

The World as Agora

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In the world of functional illiterates, books are distributed less and less. After half a century of economic development and its resulting middle class, half a century of speeches insisting on the importance of reading and spending on public and private education, most publishing runs of novels continue to be 1 000 copies. Poetry has suffered an even worse fate, descending into the catacombs.

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Without his presence in journalism, José Emilio Pacheco would not have achieved the recognition he did in life, but his greatest feat was that this recognition was the result of cultural and not political journalism. Although he understood perfectly well that cultural production cannot be dissociated from its political circumstances, and took the side of those who write as a service to the readers and make their writings an agora where the author and his readership converse, he never wrote with the intention of guiding the Prince and thus winning sinecures. Power represents a comedy of errors and trickery, of simulations and half-truths, or complete truths.

Politicians have their principles, but, as Groucho Marx remarked with barbed irony, if they don’t adapt to the circumstances, they can always be replaced without the least

hesitation or scruple. Unmasking the gesticulators was one of Pacheco's aims.

If our craft is making texts, the healthiness of our actions begins by honoring our means of expression.

Journalism was always José Emilio Pacheco's center of attention. His swift reading ability and his interest in everything around him, together with his prodigious memory, translated into solid erudition in literary, political, historical matters. His capacity for understanding and summary allowed him to process information and give the reader the essentials of a reading. His talent for putting together an article without losing sight of where the readers' center of interest lay and the importance of facts won him a multitudinous readership. To this, we would have to add a sharp sense of humor that always hit its mark.

From the start, José Emilio reviewed the literature of the day, and more broadly, the culture of the day. It all started at the magazine *Estaciones* (Seasons) and ended with *Proceso* magazine. Dr. Elías Nandino, who added to his professional practice a vocation for poetry, showed signs of enormous generosity and an authentic interest in disseminating literature by using his own funds and the scant advertising that he could get to breathe life into what is now the legendary *Estaciones*. He created a section, "Ramas nuevas" (New Branches), which he put in the hands of two young men with literary aspirations, José Emilio Pacheco and Carlos Monsiváis. Pacheco began writing most of the literary reviews and took charge of the section titled "Escolio de revistas" (Scholia of Magazines). Later, "with arms and letters," both of them went over to the supplement "México en la cultura" (Mexico in Culture), founded by Fernando Benítez. And there they continued—particularly Pacheco—to review the literature of the day. By then, José Emilio had acquired great skill in the genre. His reviews fulfilled the rules that should sustain them: informing about the content of a book, underlining its positive values and pointing out courteously—and Pacheco never strayed from courtesy—its weak points: the author of *Las batallas en el desierto* (Battles in the Desert) used to say that it was never his intention to besmirch the triumph of an author or make his/her failure more bitter. Restraint, anchored in solid knowledge of the themes he dealt with, distinguished his journalism.

Due to his warm friendship with Jaime García Terrés, who always appreciated his ethical rectitude, broad cultural knowledge, and excellent prose, José Emilio became part of the writing staff of *Revista de la Universidad de México* (Mag-

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azine of the University of Mexico). In 1960, he began his column "Sympathies and Differences," the forerunner of all his columns, though it changed names to "Calendar" in "La cultura en México" (Culture in Mexico), the supplement of *Siempre!* where Fernando Benítez and his collaborators found a new home when Ramón Beteta, editor of the *Novedades* daily, expelled them because of their sympathies for the Cuban Revolution. When he finished working at "México en la Cultura," Julio Scherer García invited Pacheco to enrich the editorial page of the daily *Excélsior*. In that newspaper's cultural supplement, "Diorama de la Cultura" (Diorama of Culture), edited first by Pedro Álvarez del Villar and then by Ignacio Solares, the last page offered a column called "Inventario" (Inventory) that appeared anonymously, as "Calendar" had before it. José Emilio continued with the same format as his other columns: miscellaneous content on occasion, obituaries, commentaries on books and authors of the day, translations of short poems, curious reports on politics and science, and every time the occasion merited it, Pacheco would launch a barb of irony or point with acute humor to foolishness, above all in those who evidenced their ignorance or recklessness. Those were the years of the Cold War, of the ferocious response of international power groups to the decolonization of Africa and Asia, of the fierce struggle in the arena of political propaganda between the United States and the Soviets with their outmoded morals. Mexico was experiencing a dynamic cultural life in the midst of authoritarianism that forbade innocent plays, tried to wage smear campaigns against writers who did not sympathize with the regime, and repressed expressions of social discontent with unnecessary violence, while new authors made novel proposals both of themes and technique. Our recent past in politics and letters was being examined more professionally.

José Emilio paid attention to all of this, and he chronicled it all, armed with surprising erudition and direct, precise prose, with turns that revealed his domination of narrative technique. He knew how to trap readers and keep their at-

tion. He invented didactic, surprising shadow dialogues based on his profound knowledge of the works of conversants who had already died. His monographic columns were true essays, but always pleasant. The sum of the *inventarios* (inventories) could be read as an encyclopedia of everything that went on in José Emilio's public life. Or, they can be read as the sum of voices that made up the face of the era. "Inventario," once in the pages of *Proceso*, is the consummation of an unrepeatable style in the genre of the journalistic column. While Novo wrote the chronicles of life in Mexico in the newspapers, we owe José Emilio for having enriched that chronicle from the cultural angle.

Once again, we have to emphasize José Emilio's precocity and great intellectual energy. The prose, notes, and comments from the column "Sympathies and Differences" are more the characteristics of a mature writer than those of a 22-year-old who seemed to know everything at such an early age. The inaugural article for the column dealt with André Malraux on the occasion of his visit to Mexico, summarizing the stellar moments of his biography: his participation in the Chinese Revolution of the 1920s, his membership in the World Anti-fascist Committee and the league against anti-Semitism; it mentions that he was the author of seminal books of contemporary literature; and it reproaches the mature man for turning his back on his past to become an inoffensive imaginary museographer. A miniature biography, with nothing wasted. Then, he focused on Cesare Pavese on the tenth anniversary of his suicide; praising him for having written the most valuable novels of his generation, among them *El diablo en las colinas* (The Devil in the Hills), Pacheco underlines the discovery of an unpublished novel, *Fuoco grande* (Great Blaze), whose theme is the suicide of the heroine, an older sister of Nabokov's *Lolita*, the angelical and diabolical little girl who was Humbert's perdition. The next theme is the news of an award for the as-yet-little-known Martin Luther King for his fight against racism; this article shows Pacheco's humanistic tone, which always characterized him. The devourer of infor-

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mation not only heard about the vicissitudes of politics abroad, but was a regular reader of the magazine *Cuadernos* (Notebooks), edited by Germán Arciniegas, where, after the recent death of Alfonso Reyes, he found the testimonies of his colleagues, great figures of other times: Octavio Paz, Germán himself, Mariano Picón Salas, and Eugenio Florit. Florit considered "Reyes's work one of the most impressive spectacles that Spanish letters can offer the world this century so far." Later, he read in *Esquire* magazine the "devastating" comments by critical-critic—as he calls him—Dwight McDonald, an illustrious example of the heights of foolishness reached by anticommunist propaganda. Dwight unmasked Sergei Eisenstein, a covert homosexual movie maker, which was easy to see because in *Ivan the Terrible* there were no women. Pacheco wrote, "Using that criterium—we don't know if naïve or ironic—it would be a good idea to review the good intentions of war movies, which transpire in submarines, jungles, or deserts, in which the only woman is the script-girl." In *L'Express*, Pacheco read about low rates of reading in France, where novels are 72 percent read by women and 51 percent by men. José Emilio asks himself, "Can anyone explain the best sellers?" Then, he briefly breaks the news of the publication of a translation of a short story by Juan Rulfo in *Chelsea* magazine, and he thinks it is biased that they mention that he was a two-time recipient of the Mexican Center for Writers fellowship.

Later, he read an article by Georges Markov in *Mercurio de France* about the relationship between Joyce and Gide, who was indifferent to the novel *Ulysses* and made no effort to understand how innovative it was, despite the fact that the Frenchman had always recognized the Irishman as someone of great talent. Later, he announces George Pilement's French translation of *La sombra del caudillo* (The Shadow of the Caudillo), Martín Luis Guzmán's great novel, in Gallimard's La Croix du Sud collection. And he concludes his column quoting François Mauriac about Jorge Luis Borges from his book *Mémoires intérieures* as saying, "My knowledge of the Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges is from yesterday as well as from today. It is too soon to say anything of value, but that reading has given us French writers of my generation the singular image that almost all of us are very clumsy."

Amazing. He was 22. It was 1960. He had reviewed the world of his day and had condensed it in a few pages. And he went on like that until the next-to-the-last week of January 2014.

The same words that he used to characterize Malraux could be applied to him: be no one to be all men. **NMM**