CHAPTER 3

José Emilio Pacheco: “I SAW A DYING FISH”

_An Ark for the Next Millennium_ is the title of Margaret Sayers Peden’s 1993 translation of José Emilio Pacheco’s poems originally published as _Album de zoología_ (1985). Her edition, the text I shall discuss here, presents nearly 80 poems, each featuring a specific animal, divided into sections representing the elements that the animals inhabit: water, air, earth, and fire. The lyric subjects include, for example, crabs, fish, octopus, and whales in the realm of water; sparrows, owls, buzzards, mosquitoes, flies, bats, and moths in the air; monkeys, lions, horses, scorpions, boars, ants, and mice on earth; and a lone poem about a salamander, which mythically inhabits the flame, comprises the final section. Pacheco’s “ark” is certainly one of the richest poetic assemblies of animals ever created—throughout the course of my research on animals in literature, I have found no other poet who has engaged animals with as much determination and focus. Pacheco, as a Mexican poet, is geographically proximate to the Mesoamerican communities that embrace animal souls, although I see no explicit or intentional connection between his ideas about animals and theirs—it is only coincidental that Pacheco’s system of beliefs about people, animals, and their shared existence rivals the philosophical and ethical intricacy of animal souls.

A keenly-honed consciousness of animals pervades Pacheco’s canon. His first collection, _Los elementos de la noche_ (The Elements of the Night), from 1963, includes “animals, later to populate many of Pacheco’s most memorable indictments of man, lurk[ing] in these opening lines,” writes Michael J. Doudoroff (265). _No me preguntas como pasa el tiempo_ (Don’t Ask Me How the Time Goes By), from 1969, includes a section called “The Animals Know,” 13 poems that anticipate what would become the larger collection of poetic animals in _Album de zoología_. _Desde entonces_ (Since Then), from 1980, depicts “a parade of animals, to mankind’s discredit. The theme of ecological balance, an implied ethical environmentalism,
is intensified in this collection” (Doudoroff 270). *Miro la tierra (I Look at the Earth)*, published in 1986, with the devastating 1985 Mexico City earthquake as the central metaphor, features the “attribution of prophecy to animals” (Doudoroff 273). In the mode of *An Ark for the Next Millennium*, the poems of *Miro la tierra* explore a panorama of animals that inhabit our world, arrayed in their ecosystemic intricacy and integrity, interspersed with our society and our consciousness: “The omnipresent rats of Mexico City pursue the speaker in a sardonic nightmare *memento mori*. Bluebottles replace the sparrows and pigeons. A mock dithyramb to the flies leads into a lesson on the food chain at the insect level, the great chain of being degraded and inverted” (273). *Miro la tierra* presents what Doudoroff calls “moral lessons drawn from the observations of animals” (273).

Cynthia Steele reads *An Ark for the Next Millennium* as predominantly allegorical: the animals’ main function, she suggests, is to offer a platform for the examination of people. Her summary of the collection focuses on the human context that she sees implicit in these poems: for example, “Many of the sea and river creatures have been endangered by man. . . . As for the creatures of the air, some are man’s faithful companions and helpful harbingers of disaster. . . . Like people, animals react differently to the prison of this world and the void beyond. . . . In short, this ark’s passengers share the beastly human condition” (91–2). Her reading, while not incorrect, is reductionist: it is assumptively, conventionally anthropocentric and understates the degree to which Pacheco’s poetry depicts animals not just as a meditation on our own condition, but also to explore human–animal interaction and animals on their own terms, absent humanity altogether. Henry Beston reminds us that animals “are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations” (25); Pacheco’s poetry acknowledges such an ethic of independent identity for animals and transcends the implicit monodimensionality that underlies Steele’s analysis, and that is, indeed, the default condition of much animal poetry.

Poetry like Pacheco’s honors animals without implicating them (and thus positioning them as subaltern) in human cultural models. It attempts to confront animals as they are, instead of as they appear to us, or as they suit and flatter our habits. His subjects are unconstrained by the politically oppressive subtexts that tend to infuse animal poetry. A human presence in any poetry—as mediator, artist—is unavoidable, but Pacheco minimizes this as much as possible. He declines to play the control freak, as is usually the inclination of our species when we regard and represent animals.