

Remembering Lorca:

Merton's Tribute to a Poetic Master

by **Patrick F. O'Connell**

August 18, 1996 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the death of Federico Garcia Lorca, the great Spanish poet and dramatist executed by Nationalist forces in the early days of the Spanish Civil War.¹ Lorca was a major influence on the early poetry of Thomas Merton, and the subject of one of the finest of his premonastic poems. In a letter to Stefan Baciu on May 21, 1965, Merton wrote, "in my formative years I came under the spell of F. Garcia Lorca and have never recovered. He remains one of my favorite poets and one to whom I respond most completely."² Merton wrote "In Memory of the Spanish Poet Federico Garcia Lorca" sometime during 1941; as that summer marked the fifth anniversary of the poet's death, it is possible that the poem may have been written to commemorate that occasion, though there is no evidence outside the poem itself to support that hypothesis.³ Merton could have known little about the circumstances of the poet's execution, on the orders of the Nationalist military commander in Granada, circumstances that the Franco regime took pains to conceal for decades.⁴ If he was familiar with any report, it would probably have been the erroneous story, based on mistaken identity, that Lorca had been shot by the Civil Guard, the forces of "law and order" he had pilloried in a number of his poems.⁵ In any case, part of the pathos of Lorca's disappearance reflected in the poem is precisely the mystery surrounding his death and the fact that his body had never been found. The poem is presented as a way of keeping Lorca's memory alive in the absence of a memorial at the grave site.⁶ In the judgment of critic George Woodcock, it is one of the two best poems Merton wrote before his entrance into monastic life.⁷ The elegy begins with two carefully balanced quatrains:⁸

Where the white bridge rears up its stamping arches
 Proud as a colt across the clatter of the shallow river,
 The sharp guitars
 Have never forgotten your name.

Only the swordspeech of the cruel strings
 Can pierce the minds of those who remain,
 Sitting in the eyeless ruins of the houses,
 The shelter of the broken wall. (II. 1-8)⁹

Here the pairs of descriptive lines opening the first stanza and closing the second frame the interior lines focused on the guitars. But this formal parallelism serves only to heighten awareness of the striking contrast of the two settings. The place where Lorca's name is not forgotten is filled with vitality, as opposed to the constricted, disintegrated landscape of lines 7-8. The opening lines seem to depict not so much a geographical location (though this is not excluded) as a vista of the spirit, of the imagination. The mysterious "white bridge: arches above the "clatter of the shallow river," the meaningless noise that contrasts with the music and song to come; identified with the horse, a symbol of power and energy throughout Lorca's poetry,¹⁰ the bridge itself is animated, its arches suggesting the trajectory of the colt's leap over the stream. It is an image of transcendence: its soaring suggests human aspiration, perhaps the dynamism of art in particular, making connections, spanning barriers and overcoming limits — even the ultimate barrier of death itself, which does not and cannot obliterate the name of the dead poet.

The concluding lines of the stanza reveal that the poem is addressed to Lorca himself, whose name, appropriately, is never forgotten by the guitars, which frequently appear in his own verse as symbols of art,¹¹ and of course so closely associated with the Andalusian flamenco/cante jondo from which he drew inspiration and which he recreated in his own modern idiom. The guitars are unexpectedly, yet effectively, described as "sharp," which characterizes, by metonymy, their sound, suggested as well by the sounds of the lines themselves: after the long, loose free verse of the two opening lines, the double iambic of line 3, intensified by the repetition of the "ar" sound in the two accented syllables, has the effect of bringing the reader up short, an effect equivalent to an initial burst of guitar chords, before modulating to a more relaxed double anapest to conclude the stanza.

The reason for the music's sharpness is revealed in the second stanza: the purpose of the guitars is not merely to recall but to remind, to penetrate with "swordspeech"¹² those closed minds unable or unwilling to remember Lorca and the crime that ended his life. The strings are thus "cruel" in forcing unwelcome awareness on those who would prefer to cling to their own ignorance, but also by transference, in that the real cruelty is in the story they commemorate, the murder of the poet. The audience, "those who remain," are the survivors of the catastrophic Spanish Civil War, which ended in January, 1939 with the defeat of the Republic Lorca had supported; its destructiveness is symbolized by the ravaged landscape of the final two lines of the stanza, utterly different from the opening vista of the white bridge: if the former represents the creative environment that makes music and poetry possible, the latter depicts the actual circumstances in which the song must be played, a wasteland panorama in which the image of the "eyeless ruins" both describes the shattered windows of the houses and suggests the blindness of their inhabitants, while the breakdown of the entire social order is epitomized by the "broken wall" that provides the only scant "shelter" available. If Lorca's life and art are associated with the colt's energy and the unifying function of the bridge, his death cannot be separated from the wider destruction and resultant fragmentation of the war that cost him his life, even though "those who remain," preoccupied with their own problems, would prefer to block out the past, to forget Lorca, his life, his art, and particularly his death.

In the third, central, stanza, a voice is added to the music of the guitars:

A woman has begun to sing:
 O music the color of olives!
 Her eyes are darker than the deep cathedrals;
 Her words come dressed as mourners,
 In the gate of her shadowy voice,
 Each with a meaning like a sheaf of seven blades! (II. 9-14)

By synaesthesia, a characteristically Lorcan figure,¹³ the music is described as having "the color of olives," an appropriately Andalusian yet ambiguous image, which prompts a momentary hesitation on the part of the reader: is the color green, associated with life and hope, or black, representing death and despair? The subsequent lines make clear that it is the latter. In contrast to the "eyeless ruins" of line 7, the woman sees, but "Her eyes are darker than the deep cathedrals":

they are darkened with sorrow, because what she sees is the darkness of death. Her vision creates the setting for rites of mourning for Lorca, whose funeral had never been held; but her eyes are described as **darker** than a cathedral, where the sanctuary lamp always burns: hers is a liturgy of hopeless sorrow. The words of her lament come forth “dressed as mourners” from the “cathedral” of her vision, through the “gate” of her voice, described as “shadowy” not only because it too is shrouded in darkness but because it commemorates the “shade” of Lorca, his departed spirit. But if the voice is shadowy, the words are not: though “a sheaf of . . . blades” would ordinarily suggest a bundle of grass or grain, in this context the blades of swords or knives are clearly meant, indicating that the joining of words to music has multiplied the piercing sharpness of the strings, as the meaning of each word is likened to a seven-fold sheaf, the number representing fullness. Again, mourning/remembering is linked with cutting, penetrating deep beneath the surface level of the senses to touch the innermost core of the listeners’ being with the painful awareness of tragedy.

In the following stanza, the cathedrals are transposed from the figurative to the literal term of the simile:

The spires and high Giraldas, still as nails
 Nailed in the four cross roads,
 Watch where the song becomes the color of carnations,
 And flowers like wounds in the white dust of Spain. (II. 15-19)

Here the “spires and high Giraldas” (a reference to the Moorish tower that is now part of the Seville Cathedral, mentioned by Lorca himself in his Gypsy Ballad “San Gabriel (Sevilla)”) ¹⁴ observe the song’s color change from black to red, the color of carnations,¹⁵ but also the color of blood. Clearly the imagery of the nails, of the “cross roads”¹⁶ (not only cruciform in shape but, separated into two words, suggesting “the way of the cross” as well), and the wounds is intended to recall Christ’s passion: Lorca’s death in particular, and the Civil War in general, are presented as a crucifixion, visible in the very landscape, perceptible in the beautiful but tragic flowering of the song against the background of “the white dust of Spain,” itself an image of mortality. The most disconcerting element is the comparison of the church spires to nails, an aspect emphasized by the repetition of “nails / Nailed” (picking up as well the final “I” of “still” and even of the stressed syllable of “Giraldas”), which has the effect of pounding home the image, an effect echoed by the repeated monosyllabic stresses of “. . . four cross road / Watch . . . — particularly noticeable after the regular iambic pentameter of line 15. Is Merton making an oblique criticism of the Spanish Church here, suggesting it was at least a passive instrument of the Nationalist executioners during the war?¹⁷ Such would seem to be the logical implications of the imagery used here.

The parenthetical refrain which now follows, and which will be repeated at the very end of the poem, is best understood as words from the woman’s song, the focus of the lines immediately preceding:

(Under what crossless Calvary lie your lost bones, Garcia Lorca?
 What white Sierra hid your murder in a rocky valley?) (II. 19-20)

The paired questions, addressed to the poet who is unable to respond, emphasize the element of concealment, both the criminal nature of the murder, committed out of sight, and the ongoing anguish of not knowing where the body is and so being unable to bring closure to the tragic event. (Merton has prophetically captured here a dimension of suffering that has become especially familiar in recent decades among the families of the “disappeared” in Latin America, whose stories are often eerily reminiscent of Lorca’s).¹⁸ The refrain also makes explicit the crucifixion imagery of the preceding stanza, though the exact significance of the image of the “crossless Calvary” is unclear: is it to be understood mainly as an expression of tragic paradox, the fact that an unjustly murdered innocent lies in an unmarked (“crossless”) grave,¹⁹ or does it have more redemptive implications? The fact that it is not in a climactic position but part of the first of the pair of questions, the second of which has no religious connotations, would seem to suggest the former alternative; but an

attempt to interpret the phrase adequately is best postponed until its second appearance at the poem's conclusion.

The final stanza broadens the perspective beyond the confines of Spain, as "the four cross roads" ray out across the entire world:²⁰

In the four quarters of the world, the wind is still,
And wonders at the swordplay of the fierce guitar:
The voice has turned to iron in the naked air,
More loud and more despairing than a ruined tower. (II. 21-24)

Now not just the church spires but the wind, a force of nature, is "still" in the presence of the guitar's "swordplay," an image suggesting a virtuosity provoking "wonder," but which is no less "fierce" in this wider arena. As for the song, it no longer "flowers" but has become "iron," hard and unyielding, now piercing not just human minds but the "naked air": nature itself is not spared an encounter with this unrelenting grief. This image of the iron voice in the naked air is given a material analogue in the final comparison to "a ruined tower," an image of the destructive results of war recalling the "eyeless ruins" of line 7, and perhaps suggestive of a parallel with the end of Moorish civilization in Andalusia, ruins of which would still have dotted the landscape of southern Spain. But the actual basis for the simile is oddly inappropriate, as the adjectives "loud" and "despairing" fit the figurative term, "tower," much less readily than the literal term, "voice." The comparison doesn't seem to clarify but to confuse: this conclusion seems deliberately designed to leave the reader with an unsettling final impression, a disturbing dissonance. But the comparison is not simply incoherent: a tower would be "loud," by a sort of inverse synaesthesia, by being noticeable, imposing itself on one's attention: it would be "despairing" as a sort of objective correlative, expressing, or inducing, an observer's own despair. Thus the voice is "more loud," forcing itself more insistently on the listener's consciousness, and "more despairing," in as much as the loss of life, especially the poet's life, **his** voice, **his** song, is more tragic than the material destruction represented by the ruined tower.

But does the despairing voice simply leave the reader in despair? Here a distinction needs to be made between the song and the poem which describes it: while the former is despairing, the latter is not necessarily so. The poem concludes with the same refrain:

(Under what crossless Calvary lie your lost bones, Garcia Lorca?
What white Sierra hid your murder in a rocky valley?) (II. 25-26)²¹

Read as the words of the "despairing" song, these lines leave the reader with unanswered, indeed unanswerable questions (in that they are addressed to a dead man), a raw wound that will not heal. But as the conclusion of the poem, they can be read another way: in the midst of anguish there is a hidden note of hope; from the perception of faith, the reference to Calvary can be understood not simply as part of a verbal paradox but as reflecting the paradox at the heart of reality, the emergence of life from death; it can be read not simply as metonymy, a concrete exemplification of unjust execution, but as *synecdoche*, a participatory figure drawing the referent into the redemptive mystery of cross and resurrection. This conclusion does not have to be read in this way, but it can be: without in any way diminishing or deflecting the experience of grief represented by the **song**, the **poem** provides an intimation of another dimension that does not substitute for the despair but nevertheless transcends it. Surely Thomas Merton himself favored this alternative, discovering a salvific meaning in the otherwise meaningless murder of the master whose "spell" inspired his own verse — "The Spanish Poet, Federico García Lorca."

Notes

1. It is not absolutely certain whether Lorca was killed on August 18 or 19, usually the latter date is given but in his biography of Lorca, Ian Gibson provides the evidence for both dates and tentatively favors the earlier. See *Federico Garcia Lorca: A Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), p. 464.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993), p. 241.
3. For 1941 as the date of composition, see Ross Labrie, "The Ordering of Thomas Merton's Early Poems," *Resources for American Literary Study*, 8 (1979), 115-117, which draw on a 1951 letter, written by Merton's secretary, providing the year of composition for almost all the poems in Merton's first three collections. Though Labrie states that the list presents the poems "in their order of composition" (p. 115), this does not seem to be the case, particularly for the contents of *Thirty Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1944), which are simply categorized by year in the order in which they appear in *A Man in the Divided Sea* (slightly different from the original order in *Thirty Poems*), which suggests that Merton simply went down the table of contents and assigned the proper year to each of the poems; he had said in the author's note to *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, 1946), that while the poems that first appeared in that volume were "presented more or less in the order in which they were written," those reprinted from *Thirty Poems* "are not arranged in any special sequence" (p. 11). Therefore the fact that the Lorca poem is listed under 1941 as the fifteenth among the pieces from *Thirty Poems* provides no indication when during that year it was written.
4. The first accurate account of the circumstances of Lorca's arrest and assassination was pieced together by Ian Gibson, whose book *The Death of Lorca* (Chicago: J. Philip O'Hara, 1973) is a revised version of the Spanish edition published two years earlier; since the end of the Franco era, a few further details have emerged and are included in Gibson's 1989 biography. Gibson's own theory is that Lorca was probably denounced by the Granada branch of the reactionary Catholic party Acción Popular, which included the ex-Member of Parliament Ramón Ruis Alonzo, who actually arrested Lorca; but the evidence is clear that the Falangist Civil Government and its commandant, José Valdes, were responsible for the actual execution, "which was carried out officially" (Gibson, *Death*, p. 135).
5. This version of Lorca's death had appeared in a number of newspapers, including a Brooklyn Spanish-language paper of March 1, 1940, as well as in a 1940 *Modern Language Forum* article written by John A. Crow, who had known Lorca in New York (see Gibson, *Death*, pp. 170-75). For Lorca's presentation of the Civil Guards, see especially "The Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard," one of the *Gypsy Ballads*, in Federico Garcia Lorca, *Collected Poems*, Christopher Maurer, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1991), pp. 562-69; this bilingual edition is the most complete edition of Lorca in English.
6. This focus shows strong affinities with the anthology of poems on modern war and oppression edited by Carolyn Forché entitled *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (New York: Norton, 1993), which includes four poems by Lorca (pp. 152-56) in a section on the Spanish Civil War (pp. 147-73).
7. George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978), p. 37; the other poem he mentions is "Iphigenia: Politics."
8. Though Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr, in *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979), speaks of "a number of poems" in Merton's first two collections revealing "an unmistakable Lorcan influence in ... the alternate use of the quatrain and six-line stanza pattern" (pp. 7-8), this is in fact the only poem which restricts itself to this pattern (and in fact conforms to it only if the refrain in II. 19-20, 25-26 is assimilated to the quatrains preceding it).

9. The poem is found in *Thirty Poems*, pp. [14-15], *A Man in the Divided Sea*, pp. 138-39, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1959; expanded ed, 1967), pp. 14-15, and *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 44-45; the only textual variant is noted below, n. 21.
10. Rafael Martínez Nadal's book *Federico Garcia Lorca and The Public: A Study of an Unfinished Play and of Love and Death in Lorca's Work* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), contains an extensive discussion of "The Horse in the Work of Garcia Lorca" (pp. 185-217, which suggests that "no other contemporary poet or novelist makes us of this animal with the insistency and variety found in Lorca" (p. 185).
11. See Lorca, *Collected Poems*, pp. 98-101, 126-27, 142-145.
12. Though it is unlikely Merton could have been aware of it, Lorca himself wrote in a 1926 letter to his friend Jorge Guillén, "The poem has still not been made that pierces the heart like a sword"; quoted in Howard T. Young, *The Victorious Expression: A Study of Four Contemporary Spanish Poets* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), p. 205.
13. Ross Labrie notes this influence in *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), p. 113.
14. See Lorca, *Collected Poems*, pp. 548/549, l. 33.
15. Is there a hidden pun here? The Spanish word for "carnation" is "clavel," while for "nail" it is "clavo"; at least subconsciously the connection may well have been made. Lorca himself speaks of wounds as "three hundred dark roses" in his "Sleepwalking Ballad" from *Gypsy Ballads*: see *Collected Poems*, pp. 528/529, l. 41.
16. In his *Poema del Cante Jondo*, Lorca includes a poem entitled "Encrucijada" ("Crossroads"): in his edition of this work, Christian De Paepé comments that "The crossroad suggests the presence of the cross; an exact location for pain and death: (quoted in Lorca, *Collected Poems*, p. 796). This poem is the fourth in a sequence; the immediately preceding poem pleads not to be nailed ("claves") by a dagger, and the one before that begins, "The barren hillside / and its calvary" ("un calvario"): see *Collected Poems*, pp. 106-109.
17. Though in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) Merton would facetiously mention someone "fighting for the Red Army against Franco" (p. 145), his admiration not only for Lorca but for Picasso would suggest a less simplistic attitude at this time; if he saw José Bergamín's Introduction to the 1940 bilingual edition of Lorca's *Poet in New York* (New York: Norton, 1940), he would have read that "The instigators of the crime were young men belonging to the *Acción Popular*; that is, those called "young Catholics" urged on in turn by the ecclesiastical authorities. This is also clearly established. Against the bloody imbecility of a clergy imbued with the military spirit which has betrayed and destroyed Spain, the name of the poet Federico García Lorca cries out with the spilling of his innocent blood for the truth and justice of his Spanish people" (p. 10).
18. The situation also foreshadows, of course, Merton's own uncertainty about the location of his brother's body after the first report of John Paul Merton's death in 1943, which prompted the poem "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943," which shows remarkable affinities with the poem on Lorca. For an analysis, see Patrick F. O'Connell, "Grief Transfigured: Merton's Elegy on His Brother," *The Merton Seasonal*, 18:1 (Winter, 1993), 10-15.
19. Ironically, Lorca did not in fact die beneath a "crossless Calvary": it is now known that he was shot at the foot of a mountain 9 km. from Granada, near Viznar: "Directly ahead rises the Sierra de Alfácar; on its highest point stands a tall cross" (Gibson, *Death*, p. 117).
20. Merton uses a similar image in the opening line of "The Evening of the Visitation": "Go, roads, to the four quarters of our quiet distance," and in line 25 of "St. Agnes: A Responsory": "Her charity has flown to four horizons, . . ." (*Thirty Poems*, pp. [13], [22]; *Collected Poems*, pp. 43, 55).
21. In *A Man in the Divided Sea*, line 25 erroneously reads, "Under what crossless Calvary lie your lost bones, Lorca?" (p. 139).