

MAPPING THE POETIC TOPOGRAPHIES OF JOSÉ EMILIO PACHECO'S LATEST WORK

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Mexico's José Emilio Pacheco (1939-) has written some of the most critically engaging poetry, prose, and essays in Spanish of the last fifty years.¹ In 2009, the year of his seventieth birthday, Pacheco's long career was honored with not one, but two major literary awards from Spain: first, the *Premio Reina Sofía de Poesía Iberoamericana* and then the prestigious *Premio Cervantes* - "el Nobel de las letras en español."² 2009 also marked the publication of two new Pacheco collections: *Como la lluvia: Poemas 2001-2008* and *La edad de las tinieblas: Cincuenta poemas en prosa*. In a recent and very rare published interview in *El País*, Pacheco describes, with his characteristic wit and modesty, the long creative process that led to these, his first books in nearly a decade: "La mayoría de los textos que haces son malísimos, para que te salga bien necesitas hacer 50 muy malos..." (Ordaz).³ To the question "¿Cómo agrupa los poemas?" Pacheco answers "Se van haciendo y de repente digo: aquí hay un libro, pero nunca me he propuesto escribir un libro de poesía" (Ordaz). Even if the poet does not write in terms of individual *poemarios*, Pacheco's two

¹ In the decade leading up to Pacheco's sudden burst of critical recognition (in Spain, at least) in 2009, his few works of prose fiction have seemed to garner more scholarly attention than his consistent poetic production: see, for example, the special edition of *La Torre: Revista de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* directed by Julio Ortega (2004) and 2006's *José Emilio Pacheco: Perspectivas Críticas* edited by Pol Popovic Karic and Fidel Chávez Pérez. The book *José Emilio Pacheco and the Poets of the Shadows* (2001) deals solely with the poems.

² "José Emilio Pacheco, Premio Cervantes." *BBC Mundo*. November 30, 2009. No pagination. Web. April 17, 2013.

³ To which Pablo Ordaz, the interviewer from *El País*, rightly responds "Tan malos no serán..." (Ordaz).

latest collections revisit the themes and styles that have run through all his work since *Los elementos de la noche* (1963): the mysteries of death, the pleasures of the reading life, the riddles of time and history, the false-promises of originality and authorship, the literary possibilities of modernized animal fables,⁴ and, finally, the poet's despair as witness to a sick world symbolized primarily by his beloved, unreal and apocalyptic Mexico City.

José Emilio Pacheco is a poet of time. Each of his fourteen main collections of poems contains texts that examine artifacts from the past and wonder at how they came to inhabit the poet's present moment. Not surprisingly, the aging poet's work since the year 2000 has been especially concerned with sickness, endings, and death. Recent major critical articles on the poetry have picked up on this trend by examining Pacheco's *mal du siècle* (Torres) or the deterioration and "concussive poetics" of Mexico City (Karam and Dowdy, respectively). Since the themes of time and decay are so pervasive in Pacheco's work as a whole, this essay will take an alternative approach, one that examines the poetic spaces, places, and forms of *Como la lluvia* and *La edad de las tinieblas*. As we shall see, a spatial reading of Pacheco reveals fresh ways of appreciating the poet's manipulation of metaphors and poetic forms, as well as his particularly unique struggles with the place of poetry in everyday life. Studies of space also bring new depth to our evolving understanding of Pacheco's lifelong obsession with *...como pasa el tiempo*.

Spaces and Places:

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau presents his distinct conception of the differences between "spaces" and "places." For Certeau, a place is the order in which "elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence;" it is an "instantaneous configuration of positions" (117). Spaces, on the other hand, contain another, more dynamic, dimension: "A *space* exists when one takes

⁴ See the recent articles by Randy Malamud ("The Culture of Using Animals in Literature and the Case of José Emilio Pacheco" *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal* 2:2, June 2000: [no pagination]) and Alvaro Salvador ("José Emilio Pacheco y los animales" *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 716, Feb. 2010, 115-126.) for more on Pacheco's treatment of animals.

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into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it" (117). (Interestingly, both of these spatial definitions include key temporal terms). So the Zócalo, for example, is a place in the heart of Mexico's historic district but it is also a space where Mexico's "informal economy" is practiced by street vendors, policy decisions are negotiated by politicians strolling between meetings, and the country's colonial and indigenous legacies collide as tourists snap photographs of the sinking cathedral and Templo Mayor.

A poem like "En la acera" benefits from the interplay of space and place to create a strong message about contemporary life. The first half of the text is set in Pacheco's main place (Mexico City) and explores the DF as a space in which the subject walks, talks, lives, and attempts to get by:

Fulgor del mundo en esta pobre hierba
Brotada de la calle en las ranuras
De la acera en pedazos.

Mal proyecto
Andar los desniveles de una ciudad
Hendida por fragores subterráneos.

Aquí no puede hablarse de tierra firme.
Somos los habitantes de una isla
Rodeada de temblores por todas partes.
(*Como la lluvia* 187)

In these first three stanzas, we are presented with a place ("la calle," "una ciudad") and then a description of the actions that occur there ("andar," "hablarse de tierra firme"). For this author, "aquí" is almost always Mexico City and the clues in the third stanza leave little room for other interpretations: many cities have roaring metros underfoot or suffer the whims of seismic activity but Mexico is one of few literally founded on an island, so the combination of these factors makes it hard to think of anywhere else. Still, the text does not name

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Mexico, and this fact, in combination with the use of the first person plural subject, opens up the text and makes it wider, more inclusive:

Quedan las ruinas del desastre aquel.
Siguen intactas, son el monumento
Al estrago que fue y será mañana.

La muerte acecha siempre,
El deterioro
Reina todos los días,
Marca y signo
De la ciudad en que nada permanece.

Sólo esta hierba ínfima,
Esta cumbre
Pisoteada, irrisoria, casi muerta
De sed cuando no hay lluvia.

A fuerza de endeblez
La hierba dura
Como señal del triunfo de la vida.
(*Como la lluvia* 187-88)

The open-ended allusions to "el desastre aquel" that happened where "we" live add depth to this poem by making it more about a shared way of life than simply about one place. This is a frequent move by Pacheco - as we shall see, the poet often uses individual or personal experiences to connect with a collective subject that includes his readers.

There are a few more spatial levels at work in this poem as well - the first concerns the borders of the natural and human worlds. The blades of grass that inspire the poem only appear after a sidewalk cracks. "Mal proyecto," the poet writes, not only of our attempts to navigate uneven city sidewalks but, by implication, the lack of planning that created this mess in the first place. As is often the case in Pacheco, nature is exacting a small amount of revenge for the ways in which humankind has overlooked and mistreated it: the grass is not only in an

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unwanted place, but is, like all plant (and animal) life in Mexico City, dying of thirst, and has been trampled ("pisoteada") by passers-by. Finally, the multi-voiced images of "fragores subterráneos," "temblores por todas partes" and "...el desastre aquel" could very easily be interpreted as the instability that plagues Mexico's politics, economy, and society. Even if the city is just Mexico, the collective subject reminds us readers that although we may not inhabit that specific place, we all live in spaces that share the similar circumstances (abuse of the environment, poor planning, and corruption).

Spaces of Confinement:

Reading with a spatial eye helps us identify a thematic and symbolic thread that might otherwise be overlooked in the first section of *Como la lluvia*, that is, the poet's repeated questioning of externally imposed limits. These zones appear at the intersections of space and power and take many forms in these texts: a fish tank, a prison tower, a poem, a mental hospital, a statue, a rowing galley, a monkey's cage, tuberculosis, dreams, all are images that contrast confinement with escape by delimiting freedom of movement through force.

In "Galeotes," for example, Pacheco starts right where he left off in "En la acera," by drawing the reader in with him (or, perhaps, moving out to accompany the reader) in a collective subject:

De las formas de infierno
Diseñadas en este mundo
Para hacer indeseable la existencia
La más amarga es nuestra condena.

Somos galeotes y en el viaje inmóvil,
Ritmado por el golpe de los tambores,
El látigo en la espalda no permite
Aflojar el esfuerzo un solo instante.

(*Como la lluvia* 22)

If "En la acera" omitted the proper name of Mexico to broaden the scope of its message to those living in other places, "Galeotes" first zooms in to a specific metaphor and then allows the reader to imagine

what is left vague, specifically, the identity of the slave-drivers. Slavedom is achieved and maintained through traditional disciplinary means of isolation, separation, and repetition in the text. The individual rowers share only misery and the chain that binds them ("No existe entre nosotros / Fraternidad alguna"(*Como la lluvia* 22)), so both their physical and mental movements are controlled - they are thus turned into what Michel Foucault has termed "docile bodies."⁵ In addition, the slaves cannot see daylight, quench their thirst, or hear anything but the beat of a drum. They are subjected to total sensorial control, are completely surveilled, and motivated by fear of "el látigo" and "la tortura."⁶ In the end, the poet laments, "Nadie juzga maldad la indiferencia: / Es envidia al que escapa / De esta prisión flotante, de estos remos / Que acompañan el viaje hacia la Nada"(*Como la lluvia* 23). The capitalized N of "Nada" widens and deepens the scope of the poem's conceit, though an analysis of the *space* of the slave ship clearly favors one interpretation over others. The third stanza reads "Afuerza de la tortura nuestros amos / Alcanzan otros puertos, intercambian / Oro, frutos, combates, mercancías"(*Como la lluvia* 22). This image highlights the actions that drop the slave galleon firmly in an economic context - the ship is a space in which powerless workers ("nosotros") are exploited for economic gain. The exercising of power is a means to an end and it's the pursuit of profit that defines the space of this poem. "Space," Certeau notes, "is a practiced place" (117). Furthermore, the rowers ("mulas ciegas") are even denied the ability to take pride in their contributions to the greater project they power since slave galleys are often contained in the enclosed belly or shielded body of a ship (for them, it is truly a "viaje inmóvil"). Finally, it should be noted that the intensity of the poem's images of torture negate the possibility that the slaves are in nothing but a self-imposed rat race.

⁵ See part three, section one of *Discipline and Punish* for a point by point discussion of how discipline can be achieved through the control of activity, space, time repetition, etc.

⁶ The prose poem "Reality Show" (*La edad de las tinieblas* 32) is another text explicitly about surveillance.

Among the many poems that explore prohibited spaces in the section "Los personajes del drama," we find a triptych dedicated to the unknown areas of mental illness. In Certeau's exploration of the ethnographic fable, he notes that the recording of the "position of the other (primitive, religious, mad, childlike, or popular) as a 'fable' is not merely to identify it with 'what speaks' (*fari*) but with a speech that does not know what it says" (160). As in translation, when a critic or reader decodes a fable, the goal is to "eliminate exteriority" by converting "noises" into "messages" (160). *Como la lluvia*'s "Cuadros del manicomio de Sansueña" (26), "El viento en los metales" (31), and the powerful "Tierra incógnita" (24) do this by offering interpretations of the "world apart" of mental illness.

In the first text, the poet writes that when we are faced with paintings like the "Cuadros del manicomio de Sansueña" our initial reaction is to egotistically distance ourselves from these "*interesting, fresh, spontaneous and naïve*" works of art. Pacheco acknowledges that these pieces represent another, distinct space but defines that space in terms of its relationship to time when writing that the paintings "llegan de otra caverna que no responde / A la cronología nuestra" (*Como la lluvia* 26). For these particular artists, we on the "outside" inhabit another kind of sanitarium, "otra institución no amurallada / pero igual de opresiva" (*Como la lluvia* 26). After thus establishing the existence of two separate spaces, each governed by its own inescapable timing and rules, the text's final lines provide a sardonic opinion about the therapeutic value of art. The poem tells us that we are indeed able to cross over and discuss these paintings with their makers, but only at the cost of never being able to return again.

The title "El viento en los metales" (*Como la lluvia* 31) establishes a space normally overlooked, what is sometimes called "negative space" in the visual arts, as the home for a poem about an autistic girl. As in the previous text, the speaker recognizes his distance ("La niña autista ¿es feliz / O lo parece desde mi extranjería?" (*Como la lluvia* 31)) from the girl's world, one that speaks to her in stimuli that the poetic voice is unable to sense: "cuanto piensan cubos de colores" (*Como la lluvia* 32). Despite the speaker's stated frustration at his inability to translate her words, he does acknowledge their poetry in his

space, even if they are a translation of senses he himself does not possess.

"Tierra incógnita" begins with this description of its subject: "Dice dadá, se hace pipí, suelta pupú, / Teme al guaguá y odia al miao. / Y sin cesar hay que cambiarle pañales" (*Como la lluvia* 24). Slowly, the verses reveal that this poem is not about a child but an old man that has left our mutually understandable context and moved into another, "una tierra incógnita que llamamos Alzheimer" (*Como la lluvia* 24). For Pacheco, Alzheimer's is a return to childhood, to innocence; it is a life lived in reverse. The speaker's way of understanding the mysterious distance between presence and absence the disease creates is through time: "Su victoria es ser de nuevo un recién nacido" (*Como la lluvia* 24). As with the artists in the sanitarium and the autistic girl, the poetic voice wonders if the senile are at peace, happy to be free of the demands and hard realities of their abandoned space in history.

Mental illness is an interpretive riddle not unlike death for Pacheco. A poem like "El gran ayer" that wonders at the aging process of a young man, now old, in a photograph continues the poet's career-long obsession with the poetics of *ubi sunt*. In this variation on the theme, a young man in a photo becomes the grandson of his children through a process in which "se desnace, crece al revés" (*Como la lluvia* 19). Since those that view the photo are in an inescapable process of aging, the young man in the photo seems younger and younger. In the end, however, the subjects both in and of the photo will share the same fate in death. Pacheco is the author of countless poems that cause us to ask if death is a place (a relationship of coexistence), a space (a practiced place) or simply another dimension outside of spatial relationships with a chronology and logic all its own.

"Los personajes del drama," the first movement of *Como la lluvia*, contains seventeen poems that butt up against mysterious frontiers of unknowable and impenetrable spaces. The sense of confinement these borders create is further highlighted by the images of freedom in the book's long second section, "Como si nada," which writes of the fluid distances created by the wind, the forest, rivers, and the planets.

The Moving Van has a Flat Tire:

The Practice of Everyday Life does not deal primarily with literary writing, which is characterized by the depth created by its metaphors, though Certeau's book does acknowledge that "indeterminacy" and "symbolization" ("the putting together of what coheres without being coherent" (202)) are key activities and defining characteristics of theory, which, like poetry, falls outside the suffocating economic opposition of supply and demand. Certeau, like Willis Barnstone and others, mentions the pleasing etymological curiosity of the word μεταφορά (metaphor) - which is written on the side of moving vans in present day Greece. Just as translation transports ideas from one language to another, metaphor is the trope of "transference" in which "a word or phrase is shifted from its normal uses to a context where it evokes new meanings" (*Princeton Encyclopedia* 760). In this way, all metaphors are spatial or geographic to a certain extent, only some resonate across and through a greater number of contexts than others and thus have more depth of meaning.

Pacheco's poetry has an unconventional relationship with metaphor, one that puts it in a sustained conversation with the borders of prose...and not only in his "poemas en prosa." In addition to the "flattened voice" or "prosaísmo" that Michael Doudoroff, Daniel Torres, Donald Shaw and others have noted in Pacheco, throughout his career, the poet has demonstrated a tendency to also flatten his metaphors by explicitly signaling one preferred interpretation to his readers and thus limit the number of readings possible. Pacheco's critics are divided on this issue. Torres (2006) and Mario Benedetti, for example, have explored the open nature of the poems. Benedetti writes, "el poeta mexicano ha usado siempre un lenguaje diáfano, de fácil captación, sin léxico rebuscado ni entrelíneas esotéricas" (126). Torres's conception of openness focuses on Pacheco's ability to embrace influences and genres indiscriminately. Articles by Hugo Rodríguez Alcalá ("Sobre José Emilio Pacheco y 'la poesía que sí se entiende'") and Samuel Gordon support this view that "los poetas ya no cantan ahora hablan" (255). On the other hand, as recently as 2006, Mario J. Valdés San Martín wrote that one of the "puntos cardinales" of Pacheco's aesthetics is the transformation of experiences from everyday

life through "un lenguaje abierto, metafórico, rico en polisemia y, en último caso, indeterminado" (92).

As these differing opinions show, Pacheco is truly a master in the art of opening and closing texts, that is, in the art of both showing and telling. By "showing" I mean the use of metaphoric or allegorical language and imagery to suggest a symbolic connection between an object or action and a concept or meaning. "Telling," on the other hand, is delivering a message directly in a poem, often through an editorial voice, rather than hinting at it through metaphor, or concealing it below the shifting sands of allegory. *Showing* opens texts while *telling* closes them by limiting interpretations through the use of specific details and the flattening of allegory. Modern readers are not accustomed to being told how to interpret a text - when a poet explicitly *tells* us a poem's implied message, instead of suggesting it to us through less "coherent" (Certeau's term) images, metaphors lose some of their interpretative depth and become flatter, with less space for figurative thought.

"El vecino de arriba" from *Como la lluvia* provides one example of many in Pacheco's latest work. The text opens with a famous epigraph from *La vida es sueño*: "En una encantada torre / por lo que sé, vive preso" (*Como la lluvia* 20). The stanzas describe a mysterious neighbor in an apartment above the speaker that haunts his days and nights with footfalls, strange bleats, and moans. The speaker has not seen his neighbor even once and can only guess how he stays alive up there since he never seems to leave. As a result of the growth in volume and intensity of the neighbor's protests, the speaker finally decides to move out. He has figured out, he claims, that "El vecino de arriba es Segismundo. / Sin tener culpa alguna fue condonado / A esta prisión desde que abrió los ojos" (*Como la lluvia* 21). One has to question why a writer as erudite as Pacheco would draw the interpretive strings so tightly closed in a poem like this. That is, why does the speaker come right out and tell us that "El vecino de arriba es Segismundo" in a poem with an epigraph explicitly from *La vida es sueño*? The text would have conveyed a similar message (and perhaps been more profound) *without* the epigraph or if Pacheco's metaphor were a simile with *como*. By setting us up with a well-known quote and then telling us that his upstairs neighbor *is* Segismundo, Pacheco is effectively diminishing our role as co-creators of meaning.

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One way to visualize the topography of "El vecino de arriba" is to picture an allegory comprised of two parallel story lines. The first is the life of the speaker, living in his apartment, the second *La vida es sueño*. In an effective allegory, or simile, one "story line" suggests another, the two lines run parallel, and yet they never quite touch. By stating that "El vecino de arriba es Segismundo" Pacheco makes the two lines come together and thus snuffs out the figurative depth in his text.

"*Mexican Curious: Jumping Beans*" from *La edad de las tinieblas* also relies on tension between showing and telling. The prose poem describes a small boy's wonder and revulsion over the tortured worms he finds while breaking open some jumping beans with a hammer. Instead of allowing that image to speak for itself, the poem is heavily glossed by an editorializing voice:

Los *jumping beans* son una alegoría insultante de nuestras vidas: estamos encerrados en un cuerpo, un lugar, un tiempo y un sector social que no elegimos... No podemos ir más allá de los muros que nos confinan entre una fecha de nacimiento y otra de muerte. Hagamos lo que hagamos nunca saldremos de la cárcel que nos ahoga bajo un yo inescapable.

(*La edad de las tinieblas* 19)

"El corredor" features a similar technique at work. The first two stanzas describe a corner of a park in which a group of older men, and possibly women, congregate. This space is deliberately separate, and yet visible, from another section of the park where the younger crowd publicly does its exercises. In the third stanza, the speaker uses four sentences to describe his favorite athlete - the runner of the title. In light of the opposition of old and young set up in the first two stanzas, the symbolism of an older runner does not need explanation by this poetic voice, and yet, explain is exactly what it does in each of the poem's final lines: first, he comes out and tells us that the runner is competing against his former self, next, that he's trying to out-run old age, sickness, and death, and how each step he takes, each meter run, is a small, provisional victory against the end of life. This poem is not entirely closed, there is still some room for interpretation, especially in

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the "enemigos que se disponen a acabar con nosotros" (*La edad de las tinieblas* 36) of the last line, but, for the most part, the observer of the runner in the poem acts as both writer and reader by giving us an image rich in symbolism and then interpreting it aloud for us in the text.

Pacheco does this constantly. It could, for all intents and purposes, be called the dominant metaphorical mode of his later poetry.⁷ Some of his texts, such as "Invencible" (*La edad de las tinieblas* 56) or "Un ritual" (*La edad de las tinieblas* 57-58) start out as riddles that the poetic voice sets up and then divulges the answer to, while others, like "Elogio del jabón" (*La edad de las tinieblas* 7) begin with a circular union of opposites that is then inverted. It might seem that this technique would be more prevalent in the "poemas en prosa," but it is ubiquitous in Pacheco. "Nocturno de Viena," for example, uses a place (the Austrian city) as a space in which a speaker experiences the fall of other empires. Instead of suggesting or implying this connection obliquely, the poet instead states it in each of the poem's two stanzas:

Mientras que con pasión de anticuario ilícito
- No hablo el idioma - exploraba el fin
Del imperio austro-húngaro -
Otros imperios
Se derrumbaban a mi lado.

Absorto en el esplendor
De Viena al borde de su atroz abismo,
No alcancé a percibir el pozo de sombra
En que se hundió con mi propia época
Todo el mundo que me rodeaba.
(*Como la lluvia* 69)

While each text presents a depth of metaphor unique to itself, nearly all of Pacheco's recent poems feature the editorializing voice that

⁷ In his discussion of Pacheco's "prosaísmo," Daniel Torres signals the freeing up of poetic rhythm; the inclusion of normally "non-poetic," concrete, and everyday subjects; and the reliance on direct, everyday language that seeks clarity (121).

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guides his readers into meanings laid out in the verses. We do not have to accept these directives, of course, but, more often than not, they offer the strongest interpretations. So how can we interpret the politics of texts such as these that diminish our role or power as co-creators of meaning? The arts, especially poetry and easel painting, have always wrestled with the paradoxical push and pull of the exclusivity of their audience. The poems that are the most indeterminate and open to interpretation by their readers are usually those that speak to the smallest audience of elites and academics (Cubist collages, for example). Texts that teach by guiding us to one interpretation are often the most closed to alternative readings and therefore the most accessible to the public at large (such as certain historical sections of Diego Rivera's murals at the Palacio Nacional). The hermetic difficulty of the former creates a small and privileged secret society of readers who hold the keys to what Certeau calls "orthodox" readings which reject others as "heretical" or "insignificant" (171). Despite the erudition of his intertexts, Pacheco's work rejects the exclusivity of hermetic poetry and balks at the creation of "private hunting reserves" (Certeau 171) for a small core of cognoscenti. And so as critics we are left with the tension between a poetic voice that signals us in one direction and also teases, as in this epigraph from Virgilio Ferreira, "Lo más importante de una obra de arte es lo que no se dice" (*Como la lluvia* 166).

Circles and Cycles and the Joining of Opposites:

The brief poem "Pan" demonstrates three of the main characteristics of Pacheco's latest work. The first is an editorializing title that guides our interpretation of the first stanza, the second, the use of "nosotros" to break down the distance between speaker and reader and create a shared space in the poem:

Eres lo que no miente,
Eres la verdad
Hecha de agua, de sol y tierra.

En ti podemos comer
La materia devoradora.

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Al final
Seremos alimento para tu espiga.
(*Como la lluvia* 58)

The third signature technique here is the unexpected combination or union of opposites - a practice that both limits and guides our interpretation of the text and creates a circular or cyclical image in the mind of the reader. Since his earliest work, Pacheco has been fascinated by twins and polar oppositions and the circular joining of opposites is present in a countless number of his poems. "Una hoja" for example, contrasts a shriveled and dead autumn leaf with an active, thinking, and writing speaker. When the speaker picks up the leaf that blew in through his open window it disintegrates, right before the poem's final verse: "Polvo somos" (*Como la lluvia* 60).

The living and the dead are also joined cyclically in "Moralidades":

Nuestro pueblo practica la moral
Y hace de cada acto una lección ética.

Aquí nunca enterramos a los muertos.
Los dejamos pudrirse en la plaza pública

Para que esta final humillación
Nos obligue a mirarnos como somos.
(*Como la lluvia* 51)

One of the main missions of Pacheco's poems is to create a space in which oppositions such as life and death or good and evil can be identified and their relationship examined. In "Folletines y melodramas" he addresses this concept directly:

En realidad mis obras predilectas
Son las inconfesables que distinguen
Entre buenos y malos sin matices.

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Reconforta pensar: Estoy del lado
Del bien y la justicia y al final
Encontrarán castigo los villanos.

Ya que en el mundo nada de esto ocurre
Me acojo a la ilusión por un instante:
La verdad es dolorosa y no la acepto.
(*Como la lluvia* 70)

In life it is sometimes difficult to sort through good and evil and this poem praises the kind of popular fiction that creates an escapist space in which we don't have to work so hard to see what is what. The way this is achieved in the speaker's "obras predilectas," coincidentally, is by telling the viewer explicitly who is good and who is evil and limiting, refreshingly, the public's necessity for judging for ourselves. The longing for a lost innocence haunts the work of the aging poet in lines such as these: "La vida se me acaba sin entender de qué se trata. El mundo insiste en ser como es, no como yo quisiera" (*La edad de las tinieblas* 20).

Form, Narrative, and Narrative Forms:

There are as many ways to write about form as there are forms to be written about. Pacheco's "Formas del mar" (*Como la lluvia* 119) is a poem in five parts that centers on images like a pier, a boat or a beach house that inhabit points of contact between separate places and spaces (earth, sea, sky, air, danger, safety, etc.). A spatial reading highlights the intermediary quality of images like bridges and the depth they bring to a text through the tension of the worlds they span. In "Muelle," the speaker compares the fate of a pebble tossed into the depths of the sea with the act of writing a poem and sending it out the public "como si fuera importante" (*Como la lluvia* 120). The ocean, like other forces of nature, is characterized by its ever-changing form and is a dominant power in Pacheco's world, while structures created by humankind (a pier, a beach house, a cruise ship, or a finely crafted sonnet) are more likely to suffer from hubris and perish.

Part four of "Formas del mar," "Barco fantasma," revisits a space Pacheco has returned to frequently in his poems and stories: a

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scene in which human beings are visited by ghosts. In this variation, a crew leaves a naval vessel in a launch to investigate an unknown and unresponsive vessel spotted seven miles off the "Barlovento islands." After inspecting the abandoned ship, the crew returns to its own to find that it is now empty, the previously deserted ship is inhabited, and that they themselves are ghosts. This poem creates a new space for the reader, one in which elements of our own reality (reinforced through seemingly true details) are made deeper through the doubts raised by the addition of fantastic events.

Pacheco's ghosts,⁸ relics from the past,⁹ and dead that speak¹⁰ transgress the spaces of everyday life - they disturb the reader in much the same way as Certeau's description of Robinson Crusoe's reaction to finding a human footprint on his island. Before Crusoe identifies the maker of the print (Friday), his world is in "disorder" due to a "presence of absence" (155) - "Disorder is due to the mark of something past and passing" (154) or a trace. The most effective vehicle for creating a reality such as this is prose or narrative poetry and many of Pacheco's poems, even those that are not "prose poems," per se, provide a "verbal presentation of sequence of events or facts ... whose disposition in time implies causal connection and point" (814).

"Algas" from *La edad de las tinieblas* is both cyclical and narrative in the sense that it tells a story of the evolution and destruction of humankind in thirteen brief lines.¹¹ To sum up, in a time

⁸ The presence of ghosts could perhaps explain the identity of the neighbor in "El vecino de arriba."

⁹ Pacheco's numerous poems about relics focus more on time than space. They tend to contrast an object assumed permanent with the constant change brought about by time or memory: "Como un ácido la desmemoria socava las reliquias. Su corrosión lo desordena todo y nos obliga a pensar: la vida está hecha para ser y desvanecerse, no para atestarla de *souvenirs*" ("Ámbar" (*La edad de las tinieblas* 12)). See also "Interrogaciones" (*La edad de las tinieblas* 15), "Una tarde" (*La edad de las tinieblas* 17), "Despoblación" (*La edad de las tinieblas* 22), among many others.

¹⁰ See, for example, "Recoger los pasos" (*Como la lluvia* 128-29).

¹¹ Other narrative "story poems" from *La edad de las tinieblas* include "Austral/Boreal" (14), "A la extranjera" (31), "Otro espejo" (47), "Pacto" (55) and "El invicto" (59).

before human beings, the world was filled with algae. This algae created oxygen which, over the course of millions of years, started the chain of beings that began as bacteria and evolved into different animals. Knowledge grew and so did the system of writing that would eventually define us as humans. Pacheco uses a speedy presentation to put momentum behind this narrative arc - so much momentum, in fact, that a speedier fall comes as no surprise when we reach the third paragraph: "Hoy ya no existe lo que duró un tiempo sin edad ni memoria. / Una bomba lo deshizo en segundos. / Ya hemos comenzado el retorno a las algas" (*La edad de las tinieblas* 13). What could be more representative of Pacheco's poetics? "Algas" blurs the lines of genre (is it a poem? a narrative poem? a prose poem? a *microrrelato*?), features a moralizing "narrator," and leads us to a cyclical conclusion in which opposites are united through death. The poem contrasts the natural world with the spaces of humankind and warns the readers about the destruction and violence that looms on the fringes of everyday life.

Aproximaciones:

Throughout his career, Pacheco has been a defender of poems, rather than poets. "La poesía no es de nadie: se hace entre todos" he wrote through the heteronym Julián Hernández¹² in *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo* back in the late sixties. Pacheco fights the modernizing effects of writing that Certeau, François Furet, and Jacques Ozouf have identified as leading to "the disintegration of the group to the advantage of the individual" (Certeau 168). As most recent criticism has acknowledged, intertextuality is a literary *a priori* for Pacheco's readers - even the Hernández quote above is a loose translation of a maxim by La Fontaine. The section "Celebraciones y homenajes" of *Como la lluvia* is a collection of free translations of classical poets, atemporal pastiche of contemporaries, creative nonfiction, fictional historical events, and more.¹³

¹² Hernández reappears in the epigraph to *Como la lluvia*.

¹³ Much has been written about these texts, most recently the article by Ignacio Ruiz-Pérez.

These texts not only transgress the established borders of authorship and authority but also of the acts of reading and writing. Like Pacheco's circular poems and those that show that opposites are rarely separated cleanly, the *celebraciones* and *homenajes* break down the walls between reading and writing, between passive and active consumption. As Certeau notes: "The social and technical functioning of contemporary culture hierarchizes these two activities. To write is to produce the text; to read is to receive it from someone else without putting one's own mark on it, without remaking it" (169). In his *celebraciones*, Pacheco's authorship sounds more like Certeau's definition of a reader: "He invents in texts something different from what they 'intended.' He detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings" (169). He challenges our definitions and expectations of what is and is not a "readable space" (171).

In books that are characterized by the flattening of metaphor, Pacheco's texts that explicitly "poach" the words of others are among the deepest. These poems move in the direction of what Certeau calls "a common poetics" (172) - one in which both readers and writers can create meanings outside the confining and well-surveilled spaces of social hierarchies. Certeau claims that "reading has no place... readers are travellers... like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write" (174) but José Emilio Pacheco's work defies this category by bringing the vagabond poaching of the reader to the "foundational" mission of the writer.

Clearly, the concept of intertextuality has a threatening side, especially to those in academic settings (read: plagiarism). Through the twentieth century, the impulse that drove theorists to proclaim the death of the author and the autonomy of the text is not without a political dimension. We have already discussed how poems such as "Galeotes" participate in this dialogue by defining power through surveillance and spaces of confinement. Pacheco's poems that feature explicit intertextuality are overt efforts to create spaces outside of the power of conventional author-text-reader relations.

"Paraquet" (10) from *La edad de las tinieblas*, for example, offers a clever metaphor of intertextuality in which the speaker names a

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pet parakeet "Paraquet" after a line in Gabriel Zaid's poem "Cuervos," "paraké" (¿para qué?). The parakeet that only asks "why?" is compared to the fabled mirrored bird brought to the last Aztec ruler Montezuma. The images she saw in the bird foretold the arrival of Cortés.¹⁴ Pacheco's poem ends with the observation that very few of us are able to see ourselves in the "paraquet" and answer the existential question "why?" "Parquet" is a literary space in which many levels of intertexts cross. Still, throughout his career, Pacheco has shown how not only texts that feature quotes but all literary texts are spaces comprised of intersecting voices from many other sources. In this way, the space of poetry is similar to the space of a play - both have a specific place (the written page, the stage) but are only meaningful when experienced as a chorus of voices and actions.

Time and Space:

As we mentioned at the start of this study, Pacheco is a poet of time and spatial readings help us see new aspects of the role of time in his work. The brief "El año pasado," for example, shows the dynamic nature of space and subjectivity in Pacheco. Amid the fluid comings and goings of time and the speaker, the poet juxtaposes the inflexible limit of death:

Pasó por mí el año pasado.
Pasé a través de él como si fuera un fantasma.
Pasó por aquí sin vernos.
A su paso dejó más muertos
Y fue a morir entre los otros pasados.

(Como la lluvia 88)

All of the poetry of José Emilio Pacheco deals with the interplay of time and space in one way or another and as we have seen, a reading that privileges space, rather than the dominant theme of time, reveals forms and contexts that might otherwise elude us. Pacheco's poetic voice both expands and contracts his metaphors and relies

¹⁴ Details of the bird and its reflective properties vary - some claim its eyes were like mirrors, others that it wore a mirror on the crest of its head.

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heavily on circular forms to bring together opposites. As Daniel Torres and others have noted, his narrative techniques allow him to extend and order time within the compact space of his characteristically short poems. Most importantly, Pacheco's work creates a new space for us, one that functions outside the vicious cycle of production and consumption that rules capitalist societies. He rejects the view of literary works as "objects of exchange" in which authors become brands. As he wrote in "Una defensa del anonimato," poetry for Pacheco is truly what Certeau calls a space, a meeting space:

una forma de amor que solo existe en silencio,
en un pacto secreto entre dos personas,
de dos conocidos casi siempre....

Poesía no es signos negros en la página blanca.
Llamo poesía a ese lugar de encuentro
con la experiencia ajena. El lector, la lectora
harán, o no, el poema que tan sólo he esbozado.

(*Tarde o temprano* 74)

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