

**POETIC MYSTERY IN GARCÍA LORCA'S  
DRAWINGS AND VISUAL POETRY**

In their recent study, *Painting on the Page: Interartistic Approaches to Modern Hispanic Texts*, Rosemary Geisdorfer Feal and Carlos Feal have examined the relationship between Hispanic literature and painting in light of recent critical theory. Taking into account numerous previous studies on the question of interartistic comparisons, they write: "... we may well ask on what basis ekphrastic correspondences have traditionally been established: on a model of intrinsic differences between the arts, or on one of inherent similarities?" (12). Beneath this rhetorical inquiry lies the centuries-old polemic of Lessing's treatise in which painting is confined to space, and poetry is confined to time. Recently, the bibliography relating to interartistic studies has been multiplying exponentially. This article is part of a longer, forthcoming study on Lorca's visual poetry and poetic drawings. In this abbreviated format we attempt to disclose certain elements of the relationship between Lorca's drawings and poetry.

In their book *Only Mystery: Federico García Lorca's Poetry in Word and Image*, Sandra Forman and Allen Josephs write:

Joan Miró once remarked that Lorca's drawings seemed to him the work of a poet, which was, he said, the highest praise he could render any graphic expression ("*Dibujos*"). Lorca would surely have been pleased with the remark since in his own words the drawings were "simultaneously pure poetry or pure plastic expression" (*OC*, III, Madrid: Aguilar, 1970). For him the two were virtually inseparable.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Forman and Allen Josephs, *Only Mystery: Federico García Lorca's Poetry in Word and Image* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 7. Note: We use the same edition of Lorca's *Obras completas*, that is, the Aguilar edition of 1989.

The very successful Barcelona premiere of Federico García Lorca's play *Mariana Pineda* on June 24, 1927 coincided with Lorca's decision to show some of his colorful drawings to the well-known art critic Sebastián Gasch, who immediately arranged to have twenty-four of the drawings exhibited at the prestigious Galerías Dalmau in the Catalan capital. Gasch wrote a seemingly uncomplicated critique of the drawings, with several comments worthy of note:

(...) Lorca's drawings are directed exclusively at the pure, the simple, those who are capable of feeling without understanding. To those who delight in the infinite poetry of allusive objects, anti-artistic and anti-transcendental, in the illustrated postcard, culminating in the pathetic intensity of the bistro placard. (...) Products of pure intuition, it is inspiration that guides the hand of their author. A hand that abandons itself. A hand that lets itself go, that offers no resistance, that does not know or wish to know where it is being led. (Oppenheimer, 64)

The phrases "capable of feeling without understanding" and "products of pure intuition" are keys to the study not only of Lorca's drawings but also of his poetry since often the poetic verses defy direct semantic transference or translation, and their meaning must be intuited or inferred. The example that comes to mind, because of the numerous semantic possibilities for the word *green*, is "Verde que te quiero verde." Several scholars have translated Lorca's poetry into English, among them Carl W. Cobb, Carlos Bauer and Christopher Maurer;<sup>1</sup> but without a sense of the intertextuality of Lorca's poems, of the interior world of the artist, of his artistic sensibility and of his intellectual and creative genius, the reader will gain only a

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<sup>1</sup> Among the fine translations of Lorca's verse we must include: *Deep Song and Other Prose*, edited and translated by Christopher Maurer (New York: New Directions, 1980); Cobb, Carl W., *Lorca's Romancero gitano*, a bilingual edition in verse (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983); *Poem of the Deep Song/Poema del cante jondo*, translated by Carlos Bauer (San Francisco: City Lights, 1987); *Poems*, translated by Stephen Spender and J. L. Gili (London: Dolphin, 1939); *Poet in New York*, translated by Ben Belitt (New York: Grove Press, 1955); *Selected Poems*, translated by Donald M. Allen (Norfolk, Conn.: New Direction, 1961); *Songs*, translated by Philip Cummings (Pittsburgh: Duquesne U. Press, 1976).

superficial appreciation for the works. Lorca's poetry is rife with enigmatic expression. But, as with Gasch's comment on the artist's hand ("a hand that abandons itself..."), one has the sense that in the poetry, particularly in the *Romancero gitano* and the *Cante jondo*, Lorca's expression was almost automatic, as if the poetry were simply part of his inner world that needed to be expressed verbally. Carmen Hernández Valcárcel, in her book *La expresión sensorial en 5 poetas del 27*, writes:

...todas las sensaciones lorquianas tienen su razón de ser, su origen y su fin en la metáfora. (...) En la conferencia "Imaginación, inspiración, evasión" define su origen: La hija directa de la imaginación es la 'metáfora,' nacida a veces al golpe rápido de la intuición, alumbrada por la lenta angustia del presentimiento.' (197)

[..all the feelings in Lorca have their *raison d'être*, their beginning and their end in metaphor. (...) In his speech "Imagination, Inspiration, Evasion" he defines their origin: "The offspring of the imagination is the 'metaphor,' born at times out of the sudden reaction of intuition, enlightened by the slow anguish of premonition".]

A thorough reading of the two collections, however, suggests that if, in fact, the metaphors themselves were the spontaneous product of his creative inner world, the lines and the verses were, nevertheless, most carefully crafted.

The same is true of Lorca's drawings. As both an intellectual and creative genius, he seemed attracted by what was beyond his comprehension. Perhaps that is why there are so many religious symbols in his drawings, so much reference to death, and so much enigma in both his poetry and visual art. In the corner of the drawing of a sailor, for example, Lorca wrote, "Sólo el misterio nos hace vivir, sólo el misterio." And in discussing his *Romancero gitano*, Lorca referred to poetic mystery:

Yo quise fundir el romance narrativo con el lírico sin que perdieran ninguna calidad y este esfuerzo se ve conseguido en algunos poemas del *Romancero* como el llamado 'Romance sonámbulo', donde hay una gran sensación de anécdota, un agudo ambiente dramático y nadie sabe lo que pasa ni aun yo, porque el misterio poético es también misterio para el poeta que lo comunica, pero que muchas veces lo ignora. (OC, III, 341)

[I tried to fuse the narrative ballad with the lyrical without losing any of the quality of either, and this is achieved in some of the poems of the *Gypsy Ballads*, for example, the 'Sleepwalk Ballad,' in which there is a great sense of anecdote, a sharp dramatic atmosphere and no one knows what is happening, not even I, for poetic mystery is also mysterious to the poet who conveys it, often unknowingly.]

Andrew Debicki, in his *Spanish Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, states that "combining metaphor and metonymy, Lorca created visions of exceptional power that attest to his goal of making poetry magnify and preserve the most worthwhile elements of human life" (26). The "Romance de la pena negra" merits mention here because Lorca once said of the *Romancero gitano*:

... no hay más que un solo personaje grande y oscuro como un cielo de estío, un solo personaje que es la Pena que se filtra en el tuétano de los huesos y en la savia de los árboles, y que no tiene nada que ver con la melancolía ni con la nostalgia ni con ninguna aflicción o dolencia del ánimo, que es un sentimiento más celeste que terrestre; pena andaluza que es una lucha de la inteligencia amorosa con el misterio que la rodea y no puede comprender. (OC, III, 340)

[...there is only one character as big and dark as a summer sky, a single character which is the Pain, the Sorrow that penetrates into the marrow of bones and the sap of trees, and which has nothing to do with melancholy or nostalgia or any illness or spiritual agony, which is a heavenly rather than an earthly feeling; Andalusian sorrow, a struggle between loving intelligence and the mystery that surrounds it but cannot comprehend it.]

Lorca calls Soledad Montoya:

concreción de la Pena sin remedio, de la pena negra de la cual no se puede salir más que abriendo con un cuchillo un ojal bien hondo en el costado siniestro. La pena de Soledad Montoya es la raíz del pueblo andaluz. No es angustia porque con pena se puede reír, ni es un dolor que ciega puesto que jamás produce llanto; es un ansia sin objeto, es un amor agudo a nada, con una seguridad de que la muerte (preocupación perenne de Andalucía) está respirando detrás de la puerta." (OC, III, 343-4)

[the embodiment of unending Sorrow, of the black pain from which one can escape only by using a knife to open a deep wound in the left side. The Pain of Soledad Montoya is the root of the Andalusian people. It is not anguish because with this pain one can laugh; nor is it a blinding sorrow since it never produces weeping; rather it is a longing without object, a pronounced love for nothing, with the certainty that death (the endless concern of Andalusia) is breathing on the other side of the door.]

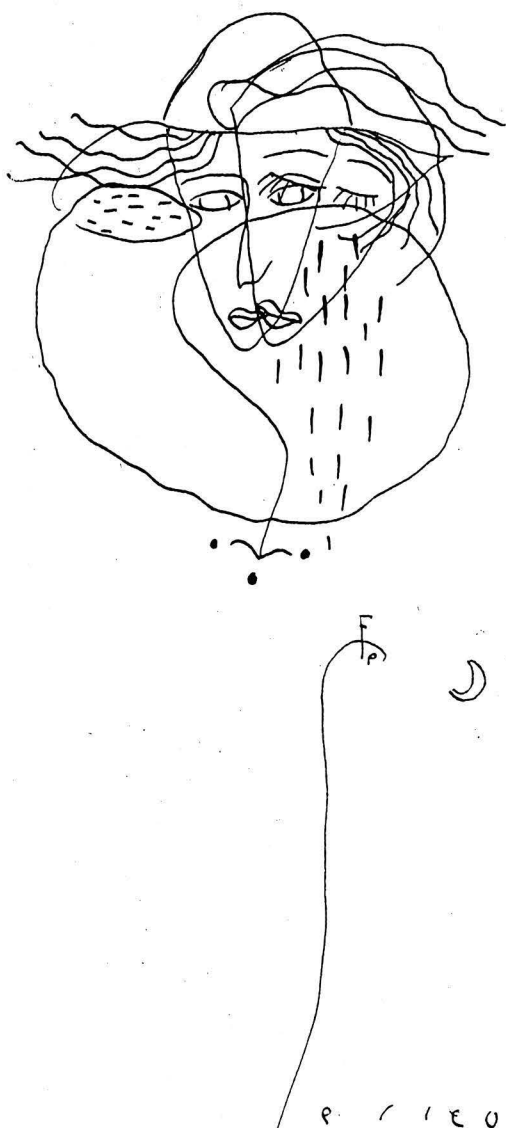
In their edition of the *Poema del cante jondo/Romancero gitano*, Allen Josephs and Juan Caballero assert that Soledad does not experience the *pena negra*; she is the *pena negra* (251). Lorca insisted that reality is poetic; Soledad Montoya is not a real gypsy but a metaphor for sorrow and heartache, but this *pena* is real and thus Lorca is true to his artistic ideal. Also real is his involvement in and personal knowledge of, his subject: when he says that the *pena* is the root of the Andalusian people, he includes himself in this assessment, and thus Lorca, too, is the *pena andaluza*.

The splitting (*desdoblamiento*) in Lorca's drawings, usually of masks, clowns and sailors, has a tripartite effect on the viewer: visual, in its communication of the immediacy of the object (that is, two perspectives of a single object); secondly, the lyrical element in which the emotions are assaulted by the depiction of the usually hidden soul or interior self. The unknown, the Other half of the person, the inner self, is normally private, hidden from view, and is shown by Lorca to have eyes that are closed, crying or with empty sockets. Thus, the sad or mysterious quality of the Other speaks to our emotions, and we are reminded of the words of Sebastián Gasch, "the infinite poetry of allusive objects." Yet, there is a third, narrative element in the work: the viewer will wonder as to the intention of the artist, and may project a story to accompany the drawing. For example, the "Payaso de rostro desdoblado" ["Clown with Split Face"] (no. 102)<sup>1</sup> might easily symbolize the exterior self versus the interior self or the soul; there is no dramatic difference in the psychic quality of the two faces, although the face tilted to the right shows eyes closed. However, the partial su-

<sup>1</sup> Mario Hernández, *Libro de los Dibujos de Federico García Lorca* (Madrid: Ediciones Tabapress, 1990), p. 102. Note: all numbered drawings in this article refer to Hernández' catalog.

perimposition of eyes and of lips in "Payaso de rostro que se desdobra" ["Clown with Face that Splits"] (no. 198) could symbolize the inseparableness of the psychic and physical selves. While it may imply a mouth with two voices — a public voice and a private one, an interpretation for the masses and another for Lorca himself or for a select few — this, in turn, implies mystery and the multiple possibilities for interpretation of Lorca's poems. In the same way, one eye may be open and one closed and crying — one looking out and the other looking in and suffering. The "Payaso de rostro desdoblado y cáliz" ["Clown with Split Face and Chalice"] (no. 135) shows the tears of the inner self to be blood that falls into a chalice. The clown may be a symbol for sacrifice since he must deny his inner self for the pleasure of others.





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The narrative element in the drawings, while not the most salient, cannot be ignored. In a drawing of 1927, "Leyenda de Jerez" ["Legend of Jerez"] (no. 106), a young man with a doubled face stands in front of, but faces away from, a tavern, arms reaching out in front. Dotted lines on the head of the "Other self" suggest hair, and give a somewhat feminine aspect to this Other; another dotted line outlines part of the rest of the Other, and though the eyes are empty sockets, the face reveals a certain expression of anguish. Above the tavern, more dotted lines seem to outline both a bedroom and bottle of wine, implying, perhaps, that entering the tavern could lead to an adventure not only with the wine but with a woman working within. The arm of the Other seems to be pulling the youth back, but whether it is back toward the tavern or not is unknown. Three crosses on the outside of the tavern, which are reflected upside down in dotted lines on the ground, also symbolize perhaps the greatest of Christian mysteries; thus, the composite is enigmatic, totally open for interpretation and debate as much of Lorca's work tends to be. Mario Hernández, in his *Libro de los dibujos de Federico García Lorca*, asserts: "La 'Leyenda' queda convertida en un misterio narrativo irresuelto al fin, como un enigma más literario que plástico" (68). ["The 'Legend' is converted into a narrative mystery that is unresolved at the end, more like a literary enigma than a plastic one."] Curiously, another drawing from the previous year (1926) entitled "El joven y su alma" ["The Young Man and His Soul"] (no. 94) shows similar figures: a young man, probably a sailor, with hands reaching out in front of him, and the "soul," a split figure, holding onto him, in this case with both arms around him and without any apparent angst. This drawing includes none of the background elements of "Leyenda de Jerez." In addition, the eyes of the "soul" are closed, and its attitude seems calm and protective. Nevertheless, as in many of Lorca's drawings, what is really happening in "El joven y su alma" is decided by the viewer.

Hernández asserts that the drawings done by Lorca in the thirties show:

el dominio de su peculiar trazo, tembloroso y firme a la vez, línea que vivifica apuntes de decorado, figurines, cartas, manuscritos, páginas de libros y dibujos sueltos hasta el fin de su vida en 1936. Sobre la mayoría de estos dibujos una luna



cambiante, emblema de su poesía, influye en el juego de sombras y colores, al tiempo que sugiere el misterio de la noche y de la existencia humana. (28)

[the command of his peculiar line, shaky and steady at the same time, a line that enlivens the backgrounds, sketches, letters, manuscripts, pages of books and loose drawings until the end of his life in 1936. Above most of these drawings, a changing moon, leitmotif of his poetry, creates an important effect on the interplay of shadows and colors, at the same time that it suggests the mystery of the night and of human existence.]



*Payaso de rostro desdoblado y cáliz (Catálogo. núm. 135)*



Leyenda de Jerez (Catálogo núm. 106)

Once again, the element of mystery pervades the drawings — the mystery of the night and of human existence. Critics of Lorca often sense in his work an obsession with death, but on examining the drawings one sees an obsession with life; the primary subjects of his drawings are people: gypsies, sailors, clowns, saints, women; his still lifes are of animate objects, and even his "Busto de hombre muerto" is full of living plants, plants that feed off the death of the man and, thus, symbolize the cycle of life. One cannot help but remember the "Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías", in which "Ya los musgos y la hierba / abren con dedos seguros / la flor de su calavera" ["Now the mosses and the grass / open with confident fingers / the flower of his skull"] (OC, I, 555). Death is a serious concern to Lorca, but this is because it is both an integral part of life and beyond his total comprehension.

Critics often do not agree on interpretations of Lorca's poetry, and the drawings, though they have only recently been examined by scholars, will likely share this critical fate. Oppenheimer, for example, sees in "Busto de hombre muerto" ["Bust of a dead man"] "the verbal imagery in these lines from 'Paisaje de la multitud que orina' ['Landscape of the Multitude that Urinates']" (from the collection *Poet in New York*):

It will be necessary to travel through the eyes of idiots, open fields where tame cobras hiss, landscapes covered in tombs where fresh apples grow, so that the dazzling light may shine feared by the rich behind their magnifying glasses...

(OC, I, 476 translated by Oppenheimer)

Oppenheimer explains that:

Although there is no explicit reference anywhere in Lorca's work to suggest that the drawing illustrates the poem, they seem to have many images in common. The man's head would be the 'idiot', set against a desolate landscape of withered plants and box-like 'tombs' rooted to the ground. The plants emerging from these tombs enter the man's ears like telephone wires: in an industrialized society we are not only destroying the countryside but people's senses are being taken over by telephones and machines and these are ultimately connected with death. (93)

Lorca's drawings are states of mind, an emotion, a lyrical, sensual, poetical form of reality. His numerous drawings of lemons call to mind the citrus-growing regions of southern and

eastern Spain, as well as such poems of the *Romancero gitano* as "Prendimiento de Antoñito el Camborio en el camino de Sevilla" ["The Arrest of Antoñito el Camborio on the Way to Seville"]:



*El joven y su alma. (Poema de Baudelaire) (Catalogo. núm. 94)*

A la mitad del camino  
 cortó limones redondos,  
 y los fue tirando al agua  
 hasta que la puso de oro.

[Halfway to town  
 he started cutting round lemons  
 and throwing them into the water  
 until he turned it to gold.]

(OC, I, 417)

Lorca's drawings of a guitar and of musical instruments held by other figures recall numerous poems, including "La guitarra" and "Las seis cuerdas" ["The Six Strings"]. Conversely, the poems, in which the guitar is personified, create in the mind of the reader the image of a guitar. The subject of these two poems is a real object, more than tangible since in order to carry out its intended function it must be held, embraced, stroked, caressed. Debicki states: "The guitar's song embodies the expression of otherwise hidden feelings. Personified, it becomes the agent for their release and for their conversion into artistic form. By stylizing the scene, hiding the guitar player, and transforming the guitarist's hand into a tarantula, Lorca takes focus off any anecdote and places stress on this larger theme" (25).

Lorca's subjects may be people and objects representative of everyday life, pieces of reality that he finds poetic because they speak to the senses and evoke a certain mystery. The ability to discern and express poetic elements in simple things, and to portray them visually, is a rare talent, especially when the principal vehicle for this expression is metaphor. Through his poetic images Lorca is capable of bringing us closer to what is for him *duende*, revealing to us the poetic mystery within the poem.

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