



CONCERNS THAT CONCERN US ALL:
QUESTIONS BEYOND THE CULTURAL

Puerta Del Sol. Francisco Aragón, Tempe, Arizona: Bilingual Press, 2005

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Given its daring title in Spanish, *Puerta Del Sol*, this bilingual collection by Francisco Aragón, which includes translations by the author of every poem into Spanish (or “elaborations” as he prefers to call them), and the fact that he is the founding editor of Momotombo Press at Notre Dame’s Institute for Latino Studies, one would expect this collection of poems to focus almost exclusively on Latino themes and cultural issues. But, surprisingly, it does not. Though richly informed by his cultural and linguistic identities, in these poems Aragón focuses on more fundamental, universal matters. This is evident from the very first poem, “Rubén Darío As Prelude,” when Aragón writes: “...Tell me/...of something worse/than knowing that we are, yet/knowning nothing...” The poem continues with this kind of existential reasoning, closing with “We endure this life/...all/the while without/a clue/of where we began,/where we go.” Clearly, something is philosophically at stake in these striking lines, and the epistemological and metaphysical dilemmas that arise serve as a subtle backdrop against which the poems of the collection play themselves out as they explore place, death, and desire.

In the first section, Aragón takes us on an imagistic tour de force of Spain, mostly Madrid. Through these poems we chat at cafés, watch the moon over the urban landscape, sit in Madrid’s plazas, etc. But perhaps because Aragón has traveled and lived in Spain for many years, these are definitely more than mere *tourist* poems; he is an *insider* and his portrayals of Spain’s landscapes are atypical. The poems do not get caught up in grandiose elocutions about Spain’s architecture and history; neither do they judge or pretend to *own* the places they describe. Rather, Aragón draws our attention to the minute and the less expected: a moth in a spider’s web in the subway, the orange uniforms of street sweepers, a bus driver’s pastel sketches, an elderly man on a bench. And almost always, Aragón defers to the image, to the sensory experience rather than poetic reasoning and rhetoric. He lets imagery speak for itself and for truth. Echoing back to the epistemology of the opening poem, through such reliance on the image the poems seem to suggest that even though we may *know nothing* conclusively, we can perhaps experience a place. And indeed, one comes away from this



section not *knowing* Spain, but (perhaps even better) feeling as if one has *experienced* Spain. A favorite poem in this section, “The Hike to Big Fountain: Granada,” describes Aragón’s visit to the province of Granada where Federico García Lorca was murdered and buried in an unmarked grave on a hillside somewhere between Alfacar and Viznar:

And no one really knows exactly
where—his final place. Better to ask
the dirt, this infamous patch of Spain:

a roadside park named after him,
the bend above a spring Moors
according to locals, carved irrigation from

—Fuente Grande, they say, or
explains one: La Fuente de las Lágrimas,
his cane pointing the way.

As the poem closes, Aragón resists delivering discourse on Lorca, the injustice of his murder, and his significance as such; instead he induces an experience through the haunting image of a man pointing the way, inviting us to go find Lorca’s grave for ourselves.

The second section of the book contains a series of elegiac, nostalgic poems about Aragón’s mother. Again in this section Aragón defers a lot to imagery and in doing so handles the subject matter, otherwise prone to melodrama, with grace and exactitude. For example, in “The Last Days of My Visit,” the ill mother is brought home and her bed wheeled into the room; she insists on having her bed propped up so that she can face

the windows facing the street:
the two slim sidewalk
trees—Purple-Leaf Plum—

Friends of the Urban Forest
at her request
had planted in front of our home
on Fair Oaks

The closing moment of the poem also seems to resonate with the philosophical questions evoked in the opening poem (“We endure this life/...all/ the while without/a clue/of where we began,/where we go”). The mother is presumably close to dying; she is not only facing the trees, she is facing death. Here, Aragón again defers to the image. But beyond this, the vacu-



ity and blankness in the mother's simple wish to watch the trees at such a moment reflects the idea that we indeed have no "clue" about "where we go." She seems to have accepted the mystery of death without fear or angst; there are no more questions to ask—only the image of the trees to enjoy. The trees are young and "slim" and presumably just planted; they represent the other great mystery: "where we began"—the mystery of birth. These two images—the mother dying and the new trees flourishing—are remarkable in the way they represent these mysteries and contrast them so subtly.

Although we may know nothing about life and death, we do know "...that we are" and we do "...endure this life," as Aragón writes. But how do we know that *we are* and how do we *endure*? One possible answer is sensual experience, and, more specifically, the sensuality of love and desire, which are the subjects of Aragón's poems in the third section of the collection. Most of these poems focus on the beloved and they provide lyric descriptions that are a feast for the senses. We can feel the narrator come alive in lines filled by the seemingly smallest sensations: the smell of "fragrant laundry air," "the sound of his breathing," "my head nestled in his lap." In the last poem, "What Else Will I Recall," Aragón writes:

For now, that moment I stepped
off the plane: let me remember well
the white-haired man

descending ahead of me, turning
around, wiping the sweat
from his brow, ¡Ay,

qué calor—Madrid en agosto
es algo insoportable! and how
something in me fluttered

hearing those words, as if I started
to understand, as if those rhythms
carried, even then the message

I'd take years to unravel.

Of all the possible things to recall, the poem (and the entire collection) ends with the rhythms of a stranger's voice and the sweat on his brow—suggesting that the smallest of sensations are of great significance and a measure of understanding beyond reason.

Of course, there are other approaches to reading this collection, which





speaks to the dynamic nature of Aragón's poems. However, it is especially refreshing to realize that this work, by a Latino author, can be discussed in a philosophical light, and that the discussion does not have to be limited to cultural context as is typically the case. While Latino writers in general focus (and have every reason to) on issues of cultural negotiation, race, and marginalization, etc., they are naturally also concerned with the "big" universal questions of life and art that Aragón explores in these poems. As such, this collection reflects an evolution in Latino letters and authors who strive for a more cosmopolitan perspective and a broader scope. While still maintaining a solid claim on his ethnicity, Aragón presents a more rounded, three-dimensional picture of Latinos and Latino authors through these poems concerned with what concerns us all—life, death, and everything in between.

