

On Agosín and Martínez · *Carolyn Wright*

MARJORIE AGOSÍN has to be one of the most prolific younger poets and women of letters currently active in this hemisphere. Even a cursory glance at the book entries under her name in the Harvard University on-line library catalogue reveals an astonishing twenty-two titles. These books are not pamphlets either. Some are monographs; some, co-authored works of literary criticism—principally dealing with notable Latin American women poets and writers. Some are volumes which Agosín has edited, of poetry, essays, or short stories by Latin American women. One volume, co-authored with fellow Chilean critic and scholar Inés Dölz Blackburn, is a study of the poetic work of the brilliant but tragic Chilean folk musician and artist, the legendary Violeta Parra. In addition, Agosín has just recently published her first collection of short stories, also with White Pine Press.

But it is chiefly as a poet and human rights activist that Marjorie Agosín—Professor of Latin American Literature at Wellesley College, married and the mother of two small children—has come to be known in this country. Even though the United States is her adopted land, to which she came to study in her teens, she has remained deeply loyal to her native Chile—a country hauntingly lovely but haunted by the political violence and repression of its last twenty years, since the bloody overthrow of the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende by military dictator Augusto Pinochet. Agosín is one of the “disenchanted generation” of Chileans who were children or teenagers at the time of the military coup in September 1973. As she has written elsewhere, this generation was cut off and discouraged from political interests and activities, and had to look to its immediate elders—those who had worked for, triumphed with, and ultimately died or went into exile for the ideals of the Allende government—for a vision of a nation restored to democracy and freedom from fear.

Circles of Madness: Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo by Marjorie Agosín. White Pine Press, 1992. ISBN 1-877727-17-2, \$13.00 (paper).

History as a Second Language by Dionisio D. Martínez. Ohio State University Press, 1993. ISBN 0-8142-0591-7, \$18.95 (cloth); 0-8142-0592-5, \$9.95 (paper).

As part of this profound tie to her Chilean roots, Marjorie Agosín continues to write all of her *oeuvre* in Spanish, and thus works closely with a number of translators who render her poems into English. Her principal publisher, White Pine Press, publishes her books of poetry in bilingual editions. One such volume is *Circles of Madness: Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo/Círculos de Locura: Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, translated by Celeste Kostopulos-Cooperman, a poetic testament to the courage and persistence of these now-famous women. The poetry is occasioned by the “Dirty War” conducted against student social activists by the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983. Thousands of these young people were arrested, imprisoned and tortured in clandestine locations, and murdered, their bodies incinerated, buried in concealed graves or dumped far out to sea in the military’s efforts to leave no evidence of its crimes.

The victims’ families, many of them among the most substantial of the Argentine middle and upper-middle class, received no word of their children’s fate, and got only the bureaucratic run-around when they tried to make formal inquiries. Their grief and uncertainty exacerbated by the terrible conviction that their missing children were in fact dead, many of the mothers began to assemble every week in the historic center of Buenos Aires, in the Plaza de Mayo. Risking the bullets and bayonets of the military police, the women circled the plaza, carrying banners with photographs of their disappeared children, with their ages and the dates of their disappearance, with slogans demanding their return. This act of persistent witness, which quickly gained the attention of the international media, was a major embarrassment for the Argentine regime, and contributed to the ouster of the military in 1984 and to Argentina’s return to some semblance of democratic government and respect for human rights.

Drawing on a wellspring of empathy from Chile’s devastatingly parallel circumstances, Marjorie Agosín pays poetic tribute to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, evoking the madness of their country’s political conditions, as well as the hope that their stubborn persistence and courage has evoked. *Circles of Madness* is illustrated with black and white photos by Argentine photographers Alicia D’Amico and Alicia Sanguinetti—or rather, as Agosín herself says, the poems are an extended response to the photographs, a cooperation with their purpose of witness: poetic illustrations, as it were, of the photos’ visual messages. “Each photograph commemorates the presence of an absence,” she writes in her prefatory piece, “The Dancers.”

“These prose poems,” Agosín continues, “are fragments, homages, threads and images that accompany the powerful art [of the photographs], as they also accompany the mothers . . . [and] when we see them together with their heads covered by white kerchiefs, they resemble hallucinatory doves that shine in the middle of a nebula and appear singing prayers of life.”

The most powerful of these poems are also hallucinatory, spellbound, as if composed in a trance of rapt attention and fellow-suffering. They are brilliant, imagistic shards, like the once-whole lives of these Argentine women, which can be mended only by their ritual circling dance of witness. The translations are fairly free, enabling the English versions to reflect the fragmented yet incantatory quality of the Spanish diction:

They arose on tiptoe, intoxicated in their doom, and each
footstep left behind traces of insomnia. Strangely, their kerchiefs
seemed like wings or like the sound of falling rain transmuted
into mist, and this is how the witches of truth went about,
slipping away and inventing ingenuous visions. They seemed like
a solitary flock of birds, assassins, and wizards. There they were,
timid, unsteady, and strange outsiders. And the plaza was a feast
of lights.

Royalties from this book are donated to Amnesty International. Let us hope that they may provide some proceeds to restore to that plaza, and to many others like it in all the politically troubled nations of the world, a “feast of lights” for its people.

“Nearly half the men of my generation have named their children after European cities.” With this bemused assertion, Dionisio D. Martínez begins “The Continental Drift Theory,” one of the prose poems whose fugue-like reptition of verbal and imagistic motifs encapsulates the theme-and-variations tactics of much of this debut volume which won the 1992 Ohio State University Press/*The Journal Award* in Poetry. This book is a lyric and surrealistic evocation of the worlds of the poet’s history and first language—his childhood in Cuba, from which his family was exiled after Castro’s revolution—and the Peninsular Spanish and English-language worlds of Spain and the United States, where he has lived since adolescence. Imbued with what Stephen Dunn calls a “passionately mediated strange-

ness,” Martínez’s poems are mnemonic music: the cultural and personal histories of a man not so much caught between cultures, but rather at home with being a stranger in each culture—a man profoundly at ease with the universal human condition of strangeness.

Martínez, bilingual as well as culturally multivalent, has completed a number of entirely independent poetry collections in his native Spanish—these are not translations of his English-language poems—and he carries on literary correspondence, in both languages, on three continents. He functions in modes other than those of many so-called “ethnic-minority” poets—whose by-now familiar strategies consist in first highlighting, then *translating*, their cultural heritage into terms which an “ethnic-majority” (presumably monolingual English-speaking) readership can grasp. Instead, Martínez has successfully blended the various cultural motifs that comprise his own history, and fused the differing voices to create a distinct persona—amused, meditative, on occasion melancholy—who is quintessentially transcultural: Latin American, European, and North American all at once.

One theme to which these poems continually return, with fugal impetus and centripetal compulsion, is that of exile. In one of the book’s most direct references to the cause behind this central fact of Martínez’s life, the title poem recalls that “My father and his friends / conspired in the next room. The new regime / succeeded in spite of their plot.” These are not poems of expatriate chic, though, but of deeply apprehended—and accepted—dislocation, a dislocation embraced as the poet’s imaginative milieu. Although Martínez understands innately the psychic dynamic of “the night birds that never fly / home once they learn the secret of exile,” he is not exactly one of them. At home in his exile, he continually rediscovers his and his family’s identity (and refines his own expression thereof) “between the people we were and the ones / we’ve become after the losses.”

One of these losses is his father, whose early passing is an emotional touchstone for Martínez, against which all other losses—and continuities—are measured. “At dusk I return to the house you knew / and a life you would probably understand,” he declares in “Standard Time: A Novena for My Father.” Martínez contemplates as well the demise of cultural icons, such as Ingrid Bergman, who dies while the poet is in Galicia. Though it is “little more than newsprint / in every conceivable language,” the passing of this cinematic legend teaches the poet “about the

many kinds of death,” and makes him realize that, at least in such a case, “history is what you choose to believe.”

Other losses lead to poignant, affection-filled insights into some of the milder human foibles—the story, in “Variations on Omar Sharif,” of his maternal “uncle with the radio dream” who longs for stardom as a popular singer. Summoning up his nerve, this uncle takes the bus “to the amateur show in Havana,” but once on stage, seeing his own adoring grandmother in the studio audience, he freezes, steps back from the microphone, and once again “swallow[s] all the silence” out of which he had hoped to emerge. By the power of retrospection, the poet sets this tale, with its aura of family legend, into his own generation’s contemporary cultural perspective. Although it would be years, Martínez tells us, before “Hollywood would . . . become a perfectly / acceptable religion” to colonize and capture market share from the popular idols of pre-Castro Cuba’s self-sufficient music and entertainment culture, this uncle—with his as-yet unrecognized resemblance to a North American film star—would be more grand in his failure, his never-to-be-realized dreams.

But the by-products of North America’s (“land of stolen // elegance”) cultural imperialism (“the way we package someone else’s tradition, // the way we price each package”) are not in the forefront of Martínez’s concerns here. He is too fascinated by the lore and the artifacts of classical and popular cultures—especially jazz—in all of their manifestations and contexts, on all their varied continents of expression, in all the variations of their recurrent themes, to object to some of the multifarious ways by which these modes of expression intersect. By turns oblique, elliptical, surreal, or suffused with lyric nuance, these poems fuse personal history with the cultural surround of several continents, with an energy and enthusiasm—may I venture that old-fashioned word *optimism*?—curiously reminiscent of Whitman. For all their subtlety and sophistication—“a sense // of decorum as motif for a whole generation”—these poems strike no poses of alienation or *ennui*, but remain unaffectedly approachable and human. We are certain to hear many more variations on this poet’s mnemonic music in the years to come, and we should not be surprised if some appear in the pages of this magazine. It would not be the first time.