler than the use of “she” in English. The translation strongly encourages one to initially read the piece as a description of a love relationship.

The final image of the wave, broken up to fill ice buckets, may be chilling, but it is also a clue to her identity. The ideas generated by the creative process become tortuous at times. One may have to leave a project for a while, in order to allow the inspiration to solidify into words. For the writer, inspiration can be a monster with which one must battle, until it is broken up into pieces—words, poems, stories. The fact that the speaker “sells” the wave further suggests her nature as Muse. Is the waiter the editor, who uses small shards of the product of inspiration to enrich the lives of readers, like chilled wine? It is an unfortunate fate—the wave of inspiration reduced to restaurant ice. One cannot truly capture the wave, Paz seems to suggest, only serve it in the tiniest of pieces.

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