

POET IN AMERICA

History as a Second Language. Dionisio D. Martínez. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993; *Bad Alchemy*. Dionisio D. Martínez. New York: Norton, 1995; *Climbing Back*. Dionisio D. Martínez. New York: Norton, 2001.

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After writers of Mexican descent, the most widely published Latino poets appear to be those of Cuban origin. Dionisio D. Martínez defies the term if, by “Latino poet,” one means someone of Spanish-speaking background who writes *primarily* about: family, hispanic culture, and/or the predicament of a people who haven’t enjoyed a fair slice of the American pie. A more complicated view, however, would allow one to see that Martínez works in that strand of poetry from the Americas that’s been nourished by—and in—the Old World. Poetry in Spanish claims, for example, the Nicaraguan-born Rubén Darío in the late 19th century, and the Chilean-born Vicente Huidobro in the first half of the 20th century. Darío looked to Paris and Madrid, inhabiting both European capitals and writing under the spell of French Symbolism. Huidobro, a fervent cultivator of the avant-garde, wrote his early work *in* French while collaborating with Apollinaire in Paris. It is from this more cosmopolitan lineage that Martínez has emerged—expanding, therefore, the narrow characterization of Latino poetry that still holds sway in certain circles. Like Darío and Huidobro, Martínez lived in Spain for a time. In his first full-length collection, *History as a Second Language*, one poem begins:

I learned the Cantabrian
coast by heart.

I drove
west till I ran out of land.

Although the word “gypsies” appears in the fifth stanza, the poem steers clear of the particulars one might expect to find in a poem about Spain. It is

set in the north, whose landscapes and customs aren't what are stereotypically viewed as "Spanish." One learns something "by heart" by getting to know it well which, in this case, means driving and driving to spend time *off* the beaten path. But there is also the "peninsula" "shaped like an open palm" from which one might try to read the future, as if that future were uncertain. But

the peninsula also
 resembles an exposed
 heart
 cupped
 in a pair of hungry hands.

The language here suggests a metaphorical response to one's surroundings. The "exposed / heart" signals vulnerability—prompted, perhaps, by a feeling of rootlessness. And yet one's vulnerability may be all one has, and so it's protected—shielded by hands that seek to sate an unnamed hunger. The title of the poem, "Iberia," underscores the physical space more than a particular nation or state. One will find no tapas bars in Martínez's "Spanish" poems. One will, however, find the poet exploring language. From *Bad Alchemy*, his second book, we learn that if

a smoker
 in the metro
 in Madrid wants a light, he taps you on the shoulder
 and asks *¿Tienes*
Fuego? He wants to know if you have fire.

On one level, the poet is not interested in linguistic equivalents. He's intrigued, rather, by the fact that the phrase used to ask someone for a light is literally *Do you have fire?* "Fuego" is the poem's title: subterranean—or hidden—"fire" is, therefore, hinted at. In early post-Franco Madrid, certain cars on certain subway lines were places where gay men often connected. And while one might literally intend to ask a stranger for a light, this banal request could, on another level, be a veiled come on. But "Fuego" starts in Rio de Janeiro, passes through Madrid, and takes us from New Jersey, through Manhattan, to Queens where a fire fighter off his shift is lighting up:

A spark
climbs up the dark to the cigarette in his mouth,
the dark holds the fire's

tenuous glow in the cauldron of its calloused hands.

Thus, the poem ends with a personified “dark” protecting in its hands—those shielding hands again—a fragile glow. The “spark climb[ing] up the dark to ignite the “cigarette in his mouth” recalls Lorca’s New York “dawn” that has “no one to receive it in its mouth.” The poet is drawn to all the aesthetic implications of fire—its connotation of beauty, desire. Martínez’s work is greatly concerned with variations of aesthetic beauty in the arts. And while it is true that he dwells on a number of European artists (he dedicates a section of a book to Erik Satie, and poems to Matisse, Duchamp, Mondrian, and Klimt), he devotes a substantial number of poems to American-bred artists, including Frank Lloyd Wright and Charlie Parker. And yet one imagines a childhood where he

was learning, in those days,
to count
on [his] fingers in French, and to say
the names of
cities [he] would mispronounce again many
years later
on the train to Paris. (p.45, *Bad Alchemy*)

It would be an incomplete characterization of the work, however, if Martínez’s condition as a Cuban exile were not addressed. This subject does find its way into it. Where he distinguishes himself from most of his contemporaries is that it is an understated facet in his work—one that is usually addressed in poems about his father. The last poem in *Bad Alchemy* ends:

Each morning, our ration grows smaller. My father
waits for the water to boil and stares

at the missing text of the newspaper on the table.
Many still refer to these days as *the triumph*

of the Revolution. All I remember is too little coffee.

Among the shapes his poems take on—mostly free verse symmetrical

stanzas—Dionisio D. Martínez has allowed himself particular freedom within the prose poem, a form he has been cultivating from the beginning. The prose poem is where he is at his most challenging. Yet here's a passage from one, called "Avant-Dernières Pensées," in *Bad Alchemy*, whose "plot" one can enjoy on a first reading. The subject is chain letters:

The letters are carefully packed with case histories that go off like timed explosives. I can see you waiting for each one to go off, wondering if the one you designed for me will do the trick. One summer, you say, a Portuguese fisherman received this letter and burned it. He spent the rest of his life trying to read the ashes.

Poems like these, in the first two books, could be seen as studies for *Climbing Back*, Dionisio D. Martínez's most ambitious collection—made up entirely of prose poems.

It is perhaps no accident that the cover of the book features a reproduction of a painting by a Spanish artist—Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, the 17th century Baroque painter. "The Return of the Prodigal Son" was originally commissioned to hang in a hospice for the homeless and hungry in Seville, which is to say: people without firm roots. Martínez takes the figure of the prodigal son (the term appears in the title of all but seventeen of the collection's seventy-five poems) and sets him in modern times. The motif conjures up this image—like a backdrop—of someone on a journey, both physical and emotional, in search of something like "home." I use the term "emotional" to suggest one's interior response to the world.

The two poems that open and close the collection, respectively, are designated as an "Intro" and "Coda." They both depict the same scene. The book's title, "Climbing Back," already insinuates movement towards a place one has already occupied. But *climbing* back (as opposed to *coming* back) suggests, as well, that the return requires effort. The "Intro" (titled "The Prodigal Son jumps bail") has the main character "spying like an insect on the screen door" of what we take to be a place (home?) he has been away from for a long time, observing people (family?) seated at a table he'd like to join. There is also a political subtext—those at the table report that "the new government has maintained its innocence, blaming the Constitution, blaming the scholars..." This political undercurrent, near the end of the poem, hints at danger when "[s]omeone starts to talk about alleged disappearances, but is soon interrupted and the subject is closed." And then the enigmatic, but evocative ending:

There is only one answer and even the bread crumbs stand at attention when it comes.

This last sentence echoes the closing scene of one of American poetry's most well-known political poems, also in prose:

He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

The piece Carolyn Forché is most known for, "The Colonel" was published in 1981 at the height of the civil war in El Salvador. Martínez, in *his* poem, has "bread crumbs" do the hearing, rather than severed human ears. But the allusion to Forché's poem is clear and one wonders why it is made. Unlike *The Country Between Us*, Forché's book, *Climbing Back* does not really revisit politics after this subtly political opening. On closer examination, one realizes that the "bread crumbs" remind one of Forché's "ears" only because it comes at the *end* of the poem. In the book's "Coda" ("The Prodigal Son catches up with the bounty hunters"), the final poem of Martínez's collection *starts* with this crucial "bread crumb" sentence, as if Martínez were making it very clear that his vision, while subtly political at the beginning of the volume, has undergone a transformation by the end. Dionisio D. Martínez's poetics, where the political is concerned, are essentially a poetics of understatement and, in the end, a poetics of play. And yet by including this "Intro" and "Coda" *in this manner*, he seems to be suggesting that one does not arrive at such a posture without paying a price.

Climbing Back, as a sequence, is like a richly diverse mosaic of the starts and stops, twists and detours, that make up a journey—one that encounters, not surprisingly, the arts, the life of the mind. Once again, music, thinkers, film, and other poets are subjects: "The Prodigal Son and the two Sinatras," "The Prodigal Son: Kierkegaard at face value," and "The Prodigal Son, Mr. DeMille, Norma Desmond, Billy Wilder, Claude Monet, et. al." are three sample titles. And within the poems themselves those who make an appearance include: T.S. Eliot, Miles Davis, Mozart, Greta Garbo, and Salvador Dalí. The title of Lorca's play, "bodas de sangre," makes an appearance in "The Prodigal Son gives blood."

One might be tempted to characterize the book as impersonal. But what redeemed the collection for this reader were poems that, beneath the surface, hinted at the personal, such as the author's time in Spain, even though through a third-person lens. "The Prodigal Son is caught off guard

by planned obsolence” is one such poem. It opens with a catalogue, including: “The soles of his boots,”—thereby evoking Whitman—and, “The tires of his car, erasers, chalk, pencils, lead in the pencils. An ice sculpture.” And so his list meshes the banal with the not so banal, a pattern that is repeated. But

“[n]othing strikes him until he comes across the man who sharpens blades for a living—scissors, axes, knives, cleavers. There’s a perilous dance—a thing like courtship and sex and the wild disagreements of youth—between the blade and whetstone: their reciprocal losses will amount to so little, or to so much, in the end.”

The effect is like accompanying Martínez’s “prodigal son” on a walk, revealing, in a seamless fashion, the flights of his character’s imagination. In this particular case, the mind’s wings unfold not so much at the sight of the man who sharpens blades, but rather: the *sound* his work produces. It’s what allows the poet to make the leap—taking us with him—in comparing the friction—the sound of the friction, really—between blade and whetstone...to romance, lust, and loud arguments. But then, as in any good poem, the focus shifts and nudges us elsewhere. We get another list of objects, including a view of one of Spain’s most beautiful cathedrals—in Santiago de Compostela in Galicia: Spain’s Celtic region. But what starts as mere description goes a bit deeper:

Inside the cathedral, a column pilgrims have been coming to touch for too many years. Very softly, with the tips of their fingers. The holes in the column show what centuries of tenderness will do.

On the one hand “*too* many years” (my italics) implies that the speaker seems to think the pilgrims’ belief made more sense in another time, but that today it seems misplaced. And yet the delicate, almost affectionate manner in which the pilgrims’ faith is portrayed—with the use of “tenderness”—suggests that a faith lived with conviction may very well be redemptive. It’s a notion, given the context, that is not without its polemic: it was in the north of Spain that the Christian reconquista of the peninsula began, culminating with the expulsion—in 1492—of Arab and Jew alike. But here the poet’s gaze dwells more on the pilgrims rather than Moor-slaying crusaders. The poem ends with the catalogue: “The fingernails of the living. Starlight. Sleep. Innocence. A hoe, a scythe, a pasture.” And so the thought

we're left with is that poetic insights can percolate to the surface of one's consciousness from a wide range of subjects—and objects.

The seventeen poems that do not mention “the prodigal son” in their titles comprise, nevertheless, a section of the book that takes as its title: “The Prodigal Son in his own words.” Again, artists enter the poetic landscape, including Li Po, John Donne, Debussy, and Pete Townshend; but also Sir Isaac Newton and the Dodgers. It must be said: Martínez casts a wonderfully wide net of obsessions. The poems in this section were a particular pleasure to this reader because their erudition seemed toned down a notch, with such titles as “Independence,” “Captivity,” “Free Will,” “Fate,” and “Faith.” The piece titled “Bees” deployed a certain degree of humor as a strategy:

Some female bees mate only once. Carrying enough sperm for a lifetime, they continue to reproduce without further need for the male. Don't let the well-stocked shelves of the hardware store fool you: the part you need is never available.

Also within this section—to revisit this theme of the cyclical—is a series Martínez titles “Credo,” which is interesting in itself for its religious connotations. The poems are examples, I think, of where form and content can intersect. The first, “Credo (1)” begins:

To find disharmony can be a blessing. Just imagine how foam left behind by a wave becomes a keepsake. A small tear in the fabric still has a certain charm when you look away instead of looking so perplexed. How foam left behind by a wave becomes a keepsake provided you have enough hands to hold it when you look away instead of looking so perplexed...

And so on—that is: here is a poem about, on one level, waves, but with the added feat of somehow getting language to *behave* like waves—with the repetition of sounds (the long a), and phrases. The pattern not only repeats itself *in* the poem but *across* the whole “Credo” series: the last sentence of each “Credo” is repeated towards the beginning of the next one, and so forth. This device rhymes with the one that opens and closes the collection—the “Intro” and “Coda” being variations of the same poem. It is no accident, therefore, that in the poem titled “Faith,” we have a passage spurring us to consider that perhaps the path to a place that approximates

home may very well be language itself, as if the consolation one might find
in words were almost enough:

We feel secure saying it; the words form and dissolve and form again and
cling to the walls within us.