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Morris, Brian

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## Lorca's "Horror a lo anecdótico": Enigma as Narrative In Two Gypsy Ballads ("La monja gitana" and "Muerto de amor")

In his letters to his friends Lorca let his guard down, making confessions that would be unthinkable in a public performance of a lecture or recital. While we eagerly latch onto contradictions, recognizing in them areas of contention within his mind, we pay less attention to confirmations and endorsements. Yet one vehement statement he made in 1927 in a letter to Sebastián Gasch—"Tengo horror a lo anecdótico" ("Lorca inédito")—did no more than explain what was only implicit in 1926 in his recital of *Romancero gitano* when he chose not to read "La casada infiel," dismissing it a "pura anécdota andaluza" (Lorca, *Obras* I 1117). His use of the word was clearly ambivalent: in the same recital he declared that in "Romance sonámbulo," "hay una gran sensación de anécdota, un agudo ambiente dramático y nadie sabe lo que pasa ni aún yo, porque el misterio poético es también misterio para el poeta que lo comunica, pero que muchas veces lo ignora" (Lorca, *Obras* I 1115). Questions immediately arise: Why did Lorca write an "anécdota andaluza" in poetry when he abhorred anecdote? Did his abhorrence precede the writing of *Romancero gitano*, coincide with the writing of *Romancero gitano*, or derive from the writing of *Romancero gitano*? Why did he choose to compose in the rich ballad tradition when the weight of that tradition is overwhelmingly narrative? If, as he declared, he discovered at the start of his poetic career that the *romance* form was an ideal mold for his "sensibilidad" (Lorca, *Obras* I 1115), what role can narrative play in evoking sensibility?

*Romancero gitano* does, of course, contain unequivocally narrative poems, with a linear development and carefully modulated phases, stages, and tempos. Four in particular derive from, and may even comment on, the melodramatic tradition of the nineteenth-century *romances de cordel* with their flamboyant characters, bloody actions, and transparent morality; these are "La casada infiel," "Romance de la Guardia civil española," and the two poems that compose the only sequence in the work, the two dealing with the arrest and death of Antoñito el Camborio. There is no reason to believe that Lorca did not enjoy writing "La casada infiel" and recreating in it two common nineteenth-century types: the boastful, virile male and the beautiful, faithless wife; and that he wrote it for the very reason that he decided not to recite it: that it was a "pura anécdota andaluza." In that case, his instinct ap-

peared to prepare him for the reactions of Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel in by now familiar letters written in September 1928. "Lo peor," wrote Dalí bluntly in his macaronic Castilian, "me parece lo de aquel senyor que *se la llevó al río*. La gracia producto de un estado de espíritu vasado en la apreciación deformada sentimentalmente por el *anacronismo*." And Dalí illustrated his censure of anachronism and redoubled his attack on that man who carried her off to the river by recaptioning a *capricho* by Goya with a line from "La casada infiel" (Sánchez Vidal 177, 179).

Buñuel was even more trenchant in a letter to José Bello, alleging a fundamental error that undermines the whole conception and execution of the work:

Hay dramatismo para los que gustan de esa clase de dramatismo flamenco; hay alma de romance clásico para los que gustan de continuar por los siglos de los siglos los romances clásicos; incluso hay imágenes magníficas y novísimas, pero muy raras y mezcladas con un *argumento* que a mí se me hace insoportable y que es el que ha llenado de menstruaciones las camas españolas. (Sánchez Vidal 180)

In underlining "argumento," Buñuel uses a word that has to remind us of Lorca's professed antipathy to anecdote. What Buñuel and Dalí censured is remarkably similar: anachronism, "dramatismo flamenco," "alma de romance clásico," "argumento;" these are the features, transparent and unequivocal, that are most exposed to view. The other features, enigmatic, oblique, and ambiguous, are ones that they never detected, and their myopia offers a distorted view of the work and misrepresents Lorca's intentions.

The most intriguing statement of his intentions is contained in a letter he wrote to Melchor Fernández Almagro, probably in the spring of 1921:

Quiero hacer este verano una obra serena y quieta; pienso construir varios romances con lagunas, romances con montañas, romances con estrellas; una obra misteriosa y clara, que sea como una flor (arbitraria y perfecta como una flor); ¡toda perfume! Quiero sacar de la sombra a algunas niñas árabes que jugaran por estos pueblos y perder en mis bosquecillos líricos a las figuras ideales de los romancillos anónimos. Figúrate un romance que en vez de lagunas tenga *cielos*. (Lorca, *Epistolario* I 31).

Here paradoxes and antitheses are the surface markers of complex intentions: while "misteriosa y clara" and "arbitraria y perfecta" point to the desired result, "construir con lagunas," "sacar de la sombra," and "perder" (presumably "en la sombra") specify activities that liken po-

etry to the creation of a chiaroscuro in which what is left out is as significant as what is put in. "Construir con lagunas" in particular denotes a complex interplay of positive and negative, one feature of a consistent process of fusion that energizes both the conception and procreation of *Romancero gitano*. While his insistence in his recital that he wanted to blend "el romance narrativo con el lírico sin que perdieran ninguna calidad" (Lorca, *Obras I* 1115) appears to illuminate his intention, we are left with the problem of assessing the resultant blends in which the proportions of narrative and lyrical always vary. Other challenges are posed by the proportions of familiar and unfamiliar, explicit and enigmatic, transparent echoes of *romances* and *cantos populares* and obscure images and passages. If the problem for Lorca the poet was the denial of expectation, the problem for us as readers is the frustration of expectations that makes us realize that his *romances* are like and unlike, that he writes within the formal constraints of the *romance* form at the same time that he strains against the conventions that give it stylistic and thematic coherence.

*The Oxford Book of Narrative Verse* contains a preface by Iona and Peter Opie, who state suggestively that "A narrative poem is in the nature of a sea voyage, and it is no good poking about in the rock pools waiting for the sea anemones to unfold their fronds" (ix). We could say that there are few rock pools to explore in such hardy favorites as "Paul Revere's Ride" and "The Highwayman," while in *Romancero gitano* such poems as "Romance sonámbulo," "Burla de don Pedro a caballo," "San Rafael (Córdoba)," "La monja gitana," and "Muerto de amor" are all rock pools and no voyage. Anyone who has been to exhibitions of twentieth-century art, particularly of abstract or Surrealist art, will realize just how strong is the need for meaning and explanation expressed in the oft repeated question "But what does it mean?," which just as often elicits from well-intentioned docents the bland explanation "The painter is making a statement." René Magritte would deny this, insisting over and over again that his paintings have no meaning, no symbolic coding, no moral dimension, underscoring the role of what he provocatively termed "la logique du mystère," and contending—in words that parallel Lorca's comment about "Romance sonámbulo," that "Le mystère n'est pas une des possibilités du réel. Le mystère est ce qui est nécessaire absolument pour qu'il y ait du réel" (Magritte 474, 525). Samuel Beckett would concur: he deflected the query of the actor Stephen Rea about a line from *Endgame* with what is essentially a credo of multiple, fluid meanings: "Stephen, it is always ambiguous" (Pacheco). However, this emphasis on mystery should not inhibit us from trying to explain to ourselves lines of Beckett

or lines from the *Romancero gitano* that elude a simple, fixed meaning.

Lorca showed how allusiveness and elusiveness overlap in the opening lines of the very familiar "Preciosa y el aire," which present the innocent young heroine moving "por un anfibio sendero / de cristales y laureles." While it is easy to see that water—the metaphoric "cristales" of gongorine pedigree—and vegetation make the path amphibious, it is less easy to determine where the path is: Málaga, ventures one critic (Havard 3); "along the mountain-side, at the mid point between sea and sierra peaks," declares another (Ramsden 11, n. 4); or on the ambiguous path of life itself, I suggest, with its tears and triumphs. We want to situate the poem, for to locate it is somehow to possess it, in the same way as we want to order, as if they were pieces in a puzzle, or building blocks, the four neatly bordered compartments of Magritte's painting *L'Idée fixe* (1925).

In this denial of schematic connection, Lorca joins hands with Beckett, Eliot, Magritte and many others in a vehicle as improbable as the Spanish *romance*. If we accept that Lorca, in the words he used of Góngora, "elige ... su narración y se cubre de metáforas" (Lorca, *Obras* I 1051), we then have to wonder whether images can replace action, whether images can be self-supporting, and whether the responses that they elicit in us can be a substitute for actions that we expect to read in the poem. Lorca appears to encourage this possibility when he contended that Góngora's images have a "forma y radio de acción," a "núcleo central" with a "redonda perspectiva" (Lorca, *Obras* I 1038). If an image, rather than an event or circumstance, has a "forma y radio de acción," clearly he is offering us a new kind of narrative, one that demands a discerning reader to interpret it. Firstly, we have to digest the difficult fact that a ballad—of all genres—may recount nothing at all, that it may appear to tell a story in the same way as an impromptu by Chopin appears to be improvised: both are illusions. This is especially true of the two *romances* that I want to consider: "La monja gitana" and, in more detail, "Muerto de amor."

Lorca's drawing of his gypsy nun documents the sedentary pose of his subject, who is sewing at the beginning of the poem and sewing at the end. The poem is static if we look for physical action, yet in mental terms it is extraordinarily vital, vibrant with tensions which are contained in the title, in the first line—"Silencio de cal y mirto"—, and in two types of flowers. There are two sources of energy in the poem (or "radios de acción," to borrow his phrase): one is the sun, the other is the nun's mind. Light activates the wonderful image of seven birds of the prism flying (but trapped) in line 6, of twenty suns above her head (in line 30), of the game of chess on the grille of her cell win-

dow (in the last lines). The sun has a natural—and semantic—relationship with the sunflowers, the *girasoles*, which are one actor in the colorful parade of flowers flashing through her mind. And here Lorca poses a challenge: how many of us can immediately bring to mind the flowers and herbs he names as part of the context or as elements in the nun's fantasising? Sunflowers present no problem, but what of the *malvas*, *magnolia*, *azafrán*, *llagas de Cristo*, and *yerbaluisa*? How many of his readers are aware that *llagas de Cristo* can be *nasturtiums*? And why would he place these "cinco llagas de Cristo / cortadas en Almería" in apparent apposition to five grapefruit sweetening in the nearby kitchen? Why five? Not to accept the challenge posed by these questions is to read the poem with one eye closed. Five, of course, points us toward the five senses, and the grapefruit sweetening are a defiant recognition of their power and an unrepentant cementing on Lorca's part of an historic association between grapefruit and nuns. Juan Ruiz's stern but picturesque stricture in the *Libro de buen amor* "Rreligiosa non casta es podrida toronja" (Ruiz II 207) did not inhibit the anonymous poets who sang:

Aquí vienen las monxas,  
cargadas de toronxas,  
no pueden pasar  
por el río de la mar. (Frenk no. 212B)

Nor did it prevent its healthy survival in the songs of children, who chant:

Salen las monjas  
Con sus toronjas. (Rodríguez Marín I no. 116)

The juxtaposition of nun and grapefruit establishes for Lorca's protagonist a pedigree in which sensuousness is a factor in constant discord with the context. If she prays, her prayer could be two lines from an earlier poem, "Canción del naranjo seco" (from *Canciones*): "Líbrame del suplicio / de verme sin toronjas" (Lorca, *Obras* I 389). After all, her heart, which is breaking, is one composed of sugar and yarrow, and folklore offers us advice as picturesque as this: "A bunch of dried yarrow hung over the bed or yarrow used in wedding decoration ensures a love lasting at least seven years. Yarrow is also used in love spells" (Cunningham 226). This connection should not surprise us if we have been attentive to the signal emitted in the first line. If "silencio de cal" denotes the cloistered life of the convent, "silencio de mirto" suggests the sexual frustration it causes; it also conditions us for the nun's fantasies when we bear in mind that "Myrtle has long been considered a 'love' herb. ... Myrtle is added to all love sachets and spells, especially those designed to keep love alive and exciting" (Cunningham 160).

The same writer also informs us that "Mallow is ... carried to attract love" (147), that "sunflower seeds are eaten by women who wish to conceive" (205); he counsels us to "Place some magnolia near or beneath the bed to maintain a faithful relationship" (146), and tells us that "Saffron is added to love sachets as well as those aimed at raising lustful feelings" (192). Lorca gives us a privileged look into the nun's mind, which does not formulate thoughts but invokes pictures whose emotional and erotic content is modulated by exclamations, provoking in her a kind of shudder implicit in the lines "Un rumor último y sordo / le despega la camisa" (ll. 23-24). This is the only movement that her body, apart from her hands, makes in the poem. It is the unruly movement of her mind that Lorca exposes to us, and in pointing us toward the "llanura empinada" and "ríos puestos de pie" (ll. 29, 31), he underlines visually through paradox the distorted perspective of a woman who is denied the experiences that are evoked and promised by flowers, rivers, and horsemen galloping over plains.

If we ask what is "La monja gitana" about, we can answer simply: it is about a nun sitting and dreaming. If we ask what "Muerto de amor" is about, we are unable to provide an answer that is simple, or remotely satisfying, for Lorca has written a poem that has been faulted by one critic for "an excessive allusiveness in the presentation of the theme" (Harris 61) and described by another as "the most mystifying poem in the volume" (Havard 152). It is an allusive and mystifying poem, all the more so as the clarity promised by the title is never realized: rather is it obscured by hints and elements as disparate as the smells of wine and amber, the sight of old women weeping, and the sound of accordions played apparently in harmony by seraphim and gypsies.

The first three lines remit us intentionally to the associations aroused by familiar poems, such as the historical *romance* in which King John asks "¡Abenámar, Abenámar...":

¿Qué castillos son aquéllos?

¿Altos son y relucían! (Smith 126)

Lorca's rapid elucidation that the opening question is posed by a child points to the function of popular poetry as the text of innocence in which simple questions hope to elicit replies as straightforward as the title; for the title, "Muerto de amor," represents the kind of simplification, or explanation, that a child would make in response to the complaint voiced by many anonymous traditional poems such as:

Quiérole, madre,  
tanto le quiero,  
quíérole tanto,

que d'amores muero. (Frenk no. 272)

Made up of lines from two separate *cantos populares*, the child's question signals with candid curiosity the gulf between his expectations of a direct reply and the bewildering scene that will unfold. Those tall corridors are, after all, a feature of a poetic fantasy world inhabited, as in this Andalusian *copla*, by a maiden called Encarnación:

Por los altos corredores  
se pasea una doncella,  
le llaman Encarnación  
porque Dios encarnó en ella. (Fuentes 75)

This is precisely where Lorca had located two gentlemen in the poem "Corredor," from *Primeras canciones*, where he chants:

Por los altos corredores  
se pasean dos señores.  
.....  
... se pasean dos señores,  
que antes fueron blancos monjes.  
(Lorca, Obras I 262)

In asking "¿Qué es aquello que reluce / por los altos corredores?," the inquisitive child sets within the fantasy of the corridors a question that, commonly used as the first line of *saetas*, normally triggers responses like

Es Jesús de Nazareno  
que con la cruz ha caído,

and

Será la Virgen María  
Que va por agua a la gloria.  
(Rodríguez Marín IV 6524, 6382)

The mother not only fails to reply: she evinces a protectiveness with a command that aims to shield the child and block out the event in an explanation so outrageously farfetched that the rest of the poem shows it to be a well-meaning but absurd lie: "Será que la gente aquella / estará fregando el cobre." The child has to be surprised by an answer—"Cierra la puerta, hijo mío, / acaban de dar las once"—that is a feeble replica of the protectiveness displayed by a child to his mother in an Andalusian *romance*:

—Madre, cierra la puerta  
que ladra un perro... (Fuentes 89)

Lorca makes us share the confusion of the child, who, though unable to comprehend all the clues and interpret all the sounds and smells, is able to conclude so decisively that a death has occurred that he reacts in a way hallowed by tradition when he tells his mother (l. 39): "Madre,

cuando yo me muera...". However, the variation that Lorca introduces shows how the child's mind seizes on a motif of the poem that is stated and restated in a resonant echo: "Tristes mujeres del valle" (l. 27) are complemented by "Viejas mujeres del río" (l. 31), who may or may not be the same ones. In reacting to the presence of women, the child composes a version of the *saetas* that purport to interpret the words of the doomed Jesus during His Passion, as in:

Cuando muera, Madre mía,  
no me niegues tu favor,  
pues sufro con tu agonía  
y lloro con tu dolor. (Aguilar y Tejera no. 772)

Although the line "Cuando yo me muera" is a commonplace of Andalusian songs and appealed to Lorca in *Poema del cante jondo*, the insertion of the apostrophe to the mother brings the child's words into the religious ambit of the *saeta*, and makes the four lines of his invocation into a version of one inspired by his very premature testamentary wish prefaced by "cuando yo me muera"—equivalent in another, more positive, context to "when I grow up." He wants his death to be marked in a way different from the one his young mind has observed: the "blue telegrams" traveling from the South to the North would transcend the narrow localism signalled by the valley and the river, and their recipients—"los señores"—would provide a male presence and introduce some class and correctitude into an event or ceremony that has been vulgarized by the playing of accordions.

Through his wish "que se enteren los señores," Lorca expresses the child's instinct that the four lamps shining in the lofty corridors are props in an event or series of events that are outside the range of his experience. Certainly, the child has made a sobering discovery: that the lofty corridors of popular song and popular ballad exist in real life, that life itself can be more frightening than the fantasies of verse, that the cocoon of a child's world can be punctured by circumstances which, however confusing and dramatized, are dominated by four lights and tall corridors; these combine half-way through the poem (ll. 25-26) in the startling synesthetic evocation of the four lights "clamoring with the fury of St. George." Implicit in the allusion to St. George (who was the subject of one of Lorca's drawings), is the dragon he slew and the chivalric values that prompted his invocation against plague, leprosy, and syphilis. The lights that yell like warriors and flash like swords appear more as agents of death; they are certainly more active than the characters who react to events: the women by weeping and taking down (presumably from the lofty corridors) the victim's blood, and the seraphim and gypsies by playing accordions.

In fact, the natural world, represented by the moon, the night, the wind, the sea, and the sky, are protagonists in a sequence of events that coalesce in a narrative and a soundtrack: the moon puts yellow braids on the yellow towers (ll. 10-12); the night knocks on the windows of the balconies pursued by a thousand dogs, presumably barking (ll. 13-16); the breezes resound through the broken arch of midnight (l. 22); the sea of oaths echoed reverberated in the distance (ll. 49-50); and the sky slammed doors on the windswept forest in a thunderous finale to the occurrences which have elicited in people sounds that are inconsistent, dissonant, even incongruous: while the accordions suggest celebration, the "rumor de viejas voces" (l. 20) hints at religious chanting, the women's weeping (l. 32) "al pie del monte" (l. 32) suggests the sorrow of the Crucifixion, and the "siete gritos" (l. 43) are sounds motivated by the death which has apparently taken place. Furthermore, these screams are appropriate to the wake that is being recreated for us by the mind of a child through an extraordinary display of understanding on Lorca's part. In describing a gypsy wake, Juan de Dios Ramírez Heredia has stressed the importance of the human voice in displays of emotion that run the gamut from singing the praises of the deceased to loud wailing and fainting:

El velatorio para los gitanos españoles, que dura veinticuatro horas como para el resto de la población del país, no es más que la concentración de gran número de personas, familiares y llegados que hacen compañía al difunto hasta la hora del enterramiento. Durante este espacio de tiempo se suceden los comentarios sobre los hechos y milagros del muerto mientras estuvo en vida. Se cuentan sus hazañas y se exageran de forma extraordinaria sus virtudes, sacándose a relucir muchos pasajes de su vida en los que tuvo algún gesto destacado o protagonizó algún acontecimiento extraordinario. ...

Estos comentarios, naturalmente, suelen ir acompañados de escenas lastimosas, de lamentaciones estentóreas de los familiares más íntimos y a veces de desmayos y pérdidas del conocimiento de las mujeres, todo ello lo más natural del mundo ante los dolorosos momentos que la familia está viviendo. (Ramírez Heredia 90)

Lorca has muted people's reactions at the same time that he has subordinated their actions to those of nature, dwarfing them in a setting whose dimensions are consistently exaggerated as in an Expressionist painting, and whose sinister, labyrinthine features, evident in the insistence on corridors (ll. 2, 18, 24, 54), "oscuros salones" (l. 46), and night made "cuadrada and blanca" by the lime-washed façades (l. 36),

evoke the intimidating open spaces and chiaroscuros painted by Giorgio de Chirico. In a setting that is menacing and amid sounds that are elegiac, the accordions strike a discordant note, as incongruous in this poem as in *L'Age d'or*, in which Péman, in the early scene in the cottage, tells his ragged defenders: "Vous avez des accordéons..." Like the amber mentioned earlier, accordions warn us not to expect a complete understanding of the poem—or, I suspect, of ourselves. While the complicity of seraphim and gypsies glorifies the latter, it is achieved through an instrument that, although "now heard in concert halls and symphony orchestras," is still associated in the minds of many people with vaudeville acts, square dances, and festive occasions (Charahus 9). Although Emilio Carrere identified it as the "Madrileño acordeón, / machacón y pertinaz" in his poem "El acordeón" (Carrere 12), Lorca would not have had to go to the Spanish capital to hear it; according to the recollection of one writer, the streets of Granada once echoed with the dissonant sounds of an orchestra composed of "Guitarras, bandurrias, acordeón, triángulo y música tradicional y sencilla" (Méndez Vellido 154). What is clear is that the seraphim are celebrating, albeit boisterously, the entry of a soul into heaven with an instrument very different from the stringed instruments, usually the lute, that they play in paintings by Bellini, Carpaccio, El Greco, Hans Memling, and Mathias Gruenewald, whose angel happily strokes a viola d'amour (Regamey). However, one of the four angelic musicians painted by Memling plays a portative organ, which, like the accordion, requires the pumping of a bellows with one hand and the fingering of keys with the other. In imagining the gypsies playing in harmony with seraphim, Lorca makes them too into descendants of the musical angels. And his insistence on "cuatro faroles" (l. 6) and "cuatro luces" (l. 25) acquires a point if we recall that there are, according to the similarly explicit Book of Enoch (26:9) four seraphim, each one of whom has four faces (Odeberg 92).

What kind of reaction did Lorca expect to evince when he introduced into the nocturnal scene a smell of wine and amber? If we draw on the common knowledge that amber, when heated, exudes a pleasant smell, we can then wonder why it would have been heated during the events that he is sketching? There are various answers in the many superstitious beliefs surrounding amber, most of which agree that, worn as talisman, necklace, or pendant, it has effective powers against witchcraft, evil in general, and against illnesses such as sore throats, diphtheria, and goiter (Lasne and Pascal Gaultier 37). Among the amber figurines found in the ancient tombs of Vetulonia, of the 7th century B.C., are many of the oriental deity of fecundity (Spekke 28); this con-

nection between amber and child-bearing extends to the superstitious beliefs that, reduced to a powder, it prevents women from having miscarriages, and that when burned it eases difficult childbirths (Lasne and Pascal Gaultier 37). Sexual enticement is certainly implicit in the old Scottish custom by which a mother gave her daughter on her wedding night a set of lammer beads, which, when warmed up, would make her smell sweet to her husband (Opie and Tatem 1-2).

Behind the wine, amber, and accordions, behind the weeping and the shouting, are human beings who react in complex, even irrational, ways to the incidents in which they become involved. Validated by centuries of superstitious association with curative and antropopaic powers, amber hints at the menace of dark forces and life-threatening conditions such as plague or childbirth. When the women take down the blood of the male victim, which is as peaceful as a cut flower and bitter because it comes from a young thigh, they demonstrate the triumph of those dark forces in a situation that has no resolution: the lights that merely shone at the beginning are clamoring at the end, so that the poem has no climax or catharsis, and we as readers are left to wander amid mixed signals that may send us in different directions.

Enigma and ambiguity are Lorca's answer to, even retaliation against, superficiality and transparency: in the presentation of people and their motives and actions; in the deployment of narratives; in the celebration of cities, which, like Córdoba, became laden with platitudes. In "Muerto de amor" particularly, Lorca replaces narrative sequence with a series of mixed signals that transfer the action from the interior of the poem itself to the mind of each reader; in so doing, he extends the possibilities of the Spanish *romance* to an extreme that perhaps he himself had never foreseen when he recounted his realization that the ballad form was ideally suited to an expression of his sensibility; what is evident is that the ballad form became the vehicle, against all odds and tradition, of what he (and René Magritte in a different medium) called "el misterio pético."

—Brian Morris

University of California, Los Angeles

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