

Ryan Cull: On "Federico's Ghost"

Martin Espada has sought to write a "poetry of advocacy" for "those who do not get the chance to speak." In describing such a poetic project that inherently suggests an inseparable intertwining of his aesthetics and politics, Espada has explained that

I see not only history but personal experience as . . . dynamic rather than . . . sta[ti]c. There is a dynamic between oppression and resistance, between victimizer and victim. There is not only struggle but triumph. And seeing that dynamic, that tension, that conflict, that's where I try to go for my poems, that place where those elements meet and combust. For me the essence of expressing our dignity, our defiance, our resiliency, our potential for solidarity is in the family.

Espada's 1990 poem, "Federico's Ghost," is an excellent example of a work that explores the political potential of this kind of familial context, as the innocent idealism of a child initiates the revolutionary action of an oppressed people.

The entitled Federico is a "skinny boy" who, like many others of his community, works the tomato fields in an effort to help his family earn a meager living. Whole families, from these school-age boys and girls to the "old women," inhabit these "camps" that are adjacent to the fields of furrows. One can probably assume that the stereotypical vicious circle is in place: children must work because miserably low wages are only barely overcome by the collective labor of the entire family. But by working, the children, in effect, make themselves unprepared to do anything but continue this existence into the next generation.

Federico, however, is too young to embrace such fatalism, and he chooses to stand "apart," both in his location and in his expression. And it is here, "in his own green row," that he and his "obscene finger" hold his ground as a cropduster plane sprays (and re-sprays) a poisonous pesticide, despite the fact that the fruitpicking had not concluded. There is a certain irony in this moment of violence. Though the cropduster certainly is emblematic of the "growers" all too sovereign power over the lives of these people, the pilot himself is just another employee who is likely not that far out of the working class himself. It is "dusk." Neither the fruitpickers nor the cropduster have finished their day's work, and each are in the other's way. All of which makes the pilot's stupidly vicious act and Federico's defiance even more pathetic. Rather than fighting such working conditions together, they fight each other. And Federico becomes a casualty.

But, as Espada's poem makes clear, this is not where the "story" ends. This, in fact, is just the beginning. By sacrificing himself to martyrdom, Federico becomes stronger in death than he perhaps ever could have been in life. In effect, he is reborn in the emergent political consciousness of the fruitpickers, who eventually recognize who their real enemy is and collectively begin destroying the crop of tomatoes that they had been tending. The grower's "muttering" about "vandal children" and "communists" is ineffectual. Their "threatening to call Immigration" is, of course, not taken seriously, for where else could they get such cheap labor.

And their "promising every Sunday off," though perhaps notable as a first concession, does not address any of the fruitpicker's real concerns. So the "smashing of tomatoes" persists.

The final stanza explains why. In a few short days, Federico has been transformed from a murdered "skinny boy" into an empowering myth:

Still tomatoes were picked and squashed in the dark, and the old women in the camp said it was Federico, laboring after sundown to cool the burns on his arms flinging tomatoes at the cropduster [1] that hummed like a mosquito lost in his ear, and kept his soul awake.

The delicious irony of these last lines is that the "old women" are able to claim that Federico in fact is doing now what the growers surely always had wanted. He is continuing to labor even "after sundown." This increased productivity, however, is in the service of showing how to reverse the power relations in the tomato fields. And its effects are almost immediate. Formerly a symbol of the fruitpicker's powerlessness before the grower's omnipotence, the crop-duster is now a mere "mosquito" that reminds them of past acts of injustice. Though these people may still have to work "between the furrows," Federico's presence, in spite of his tragic death, will be an empowering force, never far away.

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