WHAT SOUNDS GOOD ALSO RINGS TRUE

GUSTAVO PÉREZ FIRMAT

Born in Havana in 1949, Gustavo Pérez Firmat arrived in Miami in 1960 when he was eleven years old. A sense of unresolved contradiction colors all of Pérez Firmat's writing, a body of work that spans across several genres: the memoir, the novel, poetry, and literary criticism. In El año que viene estamos en Cuba, *the 1997 Spanish translation of his 1995 memoir* Next Year in Cuba, *Gustavo writes of his reasons for writing an autobiographical work: "Me he demorado demasiados años en aprender que hay continuidades que trascienden tiempo y lugar y lenguaje. Soy quien fui: el niño cubano es el padre del hombre americano. No puedo entenderme si no respeto a ese niño, si no le devuelvo el lugar que le corresponde. No es cuestión de reducir fracciones sino de integrarlas." It is precisely the need to integrate the fractions of his identity that informs the totality of Gustavo's published works.*

Pérez Firmat is the author of several scholarly works among them Literature and Liminality *(1986),* The Cuban Condition *(1989)* and Tongue Ties *(2003). His poetry has appeared in collections such as* Carolina Cuban *(1986),* Equivocaciones *(1989), and* Bilingual Blues *(1995).* Life on the Hyphen *(1994), an examination of Cuban culture in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, served to create what is today the field of Cuban-American studies.* Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio *(2000), a collection of vignettes, re-creates the tensions produced when two languages are alive and in conflict within the same author. His most recent creative work is* Scar Tissue *(2005), a book of poems about illness, healing, and exile. In 2004, Pérez Firmat was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He teaches at Columbia University where he is David Feinson Professor of Humanities.*

INTERVIEW

Conducted by Isabel Alvarez Borland

[Alvarez Borland] "How did you become a writer? Can you tell us how and when this happened?"

[Pérez Firmat] "I became a writer the night—actually early morning—when my son was born: *creación* as *procreación*. I used to have a

notebook (a real notebook, with little sheets of lined paper: this was in the age before the *hada cibernética* touched our lives with her memory stick) where I wrote new words, quotations I liked, the titles of books I wanted to read; and so while Rosa was in labor I began scribbling what became my first poem (I use the term loosely), 'Carolina Cuban,' where I wonder what sort of Cubans my children would be. Everything I have written since then is a long, sometimes inventive, sometimes tedious footnote (or *futanota*, as we say in my classes) to that birthing poem. If I were not a father, I would not write poems. I also think that ultimately everything I've written has been written for them, David and Miriam: *por y para ellos*, then."

[Alvarez Borland] "Tell us about your literary road. What are important markers? Did some people play important roles?"

[Pérez Firmat] "When I was a freshman at Miami-Dade Community College, I took a survey of Spanish literature with a bitter little man appropriately named Dr. Funke, who made it clear that teaching at a community college was beneath him. The class was boring, a lifeless recitation of names, dates, titles. Except for one afternoon, when Dr. Funke was reading a poem by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, the nineteenth-century Spanish poet, about the loneliness of a corpse that stays alone in a funeral parlor after all the mourners have left. As he read the poem, Dr. Funke began to get teary-eyed. When he reached the last line, he could barely speak. By way of apology, he explained that he had a son who had passed away when he was our age and that this poem reminded him of his son. I found out two things that day: that Bécquer's poem is about the loneliness of the living, not the dead; and that literature gives expression to experiences that would otherwise remain namelessly painful. Although I didn't know it at the time, this incident may be the reason I became a writer—and a professor."

[Alvarez Borland] "Was the work of others significant to you?"

[Pérez Firmat] "Since I make a living by teaching literature, I have to read for my classes and the literature I teach finds its way into what I write. A few years ago I published a novella called *Anything but Love*. Some time later I was teaching *El túnel*, a book by Ernesto Sábato that I had taught many times before, and was surprised by all the echoes of *Anything but Love* in *El túnel* (actually the other way around). But I'm not the sort of writer who reads all the time. I'd rather write than read and I'd rather watch ESPN than write. Growing up in Miami—a boutique rather than a book city—I read hardly at all. The nuns in the parochial school I attended used to punish me by making me come in on Saturday mornings to read. I had to sit in the library for two hours. The only thing I remember reading was a biography of John Paul Jones, and I'm not sure how much that pushed me down the literary road."

[Alvarez Borland] "Who are the writers that you admire most?"

[Pérez Firmat] "Some of the ones whose work I have envied and (perhaps) learned from throughout the years: Jorge Mañach, John Updike, A. E. Housman, Borges, Henry James, Jane Austen, Scott Fitzgerald, Lezama Lima, Cabrera Infante, Alejandra Pizarnik, Roberto Fernández, Virgil Suárez, Christopher Morley. As I write the names that pop into my head, I realize what an arbitrary, chaotic list this is! Even more chaotic if you add the nonliterary influences, which may have left a deeper mark: American song lyricists from the 1930s and 1940s; Cuban and American comedians like Leopoldo Fernández, Guillermo Álvarez Guedes, Henny Youngman, Alan King. And many other people whom I remember and don't remember. I'm the sum total of my influences—plus the five percent that belongs only to me."

[Alvarez Borland] "How do you see your work in the contemporary literary scene? Do you consider yourself in the mainstream, at the margins, elsewhere?"

[Pérez Firmat] "I'm a marginal figure but, as you know, the margins are everywhere. I like being *al margen* but not *marginado*, out of sight but not out of the way."

[Alvarez Borland] "What do you consider to be your main contribution so far? Is this a matter of style, ideas, or something else?"

[Pérez Firmat] "A contribution is what I make to the March of Dimes. I don't think of my books as contributions. I don't write them to contribute to anything except my own shaky peace of mind. Is a man who goes out in the middle of the street, takes his clothes off and screams, 'Look at me! Look at me!' making a contribution? Because that's what I do."

[Alvarez Borland] "How do you explain this acute need for attention?"

[Pérez Firmat] "I don't."

[Alvarez Borland] "How would you describe your style of writing? How has it changed throughout your career? If you were going to pick a tradition where your work fits, which would it be?"

[Pérez Firmat] "When the MS of *Next Year in Cuba* was being copyedited, my editor said to me that I was a 'writer's writer'—which sounds like a compliment but actually wasn't. He meant that I was too taken with words and (thus) wrote too many sentences, which he proceeded to cut. I also remember that one of Raymond Carver's students once asked Carver whether he (the student) should become a writer. Carver answered with a simple, complicated question: 'Do you like sentences?' I like sentences. I like words. I even like paragraphs. If you like something, you spend time with it. If you spend time with it, you get to know it. Once you get to know it, it tells you little secrets. Someone once also called me a 'master of linguistic play'—which wasn't entirely a com-

pliment either. I don't make an effort to play with words. Sometimes I make an effort *not* to play with words because when I play with words I have the sneaking suspicion that the words are playing with me. But manipulating language is pleasurable and offers a kind of release. Plus, time flies when you're making puns."

[Alvarez Borland] "Indeed your works—both scholarly and creative—have shown an increased interest in language, a need to 'zoom in' into sentences, words, even syllables. This obsession became most explicit in your *Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio*, a book which details your relationship to Spanish and English. How does this special relationship you seem to have with language affect your creative process?"

[Pérez Firmat] "Like others, I tend to write by ear. Somehow (and the 'how' is a mystery to me) you come up with a sentence that sounds good, and then you realize that it also conveys what you wanted to say—that what sounds good also rings true—or that it conveys something different but perhaps just as pertinent as what you wanted to say. Sense then follows sound. I'm hopelessly, helplessly phonocentric, perhaps because I come from a country where all the men sooner or later go deaf (while the women, on the other hand, get louder and louder, perhaps so that their deaf husbands can hear them).

One more thing: wordplay is much more frequent than one would think because it encompasses a lot more than wordplay. It includes phrase- and sentence- and paragraph-play. Ultimately it's language-play, which is the same as language use. Take Nabokov's statement: 'I'm as American as April in Arizona.' What is it about this sentence that makes it memorable? First, it varies on 'as American as apple pie,' a variation made pointed by the near homophony of 'apple' and 'April.' Second, there's the alliteration of American/April/Arizona. Third, and best of all, 'Arizona' is not even an 'American' word because it sounds Spanish—a compound put together from 'zona árida'—but apparently is of Amerindian origin. So is this wordplay? To me it's just a good sentence: cunning rather than punning."

[Alvarez Borland] "Do you find it easier to use this type of play in English than in Spanish?"

[Pérez Firmat] "Yes. For one thing, Spanish has no homophones. For another—the complementary phenomenon—it also has no 'homographs.' As that great linguist Ricky Ricardo once pointed out, in Spanish words that look the same sound the same and words that sound the same look the same. In English, as he explains, 'bough,' ' cough,' and 'through' look the same but sound different; and 'bough' and 'cow' look different but sound the same. Ricky's conclusion: 'Crazy language!' The other reason may be personal. Perhaps I feel freer to fool around in English because it's not my mother or father's tongue. Although I don't mind

writing English with an accent, I try not to write Spanish with an accent. But as you say, in *Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio*, which is all in Spanish, there's a fair amount of what might be regarded as wordplay."

[Alvarez Borland] "Are there periods or stages in your literary development? Major changes in direction or style?"

[Pérez Firmat] "I've gone from 'early Gustavo' to 'late Gustavo' and somehow skipped the 'mature Gustavo.' Since I'm a late-bloomer baby-boomer, my 'early' period includes stuff I wrote in my thirties and forties—the poems in *Carolina Cuban*, *Equivocaciones* and *Bilingual Blues*; *Next Year in Cuba*; *The Cuban Condition*, *Life on the Hyphen*. The 'late Gustavo' (not to be confused, *plis*, with the dead Gustavo) would include what I've written since—*Anything but Love*; the Spanish version of *Life on the Hyphen*, which is called *Vidas en vilo*; *Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio*; *Tongue Ties*, *Scar Tissue*; and whatever I'm writing now. The early Gustavo was a manic man; the late Gustavo is a melancholy baby."

[Alvarez Borland] "Would you describe your work as Cuban, American, Cuban American, Hispanic, Latino? How is your identity as a writer related to these ethnic categories?"

[Pérez Firmat] "To begin with, my definition of a Cuban American writer is a Cuban who writes in English. And so I don't think of myself as an American or a Cuban or a Cuban-American or a Latino writer, but rather as a Cuban who sometimes writes in English and at other times writes in Spanish. And it's always the language I'm not writing in that is my home. I can't write in English without missing the Spanish that is missing, and I can't write in Spanish without missing the English that is missing. These are the sorts of 'tongue ties' I've tried to unravel in a recent book. Also, maybe one shouldn't confuse nationality with literary citizenship. Even though George Santayana was not American, he said: 'It is an as American writer that I am to be counted, if I'm to be counted at all.' So here was a Spanish man who was an American writer."

[Alvarez Borland] " 'And it's always the language I'm not writing in that is my home.' Your remark is important if we think of *Anything but Love* and *Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio*, two books that appeared in the same year. In addition to being in different languages, these books are so different that they could have heen written by two different people. Your creative writing in English, it seems to me, is much more direct, at times bitter, while your Spanish writing seems more melancholy, more heartfelt. Any validity to my impressions?"

[Pérez Firmat] "Well, but bitterness can be heartfelt, no? Still, it does seem as if those two books were written by different people, and in some sense they were. My 'I' and my 'yo' don't sound the same. I'm not even sure how well they know, or like, each other. So in English, as you

point out, I tend to be louder, more abrasive; while in Spanish I tend to be quieter, more melancholy. I write 'I' and hear '¡Aye!' I write 'yo' and read 'y/o.' It's an amazing thing, the English-language 'I': capitalized, singular, erect, almost like an exclamation mark. To translate it properly into Spanish we'd have to write: ¡YO! Santayana has a poem that begins, 'I would I might forget that I am I.' That's how I feel sometimes. The problem is that Santayana's sentence says 'I' four times."

[Alvarez Borland] "Critics often say that valuable works of literature are universal. Yet, they also claim that they have to come from particular experiences, and fit within a tradition. How does your creative work resonate with the experiences of others?"

[Pérez Firmat] "I don't know about "universal," but sometimes experiences or incidents one thinks of as private or idiosincratic turn out not to be. In *Next Year in Cuba* I write about the word ***hollín***, soot. In Cuba our backyard—actually a tiled *patio*—always seemed to be covered with a fine film of ***hollín***. In the book I say that ***hollín*** is a word that I haven't heard or spoken in twenty-five years, but one that evokes for me large chunks of my childhood. After the book was published, several people wrote to say that this word was important to them too, that ***hollín*** for them also was some sort of Cuban fairy dust or grimy madeleine. So here I thought that my attachment to ***hollín*** was a personal quirk, and it turns out that others feel about ***hollín*** as strongly as I do."

[Alvarez Borland] "Does your work arise from what you see in the world, or from what you feel inside? Are these related to your experiences of exile?"

[Pérez Firmat] "Edward Hopper was asked once what he was after in a painting of sunlight hitting a wall. He replied: I was after myself. Which means that looking out can be a way of looking in."

[Alvarez Borland] "I remember that when you published *Next Year in Cuba* you were made aware that your book resonated with many Cuban Americans. Could you share with us some of the responses from your readers?"

[Pérez Firmat] "My favorite one came from a man named Emilio, who lived in Union City. His letter was handwritten in uneven block letters on a lined yellow sheet. It said:

> 'As I sit in my basement smoking a (PG) cigar and reading the last few pages of this heautiful book, I can't help but write you a letter of appreciation. I am full of emotions that I wish I could put down on this letter, but with only a high school diploma is hard for me to do, and very little experience writing letters, so excuse me. While I read this book, I think is me [*sic*] writing the

> words in it because our feelings are so much alike, it blows my mind. I'm 36 years old came from (la provincia de Santa Clara) Cuba in 1969 with my sister, mother, father. Now married to an American-Italian wife who speaks Spanish as well as I do for 11 years, A son named Guillermo 10 yrs (does not like that name so is Willie) and a daughter named Sophia 8 yrs old. Smoking a cigar, reading your book, with my son next to me, looking at the USC vs Notre Dame football game, and drinking a glass of homemade wine with tears in my eyes. My son asks what is wrong, so I explain and go thru my famous speech about CUBA. And he listens and understands.' "

[Alvarez Borland] "Do you consciously work with memories?"

[Pérez Firmat] "Well, everybody 'works' with memories, whether you are a writer or not. It's what makes you believe in the coherence, the continuity of your life. As for me, as I say in *Next Year in Cuba* and other places, when I grow nostalgic, it's not for the Havana of my childhood hut for the Miami of my adolescence. I have very fond memories of the early years in Miami, hard as they were. Cuba seemed so close then. And the only people in my family who weren't alive were those who hadn't been born yet. Now things are different. Now most of the people in my family who are still alive are those who hadn't been born when we came to the United States. And Cuba seems far, far away. A couple of years ago during Nochebuena I realized that I was the oldest Cuban in the house. This sent me into a depression that hasn't quite lifted yet."

[Alvarez Borland] "Are you aware of how your art modifies your memories? For instance, in *Next Year in Cuba*, did you consciously fictionalize some events in order to make them more interesting to the reader?"

[Pérez Firmat] "No, I tried to tell the truth. But of course I didn't. After the book came out, I kept getting angry calls from family members wanting to set me straight about things that they thought I had gotten wrong. My mother, who didn't like the book at all, even threatened to write her own version: 'Lo que Gustavito no dijo.' "

[Alvarez Borland] "You mentioned before your new collection of poems, *Scar Tissue*, which is and will be out by the time this interview is published. Could you tell us a little about the why and what of it?"

[Pérez Firmat] "A few years ago two things happened that changed my life, were my life susceptible to changing: my father passed away in Miami after waiting for forty years to return to some mysterious place he called Cuba, and I was diagnosed with prostate cancer, a disease that he also had. Because the two events occurred within a couple of months of each other, they bundled together in my mind and out came *Scar Tissue*,

a sticky sequel to *Next Year in Cuba* and *Life on the Hyphen*, where I write about enduring illness in a foreign language, about coping with losses of various sorts (*de padre, de patria y de próstata*), and generally about the hurt inside the hyphen. (It turns out that the hyphen was a scar all along.)

In *Scar Tissue*—my informal title is *'Knife on the Hyphen'*—I write about prostate cancer, a common but unliterary disease, with the same candor and even ardor with which others have written about breast cancer or AIDS. Kafka says somewhere that a book should be the ax for the frozen sea inside us. After the surgeons took a scalpel to my belly, I took an ax to my *entrañas*. What was left was Scar Tissue."

[Alvarez Borland] "How do you begin to write a novel or a poem? Does it have to do with particular experiences?"

[Pérez Firmat] "I write when I get into one of my moods. What may be inspiration in others is agitation in me. Except for *Next Year in Cuba*, which was written with a plan, my other books (not the criticism, the 'creative' writing) came about, if not by accident, by chance. Since I'm blessed with a bad memory, I keep journals to remember what happened—who did what to whom and for what reason—and books like *Anything but Love*, *Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio* or *Scar Tissue*, as well as all of the poems, began as journal entries. You begin jotting things down haphazardly and after a while you realize that these sentences or paragraphs are going somewhere, that they have or can be given some sort of shape and purpose. Then you stop scribbling in your journal and begin writing a poem or a book."

[Alvarez Borland] "How does having a contemporary audience matter to a writer? Who are your readers? For whom do you write?"

[Pérez Firmat] "Since you are one of my readers, why don't you tell me who *you* are? I said before that everything I've written has in some way been meant to be read by my children. That's true, but it doesn't mean that what I write isn't meant to be read by others as well. It's like this interview. I'm addressing you, Isabel, but I'm also speaking to others—and among those others: myself. Jorge Guillén once said: 'No se escribe para, se escribe porque.' Poorly translated: 'One doesn't write "for," one writes "because." ' When you write 'because,' you're writing for yourself, because there's something you need to say, or to say again, regardless of whether anybody is listening. My impression, or my prejudice, is that the best books are the ones written as if nobody is listening."

[Alvarez Borland] "What is your opinion of literary critics? If you had money to spare, would you give a damn about what critics and audiences think of your work?"

[Pérez Firmat] "I'm fortunate in that I don't make a living from writing, and so I have less incentive to pay attention to what the critics

say (but, only in English does one 'pay' attention; in Spanish we 'lend' it—*prestamos atención*—which seems to me more equitable). Also, critics come in different flavors: newspaper critics (plain vanilla), academic critics (chocolate fudge), friends and family (passion fruit). In any event, I have a tacit pact with my real or ideal readers: I don't have to please you; you don't have to read me. This way I can write what I want and they can choose not to lend me their ears. And nobody pays."

[Alvarez Borland] "Could you be, or have been, anything else but a writer?"

[Pérez Firmat] "I could have been—what is more, *should* have been—anything but a writer. That's why one of my books is called *Equivocaciones*—because I'm a writer not by *vocación* but by *equivocación:* it's not a vocation but a mistake, a kind of geographical accident. Growing up, I never wanted to be a writer or a professor. Growing old, I still don't want to be a writer or a professor. But exile turns us into other people, makes or remakes or unmakes us into who we are not. And once the undoing is done, it can't be redone. So I'm sitting here in front of my *desordenadora* drinking a dirty martini and writing that I should not have been a writer."

[Alvarez Borland] "What is your relationship to English? To Spanish? How Cuban do you feel? Is being bilingual an asset to your writing?"

[Pérez Firmat] "Others will disagree, hut for me bilingualism is a liability: *una suma que resta.* I have often wished I could not choose whether to write in English or Spanish. Then words would only fail me in one language. Then I would not have to translate myself to myself. Then my 'I' would not haunt my 'yo.' One person, one language. One person, one house. One person, one country. As old-fashioned as this sounds, this is how things should be. (I mean, how I wish things were for me.)"

[Alvarez Borland] "It seems that writers who alternate between languages in their public writing have a story to tell about each language, and yet each language brings about different aspects of your feelings about your own life."

[Pérez Firmat] "Como decía más arriba, el inglés me conoce alegre mientras que el español me conoce triste. Tal vez ésa sea la verdadera razón por la que juego con palabras más en uno que en otro. El español es la lengua de la ausencia, de la pérdida: la voz de mi padre, que ya no existe. En cambio, el inglés es el idioma de la convivencia, de la cotidianidad, el que uso para hablar con mis hijos y mi esposa. El otro día me di cuenta de que la única persona en mi familia con quien todavía hablo en español es mi madre. Pero hace veinte años no había nadie en mi familia con quien no hablaba en español. Y de aquí a cinco o diez años no habrá nadie en mi familia con quien no hable en inglés. Estas cosas afectan la relación de uno con sus lenguas. Si una persona a quien uno

quiere—un padre, una madre—habla cierto idioma, ese idioma también habla por ella. Por lo tanto, acudir a ese idioma en su ausencia se convierte en un acto de recordación, de recuperación, en una manera de dialogar con él o ella. Ahora mismo, hablando contigo en español, también estoy conversando con mi padre. O más bien, como en el poema de Florit, conversando 'a' mi padre, ya que él no puede contestarme."

[Alvarez Borland] "Why did you just switch to Spanish? Is there a core inside yourself that remains unchanged no matter what dictionary you reach for?"

[Pérez Firmat] "Yes, there must be a core or *corazón* that doesn't change. *Soy quien fui, hace años, para siempre.* But how can I get there from here without resorting to one language or the other, which turns core into encore, the speechless *corazón* into a wordy *coraza?* It may be that I go back and forth between Spanish and English to trick my languages into transparency, to sneak up on them before they put up their wall of words or *pantalla de palabras.* If I can open a crack between Spanish and English, then perhaps the core/*corazón* can peek out through it. Not that anybody should care, though. My core may be even less interesting than my *coraza.*"

[Alvarez Borland] "What distinguishes Cuban Americans from other Latino writers?"

[Pérez Firmat] "Perhaps it's more interesting to think about what they have in common—the English language, for example. Cuban-American literature, like Latino literature, is becoming or has become an English-only zone. And yet these mostly anglophone writers have not stopped pining for their *patria grande* or *chica,* for Havana or Little Havana, for Sagua or La Sagüesera, but in a language that makes those places more distant. Longing for Cuba or things Cuban in the language of Cuba makes sense; longing for Cuba in the language of America is a little odd, and yet I and others do it all the time. Odder still, often the nostalgia is directed at the Spanish language itself. This longing for Spanish in English is one of the features that joins Cuban-American literature to Puerto Rican or Chicano literature. Latino literature, whatever its ethnicity, is full of English-language love songs to Spanish, ballads that are also valedictories. The Latino writer carries a torch he or she can't lose for the language she or he has lost. Sandra Cisneros has a wonderful poem that begins, 'Make love to me in Spanish, / not with that other tongue.' Okay, fine; but if we both know Spanish, why are you telling me this in English? And what is 'that other tongue' if not the language in which the poem is written?"

[Alvarez Borland] "So why do you think she says it in English?"

[Pérez Firmat] "Because she wouldn't know how to say it in Spanish. The speaker's attachment to Spanish is sentimental rather than practical: a

'tongue tie' rather than a linguistic habit. But this does not make her attachment any less strong or genuine. When she asks to be loved in Spanish, she's looking for a secret self—someone she used to be or maybe someone she never was. In New World chronicles of discovery, translators are called *lenguas*, the body part standing for the whole person. Something like this happens here: her lover is her *lengua*, and her *lengua* names her, tells her who she would like to be. Except that the self she desires exists in and through a language that neither she nor her lover inhabit. Which is why, although the poem is called 'Dulzura,' it leaves a sour taste on the tongue."

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