

Francisco Urondo

Fuel and Fire

Selected Poems 1956–1976
Translated by Julia Leverone

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Fuel and Fire: Selected Poems 1956–76
by Francisco Urondo
Translated and Edited by Julia Leverone
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Translator's Note

To combine militancy and artistry—projects of two ethics—can be seen as a conflicted imperative. Yet in the 20th century, poets across the world undertook the task with urgency: in concert, and in response to their times, they changed the poetic line via acts of denouncing, proving, and of making manifest and testament their difficult particularities of war and political and social repression. Think of Wilfred Owen, Yiannis Ritsos, Paul Celan, Zbigniew Herbert, Langston Hughes, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich. Francisco “Paco” Urondo is part of this tradition of pressing the language of a poem to speak, against oblivion, against doubt. And he opened himself into the writing; given his cognizant and representative voice, sometimes daring, sometimes resigned, we know that fighting and art were one for him.

Paco, along with numerous other poets not just from Argentina—Juan Gelman, Mario Benedetti, Ernesto Cardenal, Raúl Zurita, Roque Dalton, Jorge Adoum, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Javier Heraud, Enrique Lihn, and many more, across Latin America and exiled, imprisoned and killed, made to live clandestinely or otherwise harmed—all sustained their positions as artists and activists and intellectuals at great risk while they fought to write with witness against the violent destruction and silence that formed a widespread reality, especially in the 1970s, in the region. Integral to this committed, conversational poetics, and arguably to the contemporaneous poetry of witness abroad, was a positioning of the poet within the poems as a representative addressing an individual reader on an intimate level, frankly and empathetically. This address, in turn, begged of the reader action, beginning with knowledge of the deadly socio-political circumstances.



I have been stricken with the direct and accessible; self-effacing and humorous; urgent and raging; and melancholy textures of Paco's Spanish words as they convert to English, as well as with the truths told across them. Wherever I could, I made choices for sound that echo his own internal rhymes and pacing. I preserved the vast majority of his line breaks and punctuation—even when technically incorrect in either language, which conveys a pulsing forward. Paco's voice and message were always on my mind. And they carried away from the translation; in my own poetry, they stay with me. His is a poetics that we can hear clearly in our USAmerican contemporary moment; that is necessary to hear; and that we can still learn from and come to utilize, half a century later.

This is a selection of Paco's poetic work beginning with *Historia Antigua* (Ancient History), 1956 and ending with *Cuentos de batalla* (Battle Stories), 1976, his last published collection. *Fuel and Fire* traces the trajectory of his revolutionary poetry and voice, as these built in response to his nation and region that fell around him.

Introduction by Hernán Fontanet

On June 1976, a few months after the bloody military coup¹ in Argentina that was to result in seven years of brutal military rule and state-sponsored terror, a remarkable intellectual and inexperienced guerrilla fighter was sent to the city of Mendoza. His name was Francisco “Paco” Urondo (1930 – 1976) and his mission was to strengthen the resistance with what in the 1970s was considered one of the most powerful guerrilla organizations in Latin America: the Montoneros.² A few days after his arrival, Urondo would be killed, and his name added to a list, according to poet Mario Benedetti, of “no less than 30 poets in Latin America who paid for their commitment to the revolution with their lives.”³

By 1976, Urondo had already gained significant recognition. He had been widely published. More than ten of his books of poetry, an essay, a novel, two compilations of short stories, and an anthology of Argentine poems were all in print. He had three of his plays staged, had written television, movie scripts and lyrics for songs, and had become a well-recognized journalist who had contributed to numerous newspapers and magazines, including *Clarín* (1967),

1 The military coup, which overthrew the unstable democratic government of María Estela “Isabel” Martínez de Perón on March 24, 1976, and established the de facto National Reorganization Process (1976 – 1983) was led by former military officers Jorge Rafael Videla, Emilio Eduardo Massera, and Orlando Ramón Agosti. All have been convicted of human rights violations, including murder, torture, and illegal deprivation of freedom, and sentenced to life imprisonment and loss of military rank.

2 The initial goals of the Montoneros were to secure the return to power of the then-exiled former president Juan Domingo Perón and the establishment of a political system in Argentina they called *Socialismo Nacional*, which they regarded as the natural historical evolution of Peronism.

3 Mario Benedetti. “Paco Urondo: constructor de optimismos.” *Poemas de Francisco Urondo*. Madrid: Visor Libros, 2003, page 206.

Panorama (1968), *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* (1970), *La Opinión* (1971), *Prensa* (1972), *Noticias* (1973), *Crisis* (1973), *Primera Plana* (1974), *El Auténtico* (1975), and *Informaciones* (1976). Urondo had also won national and international awards for his work in 1966 and 1973. He had augmented his public profile by serving as Director of the Contemporary Art Department at the Universidad Nacional del Litoral (1957), as General Director of Culture in the Ministry of Culture in Santa Fe (1958), and Director of the Department of Literature at the University of Buenos Aires (1973). Most importantly, however, was the fact that he had already been recognized as an active member of the underground guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*, or *FAR*),⁴ and which resulted in his arrest in 1973.

According to the distinguished Rodolfo Walsh,⁵ fellow writer and comrade of Urondo in Montoneros, “sending Urondo to Mendoza was a complete mistake.” Francisco Urondo was a renowned public figure at that time. Due to his high public profile, leading a life “in hiding, clandestine” in a small city like Mendoza with a close-knit population of 100,000 where “everyone knew each other” was not feasible. Indeed, Francisco Urondo’s death was entirely foreseeable. His international fame, which peaked when he was imprisoned in 1973 for his guerrilla connections, practically guaranteed the inevitable failure of the operation. Upon his arrest, a joint committee in support of Urondo was immediately organized

4 FAR was a Marxist and Guevarist organization that merged with Montoneros in 1973.

5 Rodolfo Walsh—second officer and in charge of Press and Intelligence in Montoneros—wrote essential books on the motivation and modus operandi of the military state-terror, such as *Operación masacre* (1957). He also wrote “Carta abierta de un escritor a la Junta Militar,” one of the first public letters to denounce the systematic crimes and violations of civil human rights. Rodolfo Walsh paid for his civil disobedience and rebellion with his life: on March 25, 1977, he was kidnapped and disappeared.

in Paris, and hundreds of international intellectuals rallied for his release. A paid advertisement that appeared in mainstream European newspapers was signed by the likes of Marguerite Duras, Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Régis Debray, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Jorge Semprún, Julio Cortázar (who published the widely read “Carta muy abierta a Francisco Urondo,” or “Very Open Letter to Francisco Urondo,” in the newspaper *Libération*), Alberto Moravia, Natalie Sarraute, Paco Ibañez, Malitte Matta, Arturo Jauretche, Juan Gelman, Leónidas Lamborghini, Rodolfo Walsh, David Viñas, Leopoldo Torre Nilson, Leonardo Favio, Leónidas Barletta, and many others.

Despite the foreboding, Urondo faced the challenge with integrity and went to Mendoza immediately, ignoring his father’s suggestion to leave the country and turning down his offer of a significant amount of money for that purpose. But once in Mendoza, according to Ernesto Jauretche, Urondo realized that he did not have the support he had been promised:

In Mendoza, the leaders had fallen. Mendoza was a complex reality and for that reason Paco asked to be updated on what was happening. He needed to know, but nobody knew anything; all he knew was that most of the Montoneros had been captured and taken as prisoners.⁶

Word of Urondo’s death came shortly thereafter. On June 17, 1976, following a car chase through the streets of Mendoza, he was assassinated. According to available documents, Urondo was driving a light blue Renault 6. Also in the car were his wife, Alicia Raboy, their baby daughter Ángela, and a fellow Montonero nicknamed “la

6 Ernesto Jauretche, cited by Pablo Montanaro in Francisco Urondo. *La palabra en acción. Biografía de un poeta y militante*. Rosario, Santa Fe: Homo Sapiens Ediciones, 2003, page 150.

Turca.” They were heading towards the Department of Guaymallén, bordering the city of Mendoza, to meet other Montonero members. The meeting, though, had been “poisoned.” In other words, the repressive forces were aware of the arrangements and had prepared an ambush. “La Turca” recounting the tragic events of that afternoon stated:

We were already on high alert because Varguitas, a *compañero* who lived with us, had been caught, and we had to flee.⁷ Another colleague, known as Martín, had disobeyed the order not to return to the house, and one week after Varguitas was caught, the *cana* [police] seized him right there. This Martín, who I know now was actually named Aníbal Torres, was a former police chief from San Juan who had become a *monto* [Montonero]. When he was caught, he betrayed his *compañeros*, and returned to his first love [the police].⁸

Urondo and his passengers quickly noticed the presence of local police personnel, watching and alert, and camouflaged among the neighbors. Shortly thereafter, “la Turca” recognized Martín—the *compañero* who had been arrested—inside a red car that had been taken from the Montoneros in a previous operation. Fearing for his safety and that of his family, Urondo sped along the quiet streets of Guaymallén with the police in pursuit. The chase and gunfire lasted almost 20 minutes. “La Turca” was shot in the leg. Urondo received

7 They were told, “Leave the house and go away.” Therefore, the sister of Urondo ensures that the vehicle in which they were transported was carrying several suitcases containing their personal effects. They were moving to another house that same afternoon.

8 This text reproduces the declaration of “la Turca.” It was recorded by Daniel Desaloms in his documentary *Paco Urondo, la palabra justa*. Buenos Aires: Delta Productions, 2004.

a bullet in the back.

During the confusion, Urondo had been able to get the passengers out of the vehicle. Alicia Raboy ran into a large building supply store and managed to give her baby to an employee of the store before being caught by the police. Her status remains “disappeared” to this day.⁹ Their daughter Ángela miraculously survived. “La Turca” escaped by crossing some vacant lots. Urondo who was severely injured remained in the car and continued driving very slowly. Knowing his capture was imminent, he took the cyanide pill¹⁰ he carried in his pocket, a customary practice among the Montoneros when faced with torture and to prevent them from betraying the cause. Before the pill could take effect however, the police captured him alive and forced him to drink gasoline to induce vomiting. They murdered him on the street, shooting him and bashing his head in with a rifle butt. They then stomped out whatever life remained in him.

An eyewitness named Carlos, owner of an auto shop across the street from where Urondo died, confirmed the sequence of events:

The man (Urondo) had been shot in the back, on the left side. The woman (Alicia Raboy) got out of the vehicle with her baby and started to run, and she threw the baby

9 The repression was structured in four stages: kidnapping, torture, imprisonment, and finally, assassination. To avoid legal consequences, there were no official deaths, but rather “disappeared” or “missing” persons. These came to number over 30,000 people, the majority of whom were union members, priests, social activists, human rights lawyers, intellectuals, politicians, and artists like Francisco Urondo. They were all “vanished”—were “disappeared”—during the dark night of this state-sponsored terror imposed by the Argentine dictators.

10 Beatriz Urondo recalls her brother Paco’s words: “They will not find me alive, because I love life, but I cannot betray nor harm anyone, so before they get me....” Beatriz Urondo y Germán Amato. *Hermano, Paco Urondo*. Buenos Aires: Nuestra América, 2007.

to one of the men at the building supply store. The other woman (la Turca) started to run and ran past me. She was desperately screaming: 'Where can I escape to? Where can I escape to?' So I guided her through a narrow alley which led into another street; at the end there was a very low adobe wall....

I saw one of those military officers¹¹ approach the man inside the Renault 6, grab him by the hair, put the revolver to his head and fire. [...] One of the officers said 'all done' and the other replied 'no, it is not done' and threw the man on the ground. When Urondo was on the ground they stepped on his head. After that, another officer came and hit him on his head with the butt of the revolver; but he had already been shot in his head and back.¹²

Francisco Urondo's death came as "...a result of the same series of events that had befallen the majority of those that suffered a similar fate: [...] the chain of fallen *compañeros*, the house [...] searched, the betrayal, and finally, the 'poisoned' meeting."¹³

Urondo's autopsy confirmed the testimony of the witness, Carlos. Two shots, one in the back and one in the head, resulted in "multiple skull fractures, a large hematoma under the chin—in the

11 The five police officers allegedly responsible for the death of Urondo and the disappearance of Raboy were later imprisoned for the crimes of kidnapping, torture and murder. Their names and ranks at that time were: Deputy Inspector Juan Agustín Oyarzábal Navarro, Inspector Armando Osvaldo Miranda Fernández, Inspector Eduardo Smaha, First Sergeant of the Federal Police from Mendoza Division Osvaldo Daniel Calegari, and General Commissioner Pedro Dante Sánchez Camargo.

12 Remarks by Carlos, a witness to the murder, according to Rodrigo Sepúlveda in *D2 Documental*, Mendoza, June 18, 2001.

13 Rodolfo Walsh. *Ese hombre y otros papeles*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1996.

submental artery region—a torn wound in the left ear lobe”¹⁴ and “a star-shaped fracture inflicted by the butt-end of a .45. A pistol-whip.”¹⁵

On his death certificate, Urondo is listed as N.N. (no name). His daughter was transferred to the city’s Casa Cuna Number 1 orphanage from where she was then illegally adopted.¹⁶

There are no official statements regarding the whereabouts of the currently “disappeared” Alicia Raboy. It is known that she was taken to Intelligence Department 2, (D2), one of seven undercover detention centers which existed in Mendoza, and at that time directed by the Chief of Police, vice commodore Santuchone.

The story published in a local newspaper read: “A subversive delinquent was gunned-down in Mendoza. He used a child as a protective shield. They were involved in plans to attack the police station.”¹⁷

with your death
something will come
something that never
disturbed

14 Reported by Dr. Raúl Corrandi of Tribunales Forensic Medicine, as collected by Pablo Montanaro, *Francisco Urondo. La Palabra en acción. Biografía de un poeta y militante*. Rosario, Santa Fe: Homo Sapiens, 2003, page 158.

15 Necropsy signed by Dr. De Cicco, according to Pablo Montanaro, *Francisco Urondo. La palabra en acción. Biografía de un poeta y militante*. Rosario, Santa Fe: Homo Sapiens, 2003, page 158.

16 As with hundreds of other stolen babies, it would take Ángela 11 years to “recover her identity” and be able to reunite with her family—her aunt Beatriz and her brother Javier. Hundreds of others are still unaware of their authentic identities. At the time of publication, the human rights group *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* has recovered 101 sons and daughters of “disappeared” or “missing” persons.

17 *Los Andes*. Mendoza, June 19, 1976.

your conscience¹⁸

Urondo's poetry, which up to the moment of his death had continued to evolve as both an art and a means of expression, belonged to the 'innominate' and 'lost' generation of the decades of the 1950s and 1960s. His lyrical work, which showed potential to grow in infinite ways had he not been assassinated, served as a catalyst bringing a fresh new look to the Argentine poetic field during a period of time that was otherwise stagnant.

When the publication of the literary magazine *Martín Fierro* ceased in 1927, there were no significant non-introspective initiatives in the field of poetry. It was not until 1945, with the arrival of Peronism, that new poetic movements and magazines emerged with vigor to revive the lyrical landscape of Argentina.

Among these magazines and literary movements, there were two in which Urondo's participation was noteworthy. The first, the magazine *Poesía Buenos Aires*, was founded in 1950 and became an instigator of one of the most reinvigorating poetic movements of the time. The second, *Zona de la poesía americana*, first published in 1963, made a vast contribution to the much-anticipated new poetic landscape of Argentina. After the founding of these magazines many other publications would follow, bringing new trends to that country.

Apart from the numerous contributions Urondo made to literary magazines and newspapers, he also had a prolific literary output. Urondo's work consisted of strategies and elements that combined the best traditions of Argentine poetry. His early writings: *La Perichole* (1954); *Historia antigua* (1956); *Lugares* (1961); *Dos poemas* (1959) and *Breves* (1959) were highly influenced by surrealism

18 Francisco Urondo. "Algo." *Obra poética*. Segunda edición. Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo editora, 2007, page 152.

(hyper-vital) and inventionism (hyper-artistic).¹⁹ The strategies and initiatives he deployed in these pieces also recreated, enhanced and expanded old-style techniques whilst using traditional methods.

It would take Urondo several years to offer a personal vision in a voice of his own, and present an independent poetic identity autonomous from existing movements that abused the introspective and elegiac strategies.

From *Nombres* (1963) to the end of his career, the work of Urondo demonstrated a remarkable twist more consistent with trends linked to the innovative Colloquial Movement so in vogue in the progressive circles of the 1960s. His literary output is best described as poetry associated with the surrounding reality, to the point where in some circles it is referred to as “hyper-social” or “neo-popular” poetry.

This period in his work was marked by its constant commitment to the reality of daily life. In this new stage, Urondo produced some of his best poetry, creating a new way of writing about the turbulent national reality. His voice, with all its colloquial dimensions, was full of choices, renewed colors, and a fresh approach to aspects in terms of literature, but primarily poetry, which previously had been confined to a more narrow perspective. This social colloquialism was clear in all facets of his work. His objective was to motivate his readers. He hoped that by creating a change in the readers it would serve as a catalyst to provoke change in their daily lives.

Urondo created a style which resembled some of the rhetorical methods initiated by the River Plate Region’s *Gauchesca* and *Sencillismo* movements which took place in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, respectively. Urondo found inspiration in a

19 César Fernández Moreno distinguished diverse attitudes and currents within the Argentine poetry of that time. Many of them can be found in detail and schematized in his prologue in his book *Antología lineal de la poesía argentina*, published in Madrid, by the publishing house Gredos, in 1968.

variety of schools and Argentine artists of the time, including the simplicity inherent in the verse of Baldomero Fernández Moreno (1886 – 1950) and the Boedo School (*Escuela de Boedo*) of which Raúl González Tuñón (1905 – 1974) was the main figure. Also significant were the influences of Oliverio Girondo (1891 – 1967) and of course, Juan Laurentino Ortiz (1896 – 1978), from whom Urondo took his guerrilla war name: “Ortiz.”

All these influences and rhetorical strategies were part of an attempt to create a “neo-humanist movement”—a new moral conscience—by melding the direct language of “Conversational Poetry” (*poesía conversacional*) with the imagery of Colloquial Realism (*realismo coloquial*). This new realism also incorporates, to some degree, aspects of the less rhetorically-focused expression of the Antipoetry Movement (*antipoesía*).

Urondo’s most significant contribution to the avant-garde movements was to what would later be known as the Socially Conscious Latin American Literature (*literatura comprometida latinoamericana*) and the New Generation of the Sixties (*La Novísima Generación del 60*).

The philosophy of his work, greatly revered amongst these movements, may be associated alongside the works of writers such as Nicanor Parra (Chile 1914), Ernesto Cardenal (Nicaragua 1925), Javier Heraud (Peru 1942 – 1963), Enrique Lihn (Chile 1929 – 1988), Antonio Cisneros (Peru 1942), Roberto Fernández Retamar (Cuba 1930), Jorge Enrique Adoum (Ecuador 1926 – 2009), and Roque Dalton (El Salvador 1935 – 1975).

Julia Leverone’s *Fuel and Fire* is excellent news for those who love the poetry of Paco Urondo and for those researchers who are revisiting and revising the critical understanding of Argentine history during the military *junta*. Urondo did not believe in borders, neither geographical nor linguistic, as his suffering and his thinking were

internationalist. The translation into English of his poetry, which Urondo would surely have found moving, begins a new journey, which hopefully can excite and subvert biased historiographies. This book will be a rich source of information for scholars who explore the always dramatic relationship among dictatorship, social politics, and poetry.

Ojos grandes, serenos

Andando, el barro nos llega a las caderas. Calmando algunas inquietudes, han nacido otras. Rodamos sobre nuevos remansos.

Nadie vuelve; es ahora el momento del amor. El deseo es una ola suave; aquí en la orilla, con la mano firme, detrás de los juncos, frente al sol.

Volarán los pájaros silvestres, las islas vencerán a las palabras: el silencio sagrado sobre el mundo.

Iremos a la hoguera con los grandes herejes.

Large, Calm Eyes

Going forth, the mud comes up to our hips. Calming some uncertainties, giving rise to others. We rove around new pools.

No one returns; now is the moment for love. Desire is a soft wave; here on the shore, with a firm hand, behind the dried reeds, before the sun.

The wild birds will take flight, the islands will overcome words: sacred silence over the earth.

We will go toward the fire together with the great heretics.