

BOOKS

THE VOICES OF
MEDUSA

Antonio Saborit

The last thing that could be said of these short stories is that they are flat or unimaginative: their creation has a lot to do with the singularity of a genius who looks for surprise in the plot. Emilio Pacheco gives us his very own version of the Great Unknown Dimension, that twilight zone which, apart from Carlos Fuentes' *Aura*, has been visited by other titles of Mexican contemporary narrative, dubbed into his own language and projected in the midst of a presumptuous artefact of bulbs, woods and chromatic pieces of the 50's.

The Blood of Medusa consists of various stories inspired by some fantastic vein of Pacheco between 1956 and 1984. "The Dead Enemy", which relates the story of a writer from the desk of his private secretary, and "Walk on the Lake", stand apart from the general theme of this collection, in the first place, due to their deliberate tone of minor comedy, and, secondly, because the short stories of this volume belong to the realm of the fantastic and the extraordinary. A new and creative Perseus, the narrator of these stories, dedicated himself to hunting the reflection of Medusa in a television screen, which apparently was the only shield within reach.

The plot of most of these stories revolves around their characters. A policeman tortures to death one of the few people who had treated him well, and finally commits suicide by throwing him-

self out the window, when he confuses the escort of a girl's school with the noise of his feared, imminent lynching. The heretic refuses to be executed by blows and calmly takes his place at the stake of San Diego, in the Alameda, where he was condemned by the Holy Inquisition. A touch of magic at the right moment results in the inquisitor being burned, while the heretic is saved when the flames are beginning to do their work.

In the style of the best narrative poems, these short stories are based on their delicate story line. The lonely Gutiérrez decides to finish up with the rats of his home for good and for all; he fights these rats for the ownership of the family treasure (furniture of the second empire, Phillipine screens, art-nouveau shelves and dressing tables, books from the 17th and 18th centuries); finally he falls into the trap set by his adversaries. The threat of a nuclear apocalypse and the fear that this causes him, leads a man to shut himself up in the perpetual night of his refuge, from which he eventually emerges, grey haired and staggering, his body and clothes worn and torn, to enter a lunatic asylum on a radiant, weaponless, peaceful planet. History is a fiction that short stories try to document. Thus, Lincoln attends the first night of *The Death of Abraham Lincoln*, in the Ford Theater in Washington, his last public appearance before retiring forever to a plantation in Virginia. Or again, John Warnock Hinckley Jr. offers his member of desire to the actress Jody Foster while he orders the details of an assassination attempt against Ronald Reagan.

The degree of personal obsession in each of these short stories is characteristic of Pacheco's work. A good part of his poetry, as well as his stories and journalistic prose, are based on the certainty of a kind of disaster of which nobody doubted until recently. Perhaps the probabilities, if not the general script, have changed somewhat. Today the conviction that this disaster will occur, would probably find its origins in the world of political lampoons, of comix, low-budget movies and television series which sadden their viewers with paradoxical fantasies of extermination, all fathered by the western boom of the 50's and the Cold War.

The Blood of Medusa is a bibliographic curiosity for more than

one reason. One of these is the origin of the material united for the first time in this volume, from the **Cuadernos del Unicornio** (Unicorn Exercise Books) published by Juan José Arreola in the 1950's, up to recent work published in the weekly magazine **Proceso**. "Never did such a brief book occupy involuntarily so many years", says Pacheco in the introduction. Another element which underlines the bibliographic importance of this volume is the will with which Pacheco created his own theater of memory; however, there are few texts as nostalgic as the one where Pacheco relates the origin of the material printed in **The Blood of Medusa**. Concise, austere, free from all melodrama, and in a tone very similar to that of "The Dead Enemy", the author puts forth his idea of narrative as an incessant collaboration between the living and the dead: "The author does not pronounce his own words, he just gives his own version of what he was told. It is not only himself who speaks: simultaneously, his predecessors express themselves". This leaves us in the terrain of the final and

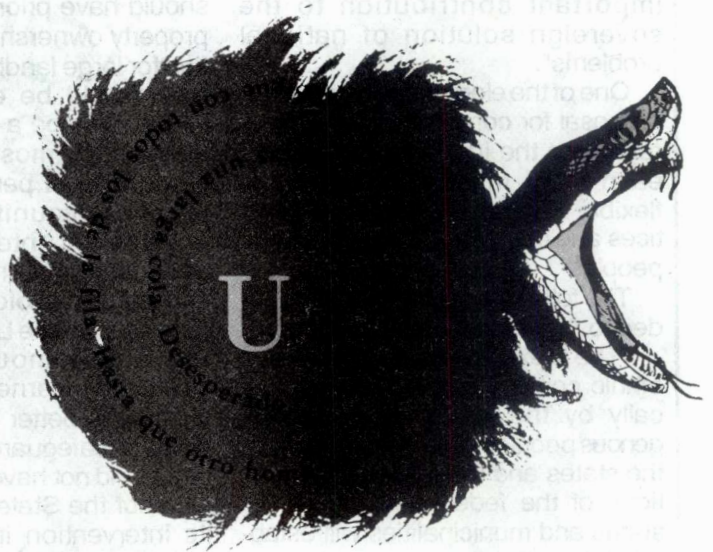
best element of this work: the parody.

Pacheco's way of making parodies in these short stories, does not venture along the path of re-interpretation, rather, his parodies advance along another route, that of recuperation, especially in the notorious case of "Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians" or that of "The Catastrophe" which, according to Pacheco, is both an offence and a homage to the great Portuguese writer Eça de Queiroz.

The Blood of Medusa is thus an assembly of voices and times, convoked by Pacheco's will and his liking for making new creations over a given text. The influence of Jorge Luis Borges is more than notorious in "Incipit Comedia", where the conveniently grave tone of the narrative voice makes an interrogation about Dante's final destiny. A couple of these short stories recall another two from the repertoire of North American writer John Cheever: I refer to one which relates the story of a television set that only receives programs from the future, in the first place, and then to that of a

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mysterious island in the middle of the ocean. In a story written two or three years before his death, Cheever imagined an unlucky island where forgotten senile celebrities of the most remote past of his century, conversed and played cards; in an earlier story he invented a radio set which would reproduce the conversations of neighbors. Pacheco speculates: "Perhaps all past and future images float in space, beyond time: only a slight imperfection is necessary for them to appear in the receiver."

Other stories such as "Metamorphosis", "Problems of Hell" and "Within an Emerald", share their author's affection for the writers Julio Torri and Juan José Arreola. This is not an exaggeration: for years Pacheco has cultivated the arduous simplicity of this kind of fiction. His space is urban although it approaches the realm of unpredictable mythology, as is the case of the miserable Pygmalion who can no longer bear his Galatea, and would prefer to have her restored to her natural stone. It also has an atmosphere such as that of a cruel do-gooder who relates the vicissitudes of hope, or rather of the hopeless, in hell. Or it is the strictly imagined space of that person who was able to regard the perfect living miniature of a naked woman inside an emerald.

In the same vein of literary recreation, there is a surprising story. Pacheco dared describe it in his prologue as the most beautiful story of our narrative of imagination. The story of "The Mulatta from Córdoba" has been told many times over the centuries, frequently subject to the narrator's most peculiar interpretations. Pacheco's version, entitled "Over the Waves", reminds us of the time when Heriberto Frías attempted to create a well written story for his mulatta in the pages of the *Imparcial*, and it takes an effort to imagine a new twist to the story.

The emotional center of *The Blood of Medusa* should not be sought in the constant collaboration among authors. Rather, their numerous voices belong to the exercise of literature as the only never ending story.

José Emilio Pacheco: *La Sangre de Medusa y otros cuentos marginales*. Ediciones Era, 1990.