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SEXUAL NIHILISM IN THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA
BY GARCÍA LORCA: A LITERARY ONOMASTIC VIGNETTE

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In May, 1955, the Milanese journal Tempo asked the most outstanding contemporary literary critics of Italy the following question: If you had to save twenty books in a new universal flood, which ones would you choose? Among the twenty chosen were: Gabriel d'Annunzio; T.S. Eliot ; William Faulkner; García Lorca for his ROMANCERO GITANO; William Faulkner; André Gide; Ernest Hemingway; James Joyce; Kafka; D.H. Lawrence; Thomas Mann; Luigi Pirandello, Marcel Proust, etc. The aesthetic merit of the corpus of Federico García Lorca's work as poet, dramatist, and lyricist is based on his mysterious poetic virtue. Beyond the dramatic, he philosophically depicts the human fearful five: malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy , and slander (I Peter 2:1), in a manner most relevant to the 20th century mind. Here we have a universal au-

thor, attuned and sympathetic to human anxieties, a pantheistic rebel whose poetry at times defies translation.

Through the microscope of literary onomastics we will consider Lorca's most popular play in U.S. universities and colleges: THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA.¹ The five formal approaches to literature are: Humanistic; Sociological; Archetypal; Psychological; Aesthetic. Literary Onomastics goes beyond these five formal approaches.² In literature we have established that there are 12 families of names with 112 categories (families: diactinic-charactonyms, personality traits; anonymical-nameless; neologisms; computerized; chimerical; invented; elliptic), 6 techniques (synechdochic-10 types), or polyanthropomical where one character has numerous names, and Typologies (one relevance to ontology or cosmology - that is, universal concepts of names).³

Non-political Lorca, a pantheistic rebel within a classical literary orb, cruelly chained, brutally murdered during the Civil War (Little World War), was considered a mysterious political risk to talk or write about in Spain during Franco's 39-year dictatorship which ended in 1975. Franco's death has opened up a Pandora's box of Lorquian studies from within Lorca's unknown grave.

Nihilism, even though it was first used by the Russian revolutionary anarchists during the reign of Alexander II, existed during Buddhist times as a metaphysical teaching of Mahayana, the

doctrine of the VOID; termed NEGATIVISM. This develops into the existentialist concept of Dostoyevsky, often cited as a forerunner of existentialism, in which REASON only leads to formulate generalizations that will let you down. Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, developed the concept of NIHILISM by defining REALITY as disappointing as a sign you see in a shop window which reads: Pressing Done Here. If you brought your clothes to be pressed, you would be fooled; for only the sign is for sale. To Lorca the theater is poetry that elevates itself from the books, becomes human, speaking, shouting, screaming until it gets desperate. In his last play HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA we perceive not only the existentialism but the Hindu onomastic concept in juxtaposition with the Christian-Roman. By choosing Anguish and Martyrdom as names for two of the five daughters we are reminded of how the Hindus conceived of proper names which, though denotative of individuals, had "universals" as their connotation. Here we have implied the universal "spinsterhood."

The play itself is a polaroid instamatic photograph impregnated in the mind of Lorca as he spied on the neighbors in Valderrubio, Granada. The old widow Bernarda Alba with tyrannical vigilance rules over her five unmarried daughters:

As they were prisoners deprived of all free will, I never spoke to them...but I could see

them pass like shadows, always silent and dressed in black...it was a mute and cold hell under the African sun, the sepulchre of live people under the inflexible rule of the gloomy incarcerator. ⁴

There actually existed in real life a lover of one of the unfortunate girls, called Pepe. The only male character of the play never appears on stage. However, there are slight rumors of his passionate lovemaking and panting with Adela, in the barn. The constant talk about him by the five daughters and all the women makes him an invisible character, omnipresent and at times even more powerful than the tyrannical Bernarda Alba. The audience senses a forceful silhouette as he passes by the windows courting ANGUISH, the oldest daughter.

Bernarda, from two germanic words 'berin' and 'hard' means "daring, strong bear." Alba from the Latin 'albus' means 'dawn or white,' which became a very popular name among the Israelites. White walls, white patio, white floors, everything immaculately white representing piety, purity, sinlessness, is visible on stage. Bernarda defends, first of all, the old, and hateful to Lorca, code of honor, for which the Spanish language has two words. Honra is the "horizontal concept" of society while honor is the "vertical personal concept" emanating from God above. Secondly, she must

defend the family from "el que dirá la gente" (neighbors' gossipy tongues). The Christian code of virginity was more rigorously enforced in Spanish tradition than in any other western culture after the tragic incident of losing their country to the Arabs or pagans. This was due to the defloration of the daughter of the ruler of Ceuta in 711. Such a historical incident served to augment the priestly misogynists in Spain. Anguish and Martyrdom, the two less attractive of the five daughters, within an onomastic framework of universality represent women subjugated to (according to Lorca) not human forces combating each other but telluric forces. The "daring bear" within a halo of whiteness and purity is a selfish, merciless matron who forces her five daughters ranging from 20-39 years of age into a pit of despair. After returning from the requiem for the deceased father, Bernarda sentences not only the five daughters but her own mother and old servant in this manner.

During the eight years of mourning the wind
 from the street won't enter this house. We'll
 pretend that the windows and doors are walled
 with bricks. That's what we did in the houses
 of my father and grandfather. ⁵

Anguish actually is the patron saint of the church of Granada (Virgen María Nuestra Señora De La Angustias). Lorca's favorite

childhood game in the family patio was "saying mass" to this patron saint while neighborhood children and members of his family watched in awed reverence. The Latin angustus from 'ango' also corresponds to the throat that contracts and tightens because of fear. Anguish is a neurosis that according to Freud, who unconsciously employed a masculine model for both sexes, creates a syndrome of irritability, respiratory disorders and dizziness. The dreadful apprehension of anguish that the thirty-nine year old daughter displays is a direct toxic effect of sexual frustration, excitation and enforced abstinence. In ecclesiastical Latin 'angustus' becomes synonymous for 'afflictions and tribulations'. The word 'angustia' first appears in the Spanish language during the XVth century with the meaning of narrowness, critical situation. Here implied is the narrowness of the birth canal, creating an erotic critical situation of unfulfillment. The first time Anguish appears on stage, we hear Bernarda reprimanding her for paying attention to rumors about Pepe el Romano being at the mass in church. In this case, however, he is anxious to get a glimpse of a good marriage prospect. He is supposed to be planning to propose marriage to Angustia since she has just inherited a great fortune. Bernarda retorts sharply:

Women in church shouldn't look at any man but
the priest and him only because he wears

skirts. To turn your head is to be looking for
the warmth of corduroy.⁶

Spanish children first learn about the supreme value of chastity in men and virginity in women through the stories of the saints and martyrs. In the Hispanic world, Martirio (Martyrdom) is a mystic name meaning "to testify, to witness, to suffer unjustly for a cause." During the fourth century there were two Bizantine Martyrs and since then Martirio has been a Spanish anthroponym.⁷ Spain is the land of western mysticism, which is a direct conscious union of the soul with God accomplishable in this life by three stages. The purgative, or the first stage, excluding all external forces, forgetting the outside world and concentrating within, is practiced in the First Act of the play, Casa de Bernarda Alba, by vocal prayers. The character Martyrdom is chastity itself, revealing the teleological meaning of virginity which remains still a mystery to many. In many primitive civilizations defloration of the bride is a ritual, public or private, performed by a priest or stranger. This practice originates from the dreadful fear of "spilling blood." Lorca rebels against all social forces creating any norms stifling woman's freedom. He was a true advocate of women's liberation.

I will always sympathize with those who have nothing but especially with those whose tranquility and peace of mind are denied, . 8

Martyrdom appears for the first time on stage to witness the disrespect of Adela towards Bernarda. The youngest and prettiest daughter, Adela, gives Bernarda her brightly colored fan which in itself constitutes an insult to the recently deceased father.

"Take mine, take mine." submissively says Martyrdom.

"And you?" Bernarda answers.

Martyrdom, sweltering with heat but with a martyr complex, replies, "I'm not hot."

"Well," retorts Bernarda, "Look for another, you'll need it eight years."

Martyrdom, in company of the entire cast, is to remain completely attired in black, including the fans used, until she is thirty-two years old. Bernarda has previously manipulated events to keep a certain Enrique Humanes from courting Martyrdom, thus intermeddling with any possibility of marriage for Martyrdom. By remaining in sexual abstinence, which according to the church brings about an energetic self-reliant woman of action, she may become a woman who is guided by the head. This brings to mind what Honoré Balzac said:

A woman guided by the head and not the heart is a social pestilence: she has all the defects of a passionate and affectionate woman, with none of her compensations: she is without pity, without love, without virtue, without sex.

Lorca makes it evident that the traditional sexual abstinence produces well-behaved weaklings who later become frustrated physically and spiritually. Martyrdom is speaking to the audience:

It's better never to look at a man. I've been afraid of them ever since I was a little girl...God has made me weak and ugly and has definitely put such things away from me.⁹

Anguish, the thirty-nine year old daughter, is rebuked by Bernarda with a cruel slap across the face and sent to her room because she eaves-dropped while the men in the patio, who came to pay their respects to the deceased father, told ~~sensuous~~ stories. Bernarda wants to know what the men spoke about. The servant willingly tells:

They were talking about Paca La Roseta. Last night they tied her husband up in a stall, stuck her on a horse behind the saddle and

carried her away to the depths of the olive grove.

"And what did she do?" asked Bernarda, turning her head to make sure that Anguish remained in her room.

Well, she was just as happy, this Paca La Roseta. They say her breasts were exposed and Maximiliano held on to her as if he were playing a guitar. ¹⁰

One day the servant announces that Pepe el Romano will be passing by the house. Surreptitiously a libidinous craze possesses all the five daughters. All four, except the youngest daughter, run to the front windows to see the handsome Pepe. Adela, the rebel, places herself half dressed in front of her bedroom window to make sure of a conquest. How successful she is! Man possesses her and drags her to doom or liberation. One dark moonless night, after midnight, Pepe proposes marriage to Anguish - what joy! These are the second-hand words told by Anguish herself to her sisters, which Pepe spoke to her in an unaltruistic manner:

Angustias, you know, I am after you. (then leaning closer to the window bars) I need a good well-brought up woman, and that's you if it's agreeable. ¹¹

Enlarging upon C.G. Jung's concepts of woman's psychology, Toni Wolff, with whom I agree, has all the psychological functions of women divided into four personality types: ¹²

MATERNAL, HETAIRA, AMAZON, MEDIUMISTIC

1. **MATERNAL:** Most prevalent is "mothering which tends to become smothering"; possessiveness rushes up from the unconsciousness - priority in life is CHILDREN, so we see BERNARDA ALBA, who by the way hated both her husbands.
2. **HETAIRA:** Companionship is prevalent; "Father or Husband" is priority, not children. Totally dependent on men (seductress is an example). ANGUSTIAS, having only one more year to pass the average life span, is only interested in a companion and with her inherited money she can buy one.
3. **AMAZON:** Independent, self-contained, concerned only with her own achievement - equality with men; fulfillment is not dependent on man or children. She misuses love relationships. ADELA is the epitome of the Amazon type who prefers death to a life devoid of total independence of her feelings, sensations,

thinking and intuitions. SUICIDE-solution: the CAREER WOMAN falls primarily into this trap.

4. MEDIUMISTIC: Prevalent and principal role is mediator --having a cross to bear like Florence Nightingale, Joan of Arc, or Susan B. Anthony, ~~whether~~ political (the Love Canal syndrome), social (abortion), religious (cults, etc.), psychological (liberty of spirit and action). MARTYRDOM carries the torch in this play under this type of female personality. Even though she hates Adela she fights for freedom of action by stealing Pepe's picture, placing it under her pillow and defying all the rules and regulations of family tradition and religious decency.

If you are a woman, to which one of these categories do you belong? Don't be ~~to~~ quick to answer because our hearts are very deceiving, the only truth in our lives, according to Lorca, is a constant Anguish and daily Martyrdom.

García Lorca's technique in nomenclature is versatile and unique. Common everyday objects he liked to call by fantastic and

capricious names, many times invented ones, while poetic things he called by their proper substantive names.

There is no mention of love, which Pepe has reserved for his passionate love affair with Adela. Every night after saying goodbye to Anguish, Pepe spends the time from one-thirty to four in the morning in the barn with Adela, until Martyrdom finds out.

Adela: You know better than I he doesn't love
her.

Martyrdom: I know.

Adela: You know because you've seen--he loves
me, me.

Martyrdom: (desperately) Yes.

Adela: (close before her) He loves me, Me! He
loves me, me!

Martyrdom: Stick me with a knife if you like,
but don't tell me that again. 13

Martyrdom involuntarily steals a picture of Pepe that belongs to Anguish which she keeps under her bedcovers. She starts to experience a "dream-state" wave of heat which increases the flow of blood as an extraordinary excitable sexual phantasy. When she finds out that Adela possesses the body of Pepe her wrath and jealousy turn into rage for she too loves Pepe. This type of rage is an archaic type of reaction to frustration. In psychological

terms there is a massive emergency discharge intended to release a flood of unmastered excitation in a total or partial absence of ego control. Martyrdom now is devoid of family sentiment, experiencing an excruciating torment, a paroxysm, a wound so deep (for Bernarda has deprived her marrying Henrique Humanes) as to render her a submissive weakling.

Angustias' last words in the play are directed to Adela in a tone of agonizing lament:

You're not getting out of here with your body's
triumph, Thief, disgrace of this House. ¹⁴

Angustias' most critical state of anxiety is experienced when she hears the shot from Bernarda's gun intended to kill Pepe. Adela, secretly carrying in her womb Pepe's child, knows that the village will stone her to death. Such is the custom in the light of the most immoral, unpardonable sin, sex out of wedlock. Fleeing from the exacerbated glare of Angustia, Adela runs to her room and hangs herself. Upon discovery of the lifeless body, Bernarda commands that the church bells are to toll twice because her daughter died a virgin, a virgin, and no one is to cry nor ever reveal the truth of the matter. Martyrdom, gazing unflinchingly at her dead hanging sister, says:

A thousand times happy she, who had him. ¹⁵

Sexual nihilism¹⁶ sets in upon the household with a mood of despair and emptiness of human existence. We might behold Anguish and Martyrdom as one entity representative of the excruciating torment and aching misery forced upon women cruelly subjected to live in a world that stifles the most potent human force. The prospect of an additional three years, added to the eight of mourning for the so-called dead virgin sister, will make Bernarda, the "daring bear," victorious. They will now remain virgins and achieve a superior being like angels¹⁷ in an atmosphere devoid of eroticism and libidinous forces. The cord used by Adela to hang herself is ironically used by Bernarda to forever tighten and constrict the grip of the "Anguish and Martyrdom" forced upon the universal world of "spinsterhood," not only limited to Spain.

Perhaps the typology of the function of literary names can be aggrandized by incorporating a third step: relevance to onomastic ontology.

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NOTES

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11. Ibid., p.179.
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15. Idem.
16. Paul Edwards, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, V, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967), pp.515-516.
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