

L O R C A ' S G R A V E



N O Ë L V A L I S

In November 2009, the novelist-essayist Francisco Ayala died at the age of 103, and his ashes are buried in a biodegradable urn beneath a lemon tree at the Alcázar Genil de Granada Palace. The poet Federico García Lorca was thirty-eight when he was assassinated at the start of the Spanish Civil War in August 1936, and we do not know where his bones or his ashes are, although there is talk of an olive tree, a fountain, and a handful of gray earth. Both were from Granada and both supporters of the Second Republic. The ironies of these two deaths abound, with multiple possibilities for symbolic interpretation. But the death of Lorca is not a post-modern phenomenon. It is a fact. A brutal fact, the product of history, of savagery and malevolence all too sadly common. At the same time, any commentary on his assassination has to deal with the double predicament created by his death, with the reality and the fiction of Lorca's wartime fate. His murder, along with his earthly remains, has been turned into something mythic, in which the meaning of history plays a large behind-the-scenes role. The search for Lorca's bones, which is ongoing, represents an effort to take possession of his myth and memory and to mold both to fit the desires of ideology and identity politics. More generally, the

fate of Lorca and his remains compels us to consider what place poets have in the public arena (if indeed they do have one, given the modern view of poetry as a private matter).

It is Lorca's grave, or rather its absence, that interests me here, though we must bear in mind that, to extrapolate from Lorca's "The Rider's Song," no one ever makes it to Córdoba: "for death awaits me before I get to Córdoba." Or as his brother Francisco said, "For Federico dying is not arriving, because death surprises us always in the midst of our journey." We never get to Córdoba because we do not know what or where it is, in contrast to the Iraqi fable that Lorca appears to reinvent in the poem. A servant sees Death in Baghdad, and runs to his master to beg for a horse so he can escape to Samarra. When the master inquires why Death threatened his servant, Death, dressed as a woman, replies, "I was surprised to see your servant there in Baghdad, because I have an appointment with him in Samarra." Samarra is the inevitable end point, the place of death, while Córdoba is an illusion, a not arriving, from which, the poet says, death "keeps a watch" on the rider. Death, then, is already a myth in Lorca's writings, and it is the *myth* we cannot escape. By this I am not referring to the cliché of Lorca's supposed premonition of his own death but to a peculiar truth about the illusory character of death as being impossible to know. In this sense, the grave is always going to be empty.

This view of death, of the poet's death, will never satisfy those for whom the quest for Lorca's missing bones is in psychic terms his desired reincarnation or at least the reanimation of a symbol that is at once uncertain and overdetermined in its meaning. The quixotic search-and-rescue effort has consumed Lorca's biographer Ian Gibson. Lorca's family prefers to leave the poet where he is, somewhere outside the city of Granada, with the other victims of Civil War madness. The desire to dignify death is universal; the manner of implementing that desire is not. Hence the decision to bury the ashes of Francisco Ayala in a biodegradable urn beneath a lemon tree, with the idea that they will leave no trace, will disappear little by little as the ashes are gathered into the breast of the earth.

There is, however, nothing natural in our view of human death. Despite all efforts to accept the inevitability of our biological demise, we resist it by marking our disappearance. We leave signs,

and those signs of death's singular artifice are found in the biodegradable urn, Gibson's obsessive search, and this essay. In "The Search for Lorca's Shadow," Philip Levine writes: "Forgive the ants, they are merely ants, / though they are alive and he is not, / though they would surely eat him if they could, / if in fact anything were left to eat — / the bones are here as clean as porcelain, / for the earth has long ago eaten all / there was to eat." Lorca may seem to have disappeared, but the earth has not yet devoured the bones of this poem.

The poet's real death was not natural, nor was the repeated death inflicted on him symbolically and poetically. Lorca has died countless times in poems, novels, history books, films, and documentaries, even online. On occasion he doesn't die at all, as, for example, in the novel *The Prodigious Light*, in which Fernando Marias imagines a wounded poet who never remembers who he once was. Can there be anything original left to his death, to an understanding of it? It is not simply a historical fact; it has proved to be a myth of great usefulness to those with an ideological agenda or those committed to identity politics. Lorca's multiple exits have made him even more of a public figure than he was in life, albeit a spectral one.

The attempted exhumation of his remains turned into a colossal flop in the fall of 2009. It appeared to be at once an effort at historical recovery and a media circus for the poet's family. The team of forensic archaeologists found nothing. By pure coincidence, the same day Ayala died in Madrid (3 November), Gibson, who had gone to Granada to document the ongoing destruction of the fertile plain called the Vega, found himself with the film crew at Fuente Grande, very near the excavation. He got swept into the spectacle when he was urged to check out the site, even though some clearly did not want him there. Gibson's keen desire to find Lorca's remains struggled with his sense of the unseemly. We know all this because he kept a diary, which he later published (more on the diary shortly). There is a rich irony of contrast between the great republican exile Ayala's definitive death and the provisional status of Lorca's body, the scene of a continually dramatized death. The problem with Lorca is that he never stops dying and is repeatedly resuscitated as a political-cultural artifact in the unceasing struggle to possess his memory and myth.

As an artifact, the poet has ended up symbolizing a variety of causes, ideas, and identities, from the Second Republic to the Spanish transition toward democracy, from republican trauma and victimhood to national reconciliation, from gypsyhood and southern Andalusianism to gay rights. This ability to represent different things to different people appears paradoxical, given Lorca's uniqueness. The latest reinvention of the poet identifies him with democratic Spain and the current-day autonomous Andalusia, although it seems to me that the roots of this symbol go back to the moment of Lorca's death, if not before, with the publication of *Gypsy Ballads* in 1928. The Statute of Andalusian Autonomy, approved in 2007, barely defines Andalusian identity, alluding to its singular character as "an essential part of Spain," one of pluralism and *mestizaje* (racial mixing), with the creation of an "Andalusian personality" fabricated on universal values. In a word, the more Andalusian you are, the more universal, a formula that Lorca himself promoted when he spoke of "the truth, Andalusian and universal."

Maybe it is not so paradoxical that Lorca's unrepeatable individuality should serve a representative purpose. It is worth recalling here what Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson said about representative men and about the uses of great men or heroes. Many of the master narratives of the poet aim to place him within an exceptional or extraordinary frame. For example, despite being a victim like thousands and thousands of other Spaniards during the Civil War, he is *the* victim above all others. Like the great man, he is notable for his singularity, though one rarely hears of his excesses and insufficiencies.

Emerson maintains that we recognize great men at once: "They satisfy expectation, and fall into place." Great men both stimulate and liberate us. At the same time, the essayist describes them as representative, saying that "Men have a pictorial or representative quality. . . . Things were representative. Men are also representative; first, of things, and secondly, of ideas." The fascinating thing about this essay from 1850 is how Emerson, after idealizing the great man, bit by bit begins to whittle away at the image and ends up partly undermining his initial argument. The turning point is the moment when he says, "We are tendencies, or rather, symptoms and none of us complete. . . . We swim, day by day, on a river

of delusions.” These notions, which underline our incomplete, illusory character, thus indirectly suggesting our need for the great man to make us feel complete and to feed our illusions, allow Emerson to introduce the idea of the “excess of influence of the great man”: “His attractions warp us from our place. . . . We cloy of the honey of each peculiar greatness. Every hero becomes a bore at last. . . . There is . . . a speedy limit to the use of heroes. . . . The more we are drawn, the more we are repelled. There is something not solid in the good that is done for us. The best discovery the discoverer makes for himself.” His Socratic conclusion is also classically American, because Emerson uses the great man as a way of defending the individual, stressing “the law of individuality”: “Nothing is more marked than the power by which individuals are guarded from individuals.”

But the essay does not end there. Emerson returns to the great man because something of the figure remains, though diffuse, and that something is his effect. Perhaps for this reason Emerson writes in one of his most suggestive passages: “Once you saw phoenixes: they are gone; the world is not therefore disenchanted. The vessels on which you read sacred emblems turn out to be common pottery; but the sense of the pictures is sacred, and you may still read them transferred to the walls of the world.” Was he remembering what his friend Carlyle had said some ten years earlier about Shakespeare? “For myself, I feel that there is actually a kind of sacredness in the fact of such a man being sent into this Earth.” The great man’s effect that Emerson talks about can be seen as the wake (in both senses) of his death, the death, real or imagined or both things at once, of the great man or hero. Or of Lorca. I think it helps to link Lorca to the idea of the poet’s trace – the empty grave – and the sense of his life’s trajectory as something sacred, even if the person he once was is not, and his actual death a dismal fact. The Lorca effect has always been felt as a kind of death, because everything that the poet is, is posthumous, as Kierkegaard once observed. He himself understood it in these terms and in his poetic capacity mythified the living illusion that death is in “The Rider’s Song” and other works. Death is a future filled with the past.

This effect has nothing to do with his possible usefulness to the reader, critic, or historian. Speaking of Dante and reflecting the

romantic spirit of his age, Carlyle wrote: "The uses of this Dante? We will not say much about his 'uses.' A human soul who has once got into that primal element of *Song* . . . has worked in the *depths* of our existence; feeding through long times the life-roots of all excellent human things whatsoever, – in a way that 'utilities' will not succeed well in calculating!" The limits of the utilitarian, of the uses of the poet or hero, are on display in the current efforts to exploit Lorca symbolically and ideologically, thereby losing what really matters with Lorca: the song, depths, and life-roots of poetic experience as the expression of the human condition.

The obsession with usefully situating Lorca in his proper place ends up burying him once more. You could say that the poet has been a victim, not once but twice: the first time is well known, but the second has occurred through a certain kind of exploitation that makes Lorca a pedagogical poster child, with a multitude of political and ideological meanings and identities. This impoverished view of the poet has also influenced how the circumstances of his death and his place in history have been understood. *The Open Balcony* (dir. Jaime Camino, 1984), one of several documentaries on the writer, begins and ends in a classroom full of adolescents. We first see them selecting photos on the life and death of Lorca for a bulletin board and then, in the closing frames, looking at this same documentary and asking, "Why did they kill him?" Others bury Lorca under a pile of clichés. "Lorca is all the dead, and all the dead are Lorca." "We are all Lorca." Were his remains found, the poet "could become the greatest symbol of the long awaited reconciliation of Spaniards." The writer's death can also serve as part of a "grieving process." A columnist claims, "Opening the grave site is therapeutic."

These examples (and there are many), found in the press and even in scholarly articles, are intrinsically utilitarian. Such sentiments diminish Lorca as a person and a poet, making him the agent of someone else's desires or motives. They tell us much more about the people expressing them than about Lorca himself, who is turned into the vehicle for a political or ideological agenda. No writer can withstand the heavy burden of significance that Lorca has been made to carry. At the very least it seems naive to believe that the bones of the poet can lead to national reconciliation or transcend the trauma of Civil War. If it is true that the dead are a

part of our identity and memory, it is also true that death puts us in our place, the place of oblivion. More to the point, not everyone shares the same identity and memory. In the case of the Spanish Civil War, what hasn't always been sufficiently considered is the existence of different memory communities whose individual and collective values, beliefs, and experiences vary considerably and are often resistant to the smoothing out of ideological differences and the conflicting demands of historical reality. How can Lorca represent all Spaniards? Or all the dead? What does that mean?

From the moment of his death there was a struggle to take possession of his memory. In 1936 the idea of reconciliation or moving beyond trauma would have been inconceivable. To speak of trauma or grief at this point in time, however, is of necessity unconvincing, inauthentic, not because the trauma and pain didn't exist but because we are now reduced to talking about the cultural mediation of mourning and trauma. Cultural critics tend to postmodernize grief and trauma, transforming them into a kind of simulacrum of what they are or once were. So, for example, a scholar speaks of exhuming Lorca as a "technology of memory" to recuperate the past. At heart, it is assumed that cultural studies must necessarily be postmodern. What then is the role of history? Is history postmodern? That seems highly unlikely.

The assassination of Lorca (and so many others) was a vile, horrifying act. His death is trivialized when it is subjected to a preestablished model like trauma theory. These are pseudo-therapies meant to cure us of the damaging effects of history. Equally prefabricated is the vision of a Lorca teleologically marked by death. None of this explains evil and violence, nor does it illuminate Lorca. On the contrary, these kinds of schema create yet another predigestible stereotype of the poet as victim.

Such uses of Lorca and his death serve rather to reaffirm the ideological posture or identity politics of the critic, a posture that is at heart moral, if not moralizing, in line with the current historical revisionism of the Spanish Civil War – of history as grievance, as Ángel Loureiro has observed. Partisan politics has had a corrosive effect on the historical understanding of the Civil War, not to mention the social fabric and civic community. In the case of Lorca, our age does not seem to know what to do with the poet,

bowing to the default mode, which is to make him somehow accessible, domesticated symbolically and politically.

But neither did his own time. There is a tendency to idealize the period, emphasizing the aesthetic promise of the 1920s (Dalí, Picasso, Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Luis Cernuda, etc.) and the political promise of the Second Republic. The partiality with which this time frame is often viewed occludes its contradictions, conflicts, insufficiencies, and insoluble problems. More fundamentally, it blinds us to the limitations and consequences of the idea of human perfectibility that was the basis for some of the more radical political thinking of the 1930s, thinking that tended to lead to a dystopian absolutism seen on both sides of the Spanish conflict. Few succeeded in escaping the straitjacket of ideology. The chaotic polarization and exclusionary politics of his time trapped Lorca's image in a kind of stagnant catchment, where he is always the dying victim.

It is helpful to recall here what Carlyle says about three literary figures, Samuel Johnson, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Robert Burns, and their relation to the eighteenth century. For the essayist, these three represent the hero as the Man of Letters. Unlike Dante and Shakespeare, who illustrate the Poet as hero, they do not bring but seek the light, largely because the age in which they lived was one of skepticism, which for Carlyle signified "a chronic atrophy and disease of the whole soul": "They lived under galling conditions; struggling as under mountains of impediment, and could not unfold themselves into clearness, or victorious interpretation of that 'Divine Idea.' It is rather the *Tombs* of three Literary Heroes that I have to show you. There are the monumental heaps, under which three spiritual giants lie buried. Very mournful, but also great and full of interest for us." From those mountains of impediment he singles out "that waste chaos of Scepticism in religion and politics, in life-theory and life-practice." Metaphorically, his own era heaped earth, the detritus of the age, on all three. By contrast, Carlyle never speaks of the tombs of Dante and Shakespeare.

The deterioration, or disease of the soul, that Carlyle already saw in the eighteenth century reached its nadir in the twentieth, something that Lorca imagined poetically as "water that does not flow" and "the eyes of statues [that] suffer from the darkness of

coffins.” The poem from which these lines are taken is ostensibly about a girl drowned in a well, but it is set within the larger context of his volume *A Poet in New York*, which, like the essayist’s funereal image, is produced in a moment of waste chaos, of detritus and disarray. Speaking of Samuel Johnson, Carlyle says that “his time is bad,” hence his desperate efforts to be genuine. He suggests that none of these Men of Letters achieved authenticity because they were in some sense beaten by their own time. So we study their tombs, their valiant defeat, that which remains of them after the mortal fray.

Something of this tremendous struggle against mountains of impediment can be glimpsed in the personal and historical circumstances of Lorca and his death. It may be less the skepticism that Carlyle perceived in the Age of Enlightenment than the waste, the remains of the eighteenth century that have rivered their way into the futile confusion and extremism of our time. The mythification of Lorca after his death is not surprising, for it is the result of the poet being transformed into his own grave; metaphorically, he has become his own tomb. The insufficiencies and exhaustion of the present era have created a hunger for empty graves to be filled with some sort of transcendent meaning. Marx (Groucho, not Karl) was said to have remarked, “What should I care about posterity? What’s posterity ever done for me?,” thus comically emphasizing the fundamental irony of a posterity that only other people can enjoy. Lorca’s transformation into the child of posterity began shortly after his assassination, a posthumous image that served an array of political and ideological purposes in the struggle to take possession of his myth.

The poet Antonio Machado already hints at seeing Lorca in an allegorizing mode, not only in his celebrated poem “The Crime Was in Granada” but in these words from a wartime republican propaganda pamphlet: “With the murder of Lorca Fascism has committed its most stupid, most abominable crime. García Lorca lived on the fringe of politics, but inside the real soul of the people.” Lorca as the voice, or soul, of the people almost immediately became a cliché. The identity of the people is never defined here (as it is not in the Statute of Andalusian Autonomy), in large part because the specific audience that the text addresses has already claimed it as theirs, ignoring the reality that not everyone

viewed the concept of the people in the same way. Or that the mythification of the people, which became part of the Lorca myth, might engender not a consensus but a conceivably insoluble problem in not paying sufficient attention to the complex and multiple constituencies that make up the people.

Similarly, from Latin America, José González Carbalho, the son of Spanish emigrants and a friend of the poet, wrote in 1938, in *Vida, obra y muerte de Federico García Lorca* (The Life, Work, and Death of Federico García Lorca), that Lorca represented “the finest of the soul and intelligence of the people,” without explaining exactly what that meant. This worn-out image remains in force today (“we are all Lorca”), in part because it is attached to another deep-rooted cliché: Lorca as a republican martyr. Curiously, González Carbalho says that the poet’s death, “unhappily certain, has something of the phantom about it.” This ghost is not the return of the repressed but the historical awareness of his missing body and of the Lorca effect, that wake of reverberation which has been observed so many times but especially in the immediate aftermath of that death. Then, as if it were of importance to counteract the ghostly with something more solid, he writes that “above all, there is his death, which should be remembered more than his own work, because his death is the terrible document of a historic moment.” Lorca, he continues, is a martyr of the Civil War. Like the traditional martyr, he leaves life-giving traces of himself with his blood: “Even his death is fertile. Now dead and buried in the earth where his bones are become ash, his blood has begun to run like an underground river, opening canals through which the generous passion of this new man whom they tried to annihilate will circulate. And the fields of Spain will flourish with wheat.”

Here the representative man of his time is also archetypal, the earth itself; he is, moreover, tangible as a document and ghostly as ash. In associating the image of the martyr with that of the earth, González Carbalho echoes republican rhetoric, in which the profoundly felt, intimate connection between people and land was exploited in posters, song, documentaries, and other forms of propaganda. That which is martyred is the popular as embodied in Lorca. The double process of mythifying poet and people is also a way of laying claim to both, as political signs of identity through a

dual, mutually reinforcing unfolding of solidity and phantasmagoria. The myth made fruitful, giving life to another myth.

This topos reached a poetic and ideological paroxysm in the work of the exiled republican and Communist militant Juan Rejano. In *El poeta y su pueblo. Un símbolo andaluz. Federico García Lorca* (The Poet and His People: An Andalusian Symbol; Federico García Lorca, 1944), Rejano writes that “those who summoned death, dark and sordid, lived detesting what Federico loved so dearly: the popular.” Because in effect “people and poet were the same voice.” Moreover, Lorca is the “intertwined bloody and spiritual symbol of salvation, the salvation of the true destiny of man.” And then this: “García Lorca died at the hands of the enemies of the people, in order to be resurrected with his people in history and immortality.” In the end, Rejano’s rhetorical excess nearly loses sight of the poet, as an apocalyptic landscape of a ruined Spain looms over everything in “an abyss of abjection.” His last words are these, reminding us that his text was first read on the occasion of the eighth anniversary of the poet’s death: “Commemorate? No. It is not enough to remember. It is not enough to reanimate for a moment the shadow of García Lorca – the shadow of so many who died – and then relapse into forgetfulness. The shadow we invoke now must be a living body, a real image, the image of the body of Spain . . . that seeks to join us together in one protest, in one struggle, to save each and every one of us.”

A transcendent metanarrative of martyrdom and salvation arose, fusing poet and people into one, in stark contrast to the brutal facts of his assassination. Lorca’s death was not heroic but sadly anonymous. The facts, however, seem to have little influence on the need for myth. On the other hand, the desire to know absolutely everything about the last moments of the poet’s life and to find his remains have produced a countermovement to mythification, relying on the power of documentation to dispel the mysteries of Lorca’s fate. The two impulses – the mythifying and the documentary – have something in common: an extraordinary obsession with Lorca.

Ian Gibson, who has written extensively on the poet, is a case in point. In 2010 he published a diary, *La fosa de Lorca: Crónica de un despropósito* (Lorca’s Grave: Chronicle of a Travesty), that recorded what happened and what was written in the press during

the failed excavation for Lorca's remains in 2009. As he himself confesses, "It is an obsessive document." He thought he had nothing more to say about the writer, observing: "It was not my intention to publish this chronicle, but I have come to believe that it is my obligation to do so." From the beginning, the tone and direction of the book waver between chronicle and diary. The moral posture of the writing is visibly shaped by the solemnity of the situation and by the defense that Gibson feels obliged to make, faced as he is with the controversy swirling around the exhumation and the number of disproportionate, personal attacks against him.

Although I disagree with some of his views and do not share his desire to continue seeking Lorca's bones, there is no doubt in my mind of the invaluable contribution he has made to biographical studies of the poet, especially with his first book, *The Assassination of Federico García Lorca*. The harsh criticism meted out against the Irish investigator (a Spanish citizen since 1984) during and after the excavation also strikes me as uncalled for. He has been blamed for having mistaken the location of Lorca's grave, placing it at the site of the monument in Alfacar Park built to honor the poet. But Gibson never limited the possible location to the reduced area where the excavation took place, and he was never consulted by the forensic archaeologists during their preparations. More unfortunate are the personal denunciations of Gibson, especially from bloggers. One says, "Gibson is not an historian. Gibson is an opportunist who has discovered in the murdered Lorca a motherlode for his wallet and ego." After the team found nothing but rock, two cans of tuna fish, and a bottle of soda pop in the excavated zone, another blogger wrote in response: "The search is ended, and unless Lorca has the power to change into a can of tuna fish, the 60,000 euros budgeted by busybodies have served to bring to light the remains of Mr. Gibson's next-to-last bender in the environs of Alfacar Park." This comment offers a unique twist on the remains of the poet being shoveled onto the compost heap of time.

Even worse treatment came from Francisco Bejarano in an article from *Diario de Sevilla*, in which he alluded to "Gibson's ravings" and "the Lorquian fanaticism of a convert [*converso*], whom an ill wind from Ireland brought to Spain to join with

leftists *du jour* and usurp the historian's place. Spare us the fate of conversos, spare us from those who make political hay even of the Holy Sacrament." Poor Gibson. These attacks, all discussed in his book, come wrapped in a particular view of Lorca and the Civil War that claims to depoliticize them. The result is the opposite. A language supercharged with historical and cultural associations like *converso* (referring to Jews compelled to convert under pain of expulsion) and *fanatismo* (referring to excesses like the Inquisition) politicizes things as much as commentary such as this, with which Bejarano opens his piece:

The fear that García Lorca's remains would be found, transformed into secular relics and passed off as a symbol of resurrected and antiquated political ideas, made us reject a poet who represents nothing more than good poetry. . . . We have no interest in a partisan, shrunken Lorca in the hands of functional illiterates in public office. "Lorca is one of us!" a bold-faced woman councillor of the Junta shrieked in the Andalusian Parliament, when the poet was quoted by the opposition.

He concludes by referring to the "dogs of politics scratching the earth to devour [Lorca's] bones."

Likewise, declaiming vehemently "Lorca is one of us!" hardly exudes the voice of reason. More to the point, these commentaries demonstrate once again the degree to which Lorca's myth continues to be the object of an ideological and identity-laden struggle to possess his political and cultural capital. Even a book like Gibson's, which aims specifically to document the vicissitudes of the search for the poet's bones by chronicling the press, ends up documenting the controversy and politicization of the excavation, thus losing sight of what is most important: Lorca himself. Paradoxically, the more documented Lorca is, the more ghostly and less knowable he appears, serving the pseudo-myths of political interests that have also influenced the way he is seen historically.

The argument in favor of his exhumation maintains that Lorca belongs to everyone, that he is a public figure. Holders of this position tend to vilify the poet's family, who until recently were strongly opposed to the project of digging up his remains. By contrast, the idea of leaving the poet in the company of the hun-

dreds of other victims of Vázquez, most of them anonymous, is especially appealing to writers. Francisco Ayala declared he was in favor of “leaving him alone”: “We shouldn’t mess with corpses. . . . There is no need to do anything.”

The novelist Javier Marías also opposed the exhumation: “Lorca’s ‘undeserving’ burial is a necessary reminder of the undeserving death he suffered, and not to respect it would, in the long run, practically ‘whitewash’ his executioners.” Defending the poet’s family, he asked ironically: “Are [the family] then against ‘historical memory,’ against the poet ‘who belongs to everyone’ being buried with honors?” Marías brings out the stereotyping and disingenuousness of the myth that the poet is a cultural possession belonging to everyone. If Lorca truly belonged to everyone, his exhumation would not be so hotly debated. The novelist also undermines a strawman argument of the controversy: the claim that the family’s opposition and a politically incorrect position against historical memory and against the dignity of the dead are one and the same. To this end, John Lee Anderson in *The New Yorker* (11 June 2009) cites another commentator complaining that “any normal person, with a close relative . . . who has been mysteriously disappeared, and is known to have been murdered, has to feel the minimal interest in where he might be. . . . Lorca isn’t only the patrimony of one family but of all decent people of this world. Normal people want to know what happened. . . . But it seems there are people who are not normal, and are incapable of resolving their personal and family traumas.” Here moral posturing barely hides the heavy-handed pressure laid upon the Lorca family to conform to public opinion, an arena in which historical memory, whatever that might be, has become politicized, in a country that once chafed under stifling conformism of another ideological stripe.

But history and memory are not monolithic, nor is the manner of dignifying the dead. It is the place of all the bodies, real and symbolic, from the Civil War that vexes Spaniards today: what place should these dead occupy in history? While individual families seek answers to particular questions, nations and societies are obliged to find a larger purpose in the largeness of many deaths. The tug of the particular and the general is taut with unresolved tension, especially when we speak of civil wars. Those with com-

peting loyalties and creeds interpret the historic events of such conflicts in radically different ways. The meaning of the dead depends on whose dead we are talking about.

This tension between the particular and the general is evident in the debate surrounding the poet's body. I am struck by how the identity of this specific body is meant to define, however tentatively, not only the meaning of his death but the more general meaning of the history that produced it, situating it as a political and cultural possession. And yet to claim Lorca as belonging to all presupposes an underlying consensus concerning the war itself that simply does not exist. History stops us short.

Gibson argues that the poet himself would "have wanted us to look for him," that he would not have wanted to be "an eternally disappeared person." I confess that these speculations leave me somewhat perplexed. How can he know what Lorca would have felt or thought? Not even his own family knows. In his last interview, Lorca said, "It is so tragically painful to disappear forever. . . . In that tragic ending, I would only ask for one lasting thing: that my body be buried in a garden; that my afterlife, at least, be a fertile one." That was not his end (though, curiously, it was Francisco Ayala's), and the disappearance to which he ironically alludes has nothing to do with the political status of a disappeared person. Clearly, Gibson seeks a larger perspective than that of the poet's family, whose views he considers shortsighted.

Lorca's place in the scheme of things, then, appears to be that of history itself, or at least of a particular history. The larger question remains unanswered: To whom does this history belong? And which history is this? The Lorca case obviously offers the opportunity to relive and rethink the Civil War and to consider its place in the democratic Spain of today. It also exemplifies the extremes to which the clumsy uses of great poets can be applied: to fetishize his aura, his effect, to the point of converting Lorca into a usable lay relic, a public icon, at the same time tends to favor a simplistic and unilluminating historical vision of the war that continues to sidestep its own partisanship. Lorca's aura is in the end non-transferable, as Emerson suggests when he speaks of the "virtues and powers not communicable to other men." The individual gift of personhood cannot be transferred to the wretchedness of an

execution. A sacralized Lorca is simply not compatible with the facts of his death.

A recent book by Miguel Caballero Pérez, *Las trece últimas horas en la vida de García Lorca* (The Final Thirteen Hours in the Life of García Lorca, 2011), demonstrates that unpleasant reality, as the earlier investigations of Gibson, Eduardo Molina Fajardo, and others had also done. Lorca was killed in all likelihood because he supported the Second Republic, because he was homosexual, because he alienated the well-connected bourgeoisie of Granada, because his brother-in-law, also murdered, was the socialist mayor of Granada, and possibly because his father, a wealthy liberal landowner, was involved in economic and political disputes with other members of his extended family. The book brings home how difficult it is to separate the personal from the political in the circumstances that led to a violent death in a countryside already sown with many violent deaths. Caballero Pérez illustrates the thick web of relations connecting family members to executioners and others involved in the murder.

Perhaps even more disheartening is the caliber of Lorca's executioners. It was said of the squad's leader, whose father was an agricultural laborer, that "the promise of promotion up the ladder and a material reward of 500 pesetas encouraged Mariano to join the squad." The Assault Guard that carried out the shooting was not for the faint-hearted, as its general function was to impose a reign of terror on the population of Granada. On the personal level, as Caballero Pérez observes, the executioners "were not refined or cultivated individuals, nor were they given to soul-searching or moral doubts." Neither before nor after the war had they been assassins, but rather had led respectable, ordinary lives. It is not at all surprising that, with an exception or two, the squad unit members came from humble backgrounds, given the kind of work they had been assigned.

The historical wretchedness of these circumstances is the opposite of the mythifying, exalted image of Lorca's death. Faced with such dismal truth, the imagination feels apparently compelled to fill the poet's grave with alien things, while the detritus of history continues to pile up in slag heaps on his repeated burials. *There* is the monumental heap, as Carlyle said. The valiant defeat

of the poet not in the moment of his death but in time. The dispute over his empty grave is nothing less than the struggle over the remains of history itself. If Lorca has become a myth of cultural possession, it is because history has turned into another, passionately reclaimed possession.

Lorca, I imagine, was probably not thinking about history in those last, unbearable moments of his time on earth. His line of vision would have been very reduced, very small, because the world that had brought him to this place had turned terribly small. Physically, the likely place of his death appears in a registry from 1906 as “a patch of land, unirrigated and uncultivated, useful only for the poorest-quality grazing.” There is no mention in the registry of an olive grove. “At some point between 1906 and 1937,” writes Caballero Pérez, “this nearly worthless land was planted with olive trees.” In such strange and humble poetry of scarcity lies Federico García Lorca, possessed only by the earth, his last possession.