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### ***THREE POSTCARDS FROM MEXICO CITY: LÓPEZ VELARDE, HUERTA, PACHECO***

**Keywords:** Mexico City; Postmodern Mexican poetry; Ramón López Velarde; Efraín Huerta; José Emilio Pacheco.

**Abstract:** This chapter discusses the visions of three of the leading voices in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Mexican letters: Ramón López Velarde, hailed as Mexico's 'national poet', Efraín Huerta, perhaps the best poet of the second half of the last century, and José Emilio Pacheco, a poet, essayist and translator, whose mastery of form and 'inner emotional involvement' were praised by no other than Huerta himself. In more than one way, the three were the antipodes of each other, yet if there is one single them common to all three is their passionate love for Mexico City. The Mexican capital can be described as a place where past, present and future meet in perfect harmony. Majestic colonial buildings stand atop the ruins of pre-Columbian Aztec temples. In other, more gentrified, areas the skyline and sleek architecture conjure up images of Singapore or other adrenaline-charged metropolises. In the poetic imagery of our three poets, Mexico City is alternatively characterised as a motherly figure, a seductress and a whore. The city is a God-given haven sheltering the destitute, the hordes of poor Indians that throng to the capital in their quest for a brighter future. Similarly it is a mother, one that loves its children, poor or rich, in equal measure. But the city is also a heavily made up prostitute whose stale perfume both repels and enchants. Without their particular idiom each poet paints a most accurate portrait of Mexico City's misery and splendour.

**Ramón López Velarde's Mexico City.** Ramón López Velarde spent the last few years of his short life in Mexico City. He was 33 when he died there in 1921. At that time, the population was shy of one million. Today, more than 9 million live in Mexico City proper, and another 12 million in the metropolitan area. Today, over 21 million call this urban centre home.

In López Velarde's literary and personal geography there are only two latitudes, Jerez, his native village, and the cities. The former stands for all that is pure, pristine and unpolluted. By contrast, cities—the very few he set foot on—are the exact opposite of his immaculate birthplace. Cities, especially Mexico City, epitomize decadence, corruption and decay.

Against this backdrop of striking dualism—which is in fact his hallmark—López Velarde contrasts cities and villages in terms of their supply of pure love. He unreservedly confesses to his unremitting thirst and hunger for that most coveted of goods, true love. In one of his poems, "To the primitive charm of village girls"<sup>1</sup> (*A*

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<sup>1</sup> The source of Ramon Lopez Velarde's chronicles and other texts in prose is *Obras*, José Luis Martínez (ed.) (1994), which, from this point on, are abbreviated with a three-letter

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*la gracia primitiva de las aldeanas*), he paints an idyllic picture of chaste beauties born and raised in a village. He finds himself famished and thirsting for love, yet he refuses to be satiated in a city.

I am famished and athirst.  
I have always refused to  
Find appeasement in the disturbing  
Pleasure of cities—flowers of sin.  
May this hunger for love  
And this thirst for reverie  
Be assuaged in an unknown  
Group of girls from a small town (SAN 144)<sup>2</sup>.

While the city is inhabited by *flowers of sin*, the village is the abode, of all that is pure and virginal; it is the pristine and unpolluted garden of immaculate love, where love is never contaminated. During the bloodshed that was the revolution of 1910, these virginal beauties from small towns are forced to take shelter in the sinful city, to which they lend their unblemished charm, as can be seen in “Women in Exile” (*Las Exiliadas*):

The poor exiles of Morelia and Toluca, of Durango and San Luis,  
Are scenting the Metropolis like grains of anise (Z0Z 194).

The poet himself is ostracized to the seediness of the Capital. In 1914 his family flees to Mexico City, where, after graduating as a lawyer, he finds himself penniless, and with his parents and siblings to feed. It was here that he got his first job, saw his poems published and found unrequited love.

He is well aware that life in the capital is akin to a season in hell. Guillermo Sheridan, perhaps López Velarde’s best biographer, describes Mexico City in these terms: “The asthmatic and corrupt city, thunderous like a leviathan, as charming as a courtesan, more than ever before gobbles up the rest of the country, thus fuelling her own obesity” (104).

It is in Mexico City, of all places, that he has a most fortunate encounter with a girl from that pristine wilderness that is Jerez. This fortuitous encounter provides him with an excuse to reminisce about his childhood, spent in the innocent bliss of the village. This is the source of “To a Travelling Lady” (*A una Viajera*). As can be expected, the poem pities this girl—this fragile and defenceless flower—trapped in the bustling city.

Poor friend of yore. Poor flower from the province,  
Promenading the raucous streets of the metropolis [...]

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abbreviation, which refers to the name of each section in the edition: *Primeras Poesías* (PP), *Don de febrero* (DON), *El Minutero* (MIN), *El Son del corazón* (SON), *Zozobra* (ZOZ), *La Sangre devota* (SAN) and *Crítica literaria* (CRI). The abbreviations are followed by the page number.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all the texts quoted here were translated by the authors of this chapter.

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Return to your village lest your clothes are soiled  
With the mud of impure cities (PP 125).

Leaving aside the risk it poses to the virtue of young *señoritas*, Mexico City is also a hotbed of modernity, or more precisely, of Mexican literary modernism. This literary movement stands in direct opposition to the themes, values and imagery of poets, mostly catholic poets, from the provinces. López Velarde is one of those condemning the excesses of cosmopolitanism, adamant in their decidedly xenophobic opposition to anything oozing even the slightest whiff of Yankee Protestantism (or anything too French-sounding for that matter). Mexico City is the stronghold of the brand of Modernism that they hate, the one that embraces the novelty of the foreign. The capital is also the symbol of Porfirio Díaz's dictatorial regime. We must read in his contempt for the modernists from the metropolis —associated to the oppressing regime and official ideology— the rejection to a literary imposture that mars the authentic Mexican tradition (Sheridan 254).

This foreign influence is regarded as an affront to what is pure and holy. It is hardly surprising then that to the likes of López Velarde the city is a byword for *whore*, or to put it mildly, a temptress. Yet, temptresses are not without their charm. In another poem, “My Village”, the poet regrets yielding to the temptation of the bright lights:

Had I not left my village,  
With a saintly wife  
I would bask in the bliss  
Of knowing but one hemisphere (SON 255).

When it comes to sinning, not all cities are in the same league. In “*Etching*” (*Aguafuerte*) (SON 259-260), one of his texts in prose, he contrasts archetypical Venice —city of carnivals, depravity and unparalleled riches— to saintly Jerusalem. It was not in Venice —and certainly not in Jerusalem—, most probably in Mexico City, that Velarde contracted a sexually transmitted disease. A “flower” —a sinful one at any rate—is his metaphor of choice to allude to STD. In “Punitive Flower” (*La Flor punitiva*) (MIN 294), the lustful gentleman describes himself as an *orangutan in rut* while the ladies are, well, *Babylonian*.

If Mexico City were simply a metaphor for hell, it would be impossible to explain the fascination that it exerts on López Velarde. The city is abuzz with artistic and intellectual activity. Here the latest fashions can be bought for a price. The city is a magnet to the cinema buff that our poet was. The capital is also home to Saturnino Herrán, one of Mexico's most celebrated painters. In “Elegy”, López Velarde bemoans the passing of the painter: “He loved his country, yet, by making use of the most realistic allegories, I can confidently say the Herrán's mistress was no other than Mexico City, a millionaire in pain and pleasure” (MIN 262). In the same poem, he goes on to describe life in the city by personifying it as a woman. Not just *any* woman, but one that is capable of giving inspiration to artists; one that blends modernity and pre-Columbian splendour; a city of drama, a city that is not for the faint-hearted, but a saintly and sensuous city:

She gave him landscapes and shapes; he in turn caressed her every stone, her every inhabitant, her every cloud. Tedious though the city may seem to the infirm at heart, her treasures are proof of her priceless: from the visible traffic to the mirrors in which the eternal Goddess morganatically copies the blueprint of a pyramid. At night, when the three-act play of births, marriages and deaths unfolds, and silence materialises for us to enjoy it through our noses, the city conjures up, as we traverse it, a devoted Saint Genevieve watching over a dormant city of Paris (MIN 262).

I would like to turn my attention to one of the city's most emblematic streets: *Avenida Madero*, or simply *Madero*, a thoroughfare in the historic city centre. In recent years, it has been gentrified and pedestrianised. The street was once known as *Calle de Plateros*, the street of silversmiths. Pancho Villa himself —on entering the city with his troops and Zapata's army— bestowed the street its present name, with the caveat that whoever removed the plate with the new name would be shot on the spot. When López Velarde lived in Mexico City, the street was as important as it is today. Ever the flâneur, López Velarde chronicles the vibrancy of the street in his aptly named "Avenida Madero":

Plateros... San Francisco... Madero ... various names for one single stream, for the single pulse of the city. Not for one of the twenty four hours in a day, does this street cease to feel my steps. I am addicted to it. Yet, I am fully aware of its sheer utilitarian character since it cannot be separated from those deceiving courtesans going up or down the street in their carriages (DON 473).

In 1917, and today, *Avenida Madero* was dotted with countless shops of every description: from places selling traditional sweets, to goldsmiths, to restaurants. In the same chronicle, however, our poet quotes a politician complaining that sex was *Avenida Madero's* real stock-in-trade. The street is a small-scale version of Mexico City, of what attracts and repels the poet. A meat market though the street may be, it is also a favourite place for the elderly and the innocent:

There is certainly no whiff of sanctity in the air, yet there is no shortage of honest to goodness vehicles. There are married couples —he and she— physiological ruins, that stroll around harbouring no suspicions, civil, canonical or otherwise. Also present are the last remnants of our so-called aristocracy, fiercely colonial, looking gaunt by so much fasting and abstinence [...] and girls trying to cross the street [...] who are the Seven Virtues incarnate (DON 474).

Full of contrasts as the avenue itself, López Velarde can simultaneously be ardently nationalistic and an avid reader of Baudelaire and Verhaeren, while remaining a poet in the modernist mode. Despite this, he resents another sign of the times:

The avenue might have had its share of avatars, but the poet trembles at the prospect of the street losing its sheer essence. *Madero* was a once a Mexican "calle" that later took pains to look like a Parisian "rue", but is now an American "street" (DON 475).

*Avenida Madero* stands as a synecdoche for the capital, or indeed for the whole country. The metropolis is home to the National Palace and much of Mexico's best art. Here the ruins of Aztec temples stand next door to the Metropolitan Cathedral. If the essence of the street could be summarised in one word, that word would be *Mexico*. No wonder then that Mexico's "national poet" should find reason to worry in the presence of a protestant temple and in the numerous signs written in English. At the beginning of the last century, Madero displayed advertisements of *Mobil Oil* with its signature Pegasus as a logo. This is as powerful a symbol of imperialism as the United Fruit Company. The poet therefore decries that "Pegasus flies over the Avenue. Over the swarm, over the mirage of luxury, over the trains of pleasure, over the astonished visitor it flies; Pegasus in full swing" (441).

To Ramón López Velarde, Mexico's capital city might well have been a mixture of what is best and worst about the country, but at least it was a *Mexican* mixture. The city is simultaneously a demon and an angel, yet neither flies on *Mobil Oil*.

**Efraín Huerta's Mexico City.** Efraín Huerta, 1914-1982, is one of Mexico's most iconic poets. One of the most coveted Mexican literary prizes is in fact named after him. It was thanks to Rafael Solana, that some of Huerta's first poetry chapbooks were published. This is the case of his much acclaimed, "Line of Dawn" (*Línea del Alba*). Together with Rafael Solana, Huerta co-founded *Taller* (Workshop) a Mexican literary magazine. At the editorial helm of *Taller* stood Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz and Alberto Quintero Álvarez. Unfortunately though *Taller* proved to be a rather short-lived venture, only twelve numbers of the literary magazine were published, from 1938 to 1941. Apart from Huerta, some other writers were also brought to its pages: José Revueltas, Carmen Toscano, Neftalí Beltrán, among others. Also published in *Taller* were the works of Spanish writers who had just arrived in Mexico, fleeing the Civil War: José Bergamín, Manuel Altoaguirre and León Felipe (Correa Pérez 491-493).

Most of these writers in exile were communists who enjoyed the unflagging support of those in arms against General Franco. As time passed by, some of them began to question the communist agenda and closed ranks against Stalinism. Octavio Paz was one of the first and most outspoken poets who voiced their rejection of communism. By contrast, for over three decades, Efraín Huerta remained a steadfast admirer and supporter of dictatorial communist regimes. In fact, one can go as far as describing him as a "communist poet" because a great deal of his poetry advocates the basic premises of this ideology.

Decidedly, his politically charged poetry does not constitute the best of his literary output. Like many in Latin America, Huerta was deceived by political propaganda, which made sure that the atrocities committed against the peoples of Eastern Bloc nations remained mostly unknown. This situation lasted until well into the late eighties, a period that heralded the demise of communism in Europe.

His politically charged poetry aside, we can enjoy love and eroticism present in many of his finest poems. Humour is also present in his works, especially in those succinct humoristic poems called "minute poems" (*poemínimos*). This is Huerta at his very best. This facet of his literary production is exemplified by his first text his

discussed here, “Declaration of Love” (*Declaración de Amor*), which is simply a love poem dedicated to a woman. The woman in question is Mexico City. The second example is “Aphrodite Morris” (*Afrodita Morris*), a poem about a beautiful woman strolling in Polanco and Anzures, two upmarket enclaves in Mexico City, famous for their host of glitzy designer boutiques, sleek malls, and ritzy hotels and restaurants. This aspect of his literary output provides the groundwork for this part of our analysis, which focuses on the female body as a metaphor for Mexico City.

Following Franco Moretti’s (6-7) study on geography and literature, there are two different approaches to the study of mimesis of the cities in literature: Depictions of imaginary and of real places. In literary works both depictions may occur. We are fully aware of the fact that the aim of Moretti’s research is based on the design of maps that explain the internal logic of European novels plots. However, this approach can readily be applied to the poems discussed here.

For clarity purposes, it must be borne in mind that a place (in this case, Mexico City) implies two more concepts: distance and movement. These can also be referred to as “I” and the “Other”, i.e., space we are familiar with, and foreign or unknown regions. In other words, distance is an ontological category, which has also been used to ascribe sex roles (Moretti 26); for example, in the *Iliad*, Penelope waits knitting at home while Ulises travels abroad.

In “Declaration of Love” (*Declaración de amor*), the poet is simply a lover in conversation with his beloved. The poem echoes Ramon López Velarde’s, “Gentle Homeland” (*La suave patria*), which, notwithstanding its epic contents, is a love song. It is clear that here Huerta tries to create the imaginary ideal space of a City-Woman, whose main quality is her capacity to give birth, not only to the poet himself, but to the myriad people he stands for. The city is thus personified as a maternal figure, which hugs and cries while tenderly gazing at her children. The city is also a most generous mistress that willingly offers herself to a thousand —alas— coy lovers. Mexico City reminds the poet of his wife and son, who will be a sacrificial offering. In the last stanza of the poem, Huerta imagines the city as a mythical place from which suffering and discomfort are banned:

Mi gran ciudad de México:  
 el fondo de tu sexo es un criadero  
 de claras fortalezas,  
 tu invierno es un engaño  
 de alfileres y leche,  
 tus chimeneas enormes  
 dedos llorando niebla,  
 tus jardines axilas la única verdad,  
 tus estaciones campos  
 de toros acerados  
 tus calles cauces duros  
 para pies varoniles,  
 tus templos,  
 viejos frutos  
 alimento de ancianas,  
 tus horas como gritos

My great Mexico City,  
 the depths of your sex are a hatchery  
 of clear strengths.  
 Your winter is deceit  
 of pins and milk;  
 your huge chimneys,  
 fog-shedding fingers;  
 your axillae gardens, the only truth;  
 your seasons, fields  
 of steely bulls;  
 your streets, paths  
 hard on manly feet;  
 your temples,  
 old fruit,  
 fit for old women.  
 Your hours are the cries

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de monstruos invisibles	of invisible monsters.
¡tus rincones con llanto	¡Your wailing corners
son las marcas de odio y saliva	are the marks of hatred and saliva
carcomiendo tu pecho de dulzura!	gnawing at your sweet heart!
(Huerta 135-136).	

The poem, “Aphrodite Morris”, also likens Mexico City to a woman. In striking contrast to “Declaration of Love”, where the city is described as a motherly figure, this poem extols the beauty of a woman (Aphrodite) as she takes her early afternoon walk in the swanky Polanco and Anzures districts. “Morris” in the poem refers to Aphrodite’s surname, but it is also the name of a shop that sells second-hand car spares, which Aphrodite walks past every day. Away from her classical world, this “goddess of love” also turns heads in Mexico City. Sometimes, though, she fails to take her daily walk, which causes her admirers to fall ill:

Pero cuando ayayay no pasas	But, ow ow ow, whenever you fail to
Vario coraje nos enferma y	show,
Por absoluta mayoría se resuelve	We are variously angered and sickened.
Que simplemente seas Froda	By an absolute majority, it is agreed
Afroda Pérez López González o Martínez	That you should simply be Froda
Y no como te llamen en tu oficina en tu	Afroda Pérez López González o Martínez
alcoba.	And not what they call you in your office
(Huerta 341-342).	or your bedroom.

While in “Declaration of Love”, the poet is a symbol of the millions of Mexicans living in the capital, in “Aphrodite Morris” he is simply a witness, a stalker if you will, whose pleasure is to watch the Goddess of love. The sultriness of the city is perceived through the eyes of the countless bystanders in the poem. The reader thus catches a glimpse of a torrid Aphrodite, who also happens to be Mexico City, with its share of lecherous construction workers and other salacious men wolf-whistling at a bus-borne Aphrodite:

Vegetal marmórea canela pura	Marmoreal vegetal pure cinnamon
Piel de adivinaciones	Skin of divination
Pies tejedores de aullidos	Howl-knitting feet
Cuando un fregabundal de albañiles te	When a mob of construction workers stare
miran	at you
Y los andamios son ya castillos en ruinas	And the scaffolding is a ramshackle castle
Los pasajeros de autobuses fallecen de	Bus riders shiver and die
escalofrío	And the deceased (the de-sexed) keep
Y los decesos (desexos) se suceden	cascading into a heap of alfajores.
como un	
tropel de alfajores (Huerta 341-342).	

From a safe distance, the poet stalks Aphrodite Morris during her daily stroll. It is fairly obvious here that Huerta is trying to evoke the Baudelairean character of the *flâneur*. However, unlike his French counterpart in the nineteenth century, the Mexican *flâneur* is not quite as melancholic. On the contrary, he is an

irreverent, happy-go-lucky fellow, who is also an ardent lover of beauty. If, according to Benjamin (11), Baudelaire's Paris is a weak and wrecked city, the Mexico City that Aphrodite Morris inhabits is one of unwavering energy, which holds the poet in constant awe. Its sheer vitality energizes its dwellers, the poor and the rich alike. Consequently, the poet doesn't want to be any different from the hordes of homeless or the peddlers, all united in their love for this Mexican Aphrodite, carved in lava stone. Here—quite literally—people from all walks of life share the same space. The poet makes the reader hear the urban noise and catch a fleeting glimpse of a variety of characters:

<p>Después la asfáltica nube que discurre desde Morris Hnos. (todo lo diagnosticas tú, todito, toditito, Doctora en almas herrumbrosas automóviles esbielados) Hasta Masaryk, Horacio y Homero Territorio de los rugidos las aromáticas mentadas de madre Las sirenas de la Cruz Verde y la Cruz Roja El claxon rencoroso de las damas liverpúlicas</p> <p>Las solamente lindas propietarias de boutiques [...] Los vendedores de billetes de lotería Los boleros sin ranita con mandolina Los vagos, los imbéciles gerentes del banco Y sus medianamente guapotas secretarias Las carrozas de Gayosso y Tangassi [...] Los camiones 60, 77, 85 91, etcétera, Que van y vienen como cangrejos locos (Huerta 341).</p>	<p>Atop the asphaltic cloud that goes from Morris Co. (you diagnose everything, every little thing, Doctor of rusty souls, those automobiles whose engines have seized), All the way to Masaryk, Horace and Homer Streets, Territory of the roar of people aromatically yelling expletives The sirens of the Green Cross and Red Cross, The rancorous honking of splurging ladies shopping at <i>Liverpool</i>. The merely so-cute boutique owners [...] The sellers of lottery tickets The shoeshine boys without a little frog with a mandolin Hobos and stupid bank managers And those secretaries that tend to be hot The Gayosso and Tangassi hearses [...] The 60, 77, 85, 91 busses, etcetera, Which come and go like crazy crabs.</p>
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As we can see, in the two poems the city is not just a sprawling metropolis, but also a living female presence. "Declaration of Love" (*Declaración de amor*) is a love song dedicated to Mexico City; the poem embodies the mythical, yet optimistic conception of the capital, where the female forces that reign in the city protect everybody. The poem "Aphrodite Morris", shows a Mexican flâneur (the poet) basking in the presence of a beautiful woman, together with countless other men. The raucous atmosphere of "Aphrodite Morris" affords an exhilarating view of daily life in Mexico's capital city.

**José Emilio Pacheco's Mexico City.** Poet, novelist, storyteller, essayist, and translator, José Emilio Pacheco (Mexico City 1939-2014) is widely regarded as

one of Mexico's most influential poets. Historically speaking, he is related to the so-called "Mid-century Generation", a group of writers who were born in the 1930's and lived Modernity in Mexico City<sup>3</sup>. As regards his style, his oft-quoted simplicity is nothing but deceptive. The transparency of his verse is consequence of an outstanding ability to write. Pacheco is one of those poets who avoided grandiloquent speech, solemnity or self-importance (Gordon 255). Even if his works explore several literary genres (narrative, drama, essay, chronicle, among others), he is first and foremost a poet. His fourteen volumes of poetry attest this<sup>4</sup> (Fernandez Granados, in Pacheco, *Los días* 7). While alien to linguistic fireworks, Pacheco nonetheless mastered verse. Despite its restraint, his poetry is also a profound reflection of the poet's times:

The images, personifications, choice of words, rhythm, and enjambment, impress the reader with their clarity. Pacheco eliminates anecdote. His wording highlights the subjectivity of any scene by transforming it into a sort of "objective correlation" of spirits. His verse is faultless, mostly regular (with a penchant for verses of ten or eleven syllables that seem to flow seamlessly). His poetic idiom is capable of producing subjective, yet poignant effects, with visions that far exceed the linguistic scope of words (Debicki 281 our translation).

Mexico City, the so-called "City of Palaces", is a recurring theme in the poetry of José Emilio Pacheco. It was here that he was born. It was here that he died at the age of 74. As one of its inhabitants, he grieves over the City. He explores it and *reads* it. According to Lefebvre, the City is a language, a form of writing that reveals an ensemble of life, memories, and images (*De lo rural* 189).

Pacheco is a critical reader of Mexico City, a place where progress and degradation have coexisted since Pre-Columbian times. In his poems, the capital is not just a modern metropolis; it is also vivid testimony of a painful conquest. In "The resting place of fire" (*El reposo del fuego*), Pacheco depicts the birth of his nation as a cruel fusion of cultures. Though long buried, that period in the history of Mexico City is very much alive and palpitating under the pavement:

Bajo el suelo de México verdean  
eternamente pútridas las aguas  
que lavaron la sangre conquistada.  
Nuestra contradicción –agua y aceite–  
permanece a la orilla y aún divide,  
como un segundo dios,  
todas las cosas:  
lo que deseamos ser y lo que somos  
(Pacheco, *Los días* 23).

Under the ground of the city the waters  
gather  
thick and putrid green  
to scourge the conquered blood.  
Our contradiction –oil and water–  
cleaves like a twinned god  
to the shore, dividing  
everything in two:  
what we wish to be and what we are  
(*Selected Poems* 33)

<sup>3</sup> Among them Thelma Nava, Marco Antonio Montes de Oca, Juan Bañuelos, Isabel Fraire, Eraclio Zepeda, Jaime Labastida, and Homero Aridjis (Gordon, 1990:256).

<sup>4</sup> *Los elementos de la noche* (1963), *El reposo del fuego* (1966), *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo* (1969), *Irás y no volverás* (1973), *Islas a la deriva* (1976), *Desde entonces* (1980), *Los trabajos del mar* (1983), *Miro la tierra* (1986), *Ciudad de la memoria* (1989), *El silencio de la luna* (1996), *La arena errante* (1999), *Siglo pasado (Desenlace)* (2000), *La edad de las Tinieblas* (2009) y *Como la lluvia* (2009).

The poem evokes significant historical figures —half fact, half myth—, phantasmagorical visions that refuse to disappear from the present-past of Mexico City: defeated emperor Moctezuma; Cuahutémoc, the last Aztec emperor; Cortés, the greedy Spanish conquistador; the unjust Viceroy. The Viceroy himself speaks in this poem. As noted by Alemany Bay (6), Pacheco often used this literary device, which consists of adapting or stressing words uttered by somebody else in order to insert them in the text, thus rendering it more compelling:

Dijo el virrey: *Los hombres de esta tierra  
son seres para siempre condenados  
a eterna oscuridad y abatimiento.  
Para callar y obedecer nacieron*  
(Pacheco, *Los días* 27)

The Viceroy said: *The men of this land  
are beings condemned forever  
to obscurity and to be downtrodden.  
They were born to shut up and obey.*  
(*Selected Poems* 37)

Reminiscing about the city's past, Pacheco's verse bemoans its lost splendour:

¿Qué se hicieron  
tantos jardines, las embarcaciones  
y los bosques, las flores y los prados?  
Los mataron  
para alzar su palacio los ladrones.  
(Pacheco, *Los días* 27)

What befell  
the many gardens, the vessels  
the woods, the flowers and the meadows?  
They were killed  
by the thieves to build their palace.

Gazing into the this melting pot of cultures, Pacheco starts a dialogue with the origins of the city, which have not vanished and are the source of the City's present, as stated by Lefebvre:

Our cities are pulled, so to speak, by their past. On this street of Paris, a hotel dating back to the Middle Ages distances itself from the “modernity” that surrounds it, while retaining its distance in time. The juxtaposition of buildings, the Roman ruins on the river banks, reproduce in space the ages of History, the succession of epochs. The past is emblazoned even in the wounds of the stones (*De lo rural* 20 our translation).

In “Don't ask me how the time goes by” (*No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo*), Pacheco's poetic voice denounces a watershed in Mexico's modern history: The Massacre of Tlatelolco, which took place on October 2<sup>nd</sup> 1968, when a student protest was violently suppressed by the government in a bloodshed. “Manuscript of Tlatelolco” (*Manuscrito de Tlatelolco*) is a markedly intertextual poem. It has two parts, the first is a translation of “Vision of the Defeated” (*Visión de los vencidos*), originally written in the Nahuatl language. The second part is based on a compilation of texts collected by Elena Poniatowska in her book *La noche de Tlatelolco* (*Massacre in Mexico*). This poem is regarded as a turning point in Pacheco's art. According to Verani, in this poem, Pacheco, the “poet of desolation”, displays a way of saying entirely akin to the modern sensibility, conversational, epigrammatic, and of scrupulous soberness; he focuses on the multiple everyday experiences with an acute consciousness, and an irreverent demythologising irony (9).

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A defining feature of Pacheco's poetry is the presence of national myths. They are the stars that shed a melancholic light on Mexico's historical horizon. In the poem "Premonition" (*Presagio*), the ill-fated emperor Moctezuma refers to that most archetypal event in Mexican history, the self-fulfilling prophecy that is the collapse of his empire, lost to the Spanish conquistadors:

Vuelven los dioses –dijo Moctezuma–.  
Las profecías se cumplen. No habrá oro  
capaz de refrenarlos. Del azteca  
quedará sólo el llanto y la memoria  
(Pacheco, *Los días* 84).

"The gods are back", said Moctezuma.  
"The prophecies are fulfilled. No gold will  
ever restrain them. Of the Aztecs  
only wailing and memory will remain".

Centuries after this tragic event, Mexico City looks more than just shabby and grey in Pacheco's poems. In fact, it has been catastrophically devastated. In "Mexico: from above" (*México: vista aérea*), the metropolis is a monster of progress and destruction:

Desde el avión ¿qué observas? Sólo costras,  
pesadas cicatrices de un desastre.  
Sólo montañas de aridez, arrugas  
de un planeta antiquísimo, volcanes (90).

From the plane, what do you see? Only  
scabs,  
hard scabs formed by disaster.  
Only mountains of dryness, wrinkles  
on the ancient planet, volcanoes.

Present-day Mexico City witnesses a new kind of foreign invasion, portrayed in a poem called *H&C* (which stands for "hot" and "cold"). This time there are no invading armies, but a new lifestyle heralded by a series of technological innovations. The taps imported from the United States come labelled with the letters *H* and *C*, to indicate "hot" or "cold". In its transplant to Mexico, the hot-cold dichotomy takes a 180-degree turn: *cold* means now *hot*, while *hot* is *cold*. The poetic voice examines this exchange and takes a dim view on that mixture of light and darkness that is "progress":

En las casas antiguas de esta ciudad las  
llaves del agua  
tienen un orden diferente.  
Los fontaneros que instalaron los grifos  
dieron a *C* de *cold* el valor de *caliente*;  
la *H* de *hot* les sugirió agua *helada*.

In old houses in this City, taps  
have a different arrangement.  
The plumbers who installed them  
gave *C* (cold) the meaning of *caliente*  
(hot);  
the *H* (hot) suggested *helada* (cold).

¿Qué conclusiones extraer de todo esto?:  
Nada es lo que parece.  
Entre objeto y palabra cae la sombra,  
presentida por Eliot.

What can we conclude from all this?  
Nothing is what it seems.  
Between object and word stands the  
shadow,  
foreseen by Eliot.

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Para no hablar de lo más obvio:	Not to speak of the obvious:
Cómo el imperio nos exporta un mundo	How the empire exports a world
que aún no sabemos manejar ni entender.	we can neither handle nor understand.
Un progreso bicéfalo (creador	The progress is two-headed (it creates
y destructor al mismo tiempo	and destroys at the same time
–y como el mismo tiempo)	–the same as Time itself),
al que no es fácil renunciar (99).	it is not easy to resist.

Pacheco is also one of the most outspoken critics of this contradictory urban mass. “At the gates of the Metro” (*A las puertas del metro*) is a prose poem about abject poverty. The Metro, one of the most emblematic places in Mexico City, is where “the logic of the contemporary city is dramatized, comprising everything: indifference to others and to oneself, foul smells, forced tolerance, and the fierce struggle –not in a metaphorical sense– for survival; all this coupled with fathomless boredom, resignation and vitality” (Monsiváis 80 our translation). Against this ominous backdrop, the poet describes a familiar image: the glue sniffer “whose brain has been destroyed” (Pacheco, *Los días*120). The addict, “fifteen or forty, maybe eighteen years old” (ibid.), is an unwelcome sight to the more prosperous inhabitants of the metropolis. The addict is a metaphor for the misery and the splendour of this society<sup>5</sup>.

If Ernesto Cardenal saw him, he would tell him: Stand up. You are the result of four centuries of hunger, violence and oppression. But you are also the genius builder of pyramids and Machu Picchu, the Mayan Calendar, Aztec sculptures, a Nahuatl codex, the writings of Nezahualcoyotl..., all of which lies beneath the voice trying in vain to replicate rock lyrics (Pacheco, *Los días* 120).

An obsessive longing for what the modern world has devoured can be heard in “Badland” (*Malpaís*). This poem starts with an epigraph: “Badland: arid, desertlike, inhospitable land: without water or vegetation; commonly covered by lava. Francisco J. Santamaria, Dictionary of Mexicanisms” (Pacheco, *Selected Poems*181). Here, Mexico City is a byword for our relentless destruction of the planet. The poem deplors the destruction of mountains, water and vegetation, symbols of the brighter days of yore:

Ésta fue la ciudad de las montañas.	This was the city of mountains.
Desde cualquier esquina se veían las montañas.	From any corner you could see mountains.
Tan visibles se hallaban que era muy raro fijarse en ellas.	They were so visible you didn't notice them. We only truly realized
Sólo nos dimos cuenta de que existían las montañas	the mountains existed when

<sup>5</sup> Ronald J. Friis remarks that in Pacheco’s work the reader often finds “the unexpected combination or union of opposites. This both limits and guides our interpretation of the text, thus creating a circular or cyclical image in the mind of the reader. Ever since he published his earliest works, Pacheco has been fascinated by twins and by the polar oppositions and the circularity of opposites, present in many of his poems” (2015).

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cuando el polvo del lago muerto, los desechos fabriles, la ponzoña de incesantes millones de vehículos y la mierda arrojada a la intemperie por muchos más millones de excluidos bajaron el telón irrespirable y ya no hubo montañas. [...] (Pacheco, <i>Los días</i> 157).	the dust of the dead lake, industrial wastes, the cruel toxin from the incessant millions of vehicles, the shit in atoms on the many more millions of the exploited, brought down an unbreathable curtain and the mountains were no more (Pacheco, <i>Selected Poems</i> 181)
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The aftermath of the earthquake that ravaged Mexico City in 1985 is described in “The Ruins of Mexico/ Elegy of Return” (*Las ruinas de México. Elegía del retorno*). This long poem is Pacheco’s reaction to the natural disaster (Doudoroff, 1989), which happened while the poet was teaching at the University of Maryland. The poem affords a broad and gripping view of a place in ruins. The elegy laments the surrounding horrors, Nature’s dominion over human frailty, the loss of lives amidst dust and chaos:

Sólo cuando nos falta se aprecia el aire, cuando quedamos como el pez atrapados en la red de la asfixia. No hay agujeros para volver al mar que era el oxígeno en que nos desplazamos y fuimos libres. El doble peso del horror y el terror nos ha puesto fuera del agua de la vida (Pacheco, <i>Miro la tierra</i> ).	Only when it vanishes do we appreciate air. Only when we are trapped like fish in a suffocating net. There’s no way out no return to the sea of oxygen where once we wandered free. The double burden of horror and terror has cast us out of the water of life (Pacheco, <i>City of Memory</i> 105)
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Another leading feature of Pacheco’s poetry is his unflagging certainty that everything in life is ephemeral. The city is the doomsday scenario where, paradoxically, he chose to spend his life Mexico City. As Carlos Mosiváis, one of Mexico’s most respected (or reviled) critics puts it: “the city of apocalyptic signs is inhabited by those who, with their sedentary lifestyle, or simply because they have chosen not to leave, prove to be radical optimists” (86 our translation).

Pacheco’s Mexico City is a place where opposites meet: past and present, glory and defeat; a city where progress and decadence coexist. The metropolis may have lost all its battles in Pacheco’s poetry, but it remains jubilant, because for the writer, suffering can be transformed into a pleasure, by means of the pleasure of poetry (Pacheco, “Ovidio en el iPod” 29).

López Velarde, Huerta and Pacheco are different in more ways than one. Despite their obvious differences in idiom, ideology and style, Mexico City is the element that unifies their respective poetic world. To all three, Mexico’s capital city is not simply an urban sprawl encroaching on the surrounding hills. The city is undoubtedly a place of misery and riches, a magnet to illiterate peasants migrating from the poorest backwaters of the country in search of a brighter future among the skyscrapers and elegant malls. This shameful inequality which accounts for the country’s appalling position in the Gini index. Yet its sheer vibrancy and its irrepressible beauty make of this metropolis a most Borgesian locus, where past, present and future can be experienced on any given day.

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