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Homage to Federico Arcos

(on the occasion of his 80th birthday, 18 July, 2000)

David Watson

July 2000

No se puede contar el infinito, ni concebir la eternidad; pero hay realidades intangibles que no podemos ignorar.

— Federico Arcos, *Momentos* (1976)

We have gathered here to honor and to celebrate our *compañero, amigo, padre, abuelo, hermano — y guapo* — Federico Arcos, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday.

Fede, sorry we don't have a present like the one you received on your sixteenth birthday — a revolution by the people of your beloved Barcelona, by the people of Spain, against the fascist rebels. We'll try better on your eighty-first birthday, promise.

Federico, was the son of *gente humilde*, of *obreros*. He grew up breathing the air of anarchist fervor in the old CNT districts of Barcelona, and one of his early memories is of reading the anarchist press aloud to the gathered *compañeros* and *vecinos* in his neighborhood because not all could read. When the revolution came, he took his place in the fight, doing what needed to be done, whether it was teaching a comrade to read, or running through a firefight to fetch ammunition, or sharing a crust of

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bread — sacrificing his energy and youth to the cause, *el Ideal*, and learning in the process that such sacrifice brings greater rewards than any egoism bourgeois society could ever offer.

Federico has suffered for his beliefs and principles — in exile in France, hiding from the Nazis; then in jail in Spain after he returned; then in compulsory military service in Morocco; then in the snowy Pyrenees as an underground partisan against the fascist regime. He eventually came to North America where he found a still vibrant anarchist community, mostly Europeans — Spaniards, Eastern Europeans, and especially Italians. Fede was at one time the youngest adult member of that community. Now he is our *abuelo*, our elder. *La lotta continua*.

Federico went to work in an auto factory and in the time that was his own he became a devoted archivist and preserver of our movements memory. He has through dedication, concentration and love collected one of the foremost anarchist archives in North America, indeed, in the world, in his modest working class home in Windsor. He is a lover of poetry, and knows by heart many poems, songs and proverbs. He also has written poems, elegies for his fallen comrades and meditations on the powerful yearning for freedom and authentic meaning that lies at the root of the anarchist adventure.

Federico believes in the power of the word, just as he believes in the power of love, of friendship, of loyalty, of justice, of freedom, of comradeship.

Federico is a dedicated comrade — he never arrives on time but early to work on projects or to visit his dear friends. He never suggests putting something off that can be accomplished now. He steps forward, even as his knees, or back, or lungs sometimes protest against his spirit.

Federico has lived modestly, deriving his pleasures not from material things or from empty status but from solidarity and a revolutionary passion. His have always been the highest ideals and principles, from the time of his youth as a *Quijote del Ideal* in the Spanish Revolution, to his involvement in Black & Red

and the *Fifth Estate*. Never have I heard him utter a petty or cynical word. He has proved by example that one may lose great historic battles, and yet triumph in life.

One of the most vivid stories Federico ever told me was from after the defeat of the revolution and then the Republic, when the refugees, Fede among them, were crossing into France, ill, dispirited, unsure of the future, and weak with hunger. He recollected with a smile and a kind of wonder how they gathered acorns under the oak trees there to eat, and how they were sustained.

Those who know the literature of Spain, and who know the *Quijote*, which not only criticizes great idealism but defends it with affection and deep respect, know also that since classical times the oak tree has been a symbol of the Golden Age. Behind the young Federico Arcos, not yet nineteen years old in 1939, lay the ruins of one of history's greatest revolutions, one of the greatest dreams human beings could ever dream. Ahead, lay a great uncertainty — and we know in retrospect, more violence, more calamity, more disappointment still.

But the *compañeros* gathered and ate the acorns and were sustained. And they — and he — have sustained us. Federico Arcos has lived his life with that new world ever in his heart, reminding us, as Rousseau once remarked, that the Golden Age is neither before us nor behind, but within.

Congratulations and long life to our dear friend, Federico Arcos. *Viva! Salud y libertad!*

Note: In the tradition of the anarchist *cenar*s or dinners, at the gathering in Detroit to celebrate Federico's birthday our friends and *compañeros* here collected money for the Centro de Estudios Anselmo Lorenzo in Madrid, to support their important archival, publishing and related projects, and are donating it to honor his lifelong commitment to *el Ideal*.