

Negation of the Meaningful Space in *Lorca's Poet in New York*

Lecturer

Hussein A. Zahra Majeed

Department of English

College of Arts

University of Basra

ملخص

غاية هذا البحث دراسة نفي الفضاء الشعري كما يرد في صور الفراغ والاعتراب . وبهذا فإن العمل الشعري هنا يختصر الموت باسم الحياة الباقية، ويحاول منح الصمت صوتاً جديداً. وديوان لوركا بعنوان "شاعر في نيويورك"، الذي ندرس منه هنا نماذج مختارة، ملعب لرغبتين متطاحنتين، الأولى تتمثل في الثورة الاجتماعية، والثانية في تثوير الخطاب الشعري نفسه، وذلك من خلال دفع اللغة إلى أقصى الحدود الممكنة بحثاً عن المعنى.

Abstract

In this paper, my intention is to examine the negation of meaningful space as represented in images of emptiness, disorientation, and the void. It summons death in the name of everlasting life and attempts to give voice to silence. Lorca's *Poet in New York* is the site of unique convergence of two desires, one for social revolution and the other to revolutionize poetic discourse by pushing language beyond its limits.

Negation of the Meaningful Space in *Lorca's Poet in New York*

Federico Garcia Lorca was a poet of intensity focused on a narrow range of themes. His work is a space for a struggle between life and death, love and sterility. The conflict makes him a dramatic poet, and the unequal combatants make him a tragic poet. He is best known for the poems that use the forms and techniques of popular song, poems in which he develops the dramatic intensity so characteristic of his work and also a personal system of symbols representing the

two sides in the conflict of life and death. Through some five collections of poems written between 1918 and 1927 Lorca presents a vision of the world that bewilders by its sensuality and by its frequent indifference or hostility to the human presence. The romantic mismatch between individual and cosmos is most commonly expressed through the guise, and sometimes the disguise, of folksong and popular poetry, a style in which Lorca comes to excel.

Lorca's work reaches its highest success with the *Gypsy Ballads* published to immense public acclaim in 1928. But he feared being typecast as an Andalusian folk poet, and is perhaps one of the factors that lies behind severe personal crisis in his life at this time.¹ It is the case that he sought to promote a radical change in his writing from the popular song forms to prose pieces that are marked by avant-garde attitudes.

It is against this circumstance that the personal crisis affecting Lorca reaches a critical point. An intense depression provoked by artistic, sentimental and existential problems took hold of him, and a rescue attempt was made by friends and family in the traditional form of a

change of environment. A year's visit to New York was arranged with the pretext of enrolling him as a student at Columbia University to learn English.² The new environment was different from his native Granada of the time. New York had become a metropolis rather than a city. Lorca saw the American Dream and the collapse of that dream. This may have been a factor in the way he reacted to the city in the poetry he wrote there, but the vision of New York that his work presents comes from within him through the distorting prism produced by his personal crisis. The city and the whole American experience is subjected to a process of hallucination in *Poet in New York*, the book which collects together Lorca's American poems.

Poet in New York is the site of a unique convergence of two desires, one for social revolution and the other to revolutionize poetic discourse by pushing language beyond its limits. While the collective vision and highly performative discourse of this poetry discourages any facile biographical interpretation, Lorca's situation at the time of writing the poems was characterized by crisis. This crisis was threefold, and it explodes in the New York poetry as all encompassing revolution, one that is artistic, sexual, and political. In the context

of Lorca's obsessed investigation of an otherness, the city becomes an objective correlative for a hostile urban otherness that is very much of the moment, Lorca's personal wasteland. The discursive structures of *Poet in New York* emphasize negation, absence, destruction, and disintegration, all of which are given shape through the fragmentary subjectivity of the poet's lyric person. Chaos tends to be associated by commentators exclusively with the social evils plaguing New York, the symbol of modern technocracy and the text's assumed object reference.

The void in *Poet in New York*

constitutes a stage of consciousness in which the subject is marginalized, made incapable of ordering the shattered world into a meaningful pattern. Lorca's sense of displacement in what he perceives to be a hostile environment is poetically transformed into ideologically charged dichotomy between the alienating and soulless world of the Whites and the temporarily alienated condition of the Blacks, who will regain their essential integrity through apocalyptic upheaval. This dichotomy lays the basis for the entire structure of *Poet in New York*.

The first poem of *Poet in New York*, "After a Walk", establishes the central problem of victimization: the poetic subject seems emptied of identity because of a murderous sky. The highly ambiguous nature of the violence perpetrated by the sky does not permit the identification of any cause:

Assassinated by the sky,
Between forms moving toward the serpent
And forms searching for the crystal,
I'll let my hair grow.³

(1-4)

The use of the participle "assassinated" implies a passive attitude on the part of the victim, reinforced by an action that is devoid of the attributes required by an active stance, such as will, decision, or participation. Letting one's hair grow may be a Christian symbol of penitence, and for this reason, Johnston's interpretation of this act as being connotative of the biblical image of mourning seems more convincing.⁴ This passive and purely biological action functions as an expression of resignation in the

face of absurdity. It can also be read as a banal statement, but such banality is common in the existentialist tradition as a reflection of the impossibility of meaningful and consequential discourse. The speaker situates himself within a tenuous flux of forms, but he is, at the same time, distant, jostled, and bewildered in the midst of a phantasmal crowd. The ambiguity of these verses can be attributed to the subject's own incomprehension. The contrast of "between" and the anaphoric "with" distinguishes his alienation in the first stanza from his identification with other victims in the next three stanzas:

With the tree of stumps that doesn't sing
and the child with the blank face of an egg.
With the little animals whose skulls are broken
and ragged water with dry feet.
With all the bone-tired, deaf-and-dumb things
and a butterfly drowned in the inkwell. (p.7)

(5-10)

These elements – tree, child, little animals, water – all have inherently positive connotations both traditionally and within Lorca's apocalyptic poetics. The values they imply here are systematically negated, destroyed, and silenced. The images of amputation (stumps), indifferentiation (black face of an egg), and other terms of degradation (broken, ragged, dry) all evoke the loss of self, which in the following verses leads inevitably to the silence of the poet's annihilation. The "bone-tiredness" reinforces the notion of resignation implied in the passive, mournful action of letting one's hair grow. And the ambivalent act of assassination evoked in the first verse is echoed in the drowning of the butterfly, a traditional symbol for the poetic Word, which here expires in the inkwell instead of being actualized through writing.

The last stanza identifies the poet with the previous examples of victimization – each constituting one of his multiple faces. At the same time, this lack of a stable appearance underscores the loss of self where there is also an absence of context, situation, or what we might call a world. The speaker's

anguish, accentuated in the last verse as an exclamation, is contained by a discourse whose structural circularity intensifies the subject's confinement.

Several of the poems in *Poet in new York* describes the subject's external circumstances, signaling a significant change from his initially schizophrenic silence of "After a Walk" to a state of awareness that allows him to observe, record, and interpret. The very title "Landscape of a Vomiting Multitude" distances and frames the impression spatially, for the term "landscape" establishes the subject as observer. The subtitle, "Dusk at Coney Island" increases the distanced objectivity sustained through the poem by the imperfect tense. It becomes apparent that the world portrayed is a highly personal nightmare resistant to all forms of naturalization, such as those implicit in allegorical readings.

The fat woman, who visually dominates the subject's perspective, performs ambivalent acts of a ritualistic nature:

The fat woman led the way
tearing out roots and moistening drumskins.
The fat woman
who turns dying octopuses inside out.
The fat woman, the moon's enemy,
was running through the deserted streets and buildings
and leaving tiny pigeon skulls in the corners
and stirring up the furies of the last centuries' feasts
and summoning the demon of Pan through the sky's clean-
swept hills
and filtering a longing for light into subterranean
tunnels. (p.53)

(1-10)

The principal action in the opening verses consists of uprooting or disconnecting things from their life source. By wetting the drum skins she silences them, echoing a pattern where silence functions as a paradigm of death. At the same time, her actions summon and unleash such dormant powers from mythical origins as the furies and Pan, the Greek rural god related here to the demonic.

The territory is one of utter desolation expressed in spatial terms connotative of a void both concrete and spiritual: "the deserted streets and buildings", "the sky's clean-swept hills", "the subterranean tunnels". These are identified by the subject as if in a dialogue with someone who confirms his own interpretation: "They are the graveyards. I know. They're the graveyards" (11). This type of affirmation directed to an Other is a recurring construct in *Poet in New York* and constitutes a first step in confronting external reality.

The subject offers an explanation of the vomiting, first presented in terms of what it is not: "It's not the vomit of hussars on the breasts of their whores,/ nor the vomit of a cat that accidentally swallowed a frog" (53). The hussar's vomiting refers to sensual overindulgence, while the cat's results from an innocent act of bestiality. The cause of the multitude's vomiting is more disturbing. In the next stanza, the subject gives way to despair and laments the impotence created by his loss of identity.

The fat woman led the way
with the crowds from the ships, taverns, and parks.
Vomit was delicately shaking its drums
among a few little girls of blood
who were begging the moon for protection.
Poor me! Poor me! Poor me!
This gaze was mine, but no longer is mine,
this gaze trembling naked for alcohol
and launching incredible ships
through the anemones of the piers.
I protect myself with this gaze
that flows from waves where no dawn dare go
I, poet without arms, lost
in the vomiting multitude,
with no effusive horse to shear
the thick moss from my temples. (p.54)

(24-39)

In verse 31 ("this gaze trembling naked for alcohol"), the subject's sight undergoes a series of changes from negative to positive connotations of potentiality. Its trembling nakedness linked to alcohol suggests a qualitative change towards vulnerability and openness.

Loss of perception seems to lead to visionary insight and confidence in being able to defend himself, despite the images of impotence that follow. The subject's visionary sight emanates from a place where daybreak dare not enter. The association of these verses are complex because of the ambiguous status of the image of dawn. We expect the dawn to be symbolic of the ideal being sought in *Poet in New York*, but it is often not an ideal but an obstacle.

The last verses of the poem constitute a dramatic conclusion, but since the final act is not described, it remains ambivalent. These verses maintain the logical thread of physical illness:

But the fat woman went on ahead
and people searched for the pharmacies
where the bitter tropics are set
Only when the flag went up and the first canines arrived
did the entire city rush to the railings of the boardwalk. (p.55)
(40-44)

While it is logical that the multitude would seek relief of their indigestion at pharmacies, we would expect the remedy available there to be a topical medication, and not the "bitter tropics." This refers to the tropic of Cancer, corresponding also to the lunar tropic, meaning death. The final verse may be read as a victory for the subject, since the multitude appears to heed his admonishing words and rushes over to the railings to vomit, to tear down the flint doors imprisoning death and the unconscious in suppressed putrefaction. The raising of the flag is a metaphor for the rising moon, which would explain the ominous arrival of the canines given their lunar associations.

"Christmas on the Hudson" is characterized by solipsism, the speaking subject's gradual internalization of the world. The initial verses differ greatly from the first stanzas of the previous poems in that the subject does not attempt

to link images into a narrative description. He remains an observer of sorts by virtue of naming objects from a subject position marked by the anaphoric demonstrative pronoun "that." Yet he gradually finds himself so deeply immersed in the world that by the last stanza, the things named are completely confused with the self. This conflating of subject and object is linguistically enacted by changing the demonstrative pronouns of the first stanza to the possessive form in the closing verses: for example, "That gray sponge" becomes "Oh, my gray sponge" in the last stanza, and so on with the other four things named.

That gray sponge!
 That freshly slain sailor.
 That great river.
 Those dark boundaries of the breeze.
 That keen blade, my love that keen blade. (p.63)

(1-5)

The various elements are identified in a demonstrative form, devoid of the usual function of deictics. The disconnectedness of the verses suggests the impossibility of organizing the given in a meaningful pattern. The rest of the stanza establishes a conflict between the hostile urban world and the sailors who, when examined in the broader context of Lorca's work, become associated with the idea of a quest for freedom.⁵

The four sailors wrestled with the world.
 With that sharp-edged world seen by all eyes.
 With the world that can't be traversed without horses.
 One, a hundred, a thousand sailors
 wrestling with the world of sharp speeds,
 unaware that the world
 was alone in the sky. (p.63)

(6-12)

As in "Landscape of a Vomiting Multitude," the absence of horses implies impotence or restraint. The sailor represents the opposite of a sedentary way of

being. Here the sailors are ironically grounded in a space where they must battle not with the singular, mythological monsters of Homer's *Odyssey* but with the entire world.⁶ This struggle is deprived of meaning due to the isolation of the world, additionally alienated in the following verse by being located in a solitary sky.

The world alone in a lonely sky.
It's the hammers and the thick grass's triumph.
It's the teeming anthills and coins in the mire.
The world alone in the lonely sky,
and the air where all the villages end. (p.63)

(13-17)

This solitary sky is related to the "clean-swept sky" of "Landscape of a Vomiting Multitude," the murderous sky of "After a Walk," and the "deserted sky" of the following stanza.

Lorca's characteristic use of the verb "to be" identifies the iniquitous aspects of this world in a factual objectifying tone and simultaneously implies the subject's presence as well as his capacity of identification. At this stage, the subject does not yet denounce, but we can already discern his involvement in the world through the discourse that implies more than it says. The images he uses combine industrial din with the muffling silence of the thick grass, an allusion to the dark forces of entropy in both nature and the human psyche that will radically affect civilization and consciousness. There are many examples of roots, weeds, and the like as symbols of terrestrial bondage in Lorca. Some function as reminders of humanity's essential nature, its role in the natural vegetal cycle of life, while others are graphic representations of death, decay, and the return of the body to the earth.⁷

The world is dehumanized and society converted into a teeming anthill of regimented masses devoid of individuality, while the image of coins in the mud economically associates the notion of materialism and corruption.

The next stanza refers back to the title and the symbolic circumstances of Christmas, but the singing of hallelujahs is incongruent with the presence of a deserted sky and a solitary world.

The earthworm sang its terror of the wheel,
and the sailor whose throat was slashed
sang the water-bear that would hold him close;
and they were all singing hallelujah,
hallelujah. Deserted sky.
It's all the same, the same! Hallelujah. (p.63)

(18-23)

The worm and the sailor both sing the praises of their assassins instead of conventionally celebrating their creator and savior. This reversal is reminiscent of the subject's annihilation by the sky in "After a Walk" but, in "Christmas on the Hudson," instead of the obvious anguish and negative consequences of the act, there is some room for doubt as to whether the singing is ironical. Towards the end of Revelation, just before the final battle and in a setting of desolation with smoke billowing from the burning ruins of Rome, John describes a similar vision of "hallelujahs" praising the end of a decadent world and the inauguration of the kingdom of God.

After the enigmatic verses, the subject becomes temporarily expansive, adopting a testimonial style of discourse to identify himself directly with the sailor's struggle:

I spent all night on the scaffolding of the outskirts
leaving my blood on the stucco projects,
helping the sailors lower their ripped sails.
And I stand empty-handed in the murmur of the
river's mouth. (pp.63-64)

(24-27)

These verses constitute the first instance of the subject's participation in some kind of collective struggle, but the effects of his samaritanism are vague. The *river's mouth* is an aquatic image of finality, and the subject's proximity to its murmur links him with the slain sailor embraced by the water-bear.

The next series of negations are again characterized by ambiguity because it is not known whether the verb *to matter* refers to a value judgment or to simply inevitability:

It doesn't matter if every minute
A newborn child waves the little branches of its
veins,
Or if a newborn viper, uncoiling beneath the
branches,
Calm the blood lust of those who watch the
nakedness.
What matters is this: void. Lonely world. River's
mouth.

Not dawn. Idle fable.

This alone: river's mouth. (p.65)

(28-34)

The birth of an innocent associated with renewal, as well as the birth of what we interpret as evil, usually associated with spiritual death or the Fall, are both denied importance. Hence the Edenic and the Adamic are dismissed as insignificant in the face of death. Dawn is again rejected as a fable or an inert deception. While this negation can once more be interpreted as a variant of the ancient litotes, it is difficult to ascertain an ironic attitude on the part of the subject. The verse "void. Lonely world. River's mouth" can easily be read as connoting desolation, alienation, and death, but this sort of negativity is not necessarily the equivalent of evil or injury. The breaking of daylight constitutes in several instances as obstacle to some complete form of realization and, here once again, what at first sight can be read as a bitterly ironic denial can also be read at face value.

The underlying affirmation of death actualizes a qualitative change in the apparently circular structure of the poem. While in the first stanza the discrete elements are evoked as external to the subject by the use of the demonstrative *that*, in

the final verses these same elements are completely absorbed by the subject. His discourse now combines apostrophe with solipsism, thereby abolishing dualism.

The last verse of "Christmas on the Hudson," one of the most ambivalent but powerful of *Poet in New York*, can be related again to a concrete image in Revelation. "Oh the keen blade of my love, oh, the wound-working blade!" invokes the association between love and a wound, a pairing so prevalent in and fundamental to Lorca's poetic vision. The identification of the "wound-working" instrument as a blade recalls one of the most striking images of John's vision, the representation of Christ mounted on a white horse, "clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God."⁸ It is the power of the Word in the struggle against tyranny.

Notes

1. Derek Harris, *Poeta en Nueva York*. Critical Guides to Spanish Texts (London: Tamesis Books, 1967), p.10.
2. On Lorca's visit, see Leslie Stainton, *Lorca, A Dream of Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), pp. 221-510.
3. "After a Walk," Federico Garcia Lorca, *Poet in New York*, ed. Christopher Maurer, trans. Greg Simon and Steven F. White (London: Penguin, 1990), p.7. All quotations are from this edition; page reference bracketed in the text.
4. David Johnston, *Federico Garcia Lorca* (Bath, Somerset: Absolute, 1998), p.48.
5. See David K. Loughran's *Federico Garcia Lorca: The Poetry of Limits* (London: Tamesis, 1978), esp. chapter 5, "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles."
6. Derek Harris interprets the four sailors as representing the evangelists and the recently beheaded sailor as John the Baptist. See "The Religious Theme in Lorca's Poet in New York," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 54 (1971):317.
7. Loughran, *Federico Garcia Lorca*, p. 22.
8. Revelation, 19:15.

Bibliography

- Allen, Rupert C. *The Symbolic World of Federico Garcia Lorca*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972.
- Bataille, Georges. *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. Translated by Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights, 1986.
- Binding, Paul. *Lorca: The Gay Imagination*. London: Gay Men's Press. 1985.
- Bonaddio, Federico, (ed.), *A Companion to Federico Garcia Lorca*. London: Tamesis, 2003.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast. The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1987.
- Ferguson, George. *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Garcia Lorca, Federico. *Poet in new York*. Translated by Greg Simon and Steven F. White. Edited by Christopher Maurer. London: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Harris, Derek. *Poeta en Nueva York*. Critical Guides to Spanish Texts. London: Tamesis, 1978.
- Johnston, David. *Federico Garcia Lorca*. Bath, Somerset: Absolute, 1998.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Strangers to Ourselves*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- Loughran, David K. *Federico Garcia Lorca: The Poetry of Limits*. London: Tamesis, 1978.
- Lutwack, Leonard. *The Role of Place in Literature*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1984.
- Predmore, Richard Lionel. *Lorca's New York Poetry: Social Injustice, Dark Love, Lost Faith*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1980.
- Saez, Richard. "The Ritual Sacrifice in Lorca's *Poet in New York*." In *Lorca: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Manuel Duran, 108-29. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962.
- Schleifer, Ronald. *Rhetoric and Death: The Language of Modernism and Post Modern Discourse Theory*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.