

Poets Don't Die

Hernán Lavín Cerda*

I

Does he who leaves not come back even if he returns? Who knows. I suspect that poets that still emerge from the bottom of our souls toward our skin, like José Emilio Pacheco, do not die: they just resuscitate. In any case, the doubt arises, and suddenly, half whispered—an increasingly soft whisper—you ask yourself, “Who gave life to death?” The author of fundamental works for the development of Latin American poetry in the second half of the twentieth century, among them *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo* (Don't Ask Me How the Time Goes By) (1969), had just written and sent in his usual contribution to *Proceso* magazine entitled “La travesía de Juan Gelman” (The Voyage of Juan Gelman), about the poet who had recently died in Mexico City. Once again I say those initial words, “Real poets, like José Emilio Pacheco, don't ever die: they just resuscitate.” In any case, you have the right to ask yourself, “What is going on? How is it possible? What does this mean? Where are we going?” Undoubtedly the ancient question is useless, but that doesn't mean we're going to stop asking it: “Where are we going? What does all this mean? How is it possible? What is going on? Is there a stairway over there?

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What is a stairway good for, at the end of the day?” Undoubtedly, the question may sound like the unforgettable Eugène Ionesco. It had also become very difficult for José Emilio Pacheco to walk, even inside his own home. Falling off of oneself inside oneself, then, is no longer impossible. We all fall down or will fall down at some point, outside and also inside. His beloved wife Cristina, also dedicated to journalism and literature, says that José Emilio had difficulty moving around the house. Suddenly came the fall and even that loss of the power of speech. He did not recover. Did he leave this world, perhaps without even knowing that he was leaving? But not forever. His work remains, his integrity and ethical strength—a fundamental value—, his magnificent example.

After receiving the Vicente Huidobro Prize in Santiago de Chile for a book of short stories *La crujidera de la viuda* (The Creaking of the Widow) (1971), I came to Mexico City for the first time in 1971. It was the poet Efraín Huerta who gave me some books that I still have in my library. Among them, *Ladera este* (East Slope), by Octavio Paz, and *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo* (Don't Ask Me How the Time Goes By), by José Emilio Pacheco. Two essential works, without a doubt. Another fundamental poet for the development of our literature in Latin America, Enrique Lihn, born in 1929 and one of our teachers in Chile, was the first who praised Pacheco to us. When we talked to José Emilio, he always asked us about Enrique Lihn. I remember that Pacheco was one of the members of the panel that gave Lihn the 1966 Casa de las Américas Prize for his book *Poesía de paso* (Poetry Passing By). The other members of the panel of judges were also very exalted figures: Jorge Zalamea, Gonzalo Rojas, and Pablo Armando Fernández. On the flyleaf of that Casa de las Américas publication, José Emilio Pacheco writes that Enrique Lihn developed a very original accent

in the context of a tradition that he changes and enriches. The testimony of a unique experience in the world of man, this book conciliates the intimate with the collective, lyricism and prosaicism, passion and reflection. Therein lies the unity in its diversity and that these poems, whether descriptive, loving, or political, are not very similar to what is being written today in our language. The “space lived” by each man does not fit the words that others conceived of, no matter how precise they are. And yet, he seems to tell us between the lines, more than a break, ours has been a (critical) period of examination and utilization of the national and continental poetic heritage, incorporated into new situations and other necessities.

Undoubtedly these words were the poetic project of those years. José Emilio Pacheco refers to Lihn, but also to himself. *Poesía de paso* was published in May 1966 in Havana, and *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo* in Mexico City in August 1969. This moving book is dedicated to Cristina and has an epigraph that says a great deal because of its author: Ernesto Cardenal. This Nicaraguan poet and priest contacted some English-speaking poets after a long conversation with the unforgettable José Coronel Urtecho. Cardenal had his romantic-modernist period, and then he moved away from that. In his way, Pacheco also went through those changes, not to mention Enrique Lihn and Nicanor Parra, among

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others. Observe and listen to these lines of Cardenal that Pacheco used as the general epigraph for his 1969 work, published by Joaquín Mortiz:

Like figures that cross a television screen and disappear, that's
how my life has passed
Like the cars that passed swiftly on the highways
with girls' laughter and music on the radio...
And beauty passed quickly, like the models of the cars
And the songs on the radio that went out of style.

We can see in these lines that they no longer have the romantic-modernist aesthetic that valued so highly figurative meanings based on the use of the metaphor. However, the rhythm does not disappear. There's an approach to certain lines of development that we can see in English-language poetry.

And, having touched on that, I want to pause here at the poem that José Emilio Pacheco called “Declaración de Varadero” (Cuba) (A Manifesto from Varadero [Cuba]) on the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Rubén Darío. The heavenly poet himself, that unforgettable modernist, wrote an epigraph for his text “Armonía” (Harmony):

Crawling on the carpet I watch the golden tortoise go,
tracing through the shadow
a stigma,
the marks of an enigma,
we cannot name, or know.
When sometimes I think of it,
the mystery never grasped,
it clings there, singing yet
between the bow and violin.¹

And José Emilio Pacheco writes, and through his words, we can see how the poets of the 1960s open up gradually to other alternatives. I cannot resist transcribing his text in free verse:

In his beginning lies the end. Returning to Nicaragua
 he takes on the power of death.
 A lighting flash between two darkneses, a little stone
 returning to the sling.
 He shuts his eyes and sees himself dead.
 Then begins on that other death, the bitter
 hacking through jungles of paper, wringing the neck
 of an old swan like eloquence,
 setting fire to the piles of dead leaves,
 the rhetorical masquerading, and the dressing-up room:
 that high attic with its name “modernism.”
 It was time / for spitting on the tombs.

Water always gathers in a pool;
 the country round draws on
 a thousand time-honored rites, beliefs, conjurations.
 Rightly turned the earth
 lets in other crops to thrive.
 Words / are lodestones of dust / that draw down
 the yellow rhythms off the tree,
 charm music / from the seashell
 and inside, the sleeping tempest
 turns out a jingle or broad harmony,
 thick and municipal, or worn away as waltzes
 by brass bands on a Sunday.

What is met is met to be split apart
 We are ephemeral —only trees
 touched by lightning
 hold the force of the fire in their wood,
 and friction frees that energy.

So now a hundred years have passed:
 we can pardon
 and call down Darío.

II

We are now in Mexico City, and we can see José Emilio Pacheco’s full development, both in poetry in verse and in prose, as well as in the essay and narrative. An untiring artist of multiple registers. We will always repeat it: an authentic, faithful artist of the word in its aesthetic dimension. We were able to appreciate his works starting with *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo*. He went from the novel to the short story to the es-

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say, although his real center was Poetry. Everything starts and returns there. He always loved his country, even when his love was often a kind of open sore. How can we forget the image and legacy of José Revueltas? Love and pain for Mexico. A complete intellectual who had the virtue of not forgetting others. We’re not saying it now that he’s no longer with us. The truth is we have said it always. I saw him with the students in the UNAM School of Philosophy and Letters main auditorium, where not even a humble pin could have fit—to use the common [Spanish-language] phrase that may be on a par with the significant poverty of pins—and I ask your pardon for this not-too-fortunate reference.

I remember the time that he gave me one of his beautiful books, *La arena errante* (The Shifting Sands), published by ERA in 1999. It was at the Guadalajara International Book Fair. Maturity can be seen in its pages. Reflexive, very human writing. Let’s look at his poem “Ages,” as an example:

A sad moment of age arrives
 When we are as old as our parents.
 And then we find in a forgotten drawer
 The photo of grandmother at fourteen.

Where does time go, where are we? This girl
 who lives in memory as an old woman,
 dead half a century ago,
 in the photo is the granddaughter of her grandson
 the life un-lived, the entire future,
 the youth that always renews itself in others.
 History has not passed by that instant.
 Wars and catastrophes don’t exist yet
 And the word *death* is unthinkable.

Nothing is experienced before or after.
 There is no conjugation in existence
 except the present tense.
 There, I am the old man
 And my grandmother is the little girl.

How his most recent sensibility reminds me of that of Émile Cioran or Nicanor Parra, and —why not say so?— of my little books *Neuropoemas* (Neuropoems) (Santiago de Chile, 1966) or *Cambiar de religión* (Change Religions) (Santiago de Chile, 1967). The fact is that we were at a similar temperature. Is it perhaps because we were born in the same year, 1939, that year of the world war? Observe how categorical his text “En el camión de la basura” (In the Garbage Truck) is. It appears in his book *Como la lluvia* (Like the Rain) (Editorial ERA and the National College, 2009):

Everything goes into the garbage truck:
Useless objects, plastic containers,
The ruins of a life, deserted tributes
Paid to death of the days,
The papers, the letters that will never
Be written again
And yesterday's photographs.

Everything of ours is made
To end up in the garbage.

What can we brag about, then? As you see, the function of a true poet is to dynamite false pride and human stupidity. Nothing lasts forever, friends. Even the word “forever” does not last forever. Understood? Do we agree or not? What can we brag about, then? Don't make me laugh too hard because it'll make the teeth of Your Insecure Servant fall out the teeth that I hardly have anymore! The truth is that José Emilio Pacheco came, comes, and will always come back. You have to dare to dare, but with knowledge aforethought of the craft. I suspect that he was always a true artist of the word. A total poet at every moment, minute by minute, while he wrote and while he didn't write. That is, never. That's the real truth. Almost never. Of course, he loved his country and Mexico's pains —Our Daily Mexico— pained him to the depths of his soul.

I cannot resist the temptation to transcribe several of José Emilio Pacheco's very brief poems. They appear in that

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stupendous volume, *Como la lluvia* (Like the Rain). But before that, allow me to touch the unheard-of chord from his poem “Realidad virtual” (Virtual Reality), from the volume *La arena errante*. (The title for this volume comes from Federico García Lorca's line “the shifting sand will turn yellow”):

We have to say it even if people laugh:
virtual reality was invented in Mexico,
in the Del Valle neighborhood,
around 1950.

My cousin Juan's telescope
—a toy bought
second- or third-hand in the Lagunilla market—
was capable of reinventing the Moon
as a UFO base and the home
of creatures from another galaxy.
It drew three-headed Martians
where we now know that everything is stone.

And in the height of mysticism,
It discovered Heaven on Venus
And Hell on Saturn.



The poems grouped under the general title “Astillas” (Slivers) are brief and very bare. They go right to the chin. They win the battle by knock-out or they lose pitilessly. Here are some of them:

Fundaciones (Foundations)

When a city is founded
The first thing they put up
Are the places of power:
The palace, the seat of commerce,
The Market, the church, the barracks,
The court, the jail, and the execution yard.
Then they put up
The brothel, the graveyard, and the slaughterhouse.

Cortesía (Courtesy)

How kind the ogre is.
With his unpunished claw
He destroys my face.
After slitting my throat
He said to my cadaver, “Excuse me.”

Consejera del aire (Counselor of the Air)

Every time I think I'm important
A fly comes by and says, “You're nobody.”

A los poetas griegos (To the Greek Poets)

Yes, Cavafy,
Wherever I go I will take the city with me.
Yes, Seferis,
Wherever I go, Mexico continues to wound me.

Quevediana (Quevedian)

May is gone
And June has not arrived.
Today is falling
And the past is over.

As Pablo Neruda would have said,
José Emilio Pacheco fell from the skin
to the soul, perhaps without completely
perceiving the height of the fall.

Canción (Song)

I continue holding you in that song
That is sometimes suddenly heard again:
The corniest, the most vulgar,
The most beautiful song in the world.

Pabellón de incurables (Terminal Ward)

Somber is this theater of pain,
Life, cruel, absurd, inexplicable.

Ciudad de México (Mexico City)

I pass by a place that's not there anymore.
I abandon myself to the ephemeral, I'm going
With the stones...where do you suppose they've gone?

Plegaria (Prayer)

God, who are in the No,
Bless this Nothing
From where I come and where I shall return.

El fin del mundo (The End of the World)

The end of the world has already lasted a long time
And everything gets worse
But it doesn't end.

Undoubtedly, the reality of the world affected José Emilio Pacheco. He did not think the birth of a more fraternal and loving world was close, a world where Man is not the wolf of Man —I hope the wolves forgive me; they're not always as depicted. Human cruelty seems to have no limits in this world of ambitions and inequality where inclemency reigns. Our very dear poet, whose life and work merited widespread, significant recognition beyond the borders of Mexico, left

this world after writing about the life and work of Juan Gelman. And so, you ask yourself: What does all this mean? And even though it sounds like a sickly sensibility, why are our poets dying, the ones whose work make up the absolutely free song of the other voice, to use Octavio Paz's idea? Will better times come? For now, destitution not only of the moral type? Let us for the moment remember the verses of José Emilio Pacheco in his poem "De sobra" (Not Needed):

As the planet is
It doesn't need me.

It will go on without me
As before it could
Exist in my absence.

It didn't invite me to come
And now it demands that I
Go in silence.


My insignificance matters not to it.
I'm not needed because everything belongs to it.


As Pablo Neruda would have said, José Emilio Pacheco fell from the skin to the soul, perhaps without completely perceiving the height of the fall. A fall toward Nothing where the only thing that can be heard, drop by drop, are the beats of the Art of Resurrection? I don't know. Perhaps no one knows yet. Everything is yet to be seen, and the unforgettable José Emilio inhabits, almost immobile, though not completely, the luminous dimensions of Mystery. **MM**

NOTES


¹ The translations of this poem and "A Manifesto from Varadero," included in this article, are by George McWhirter, *José Emilio Pacheco, Selected poems* (New York: A New Direction Books, 1987). [Editor's Note.]

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