

NATURE IN FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA'S POETRY

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Abstract

One of the integral figures of ecocriticism, nature has been at the origin of incredibly flourishing critical interventions into literary works with a commitment to environmental justice. Such critical readings have as their goal to highlight the meticulous work that goes into the literary world's carefully hidden stylistic components. Additionally, it directs the poet toward an obligation to uphold the inviolable sacredness of nature, which is the foundation of poetry. This paper aims at understanding the concept of nature by reading a select group of Lorca's poems to show that Lorca's constant attachment to nature. This paper uses comparative study as the approach to the analysis since the paper observes Lorca's selected poems. The findings show that Lorca's poems provide insights about his love to Andalusia and also his love to nature. Thus, as a poet, Lorca can be understood as the ecocritically conscious poet of his time.

Keywords: Nature, Ecocriticism, Poetry

INTRODUCTION

In his preface to the new translation of Federico García Lorca's the poetry collection *Selected Poems* (2007), Martin Sorrell (2007) wrote that Lorca's poetry "evokes an ancient land, Andalusia, where Europe, Africa and Arabia met and clashed [...] a world of searing heat, passions, and rough justice, resonating to the haunting sound of [the] *cante jondo*, the purest form of Flamenco music" (p. xxv). If we situate it in the cartography of present-day Spain, Andalusia will not arrogate to itself anything more than the trappings of an autonomous community in the southernmost tip of Spain; however, the ways Lorca has orchestrated the traditional Andalusian musical notes in his poems, represented the flora and fauna of the region and scrupulously handpicked images to call for a place far removed in time and space leaves an unmistakable impression on the reader that Andalusia is not only "an ancient land" but also a nature-rich inviolable empire *par excellence* replete with nature.

Indeed, Andalusia is a treasure-trove of natural resources that seem to have predisposed Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) early in his life to his subsequent poetic inclinations that blossomed for him into a life of intense poetic activities. Born of a prosperous family in the village of Fuente Vaqueros in the pediplain of Granada on June 5, 1898, Federico García Lorca must have derived from his close-knit family circle “a love and knowledge of peasant life and rural lore that served to shape him as a writer” (Sorrell, 2007). Hardly had he turned four when Lorca memorized scores of Andalusian folk songs composed in the verdant pasture of his birthplace, and penned some of his own verses, an experience which Sorrell (2007) commented ensured “[his] exposure to the rich vein of Andalusian popular culture” (p. ix). About a decade later, his parents decided to move in Granada to give their sons and daughters some promise of the city so that they could realize their latent talent. As a matter of fact, Lorca forged a hallowed bond between himself and the city of Granada, first as a school going kid, and then for the rest of his life, as one of the foremost poets in Spanish literature.

It is probably for this reason that Lorca found it difficult to adapt himself to the cloistered academic atmosphere of Columbia University at New York when he studied there as a foreign student from 1919 to 1930. It is no surprise that Columbia University came as “nothing less than culture shock [he] registered in a series of poems written during his stay” (Sorrell, 2007). All this information will surely point to the fact that Andalusia is an unspoiled nature by its own right with its huge open sky, wide expanse of pastureland and narrow strait connecting the sea with the ocean. In this article, however, I propose myself transcending the fetters of biographical readings into the life of Lorca, and investigating his creation of the literary nature, which makes his contemporary Andalusia far remote in time and space, evoking a plethora of imaginative responses on the part of Lorca’s readers. I will therefore penetrate the ostensibly impermeable texture of his overtly metaphoric poetry to unravel the quintessential intimations of “an ancient land” deeply buried beneath the surface of his fantastic musicality.

FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA AND HIS CRITICAL RECEPTION

Given the breath and complexity of his poetry, often described as grounded in a relentless quest for the roots of the Spanish traditional values, Federico García Lorca (1898-1936), it is no surprise, provoked innumerable reactions in Spain and in the world outside. As a matter of fact, the critical receptions of Lorca’s have been so diverse that it is virtually impossible to document all of them in one place, so I will make a careful attempt to catalogue only those interpretations that touch on the areas related to ecocriticism. In her seminal work on Lorca, *In the Light of Contradiction: Desire in the Poetry of Federico García Lorca* (2010), Roberta Ann Quance detailed the way Lorca emerged as a formidable Spanish modernist poet, writing out of his personal inclinations, disregarding the poetry-making recipe of his preceding age and

aesthetically living the color of the Spanish countryside (p. 219). Despite her occasional references to the Spanish countryside, however, Quance did not clearly explicate exactly how Lorca adds the color of the Spanish countryside to the texture of his poetry.

If Quance seems to have established a rather superficial connection between the poetics of Federico García Lorca and the Spanish countryside that he inhabited for the better part of his life, David F. Richter (2014) interpreted the elements of the countryside only as an essentially viable part of symbolism. For instance, he dubs Lorca's masterpieces as "floral texts", and says, "Lorca's treatment of botany shows a fall of form that constitutes a break with symbols of beauty". Richter makes use of this idea to posit his theory that "Lorca's use of the rose metaphor radically overturns conventional uses of this symbol as it presents the rose as an ever-changing structure". In so far as the use of such images deeply rooted in the Spanish countryside, Richter found his support in Algerian-descent French Jacques Derrida and quotes him as saying "the place of the flower, the autographic, marginal and paraphing text: which no longer signifies".

Neither Quance nor Richter, however, seems to have anything more in store to talk about Lorca's eco-friendly poetics despite the fact that they have garnered a critical acclaim for their groundbreaking research on the Spanish foremost poet. Set against the backdrop of multitudinous voices raised in the favor of an ecocritically just world around the green planet, and more importantly for the critically inherent poetic polyvalence of Federico García Lorca's poems, the whole collection of his poetry warrants a novel approach of study predisposed to unravel his ecoconscious poetics. I put to use all the requisite critical accoutrements to channel my study to the accomplishment of the novel academic praxis.

In this paper, therefore, I shall make an educated effort not only to dispel the uncalled-for confusion surrounding the unquestionably impressive poeticity of Federico García Lorca despite his firmly established position in the pantheon of Spanish literature but also to demystify his brilliantly contagious penchant for the promotion of environmental justice. In the process, I will primarily draw on the idea of nature as a site impermeably uncontaminated from human civilization, its image of sacramental virtues, its extraordinary resilience to orient itself into a self-organizing position and its preordained will to the perpetual regrowth on Earth. I am convinced of the potentials of this new study that will give scholarly critical insights into the texture of Lorca's poetry in addition to clearing a novel way into the often-misunderstood mental recesses of the poet's psyche. Unless otherwise indicated, all the translation of Federico García Lorca's verses with which the article is generously strewn from end to end are *mine*.

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Nature in Its Pure Form

Perhaps the most fitting way to initiate a theoretically informed discussion on nature is to focus attention on the unspoiled state of nature, often far removed from the

menacing encroachment of human civilization. Central to the edifying nuances of ecocritical politics, such an untouched state of nature is often deemed as “construction mobilized to protect particular habitats and species” (Garrard, 2004). As we read the broad spectrum of Lorca’s poetic oeuvres through this theoretical lens, we will find most of his poetic works amenable to a significantly wide array of ecocritical interpretations. It is no wonder that he wrote most of his poems at a time when he was a voracious reader of Walt Whitman, William Wordsworth and other English romantics (Barnstone, 1993). It is not “here” but “elsewhere” that engrossed him for the better part of his poetic career. If we have a look at one of García Lorca’s most celebrated poems, “La Luna Asoma” [The Moon Pops out], in his book *Canciones de Luna* [The Songs of the Moon], we will come across a world far removed from the bustle of the Spanish city center and extolling a spectacular beauty of the moon and the life lived under its diffusion of beaming light. The speaker in the poem says, “When the moon pops out/ Bells are lost and the impenetrable roads come in sight”. In the lines quoted above, the words “bells” and “the impenetrable roads” worth a critical consideration. Generally associated with the constitution of a parish in which the church has a pride of place, the word “bells” marks the contours of a village and distinguishes it from an untamed world lying outside the peripheries of the parish. Likewise, “the impenetrable roads” designates a place far removed from the village, a place that lacks the character of civility, sophistication and administration. As a result, as soon as the moon emerges out of clouds, the speaker finds himself far away from the little parish bordering the nature of the “uncultured” countryside, completely lost on a road that does not seem to be inviting at all.

For Federico García Lorca, however, it is always not the distant location of entities that make them natural. It is rather the elements of nature that inspire them. In his poem, “A Little Madrigal” [Madrigalillo], also collected under the title *Canciones de Luna* [Songs of the Moon], Lorca writes that the speaker has the joy to behold a pomegranate tree and a cypress tree sprouting at their own speed in the orchard of his friend. Profoundly elated as the speaker is, he wants to give his heart to the friend in exchange for his marvelous sight. However, when the moonlight shimmers on the orchard, slitting through the thick tenebrosity of the pitch-dark night which has previously enveloped the little family garden, the rapturous speaker feels that the orchard is no more a garden and that he is immediately transported to a faraway place with the karma of a fallow countryside. Such a novelty of poetic proposition sets him apart from his contemporary poets. Although Maurer (2010) posited that there is “no clear line of evolution” in Federico García Lorca’s works of poetic art, that Lorca finds a bewitching transportation at work in things otherwise ordinary definitely makes him stand out.

Between the distant and the near that embellish nature in Federico García Lorca’s poetry is what Garrard would call “the motif of escape and return” embedded in its texture. In “Minor Song” [*Cancion Menor*] of his widely admired collection *Libro de Poemas* [Book of Poems], for instance, Lorca creates a vignette of a truly pristine state of nature lying outside the marauding clutches of human civilization’s indomitable zeal to

the juggernaut of European industrialization in the first half of the twentieth century. He makes the speaker in the poem crave for the wild, saying goodbye to everything that he used to hold close to his heart. The speaker says, "The girls in the gardens/ All kiss goodbye to me/ When I pass by/ Even the bells bid me farewell". Indeed, the speaker's departure from the township—as he walks along the church, the garden and the acquaintances—constitutes a recurring leitmotif in the whole collection of poetry. Therefore, Valis styled (2022) Federico García Lorca to be a poet who "breeds nonconformism, in an era often characterized as asphyxiating and conventional" whether in Spanish or in other literatures.

Nature as a Safe Haven

The second preponderant way to investigate the deeply complex interior of Federico García Lorca's poetry from the ecocritical perspective is to direct attention to it as a safe haven. Notwithstanding the prevailing tendency to define "home" as something diametrically opposed to "nature", the idea of nature as a safe haven gained currency with the ecologically informed authors. In the process, the field of ecocritical study emerged with the prospects of a "safe haven" and as "a challenge to homogenizing notions of globalization" (Head, 1998, p. 60). One poem which Lorca calls "Ghazal IX of Marvelous Love" [*Gacela IX del Amor Maravilloso*] from *The Divan of the Tamarit* [*Diván del Tamarit*], Lorca writes: "With all the gypsum/ of the badlands/ you were the reed of my wet jasmine love". Even though wild nature is replete with sedimentary deposits like the "gypsum" of marshy waters, the speaker in the poem still considers nature a flute of his unforgettable love.

Much in the same way, Federico García Lorca extols the bountifulness of nature lying at the heart of the nature question. Bly (1973) cited a few lines of one of Lorca's poems, which read: "Green, how I love you, green! / Green wind. Green branches. / The ship on the sea/ The horse on the mountain" (p. 9). The repetition of the word "green" evokes in the reader's mind a certain form of perfect world stripped of danger, insecurity and fishiness. A familiar and tranquilizing color, green exerts an enormous influence on the psyche of the reader. In 1919, when Lorca moved to Madrid, Carpani (2009) wrote in a preface to Lorca's rural trilogy *The House of Bernarda Alba* [*La Casa de Bernarda Alba*], he came to know about the poets, playwrights and painters of the first order, including Juan Ramón Jiménez, Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, among others, and dedicated himself to the representation of the cultural heritage of his own land as a safe refuge in his poems (p. 4). Even if Federico García Lorca himself travelled from city to city, from Madrid to New York, from Europe to the Americas, just like an eternal flaneur of French literature, he did not forget the healing properties of mother nature that also proffers itself as a safe abode for city dwellers like him.

If nature is represented as a safe refuge in eco-conscious literature, Garrard (2004) is convinced that it is primarily because nature is "seen as a place for the reinvigoration of

those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city” (p. 59). In his “Ode to Walt Whitman” [*Oda a Walt Whitman*], Federico García Lorca gives vent to his pent-up anguish at the dominance of the city and its associated paraphernalia. He writes, “This is the world, friend, agony, agony. / The dead decompose under the clock of the cities/ the war goes on crying with a million gray rats”. Indeed, death, prostitution, massacre, murder, depression, agony, poverty, and ruthless self-aggrandizement are so rampant in cities that the poet seems to have harbored an extreme form of abhorrence towards them. Since life in cities is so dehumanized that Lorca in the same poem writes, “and life is not noble, nor good, nor sacred”. This is probably why Umbral (1968) in his critically acclaimed book *Lorca, Poeta Maldito* (1968) said that Lorca took a lot of interesting in the representation of the feminine Andalusian countryside of safety and tranquility (p. 55). The Spanish world seemed to have finally waken to the truism of the crude reality many years after the tragic assassination of Federico García Lorca at the Falangists in 1936 (Gibson, 2003, p. 728).

Embodiment of the Sublime in Nature

Although Judo-Christian tradition always associated nature with an Eden overrun by the metamorphosed snake-Satan, much like the rationalist Renaissance ideal that viewed the wild to be a place to be governed, utilized and administered to the benefit of human civilization, Garrard (2004) believed that this stigma started dissipating after the Age of Enlightenment. He also posits that the counterargument polemic started in the main with Burke. In order to prove the point, Garrard quotes Edmund Burke who says, “the passion caused by the great and sublime in nature . . . is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended”. In one novel of his Spanish novels, translated by Edith Grossman as *The ingenious gentleman and poet Federico García Lorca ascends to Hell*, the novelist Carlos Rojas (2014) replicated Lorca’s perception of the sublime and says, “Imagine a solitude that is perhaps interminable in a large orchestra section I share with no one”. In other words, “solitude...interminable” is the intimation of the sublime in Lorca’s works of arts that Carlos Rojas illustrates in “The Spiral”, the first chapter of the novel.

In the profundity of nature, Garrard (2004) found a manifestation of “awe” and Wordsworth’s “sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused” (p. 65). In Lorca’s life, too, Edwards Gwynne (1990) found the episodes of “awe” as he chronicles the relocation of his family from a little township to the city of Granada. He wrote:

This fascinating city, distinguished by its exotic mixture of Arabic, Greco-Roman and gypsy tradition and boasting amongst its architectural delights the Palace of the Alhambra, became in a sense Lorca’s real birthplace and would occupy a central position in all his mature work (p. 11).

This “exotic” streams of multiple cultural vestiges, including those of the Arabs, Greeks and the Spanish native gypsy, used to hold the eleven-year-old Lorca. As a

matter of fact, the “awe” overwhelmed him at that time clung to his poetic persona for the rest of his life. In his poem “Song with Reflection” [Canción con Reflejo] assembled under the book title *Poems of Suites* [*Poemas de Suites*], Federico García Lorca expresses his awe in the stanza where he says: “O lost language! / Language without horizons”. There is such a wild *mélange* of cultures that you would never know where one language tapers off and another begins.

It is not only of the awe-inspiring edifice of the city of Granada that Federico García Lorca would talk. He would also register the varied experiences of the Spanish countryside in many of his poems. In his “Another Song” [Otra Canción], for example, Lorca depicts his leisurely walk into the wild where he sees for the first time in his life trees weeping rain. He writes, “And in the misty afternoon my heart learns the autumn tragedy that the trees rain”. The image of trees weeping rain had such an important effect on his life that Carlos Rojas (2014) in “The Spiral” writes, “In the same mix of resuscitated memories, visions of other reveries of mine appear at the edge of the lake and in the middle of the stage”. Indeed, the image is so compelling even with the readers that they can enjoy reading his poetry to the fullest of their satisfaction no matter where they are reading the poem from. Carlos Rojas that reading his poems therefore accords the readers a pleasure that seems to emanate from “corner of eternity”.

CONCLUSION

It should by now be manifest that there are in essence two Lorcas: one Lorca who has always been in a perpetual enchantment as far as the umbilical cord of his birthplace is concerned and the other Lorca is transcendental, universal and deeply rooted in his rights to environmental justice anywhere in the world. However, it is on the first ground that Lorca has often been lambasted by some unscrupulous critics. Mayhew (2009) explained, “the caricature of an *Andalusian Lorca*, a poet both defined and limited by a regional identity, has a long history both in Spain and in the United States. Even some Hispanists continue to perpetuate this caricature, whether by commission or omission”. The last two words “commission” and “omission” in Mayhew’s quote is worth considering. Even though Mayhew does not clearly spell out the reason for the pasquinade directed at the expense of the poet, it is understandable that many of Lorca’s detractors, often denuded of credible evidence, irrationally criticize him, an act that might point to Mayhew’s idea of “omission”. But it is really difficult to ascertain what Mayhew means by “commission” as far as the vilification of Lorca is concerned.

Despite the existence of a sizable number of lampoons, “Lorca has traditionally been seen as the poet of the gypsies, the childlike embodiment of the Andalusian blessing, or else as a poet of the romantic sublime” (Mayhew, 2009). At every instance of the critical dissection of Lorca’s works, we discover that an unmistakable *mélange* of the gypsies, the Andalusian blessing and the sublime have an enduring effect on the lasting acceptance of the poet as one of the foremost ecoconscious Spanish poets of all times. As Lorca has always loved integrating himself in the perennially marginalized but most

often aesthetically rich community of the gypsies, I believe his unfeigned association with the morally uplifted gypsies, his relentless search for the Andalusian blessing and his determined efforts at retrieving the sublime add a particular edge to the ecocritical pledge in his works of stylistically exquisite poetry.

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