

# ***Lorca After Life***

**Noël Valis**

reseñado por

*Elizabeth Scarlett*

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

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Upon hearing that his friend Federico had been assassinated by Nationalists in Granada, Salvador Dalí stated that he exclaimed, “Olé!” A reaction that at first appears incongruous in the Surrealist manner encloses a truth—that the poet had capped his literary career with the perfect conclusion. Valis shows in this book that this conclusion essentially was not one. The relevance of his tragic death to the interpretation of his work and to his popularity is one of multiple themes in Valis’s book on Federico García Lorca’s afterlife in poetry and culture, centering on his figure as a victim of political and homophobic violence, as the subject of an enduring mystery concerning the fate of his remains, as a poet of the people, a celebrity, and a gay poet/icon. Part of the premise is that the mark of Lorca on successive poets is more subtle and complex than a standard concept of influence can explain. It also brilliantly explores how his poetry emerged from a fertile context concerning gender and sexuality differences from less canonical sources. Along the way, the book delivers dramatic insights into adjacent or related writers from José Zorrilla and Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer to Walt Whitman to Antonio Machado to Rafael Alberti to Francisco Ayala and on to living poets like Jaime Manrique. The line of inquiry is enhanced throughout by grace, eloquence, and ironic reflection as well as a judicious selection of images.

“Why Dead Poets Matter,” deals with Lorca’s status as one of a small group of poets often considered to be “national poets” or proclaimed as “el Poeta” at some point in history. It analyzes how Zorrilla and Bécquer have been memorialized, as authors who vied for this status in the previous century. In tandem, it relates the attempts at constructing a tangible pantheon in Madrid to gather the tombs of representative authors and other figures. Valis asserts that because of his “symbolic importance as the voice of the marginalized and oppressed” and other cultural roles, “Lorca can be considered as probably the last national poet of Spain, a civic presence echoing a much longer, contentious history of national issues of identity and consensus that continue to be worked out on the public stage” (68).

“Lorca’s Grave” contemplates the legendary controversy over the author’s murder and the location of his earthly remains. The points where his poetry becomes oracular in retrospect over his premature and violent death and disappearance are provocatively collated with his mythification and the ongoing unresolved theories of the exact circumstances of his execution and whereabouts of his resting place. The third chapter continues in this vein, examining claims on his martyr status from the Left (starting with Antonio Machado’s elegy “El crimen fue en Granada”) and—with far less basis—from the Right (Luis Hurtado). Light is cast on the apparent contradiction of a person whose background matched the stereotype of the *señorito* (spoiled, idle rich young man) coming to represent the (common) people, with comparison and contrast to José Antonio Primo de Rivera, another figure perceived to embody tensions of social class and popularity. Roy Campbell’s conflictive manipulations of Lorca are brought to bear, as well as the Falangist painter Alfonso Ponce de León’s haunting self-portrait as an accident victim. All of this leads Valis to conclude that “There was never a clear understanding of what pueblo meant and attempts to limit it to specific social categories run up against an idealizing counter tendency to romanticize the pueblo because pueblo is not a neutral term, so closely associated is it to the idea of nation.” (152)

The three chapters constituting Part Two of *Lorca After Life* are united by highlighting the role of sexuality in the poet’s afterlife. That a man who was not completely open in living his orientation should wind up representing gayness is repeatedly alluded to, as Lorca’s life, work, and projection into global culture are analyzed. First, the consequences of being gay, murdered, and famous are examined alongside figures who share at least some of these characteristics (Pasolini, Hinojosa, Marlowe, and Conde de Villamediana). The second of these chapters enters by way of Oscar Wilde into queer subcultures of Madrid in the early decades of the twentieth century. Given his highbrow aspirations, Lorca necessarily kept his distance, but Valis demonstrates the relevance of the emergence into celebrity of the sexually eccentric, marvelous, or ambiguous. This chapter charts transgressiveness in Lorca’s circle, the wilder fringe (Álvaro Retana, Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent), and certain hinge figures who interacted with both the avant garde and the urban underbelly (Ramón Gómez de la Serna, Edgar Neville). The third chapter of Part Two completes the view of an incomplete literary figure (paradoxically) as Valis proves that precisely because of the many indeterminants studied throughout the volume, Lorca’s celebrity continues to evolve and encompass new features and issues. His “iconic exceptionalism,” partly intentional and partly not, enriches his life and work, making him second only to Dalí in visibility among writers and artists of his generation. Mass mobilizations of fascism and communism shaped this era, and Lorca found value in indulging the crowd in his Barcelona address (when he was proclaimed “poeta del pueblo”) and the throngs of fans who received him in Argentina and Uruguay. Valis endearingly shows him purposefully candid and approachable towards his interviewers, and by extension, his readership. With grounding in Richard Schickel’s theory of celebrity, Valis illustrates Lorca’s intuitive grasp of the approachability and aura that make an irresistible combination. Yet she also shows his dread of the multitude and mass culture that thoroughly pervades *Poeta en Nueva York*.

One of the formidable strengths of *Lorca After Life* is the network of connections it builds among the author, his poetry, and prior, contemporary and subsequent writers

and other kinds of cultural production. Particularly valuable are the projections of Lorca as gay icon into the poetry and prose of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Spicer, and Jaime Manrique. In addition, based on both archival research and pioneering studies by Luis Antonio de Villena, Alberto Mira, Jeffrey Zamostny, and others, Valis draws surprising parallels between the pulp erotic fiction and performance art of Lorca's time and his own manner of dealing with his sexual orientation, including his attack on the more flamboyantly gay in the "Oda a Walt Whitman." Valis's close reading of this poem, after the meticulous exploration of gay subcultures as well as of Whitman himself, is one of the immense rewards afforded by this study.

The aim of the book is not to answer all questions about the author's legacy or the politics of his memorialization. It thoroughly plumbs the depths of the issues selected, detailed above. This suffices to make it an original, indispensable, and seminal contribution to twentieth-century Spanish poetics, taking its place among latter-day classics of Lorquian studies (Gibson, Anderson, Maurer, Mayhew, etc.) as well as other classics of cultural studies penned by Valis (*The Culture of Cursilería*, *Sacred Realism*). What it does not resolve it suggests and leaves to future scholars and students, opening new avenues into the future as Lorquian studies progress into the twenty-first century and towards the centennial of the crime that happened in Granada, his Granada.

