Continually Reread

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Writing is a privilege, not only a creative act that is later published and multiplies the dialogue, originally designed to operate among equals, but rather the fact of turning thought and the voice into graphic signs able to retain memory. There is something magical in writing; for that reason, cultures have idolized and feared it. Someone who writes is looked at differently, as if he/she knew a different mystery, as though he/she knew other arts that overcome time, as though he/she had at the tip of the pen the ability to make us happy or to make us pass through the ring of suffering. That is why, in his time, the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé said that the poet was the custodian of the words of the tribe. That is why for countries that like Mexico have always admired their writers —writers they need now more than ever—, the death of those guardians moves us deeply.

How pleasant it would be if, whenever we had a space to write in, we noticed the passage of time, its teachings, and its joys. How pleasant it would be to always talk about friends and the way they have made our world friendlier. That cannot always be; it is unfortunate to have to put letters together to say something that we would prefer never to have to mention: José Emilio Pacheco has left us. In his pen, he embodied the idea of a temporal conscience beyond time; from the beginning of his lyrical work, he said —not without malice— "Don't ask me how the time goes by," because its passage is inevitable and his literature is a sample of that constant passage.

In a certain way, what makes us human is having this awareness of the passage of time, of knowing that unacceptable and inexplicable death has to be accepted as something natural, but at the same time turned into a dialogue with the dead, just as Quevedo said 400 years ago. It would be better if we did not have to say that José Emilio Pacheco has died, particularly now when we need him the most, him, like other prudent pens, brave and intelligent. It would be better if it did not have to be now, these years when, like bad fortune, the generation that showed us universality and well-crafted letters seems to be leaving us. It's true it had to be sometime, but not now that they were in the maturity of their expression

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and their genius. So, starting with the simple way of saying it, the friend has left, the poet has left, and we are left without that generation that we trusted as our own voice and our conscience.

The poet of the passage of time is no longer among us, but he remains in his literature. That dialogue must be kept alive; he continues to be the guardian of the words of the tribe from the other side, and we must continue listening to him. Pacheco was not an ivory-tower poet; he was a brilliant journalist: just remember his activity as an editor in the 1960s at the magazine *Estaciones* (Seasons), in *Diálogos* (Dialogues), in "La cultura en México" (Culture in Mexico), his constant contributions to the *Revista de literatura mexicana* (Magazine of Mexican Literature), to the *Revista de la Universidad de México* (Magazine of the University of Mexico). His column "Inventario" (Inventory) is a classic of research and dissemination of literature and constitutes a public diary of his readings, interests, and ideas. Pacheco never scorned the less visible work of the reviewer, the bookworm, the proofreader, and with time, his readers began to understand that for him —and now for us— that work is as important and exalted as his best poems.

Pacheco worked until the very last moment; his final "Inventario," published the day of his death in *Proceso* magazine, about his friend Juan Gelman who had died only a few days before, will be remembered as a masterwork, a goodbye letter to a friend that, without intending to, became a goodbye to himself, a song to friendship and respect between creators. Gabriel Zaid pertinently commented on the column "Inventario" that Pacheco created unexpected contacts, that he united themes, authors, seemingly unrelated issues, and —I would add— when he linked them up, their relationship seemed obvious to us. How many absolutely unexpected topics did he leave for us on the page to see if anyone would be interested enough to follow them up? And with generosity and absolute open-handedness, with no pretention of ownership or of being a literary landlord. We could not understand our literature without his anthological work (about modernism, the nineteenth century, *Poesía en movimiento* [Poetry in Movement]), and without his translations.

We have to add to this his attitude toward his readers; he liked to be read and recognized by the public, particularly by young readers, although he knew it could be a mirage. In several lectures and essays, he asked himself, for example, about the fate of Eduardo Mallea, the Argentinean writer considered that country's greatest novelist in the 1960s. And

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he seemed to lower his voice when he would ask himself, "Who reads Mallea today? Who remembers him?" And he liked to be read not because of any vanity of the public man, but because, regardless of his skepticism about the world, Pacheco always trusted literature.

We Mexico City dwellers cannot experience the city in the same way after having read Pacheco. He found in it the stage not only of young loves and day-to-day nostalgia, but also of a mythical universe, with innumerable and possibly infinite mythological strata: our indigenous past, our yearning for the future, our innumerable and amazing cultural syntheses. He knew how to see in the successive mixtures an enormous source of expressive wealth, and he had the good judgment of being a man without dogmatisms, who always put respect before differences, opposite ideas, affirming a vocation for intelligent dialogue, for conversation among friends. And in that idea of friendship, he accepted all his readers without distinction.

He recovered for us an entire city, multiple, conflicted, this city where millions of us live, and he turned it into a central character not only in his famous and beautiful *Las batallas en el desierto* (Battles in the Desert), but in all his prose and in all his poetry, letters crafted on the margins of the metropolis and of the interior space of its inhabitants. He restored to us the simple things of poetry, with which he built enormous edifices of comforting space and magnificent vistas of the universe. He has gone, and together with other builders of our literature who have already left us, enriches the history of our letters and our daily lives in many ways.

Perhaps as a result of love of country and city —there's a poem in which he makes this very clear, "Alta traición" (High Treason)—, Pacheco wanted to make his poetry a kind of emotional, intellectual, and sentimental seismograph, advise us of what was happening, warn us against misfortunes, and propose a way of overcoming them. He never thought that his individual voice, connected to his person, was unrelated to the circumstances that allowed the self to be an "us."

He also knew how to notice the totalitarian temptations hidden beneath the earth, the dangers that threatened a

regime dominant for several decades, and from the apparently de-contextualized spheres of literature, he was able to observe and be a biting critic of his time, that present, which, once again, don't ask me how the time goes by, how it becomes the past, but in any case, how it becomes the future. Pacheco was surprised every day when he found that *Las batallas en el desierto* had stopped being a secret little novel and became a best-seller, adapted for the screen, read by teenagers, constantly reprinted. And the sentimentality of the text is counterposed to the dissection with a sharp scalpel of the fascist impulses that he had described in *Morirás lejos* (You Will Die Far Away).

If his literature brought him the affection and kind regard of Mexicans, the quality of his writing also earned him international fame. He received the most important awards in the Spanish-speaking world, and his books were translated to different languages. In Colombia, in Argentina, in Spain, in Peru, in Cuba, in Venezuela, he was read with fervor and attention. The reaction in the international press to his absence is proof.

We historians, for example, have benefitted from his attitude and findings. He knew how to locate and share a concrete fact and propose a new interpretation of essential events in our history, in an era (the Mexican Revolution, for example) in which letters and politics were intimately linked. His affection and admiration for Alfonso Reyes led him to write splendid pages about the polygraph from Monterrey, and like him, he practices an enormous number of genres and expressive forms.

I want to expressly mention his translations. One of his last works is his exhaustive, obsessive revision of his version of T. S. Elliot's *Four Quartets*. The first version, published 20 years ago, was already greatly praised, and Octavio Paz called it unsurpassable. Pacheco, as though to contradict him, decided to surpass it himself. In the weeks before his death, parts of the new version had already been published in different places, and great expectation surrounded its appearance as a book. It was not the first translation of Pacheco's that caught the public's attention; many years before, his version of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis, Epistola in carcere et vinculis* (From the Depths, Letter in Prison and in Chains) had been highly praised.

When a writer of the stature of Pacheco translates, it tells us clearly that literature is everyone's and that, therefore, and as Lautréamont wanted, we all write it together. He, Pacheco, only serves as a scribe. There is one well-known anecdote that he didn't like to remember, but that is a clear example of his generosity as a man of letters: concerned about a deadline that his teacher Juan José Arreola was working toward with a publisher, he took dictation of some of the stories, which we now know as *Bestiario*, from the writer from Zapotlán el Grande.

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Among the innumerable writings upon his death, I have the temerity to add these words, moved by my admiration and gratitude to the poet. Pacheco had gotten us used to not believing him when he said he was ill. How we would like to not believe him now that he has passed away, but death does not allow for incredulity given that it always seems unbelievable to us. The thing is that death always leaves us a little more alone.

José Emilio is quoted, of course, but above all, he is read a great deal. His is a voice that we became accustomed to and that does us good in times like these when culture seems bereft in his absence. José Emilio Pacheco was a great person, a great human being, a good man in the sense of Antonio Machado, as Enrique Krauze remembered in his goodbye speech at the National College.

There are commonplaces that language invents to fulfill those things that are difficult to express. Resorting to them is to run in search of the aid of proven formulas that are quite right in pointing out what it costs a great deal to say: that the oeuvre of José Emilio Pacheco, even without his presence, makes him remain forever; that we will pay homage to him constantly in the future, when new generations of readers are moved by his books; that he is and always will be a protagonist of the history of our letters. All of this is fair to say; however, nothing makes up for his absence, his simplicity, that bonhomie that did not trust his own fame and didn't take it seriously, in his kind sincerity that honors swept over toward the past with rare velocity; for the absence of his sharp intelligence and his poetic sensibility. Cristina Pacheco already said it, and now we say it with her: we will have to learn to speak in the present tense of someone who is no longer here, but, without a doubt, we will speak a great deal of him, in the present tense and forever. VM