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Cynthia Duncan sobre Hugo J. Verani, editor: *José Emilio Pacheco*

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***José Emilio Pacheco ante la crítica*, ed. by Hugo J. Verani.
Mexico: Universidad Veracruzana, 1987, 310 pp.**

Over the past thirty years, the Mexican writer José Emilio Pacheco has produced an impressive body of work that should easily give him a place of primary importance in contemporary Latin American letters. The author of sixteen books of poetry, two novels, four collections of short stories, numerous essays, critical studies, movie scripts, journalistic writing, translations, and the editor of several important anthologies, Pacheco has established himself as a literary figure of both breadth and depth. It is surprising, in light of Pacheco's widely accepted and acknowledged talent as a writer, that so few major works of criticism have been devoted to him. Hugo J. Verani's *José Emilio Pacheco ante la crítica* is a step in the right direction toward correcting this oversight. Verani has gathered together the work of a dozen scholars who have contributed to the growing interest in Pacheco as a poet, short story writer, and novelist, and has presented them in a cogent way to show the underlying unity in Pacheco's diverse literary texts. Although most of the essays in the collection have been published elsewhere, many will be new to the reader of Verani's book, since they originally appeared in print in newspapers, monographs, or journals that were not widely circulated on an international scale. Verani has recovered these critical studies which have had, to date, only limited exposure, and has presented them to a wider audience by combining them in a more convenient and more accessible form. *José Emilio Pacheco ante la crítica* will be of interest to students and

specialists alike, since the essays which make up the volume vary in approach and range from the general to the highly specific. Furthermore, Verani's excellent bibliography provides a valuable research tool for anyone interested in pursuing further study of this important, but too often underrated, Mexican writer.

The collection opens with a poem and a brief homage dedicated to Pacheco by the literary giant, Octavio Paz. This is followed by a short essay by yet another well-known figure, the Peruvian novelist, Mario Vargas Llosa. These initial pieces in the collection cannot be regarded as mere cases of "window dressing" designed to attract readers through the use of famous names. They are, in a sense, a justification for all that follows, for they prove, beyond any doubt, that Pacheco is regarded as an important writer by those who, themselves, have played a major role in the shaping of contemporary Latin American literature. The first six essays in the book deal with various aspects of Pacheco's poetry, focusing on themes and techniques which characterize his work. José Miguel Oviedo provides an insightful look at Pacheco's early development as a poet, beginning with *Los elementos de la noche* in 1963, and ending with *Islas a la deriva* in 1976. Although the essay provides a good overview for the reader unfamiliar with Pacheco's poetry, it will also appeal to those who have studied the poet's work in depth, for it traces the evolution of his attitude toward poetry from a rather standard notion of the poet as "creator of a text" to the less conventional idea of poetry as "ready-made". Andrew P. Debicki's article nicely complements Oviedo's by focusing on the same body of work, but from a different perspective. Debicki shows how the poet uses a number of strategies first to create distance between the speaker and the subject matter he describes, and between the world of the poem and that of the immediacy of the poem. As Debicki convincingly demonstrates, this complicated narrative device underlines and emphasizes Pacheco's constant thematic concern with the passing of time in his poetry. Livia Soto builds on what Debicki and Oviedo have done in their essays by studying the use of intertextuality in Pacheco's poems. She shows how, through the use of masks and the superimposition of voices from the past, Pacheco creates verbal irony and distance in his texts. While the five articles dealing with Pacheco's poetry are interesting and useful pieces of criticism, it is somewhat disappointing that they all focus primarily on poems written in the 1960s and 1970s, with little or no reference to those written in the past decade. Clearly, there is still work to be done in this area.

The second half of the collection contains essays dealing with Pacheco's narrative. Barbara Bockus Aponte's article is an excellent overview of Pacheco's short stories. It should serve to stimulate more interest in this facet of the writer's work, which has received relatively little critical

attention to date. Ignacio Trejo Fuentes examines the fascinating interrelationship between characters and setting in *El viento distante*, *El principio del placer*, *Morirás lejos*, and *Las batallas en el desierto*. He shows how nostalgia for lost youth and innocence is linked in the minds of the characters and in the tone of the narrative to the progressive deterioration of Mexico City as a habitable environment. *Morirás lejos* receives perhaps more attention than it merits in the collection, being the sole focus of three separate essays. Nevertheless, there is surprisingly little repetition from one article to the next, due to the fact that each critic uses a different theoretical basis. Verani's discussion of *Las batallas en el desierto* is one the best in the volume. In it, he examines the novel as an example of post-boom writing in Latin America, thus giving it an ultra-contemporary critical focus which is lacking in some of the other articles. It is both sophisticated and clearly written, making it accessible to all who are interested in learning more about Pacheco's most recent work of fiction. In contrast, Yvette Jiménez de Báez's two articles border on the hermetic and may present problems for readers who are not completely familiar with post-structuralist criticism.

Overall, *José Emilio Pacheco ante la crítica* is a well balanced, well thought out collection of essays which fills an obvious need. Hopefully, it will make more readers and scholars aware of the importance of Pacheco in the field of contemporary Latin American literature, and will promote greater critical interest in him in the future. Verani is to be commended for taking on this worthwhile task and for carrying it out so well.

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