The Writer and His Time

In order to synthesize the work of the most widely-studied Spanish writer of all time, second only to Cervantes (despite the many shades of meaning that are sure to be left out) it might be useful to examine García Lorca’s genius within the context of an extraordinary milieu. He was an exceptional individual – the testimonies of great writers like Guillén, Alberti, Aleixandre and Neruda attest to this-, but the cultural scene he moved in was one of the richest in the history of Spanish literature. So rich, in fact, that it has been dubbed the "Silver Age" (Mainer) and the "Age of Liberal Gold" (Marichal).

We are talking about a period that is covered by the exact dates of the poet’s birth (1898) and death (1936).

In 1898 Spain loses its last major colonies – Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines- to the United States. This is a rude awakening for the collective conscience. As Azorín famously described it (1913): "The youth of ‘98 were inspired by a spirit of protest, of rebellion. Ramiro de Maeztu wrote impetuous, fervent pieces in which he tore down traditional values and yearned for a new, powerful Spain. The coolly analytical Pío Baroja reflected the situation by introducing a deep spirit of dissociation into the novel; the categorical, pompous, loud style of the past fell to pieces in his hands, becoming an algebraic, dry, scrupulous notation. Valle-Inclán, with the arrogance of a lord, with his wild hair and refined ways, was extremely appealing to novice writers, who were enthralled by his vision of a landscape and figures out of the Italian Renaissance [...] The Generation of ‘98 loves ancient civilizations and the landscape; it attempts to revive the medieval poets (Berceo, Juan Ruiz, Santillana); it fuels the Greco fever that had already broken out in Catalonia [...] it reinstates Góngora [...] it declares itself romantic [...] it is enthusiastic about Larra [...] it strives, in short, to get closer to reality and break down language, to sharpen it, to imbue it
with old, flexible words, with the goal of capturing that reality, minutely and securely."

In order for us to understand all of these novelties, it is important to look at them within the context of the crisis that is affecting all of Europe at the turn of the century—the neo-Romantic attack against the grey universe of Bourgeois positivism—referred to in Hispanic scholarship as Modernismo: "Modernism and '98 are so closely related that the Generation of '98 can be viewed as a partial, metaphysical and political expression of the country's fin-de-siècle crisis, of the general shift toward modernism. The entire linguistic and ideological revolution is contained within it." (Cerezo Galán 1993: 148).

As far as poetry goes, the amalgam of trends (Parnassianism, symbolism) synthesized and spread by Rubén Darío is the essence of this new spirit. Not for nothing, in 1933 García Lorca and Neruda both recognized the influence of this poet, thus establishing the remaining genealogy of their masters: "As a Spanish poet, he taught the old masters and the young in Spain with a generosity and a sense of universality that is lacking in poets today. He taught Valle-Inclán and Juan Ramón Jiménez, the Machado brothers, and his voice was water and niter in the furrows of the venerable language. From Rodrigo Caro to the Argensolas or Don Juan de Arguijo, the Spanish language had not seen such plays on words, such clashes of consonants, such lights and forms as in Rubén Darío." (OC III 1997: 229).

That "tragic generation" was essential to García Lorca's education (Cerezo). This becomes clear when we read the prose, poetry and theater he wrote during his youth, (1917-1919), unpublished during the author's lifetime (Maurer (ed.) 1994, De Paepe (ed.) 1994, Soria Olmedo (ed.) 1994). Eutimio Martín (1986) drew attention to the symbolic value of the phrase with which the 19-year-old writer ended a short prose piece titled "Mística en que se trata de Dios": "Night of October 15. 1917. Federico. One year since I set off toward the good of literature".

This idea of literature as a life-mission has an impact on one of the themes that characterizes García Lorca, that
of the "lonely rider" (Rider’s Song), whose "mysterious advance" "reverberates from very remote thresholds of time" and belongs to the category of myth (José Ángel Valente 1971: 123).

But on the path –in the method- of the Apprentice, the notion of the "quête" (or historic quest) predictably yet decisively rears its head; in particular, Unamuno’s The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho (1905). García Lorca may have read the 1914 edition of this work, with the prologue "The Sepulcher of Don Quixote", in which Unamuno calls for "a holy crusade of going to rescue the sepulcher of the Knight of Madness from the champions of Reason." As a "new religion", "Quixotism" would entail "risking ridicule" and taking action, consumed by "an incessant fever, a thirst for unfathomable oceans without shores, a hunger for universes and a nostalgia for eternity." In the second person, addressing a "good friend," he urges: "Set off, alone".

In his early writings, García Lorca persistently refers to Unamuno’s voluntarism and sense of tragedy. Deep down he will never cease to rely on that ideological space for rebellion, spiritualism and heterodoxy provided by Modernism, from Ganivet and Unamuno to Nietzsche, Tolstoy and St. Francis of Assisi.

Getting back to the big picture, let us recall that the inaction of the "tragic generations" will be followed by the rational, logical dynamism of the "classical generation" of 1914, with its specific programs for cultural modernization, renovation and education. The main advocate of this project to make backwards Spain more European ("Spain is the problem, Europe is the solution") will be José Ortega y Gasset, founder of the weekly publication España (1915), the newspaper El Sol (1917) and the magazine Revista de Occidente (1923). In this context, a series of institutions appear, the product of an educational reform initiated in the 1870s by the Institución Libre de Enseñanza; in particular, the Junta para la Ampliación de Estudios (1907) which gives out scholarships for studies abroad, the Centro de Estudios Históricos (1910), where the philology program is renovated under the direction of Menéndez Pidal, and the
Residencia de Estudiantes (1910). The latter is crucial to our understanding of García Lorca’s development from 1919 to 1928, as this is where he will find an environment of maximum intellectual and artistic tension, equally open to the serious (everyone from Einstein to Valéry passes through the Residencia) as to avant-garde rebellion (in the form of a passionate debate between Cubism and Surrealism, represented by the painter Salvador Dalí and the filmmaker Luis Buñuel).

In effect, the first to benefit from the educational program of the Generation of 1914, whose mission was to train “a cultural elite”, will be the youths from the third generation, including the poet friends known as the 1927 group (they called themselves “the young literature”). 1927 is the year when, to commemorate the tercentennial of the great Baroque poet Luis de Góngora’s death, they decide to revive his work, which had been written off by established critics (Pedro Salinas, Jorge Guillén, Gerardo Diego, Dámaso Alonso, Vicente Aleixandre, Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti and Luis Cernuda, Emilio Prados and Manuel Altolaguirre). These talented youths belong to the broader group of a generation, or better put, a complex, multifaceted and diverse literary system (Claudio Guillén 1997).

Between 1914 and 1936, Spain progressively opens up to the outside world, and contacts with foreign nations are more and more frequent. Spain, which did not participate in World War I, closely followed the rapid succession of European avant-garde literature movements, with all their revolutionary ideas about how to look at art. Futurism in Italy, Cubism in France, Expressionism and Dadaism in Germany, and finally Surrealism—also French—as well as local responses (the work of Ramón Gómez de la Serna, Creationism and Ultraism) were all decisive influences on García Lorca and his colleagues in Madrid and Granada.

In Granada, because the intellectual elite of this provincial city reflects, on a smaller scale, what is going on in the capital. Also, Lorca’s biography is intertwined with a number of group activities there, starting with magazines like Andalucía 1915 and Granada 1915, following
the example set by the already-mentioned España 1915. The promoters of these publications are more or less the same adolescents who gather at "El Rinconcillo" to talk about literature and ideas. They support Manuel de Falla in his defense of "primitive Andalusian song". They organize the Cante Jondo Contest (1922), they found the new Ateneo (or cultural center, in 1926, inaugurated with a lecture by García Lorca) and, with the help of younger classmates, they create the magazine Gallo (1928). Thus, García Lorca joins the chorus of avant-garde voices in publications from those years.

This project to "universalize Spain" (Juan Marichal, in Soria Olmedo (1986 ed.), which found its democratic political expression in the declaration of the Second Republic (1931-1936), may have been effective. But it was also fragile. In 1936, right-wing forces unleashed a cruel civil war leading to the death and forced exile of thousands of Spaniards. There is no need to say that the most prominent victim was García Lorca, whose death has become the harshest, deepest symbol of the tragedy, no matter how hard the Franco regime tried to manipulate it.

Poetry

Limiting ourselves to aesthetics and poetics, we might say that the artists of ’27 (and García Lorca in particular) operate in an environment of dialectical tension between two primary forces, avant-garde and tradition. The first corresponds to the vanguard (though not actual political activism, which no member of the "young literature" crowd exercised save for the creationist Gerardo Diego). The avant-garde is important, first of all, because it is the new reality that these writers come across. It implies present and future, a focus on the new, invention as an attitude opposed to the idea of art as mimesis or imitation of reality.

In the field of writing, the preferred procedure for reflecting that desire to create rather than to imitate - the vehicle for the autonomy of the aesthetic object - is
the metaphor; the image. Ortega defined it as the "beautiful cell", or the smallest unit of beauty. For Gerardo Diego, the fundamental aesthetic operation consists of extracting the image "from the messy jumble of rhetoric."

As García Lorca himself would say, Góngora "invents, for the first time in the Spanish language, a new method of tracking down and expressing metaphors, and he thinks without saying it that the timelessness of a poem depends on the quality and coherence of its images" (OC 1997 III: 57-58).

Lorca thus describes, for instance, the prickly-pear as "wild Laocoön" and "multiple pelota player", immediately conjuring up the arrangement of its branches.

But this incitement to see things with fresh eyes, as if for the first time -something which was at the heart of avant-garde European poetry (with some differences, the Russian formalists and the theatrical technique of Bertolt Brecht come to mind)- is aimed at an examination of all things Spanish, just as their elders from '98 and '14 have taught them (Ortega, in El espectador, qualifies the Creationist attitude: "Things are not created, they are invented in the good old sense of the word: they are found. And new things [...] are found, not further from, but closer to, what is already known and consecrated, closer to our private and domestic lives...").

One result of this impulse to embrace the new and concrete is a new way of looking at the past. It entails examining tradition -both popular and learned- through avant-garde eyes. New art, valuable in its own right, serves as a filter to select a dialogue with the past and see it in terms of the present.

This explains García Lorca’s interest in popular art forms and ballads, inspired by the work of Menéndez Pidal (Lorca helped him compile ballads in Granada, in 1920). On another, perhaps more important level, are the lessons about stylization he has learned from Juan Ramón Jiménez ("There is no such thing as popular art, only imitation, a popular tradition of art [...] synthetic simplicity is the end product... of refined culture[...] simplicity is "what is
obtained from the fewest elements," art is "the spontaneous subjected to consciousness") and from Falla, for whom it was "paramount" to evoke "truth without authenticity," just as Debussy did with La soirée dans Grenade (the composer never visited the city) as opposed to the "makers of Spanish music." Along this straight line, the musicologist Adolfo Salazar, a close friend of Lorca, pondered the importance of "bringing basic forms of expression to popular song to renew and increase its cosmopolitan capital. Universality through distinction: therein lies the thesis". (Maurer in Soria Olmedo, 1997: 42-61).

We still must take into account that, since the second half of the 1920s, the "Surrealist stimulus" has been calling into question all these strategies of ironic, distanced, reflexive treatment of aesthetic material, and that García Lorca responds to that stimulus. His career is exemplary, then, in that it explores all of the possibilities offered by the art of his time. On the one hand, he acquires "extraordinary knowledge... of the multifaceted, diverse Spain, of its monuments and landscapes, of the people who inhabit them, of their ways of life, languages and foods, dances and songs" (Francisco García Lorca 1981: 185). On the other hand, over and over, with a specific objective for each experiment, "he acts with complete originality, taking a series of traditional forms and reinventing them for his own purpose. This is his secret: he takes the sap from the tree and not its branches" (Mario Hernández).

García Lorca was also an extremely versatile artist. In 1927, Gerardo Diego described him: "The juglar de boca is already, at the same time, a modern lyrical poet, a writer of plays - I shall honorably refrain from calling him a "dramatist" or "playwright" - and gypsy-Catalan illustrator" (that year he showed his work at the Dalmáu Gallery of Barcelona). His musical experiments and his script for the film Viaje a la luna complete a picture that does not seem one bit "amateurish". On the contrary, it shows a complete artist, who was well-aware that all these activities respond to an impulse shared by every expressive genre, the
"eagerness felt by all true artists... to establish a message of love with others, in that marvelous chain of spiritual solidarity that all works of art strive at, which is the sole objective of words, paintbrush, stone and pen."

Theater is the terrain where all of these disciplines come together. The student theater troupe La Barraca - examined in other pages - is a clear example of this. In addition to introducing him to all aspects of the dramatic arts, it represented the most serious form of public commitment to "the youth of the new Spain" of the Second Republic.