

“Brief Reviews”

*Sebastian's Arrows: Letters and Mementoes of Salvador Dalí and Federico García Lorca*  
Edited, translated, annotated, and with a prologue by Christopher Maurer  
Swan Isle Press/The University of Chicago Press  
xii + 231 pages, 24 colour plates, \$63.50 cloth  
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by Jeff Burse

This collection of letters and addresses reads like a handful of scribbled mash notes from one artistic schoolboy to another. The notes are filled with affectionate, sweeping pronouncements—Dali to Lorca (1927): “I think no epoch has ever known the perfection of ours”—encomiums or imprecations against those who just don’t get what’s new—Lorca to Dali (1927): “All of us are a little like St. Sebastian when they criticize and gossip about us”—and, as passions cool, criticism, and wistfulness. It is a very incomplete picture due to immense gaps between letters (Maurer indicates it is not known how many have been lost). A casual reader who is not a Lorca or Dalí scholar will be frustrated by the silence surrounding the letters, of which more later. The endnotes refer the curious to “detailed commentaries” by other writers where, presumably, the missing incidents will be supplied.

The courtship between Dalí (1904-1989) and Lorca (1898-1936) began, as Maurer tells it, in 1923 at a college in Madrid. They continued an artistic relationship through letters and visits from 1925 to 1936. St. Sebastian proved a complex and protean figure for each, in contexts both intimate (letters) and public (paintings and drawings, addresses or articles), and helped to reflect their views on art (nine years before his execution by Falangists, Lorca told Dalí that St. Sebastian was “martyred for political reasons”) as well as on the homosexual aspect of their friendship, which is nicely glossed in the prologue. “Didn’t you ever think how strange it is that [St. Sebastian’s] ass doesn’t have a single wound?” Dalí wrote in September 1926. This is a reference, and a tweak, to how the painter never let the poet possess him sexually. In the endnotes Dalí is quoted as saying: “Not having succeeded in persuading me to put my ar— at his disposal, he swore to me that the sacrifice exacted from the girl was compensated by his own: it was the first time he’d had intercourse with a woman.” In 1927 Lorca wrote, “I wanted to throw myself from the car so that I could stay with you... I realize now what I’ve lost by our separation.” In the last letter, Dalí is still calling Lorca “dear”, and sending him “a big hug.”

Apart from the stock hearts-and-flowers and recognitions of each other’s uniqueness, the tone of the thirty-nine letters is a bit peculiar. Of the twelve written by Lorca, seven are to Dalí’s sister Anna Maria. Dalí’s contributions are vigorous, cocky, and schoolmasterish, whereas Lorca’s are fuzzily romantic, strained and tentative. He appears inauthentic and merely reactive when he writes: “I can’t understand why I need to look again and again at my fingernails while I read your poems. They make me feel as though a cat’s hair had gotten into my blood.” It seems that the words of his friend had gotten to him and he could only reply with a watered down version of Dalí’s frequent wordplay. Lorca’s “St Lucy and St. Lazarus”, a sort of story, is reprinted in *Sebastian’s Arrows*, and it shows that his attempt at being a Surrealist is unconvincing; he wants to look fashionable in the new style but can’t put his soul into it. “Sketch

of the New Painting”, where Lorca declares Surrealism is the pinnacle of art, is filled with the vanity that adherents of every movement possess, in addition to a disquieting pride about things Spanish which comes across as nationalistic and terribly naive. For his part, Dalí begins with a tenderness equal to Lorca’s and a humour Lorca never has, but by September 1928 his appraisal of *The Gypsy Ballads* is blistering: “Your poetry is tied hands and feet to the old poetry. You probably think some of your images very bold, but I can assure you that your poetry moves within the illustration of the commonest and most conformist of commonplaces.”

Thanks to the scarcity of letters, the next one comes from the summer of 1930, so a reader turns to the notes to read about Lorca’s reaction to such harshness. There is no note detailing if he was hurt, amused, or chastened. The prologue anticipates some questions, but by no means covers the many topics Lorca and Dalí throw out. While *Sebastian’s Arrows* is a handsome book, with photographs that include reproductions of art works and facsimile pages, the notes are, at times, abysmal. There is nothing within any given letter, or even the prologue, that signals there might exist a note attached to this movement or that figure. Consequently, a reader must keep going from the main body of the book to the notes. Such explanatory material could have appeared as footnotes following each letter, as most are quite short. There are numerous typographical errors throughout, and lastly, notes for one letter are merged with those for another, or attributed to the wrong letter. These small errors cause considerable aggravation.

It might be asked whom Maurer envisioned as reader for this book. It isn’t put together well enough for academics, though by what it leaves unsaid, clearly it’s assumed Dalí or Lorca specialists are the only ones who could fill in the considerable blanks. The price will deter the general reader; better to borrow it from a library. But the best route might be to read biographies in which the letters are quoted within larger examinations of the lives of the painter and the poet.

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