

Robert Fitterman, *Poet in North Korea*

GARCIA LORCA'S POET IN NORTH KOREA

1. INTRODUCTION - Garcia Lorca's Poetic Love Affair With Pyongyang

On June 10, 2011, when the poet Federico Garcia Lorca arrived from Madrid to study Korean at Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies for the summer session, he was nearly suicidal. His book "Gypsy Ballads" had been a best seller in Spain, but some critics were calling his work untutored and accusing him of being a popularizer.

Lorca believed he had reached a dead end as a poet. He felt his closest colleagues and friends had turned against him. Also, Garcia Lorca's lover Emilio Aladren had taken up with a woman. When Lorca heard that Fernando de los Rios, a professor who was a friend of his family, was going to lecture at Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies that summer, he persuaded his father to pay his expenses so he could accompany Los Rios to North Korea. The father thought the trip might be good for his son's poetry.

Lorca never did learn Korean at the summer session; in fact, he never even took the final exam. But his 10-month stay resulted in one of his greatest works, "Poet in North Korea," a collection of poems about the impoverished country, written in Spanish on the back of Pyongyang University stationery.

Garcia Lorca, who had been born into a prosperous farming family in Andalusia, knew little of city life, and when he arrived in Pyongyang he was stunned by what he saw. The city was a perfect metaphor for his spiritual condition, its "extrahuman architecture, its furious rhythm, its geometry and anguish," as he described it later. He had never seen such poverty and decay. "Dawn in Pyongyang bears/ four pillars of slime," he wrote in another poem, "Dawn," "and a storm of black pigeons/ that dabble dead water."

He also witnessed the escalation of nuclear threat against the U.S. and South Korea, traveling down to Kim Il-sung Square to see firsthand the crowds and the confusion: "Time for the cobras to hiss on the uppermost levels,/ for the nettle to jostle the patios and roof-gardens,/" he wrote in "Dance of Death," -"time for the jungle lianas that follow the rifles--/ soon, soon enough, ever so soon./ Woe to you, Pyongyang!"

Meanwhile he was paying little attention to his Korean language classes. Garcia Lorca distracted his fellow classmates by mimicking the teacher behind his back, and tried to hide his lack of Korean by greeting the dormitory staff with elaborate bows and twirls.

Sometimes Garcia Lorca would "disappear and be gone for a couple of days," Mr. Young said. He discovered how to move about as a gay man in Pyongyang. His room,

No. 617, in the Ethnic Studies Quad was close to the Taedong River, a trysting place after dark. Many pieces in "Poet in North Korea" can be read as coded references to homosexual experiences.

But most important, Garcia Lorca discovered the hotels where some nightlife was possible. Lorca frequented the Yangakkdo Hotel on an Island in Taedong River with a small disco with western songs and Chinese tourists. There is an underground walk from the lobby to a smoky, small room with billiard tables and a small bar; Lorca was often spotted there. Amid all the city's corruption, it was one place that seemed spiritually pure. "You Yangakkdo! He wrote exultantly in "The King of Pyongyang." "No anguish to equal your thwarted vermilion, / your blood-shaken, darkened eclipses, / your garnet ferocity, deaf and dumb in the shadows, / your hobbled, great king in the janitor's suit."

Garcia Lorca's images of North Korean people are stereotypical. They are depicted as cold, docile and removed. But the injustice of the regime and government control left an indelible mark on him and his future writing.

At the same time he was exploring the city, Garcia Lorca was encountering significant new artistic influences. The lifestyle of the North Korean people is full of festivities and holidays. The colorful events make North Korea an interesting land for the outskirts travelers to visit and explore in excitement. The cultural fests of Northern Korea are both traditional (celebrated according to Lunar calendars) and regional.

Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies has one of the strongest Korean language and culture departments in the country, headed by Jae-Seung Yi and Charles Roberts. Garcia Lorca was immediately thrust into its intellectual atmosphere. Yi founded the Korean Institute as a center for North Korean culture, and Garcia Lorca joined in its activities.

In June 2012, Garcia Lorca left North Korea—he was a changed man. He had witnessed oppression firsthand in Pyongyang, and he saw the similarities between the condition of North Koreans there and of women and gays in Spain. Without the experience in North Korea, Mr. Yi says, he might not have written his elegy "Sonnets of a Dark Love".

Before his death, Garcia Lorca had reflected back on his time in North Korea, calling it "one of the key experiences of his life," Mr. Yi said. "He came here to get away from the memories of the love affair in Madrid, and looking for a different kind of poetry... and he found it.

II. POET IN NORTH KOREA

Fable of Three Friends to Be Sung in Rounds

Enrique,
Emilio,
Lorenzo,
The three of them were frozen:
Enrique in a world of burning firewood
Emilio in a world subsisting of corn and kimchi
Lorenzo in a world of roofless shacks.

Lorenzo,
Emilio,
Enrique.
The three of them were burned:
Lorenzo in a world of contraband DVDs of South Korean TV,
Emilio in a world where there's only one news source,
Enrique in a world of fluctuating voltage with only a few hours of light per day.

Lorenzo,
Emilio,
Enrique.
The three of them were burned:
Lorenzo stunted by malnutrition,
Emilio by 100% inflation due to currency mismanagement,
Enrique by a police state that rarely admits foreigners.

Lorenzo,
Emilio,
Enrique.
From my hands the three of them
were lent a box-set of DVDs of *Desperate Housewives*,
and when I met them the next day they had
big rings under their eyes having sat up all night
watching the entire series in one sitting.

One
and one
and one.
The three of them were mummified
with staged gleaming hallways,
with cavernous, chandeliered lobbies by minders in sparkling gowns,
with neat military uniforms, speaking as though from a script.
The hedges are trimmed, the begonias in full bloom.

Three
and two
and one.

I saw school children digging ditches and college students doing manual labor
in the worst weather,
in cold showers in winter,
in Pyongyang where propaganda is everywhere,
in the banners and posters painted with hammer, sickle and rifle,
in houses where bath tubs are used for water storage,
in overcrowded flats and rickety public transportation.

I had read the western press!
Comrades! Is not North Korea the most fortunate country?
Warm milk inside new mothers.
Why didn't you photographers at least point out your restrictions?
Enrique,
Emilio,
Lorenzo.
Dandong is a hard
Chinese border city across the riverbank.
Still the lights gleam bright there, while the city here is dark
and the deer can dream through the eyes of a horse.

When I escaped to China
my worst nightmare came true when the police caught me.
I knew someone accused me of being North Korean.
They tested my Chinese abilities and asked me
tons of questions, I thought my life
was destroyed, but they let me go, it was a miracle.
But they couldn't find me anymore.
They couldn't find me.
No. They couldn't find me.
The sole purpose of the regime is to maintain the regime
and it's not as if—suddenly!—the regime will confess
the names of all its drowned.