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From Vision to Apocalypse: the Poetic Subject in Recent Mexican Poetry

Abstract

Over the last two decades there have been significant changes in the poetic subject. After the colloquial realism of the fifties and sixties, in which the poetic subject acted as witness to his or her time or spoke as a collective subject, there has emerged, particularly in the poetry of José Emilio Pacheco, a poetry in which the subject assumes an impersonal voice. This poetry questions originality, privileging appropriation, parody and pastiche while becoming increasingly skeptical and apocalyptic.

Keywords

Mexican Literature, Mexican poetry, poetry, poetic subject, colloquial realism, José Emilio Pacheco, impersonal voice, voice, originality, appropriation, parody, pastiche, skepticism, apocalyptic

From Vision to Apocalypse: The Poetic Subject in Recent Mexican Poetry

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In 1980, Gabriel Zaid published an anthology of poetry, *Asamblea de poetas (Assembly of Poets)*, that included no less than 549 Mexican poets born after 1950. One-hundred and sixty-four of these were represented by a single poem. The collection stands as an illustration of the problem of selection in a country in which more and more poetry is published every year. The significance of Zaid's anthology consisted in its being the first to be published since Octavio Paz's *Poesía en movimiento (Poetry in Motion: 1966)*, in which the youngest poet represented was Homero Aridjis, born in 1942. Despite its broad scope, Zaid's anthology excluded a generation of writers born between 1940 and 1949.

This unprecedented boom in poetry was a direct result of the prosperous state of the arts in the seventies, a prosperity that can, in turn, be traced to the events of October 2, 1968 when the government brutally crushed a student demonstration and brought about a deep division in the country. In an effort to repair the damage and to win support, the government devoted vast resources to culture. "Never before in the history of Mexico," observes Zaid, "have there been so many millions of pesos given to cultural activities."¹ The state promoted literary workshops, awards, and publications. New magazines and publishing houses aimed at the younger generation sprang up, and spaces were created for all kinds of literary activity. And all this occurred when the population itself was growing rapidly. Zaid's anthology, thus, registers a cultural as well as a demographic expansion.

Critics pointed out that the anthology overlooked an entire generation of poets, that it was too eclectic since it included many who, although interested in literature, could by no means be called

poets, and that Zaid had selected poems whose themes were rather abstract and non-political. Even so, the anthology was important for the debates it generated and because it encouraged people to re-evaluate recent literary history. It was followed by two important anthologies—Jorge González de León, *Poetas de una generación*; (1940–49 [1983]) which included the work of 22 poets, and *Palabra nueva* (New Word [1983]), a selection that ranged from the poetry of Homero Aridjis to that of Francisco Segovia (born 1958).

The prestige accorded to poetry in contemporary Mexico can also be gauged by the fact that the National Literature Award has often been given to poets—for instance, to Elías Nandino (1982), to Jaime Sabines (1983), to Marco Antonio Montes de Oca (1985), to Ali Chumacero (1987), and to Eduardo Lizalde (1988). In 1984–85, two poets, Gabriel Zaid and José Emilio Pacheco, were admitted to the prestigious Colegio Nacional. In 1987, Octavio Paz was awarded both the Alfonso Reyes International Prize and the Cervantes Prize. Poets from all over the world attended the three international poetry festivals held in Morelia during the nineteen eighties. In 1988, publishing houses brought out the complete works of Homero Aridjis and Marco Antonio Montes de Oca as well as new collections by several established poets: *Arbol adentro* (A Tree Within) by Octavio Paz, *Albur de amor* by Ruben Bonifaz Nuño and *Miro la tierra* by José Emilio Pacheco. Important collections by younger poets such as David Huerta and Alberto Blanco were also published.

Yet Mexico is also a country where the very excellence of tradition gives rise to “an anxiety of influence”; the break with tradition therefore constitutes a problem that is registered, above all, in the poetic “voice,” at the level of enunciation. In this article, I want to trace some instances where a new poetic voice constitutes the moment of break or rupture with the past. Concentrating on the poetry of José Emilio Pacheco, I shall argue that his poetic voice represents a new vision of the world, increasingly skeptical and apocalyptic in tone. His poetry, especially with the publication of *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo* (*Don't Ask Me How the Time Goes By*), constitutes a new poetics which has widely influenced the younger generations.

José Emilio Pacheco is a critic as well as a poet, and it is he who has best defined the realist and colloquial poetry out of which the poetry of the sixties and seventies emerged, a trend that was initiated by Jaime Sabines in the fifties and continued by a group of poets

known as “La espiga amotinada.” Whereas the poetry of Octavio Paz was affiliated with Surrealism and the European avant-garde, Pacheco identified with “the other avant-garde,” which was influenced by North American poetry. For Pacheco, Jaime Sabines belongs to this other “avant-garde,” which he sees as a realist current in poetry.² Sabines’ poetry is “spoken” rather than “sung,” a description that corresponds to T. S. Eliot’s contention that “the music of poetry . . . must be a music latent in the common speech of its time.”³ What Sabines achieved was to bring Mexican poetry nearer to “common speech.” By the seventies, this colloquial poetry, which had earlier been termed “anti-poetry,” had become the dominant trend. As an advocate of what he calls “colloquial realism,” Sabines describes the poet’s responsibility as that of a “witness to his times. He must discover reality and recreate it. He should speak of that which he lives and experiences. I feel that a poet must, first of all, be authentic: I mean by this that there must be a correspondence between his personal world and the world that surrounds him. If you have a mystical inclination, why not write about it? If you live alone and are afflicted by your solitude, why not speak about it, if it is yours? Poetry must bear witness to our everyday lives.”⁴

Sabines’ generation, which included Rosario Castellanos, Jaime García Terrés and Rubén Bonifaz Nuño rejected the image of the poet as an exceptional being, as visionary subject. Thus Sabines insists that the image of the poet should be that of a witness or chronicler who is also the critical consciousness of his era. Whereas the poetic persona of Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda and even Efraín Huerta seems capable of dominating the world, Sabines rejects any semblance of grandeur. The poet is not an inspired magician or an abstract being; he speaks of everyday happenings, of recognizable experience, and uses a language whose conversational tone and rhythm achieve what appears to be a natural alliance between sound and feeling. But the recreation of the tone and rhythm of conversation is also intentional. As T. S. Eliot has observed, “No poetry . . . is ever exactly the same speech that the poet talks and hears: but it has to be in such a relation to the speech of his time that the listener can say that is how I should talk if I could talk poetry. This is the reason why the best contemporary poetry can give us a feeling of excitement and a sense of fulfillment different from any sentiment aroused by even very much greater poetry of a past age.”⁵

No one speaks in the language of conversational poetry. Thus in Sabines' poetry an effect of the conversational is achieved through the suppression of metaphor, abstract images, and superfluous adjectives. The use of colloquial and familiar phrases drawn from prose underpins its rhetoric. Sabines' poetry, in common with that of other poets of his generation, establishes a framework of everyday life through references to houses, theaters, bars, hospitals, offices, parks and other elements of a cityscape. It is peopled with office workers, politicians, family members:

En este pueblo, Tarumba
miro a todas las gentes todos los días.
Somos una familia de grillos.
Me canso.
Todo lo se, lo adivino, lo siento.
Conozco los matrimonios, los adulterios,
las muertes.
Se cuando el poeta grillo quiere cantar,
cuando bajan los zopilotes al mercado,
cuando me voy a morir yo,
Se quiénes, a qué horas, cómo lo hacen,
curarse en las cantinas,
besarse en los cines,
menstruar,
llorar, dormir, lavarse las manos.
Lo único que no se es cuándo nos iremos,
Tarumba, por un subterráneo,
al mar.⁶

In this town Tarumba, I look around at everybody every day. We are a family of crickets. I get tired. I know everything. I guess it, I feel it. I know about married couples, about adulteries, about the dead. I know when the cricket poet wants to sing, when the vultures descend on the market place, when I'm going to die. I know who, at what time, how they do it, get drunk in bars, kiss at the movies, menstruate, cry, sleep, wash their hands. The only thing I don't know, Tarumba, is when we will pass underground to the sea.⁷

The conversational tone of this poem from his collection, *Tarumba* (1956), and the use of the lyrical apostrophe, becomes a communicative gesture which reaffirms the poetic speaker's desire to break out of his solitude and reach for "the other." The explicit listener addressed, Tarumba, becomes "the invented other" with whom the profoundly sensitive speaker shares his frustrations and his fears.

In the poetry of the sixties and seventies, this conversational tone predominated, although there was a gradual change in the attitude of the speaker, a rejection of the romantic voice of Sabines' existential and subjective poetry that expressed human impotence in the modern world. After 1958, Mexican poetry became more openly political as Mexicans began to question the apparent stability and democracy of the government. The ambiance of social malaise is reflected in a group of poets who published *La espiga amotinada* in 1960 and in 1965, *Ocupación de la palabra*. This group that included Juan Bañuelos, Jaime Labastida, Oscar Oliva, Jaime Augusto Shelley, and Eraclio Zepeda. In the words of Enrique Jaramillo Levi, this group made a significant innovation in that "independent of their individual characteristics, they introduce the notion of social praxis as an essential part of their subjectivity. As a group and as a militant gesture on behalf of their subjectivity, they successfully create a distinctive image."⁸ This is born out by another statement by a member of the group, Bañuelos, who declared "poetry today should be directed as "organized violence" against that poetic and ordinary language which becomes rhetorical and conservative when placed at the service of a declining class. It should be a psychological and social necessity and not the exaggerated pleasure in perfection or the snobbism that would have us plunder the wealth of language in search of 'le mot juste'."⁹ This group distanced itself from the existential and largely individual rebellion of the poetry of Sabines, though not from his colloquial realism. While the poetic voice of the poets of the group is rooted in everyday life, the poet also rebels against it. In a fragment of the poem, "En protesta" (In Protest) by Oscar Oliva, a politicized speaker seeks from the oppressed a language that must awaken and shock those who believed that poetry communicates only individual emotion and sensibility:

Entonces hay que luchar
Pelea, fatiga, Pelea, cama, contra mis huesos
Pelea contra los indignos de llamarse Pedro o Nicolás
Pelea piedra.
Pelea obrero.
Pelea aire, contra las aves.

Yo acuso al agua que da de beber a los criminales
Yo acuso al aire malo y enfermo
yo acuso al señor día, de vivir entre bandidos.
Al señor animal.
al señor banquero,
al señor piedra,
al señor político,
al señor dinero,
de presentarse y de inclinarse ante el señor Estado
que les da de beber y comer para mantener el crimen
Yo acuso a los periódicos de toda falsedad,
yo acuso al ejército de estar contra el pueblo,
yo acuso a la juventud de ancianidad,
y a los muertos que no hicieron nada los aborrezco . . .¹⁰

Then, we must fight Fight, fatigue. Fight, bed, against my bones. Fight against those unworthy of calling themselves Pedro or Nicolás. Fight, rock. Fight, worker. Fight, air, against the birds. I accuse the water that is given to criminals to drink. I accuse the bad and sick air. I accuse mister day, for living among crooks. Mister animal, mister banker, mister rock, mister politician, mister money, for introducing themselves and kneeling before mister State who gives them drink and food to support crime. I accuse newspapers of all lies, I accuse the army of being against the people, I accuse youth of old age, and the dead who did nothing, I despise.

In this kind of poetry, the speaker sees himself as a “rebel with a cause” and assumes a privileged moral position from where he feels authorized to judge the society of his time. However, the “I” is different from the existential self of Sábines’ poetry, in which, even though that “I” is fictitious, the poet nevertheless constitutes a relationship between an empirical self and the poetic voice. The “I” in

Oliva's poem is no longer individual, but is represented as being a social class or group rather than the individual.

It is against this tradition of social poetry which, while not always explicitly political, nevertheless responded to the political radicalism of the sixties, that José Emilio Pacheco's poetry needs to be placed. Like Brecht's, much of Pacheco's poetry is public; the poet has the responsibility of chronicling the collective experience of his time. His collection, *Don't Ask Me How the Time Goes By*, which was awarded the National Poetry Prize in 1969, marked a radical change from his earlier collections. In it, he uses a variety of forms, and eclectic combination of short poems, satires, epigraphs, quotations, letters, haikus, fables, a bestiary and a series of apochryphal translations. The poetic subject, though inseparable from the social and political, is an impersonal subject. This impersonality is achieved through the appropriation of other texts, which allows for distance, demythification, and irony. For Pacheco, the poet is one who keeps literature alive by reenergizing and reactivating other texts. Thus in "Homenaje a la cursilería" (Homage to Bad Taste) he says:

Dóciles formas de entretenerte/
 olvido:
 recoger piedrecillas de un río sagrado,
 estampar becquerianas violetas en los libros/
 para que amarilleen ilegible/

besarla lentamente y en secreto
 cualquier último día
 antes de la execrada separación
 al filo mismo
 del adiós tan romántico
 y sabiendo
 (aunque nadie se atreva a confesarlo)
 que nunca
 volverán
 los golondrinas¹¹

Gentle ways of entertaining you/oblivion: picking up pebbles in a sacred river placing Becquer-style violets in books to yellow illegibly kissing her slowly and in secret any last day before the cursed separation just at the moment of so romantic a goodbye

and knowing although no one dares confess it that the swallows
will ne'er return

The poem's last line is a direct appropriation of a line from the 19th century romantic poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer. However, instead of functioning as a homage to romantic discourse, the atmosphere recreated constitutes an ironic rejection of sentimentality. At the same time, it is only through parody that this incurably romantic poetic persona can speak a language no longer fashionable or possible in today's skeptical world.

Pacheco believes that creation is, in reality, translation. He questions the concept of author as absolute originator of a text and does not believe that it is possible for anyone to write without referring consciously or unconsciously to another text. Nevertheless, whilst rejecting the avant-garde notion of originality and the new, he himself breaks with the poetics of a previous generation.

One of the central problems for Pacheco is the rapidity of obsolescence in contemporary culture. He is obsessively concerned with the present, with the swift passage of time, with destructiveness and oblivion in the age of mechanical reproduction. Defying time, he seeks permanence through conservation. Writing (which includes the work of writer, critic, reader and translator) becomes a personal commitment to the task of conservation, and especially, the conservation of poetry. Significantly, his weekly column in the journal, *Proceso*, is called "Inventario," a name that epitomizes the task that he has taken on, that of appraisal, appropriation and recycling.

In 1976, the critic Hugo Rodríguez Alcalá criticized *Don't Ask Me How the Time Goes By* as "ready-made" poetry.¹² He attacks Pacheco's poetry for being discursive and prosaic, for its lack of emotion and depth, its excess of literary allusions, its use of epigraph, citation, foreign words and for using a language that does not stimulate the reader to *feel* poetic experience, for the use of clichés, and for its concise and stark prosody. He again and again asks himself whether this is poetry, and finally answers in the negative. Yet, this criticism is also a summary of what Pacheco's poetry is about, as he himself commented in his poem, "Disertación sobre la consonancia" (Dissertation upon Rhyme):

Aunque a veces parezca por la sonoridad del castellano
que todavía los versos andan de acuerdo con la métrica;

aunque parta de ella y la atesore y la saquee,
 lo mejor que se ha escrito en el medio siglo último
 poco tiene en común con La Poesía, llamada así
 por académicos y preceptistas en otro tiempo. Entonces debe
 plantearse a la asamblea una redefinición
 que amplíe los límites (si aun existen límites);
 algún vocable menos frecuentado por el invencible desafío
 de los clásicos

Un nombre, cualquier término (se aceptan sugerencias)
 que evite las sorpresas y cóleras de quienes
 -tan razonablemente-leen un poema y dicen:
 “Esto ya no es poesía.”¹³

Although it sometimes may seem from the sounds of Spanish that verses find themselves following meter; although it flows from it, treasures it and plunders it, the best that has been written in the last half century has nothing in common with Poetry, named thus by scholars and theorists of another time. A redefinition that extends the boundaries (if boundaries still exist) must then be offered to the public, another expression less common to the invincible challenge of the Classics. One word, a few syllables, a name, any term (suggestions are accepted) to avoid the surprise and indignation of those who—reasonably so—presented with a poem say: This cannot be poetry.

Pacheco's poem illustrates the use of what Lotman calls “minus devices”—that is the process of elimination of certain poetic devices which give complexity to poetic language, devices such as enjambement, synesthesia, redundant adjectives, rhyme, anaphora and apostrophe. Pacheco's concise and concrete images are complex more because of their conceptual implications than because of syntax, diction or prosody. Lines, for the most part, end on semantic pauses as in prose. In many cases he appropriates other texts using allusion, parody, pastiche, quotation, irony, and satire, and gives emphasis by the use of typography or internal rhymes and rhythms. He can be described as a postmodern poet insofar as he constitutes a decentered subject, and draws on a diverse repertoire of ancient, classical, modernist, and popular texts, disrupting hierarchies between high and popular art.

The Mexican critic, Evodio Escalante, has described this kind of

poetry, a dominant mode since the late seventies, as “conformación modélica” (modeling structure) since it uses previous texts as models.¹⁴ This poetics relies on eclecticism rather than innovation. Poetry thus rewrites other texts, dialogues with other poets or other people and is composed as a collage. Such poetry relies on the reader’s knowledge of other texts, the clue to the inter-textual references often being given in the form of a title, an epigraph, a dedication or a style.

One of the best-known of Pacheco’s appropriations is his “Reading of Cantares Mexicanos.” This is a poem originally written in Nahuatl soon after the conquest and is a lament for the defeat of the Aztec civilization. Pacheco appropriates the poem using the subtitle, “Manuscript of Tlatelolco” and dates it October 2, 1968. He rewrites it as a Spanish translation, but uses it to express a contemporary reality, thus reactivating an ancient text as a response to an event in the present. Nevertheless, parallels are inevitably drawn between the end of one civilization and the end of the present century. The appropriation of the poetry of another civilization reinforces our own sense of doom.

Pacheco’s poetry has increasingly privileged the “writing of the disaster.” The foreboding and apocalyptic voice of his poems returns again and again to the same themes: the inevitable passage and erosion of time, the ecological destruction of nature, the possibility of a nuclear holocaust and a Mexico in continual crisis and deterioration. In “Malpaís” (Badland) the poet anticipates the end of the city:

Cuando no quede un árbol
cuando todo sea asfalto y asfisia
o malpaís, terreno pedregoso sin vida,
esta será de nuevo la capital de la muerte

En ese instante renacerán los volcanes.
Vendrá de lo alto el gran cortejo de lava.
El aire inerte se cubrirá de ceniza.
El mar de fuego lavará la ignominia
y en poco tiempo se hará de piedra.
Entre la roca brotará una planta.
Cuando florezca tal vez comience
la nueva vida en el desierto de muerte.

Allí estarán, eternamente invencibles,
astros de ira, soles de lava
indiferentes deidades,
centros de todo en su espantoso silencio,
ejes del mundo, los atroces volcanes.¹⁵

When there is not one tree left, when everything is asphalt or asphyxiation or *badland*, stony lifeless ground, this will once again be the capital of death. In that instant the volcanoes will be born again. The great cortege of lava will descend from above. The inert air will be covered by ash. The sea of fire will wash away the ignominy and soon become stone. A plant will sprout among the rocks. When it blooms, perhaps in the desert of death new life will begin. Eternally invincible, there will be fixed-sums of lava, stars of rage, impassive deities, centers of everything in their frightening silence-axes of the world, the horrible volcanoes.¹⁶

The Apocalypse is a revelation, though in contemporary poetry it is deprived of its purely Christian connotations. Pacheco brings indigenous omens and prophecies together with the theme of Christian Apocalypse. Whereas the avant-garde envisioned a future of hope that often arose out of destruction of the present, the apocalyptic poet has no such vision of hope. Indeed the apocalypse which Pacheco had predicted long before seemed to occur in Mexico in 1985.

Understandably, the poetry that he wrote after this catastrophe, *Miro la tierra*, turns into testimonial rather than prediction:

La ciudad ya estaba herida de muerte
el terremoto vino a consumir
cuatro siglos de eternas destrucciones.¹⁷

The city was already wounded and dying the earthquake came to consummate four centuries of eternal destructions.

Con que facilidad en los poemas de antes hablábamos
del polvo, la ceniza, el desastre y la muerte.
Ahora que están aquí ya no hay palabras
capaces de expresar qué significan
el polvo, la ceniza, el desastre y la muerte¹⁸

How easily we spoke in previous poems of dust, ashes, disaster and death. Now that they are here there are no words capable of expressing what dust, ashes, disaster and death mean.

Nadie pensó en las siete como una hora
propicia a los desastres. Más bien creímos
que las grandes catástrofes sólo ocurren de noche.¹⁹

No one thought of seven as an hour favorable for disasters. We rather thought that the big catastrophes occur only at night.

Confronted with a real catastrophe, the apocalyptic imagination loses dramatic impact. Given the experience of the earthquake of 1985, as well as the sense of economic and social crisis, it is not surprising that the apocalyptic voice should have become so prevalent. Among recent collections of poems, we find the following titles: *Zona de derrumbe* by Gaspar Aguilera Díaz; *Erosiones y destrucciones* and *Saldo ardiente* by Miguel Angel Flores; *Esta tierra sin razón y poderosa* by Jorge Aguilar Mora; *Ciudad bajo el relámpago* de Efraín Bartolomé.

For Eduardo Milán, a critic for *Vuelta*, the poetry of recent years represents a negative sign of postmodernity. This space, which permits intemporality and coexistence, given the fact that any time, any form, and any idea is valid, has produced a moment of crisis, an impasse that has paralyzed most writers "not knowing which direction to take, whether to continue a critical tradition or yield and relapse into hackneyed forms. The impulse of looking for new expressive modes (the project of the vanguard) has come to a halt."²⁰

In the last few years, however, some new poets have emerged. Their poetry represents a departure from the poetics of the impersonal subject that Pacheco initiated. The poetic voice, although still skeptical, has a more personal tone. The avoidance of parody, pastiche, and ingenious verbal games makes the language seem less artificial, more naturally linked to an intimate discourse rich in imagery. It is not the existential and emotional voice of Sábines, nor the impersonal social voice of Pacheco that speaks, but a voice that gives personal testimony of everyday life, loves, dreams, thoughts, and origins often in regions far from the city. Among them, I would like to mention Fabio Morávito, José Javier Villarreal, Silvia Tomasa Rivera, Vicente Quirarte, Sandro Cohen, Verónica Volkow, Marcelo

Uribe, Blanca Luz Pulido. Although still uncertain of the future, these poets do not dwell on the catastrophe, or the passage and destructiveness of time, but look for new spaces where life and creativity might for a moment find some fertile ground.

NOTES

1. Gabriel Zaid, *Asamblea de poetas jóvenes de México* (México: Siglo XXI, 1980): 12.
2. José Emilio Pacheco, "Notas sobre la otra vanguardia," *Revista Iberoamericana* 106–107 (1979): 327–334.
3. T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976): 24. 1st edition
4. Jaime Sabines, "Tarumba" *The Selected Poems of Jaime Sabines*, ed. and trans. by Philip Levine and Ernesto Trejo (San Francisco: Twin Peaks Press, 1979): 6.
5. Eliot, 23–24.
6. Jaime Sabines, *Nuevo recuento de poemas* (México: Joaquín Mórtiz, 1977): 96.
7. All translations are mine with the exception of "Badland."
8. Enrique Jaramillo Levy, "Atisbos y evidencias: Nueva poética de México," *Plural* 129 (1982): 68–71.
9. Juan Bañuelos in *La espiga amotinada* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960): 20.
10. *La espiga*, 101–102.
11. José Emilio Pacheco, *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo* (México: Era, 1984): 22.
12. Hugo Rodríguez Alcalá, "Sobre la poesía última de José Emilio Pacheco." *Hispanamérica* 15: 57–70.
13. Pacheco, *No me preguntes*, 29.
14. Evodio Escalante, *Poetas de una generación: 1950–1959* (México: UNAM-Premia): 9–11.
15. Pacheco, *Los trabajos del mar* (México: Era, 1983): 52.
16. This fragment of the poem "Badland" is a translation by Linda Sheer in *José Emilio Pacheco: Selected Poems*, ed. by George McWhitier in collaboration with the author (New York: New Directions Books, 1987): 183.
17. Pacheco, *Miro la tierra* (México: Era, 1986): 22.
18. *Miro la tierra*, 22.
19. *Miro la tierra*, 36.
20. Eduardo Milán, *Lluvia postmoderna: sobre el follaje después*, *México en el arte* 16 (Spring, 1987): 43–48.