

Domingo López Torres, a Surrealist in Tenerife

In connecting surrealism and Domingo López Torres, I associate with one of the most thoroughly documented literary movements of the twentieth century a name that is almost completely unknown beyond the shores of Tenerife, one of the Canary Isles. López Torres was better known in France during the 1930s than in mainland Spain; he helped to organize the Surrealist Exhibition held in Tenerife in May 1935, when he conducted with André Breton an interview that became the nucleus of the surrealist manifesto published in that island in French and Spanish in October 1935.¹ While the assassination of Federico García Lorca in 1936 has generated controversy, books, and a play, the murder of López Torres in 1937 has gone unnoticed outside Tenerife. The author of the play about Lorca's death, José Antonio Rial, has written a brief account of it in his novel *La prisión de Fyffes*:

El abogado Castillo era pariente de Domingo López Torres, un joven socialista asesinado en 1937, a quien Ortega conocía, y al cual ciertos burgueses, y algunos escritores cursis, odiaban porque había hecho campañas en la prensa para que en el Ateneo de la ciudad se abriera una exposición surrealista.

El y sus amigos invitaron a André Breton, que viajó desde París a dar unas conferencias, para presentar la muestra de arte, en el gran salón del Ateneo.

Había allí un dibujo de Dalí que se llamaba "El Gran Masturbado" y algunas pinturas que ofendieron a la burguesía. Y ello debió ser la causa de que dos años más tarde a Domingo López se lo llevara la ronda.²

As a fellow prisoner of Fyffes, Rial provides an inevitably partisan explanation of López Torres's death; although his emphasis may be wrong, his insistence on López Torres's connexion with surrealism as the major motive for his murder does show to what extent he was associated in the minds of the middle class, the military, and the church with a movement that aroused in Tenerife in 1935 much antagonism and vitriolic criticism. The French surrealists recognized López Torres's fervent espousal of their doctrines, which he interpreted and relayed with more constancy and commitment than any other member of the group of writers who edited *Gaceta de Arte*, probably the most cultured magazine published in Spain during the 1930s. He was one of the two Spanish writers invited to contribute to the *enquete* conducted in *Minotaure* in 1933 by Breton and Eluard.³ A photograph of him which appeared recently in a Tenerife magazine shows him carrying under his right arm one of the large volumes of *Cahiers d'Art*.⁴ The simple act of carrying through the streets a volume of the journal in which his group published in 1935 a declaration of views jointly with Breton and Péret is a display of the internationalist aspirations that led

Gaceta de Arte to announce in 1933: "*Gaceta de Arte* sostiene la internacionalidad del espíritu contemporáneo."⁵ One member of the group—Eduardo Westerdahl—travelled to Europe; others nurtured their minds with European art and literature.

The essays and poems of López Torres reveal a range of readings that, on a literary level, reflected and endorsed his dream of what he called in 1933 "un abrazo internacional por encima de las estúpidas fronteras".⁶ His diction as well as his dreams mark him as a man of the intellectual left in the 1930s; when he talked of the class struggle, a tired system, a new order, a crisis of values, and reform, he claimed kinship with Auden, Day Lewis, MacNeice, and Spender in England, and with Aragon, Breton, and Eluard in France. With them he shared an evangelical ambition and a sometimes pontifical way of expressing it; the prediction Roger Roughton made in 1936—"Tomorrow REVOLT will be written in human hair"—is the premise on which López Torres based the essays on agrarian reform he published in the Tenerife newspaper *El Socialista* in 1931 and 1932.⁷ His indignation was aroused particularly by the number of unemployed farmworkers in Andalusia; in January 1932 the thought of "los miles de obreros parados en Andalucía" inspired a vision of protest, of heroic deaths in street fighting where the hungry worker comes face to face with the Civil Guard. "Morir de hambre es una muerte cobarde y desesperada," he stated. "El pueblo prefiere morir ametrallado en las calles reclamando su derecho a vivir."⁸

Nine months later, in October 1932, López Torres moved from the veiled threat of 'agrarian reform or revolution' to the bold heralding of 'Surrealismo y revolución'. The ideal of "una humanidad mejor" he found in the surrealists fortified his own dream of "una cultura de nuestros campesinos" he had expressed in 1931.⁹ His stance is now openly aggressive; his loyalties are unequivocally with the proletariat, with whom he aligns himself in the combative final paragraph, which begins: "Los proletarios del mundo estamos en constante lucha por la implantación de nuestros principios, para la destrucción de un sistema cansado."¹⁰ The exhibition of Oscar Domínguez's paintings held in Santa Cruz de Tenerife from May 5 to May 15, 1933 catalysed López Torres's enthusiasm for surrealism, which he analysed in no less than three perceptive essays published during the same month. In one of them he posed the question few Spanish critics had asked: '¿Qué es el surrealismo?' His replies reveal a careful reading and an acute understanding of the movement. The truculent declaration signed by many surrealists in 1925 under the title 'La Révolution d'abord et toujours' fuelled the discontent of López Torres, who put his own gloss on their claim: "Nous sommes la révolte de l'esprit."¹¹ His gloss, stiffened by a list of verbs, promises violent action: "Romper con todos los prejuicios de una civilización caduca; desescombrar a la humanidad de una cultura gastada; desacreditarla, arrastrar por las calles las galas

de la burguesía. Porque para el surrealismo no hay más realidad que la realidad interior, la verdadera expresión personal libre de toda conveniencia social, de todo control razonado, de toda dictadura moral."¹²

While surrealism exacerbated and reinforced his own instinctive revolutionary feelings, it also opened his eyes to what he called in the same essay "terrenos subconscientes", particularly in the paintings of Dalí, Ernst, Miró, and Domínguez. He had already expressed and was to maintain firm ideas about the role of the artist in an unsettled age, and singled out for special praise Georges Grosz and Hans Tombrock, who exhibited his drawings in Tenerife in January and November 1934. Inspired by Tombrock's drawings of "vagabundos, prostitutas y bebedores", López Torres was moved to indict this "civilización capitalista".¹³ 'Arte al servicio del proletariado' was the title he gave to the essay he published in the first and only number of the magazine he founded in 1935, *Indice, Revista de cultura*, where he asked rhetorically questions about the social mission of the artist that several months later he put directly to André Breton in the name of *Indice*. Although different from the drawings of Grosz and Tombrock, the paintings of Domínguez represented for López Torres another kind of protest: against order, reason, and taboos. In paintings such as *Sueño* (1929), *Piano* (1933), and *Los niveles del deseo* (1933), he saw "las formas más audaces ensamblándose prodigiosamente. Formas sexuales deformadas por una fantasía exuberante. Figuras alargadas; fondos tenebrosos."¹⁴ Two years later, the exhibition of surrealist art in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, which he helped to organize, prompted him to reconcile both types of protest in a perceptive summary of surrealist canons:

Lucha contra las barreras de la civilización gastada, contra todas las censuras de un orden moral establecido, agrupando y seleccionando de manera voluntaria las aportaciones subconscientes con auxilio de "estímulos" reales para, en el libre juego de las percepciones externas e internas, anular la misión fiscalizadora del "yo".¹⁵

The harmonization of subconscious elements was a technique López Torres found particularly striking in Eluard, who, he stated in December 1934, "se sitúa en el centro del ir y venir de las corrientes subconscientes."¹⁶ His reading of Eluard and of other surrealist writers broadened his view of poetry and refined his practice of it. Without the stimulus of surrealist literature, he would have remained a totally unremarkable poet, drifting through techniques and themes, disguising rather than revealing himself in sentimental ballads or in image-studded evocations of, for example, the landscape of Lanzarote. Surrealism gave him thrust and a distinctive voice. In 1932 his anger at the tardiness of agrarian reform vented itself in a poem that displays a trenchant quality as he imagined the countryside invaded by locusts and the absurd measures employed by the authorities to combat them. The epigraph to his poem 'Poema de la langosta' advertizes a critical intention; addressed to the locusts, it narrates an allegory of

vengeance: "(Caísteis sobre el lecho de los agricultores asesinando un sueño de libras esterlinas)". The dream of pounds sterling clearly alludes to foreign investors such as Fyffes, which later ceded to the Franco authorities the warehouses where López Torres was imprisoned. The poem is one of surprises, largely due to the poet's daring tactic in letting the locust speak for itself; it thus becomes an actor within the poem explaining that it is a victim of forces more powerful than itself. The locust, López Torres hints, was born to suffer, and its fate—to be perforated "con alfileres de acero"—was one endured by many victims of surrealist fantasies. In the third and final section, López Torres is both a spectator of bourgeois folly and a commentator on it; his judgement takes the form of a sardonic fantasy in which he stage-manages a group composed of priests, bishops, officers, councilors, and agricultural engineers, who use methods as ineffective and divergent as machine-guns and bureaucratic documents:

Obispo, concejales, militares y curas,—de gala—, marchan al campo a exterminar la plaga de langostas. Ingenieros agrónomos, con ametralladoras, en los picos más altos de las islas, —lejos de la indiscreta mirada de los tontos—, (los nativos tienen los ojos secos de mirar siempre al cielo), archivan comprobantes para confeccionar nóminas especiales.¹⁷

The sarcasm and the choice of such details as dinner-jackets and machine-guns reveal a new register in tune with the mordant poems of Aragon and Péret. Although surrealist literature excited and stimulated him, López Torres never allowed himself to become a slavish imitator. He took from surrealist literature what he found most suited to his temperament and to his purpose; he eschewed vulgarity and word-play; he absorbed the powerfully visionary quality of much surrealist writing, especially when the visions dwelt on sex and violence. And the technique of surprise, of chance groupings, so fervently cultivated by the surrealists, became a key factor in his art. When he chose as the title of his only, very slender, book of poems *Lo imprevisto*, he enshrined not only a manner, but the consequence of writing on certain themes and of holding certain views. *Lo imprevisto* is a title rich in ambiguities and ramifications. It portends the surprise of manipulating a text that, intended to be a *libro-objeto*, unfolds to reveal five disturbingly surreal drawings by his friend and fellow prisoner Luis Ortiz Rosales. It also records his surprise at the suddenness with which his epigraph to 'Poema de la langosta' boomeranged on him: those landowners with their capitalist dreams now fell on him. López Torres little guessed when he wrote that prison for Mayakovsky "fue su primera y única escuela" that he would find—with tragic tardiness—his identity and his integrity as a poet in a banana warehouse.¹⁸

The seven poems of *Lo imprevisto* are in stark and dignified contrast to the hideous conditions under which he wrote them. They have an intensity out of all proportion to their number. The book is remarkable for what it is not: it refuses to be a piece of partisan rhetoric. It would have

been easy for López Torres to have fallen into the political posturing of, say, Aragon in 'Front rouge' or Alberti in *El poeta en la calle*. Yet it contains no threats, no insults, no recriminations, no regrets; he cites no names, no dates, no events. There are no villains other than hostile feelings categorized as "una cloaca de desdenes"; and there are no victims other than physical liberty. The poet's mind remained free to dream in spite of the gross realities of a fetid, overcrowded, makeshift prison evoked in the poems 'Las moscas' and 'Los retretes (3 de la mañana)'. In *La prisión de Fyffes* Rial wrote graphically of the "moscas torpes y pegajosas" and of the diarrhea that attacked the whole prison one night, causing "un mar de excrementos" and dooming men to "aquel vivir en cloacas".¹⁹ Rial mused that "Resultaba difícil superar la prueba física de lo escatológico humano"; López Torres succeeded in doing so in his poem, which is an excellent example of a poet's capacity for transforming a foul circumstance into a statement about cruelty, discipline, and degradation. The crude reality of diarrhea and overflowing sewers is changed into a "cloaca de desdenes"; the corridors connecting the three halls of the Fyffes warehouse become "empinadas trincheras de prejuicios"; and the pathetic conflict between those who suffer and those who torment them is summarized in the last two lines in the stark confrontation of "altas severas órdenes cuadradas / y suplicantes, encendidos ruegos".

In such circumstances López Torres retreated into himself, venting his sexual frustrations in images of blood and violence modelled on many surrealist fantasies. 'La patata' prepares us to focus on the insignificant but turns into a sexual allegory in which a girl, as fragile as a potato in his hand, falls prey to his "sangriento amor", expressed, as in much surrealist poetry, in images of mutilation and skinning. López Torres was being honest with himself, purging himself of a sexual dream made all the more painful by the enforced celibacy of imprisonment. He was suspended in his own consciousness, free to fantasize, free to develop the kind of poetic objectivity defined by Eluard as "l'enchaînement de tous les éléments subjectifs dont le poète est . . . non le maître, mais l'esclave."²⁰ In the first, untitled, poem of *Lo imprevisto* he carries us along in a search that is stilled and chilled in the last line by "un frío venturoso". He gives us enough physical points of reference to enable us to follow his imagination from the "mares de silencio" of the first line through "nubes grises" housed in "el espeso túnel"; and while joy has its swing, as if it were a playground, desire is overshadowed by "una estatua fállica". In this linking of subjective elements, López Torres simulates movement that is contained and ordered within a framework composed almost entirely of hendecasyllables:

¡Qué profundo correr por mares do silencio!
 Las empinadas desbocadas venas
 rompiendo limpios mares pudorosos
 con la brisa, el calor, la flor, el grito.
 Ampulosas redondas nubes grises

—gris castaño, gris rosa, gris violeta,
 del ensoñado sexo prometido—
 alojadas sin gracia en el espeso
 túnel donde cabalga luz en sombra.
 La fiebre, sí, la fiebre dando saltos
 asciende hasta el columpio azul del gozo.
 (Dominando la muchedumbre de deseos
 hay una estatua fálica que indica
 caminos para idéntico destino.)
 La desatada sangre, fiera y loca,
 suelta en claras cascadas de suspiros,
 vuelve ordenadamente desbravada
 al mapa de sus ríos y lagunas.
 Sobre el fondo de rítmicos anhelos
 se eleva lento un frío venturoso.

The start, glutinous with adjectives, gives the impression of a man trying to paralyse and savor the illusion of desire for that “ensoñado sexo prometido”. Veins, fever, desires, blood—“fiera y loca”—, the “rítmicos anhelos”, show a man tormented by his own urges; in this elegy to unsatisfied desire, López Torres again avoided the pitfalls of vulgarity and exhibitionism.

In *Lo imprevisto* the rage he expressed from 1931 subsided into a dignified, cathartic creativity in which he exercised full control over his medium and over himself. In *De profundis* Oscar Wilde diagnosed eloquently the painfulness of imprisonment when he stated: “With us time does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle around one center of pain.” In what was probably the last poem he wrote, one that he did not include in *Lo imprevisto*, López Torres evoked the same cycle of sorrow as he predicted certain death:

Giraba en torno a todos firme pena,
 destino inexorable, orden segura
 de transitar andenes sin mañanas.²¹

The sense of menace, the fellowship of suffering captured in these lines, made López Torres into such an eloquent spokesman of the despondency and despair shared by so many of his countrymen. Those who in February 1937 took him out to sea, bound him, put him in a sack, and threw him overboard extinguished a talent that had been enriched and enlivened by surrealist literature. In him surrealism found one of its most sensitive and discriminating converts; it is a tragedy that he came to fruition as a poet in one of the prisons so often condemned by them.

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NOTES

1. *Boletín internacional del surrealismo*, no. 2 (October 1935); reproduced in C. B. Morris, *El manifiesto surrealista escrito en Tenerife* (Universidad de La Laguna: Instituto de Estudios Canarios, 1931).
2. Rial, *La prisión de Fyffes* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1969), p. 257.
3. *Minotaure*, no. 3-4 (15 December 1933), 101-116. The questions posed by Breton and Eluard were: "Pouvez-vous dire quelle a été la rencontre capitale de votre vie?" and "Jusqu'à quel point cette rencontre a-t-elle donné, vous donne-t-elle l'impression du fortuit, du nécessaire?" López Torres' replies appear on p. 11.
4. *Jornada Literaria* [Santa Cruz de Tenerife], Año II, no. 56 (26 December 1981), p. 12.
5. '7'. manifiesto de g.a.', *Gaceta de Arte*, no. 15 (May 1933), p. 4.
6. López Torres, 'Un movimiento nacionalista. Los enemigos del arte viviente', *La Prensa* [Santa Cruz de Tenerife], (16 September 1933).
7. Roughton, 'Animal Crackers in Your Croup', in Robin Skelton (ed.), *Poetry of the Thirties* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 239.
8. López Torres, 'La reforma agraria', *El Socialista* [Santa Cruz de Tenerife], Año I, no. 25 (25 January 1932).
9. López Torres, 'Socialismo agrario', *El Socialista*, Año I, no. 1 (28 July 1931).
10. López Torres, 'Surrealismo y revolución', *Gaceta de Arte*, no. 9 (October 1932), p. 2.
11. 'La Révolution d'abord et toujours!' *La Révolution Surréaliste*, no. 4 (15 June 1925), p. 31.
12. López Torres, '¿Qué es el surrealismo?', *La Prensa*, (10 May 1933).
13. López Torres, 'Arte social. Hans Tombrock', *La Tarde* [Santa Cruz de Tenerife], (24 January 1934).
14. López Torres, 'Expresión de "Gaceta de Arte". El surrealismo', *La Tarde*, (17 May 1933).
15. López Torres, 'En el Ateneo. 1. Exposición colectiva de Arte surrealista', *La Tarde*, (17 May 1935).
16. López Torres, 'Índice de publicaciones surrealistas en 1934', *Gaceta de Arte*, no. 32 (December 1934), p. 4.
17. López Torres, 'Poema de la langosta', *Gaceta de Arte*, no. 9 (October 1932), p. 4.
18. López Torres, 'Maiakovsky', *El Socialista*, Año I, no. 2 (17 August 1931). *Lo imprevisto* was published in a limited edition in 1981 by the Instituto de Estudios Canarios of the Universidad de La Laguna, Tenerife. Four of its poems were reproduced by Domingo Pérez Minik in his *Facción española surrealista en Tenerife* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1975), pp. 153-156.
19. Rial, *La prisión de Fyffes*, p. 155.
20. Eluard, *La Rose publique* [1934], in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), vol. I, p. 421.
21. 'Un poema inédito de Domingo López Torres', *Jornada Literaria*, Año I, no. 18 (4 April 1981).