

Last Encounter with Lorca

MARIE LAFFRANQUE WAS MY FIRST French translator. Sometime in 1953 she stopped in San Sebastian to show me her version of my book *Paz y Concierto* and to discuss some questions she had about it. Of course, Marie Laffranque hadn't come to Spain just to visit the provincial and young poet I then was: she had stopped off unexpectedly in my hometown on her way to Madrid and Fuente Vaqueros where she was doing research on Federico García Lorca. That her trip bore fruit can be seen in the pieces she later published in various issues of the *Bulletin Hispanique* of the Faculté des Lettres de Bordeaux.

During our talks in San Sebastian, the conversation inevitably came round to Federico. When Marie found out that I had known him, she besieged me with questions. And I, of course, spoke as openly as one does to friends. But when she asked permission to publish what I had told her, I had to tell her not to do it; partly because it was all too intimate; partly because I am only too aware that there is no more distorting mirror than that of memory.

Still, Marie hoped to hear some unexpected revelation from me. Hadn't I known him many years? Wasn't there *something* I could tell her? And I remembered then my last encounter with Federico. I couldn't remember the exact date; I knew it was sometime in the Spring of 1936: our poet had come to San Sebastian to give a lecture and recitation at the Ateneo. And I remembered that in those days I kept a diary, for I was very

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young. I looked around for it and found that on March 8, 1936, I had written some notes about the meeting. Now, *that* was something objective; those notes were really a direct impression—undistorted by memory—of, as it turned out, my last meeting with Federico. I could, therefore, offer them to Marie and know I was not deceiving her in any way. But—could I really pass on the diary entry to her? Not completely, for there were things in it that I didn't think right to publicize at the time. So, full of all these scruples, I only sent her a paragraph about literary matters, but that paragraph was an exact copy of what I'd written in my diary.

To understand it, you have to know all the circumstances. By 1936 Federico had already been deified; I, a youngster, had just published my first book of verse (*Marea del Silencio*) and believed that I had broken all poetic forms past and future. I did not know then that Federico, whom I hadn't seen for several months, was obsessed, as were many other poets of the time, with his return to the sonnet form and, in general, with formal concerns. This is the cause of the disconcertion that my diary entry for March 8, 1936 reflects. Here it is:

What Federico said about my book (*Marea del Silencio*) really surprised me. I had expected anything but that. The things a reader picks out! He doesn't see the book for what it is. He notices only those things which he can use to reflect what is preoccupying him now. Very natural, of course, but how disconcerting! So Federico says: What I have pointed out in your book to Neruda and Alberti is your concern with form. It's very important. We are going through difficult times. This abandonment without order or measure (I think he's referring to the "school" that has begun to surround Neruda) is very dangerous. I'm now writing a book of sonnets, he continues. We need to return to this. For that reason, I am pleased with the preoccupation with poetic construction that each poem in your book shows. You don't precisely practice classicism at all costs. People will not notice, as a result, your concern with form. They will not be aware that your verse is not an innovation but the most classical of formulas.

The book of sonnets that Federico spoke to me about that day and about which he spoke to many other friends was the

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one to be titled *Sonetos del Amor Oscuro*. Did he really get to write it? If he did, where is it? Has it been hidden or destroyed by some narrow-minded person who thought it could harm him? I don't think so. I believe that book never really came to be, though Federico spoke about it with passion.

It's been said that Vicente Aleixandre saw and read this book of sonnets. But this is either false or a distortion. Vicente Aleixandre told me himself. What he saw and read, as I and many others did, were four sonnets—just four sonnets—meant, perhaps, to be the germ of this dreamt-about book. Perhaps not even that. Federico was very fond of inventing titles for books. (Vicente Aleixandre told me this and it agreed perfectly with my own knowledge of how Federico worked.) Remember the announced-and-nonexistent *Tierra y Luna*? In this he is like Blas de Otero, another poet who puts off the publication of his work for years and years. This is the way it works: the poet starts accumulating one poem after another in his desk; once in a while he rereads them; he accepts some and rejects others. But the criteria for this selectivity changes with each day's moods. And so he shuffles and reshuffles them and finds another order for them and casts and recasts them in a hundred ways. And for each of these fugitive structures for a possible book he looks for a title that he immediately forgets.

Federico always advised others not to submit their poems to publishers until long after they were written, and he followed this practice himself. It naturally led others to fall into chronological traps about his poems. It is known, for example, that those few short marvelous poems entitled *Primeras Canciones* were written, despite what the title insinuates, much later than his *Canciones*. What does this mean? Not that he lets his poems settle until he can tell if they are really worth the bother but that he is looking for an excuse at publication time: "I wrote them such a long time ago. . . ." Yet it does also mean—though it may sound contradictory—that he only valued his most recent work. This is why we can imagine him being enthusiastic about a few recent poems—the four sonnets for the book I've mentioned, the two poems from that other nonexistent book to be

called *Tande Valses*, or those he showed as samples of the also nonexistent *Tierra y Luna*—and besides imagining him enthusiastic, we can also see him evoking a book that he seemed to feel was already in his hands though it was still dormant.

But let us leave literary matters. I would like to say something more to the point and serious about my last encounter with Federico. Something that ten years ago I didn't dare tell Marie Laffranque but which is also in my diary and is painful to continue keeping to myself. To me it illustrates how Federico walked to his death because he believed that man is always human. Perhaps what I am going to tell will seem merely anecdotal though I think it is profoundly meaningful. In any case, I believe that when a poet gains the attention that Federico earned even the smallest details of his life acquire importance.

That March 8 of 1936 to which I've been referring (that last day I enjoyed Federico's company and enjoyed also what Neruda called his "laughter of rice of hurricane proportions"), Federico called me from the Hotel Biarritz where he was staying. When I got there, I found to my surprise that Federico had also called Jose Manuel Aizpurua. I came close to shedding all polite pretence: I have always sinned on the side of violence and, besides, I was young then. You understand, Jose Manuel Aizpurua was—I say *was* because he died during the Civil War—a very avant-garde and intelligent architect. San Sebastian, a dull and provincial city, owes to his initiative showings of Picasso, Miro, Picabia, Max Ernst, and others. He was also—one must in fairness leave nothing out—a great partisan of the new poetry. But he was the founder of the Falange in San Sebastian, and I had always refused to greet him though we'd known each other from childhood.

Federico spoke to Jose Manuel, he spoke to me, and both of us answered him; but he could not get Jose Manuel and me to talk to each other. Why? Because the Civil War was already stirring. Federico didn't understand this. "Both of you are my friends." It was useless, it couldn't work. The Civil War was there. Still Federico didn't understand this. Or maybe he understood it but he didn't want to believe it.

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When we were alone, just the two of us, Federico told me something terrible, something I have not dared to tell until today. Terrible, but at the same time beautiful, for it shows with what innocence he walked toward his death, brought there not only by his enemies but also by those he believed to be his friends.

Federico asked why I hadn't wanted to greet Jose Manuel Aizpurua. I tried to explain—with fury, with sectarianism too; and he, falling back on what is *human*, tried to explain to me that Aizpurua was a good fellow, that he had real sensibility, that he admired my poems, etc. . . . Then, finally, he told me this terrible thing:

“He is like Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera.¹ Another good fellow. Do you know that he and I dine together every Friday? We go out in a taxi with the shades drawn because it isn't convenient for him to be seen with me, nor for me to be seen with him.”

Federico thought that all that was child's play. And he laughed like a child. But that laughter, that confidence that man is always human, that belief that a friend, fascist or not, is a friend, cost him his life. It was friends—friends whom he counted among his best—who turned out at that last moment to be fascists first and foremost. They didn't execute him, no. They washed their hands. And they turned him over to those who would.

¹ Leader of the young fascists during the Thirties, Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera founded the Falange, was tried and executed by the Republic, and became the leading martyr of the Spanish fascists.