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Review

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Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Saber de ausencia: Lecturas de poetas cubanos (y algo más)*.
Sevilla, Spain: Editorial Renacimiento, 2022. 303 pp. (Paper €19.90)

Saber de ausencia is the most recent among many contributions by Gustavo Pérez Firmat to the study of Cuban and Cuban American literature. The title of the collection refers to the notion of absence as the fundamental marker of lives lived in exile—that is, lives marked by loss, distance, ambiguity, and a lack of centeredness. Perhaps more importantly, however, Pérez Firmat also takes pains to emphasize *ausencia* as the source of a unique perspective and perspicacity that those separated from their homeland develop due to their existential predicament. As a product of exile himself, his own *saber de ausencia* is on full display here in eleven trenchant analyses of Cuban poetry, most of which have been expanded since their original publication in scholarly journals over the last two decades.

In this collection, Pérez Firmat studies the writings of nine major Cuban poets from the late nineteenth century to the present: José Martí, Eugenio Florit, José Ángel Buesa, Dulce María Loynaz, Hilario Cabrisas, Eliseo Diego, Heberto Padilla, Orlando González Esteva, and Ricardo Pau Llosa. Also included as an example of the frequent presence of Cuba in the U.S. literary imagination is a chapter on modernist poet Wallace Stevens's visions of the island nation. To grasp the analytical yet markedly personal approach that Pérez Firmat brings to the texts, readers would do well to peruse the volume's introduction and epilogue prior to diving into the chapters, which can be read in any order. In the introduction, he describes the book as a "group of studies on Cuban literature undertaken from absence and in collaboration with it" (p. 11). Refreshingly frank, he also confesses to "seeking out the writer in the writing" (p. 15) and reading the poems as "aesthetic objects, as sources of pleasure" (p. 17), rather than as autonomous texts to be dissected in a vacuum through a New Criticism-type close reading. Furthermore, Pérez Firmat clarifies in the epilogue that he has chosen to focus on writers who, like himself, "feel or have felt disoriented, out of place and out of time" (p. 275). In other words, he unabashedly states that his criticism is at once biographical (taking into close account key aspects of the poets' extratextual lives) and *autobiographical* (highly influenced by his own life circumstances).

Three of the poets studied in this volume—Florit, Diego, and Padilla—are the subject of multiple chapters. Among these, it is Florit, described here as a paradigmatic *infeliz* among the many melancholic voices in Cuban literature, to whom Pérez Firmat feels the most connected, as evidenced by the three chapters dedicated to Florit's work. The most memorable is titled "The Lover of Torture" (*El amante de las torturas*), which offers a fresh interpretation of the

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“Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian,” the most frequently anthologized poem from among Florit’s prodigious oeuvre. Taking a diametrically opposed tack to prior readings of this supposedly pious ode, Pérez Firmat highlights Florit’s meticulous and machoistic eroticization of the martyr’s moribund body.

Also worth mentioning is the lone chapter to focus on a woman poet, Dulce María Loynaz, who has often been dismissed as a creator of dulcet verses lacking in gravitas. Pérez Firmat describes his admiration for Loynaz’s literary gifts but also her “admirably strong temperament that made her rule out the thought of exile” (p. 14) despite the internal ostracism that she suffered under the Castro regime. The persuasive reading of Loynaz’s “Song to a Sterile Woman” (*Canto a una mujer estéril*) reveals the poem as a testament to the damage wrought by traditional notions of motherhood, rather than a triumphantly feminist deconstruction of conventional gender roles, as frequently argued by other critics.

The penultimate chapter of the volume, “Conversation Between the Deceased” (*Conversación entre difuntos*), is unique in its focus on Spanish translations of canonical English-language poetry by Diego and Padilla. Pérez Firmat compares their distinctive approaches to their role as translators and shows how the substantial differences between their renderings of the same texts can be understood, to large extent, as the byproduct of Padilla’s notorious persecution by the Cuban government for his poetic critiques of the Revolution.

Saber de ausencia is recommended with enthusiasm for those seeking an insightful and unapologetically personal take on Cuban poetry through the eyes of a renowned Cuban exile who is also an acclaimed poet. Perhaps the book is best summed up by the author himself when he writes that “literary criticism is a subgenre of autobiography. Impossible to read without reading oneself” (p. 275).

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