

Aguirre-Oteiza, Daniel. *This Ghostly Poetry: History and Memory of Exiled Spanish Republican Poets*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2020. 386 pp.

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In “El Poeta”, a fragment from the collection of short prose texts *Ocnos*, Luis Cernuda describes his relationship with an illustrious precursor, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer. As a child, Cernuda could glimpse in Bécquer’s poetry the ghostly remnants of a life “ahogado en abandono y nostalgia” (70). Now a college student, Cernuda visits the *capilla universitaria* where Bécquer’s remains are held, pausing, not at the pompous tombstone in the crypt, but in the chapel, in front of a statue of an angel who holds in one hand a book, raising the other to his lips in a gesture that symbolizes silence. Cernuda gazes at the statue, hoping that a definitive revelation of the meaning of Bécquer’s life might come from lips of stone. But the statue does not speak, and the silence is broken by the excited voices of students cavorting in the sunlit patio outside the church. These living voices are the only possible response to his questioning; the statue and the vanished author are indifferent and forgetful.

Cernuda’s tale points to the paradoxical sense of authorial presence and absence characteristic of lyric poetry, and speaks to many of the questions raised in Daniel Aguirre Oteiza’s fascinating study of the relationship between poetry and exile in twentieth century Spain, *This Ghostly Poetry: History and Memory of Exiled Spanish Republican Poets*. In it, Aguirre Oteiza traces the complex relations between *lo vivo*, *lo escrito*, and the living voice of *cada lector* –a triadic terminology he takes from Max Aub– in the work of the “ghostly” writing of Aub, Cernuda, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Tomás Segovia, and Antonio Machado. For Aguirre Oteiza, re-reading these writers can help us better un-

derstand the continuing political and cultural significance of the poetry of Republican exiles.

Aguirre Oteiza frames his work in terms of the links between national identity and poetry. While national literary histories seek to link poetry, identity, and place in a lineal or teleological narrative, a reading of exilic poetry attentive to its “claim-subverting textual elements” (3), its “border-crossing, non-chronological, plurivocal, and plurilingual patterns” (7) can complicate narratives that simplify and exclude. Beyond a reading that would be limited to thematic concerns, Aguirre Oteiza claims, inspired by a range of theorists that includes Barbara Johnston, Jonathan Culler, Karl Bühler, Paul de Man and David Nowell Smith, that the political significance of exilic poetry is revealed in its “verbal fabric”(7), its “deictic, tonal, prosodic, rhetorical, topical, translational, and intertextual repertoires” (7). Thus, an analytical framework that centres on the categories of voice, deixis, prosopopeia, and memory is brought to bear on a series of writers who occupy an ambiguous position with regard to Spanish literary history –they are outsiders, due to their experiences of exile and various types of marginalization, but they are also insiders, as male writers working in Castilian whose lives and work can potentially be inserted within narratives of national reconciliation.

The question of voice is central to Aguirre Oteiza’s concerns, as it is the category that has since Romanticism formed the constitutive link between the poet and a national “people”. In his third chapter, Aguirre Oteiza considers the claim to speak as the voice of the people in the patriotic lyrics of wartime poets, identifying the animating force of apostrophe in the exhortatory verses of Miguel Hernández, César Vallejo, and Pablo Neruda. A more detailed reading of León Felipe’s “Reparto” allows the author to showcase his approach, as he expertly demonstrates the ways in which intertextual elements (Whitman) and complexities of deixis and voice undermine the poem’s claim to speak as the “voz de la tierra”, arguing that a reading of the poem inattentive to these elements and focused primarily on its significance would be unable to sufficiently distinguish its nationalist rhetoric from that of a right-wing figure like José Antonio Primo de Rivera, who also, taking from a common source of Romantic aesthetic ideology, urged poets to speak with the voice of the “tierra”. To understand the political significance of Felipe’s work it is necessary to read it as an “undecideable” text, whose claims are complicated by intertextual, rhetorical, and formal elements. Similarly, a reading of Neruda’s “Explico algunas cosas” shows how the uncanny sense of presence provoked by the poem’s enunciative structures lends it weight as a testimony to wartime violence.

With this groundwork laid, Aguirre Oteiza opens the second section of his work with a fascinating exploration of Juan Ramón Jiménez’s posthumously published collection

of heterogeneous materials, *Guerra de España*. Aguirre Oteiza pays special attention to the way Jiménez arranges his archive around the figure of Antonio Machado, entwining his memories of the poet with documentary evidence –photos, newspaper clippings, obituaries– so as to resist the reductive appropriation for political or nationalist ends of his friend's life and work. In a wider sense, the author argues that Jiménez's collection stands as proof of his political engagement, but also as an exemplary exercise in testimony, in that the mixture of varied elements –poems but also photos and newspaper clippings– reflects the double nature of what he terms “poetic memory”, both subject to time and ever renewed in the present of reading.

The lyrics from Cernuda's “1936”, “Recuérdalo tú y recuérdalo a otros”, provide the focus of the following chapter, devoted to the Sevillian poet. The survival of Cernuda's lines in the context of debates about memory in the twenty-first century is, for Aguirre Oteiza, reflective of the capacity of lyric utterance to enact a presence that goes beyond anecdote. The specific “time signature” of the “1936” relates, in Aguirre Oteiza's reading, to Cernuda's self-mythologization as the quintessential outsider, in which “self-elegy” is the response to a “poetics of self-exile” (126).

The question of marginal or decentred identity could also be said to define the life and work of Max Aub, to whom the sixth chapter of the book is dedicated. Although Aub is known mostly for his narrative accounts of the Civil War and subsequent repression and exile, Aguirre Oteiza explains how the enunciative possibilities of lyric poetry allow Aub to explore the “alterity, plurality, and opacity” (163) of witnessing through the apocryphal authors of his *Antología traducida*. Well-meaning attempts, such as those by Antonio Muñoz Molina, to recuperate the figure of Aub for a renewed vision of Spanish culture would, from this perspective, reduce the necessary gap between experience and expression that is fundamental to the writings of the author of the *Laberinto mágico*.

The work of Tomás Segovia can also be understood in the light of the paradoxes of exilic writing. Although Segovia claims that his poetry is based on an understanding of exile that is not reducible to historical determinants, and that the poet should “exiliarse del exilio”, Aguirre Oteiza sees it as a complex, contrapuntal writing that expresses a dialectic of particularity and universality that is fundamental to a writing of exile informed by what Kwame Anthony Appiah terms a “cosmopolitan ethics”. Rejecting a binary choice of historicist or anti-historicist approach, Aguirre Oteiza claims that paying attention to the ways that the “condition of exile can be traced in the verbal fabric of Segovia's poems” (193) can allow for a better understanding of the political significance of his work.

Concluding his study, Aguirre Oteiza explores the afterlife of Antonio Machado as both “national” poet and symbol of Republican exile. In a masterful analysis of Machado’s famous last lines “Estos días azules y este sol de la infancia”, Aguirre Oteiza shows that far from a purely biographical expression of nostalgia, the verses draw from a web of plurilingual, intertextual sources, not least the tradition of French symbolism. A contemporary voicing of the demonstratives that define the line would enact the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity that constitutes the paradox of exilic writing, a writing that resists a reductive vision of Machado as the quintessential poet of Castilla.

Aguirre Oteiza’s study is an impressive work. It demonstrates an enormous range of reading and a keen understanding of theoretical and contextual issues –the notes and bibliography are extensive and an excellent resource for any reader seeking to gain an understanding of contemporary debates regarding twentieth century poetry and Spanish literary history as well as broader questions relating to literary theory and memory studies. The theoretical approach taken also allows the author to investigate the lesser known aspects of the work of canonical authors, and to explore their continuing significance for an understanding, or misunderstanding, of Spanish cultural history.

But while the author’s emphasis on deixis, prosopopeia, apostrophe, and intertextuality allows for readings that avoid reductive thematic glosses of the poems, there is also the danger, especially in the recourse to deixis as an analytic tool, that the generality and abstraction of these categories can limit their usefulness for understanding the specificity of the work read. If the tension between presence and absence in the voicing of poetry is an aspect of all lyric, there is a possibility that reading poems in this light can become a repetitive exercise that achieves the same foregone conclusion for every poem. There is also the danger of overreach in the ascription of political significance to formal elements of texts. It is surely a stretch to argue, in reading Aub’s “Tres años”, for example, that the employment of anaphora, a “paradigmatically pliable, protean, and polymorphic rhetorical figure” (180), *inherently* undermines nationalist claims. The question arises as to what rhetorical figure is not “pliable, protean, and polymorphic”, but also as to whether there is a rhetorical figure –including anaphora– that has not been employed to incite nationalist feeling. It is notable that some of the most exciting readings in the book are those that are most culturally “rich” –the discussion of photography in Jiménez’s *Guerra en España*, the defence of Machado’s *galicismo mental*, the criticism of Muñoz Molina’s historical vision, or the tracing of the afterlife in Spanish culture of Cernuda’s “Recuérdaselo tú y recuérdaselo a otros”.

Nevertheless, it should be said that *This Ghostly Poetry* is an outstanding work of literary and cultural criticism. The sheer range of its concerns is astonishing, and Aguirre Oteiza

expertly articulates the links between poetry, exile, politics, national identity, memory, and literary history. If the emphasis on voice and deixis can at times feel slightly restrictive, it also grants this complex study a central argumentative thrust, and allows for brilliant readings of the works and authors discussed –the analysis of complex enunciative structures of Aub’s *Antología traducida* is a highlight in this regard. Perhaps one of the most notable aspects of *This Ghostly Poetry* is its capacity to provoke further reflection on figures we thought we already knew. For the reviewer, the questions it raises have a special resonance for another exile, José Ángel Valente, whose poetry could be accurately described, to use Aguirre Oteiza’s terminology, as “ghostly”. That Aguirre Oteiza’s study can stimulate new thought on the phantasms of this –and any other– *cada lector* reflects its value as an innovative contribution to the study of Spanish language poetry and culture.

Works cited

Cernuda, Luis. *Ocnos*. Seville, Editorial Renacimiento, 2014.