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The Slow Violence of Eco-Apocalypse in the Poetry of José Emilio Pacheco

Niels H. Christensen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Slow Violence of Eco-Apocalypse in the Poetry of José Emilio Pacheco

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Over the course of his fifty-year career, Mexican writer José Emilio Pacheco has almost habitually written poetry about environmental themes especially those related to pollution, extraction, deforestation, and other related themes of destruction. Simultaneously, his work has engaged with questions of temporality, namely the passing of time and the inherent violence of such questions. In this essay, I examine a selection of Pacheco's poetry from the 1970s to the early 2000s, demonstrating Pacheco's marrying of the two concepts: environmental degradation and time. This marriage results in a provocative synthesis of eco-apocalypse, a phenomenon that details a paradoxical end that never actually arrives, but only consistently worsens. I illuminate Pacheco's work by incorporating Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence", which informs my reading of the poetry by calling to its imaginative power. This power allows it to depict that which is imperceptible, either because it moves too slowly or too broadly to be witnessed by the human observant. In short, Pacheco's poetry addresses human-perceived time and natural or deep time in light of the ongoing apocalypse, which, despite the morose tone of the poetry, obliquely urges the reader towards an awareness of eco-apocalypse.

Keywords: eco-apocalypse, eco-poetry, slow violence, ecocriticism, José Emilio Pacheco

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INTRODUCTION

And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed
And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.
As long as the sun and the moon are above,
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
As long as rosy infants are born
No one believes it is happening now.

-Czesław Miłosz, “A Song on the End of the World”

Where must we go, we who wander this wasteland, in search of our better selves?

-The First History Man, *Mad Max: Fury Road*

American novelist Richard Powers includes in his twelfth novel, *The Overstory*, an extended metaphor of time that asks readers to imagine the entire geological history of the earth in one single day. First, of course, there is nothing. Life, as we understand it, begins around three or four a.m., at the microscopic, single-celled level. By four p.m., animals and plants separate. Multi-celled life forms at dusk, jellyfish and worms at nine p.m., plants on land at ten, insects, tetrapods, dinosaurs and more: all creatures we know through scientific research appear before the day comes to a close. Many of them, known and unknown, vanish hours before *Homo erectus* shows up. Then, four seconds before midnight, modern man makes an appearance and by midnight the vaster part of the earth has been cultivated with “row crops” to support the human enterprise (Powers 475). On the surface, Powers’s borderline mythical novel tells the story of various trees and the human beings who interact with and are changed by them. But more broadly, it recounts two different rhythms of time: the human and the nonhuman. The temporal disparities arise directly in the text as several of the human characters recognize the wide

differences between the gigantic, patient, and slow time of a redwood or a chestnut, and the more acute, prompt time of a human being.

Powers's antihuman metaphor recalls John McPhee's popularization of the term "deep time", a paradigm of time characterized by the geological study of earth's history, which indicates a much further-reaching past than that which humans have previously conceived (7). The concept of the Anthropocene reflects an epoch in which humanity has a geological impact on the surface of the planet, one that will produce sweeping effects on the environment for years to come (Crutzen 13, 17). Such a conception of time invites humans to reconsider the previous paradigms with which we perceived and constructed time, and offers a reconstruction of a world billions of years older than we have imagined. Eco-literature and ecocritical studies are filled with literary imaginations and analyses of deep time, especially in Anglophone literature, but they remain understudied in the Latin American world. Mexican poet José Emilio Pacheco is one of these Hispanic authors who has devoted the better part of his career to musings on time and reflections on both human and nonhuman rhythms, with an overall green trajectory, or a trajectory that considers the question of ecological associations.

Pacheco's abiding interest in the eternal trudging of time particularly marks his early poetry, where the earth is "Carne unánime / de las generaciones consumidas", where time itself is "muda mutación", where the earth's inhabitants are called to celebrate "el peso de los años", and various odes to Heraclitus reflect an anxious acceptance of time's relentless linear journey (Pacheco 85, 117, 44-45, 130).¹ Though his later work leans more overtly into ecological

¹ See, respectively, "Tierra", "The Dream is Over, "2 (Don de Heráclito)", and "Siempre Heráclito", from Pacheco's complete collection *Tarde o temprano (Poemas 1958-2009)*.

themes, that theme of time is clearly still at large and, oftentimes, the most prominent of all the varied themes which his work touches.

The tone of Pacheco's poetry is especially dark, vacillating between wry irony and despair, reflecting the aforementioned Heraclitian acceptance of an amorphous eco-apocalypse. Octavio Paz calls him "un Doctor pangloss al revés, empeñado en demostrar que vivimos en el peor de los mundos posibles" ("Cultura" 13). Michael J. Doudoroff similarly characterizes his work as containing a distinguishable "bleakness", "disintegration and change", and frequently employing epigraphs that "invoke a threatening darkness". (265). Doudoroff claims that Pacheco's early penchant for catastrophe persists "at the center of his subjectivity through all the subsequent books" (265). Norma Klahn calls this a "new vision of the world, increasingly skeptical and apocalyptic in tone" while Analisa DeGrave notes Pacheco's vision of "destruction and waste" (Klahn 82, DeGrave 94). All of Pacheco's admirers and critics are in solidarity when it comes to Pacheco's bleak outlook on the nature/culture dichotomy and the inseparable, inevitable end of the world.

However, where conceptions of apocalypse usually defer to singular or a series of spectacularly violent events, Pacheco, in much of his poetry since the late 60s, presents the apocalypse not as any sort of divinely-ushered event but as a man-made epoch of environmental decay. Pacheco's apocalypse is distinctly an eco-apocalypse, a term defined by a scenario in which environmental degradation, resource scarcity, and climate change ultimately result in absolute or irreparable destruction of the planet itself, its inhabitants, and/or its methods to provide for its inhabitants.² Pacheco's poetry meditates on the devastation itself, the results of

² Lynn Keller uses the term in the title of chapter 3 of her book *Recomposing Ecopoetics*, "Under These Apo-calypto Rays': Crisis, Pleasure, and Eco-Apocalyptic Poetry", cited below, but doesn't define the term. Philip Hammond and Hugh Ortega Breton use the term in chapter 8

such destruction, and the philosophical questions that arise from a landscape and sociopolitical world torn apart by extraction, deforestation, air pollution, and more forms of violence towards the earth. However, while it reflects elements related to ecological devastation, it does so with a focus on the slow passing of time, which brings to mind a particular kind of violence unique to the interdisciplinary field of ecocritical studies: that of “slow violence”, a term popularized by Rob Nixon in his 2011 book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

“Slow violence” describes a violence that is “gradual and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all”, as opposed to the sort of immediate violence which is “explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into sensational visibility” (Nixon 2). Nixon’s definition hinges on spectacular violence’s facility in representation, while slow violence relies more heavily on either imagined effectual representation (by writers/artists), or on the passing of time itself, so that its effects may finally be understood through studies of the relationship between past and present via long-term quantitative studies. Its problem, ultimately, is posed by Nixon in the form of a question: “How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time?” (3). Naturally, its own dependency on temporality is what grounds slow violence. Throughout his work, Pacheco has woven these themes of temporality and slow

of K. A. Ritzenhoff & A. Krewani’s book *The Apocalypse in Film*, titled “Eco-Apocalypse: Environmentalism, Political Alienation and Therapeutic Agency”. It has been used in very few articles, papers, and theses, but it seems as if the title is to be intuited. I have included my own definition for clarification.

violence together, depicting a world that is being chipped away by humanity, imperceptibly to those who aren't paying attention.

While perhaps other literary mediums (feature films, fiction) often depict the immediacy of both natural and human-caused violence, “the ways of poetry are slower, more insidious”, in that the economy of poetry lends itself to a type of meditation that is often lacking in other artistic mediums (Binns 117). In this vein, Pacheco's poetry won't satisfy Nixon's question because, instead of attempting to sensationalize the effects of environmental slow violence, he leans into his lyrical medium, embracing poetry's slow, meditative approach to address the immediacy of the issues at hand. If indeed the ways of poetry invite an unhurried analysis, then Pacheco's poetry embodies slow violence as it depicts an apocalyptic violence that is ushered in agonizingly slow, century by century.

This paper seeks to reconceptualize the concept of apocalypse both in light of its environmental implications and in regards to poetry: namely, how does Pacheco's ecopoetry, whose deliberation, precision, and slowness (regarding language), provide an aptly provocative look at slow violence in the context of an impending eco-apocalypse? I will analyze several of Pacheco's poems from various points of his career, using slow violence as a type of lens to sharpen the poems' eco-apocalyptic themes. Where Pacheco's works and Nixon's theory truly converge is in Nixon's elaboration of imagination, as a legitimate form of representation for a concept that so frequently eludes portrayal. Nixon contends:

... writer/activists can help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to senses, either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale, or are played out across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation or even the

physiological life of the human observer. In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. Writing can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration. The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing, of sights unseen. (15)

It is this imagination which is largely responsible for rendering visible the imperceptible, for calling attention to the unavoidable and indispensable minutia of ecological destruction. Pacheco's poetry accomplishes this by juxtaposing images of time passing with those of apocalyptic violence. Through the course of his oeuvre, his pessimism toward humanity grows and becomes more and more correlated with climate change and human-caused slow violence. Additionally, the green elements in his work develop as his work becomes more and more interested in the intertwining of the human with the nonhuman world. Pacheco's poetry is deeply interested in the passing of time, but I too am interested in the very same concept of slow time in the larger arc of Pacheco's work. I ask, as time passes, how does Pacheco become more environmentally and ethically concerned? What follows is how the slowness of poetry factors into this. First, I am taking a slow approach to Pacheco's work: rather than studying a particular phrase of Pacheco's career and his poetic sensibilities of an epoch, I study a handful of poems from a few collections over his career, from the 1970s to the early 2000s, exploring the trajectory of his eco-apocalyptic ethos. Second, I highlight the "slow" elements in Pacheco's poetry by offering a "slow reading" of Pacheco's work, by attempting to read his poems through the

perspective of a timeline and a rhythm that is beyond human. In *Ruinas de México (Miro la tierra, 1986)*, for example, it is as if the trauma of the violence of the moment freezes time; the poet wanders the wreckage of a world where time has stopped, where death has frozen time itself, which allows the poet to witness the carnage of nature in a singular, eternal moment.

We will see that Pacheco's apocalyptic poems, bleak and morose as they are, reflect imaginatively the slow violence that is inherent in climate change and environmental degradation. The poems generally shy away from "real" images of destruction, trading experiential observations for apocalyptic visions of projected futures (the exceptions are "México vista aérea" and *Las ruinas de México*). This rich yet dark imagination is indeed Pacheco's forte, and is easily identifiable in many of his works, such as his various meditations on the thoughts and inner workings of animals.

Ecofictions, Ecorealities, and Slow Violence in Latin America and the Latinx World, a recent book by Ilka Kressner, Ana María Mutis, and Elizabeth M. Pettinaroli (2020), recontextualizes Nixon's work on slow violence (who comes from an Anglophone and postcolonial perspective) to Latin America, with essays that explore a host of Latin American/Latinx texts, which "... document, conceptualize, and visualize this specific form of violence that so often resists representation" (Kressner et al. 3). Though Kressner, Mutis, and Pettinaroli's book contains essays about both Mexico and Latin American poetry³, it does not mention Pacheco's poetry nor the inherent themes of temporality, which I have suggested are provocative when studying slow violence.

³ For the most thematically related studies in Kressner, Mutis, and Pettinaroli's book, see Diana Aldrete's chapter on Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (Chapter 3), Laura Barbas-Rhoden's chapter on Slow Violence in Mexican film (Chapter 4), and Jacob Price's chapter on Nicaraguan poetry (Chapter 6).

THE SLOW VIOLENCE OF ECO-APOCALYPSE

Though I will generally move through Pacheco's work chronologically, I wish to begin with a poem from his more recent collection *Como la lluvia* (2009). This short poem titled "El fin del mundo" epitomizes the particular slowness of the apocalypse which saturates his work and sets the tone for illuminating the currents of slow violence throughout his oeuvre:

El fin del mundo ya ha durado mucho

Y todo empeora

Pero no se acaba. (Pacheco 660)

The poet's remark that "todo empeora / pero no se acaba" reminds the reader of Pacheco's enduring hopelessness throughout time. Pacheco uses the past participle "ha durado", suggesting a continuous past—the end of the world has lasted a long time, yet how much longer can "el fin" be sustained? Does not "el fin" imply a closing and not a continuation? This extension of the end presents a temporal ambiguity which results in a paradox of an end that never actually terminates but is perpetually ending. This ambiguity slows down the typifying linearity of the poem, where apocalypse is the *end* of all things; instead, the poem starts at the end ("El fin") and ends at some kind of middle ("no se acaba"), creating a paradoxical loop that leaves the reader suspended in that eternal moment of the end. The poem postpones the moment of the end, instead leaving the reader within the vague lethargy of a frighteningly slow apocalypse. Here *eschaton* is a farce. Following the logic of the poem, situated at the tail of a corpus that has treated eco-apocalypse for over forty years, the poet declares that everything only gets worse but never actually ends. Pacheco's vision is an eternal nightmare of decay from which humanity cannot wake up. Though

bereft of explicit ecological imagery, understanding Pacheco's ecologically thematic trajectory through the years will help contextualize this poem with the poet's more overtly green works.

"El fin del mundo" ironically trades a traditional, Christian concept of the millenium in which the salvific Christ arrives in a single triumphant moment to redeem mankind from sin and suffering, for a more subtle gradual apocalypse that has already begun; one which completely lacks a redeemer, and one that has been developing for an uncounted, perhaps innumerable, number of years. Rather than a sprint, a shuffle; not a single moment, but humanity's infinite lifetime. The slow apocalypse, one that is happening in the gerundive, underneath our very noses, is the reality that we face, and it has neither beginning nor ending. Though the subject of much of Pacheco's poetry (and, indeed, the literature of many modernists and postmodernists alike) inculcates modernity's disregard for the planet as the beginning of the end of the world, Pacheco's work and its focus on temporality suggests violence itself as being inseparable from existence, and therefore, as having no beginning. George Handley writes "Deep time means that life and death are synonymous" (212). Only by altering the way we configure ourselves into antihuman concepts of time will we be able to confront the reality of violence. Violence is time and time is deterioration and that deterioration is implicit in the very notion of being, "como si la destrucción estuviera predeterminada en el destino de los hombres" (Pascual Battista 113).

One of Pacheco's well-studied poems, titled "Séptimo sello", comes from his collection published in 1976 *Irás y no volverás*. In *Irás y no volverás* (1976), the poetry evolves, away from the "defense of poetry" that runs thick through *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo* (1969) (Doudoroff 268). Less focused on poetry and time than its predecessor, (though still clearly engaged with the subjects) *Irás y no volverás* is sharper and more observant, as the poet occupies a more prophetic tone—a Jeremiah figure who wanders the desolate land, writing what he sees.

Thematically congruent with “El fin del mundo”, published some thirty years later, the poem “Séptimo sello” takes the Christian theme of apocalypse (pulling imagery from the Book of Revelations) and ironically turns it on his head: the eco-apocalypse is ushered in by humanity’s blatant disregard for the planet’s wellbeing and not by traditionally conceived wickedness. Pacheco’s conception of the end of the earth is typically dystopian: an arid and stinking wasteland, poisoned by humanity:

Y poco a poco fuimos devorando la tierra.
Emponzoñada ya hasta su raíz,
no queda un árbol
ni un vestigio de río.
El aire entero es podredumbre,
los campos son océanos de basura.
Soy el último humano.
Sobreviví a la ruina de mi especie.
Puedo reinar sobre este mundo,
pero de qué me sirve. (138)

Again, Pacheco returns to a few of his common themes: the slowness of apocalypse, the results of ongoing slow violence, and the subsequent futility of progress. The use of the preterite progressive “poco a poco fuimos devorando” indicates that the devouring was ongoing at some point in the past, but no longer is. It is demonstrative of continuous action, regardless if the action is now finished in Pacheco’s imagined future. But the devouring of the earth finishes at an

unmarked point in time, which signals again the idea of apocalypse as a slow process. The concept of extinction is implied, albeit gradually: a process of *becoming* extinct. Yet the concept of a process requires some form of chronology which dictates its makeup of a beginning, middle, and end, of sorts. The poem's first line violently displays a Heraclitean notion of process which leaves the reader suspended in the nightmarish world of trash, in which the poetic voice occupies a symbolic role of prophetic witness whose only need is to see and write the narrative of apocalypse—a narrative which he practically embodies.

Norma Klahn sees in Pacheco's work his curiosity and propensity for disaster in a religious and cultural context. She points out his syncretizing of "indigenous omens and prophecies together with the theme of Christian Apocalypse" claiming ultimately that "the apocalyptic poet has no such vision of hope"—regarding the aforementioned hopeful Christian concepts of apocalypse (91). Klahn's commentary on Pacheco's personal and poetic vision of the future brings to mind the much-debated idea whether or not ecologically inflected literature should offer some remedy or solution for the environmental crisis. Lynn Keller posits that "such writing, in which 'the imagination is being used to anticipate and, if possible, forestall actual apocalypse⁴,' may be justified by the hope of practical efficacy" (102). Perhaps for other poets and artists, that hope underlies the work they produce, as a type of political call-to-arms, a marriage of art and activism; however, Pacheco's poetry appears to lack rallying cries, which would ideally "increase one's empowerment or ensure social change so much that the sense of impending doom disappears" (Keller 107).

But does the despondency of Pacheco's poetry allow for advancing optimistic environmental action? According to Niall Binns, his poetry from this and every era is laden with

⁴ Keller is quoting Lawrence Buell, from *The Environmental Imagination* (1995).

“insistent and inescapable imagery of destruction” with no provided remedy, nor even an imagined sense of relief (114). Indeed, Pacheco’s vision of the earth is caught both in the 1970s present and in the foreseeable future, suspended in a future that already looks irredeemable to the poet (Binns 112). It would seem that Pacheco is uninterested in escaping beyond his bleak imagined prolepsis. In a documentary commemorating his life and work titled *José Emilio Pacheco*, a segment shows Pacheco giving a lecture at the Colegio Nacional in the early 2000s. At one point in the lecture, he says that despite our accomplishments as a species and despite our access to infinite information housed in libraries and the internet, “lo ignoramos todo. No sabemos quiénes somos ni quiénes son nuestros prójimos más próximos ... aún no conocemos del todo el abismo que llevamos adentro, la oscuridad de la que provenimos y las tinieblas a las que nos aproximamos a cada segundo sea cual fuere nuestra edad” (0:26:15-0:27:20). Even in his later years, Pacheco seemed to sink into his embodiment of a “Pangloss al revés” as Octavio Paz described him (“Cultura” 13). The loose religious context in the poem offers no balm: it is as if Pacheco believes that humanity deserves their punishment.

Humanity is clearly responsible for the state of the broken earth, but the poet doesn’t disclose exactly *how* the earth got to this point. In fact, Pacheco’s lack of exposition suggests two things: primarily, it attests to Nixon’s point that writers and artists apprehend threats imaginatively, in this instance across a vague time-span that “exceeds the instance of observation” (Nixon 15). Buell suggests that the “rhetoric of apocalypticism implies that the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the imagination to a sense of crisis” (285). Both Nixon and Buell agree that imagination is paramount to evoking the expected horror of individuals to slow violence. “Séptimo sello” ignites a sense of slow violence because it asks the readers to imagine the real consequences of consumption, extraction, and all other activities that contribute to

ecological disintegration. Secondly, it cements the paradoxical appearance of slow violence, a typically imperceptible event. It is therefore the lack of description in this poem that makes the imperceptibility of the violence so apparent. The poetic voice doesn't explain to readers what happened to the sickened earth because it doesn't have to. The metaphor of humanity devouring the earth reflects the greed and subsequent corrupting power of modernity and capitalism from line one: these are processes of violence that stretch out over lifetimes.

Ultimately, the poem's whole vision is deeply dystopian, especially the final four lines in which the poetic voice declares his solitude and the demise of almost the entire human race. The poetic voice's solitude indicates a sort of prophetic witness, that he experienced the much-anticipated apocalypse and wasn't raptured: a cursed prophet who now wanders that wasteland. These final lines point to some of the slow violence that is destroying humans' terrestrial home; humans rendering useless their own home has obviously destroyed *their* capacity for survival, just as it would for any other nonhuman entity. The poetic voice ironically muses that to be king of such an earth is to be king of nothing: the planet can no longer offer up its resources, assumedly having been extracted beyond the point of sustainability, and thus the voice recognizes the irony of empire, of reigning over that which is no longer self-serving. These final two lines seem to comment on the capitalist enterprise that beset(s) post-revolutionary Mexico. The notion suggests a potentially triumphant monopoly, but over a landscape stripped of its resources and therefore its economic value, calling to mind the arid wasteland of the peasants in Juan Rulfo's "Nos han dado la tierra", a miserable inheritance bequeathed unto them by the post-revolutionary Mexican government. Indeed, slow violence is clearly a product of capitalism and its normalization of extraction as early as the sixteenth century (Kressner et al. 10).

Along with the images of a poisoned planet, the result of the slow violence of capitalism, the notion of competing rhythms—a nonhuman and a human—arises several times throughout Pacheco’s poetry. Many of the poems in *Irás y no volverás*, such as “Urbana, Illinois” and “Pez” ironically depict the cyclical nature of death and the inevitable destruction that awaits humanity. The poem “Idilio” counterposes hopeful scenes such as “El mundo / volvía a ser un jardín” and “El viento / era otra vez la libertad / en vano / intentamos anclarla en las banderas” with a final stanza that refutes such romantic pastorisms:

Como un tañido funerario entró
hasta el bosque un olor de muerte.
Las aguas
se mancharon de lodo y de veneno.
Los guardias
brotaron como surgen las tinieblas.
En nuestra incauta dicha merodeábamos
una fábrica atroz en que elaboran
defoliador y gas paralizante. (lines 23-24, 36-48)

This stanza highlights different timelines or rhythms of time: the slowness of the effects of human-induced climate change—the mud and poison and the smell of death—contrasting with the speed/hum of the factory. These images—the former signifying a human rhythm and the latter, a nonhuman—acknowledge competing rhythms of time. Where the factory *creates* chemicals, whose impacts clearly fit within the scope of slow violence, the rest of the planet

experiences their spread and long-lasting effects. These chemicals evoke Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as an "inaugural example of apocalyptic discourse", signaling the adverse and temporally prolonged effects of chemicals like DDT (Keller 100). However, the effects of "defoliador y gas paralizante", though enveloped them in the rhetoric of slow violence by Carson and other environmental and human rights activists, were also clearly spectacularly violent. The reference to these herbicides recalls the use of Agent Orange in the Vietnam War, a war of which Pacheco was a vicious critic. Though in the early stages of the war, the use of these harsh chemicals evaded prosecution—what with the consequential ignorance surrounding their use—their effects were definitely far-reaching. The immediate effects on humans darkened the skin, and caused painful skin diseases and liver problems. However, the long-term effects, including severe birth defects, are still suffered by many in Vietnam as well as some US war veterans and their children (Sagolj, "The Legacy of Agent Orange"). The "poesía social" of Pacheco, or the poetry of protest, as described by Luis Antonio de Villena, began with *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo* and continued throughout his career, especially during the turbulent 70s (de Villena 30). Just the reference to the toxic herbicides indicates Pacheco's interest in poetry's ability to convey an environmental ethos, poetry as protest at the destruction that these chemicals caused on both humans and the environment.

The toll of the funeral bells indicating the end of the natural world as humanity is concerned, the smell of death, the muddy and polluted waters: all images that convene at the *diminuendo* of the poem, where the poet seems to shake his head at humanity's belligerence in metaphorically prowling about a factory of chemical weapons. The image of these chemicals of death recall related forms of slow violence: the beginnings of mass chemical warfare in WWI,

WWII, and the Vietnam War, as well as concepts such as “the radioactive aftermath of wars” which Nixon mentions (2).

“Idilio” uses a stark, matter-of-fact, almost prosaic tone to present the realities of the future, in what Klahn calls a “process of elimination” of poetic devices such as “enjambment, synesthesia, redundant adjectives, rhyme, anaphora, and apostrophe” (89). This technique guides the reader past the complexity of verse, establishing “concise and concrete images [which] are complex more because of their conceptual implications than because of syntax, diction or prosody” (Klahn 89). This dearth of poetic devices suggests not necessarily a facility of reading and interpreting the work, but instead presents a particular challenge: interpret the poem without traditional tools. If we imagine poetry as a huge piece of construction, then the reader lacks the traditional rhetorical tools with which to build an understanding and interpretation of the work. The elimination of poetic devices indicates a lack of movement, no vibrant stepping stones of poetic pyrotechnics to use to move *through* it. Instead, the poem guides the reader toward the destructive imagery and leaves them adrift with a sense of aesthetic austerity; in essence, leaving the reader to contemplate the chronology and repercussions of slow violence.

The poem that follows “Idilio”, titled “The Dream is Over”, evokes a similar commentary of the slow violence via chemical death, as the poet claims “Ya no hay plantas ni peces en el Erie. / Ya está muerto, / como el lago de México” (Pacheco lines 1-3). Yet again, Pacheco finds the irony of the capitalist fixation on ownership and performance, laying it out in a dramatic metaphor: “El que fui en otro mundo / repite sus palabras ante un teatro sin nadie” (lines 16-17). The poetic voice is rhythmically out of sync with nature, blind to what is happening in the nonhuman rhythm. The poetic voice referring to another world represents a pastoral world that existed before modernity’s tarnishing fumes, or, at the very least, before the earth passed the

point of no return, so to speak; the time in which the voice speaks in the poem is the imagined future, where human-induced climate change has brought the earth to a state of eco-apocalypse. The soliloquy of the poetic voice in front of the empty theater recalls similar paradoxes of capitalism in the finale of “Séptimo sello”, where the poetic voice suggests that things, over which one can rule, are required to construct meaning in capitalism’s ideology of ownership and dominion. But, as in that poem where the speaker realizes the futility in ruling in a place with no subjects (and over a world with no resources), “The Dream is Over” suggests a similarly meaningless solitary existence.

As the desert bleeds and multitudes make trips back and forth to the “templo de la guerra” the only thing that remains for the poet is uncertainty as the poem finishes: “Hoy recomienza / *la pesadilla de la historia*” (original emphasis, lines 44, 46-47). The poetic voice’s reflection on the cycles of destruction and violence are a key component of Pacheco’s reflection of the passing of time. The “*pesadilla de la historia*” is, to be sure, the fact that humanity does not learn from its mistakes, and continues to move in these cycles of extraction, destruction, and pillaging of the land, through the various forms of immediate and attritional violence, causing lakes as vast as Erie and Texcoco to poetically and (as projected by scientists) literally dry up and die. That “*pesadilla*” deepens when considering humanity’s “false assumption that human history *is* nature’s story and that what happens to us happens to the earth in undifferentiated parallel lines” (Handley 8). Though Pacheco does conflate the slow violence of humanity’s influence on the earth, Handley’s declaration should be considered: “*la pesadilla de la historia*”, though violently cyclical, exists outside of the scope of deep time and natural history, which makes such conceptions of history entirely human. The two rhythms—the human and the nonhuman—are at odds because their conceptions of time are radically opposed. Where

humanity's is immediate and shallow, the nonhuman world's is slow and deep. And the problem with the general assumption of apocalypse is that it is defined by the end of human history. Eco-apocalypse, however, complicates this because it inextricably binds the future of natural history with human history, a future where they synonymously end in a series of long and imperceptibly violent moments. Where before the nightmare was only of human proportions, it has now collapsed nature's timeline, rendering it subservient to humanity's own. Slow violence, though momentarily imperceptible, is almost entirely human-induced, and aptly represents the discrepancy between the two concepts of time that are ideologically at odds with one another. That is, humanity's "tiny moment" ultimately subsumes the nonhuman billions of years of history and time as it commits slow violence over the course of only a few hundred years (Handley 8).

The final two poems in this paper correlate with the concept of competing rhythms or timelines in their binarity; though instead of presenting alternating forms of *time*, these poems present alternating forms of *space*. "México vista aérea" and *Las ruinas de México (Elegía al retorno)* parallel the nonhuman and human rhythms of time, respectively, but do so in relation to space. Where *Ruinas* presents a shattering post-apocalyptic account from the poet's perspective following the 1985 Mexico City Earthquake, "México vista aérea" takes the human perspective and, pulling back from the carnage on the ground, retreats towards the sky. This poem details an alternate spatial perspective: a birds-eye view from a soaring plane:

Desde el avión ¿qué observas? Sólo costras,
pesadas cicatrices de un desastre.
Sólo montañas de aridez, arrugas

de una tierra antiquísima, volcanes.

Muerta hoguera, tu tierra es de ceniza.

Monumentos que el tiempo erigió al mundo,

mausoleos, sepulcros naturales.

Cordilleras y sierras nos separan.

Somos una isla entre la sed, y el polvo

reina sobre el encono y el estrago.

Sin embargo la tierra permanece

y todo lo demás pasa, se extingue.

Se vuelve arena para el gran desierto. (177)

“México vista aérea” is about observing the landscape from a previously uninhabitable place, one now accessible due to modern technology. Yet again, the poetic voice is bleak and pessimistic in what it sees. It seems to respond to its own question “¿Qué observas?” with a begrudging stream of replies, introduced by a pair of “sólo[s]”: “Sólo costras, / pesadas cicatrices de un desastre” and “Sólo montañas de aridez, arrugas / de una tierra antiquísima, volcanes (lines 1-4). Along with the shell-like exterior, aridity, and volcanos that is Mexico’s outer crust, the poetic voice describes other images of death and decay: this particular shot of Mexico is of a land stripped of its verdancy and virility—where the only notable visible human accomplishments are tombs and sepulchers.

From the plane, the perspective is one of slow change, perhaps only observable from an inhuman perspective. The slow violence inflicted upon the earth from the aerial view is only noted in the aftermath of its infliction, as Mexico's surface is witnessed, documented, poeticized, the poet having become a cartographer of sorts. The landscape doesn't change much from such an elevated view, thus the images are fixed in the poem, the "muerta hoguera" with deep "cicatrices de un desastre", indicating a permanence, an imperceptible raking of the earth's surface. Yes, "la tierra permanece" but at what cost? Similar to both "Séptimo sello" and "The Dream is Over", the earth with its ugliness and dryness is no longer tillable, workable, or extractable, and therefore, no longer serves a purpose for the capitalist enterprise. Furthermore, Mexico no longer serves neither the human nor the nonhuman entities that depend on the land for sustenance of any kind. It reverts back to a type of wilderness as devoid of meaning and utility to humanity, as the "antithesis of all that was orderly and good", according to William Cronon (71). If this view of Mexico depicts it as yet another part of the great barren wilderness or desert that is the world, then truly such a land can no longer provide for its inhabitants.

Perhaps functioning as a spatial antithesis to "México vista aérea" is Pacheco's elegy to the post-apocalyptic landscape that was Mexico City, immediately following the 1985 earthquake. Thus to alternate between *Ruinas* and "México vista aérea" is to alternate between depictions of fast and slow violence. Though the earthquake's violence was fast and spectacular in the moment, the poetic voice absorbs the violence around it, processing it into written word. The reader, in turn must digest the violence slowly, as if it were a biological process, another reflection of slow violence's subtly consuming power. Pacheco's images—of hell rising up to swallow the earth, of a faceless cadaver of a woman covered in debris, of humanity's futile layering of steel and concrete upon ruins upon even older ruins—force the reader to face the

violence of the earthquake in the context of the impending eco-apocalypse. This conflation of the two worlds attempts to unite slow violence with immediate violence and results in one of the most compelling moments in Pacheco's entire oeuvre. It is as if Pacheco is forced to establish a dialogue between the slow violence of eco-apocalypse and the immediate violence of natural disaster. All of a sudden, Pacheco becomes a believer in the divinity of nature, in its capacity for retribution, as we will see in the stanzas analyzed in the following section.

The markedly distinct perspective between the grounded poet in *Ruinas* and the flying poet in "México vista aérea" showcases an almost cinematographical interest in observation. How, in light of the present theme of slow violence then, does the variation in perspective inform Pacheco's holistic approach to landscape? Where the approach of "México vista aérea" is obvious from the title, the perspective of *Ruinas* is among, throughout, and/or *within* the ruins themselves. The poet may not be trapped under the weight of toppled buildings with the dead—as he so crushingly observes and relates—but his imagination settles over the cadavers and ruins, like the ever-present imagery of "polvo", which populates many of the sections in *Ruinas*. As the change in perspective between *Ruinas* and "México vista aérea" introduces questions of spatiality and a subsequent visibility, the immediacy of the trauma of *Ruinas* is questioned by the larger, long-term effects noted in "México vista aérea". If the city's devastation isn't visible by a bird or a plane hovering above, how meaningful can a society built on generations and generations of ruins be to the apathetic scale and weight of deep time? However, despite the previous poem's poetic widening of the lens, *Ruinas*'s detailed imagery and its organization as a deeply human lament of grief, present an alternate form of perspective, perhaps one that bridges the gap between deep time and human time.

The poet writes in poem 7 of section I of *Ruinas*: “El día se vuelve noche, / polvo es el sol”, and in poem 12 of section I “somos lo que desciende siempre: / polvo en el aire” (309, 311). Day becomes night as the “polvo” covers and asphyxiates, like a thick fog. Later, the poet includes himself in the first-person plural (which is striking as Pacheco wasn’t actually present for the earthquake) and compares himself and an undesignated population to the “polvo” en el aire. The “polvo” which appears in “México vista aérea”, instead of a layering which covers and conceals the sun and the city, is the material representation of the choked and arid earth, “polvo [que] / reina sobre el encono y el estrago” (lines 9-10). But the line prior to the aforementioned quote in poem 12, section I reads “Somos la naturaleza” (which actually contends with Pacheco’s characteristically binary perceptive of humanity vs nature) suggesting humankind’s closer-than-perceived connection with nature. Humankind constitutes nature just as much as the animals, trees, and stones, and their comparison to “polvo” suggests an almost parasitic consistency: always *a part of* but *apart from* nature.

The image of “polvo” stands as a metaphor for the poet’s imaginative witness of the aftermath of the earthquake, or a “reflective mode that ... [is] productive, creative” (Lazarra and Unruh 4). These new ruins of Mexico provide Pacheco with ample inspiration to construct a vision of post-apocalyptic Mexico from the ground up, as opposed to the plane seat of “México vista aérea”. Pacheco uses the images of destruction to craft a narrative of time and space, where the earth’s anger is made manifest in the form of a natural disaster. He walks freely amongst the sepulcher of ruin in the city, loosely documenting and then poeticizing the concrete images. Handley argues that Neruda’s *Canto general* deals with similar creative concatenations of time and space, and that “Poetry’s response to the fragments of memory embedded in the physical senses is the only means by which the self-conscious adult can return to natural time. Although

nature is still available to the poet, his consciousness of loss has made it impossible to achieve stasis within deep time” (164). Similarly, Pacheco’s poetic voice depends on sensorial experience and memory of the earthquake, as well as his experience and memory of human-induced violence in the form of toxic drift and pollution, to “return to natural time”. Although Pacheco paradoxically claimed the entities of the natural world to be among “nuestros prójimos más próximos” in his poetry, he consistently paints a picture of separation and difference between the human and the nonhuman (*José Emilio* 0:26:15-0:27:20). More than categorically, *Ruinas* reconciles the human and the non-human *temporally*, as he attempts to merge deep time with human time, as he presents the violence as cracking open the fabric of history, of ruins upon ruins upon ruins.

The apocalyptic overtones which mark Pacheco’s poetry seem to serve a narrative and tonal ark that can be drawn from his elemental, abstract, and more metaphysical poems, towards his *Ruinas de México*. The poem contextualizes Pacheco’s previous prophetic inclinations about catastrophe and apocalypse, grounding them in a real, tragic experience of disaster. Here is its “realization and aftershock” which suddenly brings all the apocalyptic undertones to the forefront (Doudoroff 273). Some critics argue that Pacheco’s “apocalyptic imagination loses dramatic impact” when faced with the violent realities of the earthquake (Klahn 92). However, I believe that, in the larger context of Pacheco’s body of work, the apocalyptic imagination becomes more concrete more evocative, and more dramatic as he correlates the natural with the man-made disaster. For example, stanzas 3 and 8 of the poem poeticize the earthquake’s effects on the city:

La piedra de lo profundo late en su sima.

Al despetrificarse, rompe su pacto
con la inmovilidad y se transforma
en el ariete de la muerte.

8

Así de pronto lo más firme se quiebra,
se tornan movedizos concreto y hierro,
el asfalto se rasa, se desploman
la vida y la ciudad. Triunfa el planeta
contra el designio de sus invasores. (308-309)

The imagery in these stanzas reflects the aforementioned deeply-internalized binary between nature and civilization that much of Pacheco's poetry depicts. In 8, humankind is duped into believing their creations have a certain kind of permanence, both culturally and physically. Their presence represents dominion over the earth. But then suddenly the ground "rompe su pacto / con la inmovilidad" and all edifice and inherent memory are torn asunder. The impermanence of civilization is contrasted here with longer, more drawn out processes. Klahn's claim that the text lacks dramatic impact because of the violent reality of the earthquake came before the conceptualizing and naming of slow violence, and thus views violence in the singular, spectacular form, and not in the accretional one so emphasized by Nixon. Pacheco's poem sits somewhere between the spectacular and the slow, subtly uniting the two. The five sections of 12 short poems contained in *Ruinas* stand as snapshots of the city, moments frozen in time by the

death and destruction. Time, as the poet perceives it, stops, offering him a glimpse of another trajectory at play within the earth. The reference to “invasores” recalls a more pastoral landscape, bereft of skyscrapers of concrete and steel. The romantic notions of the poem suggest the earth’s desire for vengeance or perhaps balance. Either way, the earth becomes another violent force in this poem, woven into the larger tapestry of slow violence.

Pacheco explicitly places images of man-made violence against the earth next to the earthquake’s violence to instill their connectedness in the reader’s mind, such as in stanza 11: “Secamos toda el agua de la ciudad, destruimos, / *por usura*, los campos y los árboles ... La ciudad ya estaba herida de muerte. / El terremoto vino a consumir / cuatro siglos de eternas destrucciones” (317). Built like a crescendo, this stanza concludes a type of kaleidoscope of events and violences that keep occurring, culminating in the image of a sentient earth, furious with humanity’s hubris and greed, seeking to inflict terrestrial vengeance: there must be justice for the violence and destruction that humanity has caused. The earthquake becomes a metaphor of earth’s response to the slow violence of delayed destruction, a culmination of years of rape and extraction, soiling and pollution. Yet despite this one violent response to a lifetime (albeit a short one) of mistreatment, the poem’s reconciliation of natural time with human time indicates the power of poetry to traverse the boundaries between such disparate time rhythms. *Ruinas* ultimately represents a poet grappling with the paradox of simultaneous grief and triumph: grief at so much death and a resigned triumph over the earth’s surprising sense of vengeance. Though the language of the poem is immediately, spectacularly violent, read in harmony with Pacheco’s *oeuvre*, it simply sits as another testament to Pacheco’s lyrical documentation of slow violence. The ecoapocalypse and slow violence gives the poet a frame of reference to read and interpret the 1985 earthquake. In effect, the marrying of human-caused climate change, capitalist

extraction and pollution, and natural disasters (disasters whose intensity is now questioned and even attributed to climate change) further showcases the appearance of slow violence in his poetry.

José Emilio Pacheco's characteristically morose work seems to offer no salve to heal the wounded earth, nor even a remedy to begin political change. If anything, Pacheco seems to resign himself to the impending eco-apocalypse and the subsequent suffering that will endure. Such conceptions of apocalypse are exactly what many journalists and critics are afraid of: Lynn Keller warns "without some counterforce, such grief and despair can prove paralyzing, both artistically and politically" with Greg Garrard concurring, claiming that apocalyptic rhetoric often times provokes and "produces the crisis it describes" (Keller 99, Garrard 114). Handley claims that apocalyptic thinking produces an "unfruitful dichotomy" of nature as resting outside of human history. "In either case", he concludes, "it would seem that human history is defined by its inevitable end, thus rendering us impotent to imagine and act in the interest of other futures" (8). If all these critics' theories of apocalyptic thinking as a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts, then Pacheco's poetry is doomed to exist outside of the realm of practicality, fixed within its own indefinite loop of eschatological aestheticism.

However, Octavio Paz elaborates on the pivotal concept of the poetic imagination: "the operative mode of poetic thought is imagining, and imagination consists, essentially, of the ability to place contrary or divergent realities in relationship ... in the most extreme cases, *they unite opposites*" (*Other* 158, my emphasis). Handley suggests that Paz's conception of poetry is of a medium that unites and creates ties between previously disparate forces, in this case between nature and humanity. Paz's hope is that poetry can be "earth-saving", ultimately "tak[ing] up vestiges or detritus of the past *as if* to create evidence of the past in what might otherwise appear

to be a ‘virgin’ landscape in order to keep time moving forward beyond the possibility of its end” (Handley 9). Pacheco’s *Ruinas*, for example, possesses this uniting power, in the way it uses the violence of nature to say something about the slow violence caused by humanity, demonstrating that both are indeed capable of atrocities. However, humanity’s conscience is what makes them responsible for their actions. But this demonstration indicates a need to look beyond apocalypse and beyond, therefore, an unforgiveable and very short human history. Lynn Keller posits: “Happily for environmental poets ... among poetry’s long-celebrated powers is its ability to help us come to our senses in literal as well as figurative ways” (106). Pacheco, ever the environmental poet, can be subsumed into the aforementioned category, as his poetry serves as a wakeup call for those concerned with the slow violence of environmental degradation, regardless of Pacheco’s actual inclinations towards activism.

Relying on the characterization of Pacheco’s poetry as “apocalyptic” recalls the etymology of the word “apocalypse” coming from the Greek *ἀποκάλυψις* literally meaning “an uncovering”. If Pacheco’s poetry is truly apocalyptic then it should not only treat modern understandings of apocalypse and all their correlated themes of environmental and societal collapse, but also seek to uncover and expose truths that are buried by political corruption and immorality towards environmental oversight: primarily that humanity is responsible for the care of the planet. If it is true that, according to James Berger, “the end is never the end”, then humanity still has time to recover and to heal (5). Despite the poetic voice’s consistent hopelessness in the face of ecological slow violence, the poems at least attempt to bring to light a moral imperative to care for the already asphyxiating planet and its inhabitants.

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