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A Comala of the Mind: José Emilio Pacheco's Early Theory of Influence

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One poem that sneaks its way into most of the criticism written on José Emilio Pacheco (Mexico, 1939-) is "Legítima defensa": "La poesía no es de nadie, se hace entre todos" (*Irás y no volverás* 59).¹ In both its content and context, this brief text provides an accurate description of Pacheco's work since *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo* (1969). "Legítima defensa" is an explicit declaration of the poet's belief that it is natural that all texts mix and blend with others. In fact, the poem itself is a un-cited quotation from Lautréamont that Pacheco has recycled and published numerous times under the heteronym Julián Hernández. As various critics have noted, the nature of the literary text is a central concern of Pacheco's poetics.² Even in poems that are not attributed to pseudonyms, such as "D.H. Lawrence y los poetas muertos" from 1973's *Irás y no volverás*, poetic influence is portrayed as a free and open exchange with other texts and poets.

No desconfiemos de los muertos
que prosiguen viviendo en nuestra sangre
No somos ni mejores ni distintos
Tan sólo nombres y escenarios cambian
Y cada vez que inicias un poema
convocas a los muertos

Ellos te miran escribir
te ayudan. (*Irás* 49)

This is the *persona* Pacheco promotes in his work, that of the poet who has an amicable relationship with tradition, one who agrees wholeheartedly with Eliot's famous maxim that "Good poets borrow and great poets steal." For Pacheco, they cannot help but do so because authorship is an illusory construction. And the Mexican poet backs up these words by publishing anonymously, under heteronyms, and by including loose transla-

tions of other poet's work in each of his books (his famous *aproximaciones*). Pacheco also eschews the literary spotlight by doing few public readings and refusing to grant interviews.³

Today José Emilio Pacheco is generally acknowledged as Mexico's foremost poet and literary mentor and his life is immersed in reading, teaching, and publishing. In order to arrive at such a station in the writing life, one must first pass through certain rites of initiation, especially concerning the ideas of literary influence and originality. In the early sixties, when Pacheco published *Los elementos de la noche* (1963), no young poet could have established him or herself simply on ideas of intertextuality. This was a strong moment for poetry in Mexico that saw new work from poets such as Rosario Castellanos, Jaime Sabines, and Efraín Huerta. It is also the time when Paz's monumental "Piedra de sol" and *Salamandra* burst onto the scene. In a literary environment as fertile as this one, the young artist must first prove him or herself before experimenting with more unconventional notions of originality.

In his early work, Pacheco deals with influence in a manner inconsistent with and even contradictory to his present theories. These early texts feature speakers that project themselves into characters and situations that deal with author-ity in direct and not-so-direct ways. In these pages we will witness manifestations of Pacheco's anxiety of influence in the stories "La sangre de Medusa" and "El enemigo muerto" from the collection *La sangre de Medusa*. The poem "Éxodo" from *Los elementos de la noche* will then show how the ideas on influence that were conceived in prose took form in poetry, Pacheco's strongest and most prolific medium.

The term anxiety of influence stems from Harold Bloom's work on the subject. One of the main building blocks of Bloom's theory is the audacious assertion "that the meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but *another poem, a poem not itself*" (*The Anxiety of Influence* 70). This precursor poem is not picked arbitrarily but is instead:

... any central poem by an indubitable precursor,
even if the ephebe *never read* that poem. Source study
is wholly irrelevant here; we are dealing with primal
words... and an ephebe's best misinterpretations may
well be of poems he has never read. (70)

For Bloom, poetic influence is the tradition of poetry and, in the final analysis, is *poetry itself*. After all, if a poet is to claim a place in the literary spotlight, she or he must do it through some connection, be it positive or negative, with the past.⁴ The poet must be somehow like and unlike the precursor, a state achieved through the slight change the young writer ef-

fectuates in his or her text to differentiate it from its mediator. This *clinamen* or swerve is the little touch of originality that sets an imitation apart from its model and it is where the young poet shows his or her particular talent.

The anxiety part of Bloom's equation is what artists are more reluctant to acknowledge. The desire to create verses that are somehow familiar to reader and yet still boldly original creates a double bind for the young poet. One can only imagine the long shadow cast across the literary world by Octavio Paz. At the hour of creation, a young Mexican poet such as José Emilio Pacheco would have to deal with this presence in one way or another and this is his or her source of anxiety. For Bloom, the precursor and the ephebe (or young poet) are in an adversarial relationship, one in which the later must go through a series of paces that symbolically distance away with the precursor-as-father. Obviously, this contrasts with Pacheco's portrayal of tradition in "D.H. Lawrence y los poetas muertos" in which the writer expresses his kinship with the past. In these terms, text such as this is a swerve from the reality of the situation, a defensive mechanism in which the poet covers up the shame of having borrowed from another.⁵ If this sounds far fetched, let us remember that "D.H. Lawrence y los poetas muertos" is a variation on a quotation from Lawrence himself and that the first poem we mentioned is technically plagiarized from Lautréamont. What's more, it is entitled "Legítima defensa." This title, absent in the French original, is the swerve Pacheco adds to the text to make it his own. It also proves the poet's defensive stance before the subject of influence. These ideas, which Pacheco conjugates through the entire body of his work, find their origin in his prose, especially in the stories we are about to explore.

La sangre de Medusa (1958), Pacheco's first prose collection, has been re-edited, re-worked, and re-published three times with different versions of the original stories and prologue.⁶ The narratives themselves are violent and disturbing. In the title story, for example, Perseus's decapitation of the Gorgon Medusa is juxtaposed with a domestic spat between Fermín and Isabel in which the husband kills his wife with a kitchen knife. After manipulating the two separate story lines, the tales are brought together and resolved in the final paragraph with the sentence "Al centro de la tumba que los sepulta en vida Perseo y Fermín son el mismo hombre sus historias forman una sola historia" (*La sangre de Medusa* 26). This closing action is reminiscent of the fiction of Cortázar or, more importantly, of certain stories by Borges, such as "La muerte y la brújula," in which adversaries or strangers are united in their fate. In fact, the specter of Borges is quite obvious to the reader of Pacheco's early work and is re-

peatedly inscribed in the collection by way of imitation, allusion, and epigraph.

It is telling, however, that such an explicit nod be cast towards Borges in a story that deals with Perseus. The fate of Perseus, like that of Oedipus, was foretold by the Oracle of Delphi who prophesied that the hero would slay not only the Medusa but his own grandfather, Acrisius. Perseus, in the myth and in Pacheco's faithful reproduction, is a demigod who is unhappy with his place in life. This feeling is especially strong towards his father Zeus. In fact, there is tension in all the paternal-filial relationships: Cronos-Zeus, Zeus-Perseus, and Acrisius-Perseus. All of these encounters are tinged by vengeance and death, and, in the end, Perseus inadvertently does kill Acrisius with a discus as the prophet had foretold.

In an attempt to deal with the anxiety of influence, a writer will often project him or herself onto fictional characters that carry out battles with the precursor on the page. In the story "La sangre de Medusa," for example, Perseus represents the poet while the father figures recall the precursors the youth must deal with in order to achieve success. This metapoetic subtext is signalled by triggers such as "la espada de Hermes" (*La sangre de Medusa* 24). The young Perseus must rely on both the advice of his father (his precursors - tradition) and the sword/pen of Hermes, the god of writing. In this way, the story of Perseus, Zeus, and Acrisius is a parallel to that of Pacheco and his precursor, in this case, the unnamed Borges. Thus, the relationship between these two textual levels is allegorical. One of the decisions made by the poet in the mysterious creative process is to speak of something other (allegory < Greek *agorein* (to speak) + *allos* (other)) than his anxiety of influence. This is the principal swerve Pacheco employs in his work to deal with his own personal ghosts.

In future texts, Pacheco's main swerve from Borges (and Paz, for that matter) can be seen in poems that deal directly with socio-political realities. Issues such as the massacre of student protesters at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas (Tlatelolco), the conquest, or the cultural imperialism of the United States outrage the poet, much as the agonistic perspective on literature does. The belief in intertextuality involves an aesthetic as well as political stance. Even though this outer-looking eye appears blind in his first poems, by the late seventies, the poetry of witness is a key element to Pacheco's poetics.

The main story in *La sangre de Medusa* to foreground the theme of literary influence is "El enemigo muerto." This text is narrated by an unnamed apprentice to Roberto Castillo, a master writer. In the tale, the assistant tells of his earlier experiences working under Alberto Zelaya, another distinguished author. The disciple's frustrated attempts at literature are mentioned early in the narrative, as is the fact that the world would be

shocked to see Zelaya's rough drafts before he corrected them (*La sangre de Medusa* 41). The body of this brief story focuses on Zelaya's battles with other authors, headed by Castillo. This writer jealously sets the literary community against Zelaya and accuses him of being a "poetastro, plagiaro de las revistas europeas, explotador de sus ayudantes, delincuente de la novela" (*La sangre de Medusa* 45). Eventually the pain and disgrace of these criticisms pushes the older writer to suicide. Speaking at Zelaya's funeral, Castillo benevolently admits "Lo combatimos, sí, porque lo admirábamos" (*La sangre de Medusa* 45). This gesture illustrates the competitive nature of the writer and how he usurps his precursor. The final irony lies in the fact that Castillo eventually assumes all the positions previously held by Zelaya, including that of boss of the narrator-apprentice.

"El enemigo muerto" is an important early sign of José Emilio Pacheco's distaste for the intrigues of the literary establishment and his reluctant association with fame. The story exposes creative originality as a charade by focusing on the importance of the apprentice in the creative process. Still, this is a double edged sword because the student who considers his own powers superior to that of his teacher is falling into the same trap he denounces. His pride tricks him into believing that only he is able to rewrite his precursor with the corrections (swerves) that will complete the later's work and remedy his shortcomings. In his youthful idealism, the writer views himself as the ultimate supplement but, in actuality, is merely an unknowing parallel of "el entonces discípulo amado Roberto Castillo" (*La sangre de Medusa* 43). The inter-personal connections Pacheco exploits in "El enemigo muerto" and "La sangre de Medusa" illustrate an intimate knowledge of the agonistic relationship between beginning and established writers. After *La sangre de Medusa*, most of Pacheco's stories forsake the allegorical, metaliterary mode discussed here - allegory is still used, but to different ends. Without ever abandoning the currents explored by Rulfo, Fuentes, Borges, and Cortázar, Pacheco's later prose work, with few exceptions, is more involved with the exploration of the limits of reality and genre than with battles with precursors. Still, these ideas, which find their genesis in the early stories, form a sort of primal scene that both attracts and repels the young poet and informs his later notions of influence.

Even though the focus of Pacheco's prose turns away from influence, his poetic works consider the subject at length. In fact, one could easily make the argument that, along with the destructive effects of time, literary authority is the main theme of Pacheco's poetry. Elsewhere, I trace the evolution of this theory of influence through Pacheco's first six books of poems.⁷ In brief, Pacheco begins by immersing the figure of the poet into scenes of battle which allegorically describe the struggle with the precu-

sor. This model is modified in *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo*, a book which is replete with poems that attempt to flatten allegory by exposing metapoetic layers that were hidden in *Los elementos de la noche* and *El reposo del fuego* (1966). In later books, however, the poet embraces the concept of intertextuality seen previously in "Legítima defensa," while still returning in certain poems to an agonistic model of influence. Nevertheless, his conversion is never complete and the tension between these two poles sustains the middle period of his work.

One poem that typifies Pacheco's agonistic vision of influence is "Éxodo" from *Los elementos de la noche*.⁸ As in the story "La sangre de Medusa," a common alter ego for Pacheco surfaces in this poem: the poet as warrior.

En lo alto del día eres aquel que vuelve
a borrar de la arena la oquedad de su paso;
el héroe miserable que *escapó del combate*
y apoyado en su escudo mira arder la derrota;

(1-4, my emphasis)

This poem concludes the third section of *Los elementos de la noche* and provides a brief pause in the flow of the book. The first two verses allude to the Borges-Carpentier commonplace of the hidden origin, an idea that simultaneously summons up the quest for poetic originality. Pacheco often writes from an ironically doubled perspective in which an inner poet and critic engage in debates on the page.⁹ A clue to the identity of these two voices is provided in the introduction to *Tarde o temprano*, Pacheco's selected poems: "La historia de la literatura se escribe en términos militares" (10). If the military battles of "Éxodo" are seen in terms of literary influence, the hero resting on his shield, surveying the fields of his defeat, can only be the poet himself being addressed in the second person by an inner double. This speaker (a critical voice) addresses the writer's desire to cover his tracks. While the poet, like Perseus, has barely survived the battles that led to the production of this, his first book, and appears defeated in the end (by the knowledge of the dominating presence of his predecessors). He lacks the courage and confidence necessary to defeat his precursor, and this is why the third verse portrays "el héroe miserable que *escapó del combate*": warriors should not retreat from their battles - for them, escape is never an option. In order to be successful, the poet knows that he must fight harder to create. "Éxodo" continues:

el náufrago sin nombre que se aferra a otro cuerpo
para que el mar no arroje su cadáver a solas;
el perpetuo exiliado que en el desierto mira
crecer hondas ciudades que en el sol retroceden;
el que clavó sus armas en la piel de un dios muerto;
el que escucha en el alba cantar un gallo y otro,
porque las profecías se están cumpliendo: atónito
y sin embargo cierto de haber negado todo;
el que abre la mano
y recibe la noche.

(5-14)

In these metamorphoses, the poet becomes an anonymous drowned man clinging to a corpse in order to save himself, and then a delirious exile in the desert, chasing mirages. Finally, and most significantly, the poet is painted as a warrior who has savaged the body of a dead god. He is portrayed as listening to the song of the rooster at dawn, and understanding its prophetic fate. These four images are clearly metapoetic. The first two describe the writer as lost without the company of an Other, and the final two employ battle imagery to describe the struggle for creative freedom. The poet's conflict with the precursor is never resolved because it is impossible to completely exorcise the ghosts of other voices from one's poems. Like Dante's guide Virgil, he will never be alone in his passage through the shadowlands. Still, a young poet does not know this and so influence as defeat rather than natural and necessary to his process of maturity.

The image of he who hears the song of the rooster is an allusion to the muse-figure. In this tradition, the poet acts as a conduit who receives inspiration from outside. The image also recalls the poet's (as well as Perseus's) association with prophecy. The prophetic mode allows one to transcend time, it is the ability to foresee actions and speak for others. Although we are not told what the prophecy is that is being completed, it obviously surprises the poet. Line twelve contains a strange description of the writer: he who is certain of having denied or negated everything. In the context of influence, this refers to the young poet's naive confidence in his originality, in his power to overcome and negate the movement toward the precursor. A more experienced poet is able to embrace the fact that the cycle formed by the building up and sudden destruction of this confidence is what writers must endure in order to be able to create.

The final image is a return to mystery. Receiving the night is not understandable in strictly literal terms. It is a figurative way of describing the secrets of poetic creation that were exposed in the verses that came before.

In this light, "Éxodo" is clearly a poem about influence because the text presents a series of images that fall around or about the central issue of imitation. Like the use of allegory, the vague and intuitive final verse is a way for the young Pacheco to seal his poem with an *aenigma*. He presents various theories of influence and yet does not commit himself to any single one.

Pacheco's early work is replete with such mysteries. In "Contra un diálogo inmóvil," for example, the poet repeats the haunting refrain "Alguien te sigue a veces en silencio" and describes this Other in terms that recall the precursor: "Frágil perseguidor que eres tú mismo" (*Los elementos de la noche* 9). The precursor is a strong presence in these texts, always hanging over the poet's shoulder like a personification of death, and this predecessor is always a re-creation. The focus here is obsessively internal and the battles of influence take place in the mind of the poet and on the page. In fact, these poet-speakers are self-reflexive to the point of being narcissistic. In *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo*, *Irás y no volverás*, and *Islas a la deriva*, the allegorical portrayal of an agonistic model of influence drops to the background. Allegory is flattened and metapoetry on any level is replaced by social and political messages that place far less importance on the figure of the writer. Still, the world of Pacheco's early poetry and fiction is never far behind. It is like Comala, the setting of *Pedro Páramo*, in which an insecure and fragmented Juan Preciado enters into dialogues with the dead. It is a return to a dark, inner world - a search for a lost origin that leads a confused protagonist always back to the tomb of his father.

● NOTES

1. "Legítima defensa" is used as an epigraph in the *Aproximaciones* section of *Irás y no volverás* (59), *Islas a la deriva* (63) and later books. The poem is attributed to Julián Hernández, a fictitious poet that Pacheco created, à la Pessoa, in *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo*. Paul Knight's translation reads: "Poetry must be made by everyone. Not by one" (279).

2. Critics have spent less time discussing intertextuality in Pacheco's prose than in his poetry. Barbara Bockus Aponte mentions "un eco del estilo sencillo y lírico de Rulfo en la obra de Pacheco, algo del ambiente mágico que ilumina sus cuentos trágicos, y de su visión fatalista del mundo" (198). See also Jorge Ruffinelli's article "Al encuentro de la voz común: notas sobre el itinerario narrativo de José Emilio Pacheco." Both are found in the anthology edited by Hugo Verani, *La hoguera y el viento: José Emilio Pacheco ante la crítica*

3. See "Una defensa del anonimato" from 1983's *Los trabajos del mar* which addresses these ideas directly.

4. Bloom's model (with its basis in Freud) has rightly been criticized for its exclusion of the feminine. Still, even Bloom's most ardent foes will concede the presence of agon in literature. In a recent essay, Lisabeth Daring has proposed an alternative agonistic model, "The Orphic tradition" that is neither "patrilineal or matrilineal" (285).

5. A defensive example from Borges: "En el vocabulario crítico, la palabra *precursor* es indispensable, pero habría que tratar de purificarla de toda conotación de polémica o de rivalidad. El hecho es que cada escritor *crea* a sus precursores" (166).

6. All references are to the 1990 revision entitled *La sangre de Medusa y otros cuentos marginales*. In the preface to this edition, Pacheco dates the title story at 1958 and "El enemigo muerto" at 1960 or 1961. He also writes "Hasta donde sé, 'La sangre de Medusa' y 'La noche del inmortal' son los primeros cuentos mexicanos que ostentan el influjo descarado de Borges. En una época en que se perseguían como crímenes las 'influencias' y lo 'libresco', mucho antes de que se formulara el concepto de la intertextualidad, estos relatos se atrevieron a tomar como punto de partida textos ajenos y a creer que lo leído es tan nuestro como lo vivido" (10).

7. In my dissertation, "Allegories of Influence in the Poetry of José Emilio Pacheco (1958-1978)," Penn State University, 1997.

8. The most complete critical work on *Los elementos de la noche* can be found in Luis Antonio de Villena. Ed. *José Emilio Pacheco*. Madrid: Ediciones Júcar, 1985: (20-24). From *La hoguera y el viento*, see Michael J. Doudoroff's "José Emilio Pacheco: Recuento de la poesía (147-48); José Miguel Oviedo's "José Emilio Pacheco: la poesía como *Ready-Made*" (43-6) and Andrew P. Debicki's "Perspectiva, distanciamiento y el tema del tiempo: la obra lírica de José Emilio Pacheco" (62-66).

9. Time and alienation are tonic notes in Pacheco's poetics. Time is portrayed as destruction and is also an integral element of poetic influence. Bloom calls the poet's envy of earlier work, a helpless feeling of "belatedness." In "The Rhetoric of Temporality," Paul de Man describes how ironic doubling is symptomatic of allegory: "The prevalence of allegory always corresponds to the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny. This unveiling takes place in a subject that has sought refuge against the impact of time in a natural world to which, in truth, it bears no resemblance" (206). I see the relation of the ephebe to the precursor as allegorical, as de Man concludes that "allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin" (207).

De Man's review of *The Anxiety of Influence* in *Blindness and Insight* is a clever attempt to debunk and then re-legitimize Bloom's model in terms of intertextuality. The tension between these two visions of influence, the subjective versus the lin-

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Transparencia social en la novelística de Rosa María Britton.

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Rosa María Britton (1936-) ofrece al lector, en sus dos primeras novelas, constantes repetitivas que engarzan dos argumentos disímiles estableciendo paralelos de continuidad que hacen que ambos textos compartan puntos afines. Uno de estos puntos es la marginación social del personaje, ya sea un aislamiento voluntario o una pluralidad social de rechazo que fuerza el relegamiento individual ante la influencia colectiva. Estas dos novelas, *El ataúd de uso* (1982) y *El Señor de las lluvias y el viento* (1984), ambas galardonadas con el premio "Ricardo Miró" de la literatura panameña,¹ ponen de manifiesto la intención de la autora de denunciar atropellos sociales y la marginación social que puede sufrir un individuo debido a su raza y a su posición social.

La intertextualidad narrativa de Britton denota la presencia de factores discursivos que aportan otra visión al texto.² En ambas novelas, elementos intertextuales coinciden en una sorda denuncia de aspectos sociales que la autora quiere exponer. Lidia Castillo, en su estudio sobre autores panameños, resalta que:

se considera que con la intertextualidad sale de su aislamiento el mensaje que se presenta como parte de un discurso desarrollado a través de textos o partes de textos, como diálogo cuyas frases son los textos o parte de los textos emitidos por los escritores. El fenómeno de la intertextualidad es frecuente sobre todo en los autores modernos. (91)

En su estudio sobre la literatura panameña, el crítico Ricardo Arturo Ríos Torres ha señalado que "Rosa María Britton aventura un diálogo sin formalismos entre el autor y el lector en el cual supera los imposibles, dejando a la vida misma gritar amplia y profundamente que todo puede suceder" (11-13). La relación que la autora busca, y obtiene, entre el texto y el autor es la clave para que el discurso de estas novelas expongan por sí mismos el objetivo de Britton. Sin embargo, como parte de esta relación