THE POETRY OF FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA
AND “CANTE JONDO”

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Besides literature, music may have been the most important artistic activity of Federico García Lorca’s life. His interest in the traditional Andalusian song—known as cante jondo or flamenco—was one aspect of a lifelong dedication to popular Spanish art. Two of his lectures reveal a close familiarity with this music: “El cante jondo (Primitivo canto andaluz),” and “Teoria y juego del duende.” In 1922, he and Manuel de Falla organized the “Concurso del Cante Jondo” in Granada. The traditional Andalusian song inspired one of Lorca’s early books of verse, the Poema del cante jondo. The influence of this music on his later work was more subtle and indirect. I will try to show how it left a permanent impression on his sensibility.

Most of Lorca’s allusions to cante jondo occur in his early work. In Mariana Pineda, for example, the heroine recites a slightly modified siguiriya, considered one of the most ancient and the “deepest” of the genres in this style:

Pues si mi pecho tuviera
vidrieras de cristal,
te asomaras y lo vieras
gotas de sangre llorar.

In the original version, cited by Lorca in one of his lectures, the first two lines read: “Si mi corazón tuviera / birieritas de cristal. . . .” These verses must have seemed too uncultivated for the dignified Mariana. Even in modified form, they do not fit her personality; they stand out sharply from the rest of her speech. Perhaps Lorca had not yet learned to weave traditional elements into the deeper texture of his work. He had more success in La zapatera prodigiosa, where the proletarian origin of the characters lends itself to the employment of popular songs and customs. The shoemaker’s wife echoes part of a famous flamenco poem on one occasion, without the disparity of tone we noted in Mariana Pineda: “Mi marido me dejó por culpa de las gentes y ahora me encuentro sola, sin calor de nadie.”

The Poema del cante jondo, though inspired by Andalusian music, contains only a handful of direct allusions. Each of the main divisions of the book is obviously based on a corresponding flamenco genre—siguiriya gitana, soleá, saeta, petenera. But Lorca
does not attempt to imitate these songs. Only rarely does he borrow an individual verse or two. The rather trite second line of “Muerte de la Petenera”—“En la casa blanca muere / la perdición de los hombres”—is a transcription from a well-known song of the same name:

Quien te puso Petenera
no te supo poner nombre,
que debía de haberte puesto
la perdición de los hombres.4

Lorca normally employed a traditional source as a mere point of departure for an original creation. His use of the geographic and temporal precision of popular poetry offers an illustration. The verses of cante jondo often describe a definite location in Andalusia: “Entre Córdoba y Lucena / hay una laguna clara. . . .”5 Lorca adopted this technique in his own verse. In the Poema del cante jondo, these lines from the “Escena del teniente coronel de la Guardia Civil” might derive from a traditional copla: “Cazorla enseña su torre / y Benameji la oculta.” Even in the later Diván del Tamarit, the poetry reveals a kind of neighborhood pride for Granada, whose spirit is evoked in several lyrics of the book:

Solamente por oír
la campana de la Vela
te puse una corona de verbena.

As far as I know, nobody has ever pointed out the provenance of this refrain. It probably derives from a flamenco poem:

Quiero vivir en “Graná”
porque me gusta oír
la campana de la Vela
cuando me voy a dormir.6

The inclusion of the traditional verse no longer jars our ears, since the poet has sewn it into the fabric of his own voice and style.

Just as he employed the geographic precision of popular poetry, so Lorca learned to use its temporal exactitude. The opening lines of “La casada infel” in the Romancero gitano, for example (“Fue la noche de Santiago / y casi por compromiso”), echo a sigüiriya gitana of Manuel Torres: “Era un día señalao / de Santiago y Santa Ana. . . .” In the Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías, Lorca carries to an obsessive extreme this folkloric tendency of designating a specific hour for the action. The whole universe seems to revolve around the fatal hour of the bullfighter’s death: “A las cinco de la tarde.”7

The indirect echoes of Andalusian music in Lorca’s work are far more pervasive and important than the rare direct allusions.
Lorca

His mind must have teemed with traditional rhythms, melodies, and verses. During the act of creation, they occasionally came to the surface, as we have just seen. More often, they exercised a subtler influence, vaguely molding the poet's expression and even his approach to reality. Let us look at a particular example.

The *saeta* or Easter Passion song probably left a greater impact on Lorca's poetry than any other genre of flamenco. Apart from the "Poema de la saeta" in the *Poema del cante jondo*, there are traces of this song, its spirit, and the popular customs it represents throughout his work. In his first collection of verse, *Libro de poemas*, some of the imagery—vivid and plastic—already reveals a faint air of *saetas*:

Los Niños
¿Qué tienes en tus manos
de primavera?
Yo
Una rosa de sangre
y una azucena.

The dramatic form, the season of spring, the flower symbolism, the blood, and the contrast of colors—white and red—recall the *saeta*. The theme of this lyric is in fact the poet's debt to traditional music.

In the *Romancero gitano*, the colored imagery and sharp profile of persons and things reflect the same sensibility. Even where we least expect them, echoes of the *saeta* fall on our ears. When the lascivious wind chases the gypsy girl in "Preciosa y el aire," Lorca creates an ironic overtone by employing the popular phrase for the approaching Christ in Easter processions: "¡Míralo por dónde viene!" The opening lines of "Muerto de amor" constitute a variation of numerous *saetas*: "¿Qué es aquello que reluce / por los altos corredores?" The question-and-answer sequence characterizes many of these Andalusian songs. Here is a *saeta*:

¿Qué es aquello que reluce
por cima del Sacramento?
—Será la Virgen María
que va por agua a los cielos.

Lorca's ballad even preserves the form of the response: "Será que la gente aquella. . . ." The poem acquires its atmosphere of mystery and expectation from the first lines, which tremble with unconscious resonances of the Passion. The death-from-love of the victim in this ballad, like the deaths of Christ and of so many Lorcan "heroes," evokes the mythic sacrifice of a young god, whose blood brings hope for renewal. A final trace of the *saeta* in the *Romancero*
gitano has no tragic overtones. The foppish protagonist of "San Gabriel" suggests a kind of mock-heroic Jesus. The poet describes him with the inflated rhetoric of Andalusian songs in the first five verses, which he playfully explodes in the anti-climactic sixth:

Un bello niño de junco,
anchos hombros, fino talle,
piel de nocturna manzana,
boca triste y ojos grandes,
nervio de plata caliente,
ronda la desierta calle.

The laudatory tone of some later lines—
En la ribera del mar
no hay palma que se le iguale,
ni emperador coronado
ni lucero caminante—
looks forward to these famous verses of the Llanto:
No hubo príncipe en Sevilla
que comparárselle pueda,
ni espada como su espada
ni corazón tan de veras.10

Within a remarkable range of moods, extending from the burlesque to the profoundly tragic, we perceive the same basic poetic attitude of wonder and praise.

The surrealistic world of Lorca's experimental verse—Poeta en Nueva York, the great Odas to the Blessed Sacrament and Salvador Dalí—is not as foreign to this atmosphere as we might think. In the horrifying truth of the first work, in its stark objectivity and merciless clarity, Carlos Ramos-Gil has glimpsed another reflection of the esthetic we saw in the Poema del cante jondo, the Romancero and the Llanto. Like the saetero, Lorca seems to "feel and enjoy poetically the naked horror of death, pure death. . . ."11 The nocturnal atmosphere of this and his other works also reminds us of the sunless world of cante jondo.12 In the "Oda al Santísimo Sacramento del Altar," the vast imagery of sin and redemption condenses in the small, tangible wafer of the Eucharist.13 The divinity becomes incarnate in the Host, a "little tambourine of flour," as in the wooden images of Andalusian Easter processions. In fact Lorca's Christ resembles that of the saeta: "not a rigid and distant effigy to whom a prayer could hardly reach, not an incomprehensible dogma nor an abstract and inoperative article of faith, but a definite, present figure, near the senses . . . limited in form and time . . . concrete, approachable, nameable, undeniably real, as when He roamed the earth."14 In his poetry Lorca surrounds
religion with the variegated scenery of a supreme drama. The Christian dimension of his work should be sought in this exaltation of the baroque imagery so characteristic of Andalusian churches, processions, and the saeta. Significantly, Lorca dedicated his ode to Manuel de Falla, who had stimulated his interest in cante jondo.

At least one critic has even found the model for Lorca’s popular style in the saeta.15 This is no doubt an exaggeration. The poet’s interpretation of traditional verse surpassed by far the narrow scope of any particular form. Cante jondo represented only one aspect of his concern for Spanish folklore. Nevertheless, we have seen how the saeta left many traces on his work, from beginning to end. He never imitated these religious songs, but absorbed and sublimated their lyrical essence. He used their phrasing and ecstatic tone to convey personal emotions and themes. Sometimes he evoked the saeta in order to awaken ironic overtones. Finally, his approach to religion, immediate and concrete, had much in common with the climate of this song. After all, the saeta and his poetry are two supreme expressions of the Andalusian sensibility.

Just as religious emotion is revealed concretely in cante jondo, other feelings tend to manifest themselves in a physical form. For this reason, tears, blood, and corporal suffering appear constantly. Here is an example:

Has ‘e bení a buscarme
con el corazón partío,
yorando gotas de sangre.16

In the following martine te, the lover’s anguish and memory of past happiness are symbolized by his burning insides, yellow-hot as in a forge:

Así como está la fragua,
“jecha” candela de oro,
se me ponen las entrañas
cuando te recuerdo, y lloro.17

The two examples, which could be multiplied almost indefinitely, are very representative of traditional Andalusian verse. First, the emotion becomes so intense that it manifests itself in the body: blood, tears, intestines. Second, love causes the unbearable pain. Third, there is a carnal or even visceral quality in this pain. Let us keep these three points in mind while looking at some lyrical passages in Lorca’s mature drama.

Bodas de sangre demands our attention above all, since it is the most Andalusian and folkloric of Lorca’s plays. Its basic element is a deep passion that burns inside the characters and drives them to their tragic end. This passion finds release in concrete
images, and in transpositions from the affective to the physical world. Between the Novia and Leonardo especially, we sense an almost palpable current of desire, mingled with hate. After their flight together from the wedding feast, she cries to him: "¡Ay, qué lamento, qué fuego / me sube por la cabeza!" He then describes the futility of his former attempts to suppress his love for her:

Con alfileres de plata
mi sangre se puso negra,
y el sueño me fue llenando
las carnes de mala hierba.

In the final scene, the dead bridegroom's mourning mother says that her tears will not come from her eyes, but from the soles of her feet, from her very roots: "Vuestras lágrimas son lágrimas de los ojos nada más, y las mías vendrán cuando yo esté sola, de las plantas de los pies, de mis raíces, y serán más ardientes que la sangre." 18

In Yerma, Lorca continued to use the same kind of imagery. The protagonist's maternal urge and a certain visceral quality recall the feminine characters of Unamuno. A whole constellation of related images surrounds Yerma: flesh, bowels, teeth, bones, veins, milk, blood. She muses to herself on one occasion:

Estos dos manantiales que yo tengo
de leche tibia son en la espesura
de mi carne dos pulsos de caballo
que hacen latir la rama de mi angustia.

Compared to her, the heroine of Doña Rosita la Soltera, o el lenguaje de las flores seems to lack substance. Yet she also reveals her emotions in objective, anatomical images:

Tierna gacela imprudente
alcé los ojos, te vi
y en mi corazón sentí
agujas estremecidas
que me están abriendo heridas
rojas como el alhelí.

In La casa de Bernarda Alba, his last play, Lorca returned to the frustrated, erotic realm of Bodas de sangre; the youngest daughter, Adela, reminds us of the Novia. She says of Pepe el Romano, her secret lover: "Mirando sus ojos me parece que bebo su sangre lentamente." 19

As in this passage, the majority of the above examples—from both Lorca and cante jondo—revolve around an image of blood. Usually it symbolizes sexual desire. In the wedding song of Anda-
lusian gypsies, known as the *alboreá*, blood evokes the ritual proof of the bride’s virginity:

Jesucristo te llama
desde su huerto,
coronadito de espinas
y el pelo suelto.
En un verde prado
tendi un pañuelo;
salieron tres rosas
como tres luceros.20

In this marvelous interplay of images, Christ’s blood, sacrifice, and innocence foreshadow the role of the bride, who is about to enter into the Christian sacrament of marriage. Lorca obviously had the *alboreá* in mind when he wrote *Bodas de sangre*. The Novia’s loosened hair, indicative of her new life, appears in the wedding song:

Despierte la novia
la mañana de la boda. . .
Que despierte
con el largo pelo. . .

Some later verses contain the motif of marriage and blood, set against a rural background that vaguely recalls the *Song of Songs*:

Porque el novio es un palomo
con todo el pecho de brasa
y espera el campo el rumor
de la sangre derramada.21

As the very title of the play suggests, blood is its central symbol. In Lorca’s work, the most meaningful events of human life—love, marriage, death—imply a shedding of the sacred fluid. As in the poetry of *cante jondo*, blood fulfills a complex role. It may represent a mere chromatic touch; more frequently it suggests sexual desire or death. Occasionally it acquires metaphysical attributes, as in the second part of the *Llanto* and in the *saeta*.

Blood symbolism represents only one aspect of the visceral suffering we have observed in flamenco verse and in Lorca’s drama. I do not intend to discover a cause-and-effect relation between the two. The point is not to prove that Lorca imitated the traditional songs of Andalusia, but to understand how he absorbed them into his own lyrical world.22

The revelation of emotional suffering through corporal images could be considered a facet of Lorca’s “extremism,” a quality of his work discussed by many critics. Anguish becomes so unbearable that it seeks expression in the most severe kind of pain—physical
pain. In Lorca's great tragedies, we watch the characters struggle with their feelings, which are too strong to be repressed. Finally these burst forth in all their nakedness, as if still connected to the speakers' nerve-endings. Since emotions are so powerful, language must be pushed to its metaphorical limits in order to convey them.

In his first lecture on cante jondo, Lorca notes that the poetry of this music lacks a middle tone. Love and death constitute the two basic poles; they leave little room for the development of intermediate themes. "The Andalusian either cries to the stars or kisses the reddish dust of his roads." The deepest forms of this music flourish only in extreme states—religious or sensual ecstasy, freedom, death, guilt. The poems do not usually describe or comment on these states. Their involvement is too direct to permit the luxury of moral or philosophical speculation.

Even more than cante jondo, Lorca's poetry could be said to lack a middle tone. It oscillates between the two extremes of love and death, plenitude and tragedy. But the dark hemisphere of his work casts a long shadow over the realm of light. Nearly half of the lyrics in the Poema del cante jondo contain variations on the theme of death. In the Romancero gitano, ten ballads deal with death or its approach, only two with fulfillment; the three poems on the patron saints of Andalusian cities are playful and festive. The Poeta en Nueva York reeks with mortal blood, and the Llanto might be considered a modern version of the medieval Triumph of Death. In other words, the great majority of Lorca's work revolves around extreme situations. An intermediate world does exist, but to a limited extent. It consists of trees, flowers, plants, animals, and the generic characters who form a kind of chorus in the background of the main action. Young girls for example, do not have an individual countenance or personality; by the very fact of their age and sex they will normally be sensual and frustrated. The mothers will be sad and resigned to suffering, the lot of all Lorcan women. The principal characters, on the other hand, possess a clear profile and individuality. Between them we do not witness a subtle exchange of influence and feelings. Their contacts resemble the collision of planets, as in "La casada infiel" or "Thamar y Amnón." Love is reduced to its lowest common denominator, sex, and to its crudest form, rape. "The equipose between lover and beloved, so fundamental in our refined notion of this passion, is quite absent from the gypsies of Lorca's Romancero, the beloved being nothing more than the object on which the sexual violence of the lover is spent." Other human relations are also reduced to a level of primitive violence. When Lorca leaves the climate of intensity, as in the nostalgic lyrics of his youth, his verse loses force.
and interest. Like *cante jondo*, his poetry thrives in a climate of extremes.

In contrast to other poets, Lorca did not attempt to reproduce the verse of the Andalusian song. In fact he warned against a servile imitation of folk poetry in his first lecture: one should not take more than the "ultimate essences" from the people.26 The most talented exponent of the tendency criticized by Lorca was probably Manuel Machado, who may have had a better theoretical and practical grasp of flamenco than any other modern poet. His *Cante hondo* (1912) constituted an early step in the literary renaissance of this music. But Machado, in contrast to his wiser brother Antonio, squandered much of his creative energy in efforts to reproduce popular lyrics. The fact that some of his verses have become part of the flamenco repertoire attests to his "success." Yet these poems have a merely local appeal, with no impact outside of Spain. Machado failed to sublimate the Andalusian song onto a wider artistic plane.

This is what Lorca achieved, though he knew less than other poets about the technical facets of *cante jondo*. We have seen some possible points of contact between his art and the traditional Andalusian song: departure from a concrete reality, with geographic and temporal precision; a nocturnal setting; a morbid, visceral representation of suffering; extreme situations, polarized around plenitude and death; an ecstatic tone, graphic imagery, and dramatic approach to the spectacle of life. Of course we should not attempt to identify Lorca's poetry with *cante jondo*. They are both major manifestations of Andalusian and Spanish culture, yet remain essentially different. One is highly refined and individual, the other traditional and anonymous. Lorca's sources merely supplied the component parts of his work; the total atmosphere belongs to him alone. None of the typical elements of *cante jondo* is missing from his verse: song, dance, guitar, *pena*, Andalusian, gypsy. Stylized and transfigured to the plane of art, they serve as stepping stones to a new kind of creation. Lorca absorbed the traditional songs of his land so thoroughly that they merged with his own inspiration, giving birth to an original and superior world of poetry.

**NOTES**

1. Chiefly out of respect for the poet's own usage, I have predominantly employed *cante jondo* rather than "flamenco." For Lorca's distinction between the two terms, see the first of his lectures cited below, pp. 1824-25. Ricardo Molina and Antonio Mairena, *Mundo y formas del cante flamenco* (Madrid, 1963), contains a more modern approach to terminology.
3. O.C., pp. 813, 51, 963. The italics in the last quotation are mine.
5. Ricardo Molina, Cante flamenco (Madrid, 1965), p. 136. This is not the same work as the author’s Mundo y formas, written in collaboration with the singer Antonio Mairena and cited in note 1.
8. The saeta is a religious song in the style of cante jondo, sung during Spanish Holy Week processions. It is characterized by a dramatic attitude, clear and realistic imagery describing Christ’s Passion or the Virgin’s sorrow, flower symbolism, an ecstatic tone, etc. I have discussed it at length in “Federico García Lorca and Cante Jondo,” Diss. University of California, Los Angeles, 1972, pp. 136-69.
18. O.C., pp. 1257, 1258, 1267.
19. O.C., pp. 1316, 1372, 1482.
20. Tomás Andrade de Silva, “Sobre los orígenes de treinta y tres cantes,” Antología del cante flamenco (Madrid, 1958), p. 84. The author’s article serves as an introduction to this recorded anthology by Hispavox.
22. Before leaving this subject, I should note in passing that Lorca’s sketches reveal another aspect of this “visceral” imagery. Even more than drama, the mute, objective medium of drawing offered him an impersonal vehicle for expressing his feelings. In his sketches, mental or emotional suffering is portrayed through physical pain or even mutilation of the body. See especially “Manos cortadas” and “Muerte,” O.C., pp. 1851, 1861.
23. O.C., p. 46.